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High Functioning Females and Dating

Myla M. Streander
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Human Services

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Myla M. Streander

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Virginia Smith, Committee Chairperson, Human Services Faculty
Dr. Scott Hershberger, Committee Member, Human Services Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2024

Abstract

High-Functioning Autistic Females and Dating

by

Myla M Streander

EdS, George Fox University, 2012

BS, Warner Pacific, 2009

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Human Services

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

The autism population in Southwest Florida does not have resources in the community to assist them with general living skills, social skills, job skills, and relationship skills. The research shows that autistic females have been ignored for years as they do not present autism the same as males. This means that instead of being independent and functional, they depend on the government for complete assistance. The study completed involved nine women with autism ages 18-35 to record their experiences and what gaps in the practice need to be addressed. This study was completed via Zoom and phone interviews, depending on the level of comfort. The study aimed to find the gaps in practice that need to be addressed for this population. The conceptual framework consisted of language, communication, and social skills. These were measured through a series of questions regarding dating behaviors. Their answers were recorded, and gaps began to appear. The results of this study show five categories in which there are gaps. Communication, Physical Touching, Expectations, Boundaries, and Family Support. These women are missing key elements of conversation, language, and social skills as evidenced by their responses and requests for information regarding these areas. The results showed that they do not know when they are liked, what that entails, and how to respond. Autistic females require training to understand how to function socially and throughout their lives. This involves job training, social skills, life, and relationship training. Training in these areas was welcomed as it would aid in feelings of confidence and security.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my family whose support, I would not have finished. I am forever grateful for their love and encouragement to keep going. I love them always and hope I can return the favor.

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I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement. Their constant interest and acknowledgment of the need have kept me going. My professors were amazing and gave me the skills I needed to do the research and knowledge I needed to know. I would like to thank my Chair Dr. Virginia Smith for being there for me and helping me when I needed it. I hope I can be like her when I grow up. My peers in my group were amazing ladies and I thank them for their support and encouragement when things got tough. I did not do this on my own but had oodles of help and I am so grateful for it. I hope to make them proud and start my journey in helping others.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

Background of the Human Services Program

Human service professionals may be missing the signs of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as it often does not manifest itself in high-functioning females until adolescence or adulthood (Gesi et al., 2021). ASD symptoms may appear as other mental conditions, minimizing ASD conditions while exacerbating other disorders conditions (Gesi et al., 2021). Misdiagnoses stem from these circumstances with physicians' unaccustomedness to ASD characteristics in adults, resulting in inappropriate treatment (Gesi et al., 2021). Bradshaw et al. (2021), shared that general practitioners often report feeling uncomfortable in seeing autistic patients and making changes to meet their needs. The confidence level in consulting and physical examinations for the ASD population is low (Bradshaw et al., 2021). The myths and fabrications spun about autism are still around today (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

What was once described as an epidemic is now considered to have a better understanding and a superior ability to comprehend and diagnose autism (Bradshaw et al., 2021). This is true among females who have been unnoticed in adolescence and receive a diagnosis as an adult (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Females were consistently expected to act like males therefore conditions were either not believed or thought to be something else (Bradshaw et al., 2021). This has led to females masking their autism and remaining guarded about their condition to employers, family, and healthcare providers (Bradshaw et al., 2021). According to Bradshaw et al. (2021), autism should be viewed as

a more fluid disorder varying from everyday living that is a constant instead of a static high-low label.

Social Problem

Females with ASD are an under-researched field, suggesting that the social problem for this population is misunderstood (Morrisroe et al., 2023). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)5 revealed that ASD reflects deficits in conversation, nonverbal communication, and problems with relationships (Morrisroe et al., 2023). Females with ASD may learn behaviors and social skills from others around them (Morrisroe et al., 2023). Females may exhibit camouflaging, miming others' behaviors to fit into the current social norm (Morrisroe et al., 2023).

Without proper training in social skills, verbal and nonverbal language, perspective-taking, and empathy training, the autistic population will have difficulty in their community which includes Southwest Florida (Forest et al., 2020). ASD children are bullied and become victims instead of positive community members (Forest et al., 2019). According to Forest et al. (2020), 50% of children with special needs are bullied, and over 20-30% of typical developing peers (Forest et al., 2020). Bullying is defined as “any unwanted aggressive behaviors by another youth or groups who are not siblings or current dating partners that involve an observed perceived power imbalance and is repeated or likely to be repeated” (Forest et al., p. 310, 2020). These children may grow to become withdrawn and isolated members of their community, making themselves more of a burden than active members of society, also true in Southwest Florida (Forest et al., 2020).

Local Problem

Retirees have been coming to Florida for a long time. The population dynamic is changing, based on educational reports from the Florida Department of Education (as cited in Solodev, n.d.). This means there are more families with autistic children coming to Southwest Florida. With the lack of resources for these families, the responsibility of teaching social skills, friendship skills, employment skills, and relationship skills falls to the school districts. At this time, according to Rebecca Marazon, head of psychological services for Charlotte County Public Schools (CCPS), there are no outside resources for this population (CCPS, n.d.).

A lack of resources for the ASD population creates a group of people who will be entering the working world and the community without any skills for success. They will not be able to live in the communities in Southwest Florida as thriving adults with financial skills, living skills, and social skills for employment and making friends. Nor will they have the ability to build relationships with others and become successful members of the community. They may become dependent on government funding instead (McMahon et al., 2020). The gaps in practice show that this is a large problem and one that needs to be addressed to include the ASD population as a part of every community in Southwest Florida (Pires et al., 2023).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to record the experiences of high-functioning females with autism to show the gaps in the practice and what human service professionals should be addressing for this population. By doing this, the data may reveal

what females with ASD require for success in the world of dating to ensure safety and become thriving members of their communities in Southwest Florida, instead of government dependents.

Research Questions

Do females with high-functioning autism understand the rituals of dating and the social aspects of relationships in Southwest Florida?

What interventions must be provided for this population to be socially successful and promote dating safety in Southwest Florida?

Conceptual Framework

The concepts that helped to frame this study were communication, language, and social skills. These three areas present great challenges for individuals with autism. These areas show deficits from an early age and create difficulties for this population (Milner et al., 2019). Language difficulties begin to show up as early as 3 years of age. Missing pieces such as gesturing and the forming of words are two big developing areas where children with autism do not meet the markers (Wong et al., 2022). Communication involves pragmatic language, which is necessary for conversation, and the ability to determine where the conversation is going (Sturrock et al., 2020). Pragmatic language covers idioms, sarcasm, jokes, and inferencing. This ability to recognize these pieces of language also determines empathy and joint attention (Yang et al., 2022).

Social skills are an important part of life. They allow humans to interact with others appropriately and develop relationships that are a part of the school environment, employment opportunities, and romantic relationships (Alawahbi, 2023). This ability to

recognize social cues and nonverbal communication is an important part of life. Individuals with autism struggle with this ability and often do not recognize these cues and how they are supposed to react (Alawahbi, 2023). These deficits for the autistic population need to be addressed. The gaps in practice in Southwest Florida show these areas need to be researched further to provide solutions for their success (Alawahbi, 2023).

Nature of the Study

A needs assessment was the nature of my study, recording the experiences of high-functioning autistic females and their dating adventures (Kaufman 1987). This can reveal the gaps in the practice and the areas that need to be researched further to assist this population and create safer dating environments and confidence for this population in Southwest Florida (Pires et al. 2023). A needs assessment was the backbone of my study as I looked at the needs of autistic females and what should be done to ensure safety and that understanding of nonverbal language is comprehended (Pires et al., 2023). My sample was a group of 9 high-functioning females, ages 18-35. Through an anonymous interview strategy, I gathered data on their dating experiences and report my findings. This was a qualitative study using the interview technique to find gaps in practice and further areas that need to be addressed for this population to be confident and safe in their dating relationships. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the needs assessment process allows for open listening and looking at all sides of an issue (CDC Healthy Communities Program, n.d.). The needs assessment aids in determining

how great the need is, and how to solve the issues in Southwest Florida (CDC Healthy Communities Program, n.d).

Defined Terms

Asperger's syndrome: A form of autism in which individuals may appear normal but cannot understand social situations, pragmatic language difficulties, and rigid thinking. These difficulties can be off-putting to others and appear weird in some social situations (Alduais et al (2023).

Autism: A neurodevelopmental disorder that has deficits in language, behavior, and repetitive tasks. It affects language, pragmatic language, and social abilities (Kelly et al., 2018).

Community problem: For autistic individuals, fitting in society without the skills to function in society. This could include life skills, employment skills, social skills, relationship skills, and personal skills (Solodev, n.d.).

Females and autism: Females tend to show more internal symptoms than males. They can camouflage their autism and take on the personalities of other females in social situations to “fit in” with others. They may compel themselves to make eye contact to appear normal to others (Volkers, 2018).

High-functioning autism: Signifies people who are not intellectually disabled or delayed in communication, and their autism does not have a high impact on their everyday skills (Gesi et al., 2023).

Language: A way to communicate needs using words in a predictable way that allows for an understanding of our wants, needs, and interests with others (Alawahbi, 2023).

Pragmatic language: Used in social interactions with others. It is the ability to comprehend idioms, jokes, sarcasm, and nonverbal language (Wong et al., 2022).

Relationships and dating: Interpersonal relationships that include friendship, acquaintances, and romantic partners. Dating is a ritual that involves a form of intimacy that allows two people to become closer and develop romantic feelings that may lead to a lifelong partnership (Mogavero & Ko, 2020).

Social skills: Learned skills that allow individuals to intermingle with others appropriately in any social environment (Sutton et al 2018).

Theory of mind: The ability to understand the perception of others, hold joint attention in reciprocal conversation and predict the way a conversation is going to stay on topic and interact with others. It also provides us with the ability to have empathy for others (Brewer et al., 2022).

Significance of the Study for Community or Organization

The autistic population can learn, and some want to have friends, jobs, and girls/boyfriends. They want to be a functioning part of the community in Southwest Florida. The issue is they cannot accomplish this on their own. The lack of mirror neurons in their brain may not allow for this (Federman et al., 2023). They need help to be successful members of the community. Schools are not teaching the skills they need to be successful; academics is their focus. Without training, this population becomes

withdrawn, depressed, and nonfunctioning (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). They function as government dependents instead of thriving members of society (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). This can and should be changed; they deserve a happy life just like anyone else. They may need help with this, as a community, it is our responsibility to provide what they need to be successful.

As thriving members of a community in Southwest Florida, they are employed and purchasing items that are needed for everyday life, including apartments, groceries, entertainment, and employment. They could be contributing to the tax base instead of getting the government checks that the community is paying for. This population can be successful with help, this community, should ignore it. The autistic population should not be left out just because no one wants to provide what they need in terms they understand. Communities in Southwest Florida need to fix this.

Significance of the Study for Human Services

Learning what the autistic population requires to be successful can only aid in providing a better world for them. If communities across the country were providing interventions and training for the autistic population, they would have more members in their communities that were living happy lives. My study in gathering experiences from high-functioning females helps to provide this information. It can aid in knowing what they comprehend, what they need training in, and how to help them recognize unsafe situations regarding dating. This is valuable information in moving forward with training opportunities for them. They deserve to feel safe and confident in relationships and to know what dating rituals and nonverbal language mean.

This ability to recognize these things will give them the tools they need to get through life without being abused, bullied, or worse. Educators provide all types of training for neurotypical populations, and they do well in Southwest Florida communities. Teachers and staff need to do the same for the autistic populations everywhere. They can learn, and they go about it differently, but the possibilities are there. Educators need to provide the information in a way that autistic females can comprehend. Human service providers must make this happen. The National Organization for Human Services (2015) stated, “Human service educators are committed to the principles of access and inclusion and take all available and applicable steps to make education available to differently-abled students, #38.” Three crucial factors that are important to this study are communication, language, and social skills.

Literature Review

Literature Search Strategy

The Walden Library was the main source of my research. It provided me with peer-reviewed articles that supported my field of study and allowed me to review the research available. I also used other university libraries as a student, including Liberty University and Capella University. Sage Journals were also helpful in my quest over the past 5 years researching autism.

I used key terms such as *females and autism*, *high-functioning autism*, *autism and language*, *autism and pragmatic language*, *theory of mind*, and *autism and dating*. These key terms allowed me to find the research available to review for my study. ProQuest was essential in finding what I needed and providing me with citations to save time and effort,

allowing me to concentrate on my subject. There is much more to be accomplished in the world of autism as females have been missed for so long by medical practitioners who were looking for male symptoms instead of female symptoms of autism (Sturrock et al., 2020). The practices I discovered showed the gaps that need to be addressed in this study area and what needs to be done.

Themes and Subthemes of Literature Related to the Human Services Problem

ASD signifies a population of people who experience neurodevelopmental disorders that are distinguished by complications in social and communication, along with repetitive and disruptive behaviors, actions, and interests (Mademtzi et al., 2018). These behaviors may appear subtle or significant depending on the impact of ASD on the individual (Mademtzi et al., 2018). Currently, 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with autism, and boys are 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls (Autism Fact Sheet 2023). It has been suggested that girls are misdiagnosed as their symptoms are subtle and they can exhibit a higher level of social skills than boys (Sturrock et al., 2020). This has caused females to go without services and understanding of themselves for generations (Volkers, 2018).

Unlike boys, girls display fewer restrictive interests and repetitive actions (Volkers, 2018). The interests that females exhibit are subtle and therefore not as apparent as male experts on one topic (Milner et al., 2019). Females exhibit a higher level of social interactions and abilities toward friendship with others (Volkers, 2018). Reciprocal conversation is more common in females and a motivation toward forming friendships with others (Milner et al., 2019). Girls are more likely to internalize their

emotions whereas males exhibit externalizing behaviors (Volkers, 2018). This type of behavior or lack of proper behavior can cause children to be exiled from school, restaurants, libraries, retail stores, social and community events (Volkers, 2018). As females with autism become adolescents, they display behaviors that may appear shy and introverted (Pires et al., 2023). Females have mastered the ability to mask their symptoms and mimic others' customary social behaviors, admitting that they are often exhausted and lose a part of their own identity in the process (Milner et al., 2019). Teenagers with autism shared that as they get older, they notice the differences between themselves and neuro-typical teenagers, and these differences have created the need for interventions to assist with their lack of language and social skills (Kelly et al., 2018).

According to Bernardin et al. (2021), anxiety was found to be higher than 40% among autistic youth with autism. Studies have shown that females with autism are at a greater risk for hiding symptoms than males with autism (Bernardin et al., 2021). Social skills, conversations, and relationships are affected and difficult to maintain according to Mademtzi et al. (2018). Parents have reported their concerns regarding making friends. They have reported difficulties with social skills saying their daughter's difficulties with others' emotions and a non-caring attitude regarding conversations (Mademtzi et al., 2018). Parents shared during a study that their daughters want friends, however, are petrified to attempt friendships with peers (Mademtzi et al., 2018). Females shared in a study conducted by Milner et al. (2019) that they preferred a lot of alone time so as not to be subjugated by others and to prepare for jobs, school, and life.

Females with autism are inclined to engage in social-norm behaviors when they sense nonacceptance from peers (Pires et al., 2023). Camouflage is an atypical behavior that high-functioning females engage in by seeking out and mimicking others (Pires et al., 2023). This behavior is their interpretation of social interactions with others, which takes significant effort causing them to lose their identities, interfering in relationships, mental health issues, and a sense of nonbelonging (Pires et al., 2023). This extreme effort to “fit in” can set them up for vulnerability to abuse, exploitation, victimization, and social naivety (Pires et al., 2023). Milner et al. (2019) reported that females, even after receiving a diagnosis, did not receive any support. They continue to suffer from anxiety, OCD, and depression (Milner et al., 2019).

Language

Language plays a huge role in the making of friendships and relationships with others (Maksimovic et al., 2023). Maksimovic (2023) shared that language at age 42 months finds children with ASD using fewer gestures when compared to same-age neurotypical peers. Depending on the severity of autism, children may use only phrases or agrammatic sentences or cease to mature into language (Maksimovic et al., 2023). Autism can be diagnosed as early as 18-24 months regarding social behaviors and lack of language abilities (O’Shea et al., 2023). Wong et al. (2021) reported that the level of education of parents is important in the development of prelinguistic skills with children. In other words, the more parents talk to their children intelligently the better-developed language skills become (Wong et al., 2021). The high-functioning population with a normal IQ range exhibits semantics, syntactic, and phonological graphemes, while lower

cognitive populations may present with shortfalls in these areas (Maksimovic et al., 2023). Panzeri et al. (2022) noted that Kanner (1944) spoke of the autistic population exhibiting extreme “literalness.” Panzeri et al. (2022) reported that literalness is defined as the gap in linguistic definition and expressed connotation in speech. However, girls have shown higher skill levels in the areas of pragmatic elements, narrative, richer character descriptions, perception, and judgment than boys of comparable ages (Sturrock et al., 2020). Parents of autistic females have concluded that their daughter's shortcomings with language are just as devastating as males because girls are held to a higher social skill level than boys (Sturrock et al., 2020). Relevant interventions for individuals with autism include staying on topic, using figurative language, using humor skillfully, being discrete regarding personal information about self and others, and understanding perspectives, facial expressions, and body language (Kelly et al., 2018).

Pragmatic Language

Deficits in pragmatic language appear to be common in children with ASD factors that can assist with developing language and the development of vocabulary, free talk, and the level of pragmatic skills in the mother (Yang et al., 2022). Mirror neurons are a brain-stimulated network that moves body parts and actions (Federman et al., 2023). Federman et al. (2023) reported that early inability to imitate leads to complications in understanding emotions, interpersonal relationships, and theory of mind, together are the elements of autism. Pragmatic language contains three parts: communicative intentions, presupposition, and discourse management (Wong et al. 2022). These three areas make up a conversation. First is how the communicator expresses themselves, the second is

establishing assumptions with partners in the conversation, and the third part involves topic maintenance, initiation, and termination of the conversation (Wong et al., 2022). Metaphors, sarcasm, idioms, and jokes are pieces of language that children with ASD struggle to comprehend (Yang et al., 2022). The level of understanding depends on the level of language skills of the individual and their interpretation of metaphors. Some are better at it than others and can decipher the meaning without confusion or literal interpretation (Yang et al., 2022).

Storytelling or narrative language is another area the ASD populations have difficulty with (Boorse et al., 2019). Both males and females have difficulty with putting emotion into their storytelling and narrative conversation (Sturrock et al., 2020). Conversation includes forms of storytelling either short or long; they are the adventures of daily life (Boorse et al., 2019). Conversations require an assortment of competencies working memory, executive function, and a level of social interaction (Boorse et al., 2019). This involves pausing at the correct moments, eye contact, and listening skills (Boorse et al., 2019). Pragmatic language is a large part of conversations and narratives that ASD children and adults struggle with (Boorse et al., 2019).

These deficits in pragmatics may appear as impoverished event explanations, reduced story structure, reduced coherence, modified syntactic complexity, ambiguous pronouns, fewer grammar elements, below-standard inferencing, and often extraneous verbiage (Boorse et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, the phenotypical adaptability of language abilities, pragmatics is recognized as the largest impaired linguistical domain in autism (Panzeri et al., 2022). When looking at the difference between typically

developing peers and autistic children the comparison in pragmatics shows weaknesses regarding perspective-taking (think, know, believe), referencing, and relevancy (Boorse et al., 2019). Children with ASD are known to use concrete language or no filter. They often speak in patterns or nonsensical language depending on the level of autism (Boorse et al., 2019). Boorse et al. (2019) shared that cognitively ASD children use less thinking and knowing words, exhibiting lesser social abilities and capability to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of others.

Conversations may have long gaps between speakers as the autistic speaker may not understand the relevance of conversational reciprocity, therefore awkwardness may occur (Wehrle et al., 2023). As the conversation continues and interests become clearer, the gaps in the conversation can become smaller (Wehrle et al., 2023). There does not appear to be a difference between male-to-male, female-to-male, or female-to-female conversations (Wehrle et al., 2023).

Theory of Mind

Although language and social skills deficits are both symptoms of ASD, research shows that theory of mind (ToM) may also play a part (Ringshaw et al., 2022). ToM appears as soon as 14 months of age in neuro-developing toddlers, and children with ASD show deficits in ToM skills (Ringshaw et al., 2022). ToM is the ability to identify actions, what happens next, what should happen, and what is going to happen (Donne et al., 2023). This skill allows for the tracking of inferences and mental states, including our own (Donne et al., 2023). ToM skills is in the group of social decision-making skills by which a person determines decisions founded on moral judgment (Ringshaw et al., 2022).

These decisions begin as early as 15 months in typically developing children, at age 3 they can exhibit equality, and at 6 evaluate deserving concerning merit (Ringshaw et al., 2022).

The definition of ToM is the skill to infer the intentions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of others, to predict their behavior (Donne et al., 2023). These impairments seen in autistic children are also known as perspective-taking abilities; researchers have stated that there is much to be done regarding ToM, but it is linked to perspective-taking abilities (Brewer et al., 2022). In testing with adult ASD subjects, testing was measured in the areas of sarcasm, faux pas, trivial lies, bluff, and misunderstanding (Brewer et al., 2022). As predicted, the autistic adults scored lower than the nonautistic adults, showing that ToM skills can be challenging for the autistic population (Brewer et al., 2022).

Researchers have suggested that people with ASD have difficulty processing social information and determining the next steps in behavior, therefore not knowing what to do or say next (Donne et al., 2023). Researchers have questioned whether teaching these skills can be accomplished (Lecheler et al., 2020). ToM is a social understanding that allows people to foresee their next actions in a conversation or situation with others (Lecheler et al., 2020). Lecheler et al. (2020) shared that comprehension of ToM is accomplished through psychological structure in language in a way that presents emotions and understanding. Sarcasm, irony, and figurative language are also a part of this language structure (Lecheler et al., 2020). Lecheler et al. reported a gap between skills and presentation in everyday usage. This gap could suggest that the ASD population does not have the natural ability to determine ToM (Lecheler et al.,

2020). Ringshaw (2022) reported that intense issues lead to decision-making for ASD individuals in nonsocial situations instead of a lack of understanding.

ASD individuals exhibit traits lacking in communication, and interaction with parents, incapable of processing information, fragile central coherence, lack of motivation, and perception difficulties (Andreou & Skrimpa, 2020). These deficits, according to Andreou and Skrimpa (2020), could be explained by the “broken mirror neurons” theory. This theory suggests that ASD individuals' mirror neurons, which allow the performance of action during observation of others, are malfunctioning, creating an inability to convert the intentions of others and emulate them (Andreou & Skrimpa (2020). According to Andreou and Skrimpa, the inferior frontal cortex, and ventral premotor cortex are pertinent players in the action of facial mimicking, which is crucial for empathy, imitation, and joint attention. Research has suggested that mirror neurons are the bedrock of human cognition and social understanding (Andreou & Skrimpa 2020). The mirror neurons' ability to function properly operates through accessing and perceiving the emotional state of others and allows the individual to replicate core conditions and occurrences (Andreou & Skrimpa, 2020).

Autism and Social Skills

Neuro-developing children learn skills daily without methodical instruction (Alwahbi, 2023). Social skills are in this area of methodical instruction, which is naturally developed (Alwahbi, 2023). The exception is children with ASD, the cognitive difficulties that go along with autism can get in the way of obtaining social rituals independently and instead require structured directions for success (Alwahbi, 2023). The

ASD population struggles to know the difference between the level of importance of social cues; therefore, reading faces and understanding nonverbal language is nonexistent for them (Alwahbi, 2023). Their inability to calculate emotional tendencies and behaviors shows an impact regarding a lack of empathy (Alwahbi, 2023). Furthermore, the ASD population has difficulty with compartmentalizing sections of the social framework to comprehend the complete meaning of a social situation (Alwahbi, 2023).

Social communication is imperative in developing relationships with school-age peers. Students with ASD have difficulty with this ability as the control of joint attention, and verbal and nonverbal language, are lacking (Sutton et al., 2019). This lack of ability creates shortcomings in the classroom setting and leads to even more hardship in social interactions (Sutton et al., 2019). Students with autism will interject into conversations their expertise on a subject that is not on topic, is one-sided, and often causes appearances of odd or weird behavior perception from other students (Sutton et al., 2019). Females are more in tune and will either not speak at all or watch other females to observe how they respond and follow suit, knowing because another female initiated this response theirs will also be accepted (Sutton et al., 2019). With inclusion being more acceptable, students with autism are more prevalent in the regular classroom environment with neurotypical peers (Sutton et al., 2019).

Interventions to assist students with autism to engage in conversations and build relationships are essential to their social success (Sutton et al., 2019). These interventions may look student-specific and related to their social language detriment, peer-lead interventions showing students with autism real-life examples, comprehensive-type

interventions for understanding, and ecological interventions to provide clarity to situations and environments regarding social interactions (Sutton et al., 2019).

Implementing these types of interventions can be challenging in school environments as space, staff, and peers may not be available (Sutton et al., 2019). The training of staff and students for these types of interventions can be a barrier along with a lack of specific curriculum needed are often too much for a school setting to put into place (Sutton et al., 2019). The result of this is ASD students who lack the skills they need to be successful in social environments with same-age peers (Sutton et al., 2019).

Burton et al. (2020) reported that high-functioning autistic females can mask or camouflage their symptoms of autism to others. Females may mimic other girls in their peer group by changing their hair, clothes, and even personalities (Volkers, 2018). This behavior performed daily can be exhausting and result in girls coming home from school and napping from the exhaustion of being something they are not (Volkers, 2018). Difficulties in social appearance are unusual eye gaze, weak eye contact, lack of reciprocal conversation, improper effect, and conversational fluency (Kourtesis et al., 2023). Lack of executive function skills plays a part in the social impairment of ASD individuals (Kourtesis et al., 2023).

Areas of executive function that are affected are inhibition of working memory, cognitive flexibility, and planning (Kourtesis et al., 2023). These social difficulties along with language deficits that include the inability to infer and understand sarcasm, jokes, and nonverbal cues create a social situation that may appear insurmountable (Burton et al., 2020). Examples of social situations or social stories can be an effective way to teach

social skills to the ASD population (Kourtesis et al., 2023). Social stories are a creation of Carol Gray, who developed these stories to assist parents, experts, and ASD individuals with social situations in pictures for understanding and comprehension (Balas-Baconschi & Barbulescu, 2022). This method assists ASD individuals by providing safety in social environments, confidence, and less anxiety (Balas-Baconschi & Barbulescu, 2022). Social stories can provide information regarding situations in various social settings, and behavioral tendencies, giving children with ASD a level of safety that assists in reducing social fears and an influx of emotional regulation (Balas-Baconschi & Barbulescu, 2022). Role-playing, videos, and other real-life day-to-day experiences can also aid in giving ASD individuals a way to comprehend social environments and practice before engaging others in social gatherings (Burton et al., 2020). The more practice ASD individuals have in social experiences the more comfortable they become in knowing what to say and when to say it. This is not natural for the ASD population, but with a little effort, they can become a part of life as they know it (Burton et al., 2020).

Researchers have found that children with ASD who grow up without social skills have difficulty holding a job, college attendance, criminality, drug use, and mental illness (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Adults with autism face a 50% increase in depression and anxiety, which leads to a higher rate of the need for government assistance than neuro-developed peers (Silveria-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Social skills can be a bridge between elementary and middle school when dealing with peers in social environments (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Mind blindness and lack of empathy all stem from perspective-taking and how well autistic individuals can navigate a social situation, conversation, or

relationship (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Silveira-Zaldivar et al. (2021) reported that these difficulties in perspective irregularities come from the areas of the brain's amygdala and cerebral cortex. Areas measured by rating scales in social skills are cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021).

Cooperation is the ability to follow guidelines, rules, suggestions, and messages (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Assertion is a crucial step in social skills; it is knowing what to say and what not to say to any individual, also known as a personal filter. This also involves the ability to stand up for themselves and to know when to ask for assistance (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Responsibility involves giving and showing respect for others and their accomplishments (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). Empathy assists in making friends and growing relationships with others. It is imperative in relationships and the ability to show kindness to others (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021).

Asperger's Syndrome aka High-Functioning Autism

Since the removal of Asperger's syndrome from the DSM-5, it has been replaced with the term high-functioning autism (Alduais et al 2023). Reports have shown that approximately two-thirds of individuals diagnosed with autism fall within the high-functioning range (Alduais et al 2023). Recent studies have indicated that autism has a high comorbidity rate with mental disorders in high-functioning individuals (Gesi et al., 2021).

High-functioning autism is often mistaken for ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), anxiety, depression, or intellectual disability (Nihit & Gupta 2023). Other behaviors that should be considered for autism are communication and

social impairments, along with obsessive-compulsive disorder (Nihit & Gupta 2023).

Nihit & Gupta (2023) reported that individuals evaluating high-functioning autistic females pay attention to subtleties such as deficits in ToM, nonverbal cues, and abstract reasoning. This population does not always score within qualifying parameters and looking outside the box at medication sensitivities may provide information for diagnosing (Nihit & Gupta 2023).

This subtle form of ASD may not manifest itself until adolescence or adulthood during a period when social interaction is more prominent (Gesi et al., 2021). Hartwell et al (2020) described Asperger syndrome as a developmental condition categorized by societal miscues, and focused interests, without language or cognitive detriment. According to the Global Burden of Disease Study, there are 37.2 million cases of Asperger syndrome in the world (Hartwell et al., 2020). The Asperger population appears cognizant of their lack of social abilities and motivation to form friendships or increase social events for fear of betrayal, bullying, and rejection among peers (Hartwell et al., 2020). It has been reported in studies that females often score lower on questionnaires regarding autism characteristics, showing the presence of mental disorders that can include specifically, anorexia, borderline personality, and social phobia. These disorders frequently stem from unrecognized autism in younger years (Gesi et al., 2021).

High-functioning autism is the new buzzword for Asperger's syndrome (Nihit & Gupta 2023). ASD characteristics have a propensity to be dismissed because of other more conspicuous mental health behaviors (Nihit & Gupta 2023). Social anxiety disorder can be misinterpreted and is often ASD that is misguided as obsessive-compulsive

disorder (Nihit & Gupta 2023). ADHD is another misguided diagnosis that is missed by professionals. This misdiagnosis can be very detrimental to repetitive behaviors and restricted interests are ASD tendencies that do not require medication (Nihit & Gupta 2023). Professionals should be cognizant of ASD symptoms and recognize these in individuals. These symptoms once addressed could change medication requirements and diagnoses for individuals with undiagnosed autism (Nihit & Gupta 2023). High-functioning autism falls into this category as often missed symptoms are characterized by professionals as something else and left untreated (Nihit & Gupta 2023).

Females and Autism

Burton et al. (2020) reported that researchers have questioned ASD in females due to females that can camouflage ASD characteristics. This ability often results in undiagnosed females and data that is unclear (Burton et al., 2020). Females learn social interactions by watching other typically developing females and interpreting their behaviors as their own (Burton et al., 2020). Volkens (2018) asserted that girls do not present as well as boys when diagnosing ASD. Symptoms for females may be lack of reciprocal pretend play, stimming that is more socially acceptable, exhaustion after school resulting in Jekyll and Hyde behavior, intolerance of crowds, sounds or textures, and difficulty with conversation regarding staying on topic, and turn-taking.

The Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule-2 (ADOS-2) caters to males and often misses females stating they score too low when in reality, this instrument does not measure female ASD behaviors (Volkens, 2018). ASD females may play princesses, with dolls, or other female-type interests, but it is how they play that needs to be observed.

They may sort clothing or shoes by color, or the dolls may repeat the same verses frequently (Volkers, 2018). Females pay more attention to social interactions than males at a much earlier age. They tend to put more emphasis on this area and try to behave socially appropriately according to pressures and observations (Volkers, 2018). In an attempt to be an acceptable member of a social group, girls may pick out a particular individual and begin to mimic their actions, dress, and hairstyle (Volkers, 2018). ASD females may quell their need to stim or behave oddly due to previous bullying or chastisement from peers (Volkers, 2018).

ASD females will internalize their emotions appearing shy or withdrawn (Volkers, 2018). This behavior can lead to anxiety and depression as social skills regarding conversation and relationships are missed by educators who do not realize these inabilities (Volkers, 2018). Volkers (2018) asserted that eating disorders, self-harming, and obsessive-compulsive disorder can all be symptoms of ASD that go undiagnosed in the early years. This lack of diagnosis in early years can result in bullying and sexual assault for women due to the inability to understand social cues, personal power, and the ability to say no (Volkers, 2018).

ASD females and males exhibit different behavior traits; females tend to be passive, calm, shy, and socially appropriate, which can result in emotivity, sensitivity, and compassion (Pires et al., 2023). Males tend to exhibit aggressiveness, hyperactivity, logic, strength, and rationality (Pires et al., 2023).

Relationships and Dating

Interactive relationships are a significant part of life for everyone, including those with ASD (Mogavero & Ko 2020). Research has exhibited that the ASD population has a profound sense of community when involved in romantic relationships (Mogavero & Ko, 2020). Studies have shown that parents with ASD children frequently believe that their ASD children would not be able to function in romantic relationships, and, therefore, do not have conversations regarding the topics of relationships, birth control, or sexual intercourse (Mogavero & Ko, 2020). The lack of social skills exhibited by ASD adults can lead to inappropriate discussions regarding sex in romantic relationships (Mogavero & Ko, 2020). Relationships can include a more delicate type of conversation and nonverbal perception that ASD adults are missing (Mogavero & Ko, 2020). Having little or no perspective of others can make it difficult to maneuver through a relationship when an understanding of behavior is missing (Mogavero & Ko, 2020).

These differences may become frustrating and cause females to become uninterested or fearful, which can result in harassment or stalking advances that lead to even more confusion (Mogavero & Ko, 2020). Often information obtained about relationships is from the internet and is inaccurate or unrealistic; this can lead to misconceptions and outlandish expectations that are unwanted and off-putting by females (Mogavero & Ko, 2020). Researchers reported a plethora of reasons why ASD adults are not interested in dating they range from “it is too exhausting, so I don’t know how, and fear of not meeting expectations” (McMahon et al., p.310 2021). Verbal and nonverbal communication are the greatest identifiers regarding issues with dating. Responses of not

knowing when to end a conversation, lack of ability to read body language, and ability to tell when someone they are not interested were all factors (McMahon et al., 2021).

Anxiety can also be attributed to relationship failures as females with ASD females report elevated levels of anxiety when involved in relationships and trying to maintain friendships, with the difficulty of reading behaviors and social engagements that go along with it (Hancock et al., 2020). Social engagements are a substantial portion of the dating scene and cause questions to be asked regarding how much influence these social adventures have on relationships (Hancock et al., 2019).

This gap in practice is having a detrimental effect on adults with ASD as they do not have the social and nonverbal skills to contribute to relationships with a successful ending (Hancock et al., 2020). The need for relationship skills for adults with ASD is important and relevant to their success as members of their community (Hancock et al., 2020). A study completed with ASD adolescents who were trained in psychosexual knowledge (knowledge of sexuality and social interactions) showed positive advancement in their knowledge base, interpersonal boundary awareness, and an overall improvement in relationship skills (McMahon et al., 2021).

Perception is reciprocal in dating, and it is essential to consider how partners react to their ASD date (McMahon et al., 2021). Online dating research has shown that females respond more positively to partners when ASD is disclosed rather than finding out through perception or negative behaviors (McMahon et al., 2021). This disclosure allows ASD individuals to provide guidelines and positive information regarding

behaviors and expectations, sensory issues such as lighting, smells, and noise can be essential information when planning a social outing (McMahon et al., 2021).

Populations with neurodevelopmental disabilities such as autism are sexually assaulted at higher rates than neuro-developing peers (Pedgrift & Sparapani, 2022).

Without training in inappropriate sexual behavior, demonstrating unexpected behaviors involving public masturbation, touching others' private parts without permission, and acting sexually inappropriately with children can lead to difficulties with law enforcement (Pedgrift & Sparapani, 2022). Individuals exhibiting these behaviors often end up in restricted living environments and have no idea why and frequently end up in the criminal justice system (Pedgrift & Sparapani, 2022). These occurrences create vulnerability for individuals with autism, which leads to isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and the inability to have significant relationships with preferred others (Pedgrift & Sparapani, 2022).

Pedgrift and Sparapani (2022) found only eight studies regarding training for individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities. This gap in practice shows the need for training in the areas of social skills, pragmatic language, employment skills, relationship skills, and basic living and community skills (Pedgrift & Sparapani, 2022). Females not being diagnosed until adulthood reported intimacy to be difficult as they were unsure of themselves and their confidence levels in being a sexual partner (Kock et al., 2019). Women with autism shared that they find spontaneity to be challenging along with sensory issues that partners may view as rejection (skin-to-skin touching; Kock et al.,

2019). Being thought of as weird, inadequate, and for some, a waste of time were all opinions shared in this study (Kock et al., 2019).

The need for sexuality and relationship training is becoming an area of interest for educators and researchers as this type of training can increase mental health, confidence, and better understanding for the ASD population (Crehan et al., 2022). A common place to look for information regarding this type of training is the internet, although it is not recommended as the information is often misleading or in some cases safety issues are left out (Crehan et al., 2022). Same-age friends can be a reliable source of information regarding flirting, dating, and consent; this can be accomplished through modeling or failed attempts (Crehan et al., 2022). This training can be challenging as the language components and ToM are essential in navigating this area (Crehan et al., 2022). The gap in this practice is clear as ASD populations become adults and members of communities in Southwest Florida (Crehan et al., 2022).

Exploitation is a concern for women with autism as they often do not know what to do or what to say when feeling this way (Kock et al., 2019). Hugging is another area in which women with autism find relationships difficult. Their partners would want to hug them, and they just really wanted to be alone or not touched (Kock et al., 2019). Another area of concern is dates do not have a set of rules or guidelines to follow; each one is different, and knowing what to do or say is challenging (Kock et al., 2019).

Dating abuse is an issue for all youth, but autistic youth are more vulnerable to it than most (Rothman et al., 2021). Reports have suggested that 11% of the adolescent ASD population engage in date stalking-related behaviors 12% undergo dating violence,

and 26% have suffered coerced sex by dating partners (Rothman et al., 2021). Schools have training programs to promote dating violence prevention, but none have been adapted for the autistic population in the school setting (Rothman et al., 2021). This is another gap in autism practices that must be addressed to provide healthy information to this population (Rothman et al., 2021). This is not only an educational problem but a community problem; this population must be given the skills they need to function in society (Rothman et al., 2021).

A Community Problem

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) is an organization that assists the autism population with a plethora of resources if the person lives in the right location (CARD, 2023). For people with Autism in the Port Charlotte, Florida, area CARD centers are not available (CARD, 2023). Varsity Tutors (n.d.) is a resource for academic assistance for ASD students in the Port Charlotte area. The Department of Health in Florida offers three programs for support, and the Asperger/Autism Network (ANNE) assists ASD individuals by phone but does not go into detail as to what their support consists of or looks like (Autism Resources/Florida Department of Health, n.d.). The Asperger/Autism Spectrum Education Network (ASPEN) offers educational support and advocacies but does not provide any learning for social interactions for ASD individuals (Autism Resources/Florida Department of Health, n.d.). The last resource is the Autism Society of Florida; this organization offers support groups, advocacy, and training (does not say in what) to assist people with autism (Autism Resources/Florida Department of Health, n.d.).

The gaps in practice are clear; there are few resources that assist with social skills, employment skills, relationship skills, and safety skills to assist with dating and how to read the signs of danger (Kock et al., 2019). The Florida Department of Education does not have any resources for ASD individuals at this time in Southwest Florida (Solodev, n.d.). The website speaks of the Division of Blind Services, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, none of which refer to autism and the needs that go along with it (Solodev, n.d.).

Summary

The autism population is not going away. As practitioners and doctors become better-trained symptoms are being recognized and diagnosed for females with autism (Morrisroe et al., 2023). As individuals with autism age out of school and enter their communities, they are left without knowing how to function in society as these skills are not being taught in the schools of Southwest Florida (CCPS, n.d.). This creates a dire situation in which there is a population of individuals who do not/cannot be a successful part of their communities. They have the will to learn and the drive to succeed (Kelly et al., 2018). However, without proper skills, they can develop mental disorders, withdraw, and become dependent on government aid (Silveira-Zaldivar et al., 2021). This can be corrected by providing information and training to autistic individuals. Such services can help individuals become successful members of society and contribute instead of taking from the community. They can be employed, own homes, have successful relationships, and become functioning members of society in Southwest Florida. Human service providers must assist this population and aid in their success (nationalhumanservices.org,

n.d.). Everyone deserves the opportunity to find happiness and independence, and the autistic population is no different. They need some assistance and understanding of what is expected, and Educators can provide that.

Section 2: The Project

Introduction

The main components of this project are listed below. The components consist of a project statement, which explains why this project is occurring. The project design explains what type of program is being used. The methodology explains the role of the researcher, participation recruitment and sampling strategy, a logic model, the protocol or interview questions, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the summary. This section explains the why of this study and how the information is collected, the privacy of the participants, and why this is important moving forward to assist high-functioning females.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study was to record the experiences of high-functioning females with autism to show the gaps in the practice and what human service professionals should be addressing for this population in Southwest Florida. By doing this, the data may reveal what ASD females require for success in the world of dating to ensure safety and become thriving members of their community instead of government dependents.

Project Design

My project is a formative program evaluation as I gathered data showing gaps in practice. These gaps in practice could be addressed to further assist people with autism in becoming successful members of their communities.

Methods

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to interview participants and record the data they provided to show the gaps in practice and what programs the autistic population could benefit from in their daily lives. This involved talking to 9 participants and recording their experiences with dating and romantic relationships in Southwest Florida, including what was confusing, what they liked, what they did not like, what they did not comprehend, whether they would do anything different, and what they would like to learn. I used an interview platform with strictly anonymous participants.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

- High-functioning females between the ages of 18-35
- This population did not include minors or anyone below the age of consent.
- The level of autism these females exhibited may have given the impression that they did not have any issues. They could hold a conversation, look people in the eye, and can be socially appropriate at times.
- High-functioning females could appear neurotypical, but after talking with them, their level of comprehension and what they comprehended compared to what they did not say in conversation was revealed. They may have understood who was safe and who was dangerous. They could become easily confused as they may not realize nonverbal rituals or silent expectations of dating.

- The sample was nine participants as no other themes emerged from the data. This gave an overall picture of comprehension of this population and a place to start to see gaps in the practice and what could benefit this population moving forward.
- Participants were acquired through word of mouth, ads, and acquaintances of other educators. Consent was required with a 50-dollar gift certificate for participation. They were given a number and further known by that number moving forward. Names or locations were not shared.
- With nine participants varying in age, experiences should be unique. A larger sample size may see repeat experiences and redundancy. The location of participants should also aid in keeping experiences singular and distinctive to the individual females.

Interview Questions

Interview questions were used to collect data and establish experiences for high-functioning females with dating and nonverbals that go along with dating. The literature source is from the information gathered during the literature review and the research used to create it. The data collected revealed the gaps in practice and what training needs to be done to assist this population to be safe and confident when dating and forming successful relationships. Consent was obtained from each participant, and a number was assigned to them. From that moment on, they were known as a number. Their personal information will be kept locked to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

I was the sole interviewer ensuring answers were confidential and discretion was practiced. A 50-dollar gift card was given to each participant for their time and information regarding the data collected. The interview questions are listed below:

1. What do you like about dating?
2. What do you not like about dating?
3. Can you tell when someone likes you?
4. What do you say when someone asks you out on a date?
5. Do you have difficulty with a conversation on a date?
6. What do you wear on a date?
7. Would you like to be picked up or meet someplace neutral?
8. Do you like physical greetings? (hugs, kiss on the cheek, handshake)
9. Do you have a certain type of person you like to date?
10. Does physical appearance affect who you date?
11. What do you do if your date wants to hold your hand?
12. Does physical contact raise your anxiety? If so, why, and how much?
13. What do you do if your date wants to try to put their arm around you?
14. What do you do if your date wants to try to kiss you?
15. Does intimacy make you uncomfortable?
16. How long do you date someone before becoming intimate with them?
17. Can you tell when someone wants to be intimate with you? What nonverbal signs do they exhibit?
18. How do you manage a situation on a date in which you do not feel safe?

19. Do you ever feel pressured or unsafe in relationships?
20. What does your ideal relationship look like?
21. What kind of information would help you to be successful in relationships and dating?

Data Collection

The data were collected from each participant. This was done in a comfortable environment either by Zoom meeting or in person. The participants determined the site to help them feel comfortable during the interview. I collected the data on a digital recorder, which was then transcribed verbatim from the recorder. The interviews on the digital recorder were deleted. Before starting, I stated the date and time of the interview my name, and the number of the participant being interviewed. I kept recruiting until I had nine participants as less than this amount was not an option. When the interview was over, I asked them how they thought it went and if there anything they would like to add or changes they would like to make to their answers. I thanked them for their participation and presented them with a 50-dollar gift card for their time. Follow-ups were not necessary as there were no incorrect answers.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Plan

I collected data using a digital recorder to record each interview session with my participants. They were referred to by the number they were assigned when consent was given. My participant and myself are the only people who know what number they have been assigned. I transcribed the data, after which I deleted the recorded interviews. The

transcriptions will be locked in a filing cabinet along with consent forms for confidentiality reasons. I have the only key.

Ethical Considerations for Data Collection

The IRB approval number for this study was 05-20-24-1119967. The search for participants was addressed through statements put out to families and through mutual contacts to find females between the ages of 18-35 to be a part of a study that could assist future human service professionals in knowing the gaps in practice so that they better serve high-functioning autistic females and the world of dating/relationships. I used the templates supplied by the IRB board to ensure that all requirements and guidelines will be followed. The study and requirements were explained fully to the participants, including the reason for the study, their part in the study, and their complete anonymity. When full understanding was accomplished, they were asked to participate, and no coercion was inflicted. The participation was completely voluntary. If they did not wish to participate, their appreciation for their time was acknowledged with a thank you.

When participants signed their consent, they were assigned a number, and from that point on were referred to during the study by that number. Names were not used nor the locations of participants so there is no way to trace them. Data were collected through an interview process with a time set up that is convenient for the participant.

A 50-dollar gift card was provided to participants who finished the interview. Their time was valuable, and I appreciated their participation; therefore, compensation was awarded for their efforts. The transcription took place when the interview was completed, and their original interview sheets were destroyed. When the results were

calculated, any remaining data were destroyed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Once interviews were completed and transcribed, participants received a copy and were asked to verify the content.

Summary

Everyone must have a chance to be happy. Females with autism may require some training, but they too can be happy. The gap in practice shows that human service providers should assist all people ensuring everyone's needs are met, ensuring females with autism know when they are safe on a date and what nonverbal language to look for. They should have the skills to make friends and be successful in the working world with correct social skills and appropriate language in Southwest Florida.

This study provides information that can allow future interventions and training for this population that can allow them to become successful members of their communities and live a more normal lifestyle. They can accomplish this with the right knowledge and understanding of social situations and how to act appropriately. Human service providers must assist the people who need them.

Section 3: Results of the Study

Introduction

High-functioning females strive to function in society without being noticed as different. They observe other females and learn about their social interactions (Milner et al., 2019). They attempt to fit in and be a part of society at an exhausting cost, often needing a nap to recover from being something that does not come naturally (Volkers, 2018). This study was completed to explore the dating experiences of high-functioning autistic females and look for gaps in practice. These gaps could reveal weaknesses and difficulties that could be addressed by helping this population become more confident in dating and relationships.

Research Questions

Do females with high-functioning autism understand the rituals of dating and the social aspects of relationships in Southwest Florida?

What interventions need to be provided for this population to be socially successful and to promote dating safety in Southwest Florida?

Thematic Analysis and Presentation of the Results

Thematic analysis is a review of data that looks for patterns and themes. This type of analysis can assist in discovering an understanding of issues and help to acquire solutions that may contribute to better practices in human services that may be of significant importance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes that emerged in this data collection were Communication, Physical Touching, Boundaries, Expectations, and Family Support. Thematic analysis includes sorting of data, coding, interpretation of the

results, and a summary. This study gaged the experiences of high-functioning women ages 18-35 and their experiences with dating.

I gathered the data and interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, resulting in five categories that reflect the responses received. I then coded the data into three groups: very uncomfortable, slightly uncomfortable, and relaxed. The gaps in practice are clear as the participants had similar answers to the study questions. High-functioning autistic females need assistance to ensure confidence and strength in their relationships that are missing. These missing pieces can be addressed by human service providers in each of these five areas.

The responses were coded into three sections based on the responses, very uncomfortable, slightly uncomfortable, and relaxed. Very uncomfortable describes the participants' negative responses to the questions. Questions were grouped according to similarity. Slightly uncomfortable describes the participant's responses when the time was involved, determining they be may compliant upon getting to know the person in 3-6 months. Relaxed describes positive responses to questions without needing time or effort. The numbers in the categories mentioned above refer to the number of participants that had the same answers.

Communication

The women in this study all mentioned struggles with communication and conversations. They spoke of difficulty with being asked on a date and the conversations that would occur on the date. Getting to know a person was of great concern as engaging with someone they did not know created anxiety, a lack of expectations, and the

possibility of no boundaries set up. Some mentioned not truly liking dating and the level of work it took for this ritual as not being worth the effort. Table 1 shows the communication responses.

Table 1

Communication Responses

Communication	Very uncomfortable	Slightly uncomfortable	Relaxed
Communication errors do not know what to say hard to have reciprocal conversations	7	2	0
Do not know when someone likes them	9	0	0
Conversation on a date	9	0	0

The participants all showed difficulty with conversations in the dating ritual. This included being able to tell when someone liked them, knowing what to say when asked out on a date, and how to hold a conversation on the date. They mentioned anxiety regarding the unknown and not knowing what to expect or how to engage with their date. They mentioned knowing the person was helpful as it gave them some concept of what to expect but not enough to be relaxed. They also mentioned needing to know details of the date and what to expect.

Physical Touching

Physical touch was an area of great anxiety for many of the participants. They mentioned if they had the opportunity to get to know the person, they would be more open to hand-holding, arms around them, and kissing. If they did not know them,

rebuffing was mentioned along with other negative remarks. Comments were strong and very clear in this area. Participants mentioned high anxiety when talking about this and the unexpected. When asked how long before they would be comfortable with physical touch, answers varied from two to three dates to 3-6 months. Table 2 illustrates physical touching responses among participants.

Table 2

Physical Touching Responses

Physical touching	Very uncomfortable	Slightly uncomfortable	Relaxed
It depends on how long I know the person	8	1	0
Would rather not	6	2	1
Intimacy is hard, I have to know them for 3-6 months.	6	1	1

All responded negatively to physical contact. They went on to say as time passed, they were more open to it and would allow it. Length of time varied per participant and level of comfort. The responses to this question would suggest that participants have expectations when it comes to dating and what that entails. Things such as physical contact are considered when considering dating. Some mentioned setting expectations and boundaries, others just considered it a part of the process. All participants shared some level of anxiety due to physical touching. Although the level varied between participants, all said yes. Some revealed that without consent, no level of physical touching was ok. Others were more lenient, depending on the level of knowing their date.

It is apparent that for these participants physical touching is difficult and something they prefer not to do if given a choice.

Boundaries

All of the participants had a level of boundaries, depending on the participant's comfort zone is the level of their boundaries. Strangers tended to raise the level of boundaries and safety. The participants were not easy to trust others and required some amount of time when it came to relaxing around anyone. The popular answer was “It depends,” much like psychology, but at the same time, participants were completely closed off to the idea of friendship and something deeper. With time, they all agreed comfort could be found and a relationship could bloom. Table 3 shows participants’ responses to boundaries.

Table 3

Boundaries Responses

Boundaries	Very uncomfortable	Slightly uncomfortable	Relaxed
Being picked up	8	1	0
Meeting in a neutral place	8	0	1
Feeling unsafe in a relationship	5	3	1

Eight out of nine chose a neutral place, as they mentioned, not wanting to be trapped or feel vulnerable. They were all in agreement that meeting someone they did not know well was a bad idea and may put them at risk. Participants all had a plan of action,

which suggests they can notice unsafe situations and the crossing of boundaries and could make sure they did not find themselves in one. If they happened to feel unsafe, all had a plan to ensure their safety and escape the situation. It was mentioned that when boundaries were crossed often, the relationship was ended because of it. Explanations were not given every time depending on the participant.

The majority of participants had experienced pressure in relationships, and safety was an issue. The remaining participants shared they had good family support and had not experienced this concern. They were also aware of their boundaries and expectations, and when these were not met, they ended the relationship as spending time alone was ok with them. Comfort was high on the expectations list and one that if not met could end the relationship quickly.

Expectations

The participants had very clear expectations. The issue was communicating them to others. This was the difficult part and could result in misunderstandings and relationships that never got started. Socializing for them was difficult and often something they did not want to put out the effort to do. Their answers were varied as some participants were not as rigid as others. If a friendship were established, this could aid in an easier transition and fewer communication difficulties. Table 4 shows the expectation responses of the participants.

Table 4*Expectations Responses*

Expectations	Very uncomfortable	Slightly uncomfortable	Relaxed
I need to know what to expect	6	3	0
I need to know them for a long time before I am comfortable	7	2	0
Difficulty in knowing how to express my expectations	6	3	0

Seven out of nine participants were not comfortable with intimacy for a variety of reasons. Anxiety and the unknown played a part in the situation. This population wanted to know what was going to happen and when. Expectations were often not discussed, creating an uncomfortable ambiance that participants wanted to avoid. Participants appeared to agree that intimacy needs to be further along in the relationship, if at all. Each participant needed to ensure they were comfortable and in a place where they knew their partner well. Without these elements, there was a good chance that intimacy would not happen and would continue to stay that way until expectations were met.

Family Support

Family support was an important part of the basis these young females needed to grow up with. When this does not occur, it creates a world of distrust, fear, and not knowing how to act in situations that require interaction with others. Autistic females will mask or camouflage their behavior to fit in (Volkers, 2018). This type of social skill interaction may be appropriate or inappropriate depending on who they are modeling.

They do not know the difference (Woodcock et al., 2020). This population does not know how to ask or what to say to get the assistance they need at an early age (Volkers, 2018). They spend most of their adolescent age wondering, insecure, and wanting to be alone, but fit in (Wong et al., 2022). Table 5 shows the participants' family support responses.

Table 5

Family Support Responses

Family support	Very uncomfortable	Slightly uncomfortable	Relaxed
Feelings of unsafe a call for family or a friend for help	3	5	1
If family had supported me and told me things about dating it would have been easier	6	3	0
Feelings of insecurity about how to act. Did not know how to ask for help	7	2	0

The majority of participants had experienced pressure in relationships and safety was an issue. The remaining participants shared they had good family support and had not experienced this concern. They were also aware of their boundaries and expectations, and when these were not met, they ended the relationship as spending time alone was ok with them. Comfort was high on the expectations list and one that if not met could end the relationship quickly. The misdiagnosis of these females for so long has led to social inadequacies, being unable to recognize abusive situations, and a level of insecurity that could have all been avoided (Milner et al., 2019). Moving forward, I hope that this population can receive the support they need to be confident young females who know exactly what they want and how to get it.

I want to thank all of my participants for their time and honesty regarding high-functioning autistic females and dating. They are all amazing young females and like everyone else deserve to be happy and safe in relationships. Below are my recommendations that could assist these young women in moving forward in relationships and life.

Recommendations

1. Training in reciprocal conversation, how to get through quiet spots, topics of interest, and how to begin and end conversations.
2. Training on how to read nonverbal language and faces.
3. How to be ok near someone without being anxious.
4. Defining what friendship and relationship behaviors look like
5. Defining good expectations and bad expectations in a relationship.

* These are merely recommendations and may not work for all high-functioning autistic females but can make life easier for some. *

High-functioning autistic females are aware of their shortcomings and what is missing in their social skills but may not know how to express them to get assistance. This study supports my research questions and the assistance this population could use to address these issues. This population spoke of a lack of understanding of nonverbal language and reading faces. They were unsure of how to get their needs met and shared they often just let them go as they do not know how to express themselves in this category. They each had a plan if feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in a dating situation. This involved support from family and friends who could assist them with an escape if needed.

The conceptual framework consisted of communication, language, and social skills. These three areas were reflected in their responses as areas that needed improvement to ensure a sense of confidence and stability within themselves. All mentioned difficulties with communication regarding conversations, language issues that resulted in a lack of understanding, and social skills that included masking and pretending to be something they were not.

These study participants exhibited behaviors that are explained as common traits of high-functioning autistic females in the literature review. They shared feelings of being by themselves rather than exerting the energy it takes to form relationships. They expressed a lack of social skills, pragmatic difficulties, and the inability to judge the direction of conversations in order what to say next (Wong et al., 2022). These

difficulties are creating an unsuccessful experience for this population. All of these difficulties affect being productive community members in employment, living, and building relationships (Wong et al., 2022).

Presentation of the Final Logic Model

Figure 1 shows my final logic model for high-functioning autistic females and dating.

Figure 1

Final Logic Model

NAME OF PROGRAM/PROJECT:					
High-Functioning Autistic Females and Dating					
SITUATION:					
Experiences of High-Functioning Females and Dating Experiences					
PRIORITIES/GOAL:					
To find the gaps in practice regarding high-functioning females and dating experiences					
INPUTS	OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES		
	Activities	Participants	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Autistic Females ages 18-35 Curriculum Trainers or Facilitators	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conversations 2. Expectations 3. Setting Boundaries 4. Learning to read faces and non-verbal cues 5. Being ok with physical contact. 	High-Functioning Autistic Females	Improve understanding of social interactions regarding relationships	Practice to understand non-verbal cues, reading faces, and boundaries	Ensure a level of confidence for this population to be successful in social relationships.
ASSUMPTIONS			HINDERING FACTORS		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Autistic females do not understand nonverbal cues 2. Autistic females do not know how to read faces. 			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of family support 2. Lack of conversational judgment 3. Setting boundaries 4. Setting expectations 5. Communicating their needs 		

ASSUMPTIONS	HINDERING FACTORS
3. Autistic females have difficulty setting expectations. 4. Autistic females have difficulty setting boundaries. 5. Autistic females can set themselves up for abuse as they do not know how to articulate their needs.	

EVALUATION PLAN:
My study revealed the weaknesses in the understanding of dating and relationships for the women interviewed. They all agreed having a support system and training in some areas would benefit them.

Outliers

The outliers in this study were children. When motherhood enters into the picture, there are changes in thinking regarding being a mother and not having children. This scenario could affect some aspects of dating. Their answers were similar when asked the same questions as the women who did not have children. The changes were babysitting and managing time. Finding a person who was ok with a child in the picture could also be a consideration that nonmothers do not face.

Summary

Autism is a communication disorder that affects language, social skills, and pragmatic language. It consists of repetitive behaviors that can influence everyday living, confidence, and building relationships (Milner et al., 2019). Males and females do not share the same characteristics, and, therefore, females have been underdiagnosed for years (Volkers, 2018). This has led to women who did not understand their behavior or how to alleviate the anxiety they experienced daily. Educators and parents are often not providing the support females need to be socially successful and build lasting

relationships. These shortcomings are affecting everyone as this population is misunderstood and often made to feel less because of it.

This study recorded the dating experiences of nine women ages 18-35 and their understanding of building relationships. Their answers reflected a lack of knowledge that neurotypical women do not experience. They struggled with conversation, the inability to read faces, and letting others know of their boundaries and expectations. Abuse and safety were concerns for these women as some of them had already experienced abuse. My hypothesis was proven that this population would benefit from training in reading faces, communicating boundaries, nonverbal cues, and conversation. Building confidence and understanding is imperative for these women to become successful members of society and have secure and positive relationships.

Section 4: Conclusion and Reflections

Introduction

My study was based on the hypothesis that high-functioning females do not understand the components of dating and relationships. The results of the study support my hypothesis and the gaps in practice. This population is not taught the social skills required to manage relationships and build friendships. This training has been left out of the educational process thus leaving this population ignorant and in danger. As a human service provider, this is not ok and should be addressed. No one can function at their best without the proper information.

Reflection of Self

Paying it forward is something that everyone should practice. Becoming a school psychologist and now a Doctor of Human Services is exactly how I do that. Helping others to be the best they can be is my passion. Everyone should have the tools they need to be successful and prospering members of their community. This population is no different, and given the correct tools, they can be positive members of their community.

Education is forever changing, new curriculum, new teachers, and new administration. Special education is a department that is often overlooked and ignored. In Southwest Florida, according to the director of psychology services, resources for autistic students do not exist. Students with disabilities require more resources than the general educational population. However, the funding goes to the general educational population instead of the students who need it the most. When a student is placed at Charlotte Harbor Center, a school with the highest level of support for medically fragile and behavioral students, the funding stays at the geographical school instead of transferring to Charlotte Harbor Center (CCPS n.d.).

Educators and human service providers are trained to assist students with special needs. Their job is to give these students the tools they need to be not only successful at school but in life. Southwest Florida is not meeting this goal for this population. High-functioning autistic females maintain daily living requirements but do not provide training and teaching to this population. As a former employee of Charlotte Harbor Center, I witnessed this daily. My hope is one day the district administration will notice

the situation and correct it. Until then, autistic children need training to function in society.

Reflection of Scholar-Practitioner

This journey at times was difficult and felt unsurmountable. With financial aid pulling funding every semester and having to prove enrollment, giving up could have been easier. With the support of my chair Dr. Virginia Smith, I stayed the course and continued to focus on my goal. I have discovered in my journey the lack of support and the dire need to provide it for the autistic population. I am polished and have a higher level of professionalism than before and am thankful for the evolution I have gone through.

The tools I need to move forward and assist the autistic population have been learned. I am excited to begin and hope to be effective in the lives of students with autism and their families. Parents need to learn how to interact and provide support for their autistic children. My goal is to assist them in understanding and knowledge of the best way to meet the needs of their children. A little knowledge can go a long way in preventing meltdowns, tantrums, and the destruction of property. The more these students and their families understand autism, the better life can be. This is the definition of a human service provider; this is me.

Recommendations for Human Services Organization or Human Services Field

Advocacy

Human service providers should be providing for the community and advocating for their citizens. The autistic population is a part of every community and should be

allowed to be successful members of the community. This can be done in a variety of ways:

1. Provide educators with training to understand and instruct students with autism.
2. Offer classes for adolescents and young adults in building relationships, employment strategies, and life skills.
3. Engage families in training to support their students with autism and an understanding of their needs.
4. Train law enforcement in autism to allow for understanding of this population when they come into contact with them.
5. Provide consulting opportunities for companies that teach employees interaction skills and an understanding of autism behaviors.

People can show empathy and compassion when they understand behaviors and personalities. This can create a wonderful work environment that allows for camaraderie and teamwork among employees. Production increases can occur along with profit increases. It is a win-win for everyone.

Summary

Autism is a manageable situation if people just take the time to understand it. This population has been studied with males, but females were left undiagnosed (Volkers, 2018). Once a few changes are implemented, schedules are put in place and a two-step direction method is accessed, changes can begin to take place. Autism is a spectrum disorder that impacts individuals differently. High-function autism is more of a challenge

as it is not as apparent as a person who is highly impacted. Evaluations may not qualify an individual as autistic depending on their pragmatic understanding. Nevertheless, autism is present and wreaking havoc in their lives. Assisting this population (which is growing) is imperative to their community success in Southwest Florida and worldwide.

Human service providers must provide the training needed for this population and their families. Communicating with these individuals is interesting and very rewarding once understanding is established. They learn through memorization and practicing routine behavior. It does not take years to learn routines and the strategies necessary for success just patience and love. This can be done, and it should be.

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Appendix A: The Project

The dynamics of the population are changing, based on educational reports from the Florida Department of Education (Solodev. (n.d.)). This means there are more families with autistic children coming to Southwest Florida. According to Rebecca Marazon, head of psychological services for Charlotte County Public Schools, there are no outside resources for this population (CCPS n.d.). They will not be able to live in the communities in Southwest Florida as thriving adults with financial skills, living skills, and social skills. Becoming dependent on government funding instead (McMahon et al. 2021). The gaps in practice show that this is a large problem and one that needs to be addressed to include the ASD population as a part of every community in Southwest Florida (Pires et al. 2023). This process involved a formative needs assessment to determine gaps in practice. The needs assessment showed gaps that should be addressed with this population.

The purpose of the study is to record the experiences of high-functioning females with autism to show the gaps in the practice and what human service professionals should be addressing for this population. My role was to collect the data and record it to provide an analysis of this problem. Confidentiality was established by using numbers for participants and omitting names. The data was collected by interview and transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted to reveal patterns of similarity and differences. Similar answers were combined to reveal 5 subject areas. The subject areas were communication, physical touching, boundaries, expectations, and family support. The study results

revealed that an understanding of social interactions and a higher level of confidence would assist with this issue.

Presentation of the Final Logic Model

Figure 1 Final Logic Model

NAME OF PROGRAM/PROJECT:					
High-Functioning Autistic Females and Dating					
SITUATION:					
Experiences of High-Functioning Females and Dating Experiences					
PRIORITIES/GOAL:					
To find the gaps in practice regarding high-functioning females and dating experiences					
INPUTS	OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES		
	Activities	Participants	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Autistic Females ages 18-35 Curriculum Trainers or Facilitators	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conversations 2. Expectations 3. Setting Boundaries 4. Learning to read faces and non-verbal cues 5. Being ok with physical contact. 	High-Functioning Autistic Females	Improve understanding of social interactions regarding relationships	Practice to understand non-verbal cues, reading faces, and boundaries	Ensure a level of confidence for this population to be successful in social relationships.
ASSUMPTIONS			HINDERING FACTORS		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Autistic females do not understand nonverbal cues 2. Autistic females do not know how to read faces. 3. Autistic females have difficulty setting expectations. 4. Autistic females have difficulty setting boundaries. 5. Autistic females can set themselves for abuse as they do not know how to articulate their needs. 			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of family support 2. Lack of conversational judgment 3. Setting boundaries 4. Setting expectations 5. Communicating their needs 		

EVALUATION PLAN:

My study revealed the weaknesses in understanding in dating and relationships for the women interviewed. They all agreed having a support system and training in some areas would benefit them.

Training and classes are required to assist this population in gaining the skills and confidence they require to be successful in relationships and everyday life. This includes monitoring of progress and observations through role modeling and video modeling to ensure fidelity. Pre- and post-testing could be added to confirm understanding of skills learned and how they apply to social situations. Resources include Social Thinking, Zones of Regulation, and other social resources to enhance skills in situational lessons.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

. The research questions are listed below:

1. What do you like about dating?
2. What do you not like about dating?
3. Can you tell when someone likes you?
4. What do you say when someone asks you out on a date?
5. Do you have difficulty with a conversation on a date?
6. What do you wear on a date?
7. Would you like to be picked up or meet someplace neutral?
8. Do you like physical greetings? (hugs, kiss on the cheek, handshake)
9. Do you have a certain type of person you like to date?
10. Does physical appearance have an effect on who you date?
11. What do you do if your date wants to hold your hand?
12. Does physical contact raise your anxiety? If so, why, and how much?
13. What do you do if your date wants to try to put their arm around you?
14. What do you do if your date wants to try to kiss you?
15. Does intimacy make you uncomfortable?
16. How long do you date someone before becoming intimate with them?
17. Can you tell when someone wants to be intimate with you? What nonverbal signs do they exhibit?
18. How do you manage a situation on a date in which you do not feel safe?
19. Do you ever feel pressured or unsafe in relationships?

20. What does your ideal relationship look like?

21. What kind of information would help you to be successful in relationships and dating