Romantic Relationships: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Young Women who identify a Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder

SHONA LANDON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of East London for the Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

July 2016

Declaration

I declare that while registered as a research degree student at UEL I have not been a registered or enrolled student for another award of this university or of any other academic or professional institution. I declare that no material used in this thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award. I declare that my research required ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (UREC) and confirmation of approval is embedded within the appendices of this thesis.

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Background: It is well established that diagnoses of autism spectrum disorders are increasing in numbers nationally. There has been a recent and growing awareness amongst clinicians of females on the autism spectrum having unique and different presentations, and that these females may be overlooked for diagnoses until later in life. This focus on females has not been reflected in published research; there is a paucity of research on the unique experiences of females on the autism spectrum. Furthermore, whilst research indicates that some young autistic adults aspire to have, and enter, romantic relationships, previous studies have had a quantitative focus and have not explored the unique experiences of females, hence the need for qualitative research on the lived experiences of romantic relationships of young autistic women.

Current research: This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with six young women (aged 19-29) to gather data on their experiences and aspirations about romantic relationships. Five of these young women had received a formal diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder and one had self-diagnosed. This study takes a social constructivist epistemological perspective and used interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyse data.

Key findings and implications: Key themes for individual participants included relationship violence and abuse, child sexual exploitation and grooming, non-monogamy, unassertiveness in relationships, and rejection. Themes which were found across more than one participant included vulnerability and naivety, asexuality and non-heterosexuality, gender identity and confusion about flirting. The implications of these findings are that young autistic women may be vulnerable to relationship abuse or exploitation. This is the first qualitative study where autistic young women have spoken about their non-typical gender identities and sexualities. A committed romantic partnership is an aspiration for some autistic young women and with an increasing focus on aspirations and preparing for adulthood, educational psychologists will have a role in helping support young women to reach these outcomes.

Attached CD: **Transcriptions of Interviews A-G**
                             Audio Recording of Interviews A-G

List of abbreviations and acronyms	
ABA	Applied Behaviour Analysis
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AQ	Autism Quotient
AS	Asperger's Syndrome
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CD	Compact Disc
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
EHCP	Education, health and care plan
EP	Educational psychologist
EPS	Educational psychology service
HFA	High functioning autism
IPA	Interpretative phenomenological analysis
NAS	National Autistic Society

NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NT	Neurotypical
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SRE	Sex and relationship education
SSI	Semi-structured interview
TEP	Trainee educational psychologist
UEL	University of East London

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Chapter Overview

This chapter will first introduce the concepts of autism spectrum disorder and Asperger's Syndrome, then describe how they relate to gender and romantic relationships. The national and local context of the current research will be described and the researcher's position will be explained. Finally, the importance of, and rationale or, the current research will be described.

1.2.   Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome and High Functioning Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is, '*a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people*' (National Autistic Society, 2014). As well as difficulties manifesting in the areas of social communication and interaction, individuals with autism demonstrate restricted interests or repetitive patterns of behaviour. These are known as the Triad of Impairments (Wing and Gould, 1979).

Estimates of prevalence vary widely, although it is thought that more than 1% of the UK population could be on the autistic spectrum (Baird et al., 2006). Numbers of diagnoses being made have steadily increased over recent years, but it has not been established whether this is solely a result of increased knowledge amongst professionals and parents that has led to a rise in referrals for diagnosis (Fombonne, 2005).

The term Asperger's Syndrome (AS) has traditionally been used to describe individuals who meet the diagnostic criteria for ASD, but do not have associated learning difficulties (Attwood, 2007). Confusingly, AS was previously recognised as a specific diagnostic category by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 1994) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition. However, in a recent update of its manual (APA, 2013), AS is not a distinct diagnosis, but is now considered to fall under the umbrella term of ASD. AS is therefore now often used interchangeably with the term high functioning autism or HFA. This current research will focus on AS/HFA, and will not discuss the ASD population that has associated learning difficulties

of severe language impairments. The terms Asperger's Syndrome and autism/autistic will be used interchangeably, and will aim to reflect the preferred language of the person being discussed.

1.3.   Autism and Gender

There is a well-established gender discrepancy in this area, with more men and boys receiving autism diagnoses. Fombonne's (2005) analysis of 37 studies showed that estimates for male: female ratios in autism diagnoses varied from 1.4:1 to 15.7:1 globally. Gould (2014) has suggested that there is a bias in diagnosis, with professionals being less likely to diagnose girls and women than males. Wing (1981) found that men are around fifteen times more likely to be diagnosed with AS/HFA than women, yet it is now widely believed that ASD is more common in females than previously thought (Attwood, 2007). ASD may be 'masked' in females as their obsessive interests are often those that typical girls enjoy, such as horses or fiction, they are skilled at imitating the social behaviour of their peers and they are less likely to externalize anxiety with aggressive behaviour that would attract attention from teachers, and existing diagnostic tools have been developed using male participants (Gould, 2014, Attwood, 2007, Lawson 2000). Women who do receive diagnoses often do so later in life, unfortunately often once anxiety has reached levels attracting attention from mental health services (Gould, 2014). Indeed, the Lorna Wing Centre in Kent, which diagnoses adult women, receives many referrals from mental health services which refer women being treated for diagnoses such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders or personality disorders, but throughout their school years their ASD had not been recognized (Gould, 2014).

Despite the possibility of different rates of referrals and diagnoses for males and females, described by Gould (2014), there may be other reasons why autism appears more prevalent in boys and men. Baron-Cohen's (2003) Extreme Male Brain theory has been influential in shaping the common understanding of ASD. Theory of Mind (ToM) is the ability to take the perspective of others, which it is a well-established difficulty for those with autism (Frith and Happé, 1999). This cognitive skill requires some ability to empathise and to imagine oneself in another's position. Baron-Cohen argues

that, at a population level, men are better able to 'systemise' information using logical problem solving, whereas women are overall better at empathising, or understanding others' emotions and perspectives. He argues that, because he found autistic participants were most successful at systemizing tasks, and least successful at empathising tasks, autism can be conceptualized as reflecting an Extreme Male Brain. He does not, however, explore how this could manifest differently in in males and females or how societal gender expectations could be of influence (see section 5.2.3 for further discussion of this theory).

1.4. Romantic Relationships

The term 'romantic relationships' is difficult to define without imposing personal judgments or opinions. It could mean different things to different people; some romantic relationships involve love, some casual sex, some are monogamous and others are 'open,' or 'polyamorous'. Some are sexless or only take place online. In research, this term is often used interchangeably with other terms such as intimate, close, personal, didactic relationships (Reis & Rusbult, 2004). The is research is interested in romantic relationships and conceptualises them as a kind of relationship between (usually two, but possibly more) people that is regarded as being more than 'just friends' and usually (but not necessarily) involves physical or sexual attraction or intimacy.

Developmental psychologists such as Erikson (1968) saw the development of important romantic relationships as becoming most important during the 'intimacy vs. isolation' stage of psychosocial development, beginning in young adulthood. He believed that a fully formed sense of self is essential to developing successful romantic relationships. The building of successful relationships (whether romantic, family or friendships) was viewed by Erikson as essential for preventing loneliness.

Other theories of human needs, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and Human Givens theory (Griffin and Tyrrell, 2003) emphasise that security, being loved, emotional intimacy and connectedness and physical intimacy are essential needs for humans. Romantic relationships have the potential to meet these needs.

1.5. Romantic Relationships and Autism

Given the triad of impairments associated with autism, it could be predicted that romantic (and other) relationships would be difficult for those with AS. The existing research into romantic relationships and autism (described in section 2) is scarce, but it does confirm that some young adults with AS aspire to, and enter into, romantic relationships. This information is corroborated by autobiographical accounts and books where autistic adults have been interviewed (Hendrickx, 2015; Simone, 2010) and accounts from clinical experience with this population (Attwood, 2007; Aston, 2003). Existing research is mostly quantitative and questionnaire based, and often includes mainly male samples. Little is yet known about how young women with autism experience romantic relationships.

1.6. The National Context

Since the passing of the Children and Families Act (2014) in England (HM Government, 2014a) and the publication of the new Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) code of practice (HM Government, 2014b) educational psychologists are required to provide statutory psychological advice for education, health and care plans (EHCPs) for young people up to age 25. Statutory psychological advice had previously only been provided up to age 19. Young adults aged 19-25 are a new client group for most EPs. The new SEND Code of Practice emphasises outcome focused planning, with the aspirations of the young person and their family central to the plan. Plans for young people over the age of fourteen have a specific section called 'Preparing for Adulthood.' The emphasis is now on how the educational setting can help support the young person work towards the future he or she aspires to. It is possible that a romantic relationship and family life is an aspiration for some young people, including young autistic women.

Autistic adults are recognized nationally as being at risk of social and economic exclusion, as well as being overlooked or misunderstood by the providers of public services (NICE Clinical Guideline 142, 2012). Since the Autism Act (HM Government, 2009a), and the subsequent publications of The Autism Strategy (HM Government, 2010) and its update, *Think Autism* (HM Government, 2014c), local authorities have been required to provide training

4

about autism to public sector staff and well as a having a responsibility to support transitioning to adulthood. *Think Autism* (HM Government, 2014c) describes the need for local, low level support, such as buddying, in order to help high functioning adults with autism who may not have access to clearly defined support pathways such as are available to those with health or social care needs.

1.7. The Local Context

The trainee educational psychologist conducting this research is on work placement in an educational psychology service (EPS) which is part of a community interest company that provides children's services to two outer London boroughs. Adult services are still provided separately, via the two separate local authorities. Therefore, any support available for young adult women with AS could come from either of these services. Information from colleagues in this EPS suggests that educational psychologists will be most likely to have contact with young autistic adults as part of the process of drawing up an EHCP, rather than through support or therapeutic work. However, as the community interest company continues to develop its Traded Services by offering opportunities for more organisations to 'buy in' EP work, it is possible that the EPS may do more work with other organisations that support young adults, such as further education colleges, in the future.

The local authority's draft local autism strategy (which was written in 2013 but cannot be referenced due to anonymity of the local authority) provides useful information from focus groups with local parents; they expressed desire for more support services for young people with AS. Furthermore, in interviews with young people with AS, one of the topics that was raised was that they wanted more support with life skills, with relationships being specifically mentioned. The draft document also recognises the necessity of providing adequate support to these young adults and the potential costs (social and financial) of not meeting their needs.

The researcher met with an organiser of a local young AS adults support group, who shared that romantic relationships are a frequent concern for young women attending the group, with issues varying from wanting a

boyfriend but not knowing how to get one, to not being interested in the opposite sex and finding it difficult to cope with unwanted attention and approaches from men. On attending a local coffee morning for parents of autistic girls, the researcher noted that relationships and personal safety were topics raised by parents of older teenage girls concerned that their daughter was showing an interest in boyfriends, dating and sex; they sought clarity as to how best to support their daughter(s). Improving the workforce's capacity to recognise and prevent child sexual exploitation (CSE) is also a 'key focus for development' for the community interest company. Kirtley (2013) reported that autistic girls were specifically mentioned by health professionals, who had worked with children affected by CSE, as a potentially vulnerable population. Given the triad of impairments explained in section 1.2, it could be possible that young autistic girls are vulnerable to CSE. Further exploration of this possibility could therefore be beneficial.

1.8.   Introduction to the Researcher's Position

This section will be written in the first person. As explained, I am a trainee educational psychologist (TEP), working with an EPS in outer London. I believe that educational psychologists are well placed to be practitioner-researchers and that we should use both practice-based evidence (from reflecting, co-working and reflexive thinking) and evidence-based practice, to inform our work.

I am white, middle class 29-year-old 'straight' cis-gender woman (meaning that I was born female and my gender identity is that of a woman). Prior to training, I worked for several years as an Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapist, working with young people with autism, including two teenage girls, and their families and schools. I am therefore experienced in communicating with people with autism with different levels of language, communication and cognitive abilities. I recognise that as a trainee educational psychologist I occupy a position of power and it may be easier for my voice to be heard than those of young people, especially those with conditions such as ASD. Therefore, I also see myself as an advocate for the inclusion of those with autism. I recognise the social model of disability (Oliver and Sapey, 2006), which means that I believe that changing the systems young autistic people are

in, for example by helping their staff and peers (and society as a whole) gain a greater understanding of their needs, is necessary for their inclusion.

I attend the University of East London and I agree with core values of the team delivering the professional doctorate in child and educational psychology, of social justice, advocacy and ensuring the voices of young people are heard. Therefore, I hold the view that as well as contributing to academic knowledge, research can and should be used to advocate for, and empower, the populations involved. I also believe there is a therapeutic benefit to being able to tell one's own story, and interviews are a potential way to do this. I also identify as feminist and I aim to take an intersectional approach, meaning that I believe that oppression is multifaceted for diverse groups of women, including autistic women. For further exploration of my position, please see section 5.3.

1.9. The Current Research Rationale

Young autistic women are a group currently under-represented in research. It is also well established that they are likely to be diagnosed later (Gould 2014), meaning that it is possible access to appropriate support could be delayed. It is also well-established that this group is vulnerable to mental health difficulties and emotional distress (Attwood, 2007). Romantic relationships can be increasingly important to wellbeing in young adulthood. We know from clinical (Attwood, 2007) and interview accounts (Hendrickx, 2015) that young autistic women do enter into romantic relationships, but little is known about their experiences of these. At a local level, support with romantic relationships is something that the young autistic population has asked for, so it is important for practitioners to develop their understanding in this field. It is also possible that this population might be vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, it is important from both an academic knowledge, and a professional skills and competencies perspective, that the experiences of young autistic women regarding relationships are researched.

1.10. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the topics of autism and romantic relationships, with a specific focus on girls and young women. The lack of academic research in this area has been discussed. It has been explained how

EPs are becoming more involved with the young adult client group and the relevance of a focus on aspirations. The reasons this area of research is important at both a local and national level are also explained. The researcher presented her position and the chapter concluded with a rationale for the current research. The next section (2) will review the literature in this area, and lead onto the research questions for this thesis (in section 2.4).

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines a systematic review of the existing research evidence relating to current knowledge of the lived experiences of romantic relationships of young women on the autism spectrum. It follows the steps described by Boland et al. (2014) of first defining the question, then identifying and critically assessing the available evidence.   As the current research focuses on the individual lived experiences of young women with autism, rather than attempts to generalise at a population level, the critical analysis will not focus on judgments of statistical power and 'positivist' claims, where attempts are made by the authors to find common 'truths' about this population using empirical data. The systematic process of finding the available evidence, including the databases searched and inclusion and exclusion criteria, will be described, the findings synthesized and conclusions drawn.

2.2.   The Systematic Search

This systematic search aims to answer the following question: What is currently known about the lived experiences of romantic relationships of young women on the autism spectrum?

2.2.1. Databases

A search for academic, peer-reviewed research was conducted in October 2015 using these databases: EBSCO PsycINFO, Science Direct, SCOPUS and EBSCO Education Research Complete.

2.2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 1 summarises the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which are explained in more detail below.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature review

	Included	Excluded
Date published	1996-present	Pre-1996
Publication	Scholarly, peer reviewed journals	Non-fiction books, websites, autobiographical accounts, clinician opinion articles, unpublished theses
ASD diagnosis status	Confirmed by clinicians, self-diagnosed and studies which measured autistic traits in the general population	No specific focus on autism or autistic traits
Participants' gender	At least one female	Male only
Participants' age	At least one aged 16-30	Only under 16s or over 30s
Participants' intelligence level	Average or above intelligence with capacity to communicate	Moderate to severe learning difficulties
Participants' living situation	In the community	All in supported living
Language of publication	English	Not English
Topic of study	An aspect of sexual, romantic or intimate relationships with others	Only solo sexualized behaviour/masturbation, non-romantic relationships

Abstracts of articles were read to determine whether they met the following inclusion criteria: participants must have included at least one young woman (aged 16-30) who either received a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder, self-identified with the condition or showed traits of autism established via a validated screening tool and studies where these populations were researched indirectly. Parental reports of young people with autism were also included because of the paucity of research giving first-hand accounts and because parents can be confidants of their offspring. A specific focus on aspects of romantic, sexual or intimate relationships with others was also required.

'No formal diagnosis' was not an exclusion category, because young women with HFA may often be diagnosed later in life, after contact with mental health services (Gould, 2014). Autistic traits can be considered to be on a 'spectrum,' meaning that there is a wide variety in how the condition affects people and these traits occur to a variety of degrees amongst those in the general population (Atwood, 2007). This researcher therefore considered that research measuring 'autism phenotype,' i.e. the extent to which an individual shows traits of autism, would also produce relevant data.

Pre-1996 articles were excluded, as studies from the pre-Internet era are less applicable to young people's lived experiences today. Additionally, there are regular changes to diagnostic criteria and processes for diagnosing autism, both locally and internationally. For example, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) changed its diagnostic criteria in 1994 with the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (APA, 1994). Therefore, it was felt that the current population of autistic young women may not be comparable to those deemed autistic before this time.

The focus on the female experience in the current research precludes male only studies. Studies of people with learning difficulties are also excluded as their lived experiences may not be comparable or relevant to those of the higher functioning population researched in this thesis.

2.2.3. Search terms used

Search terms used were based on the researcher's ideas about key words, preliminary exploratory searches and examination of key words associated with relevant research as each paper was found. Using just 'Autism AND relationships' was not an effective strategy because it showed thousands of articles discussing statistical relationships between two variables, rather than interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the type of relationship was specified during the systematic search. The researcher used the search term 'autism' rather than 'Asperger's' as preliminary searches found that key papers did not include the word 'Asperger's' without the word 'autism' and also because of the recent DSM-V terminology changes, as described in the Introduction.

After each search, titles and abstracts of results were read to determine whether the articles met the inclusion criteria. Only articles from scholarly, peer-reviewed journals were selected, to ensure high quality. With each consecutive search, duplications were discarded.

2.2.4. Search on EBSCO PsycINFO

The first search on EBSCO PsycINFO using the terms 'Autism AND romance' found three articles; Lamport and Turner (2014), Byers et al. (2013a), and Stokes et al. (2007). 'Autism AND spouse' found Lau and Peterson (2011). 'Autism AND romantic relationships' found Byers & Nichols (2014) and Jobe & White (2007). 'Autism AND sexual relationships' found Cottenceau et al. (2012) and Byers et al. (2013b). 'Autism AND intimacy' found Müller et al. (2008) and Pollmann et al. (2010). 'Autism AND psychosexual development' found Nichols and Blakeley-Smith (2010) and 'Autism AND adult development' found Marriage et al. (2009). 'Autism AND sexuality' with a box ticked to include female participants, found Gilmour et al. (2012), Mehzabin and Stokes (2011), Roth & Gillis (2015). A further search, including just the search term 'autism' but limited to adolescents and young adults, females and qualitative studies produced no new research studies.

2.2.5. Search on Science Direct

The same combinations of search terms as those used in PsycINFO were used in Science Direct; only those which produced new research studies will be discussed. General search terms such as 'Autism AND sexuality' produced 281 results, so an advanced search was used, selecting 'psychology' and 'journals only'. The term 'autism' was searched via 'abstract, title and key word' and the other search words via 'all fields'. Searching 'Autism' AND 'sexuality' in this advanced search found Holmes et al. (2016). Using the same advanced search, replacing 'sexuality' with 'romantic relationship,' found Gallitto & Leth-Steensen (2015).

2.2.6. Search on SCOPUS

No new studies were found.

2.2.7. Search on EBSCO Education Research Complete

EBSCO Education Research Complete was searched using the same words described above. One new article (Cridland et al., 2014) was found, using the search term 'Autism AND sexuality' when the subject was limited to 'psychology.'

2.3. Research Findings from the Systematic Review

2.3.1. Summary tables of research articles

Research articles from the systematic search were sorted into three broader themes:

- The knowledge, experiences and future concerns of participants with ASD
- The quality of relationships, including attachment and sexual and relationship satisfaction, associated with one partner or more being on the autism spectrum
- Parental concerns regarding sexuality and relationships.

These articles are summarised in tables 2-4, below.

Table 2: Research on the knowledge, experience and aspirations about romantic relationship of participants with ASD

Authors, Date, Location	Participants	Methodology & Relevant findings
Mehzabin & Stokes (2011) Australia	Young adults Aged 18-30, 21 HFA (12m 9f) 39 NT (15m 24f)	*Questionnaire:* HFA participants scored lower for social behaviour, sex education, sexual experiences and showed greater concerns for the future.
Gilmour et al. (2012) Canada	Adults with ASD (27m, 55f) mean age 28.9 years + adults from general population (102m, 180 f)	*Online questionnaire:* No difference for sexual behaviours or understanding of sexual language between HFA/general population groups. Higher rates of asexuality for HFA than general population. HFA females were less likely than HFA males to be defined by the researchers as heterosexual.
Marriage et al. (2009) Australia/ Canada	33 adults with childhood ASD diagnoses (29m 4f) + 34 in referral group diagnosed during research	*Interview, questionnaire and clinical information:* All groups had poor mean scores in intimate relationships on a measure developed by the researchers; only a few found long-term relationships. Anecdotally, 1/3 had no interest in sexual relationships and seemed asexual.
Muller et al. (2008) USA	18 ASD including 5f aged 18/19/25/26/ 62	*Semi-structured interviews (SSIs):* Participants reported: Intense isolation; no real friendships; depression and anxiety; communication and interaction difficulties; longing for greater emotional intimacy; distress about lack of relationship; worries about emotional intimacy; and the importance of downtime.
Roth & Gillis (2015) USA	Adults with ASD diagnoses (6m, 11f) at least 19 years old, mean age 29.5	*Questionnaire about online dating:* Only half the participants had utilised it. Benefits – enjoyed making profile, can give their information upfront and easier to express selves in writing. Enjoyed reading others' profiles. Easier than face-to-face meetings. Drawbacks – safety, scams and vulnerability, being over-trusting and sexual assault. Too much choice.

Authors, Date, Location	Participants	Methodology & Relevant findings
Jobe & White (2007) USA	97 undergraduate students (32m, 65f) aged 18-31 (mean age 19.4)	*Questionnaire:* Autism Quotient (AQ) scores (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) did not predict relationship status. More autism phenotype associated with longer relationship. Current dating status/length of current relationship <u>not</u> related to loneliness. Long-term friendships <u>were</u> related to decreased loneliness.

Table 3: Research on the quality of relationships, including attachment and sexual and relationship satisfaction, associated with one partner or more being on the autism spectrum

Authors, Date, Location	Participants	Methodology & Relevant findings
Gallitto & Leth-Steensen (2015) Canada	Psychology students (83m, 243f) mean age = 20.8 147 single, 179 in a relationship	*Questionnaires:* Evidence for relationship between autistic traits and avoidant attachment style, even after controlling for personality traits and gender. These participants were either less willing or less able to experience 'intimate communication.' (p.66).
Lamport & Turner (2014) USA	249 college psychology students (122m, 123f) aged 18-42 (4 excluded as no relationship experience)	*Questionnaires:* The Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP) related to lower empathy BAP associated with higher attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance and being less likely to report secure romantic attachment. Empathy negatively related to attachment avoidance. High BAP associated with high adult romantic relationship attachment avoidance.
Lau & Peterson (2011) Australia	82 participants in couples with children with ASD- of these, 7 fathers & mothers also had a diagnosis of AS 75 non-clinical controls in couples (no family ASD)	*Questionnaires:* AS parents significantly more likely to have insecure avoidant attachment styles than controls with no diagnosis and 'preferred self-sufficiency to intimacy and mistrusted own and partner's dependency' (p.397). Spouses with no diagnosis, but whose spouse and child both had AS, were just as likely to be securely attached as controls: 'Perhaps it takes a person with an already highly secure attachment style to [marry] a spouse with AS' (p.398).

Pollmann et al. (2010) Netherlands	195 couples, married on average 10 months romantically involved for average of 6.8 years. Mean age husbands 33, wives 30	*Questionnaire:* More autistic traits associated with lower relationship satisfaction for husbands but not for wives. Mediated by responsiveness towards partner, trust in partner and intimacy in relationship. Attachment and self-esteem did not mediate. No 'partner effect' of autistic traits on partners' perceptions of relationship satisfaction. Participants' high or low autistic traits did not correlate with those of their partners.
Cottenceau et al. (2012) France	26 with HFA or AS, aged 10-19, 8% female + two comparison groups: adolescents with diabetes, adolescents with neither	*Questionnaire:* ASD participants had lower quality of life than controls in areas of friendships and sexual relationships, but better relationships with teachers and parents than controls. Relationships with friends improved as young people with ASD grew older. ASD participants placed more importance on confiding in their parents than their peers did.
Byers et al. (2013a) Canada	141 adults (56m 85f) with HFA and AS, living in the community, mean age 39.	*Questionnaire:* Higher ASD symptomology associated with lower sexual satisfaction and sexual esteem but higher sexual anxiety.
Byers et al. (2013b) Canada	61m and 68f age 21-73 (mean 35) 61% diagnosed with ASD by a professional. Group 1: never been in a relationship of more than 3 months. Group 2: had but not now.	*Questionnaire:* Only 41% reported solely opposite-sex attraction. Generally, good sexual functioning and good sexual knowledge. Those with no relationship experience more likely to be male, younger and heterosexual. Participants currently single but with past experience more likely to be female. Females showed higher sexual anxiety, lower sexual arousal, lower desire for sexual activity and more sexual problems.

Table 4: Research on parental concerns regarding sexuality and relationships

Authors, Date, Location	Participants	Methodology & Relevant findings
Holmes et al. (2016) USA	Parents of children with ASD diagnoses age 12-18	*Questionnaire:* Concerns about: negative impact of poor social skills on dating and marriage, finding a partner/ spouse and ability to have emotionally reciprocal/ fulfilling relationships. Fewer concerns about inappropriate/ unusual sexual behaviour.
Stokes et al. (2007) Australia	Parents of 16m and 9f ASD offspring, mean age 22.21 + comparison parent group	*Parental reports:* Parents of ASD offspring thought their children were more likely to behave inappropriately, pursue a non-reciprocated romantic interest, less empathetic, less understanding and less able to read social cues.
Nichols & Blakeley-Smith (2010) USA	21 parents of ASD diagnosed children aged 8-18	*Exploratory focus group of caregivers and notes based analysis of clinical data:* Reported parental concerns included: children's social skills and relationship skills; community is uneducated/unaware about issues of ASD and sexuality; no sexuality specific professional for parents; and parents felt they lacked skills to teach children about these issues.
Cridland et al. (2014) Australia	Three mother daughter aged12-17 (with ASD) pairs, and two additional mothers of ASD girls	*SSIs:* Three of five mothers felt their daughters were less interested in sexual/romantic interests than their peers and/or seemed gay or asexual. One girl had a known boyfriend. Concerns about: misunderstanding of personal boundaries; misunderstanding flirting; unaware of connotations about short clothes; and vulnerability to exploitation, as overly trusting.

2.3.2. Critical review of the existing research

2.3.2.1.   Knowledge, experiences and future concerns of participants with ASD

Young adults with HFA were compared with neurotypical (NT) (i.e. those without an autism diagnosis) young adults by Mehzabin and Stokes (2011), using an adapted version of the 'Social Behaviour Scale' (designed and used in research with parents by Stokes & Kaur, 2005). Participants were required to select 'yes' or 'no' for statements describing social behaviour, privacy, sex education, sexualized behaviour, sexual experience and future concerns. The 'future concerns' subscale asked whether participants had concerns about finding a life partner and whether they anticipated others misinterpreting their own behaviour.   The relevant findings in Table 2 reveal significant differences between groups, with HFA participants scoring lower for engaging in social behaviour and knowledge of sex education. HFA participants had had fewer sexual experiences, and showed greater concerns for the future.   Due to the small sample size and unequal numbers in the two groups, inferential statistical tests may be unreliable, necessitating replication in a larger, matched-sample study before claims could be made about generalisations to the autistic population. Despite female 'over-representation' in the NT group, analysis of between-gender and within-gender differences (comparisons between ASD/NT males or ASD/NT females), were not reported. Therefore, potential unique experiences of females on the autism spectrum are not separated out. The authors suggest anxiety about future relationships may mean that romantic relationships are judged 'risky' by ASD participants. This population may present as not wanting this kind of relationship, whereas it may be that these young people lack the confidence or skills to enter into one, even despite wanting one. This study benefits from seeking data from young people directly. However, qualitative data was not recorded systematically, so that participants' voices and interpretations of their own experiences cannot be explored.

Sexual experiences, interests and sexual orientation of HFA adults and adults from the general population were compared by Gilmour et al. (2012), using an online survey.   They also had a relatively small sample size (including under 100 HFA participants) therefore the findings may not be applicable at a

population level. As shown in Table 2, individuals with HFA did not differ in comprehension of sexual language in comparison to the NT participants and the HFA group were interested in sex. There was a comparatively higher rate of asexuality for the HFA group, although differences between men and women within this group were not reported or explored. HFA females were significantly less likely to be classed as 'heterosexual' than the HFA males, and HFA females also scored higher than the HFA men for self-reported behaviours associated with homosexuality although this result did not reach statistical significance, possible as a result of the smaller sample size. The authors use prenatal androgen theory (Ingudomnukul et al., 2007) to hypothesise that increased testosterone associated with autism in women may be associated with homosexuality.   They also suggest that members of the HFA population may be less influenced by societal expectations, and therefore less likely to suppress same-sex sexual fantasies or urges. The lack of qualitative data means that these hypotheses are unexplored. A further limitation is potential sample bias: those responding to surveys about sexuality are probably interested in this topic. Thus, asexuality or a lack of knowledge or experience may have been underestimated. Indeed, Marriage et al. (2009), described next, found higher rates of asexuality in a community sample. Furthermore, women were 'over-represented' in the HFA group and the sexual experiences questionnaire was not analysed according to gender differences within the HFA/general population groups. This contrasts with the Mehzabin and Stokes (2011) study described previously, where there were more men than women in the ASD group, and the ASD group reported fewer sexual experiences than the NT group. It might be hypothesised that women with HFA could have more opportunities for, or access to, sexual experiences, as society's gender roles expect men to be the 'suitor' and HFA males may be less able to play this role successfully, whereas it may be easier for women to respond to sexual or romantic experiences initiated by men. However, as the sample sizes in both studies are relatively small, such hypotheses should be considered tentatively.

Interviews, questionnaires and clinical chart reviews of adults with a diagnosis of ASD were used by Marriage et al. (2009) to assign scores in areas of adult functioning, including intimate relationships. Participants comprised two groups: those diagnosed in childhood (who had potentially received some

support or information relevant to ASD) and those who had recently completed the diagnostic process. Both groups of participants had low 'mean scores', 2 and 2.9 respectively, on the domain of intimate relationships.   This was not norm-referenced, and there was no NT comparison group, but a score of 5 is the researchers' definition of, "age-appropriate attainment" (p.324). They do not describe how they came to these definitions, making the validity of their scores questionable. However, both groups seemed to struggle with intimate relationships, although a few exceptions had formed long relationships. The gender of those who had succeeded, and how or why, were unfortunately not reported. The authors' anecdotal report that a third of participants appeared asexual, showing no interest in forming sexual relationships, is a higher proportion than in the Gilmour et al. (2012) sample above, possibly because the participants are from a clinical sample rather than respondents to adverts. It is possible to speculate that those with ASD are less likely to identify as sexual beings or they may develop more slowly in this aspect of development than NT peers and so do not reach this stage until later in adulthood. Several of the men reported trying and failing at romantic relationships. Possibly others, whom the researchers judged asexual, had tried, failed and given up. They also did not explore whether potentially asexual participants were also a-romantic, or whether they desired celibate romantic relationships. Again, as qualitative information was not reported, conclusions about reasons for a comparatively higher rate of asexuality cannot be drawn. Furthermore, two men in the group were reported as identifying as transgender, an issue which could have warranted further exploration. This study had fewer women participants than men and again, unique female issues were unexplored.

One study did elicit participants' voices, using semi-structured interviews (SSIs), about experienced social challenges and supports (Müller et al., 2008). 17 out of the 18 participants described feelings of intense isolation with no real friendships and 15 desired greater emotional intimacy, involving romantic or other relationships. Although some participants mentioned present or past romantic relationships, many were distressed about their inability to find or maintain one.   Some also described anxiety about becoming too emotionally intimate with someone; it could be that, whilst participants felt a need for emotional intimacy, they also worried about potential difficulties. The difficulties

with communication reported in Table 2 related to initiating interactions, reading between the lines and understanding the nuances of conversations. Although this was not specifically referenced in the context of romantic relationships, these difficulties could be hypothesised to have an impact in this context. Several participants described using props or mediating objects to help communication, such as one woman giving little gifts to the man she later married. A strength of this research is the seeking of participant voice through participants relating their own lived experiences. Furthermore, the coding process was clearly explained and conducted using a research team, which compared and agreed interpretations, increasing the trustworthiness of the data. However, neither romantic relationships nor the unique experiences of the five female participants are explored in depth. Despite the research aim of exploring social supports, the positive aspects of relationships were not discussed: there was no exploration of how some had successfully achieved intimate relationships. Possibly the problem-focused language of the study description predisposed participants to speak about struggles, rather than positives.

Online dating by adults on the autism spectrum was studied by Roth and Gillis (2015) with participants from English speaking, western countries. Their survey included open and closed questions on demographics, experience, safety and future education. Of the 17 respondents, only around half had tried online dating. This sample size is too small to generalise to the general population of ASD adults. Although the authors do not describe the recruitment process, it is likely that those with a particular interest in dating online would have responded. Benefits reported included enjoying making the personal profile and choosing information to share, plus viewing information about potential individuals to date. The authors reported that participants found online dating easier than meeting potential individuals to date in clubs and bars. Drawbacks included concerns about safety, participants reporting that those with AS tend to be overly trusting, too much choice being overwhelming and communication being harder online. Unfortunately, once again gender differences were not explored. There was no control group to compare whether reported concerns were ASD-specific, or common to all online daters.   The study does include qualitative data from responses to open questions, giving

some information about participants' lived experiences. However, the process of content analysis and coding was not transparent. Nonetheless, this research provides some initial, exploratory evidence that some adults on the autism spectrum use online dating and safety is a common concern.

The final study regarding the experiences of young people used the Autism Quotient (AQ) (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) to measure autistic traits in undergraduate student participant sample (Jobe & White, 2007). They also used the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a questionnaire to gather information about dating, friendship and relationship history and an adaption of the Strivings Assessment Scale (SAS) (Emmons, 1986) which measures personal strivings and dedication to goals. Although no participants met the clinical cut-off point for a probable diagnosis of ASD, a wide range of scores was reported, enabling correlation patterns to be analysed.   Researchers found that AQ scores did not predict current relationship status, age of first date or first romantic relationship. However, of the participants in relationships (anyone who was not 'single') there was a positive correlation of AQ with length of relationship. The authors suggest this could be explained by the preference for sameness and anxiety about changes that are often associated with ASD.   Furthermore, the 'attention switching' subscale of the AQ was positively correlated with romantic motivation on the SAS. Therefore, those who demonstrated poor attention-switching, or a strong focus of attention, tended to be more romantically motivated. AQ score was found to be a statistically valid predictor of loneliness. The communication and social skills subscales were most relevant; it appeared that participants who scored lowest on these were most likely to be lonely. Although qualitative information was not gathered, this quantitative research has drawn similar conclusions to the Müller et al. (2008) study; autistic traits and loneliness do seem to be related, and poorer communication skills appear to contribute to this linkage.

2.3.2.2. The quality of relationships, including attachment and sexual and relationship satisfaction, associated with one partner or more being on the autism spectrum

Links between the adult attachment style of undergraduate psychology students and traits associated with autism were explored by Gallitto and Leth-

Steensen (2015). The findings in Table 3 report evidence for a correlational relationship between autistic traits and avoidant attachment style, after controlling for covariates such as personality traits and gender.   As this relationship is correlational, its cause cannot be ascertained. One hypothesis might be that the avoidant attachment is a result of poor parent-child bonding, worsened by autistic traits in the child. Those with autistic traits may be more emotionally avoidant, hence less motivated to form close, emotionally intimate relationships. Qualitative data and inclusion of participant voice could have provided richer evidence. This research uses a non-diagnosed, undergraduate population, so comparisons with other studies should be drawn tentatively. However, it is interesting that autistic traits were associated with fewer close, interpersonal, emotionally intimate relationships, as these were themes found in the interviews carried out by Müller et al. (2008), described in section 2.3.2.1.

The relationship between autistic traits and relationship attachment was also studied, using self-report questionnaires, by Lamport & Turner (2014).   As a higher rate of autistic traits was associated with attachment avoidance, mediated through lower empathy (Table 3) the authors suggested lower empathy may be related to attachment avoidance by making the less empathetic individual potentially less interested in closeness or others' emotions. Again, as this study is correlational, the possibility of alternative causation, such as poor parent-child attachment causing difficulties with empathy later in life, cannot be discounted. Also, participants lacking empathy skills may experience more rejection by others, causing poorer adult relationship attachment. Furthermore, this study also uses a sample of the general undergraduate population rather than young adults on the autism spectrum and excluded those without relationship experience. Regardless of causation, it appears that those with low Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP) scores are at risk for difficulties, distress and lower satisfaction in relationships.

Attachment styles in romantic partners were also studied by Lau & Peterson (2011).   Here, the relationships in marriages where one spouse had a diagnosis of ASD and also a child with ASD, were compared with parents who had no ASD diagnoses in their nuclear family or the grandparents but did have a child with ASD. The study had the benefit of comparison families, with no

ASD diagnoses. The authors measured adult attachment styles and marriage and parenting satisfaction. 73% of partners who had an ASD diagnosis (both male and female) were found to have an insecure avoidant relationship attachment style, compared to 9% of those with no diagnosis but with a diagnosed partner.   Despite the relatively small sample sizes in each subgroup, this is an interesting difference. This follows the same trend of avoidant attachment styles as the findings of Lamport & Turner (2014). The authors suggest this could be because individuals with ASD prefer being self-sufficient and are mistrusting of their partner's dependency. It is also interesting that so few NT participants with an ASD-diagnosed partner had an insecure avoidant attachment. The authors suggest it takes a special, empathetic, securely-attached person to be able to form a long-term relationship with someone with ASD. Indeed, this group of neuro-typical participants in relationships with ASD-diagnosed partners showed less insecure avoidant attachment (9%) than comparison groups where the parents were not diagnosed but the child was (39%) or where no one in the immediate family was diagnosed (19%). Surprisingly, although only 15% of adults with ASD were securely-attached, attachment was found to have little correlation with marital satisfaction in all groups of participants.   Furthermore, presence of an ASD diagnosis, in either a child or a spouse, did not appear to affect global marriage satisfaction. Because this study only considered participants who had been able to form long-term relationships that produced children, findings may not represent other romantic relationships within the ASD population. Furthermore, there were more women in the ASD adults group (15 mothers and 7 fathers), which does not reflect the ratios in the population of ASD-diagnosed adults. This sampling bias may be due to women being more likely to volunteer for unpaid research (Coon & Mitterer, 2010). It is unclear how the study was advertised, but it could be hypothesised that satisfied couples might be more likely to participate in a study on marriage satisfaction. The age range (29-71) of participants is also higher than other studies. Sampling, therefore, may have been conducted via diagnosed children of these couples. Despite the sampling bias, this study provides some evidence that parents on the autism spectrum can have subjectively rated satisfying long-term relationships with their spouses. Again, qualitative information would have provided more data about initiating and sustaining such relationships.

Pollmann et al. (2010), using the AQ and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), explored the link between autistic traits and relationship satisfaction of newlywed (i.e., married for under a year) Dutch couples. They also investigated mediating factors, including self-esteem, adult attachment style (using an instrument developed by Hazan and Shaver, 1987), disclosure and responsiveness within relationships. They found that more autistic traits were associated with lower relationship satisfaction for husbands, but not wives. This effect was mediated by responsiveness towards partner, trust in partner and intimacy in the relationship, but not adult attachment style. Thus, the authors conclude that, for men, the reason more autistic traits negatively impact on relationship satisfaction is due to the indirect effects of responsiveness, intimacy and partner-specific trust. This apparent unimportance of adult attachment style in relationships regarding satisfaction is similar to the findings of Lau and Peterson (2011). Wives with more autistic traits were not less satisfied with their relationship than those with fewer. Reasons for gender differences in the effect of autistic traits on relationship satisfaction were not explored further and qualitative interview information might have clarified this.   Furthermore, participants did not have a diagnosis of ASD. In the general population, women have lower average scores on the AQ (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) and in this study the women on average showed fewer autistic traits, despite their scores varying enough to enable statistical analysis. It could be argued that the autistic traits in this sample of women were not strong enough to impact on relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, a partner's autistic traits were unrelated to their spouse's marital satisfaction. Also, couples were not more likely to be matched with someone of a similar AQ score to themselves.   This is again similar to the findings of Lau and Peterson (2011) described above. Both studies used committed couples (i.e., having a child and/or marriage); a certain type of partner might be suited to entering a successful, committed and satisfying relationship with someone with more traits of autism, but this study could not test this hypothesis. It is not yet clear whether the gender difference of the effect of traits of autism on relationship satisfaction in new marriages would also be found in diagnosed individuals, in different kinds of relationships.

In Cottenceau et al.'s (2012) French study of adolescents, participants completed questionnaires measuring quality of life (the VSP-A, Sapin et al., 2005). Of the three groups compared here (see Table 2), those with ASD scored worse for quality of life than the other two, especially for relationships with friends and for affective and sexual relationships, but scored highest for relationships with teachers and parents. This was perhaps because, at school age, they were still at the developmental stage where relationships with adults are the most significant source of support. Indeed, Attwood (2008) describes how, in his clinical experience, people with autism do not develop close friendships as their primary source of support until around age 30. Apart from quantitative data reporting, this study did not explore the findings about intimate, romantic or sexual relationships in any detail. This may have been because of participants' young age. However, as the ASD group scored significantly differently here from the two control groups, it would have been useful to explore the reasons for the differences and qualitative information would have enabled this. Also, the study did not explore gender differences and the ASD group was disproportionately (92%) male, whereas the other groups were more equally split. It is unclear how the authors concluded the differences were not due to overrepresentation of boys: analyses using only male participants are not reported. With so few female participants, there is little information about the unique experiences of young women on the autism spectrum. Once more, a relatively small sample size restricts generalization.

The sexual satisfaction of adults with ASD in relationships, or with experience of a relationship of over three months, was studied by Byers et al. (2013a). They recruited internationally (mostly from English speaking, western countries or Europe) and used an online questionnaire to assess participants' AQ and various measures of sexual functioning, wellbeing and knowledge. They found that having fewer autistic traits did not increase the likelihood of being in a current relationship. This may be related to the average age (39) of participants. Men with ASD reported greater 'sexual well-being' than women with ASD, but these women scored higher for sexual knowledge. The authors suggest that this corresponds with general attitudes in society which are more accepting of men's sexuality. They also found that participants with scores indicating more social and communication difficulties were vulnerable to lower

sexual satisfaction, lower sexual esteem and higher sexual anxiety. Again, qualitative data was not gathered, which could have explored these links further. This study had the benefit of using participants whose AQ scores met the clinical cut off point for ASD and who self-identified with an ASD diagnosis, making them more representative of the high functioning ASD population. However, white and well-educated individuals were over represented, and again, those who had not successfully achieved a romantic relationship or who had no desire to do so were excluded.

Byers et al. (2013b) gave similar questionnaires, plus another on online sexual activity, to respondents identifying as currently 'single' and therefore excluded from Byers et al. (2013a) above. Participants were divided into groups with experience of a relationship of more than three months (59%) and those who had none (41%). Overall, most participants were unexpectedly found to show good sexual functioning and sexual knowledge. This may be a sampling bias, with those interested in sex more likely to respond. In this sample, only 41% showed sexual attraction exclusively to the opposite gender, highlighting a probable prevalence of more sexual minorities amongst those with ASD than in the general USA population (Mosher et al., 2005). The researchers suggest that, because this sample contained many participants without relationship experience, some might not have fully understood what sexual attraction meant or could have been influenced by the perceived social desirability of being open to relationships with both genders. Without qualitative data, these findings cannot be explored further.

2.3.2.3. Parental concerns regarding sexuality and relationships

Parents can be confidants and findings highlight areas that may warrant further exploration. However, this thesis focuses on participant voices and lived experiences. Therefore, research on parental views will not be critically reviewed in detail but described briefly, whilst remembering that parental studies use secondary information sources and offspring may keep information about romantic or sexual relationships private.

Parents of young people with ASD were interviewed by Holmes et al. (2016). Concerns shown in Table 4 included: children's poor social skills adversely impacting on ability to find long-term, emotionally fulfilling relationships, plus pregnancy and sexual health. Inappropriate sexual behaviour was not a common concern. Limitations include the absence of young people's voices. The closed questions prevented parents from providing additional data. No data was collected on positive factors and there was no comparison group.

A study including qualitative data compared parental concerns for ASD and NT young adults (Stokes et al., 2007).   Parents of young adults with ASD reported that their children relied less on friends, used inappropriate touching or comments with romantic interests, pursued crushes even after being rejected, had difficulties empathizing and understanding why their crushes were not reciprocated and were less discriminant with the object of crushes, such as celebrities. They were also judged to have difficulties with small talk and social cues. This study had the merit of a comparison group but did not explore the uniquely female experience and did not ask parents for information sources; it is unclear if judgments are based on observations of their offspring, information shared by them or from general knowledge about ASD. The coding/qualitative analysis process was also unclear.

A focus group about parental concerns and aspirations was conducted by Nichols and Blakeley-Smith (2010). Parents shared concerns about vulnerability of their adolescents with ASD and the risks of their children harming others. They highlighted lack of ASD understanding in the community and lack of support from professionals about sex and relationship issues. Open questions gave a bottom-up approach to qualitative analysis. This means that analysis focused first on the data itself, rather than being driven by a pre-existing hypothesis or theoretical model to be tested. However, as there were no transcripts, some data could have been lost. There was no young people's voice and uniquely female perspectives were not explored.

One study used focus groups of mother-daughter pairs to explore the individual and unique lived experiences of girls with ASD (Cridland et al2014).

Unfortunately, the daughters' voices were not included on reporting of findings about romantic relationships; perhaps the mothers' presence affected what they were asked or shared. The information provided by mothers, reported in Table 4, provides some evidence that for families of young women with ASD, romantic relationship issues are a concern and that females have unique experiences.

2.4.   Literature Review Conclusions

This systematic review has uncovered several themes about HFA and romantic relationships. The research discussed has provided some evidence that some young adults on the autism spectrum do desire and enter romantic relationships. Difficulties and concerns have been discussed by these young people and their parents, for example regarding the future and the appropriateness of behaviour. Isolation and loneliness feature in the lives of participants in several studies. Some research has focused on attachment. Avoidant attachment styles may be associated with autistic adults in relationships, although it is unclear whether attachment and relationship satisfaction are related for these individuals. Also, young adults on the autism spectrum may have less access to friends for advice about dating and romance. Another theme is that non-heterosexuality may be commoner in those on the autistic spectrum than in the general population and that more of them may be asexual. However, there are many limitations to the existing research. Much of it has taken a positivist ontological stance, aiming to find differences between autistic and NT people at the population level, despite using relatively small sample sizes. Therefore, any potential comparisons or differences should be drawn tentatively. Numerous studies highlighted the need for more qualitative information to explore further the reasons behind potential differences. For example, it is unclear whether those who present as asexual have no desire for sexual relationships, and it is not known whether they are also aromantic, or whether they would desire a platonic partnership of some kind. Furthermore, although gender identity and transsexuality have been mentioned in research, such participants have sometimes been excluded.

There is a paucity of research regarding the lived experiences of romantic relationships for young women on the autism spectrum. Few studies focus on gender differences or explore the unique experiences of young women

in any depth and the systematic search found no qualitative studies focusing on young women, ASD and romantic relationships. The voice of this population has not yet been heard, nor is there any phenomenological data in existing research evidence about what it is like to be a young woman on the autistic spectrum, specifically regarding romantic relationships. Given this, the research questions for this thesis are:

1) What are the lived romantic relationship experiences of young women who identify with a diagnosis of ASD?
2) How do these young women perceive their experiences, as females, in comparison to what they believe would be the experiences of young autistic men?
3) What are the hopes and aspirations of these young women, regarding romantic relationships?

3. Methodology and Data Collection

3.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter will first explain the purpose and unique contribution of this research thesis, which will lead on to a reminder of the research questions. The research philosophy and the ontological and epistemological considerations will then be explained, including consideration of a feminist approach to research. The different methods of qualitative data analysis will be examined and the researcher will explain why IPA was chosen as most appropriate. The procedure of recruiting participants, conducting interviews and then doing IPA will be explained, then trustworthiness and ethical issues will be discussed.

3.2. Purpose and Unique Contribution of this Research

The literature review (section 2) described how there is a dearth of peer-reviewed research on the lived romantic experiences of young autistic women. There is a particular need for qualitative studies in this area. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no academic peer-reviewed research has yet explored autistic women's lived experiences of romantic relationships. As explained by Robson (2011), when conducting real world research in such, "*unchartered waters,*" (p.39), exploratory research, which aims to describe (as opposed to explain or evaluate) is most appropriate. Therefore, this research seeks to find out how the participants make sense of and understand their own experiences of romantic relationships, in the dual contexts of being a young woman and being on the autism spectrum. The participants' perceptions of the uniqueness of their female experience is of interest, as are this population's aspirations for the future, regarding romantic relationships.

An additional purpose of the current research is one of advocacy, by giving a voice to this population. In keeping with Kemmis and Wilkinson's (1998 p.21-36, as cited in Robson, 2011, p.40) description of emancipatory research, this researcher hopes to foster self-development and self-determination within the participants. The researcher also aims to create debate and discussion, so

that change in current practice can occur, in educational psychology and other, related professions, in ways that will be beneficial for the population.

3.3.   Research Questions

1) What are the lived romantic relationship experiences of young women who identify with a diagnosis of ASD?
2) How do these young women perceive their experiences, as females, in comparison to what they believe would be the experiences of young autistic men?
3) What are the concerns, hopes and aspirations of these young women, regarding romantic relationships?

3.4.   Research Philosophy: Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

As stated above, an aim of this research is to increase the existing knowledge base about autistic women and their romantic relationship experiences. In order to justify the methodology used to use to answer the research questions above, the researcher will first consider ontological (the nature of how things are thought to be) and epistemological (how things can be known) philosophies. This researcher's philosophy about the nature of knowledge and what can be known can be described as social constructionist. This stance rejects the idea that humans are able to observe the world objectively and discover any 'true' nature of its phenomena, or 'reality' of any sort. It can be understood in contrast to the empirical, positivist stances that traditional sciences, and many psychologists, have taken in the past (Burr, 2003). The roles that society, history and culture play are central to our understanding and ways of knowing, categorizing and explaining what we observe and experience in our lives. The language we use is an essential component that we use in a social, discursive context, to co-construct meaning, and therefore our experiences of our own realities. This researcher would argue that, although we can share some understanding, knowing what a personal experience is like can only be understood by that individual; whenever an individual shares his or her experience, this will be interpreted by the listener, based on his or her own biases, knowledge and presuppositions. This concept will be explored further in the section on '*Phenomenology*,' below.

3.5.   Feminist Perspective on Research Design

As a female researcher conducting research with a female population, the researcher has taken a feminist perspective on conducting research about their experiences. Positivist and post-positivist quantitative research methods have been criticised from a feminist perspective, because it is claimed that the separation of the 'researcher' and the 'researched' reinforces patriarchal thinking (Fine, 1992). However, the current study makes no such claim of separation and will acknowledge the influence that the researcher has on the participants and the interpretation of data collected. From a feminist perspective, Robson (2011) also argues that collaborative research is more empowering and non-exploitative of marginalised groups.

3.6.   Qualitative Design

The current research is a multiple case study and qualitative design. Multiple case studies were chosen, as individual lived experiences are of most importance to the current research questions. However, it will also be interesting to explore and interpret any shared experiences that emerge across more than one participant.

3.6.1. Choosing a Qualitative Method

The researcher considered different qualitative data analysis methods, which are commonly used in psychological research, to answer the research questions about the lived experiences of certain phenomena (romantic relationships) for individual autistic young women. Options included Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where recurring patterns are coded and analysed. However, this was rejected because the focus of the current research is more on individual lived experiences; any commonalities that might be found are of secondary importance. There is also no assumption held in this new area of research that similarities would be found. Grounded Theory was also considered, but was rejected due to its assumption that social processes are governed by objective, discoverable rules from which theory can be generated (Willig, 2008). This did not fit with the researcher's social constructionist ontology, or the exploratory aims of the research. Narrative psychology and memory work were also considered. However, the researcher felt that this method would also require an assumption that participants had

relevant 'stories,' with characters and actions, to tell, and they would be able to form coherent and meaningful narratives. As this is a novel field of research, and given the social communication difficulties linked with autism, the researcher was not confident in making such assumptions. On reflection, the method most suited to the research questions, the exploratory nature of the research, and the researcher's ontological position was felt to be Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which will be explained below.

3.6.2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative psychological data analysis methodology, which aims to, "*explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world,*" (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p.51). It has three essential theoretical and philosophical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. These will now be described to introduce IPA as a methodology. The process of *doing* IPA in this current study will be described later in this chapter.

3.6.2.1.   *Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is the study of human experience. Although there are different approaches that phenomenological philosophers have taken, what they have in common is a desire to find out what an aspect of a human's life or experience is *like* (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl (1927) have argued that introspection, reflexivity and reflection on one's own consciousness is required in order to be able to attend to the experiential content of experience (Smith et al., 2009). To be able to attend to the essence of an experience, Husserl (1927) recommends that we 'bracket' our previous experiences and knowledge, as if we were putting them to one side, to minimize the impact they have on our interpretation of the experience in question. Heidegger (1962), on the other hand, questioned the possibility of bracketing and instead argued for the concept of *inter-subjectivity*, i.e., that our experience of phenomena will overlap with our experience of the rest of the world.   What the phenomenologists have in common is that understanding experience is viewed as a mental *process.* Therefore, IPA researchers will need to interpret this process that the participant is engaging in (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretation process will be described next in the hermeneutics section.

3.6.2.2. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics involves the process by which we interpret another's experience, originating from Bible study and now being used for written accounts or transcriptions of interview data. Heidegger (1962) conceptualises this process as aiming to go beyond what is explicitly stated, as if shining a light on hidden or uncovering implicit meanings. Rather than expecting bracketing to be possible, hermeneutics recognises the effect that previous experiences will have on interpretation of new data, which Smith et al. (2009) compare to a professional engaging in reflexive practice.

3.6.2.3. The Hermeneutic Cycle

The hermeneutic circle is a concept that describes the *process* of interpretation; the researcher will understand a part by considering the whole, and to make sense of the whole will analyse the parts, and then return to the whole, in a circular, round-and-round process (Smith et al., 2009).   Depending on the level on analysis and interpretation occurring, the 'part' could be considered a single word or phrase, with the 'whole' being a longer sentence or the whole interview. An entire interview could be considered a 'part' of a larger, 'whole' research project (Smith et al., 2009). This iterative process is an essential aspect of IPA research – moving back and forth between different levels of a text in order to make meaning of the experience it describes.

3.6.2.4. Double Hermeneutics

Double hermeneutics (Smith and Osborn, 2008) is a concept used to describe the notion that, while the participant is making sense of her experience, the researcher is making sense of the participant's sense-making, using a 'lens' informed by the researcher's own knowledge, which includes, but is not limited to, previous psychological research and theory. The researcher aims to understand, via both empathising and asking questions for further clarification, what the experience is like for the participant (Smith et al., 2009).

3.6.2.5.   Idiography

Idiography is described by Smith et al. (2009) as a focus on the particular. Analysis is therefore in detail, at a deep level. The participant(s) tend to be chosen purposively, because the analysis is interested in interpreting what a phenomenon is like for a particular person or group of people, in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009). The emphasis is not on generalisation from individual cases to whole populations (as in some other kinds of psychological research) but on interpreting that particular example at a deeper level.

3.6.3. Limitations of IPA

No methodology is without its limitations. Willig (2008) states that IPA relies on language to be a valid representation of experience. However, as a social constructionist, the researcher does not seek to know or understand an objectively 'real' experience, but is more interested in how it is constructed through the language used, so this assumption is not felt to be a problem. IPA can only be used on small sample sizes, and therefore it not suitable for making generalisations to wider populations. However, this is not the aim of the current research, which focuses instead on the lived experiences of a small group of individual women who identify with a diagnosis of autism.

3.6.4. Semi-structured interviews (SSIs)

There are various methods of collecting data for IPA studies in qualitative research, including interviews, diaries and participant observation (Willig, 2008). The purpose of semi-structured interviews (SSIs) is defined by Kvale (1996) as, *"To obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described* phenomena" (p.5-6). As this research is concerned with individual lived experiences of romantic relationships, and the way in which participants make sense of their individual experiences, semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were chosen as the most appropriate data-collection method, so that participants would be able to tell their own, unique stories and reflect on their experiences. SSIs were judged more practical than methods such as diaries, which would have required longitudinal commitment on the part of the participants (Willig, 2008), and would not have enabled the researcher to encourage the participants to go into further detail or explain more

about their experiences in 'real time' in the way that SSIs allow. An interview schedule was pre-planned, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009), to prepare the researcher for how to word questions about concepts that might be difficult for the participants to understand.

3.7. Procedure
3.7.1. Participants

Participants were six young women aged 19-29, who identified with the diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, Autism spectrum disorder or another social communication disorder. Five of these women had received a formal diagnosis from a qualified professional and one of these was self-diagnosed (see section 3.7.1.1 for further discussion of diagnostic status). An additional 31- year-old participant was interviewed. This was used as a pilot study.   The number of participants was small, because this research is concerned with the lived experiences of individuals. Having a small number enabled rich data to be gathered for analysis. Further details about the participants can be found in the table below.

Table 5: Participant information

Name (pseuo-nym):	Age:	Diagnosis status (as self-reported by the participant):	Method of recruitment:
Annabel (PILOT)	32	Given a 'provisional diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome' two years ago, by her local mental health team. Previous diagnoses of depression/ anxiety.	Volunteered after hearing the researcher speak about the current research at a local coffee morning for young people and parents of girls on the autism spectrum.
Becca	28	Obtained a diagnosis of 'Asperger's Syndrome' via her psychiatrist, one year ago. Previous diagnoses of depression and borderline personality disorder.	As above.
Claire	22	Self-diagnosed 'Asperger's Syndrome'. Previous diagnoses of ADHD, panic disorder and depression, which she obtained after requesting assessment from her GP.	A friend/colleague of the participant attended the coffee morning described above and gave her the participant information sheet.
Daisy	26	A diagnosis of 'very mild Asperger's Syndrome' obtained via an educational psychiatrist in Greece, whilst she was in sixth form.	Contacted the researcher after seeing the participant information sheet on a notice board at a local autism charity support centre.
Ellie	19	'Highly functioning autistic' diagnosis received at age 12.	Via a London university's support service for students with disabilities.

Name (pseuo-nym):	Age:	Diagnosis status (as self-reported by the participant):	Method of recruitment:
Fiona	19	'Autism.' Previously diagnosed with attachment disorder, anorexia nervosa and depression.	Via a local support group for young adults with autism, where the researcher spoke about the current research.
Gill	29	'Autism spectrum disorder', obtained via local diagnostic team, two months before the interview. Previous diagnoses of depression and borderline personality disorder.	Contacted the researcher after seeing a link with information about the current research which was shared on the *Research Autism* website.

3.7.1.1.   Diagnostic status

Participants were not required to demonstrate evidence of having a formal diagnosis. First, it was felt that this requirement would be damaging to the trust and rapport building that is essential for a SSI (Smith et al., 2009). Second, it is well acknowledged that young women with high functioning autism often do not get their diagnoses until they reach adulthood (Attwood, 2007) and the process of obtaining a diagnosis in adulthood can take some time so, it is likely that members of this population who are young adults may not have yet obtained a formal, medical diagnosis. Third, the ethos of the current project is one of empowerment and enabling individual voices to be heard. The researcher respected and valued the judgments of the participants regarding their diagnostic status. It was considered unlikely that anyone would respond to the advertisements for participants, which were directed at support groups, aiming to deceive the researcher by making false claims about diagnosis, especially as no financial compensation was offered. The initial interview question (appendix one) about diagnosis also enabled the researcher to ascertain whether the participant had a correct understanding of what the diagnosis meant. The only participant who did not report receiving a formal diagnosis – Claire – was judged by the researcher to have sufficient understanding of autism and capacity for self-reflection to be able to make a

judgment about the applicability of the diagnosis to herself. Therefore, the decision was taken to include data from Claire's interview in the current study.

3.7.1.2. Ages

Participants' ages ranged from 19-29. This differs slightly from the age range of 16-25 that EPs are now required to work with to provide psychological advice for supporting the drawing up of EHCP plans. 16-17 year olds were not included because of the sensitivity of the topic of romantic relationships; although 16-17 year olds can provide consent without parental permission, it was felt that targeting this vulnerable group to talk about romantic relationships might put gatekeepers such as school SENCos in a difficult position and more safeguarding issues might arise where information would need to be shared. Participants aged 25-29 were included, first of all for pragmatic reasons; when gate-keepers were initially contacted, they mentioned several young women aged 26 that they thought would be keen to take part. Furthermore, it was felt that those participants in their late twenties would have recent experience of being a young adult on the autism spectrum, so would still be able to provide relevant data. As described above, a tendency for high functioning women to receive their diagnoses later was another reason for the upper age limit to be extended.

The group can be considered homogeneous in the sense that all participants identified as being young women (although Claire described herself as, '*gender non-binary*') and with a diagnosis of autism or Asperger's Syndrome. All the women can be described as 'high functioning.' All were verbal and able to converse with the interviewer. All lived in London or the Home Counties. Becca, Claire, Fiona and Gill were white British. Annabel, the pilot study participant was mixed black and white British, Ellie who was South East Asian and white British and Daisy, who was white British and Greek. They were not asked about socio-economic status, but most participants gave the impression of coming from middle class backgrounds. Annabel and Becca were both unemployed and receiving financial support with their housing. Participants were at different stages of their lives: Fiona, Claire and Ellie were still in education at college or university, whereas Annabel, Becca, Daisy and Gill, who were older, were unemployed but wanted jobs.

3.7.1.3.   Sampling and recruitment

Purposive, opportunistic sampling was used. Due to the age of the participants, recruitment was via services which support young adults on the autism spectrum. Gatekeepers to these organisations were contacted and either agreed to pass on the participant information sheet to potential participants or display the advert on a noticeboard. Other organisations allowed the researcher to come and speak about the research; the first was a local support group for parents of girls and young women on the autism spectrum, the second was a young adults' youth group and the third was a social pub evening for university aged young autistic women. An advert was also published on the Research Autism website (www.researchautism.net), with a link to this advert being shared by Research Autism's various social media accounts.   See Table 5, above, for the method of recruitment for each participant. Four potential participants were not interviewed; one whose parents took the information sheet at a coffee morning but their daughter did not want to be interviewed, one who volunteered at the pub evening but stopped responding to text messages when trying to arrange a time and place, and two who said they were keen at the young adults group, but did not get in touch with the interviewer after this date.

3.7.2. Pre-pilot practice interviews

Two pre-pilot practice interviews were arranged, with the researcher's colleagues, two other trainee educational psychologists with experience of working with young people with autism. For both of these practice interviews, the interviewees were asked to think of a young autistic woman that they knew and to improvise, answering questions in the way that she would.   The purpose of these interviews was to enable the researcher to practise interviewing skills and to obtain feedback on the questions and process.   One of the pre-pilot interviewees shared that she felt she could have said more about some of her character's stories if she had been prompted. On considering this feedback, the researcher asked more questions inviting the interviewees to say or tell more about their experiences in the following interviews.   The first draft of SSI questions also had an open question inviting the participant to speak about the sexual side of her relationship experiences. This question was initially included

because autobiographical authors such as Hendrickx (2015) and those with clinical experience (Aston 2003) suggested that the sensory issues associated with autism could affect sexual relationships. However, feedback from the interviewee was that this question might seem embarrassing. Therefore, it was decided that discussion of sex and physical intimacy would be led by what the participants chose to tell, rather than prompted by the researcher. The other pre-pilot interviewee asked questions about why the researcher had chosen the topic and what would happen with the research. Therefore, the researcher developed coherent scripts to answer these questions before the interviews. Both interviewees reported feeling respected and able to share their stories in their own words and they confirmed that they had not felt constrained by the questioning used.

3.7.3. Pilot interview

Annabel was keen to take part and have the opportunity to share and reflect on her experiences, but at age 31 was older than the inclusion criteria for the study, therefore her interview was conducted as a pilot. This interview is transcribed (see the attached CD) but was not analysed. The interview process was discussed afterwards similarly to the pre-pilot interview. The researcher and the interviewee reflected that at one point they were discussing a different man; neither were sure why the misunderstanding arose, but it was decided that a timeline might have been useful to map out visually which relationship happened at what time, so that it could have been referred to in the interview. Consequently, blank paper and pens were brought to following interviews to enable a timeline to be drawn, if required.   Annabel reported that she enjoyed the interview process and found it to be, "*quite therapeutic*," and would be keen to take part in more studies. Based on Annabel's feedback, the interview questions and procedure were kept similar for the subsequent interviews.

3.7.4. Semi-structured interview (SSI) design

The semi-structured interview questions (Appendix 1) were designed with the aim of obtaining data that would answer the research questions, without being overly prescriptive or directive. The questions were adapted after discussions with 'critical friends', including the pre-pilot interview participants and a worker at a young adults Asperger support group, located within the local

authority where the researcher is on placement as a trainee educational psychologist.   For example, the researcher was concerned that the participants, given their diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders, might understand the term 'romantic relationships' in a literal sense and only discuss experiences where traditional 'romantic' gestures such as flowers, candles and hearts were involved. Consultation with 'critical friends' who work with this population reassured the researcher that participants would be likely to know the commonly understood meaning of the phrase (as described in the Introduction, section 1). To avoid misunderstanding, participants were asked to give their definition of romantic relationships at the start of the interview (and the researcher's definition was also pre-prepared in case clarification was needed).

3.7.5. SSI procedure

Participants were met by the researcher at a location of their choosing and the interviews took place in a quiet room where they would not be interrupted or overheard. Participants were welcomed and given snacks. Questions, such as about their journey, were asked in order to help them feel comfortable and to develop rapport. They were invited to look over the participant information sheet (Appendix 2) again and the information on the consent form (Appendix 3) was also given to them verbally. They were offered several opportunities to ask questions. After the interview, participants were thanked and asked how they would like to receive the results of the study plus they were given debriefing information and offered support if necessary. Ethical aspects of the research are described in more detail in section 3.9.

3.7.6. Recording and transcription

Interviews were recorded using an electronic audio recorder and transferred onto a password protected, secure computer. Participants were informed when the recording started and stopped.   The interviews were transcribed using a transcription service, which ensured confidentiality and data protection would be upheld. Participants consented to the use of this service. The transcripts were checked and edited by the researcher.

3.7.7. Doing IPA

The steps in the IPA process described by Smith et al. (2009) were followed, which involved following these steps with each individual interview:

- *Step 1: Reading and re-reading*

  The researcher aimed to immerse herself in the data, initially by listening to the interviews several times and then by reading and re-reading the transcripts. As this stage, the researcher's initial impressions and a one paragraph summary were written in the research diary. For example, after listening to and re-reading Ellie's transcript, the researcher wrote:

  > *'Ellie seems like she really wants a family and children and intimate relationships are a route to getting this, perhaps. She enjoys seeing people's emotional reactions, like a cause and effect game and didn't appear to show much empathy or moral obligation towards those that she had been 'abusive' to. This contrasted with her saying how wanting them not to be distressed was integral to a romantic relationship. She admits to not liking men and uses her father cheating on her mother and his consequent wives as an explanation for this. She described gender roles, believing that women should make decisions about weddings, so would allow a woman to make a decision about it but not a man. She has been obsessive/'stalkerish' in the past but now doesn't believe autism affects her romantic relationships.'*

- *Step 2: Initial noting*

  At this stage, the researcher made notes along the right side of the margin, with a textual commentary on what was being said and the researcher's impressions. These notes were descriptive (described the content or subject), linguistic (commented on the way language was used), or conceptual (meaning they were less focused on the explicit meaning, and guided more by reflections and knowledge of psychological theory and research). Pictures 1 and 2, below show some examples of the initial noting of Fiona's transcript on the right-hand side. For example, 'kidnapped by mother' is a descriptive comment, written in

black, 'tantrum = childlike word' is a linguistic comment, written in blue and 'link to attachment' is a conceptual comment, written in pink.

Picture 1: Notes on Fiona's transcript
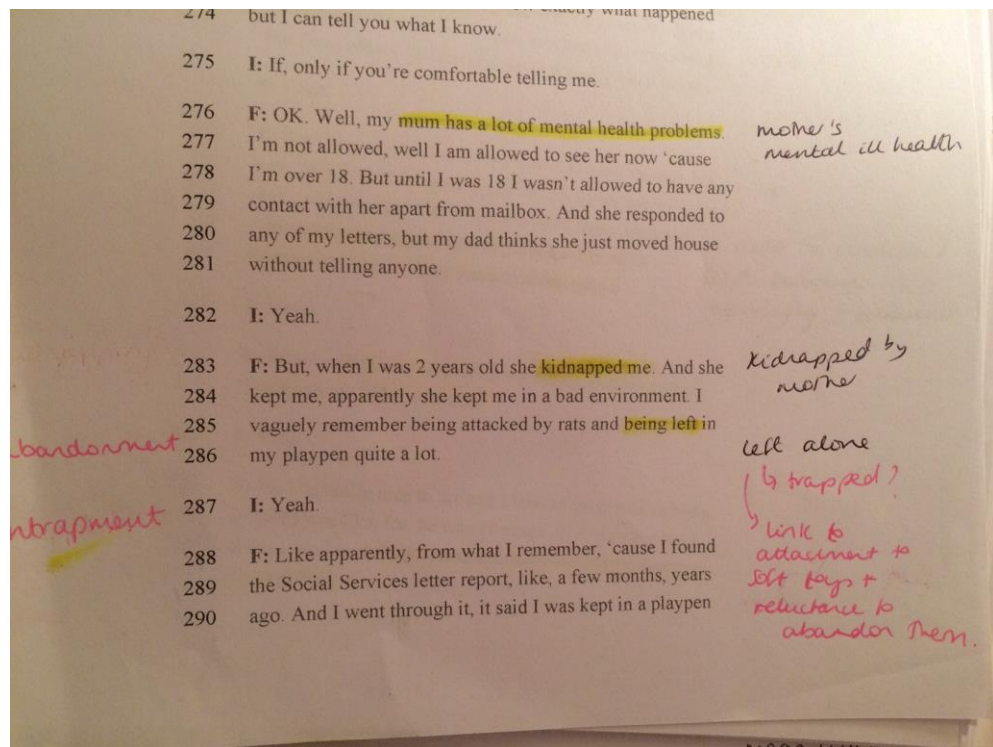
Picture 2: Further notes on Fiona's transcript
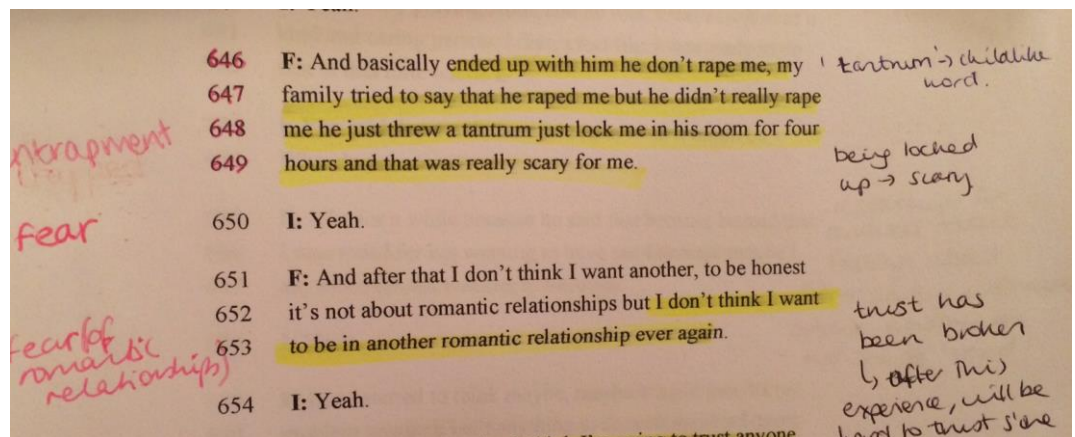
- *Step 3: Developing emergent themes*

The researcher then went back to the start of the transcript, looking at the initial notes to form emergent themes. This process involved the hermeneutic circle described above, as the meanings of the initial notes were explored in relation to the longer quotes they were based on. The emergent themes therefore arose from the researcher's interpretations of the participants'

words and the researcher's notes. Examples of some emergent themes developed for Fiona's transcripts can be seen on the left hand side of pictures one and two, above. These themes include 'fear,' 'abandonment' and 'entrapment.'

- *Step 4: Searching for connections across themes*

The emergent themes were all typed, with duplications removed. The transcript line numbers were typed next to the corresponding emergent themes. For example, in picture four, below, it can be seen that the emergent theme 'self as attention needing' corresponds to sections of Fiona's interview transcript that can be found on line numbers 526-32, 568 and 879. These typed emergent themes were then cut up and spread on a large table. The researcher then began a process of grouping these together into higher order themes. The process used by the researcher to do this included *abstraction* (where a new cluster of emergent themes was named). For example, for Becca, the emergent themes, 'Partners as physical abusers, Partners as source of emotional/ negative feelings, Partners as intentional manipulators of emotions and behaviour' and 'Partners as controlling' were grouped together and the superordinate theme was named, 'Previous male romantic partners as harmful.' The emergent themes were then regarded as subordinate themes. Any emergent themes which were regarded as irrelevant to the research questions were disregarded at this stage (after first checking back with the original text to make sure that a connection to the research questions had not been missed). See appendix 6 for the master table of super-ordinate and subordinate themes and supporting quotes for all participants. Other techniques to form superordinate themes included *subsumption* (similar to abstraction, where one emergent theme, such as 'vulnerability' became the superordinate theme for a grouping of emergent themes); *polarization* (where opposites or contrasts were found); and *numeration* (where the number of times a theme was mentioned was felt to be significant).

Picture 3, below, shows the emergent themes which have been placed into groups for Fiona. The group of emergent themes on the top row, second

from left, of picture three, which can be seen more clearly in picture four, was labelled 'romantic partner as fulfiller of own basic needs.

Picture 3: Fiona's emergent themes in groups
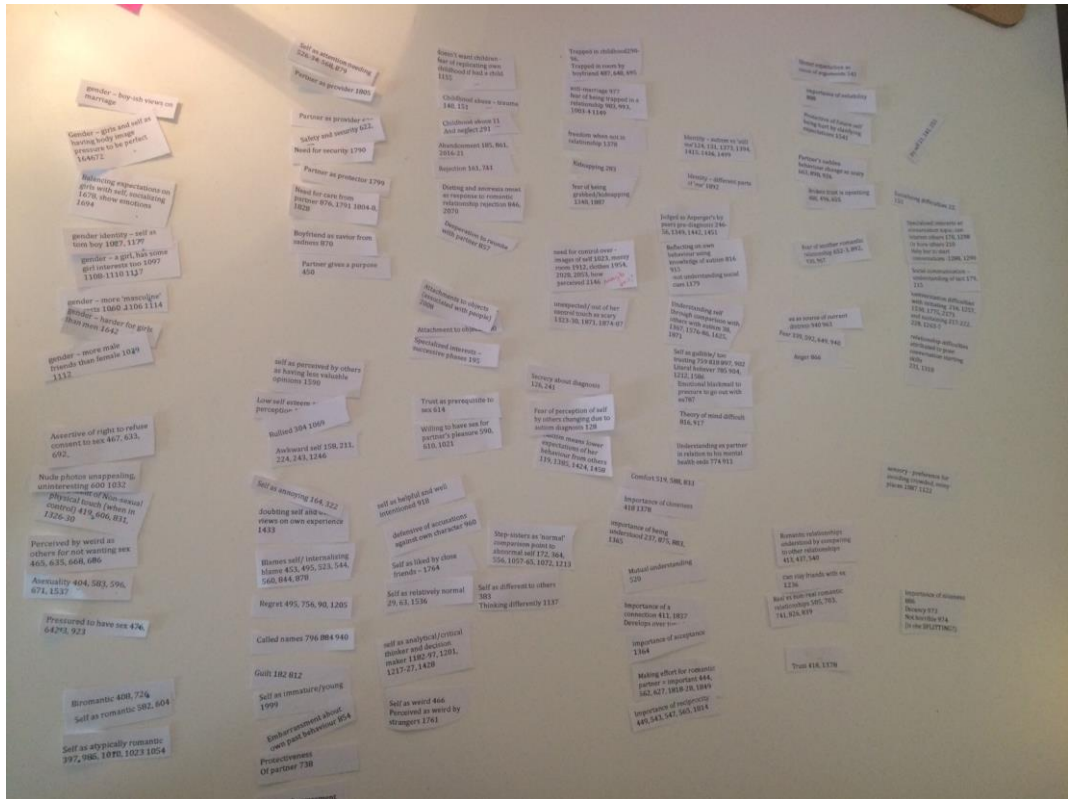
Picture 4: A close-up photograph of Fiona's emergent themes, which were grouped together and labelled 'romantic partner as fulfiller of own basic needs.'

Self as attention needing 526-34, 568, 879

Partner as provider 1805

Partner as provider 6?-

Safety and security 622,

Need for security 1790

Partner as protector 1799

Need for care from partner 876, 1791 1804-8, 1828

Boyfriend as savior from sadness 870

Partner gives a purpose 450
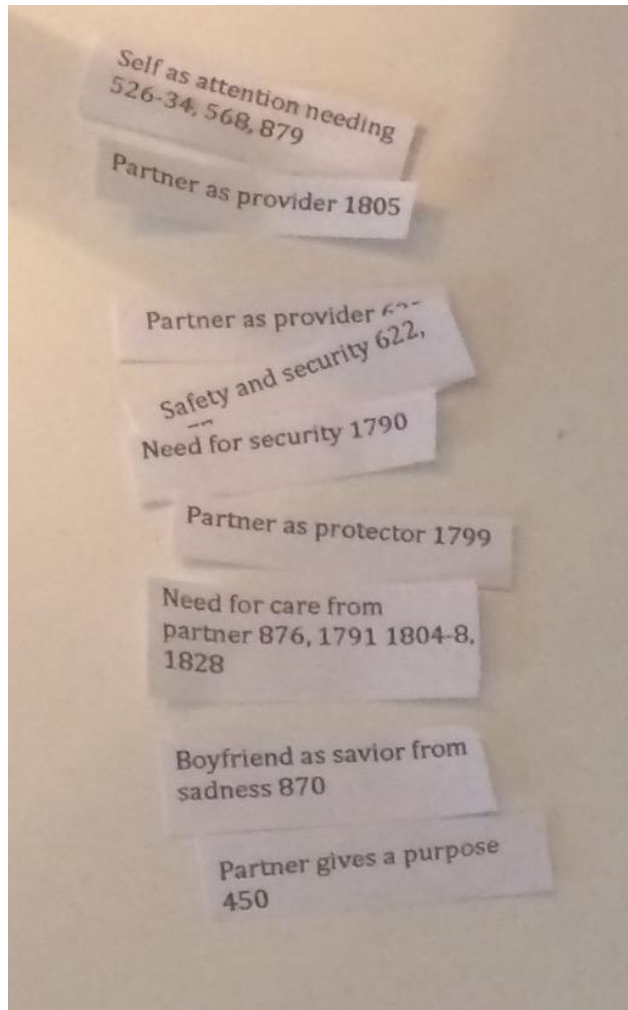
- *Step 5: Moving onto the next case*

In keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA research, the transcripts for the participants were analysed one at a time. When the analysis started on the next set of data, the researcher attempted to 'bracket' assumptions (as described in section 3.6.2.1) and the analysis completed on the previous transcript, so that it was possible for new themes to emerge. The researcher acknowledges that, despite attempts at bracketing, it is inevitable that some ideas will be carried over from one participant to the next. To reduce this, the researcher took breaks and worked on other aspects of this thesis between analysis of each case.

- *Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases*

Finally, after completing analysis at the individual level, the researcher looked for patterns across cases. This involved all the superordinate and subordinate themes from all tables of themes (Appendix 6) being printed in a different colour for each participant, and cut out (see picture 5). A similar process to step 4 was repeated using these themes, to form a new set of superordinate and subordinate themes which represented more than 50% of participants. During this stage, some superordinate-subordinate theme pairings remained intact and some were cut up and moved to be grouped elsewhere. For example, it can be seen in Appendix 6 that an original superordinate theme for Claire was 'gender and sexuality.' However, during step 6, Claire's subordinate themes were cut up and grouped separately and contributed to the new superordinate themes for the findings across participants, which were then organised separately as 'gender' and 'sex and sexuality' (see section 4.3.1 and table 12).

Picture 5: All participants' superordinate and subordinate themes. Each participant's themes are different colours.
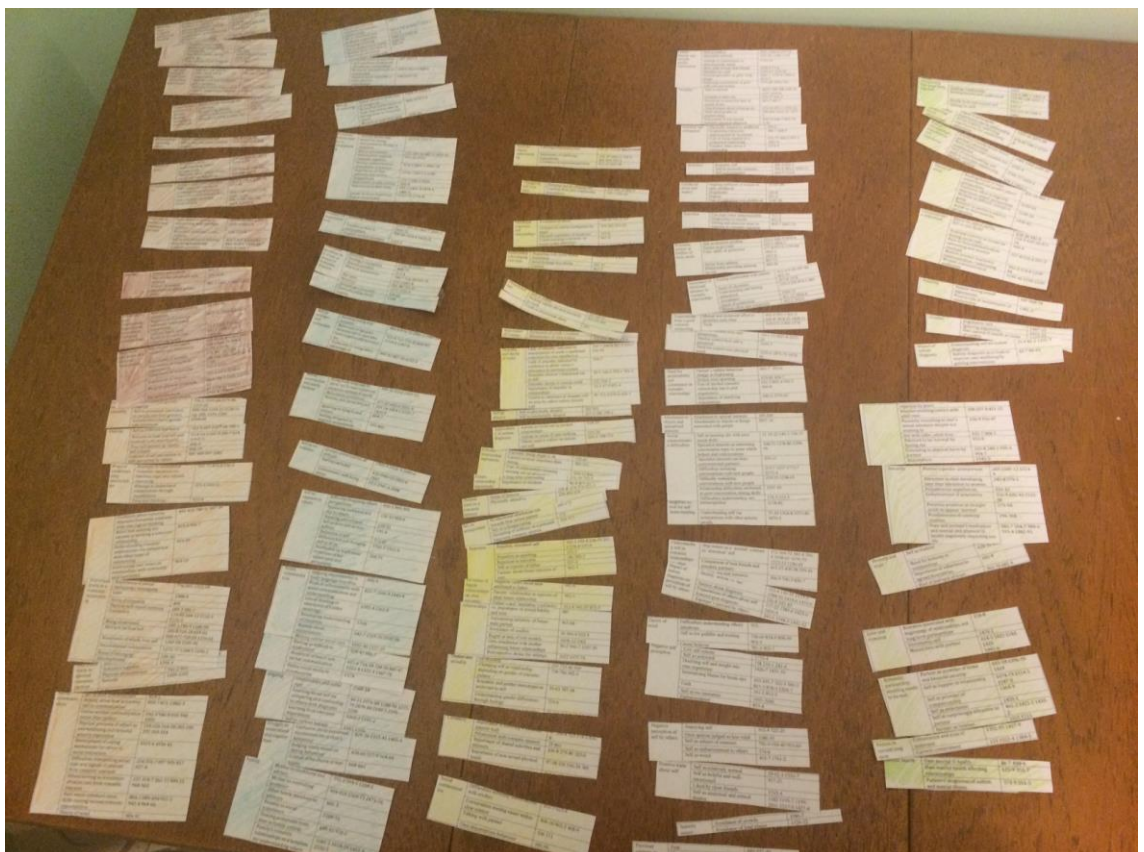
The findings from this process of 'doing IPA' are reported in section 4.

3.8. Validity and Trustworthiness Issues

Wollcott's (1990) principles to increase trustworthiness were followed, including allowing the participants to lead the discussion, recording accurately, reporting measures clearly, seeking feedback from participants and including vignettes and quotes from participants when writing up the study. The data collected was in the form of transcriptions of audio recorded SSIs, which ensured that everything the participants choose to say was recorded in the raw data, rather than relying on the researcher's notes or memory. When the researcher asked questions during the SSI which led on from what the participant had been describing, open questions were chosen, using the participant's own words rather than summarising, in an attempt to minimize the effect that the researcher's subjective interpretation might have had on the participant's perspective. The tone of questioning was calm and without judgment or emotional reactions to enable and encourage participants to tell their stories.

The research showed transparency in the data analysis by providing direct quotations from transcriptions (see results, section 4, and Appendix 6).

Testimonial validity was judged by listening for and watching for body language clues that the participant felt understood (Stiles, 1999). The researcher felt that her training in consultation and counselling skills helped her to do this. A clear audit trail was kept. A trainee educational psychologist who also had experience of conducting an IPA study and working with young autistic people was invited to read the anonymous transcripts and interpretations. This critical friend was able to understand and follow the process of analysis.

Catalytic validity, i.e., helping the participants to increase their self-understanding (Lather, 1991), was established via debriefing and reflecting on the research process with the participants. Participants reported finding the interviews interesting and all had a lot to talk about. One described the process as "therapeutic." During the interviews, there were several moments

50

when participants paused and commented that the question that had just been asked was a difficult one that they had not thought about before.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

This research was designed in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) and Professional Practice Guidelines (2014). This research was ethically approved by the University of East London's ethics committee (Appendix four).

3.9.1. Anonymity and confidentiality

The names of participants and people and places they mentioned such as previous partners, doctors or local services they accessed, which could have identified them, were changed. Interviews took place in rooms where others would not overhear participants, ensuring privacy. Audio recordings of interviews were saved on a secure, password protected drive. Participants were informed about and consented to a transcription service being used that would have access to the original audio recording.   Participants were also informed that the research team at UEL (which includes examiners) would have access to original audio recordings and transcriptions. Participants were informed that confidentiality would only be breached if the researcher was concerned for the safety of the participant or someone else.

3.9.2. Informed consent and right to withdraw

It was explained to participants both on the information sheet and verbally at the start of interviews, that they could have a break, stop the interview at any time or refrain from answering any questions, without having to give a reason.   Gatekeepers to participants were also instructed that no pressure should be put on potential participants and that involvement was voluntary. Participants were also told that they had a two-week time period after the interview date to withdraw their data from the study, after which their anonymous data would be used. Details of this 'cooling-off' time, with contact details, were included on the debriefing sheet (Appendix 5).

3.9.3. Compensation

The researcher provided snacks of the participants' choosing. All participants chose a snack item and soft drink in advance, except Fiona who is an anorexia sufferer.

3.9.4. Vulnerability of participant group

The researcher's clinical judgment was used to assess whether the participants fully understood what their involvement in the research meant. All participants were adults without learning difficulties and none were judged to lack capacity for giving informed consent. However, the participant information sheet (Appendix 2) suggested that potential participants could discuss whether to take part with someone else and that the researcher would be happy to speak with that person. One participant (Fiona) made use of this offer and her step-mother called the researcher to obtain more information prior to the interview. Two potential participants that the researcher met at a young adults group (who did not take part) were judged by the researcher as being likely to agree due to perceived social pressure caused by the researchers' presence. Therefore, the researcher did not ask for these individual's contact details but instead gave a copy of the information sheet with an invitation to get in touch (they did not).

Participants were supported in being safe and comfortable throughout the interview process, choosing either an office location or a home visit. When the researcher visited homes, the educational psychology service's home visit policy was followed.

3.9.5. Sensitivity of topic

The researcher was aware that the questions in the SSI had potential to cause embarrassment or evoke emotional responses. The researcher reminded participants that they could choose not to answer any questions. Potentially difficult questions were begun, '*would it be OK to ask more about….?*' At the start of her interview, Claire told the researcher that she felt comfortable talking about sex but worried she might embarrass other people, due to feedback she had received from peers in the past: the researcher reassured her that she was also comfortable with the topic but that she would

let the participant know if at any point she was not. Based on Claire's concern, this reassurance was also given to subsequent participants (Daisy, Ellie, Fiona and Gill).

3.9.6. Deception

No deception was used; the researcher was clear and open about research purposes and processes and the participants were regularly invited to ask questions to clarify their own understanding.

3.9.7. Debriefing and duty of care

Participants were given a debriefing sheet (Appendix 5) with details of local and national support groups as well as useful and interesting books on the topics of women, autism and relationships. After the interview, the researcher signposted them to relevant chapters given what they had spoken about. Several participants spoke about problems causing them distress, which were not related to the research questions. The researcher continued discussing these topics after the interview had ended and signposted them to organisations that could help, and talked through which of the professionals or other people in their lives would be appropriate to seek support from. One participant requested a copy of the interview transcript, so this was offered to all participants. Further information on the dissemination of findings can be found in section 5.3.8.

3.10. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explained why the current research was needed and why, given the ontological and epistemological views of the researcher and the research questions, the qualitative method of IPA is most appropriate. The research procedures for recruiting participants, conducting SSIs and analyzing the data using IPA were explained and trustworthiness and ethical issues were discussed. The next chapter will present the findings from this IPA process.

4. Findings

4.1. Chapter Overview

Following on from the IPA process described in section 3, this section will present the findings from the process of analysis. Due to the rich and lengthy nature of the data gathered from interviews, too many superordinate and subordinate themes were generated for each of the six participants for a full, detailed analysis of each theme. Therefore, only the most interesting and relevant themes, with significance for the research questions, will be reported. Themes to be discussed will be presented in a table for each participant. A complete table of all themes and supporting quotes for each participant can be found in Appendix 6. Following presentation of findings at an individual level (section 4.2), the analysis will be brought together and themes common across cases will be presented (section 4.3). Numbers inside brackets refer to line numbers in the transcripts in the attached CD.

4.2. Individual Interview Findings

Further information on the participants can be found in section 3. Individual participant transcripts were analysed using the IPA process described in section 3.

4.2.1. Becca

Becca is 28 and a single mother. She has a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome.

Table 6. Themes from Becca's interview.

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
1. Male partners as harmful		
Partners as physical abusers	431 797-9 857 866	Kill, damage, die, beat
Masculinity associated with violence	953-60 1150	Cross-dresser, gentle, become a lesbian
Partners as source of negative emotions	219 294 276-7 367-8 427 1179-80	Suicidal, anxious, hurt
Manipulation and control	227-9 350-65 434 478 789-90, 836 884-5 910 1164-1651	He knew, press buttons, trigger, controlling, threatened, talked me into
2. Influence of past on present		
Repression of previous traumatic relationship experiences	819-21 1006-9 1045-6	Traumatic, block out, numb, blocked off
Caution due to past	71-3 1205-7 1246-7	Waiting, trust is hard, fingers crossed
Desire to prevent this pattern recurring	105-7 1009 1161-3 1364-6	(Don't let) past dictate, un-numb myself, try to stop

3. Dual role as mother and romantic partner		
Importance of partner's relationship with children	307-9 341 441-2 831-3 1172-9 1663-4	See the kids, let the kids down, interact, brilliant with, relationship
Self as a protector of children from being harmed by romantic partners	412-5 437-8 470 511 842-51 875-7 919-21 1122-8 1660-1	Safe, worried, danger, watching my back

4.2.1.1. Superordinate theme 1: Male partners as harmful

The following emergent themes were grouped together, as they all emphasised harm that Becca has experienced through romantic relationships with men.

4.2.1.1.1. Subordinate theme 1: Partners as physical abusers

Becca described the violence perpetrated by her previous partner when she visited him abroad.

"He did all kinds of physical stuff to me. Uh, the worst thing, um, a couple of times actually, I thought I was going to die. He beat me up so bad I could hardly walk" (797-800).

Saying, "*all kinds,*" and, "*the worst,*" Becca demonstrates the violence experienced was varied and on-going. Indeed, she later described being raped and slapped (866, 839). Recalling that she could, *"hardly walk,"* after the attack emphasises how helpless and disempowered she felt.

4.2.1.1.2. Subordinate theme 2: Masculinity associated with violence

Becca described how, after this violent ex-relationship, she met a partner who did not conform to a stereotype of masculinity.

*"He's… a cross-dresser… I went for him because… he was really nice…
it was the total opposite of what I'd gone for and I thought… he's not hurt
me, because he was, like, really gentle"* (959-60).

By contrasting this feminine-presenting partner with her violent ex-
partner, Becca reflects on how her need to feel safe may have led her to avoid
features she associated with her ex-partner.

4.2.1.1.3.   Partners as source of negative emotions
After a breakup, Becca explained

*"He started seeing someone else… I felt that my heart was being ripped
out"* (276-7).

This emotional pain was experienced like a violent physical injury. The
phrase, "*being ripped,*" also emphasises this pain as being deliberately inflicted
by her daughter's father.

4.2.1.1.4.   Subordinate theme 4: Manipulation and control
This subordinate theme arose six times. Becca shared:

*"I'm usually… nice, kind… calm… patient… he knew what buttons to
press… brought out a side of me… which… I don't like… jealous…
controlling, short tempered"* (350-65).

The button metaphor indicates a cause-and-effect reaction, the cause
being her ex-partner, who, *"knew," i*mplying he intentionally provoked Becca's
reaction. This metaphor also places the blame and locus of control for Becca's
behavioural responses onto the ex-partner, distancing Becca's own identity
from the behaviour of her other, *"side,"* which she feels was invoked or switched
on by her partner. Again, she positions herself as helpless to respond in any
other way.

4.2.1.2. Superordinate theme 2: Influence of past on present

4.2.1.2.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Repression of previous traumatic relationship experiences

Becca explained that she had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and described her way of coping with past abuse.

"I've been through a lot; I've kind of learned to block things out… I kind of become numb to everything" (1006-9).

The present perfect tense verb form, "*been through,*" implies that Becca's difficult experiences were ongoing, but in the past. "*Learned,*" could mean that developing coping mechanisms has been a conscious, intentional process over time. To, *"block things out,"* implies she has been active in creating a metaphorical barrier between herself and her experiences for self-protection, while to, "*become numb,*" suggests a conscious choice not to feel pain. However, *"everything,"* could mean that if she does not feel pain, she does not feel other emotions either.

4.2.1.2.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Caution due to past

When discussing her new, current and happy relationship, Becca shared:

"Because of all the bad experiences I've had, part of me is thinking, why is he being nice to me? I'm waiting for something to happen" (71-3).

Becca makes the link between her past relationships and her current fears explicit, and acknowledges that these experiences have led to her feelings of suspicion about her partner's intentions. It is as though she fears her new partner is too good to be true and that change is inevitable.

4.2.1.2.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Desire to prevent this pattern recurring

Becca spoke four times of her desire to break this pattern of her past influencing her present.

"I'm trying to kind of not let… the past like dictate what's happening now"
(105-7).

"*Dictate,*" suggests feeling controlled by past events. She seems to want to regain control and choose how she thinks and feels about her current romantic relationship.

4.2.1.3. Superordinate theme 3: Dual role as mother and romantic partner

4.2.1.3.1. Subordinate theme 1: Importance of partner's relationship with children

Becca was the only mother interviewed. She mentioned her partners' relationships with her children six times and describes her current partner in terms of his bond with them:

"He's brilliant with the kids… interacts better than [son's father] ever did with [son]… when you've been with someone like a month that just shows you" (1173-9).

By comparing and contrasting men based on their effort with her children, Becca shows not only that her children are important to her, but that she uses the partner-children relationship as a barometer to judge the quality of her current relationship. "S*hows you,*" could mean that she is using this contrast to support a belief she wants to hold; perhaps she has found evidence that her new boyfriend is different from her unreliable ex. The pronoun, "*you,*" could be an attempt to make this a general rule from which she could make predictions.

4.2.1.3.2. Subordinate theme 2: Self as a protector of children from being harmed by romantic partners

Becca mentioned protecting children nine times. Becca had stayed with her violent partner so that their daughter would know her father. However, once her daughter became at risk of injury, she left him.

"She was crying, he went to hit her and I stood in front of her…
Something clicked and I was like… I'm not going to let you do that to my
daughter… I ended the relationship" (842-51).

"Something clicked," suggests a moment of realisation, as if a lightbulb has been switched on allowing her to 'see' the situation with more clarity. The words, *"let you,"* imply she felt she had enabled her abuser, but seeing her daughter at risk was the catalyst required for change. It is as if before this moment, Becca had prioritised her own safety less than her daughter's access to her father.

4.2.2. Claire

Claire is 22 and self-diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Table 7. Themes from Claire's interview.

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
1. Gender and sexuality		
Self as gender non-binary	700-2 1059-64 1079-86 1219-22	Non-binary, I'm not anything
Pansexual self	898-904 1119-25 1128-31 e.g. 189, 1159, 1181	Pansexual, don't care what's down there, regardless of their gender

2. Methods of understanding relationships		
Attempts to use logic, theories and visualisations to understand romantic situations	165-73 441-450 470-8 525-6 543-51 530-3 788-92 807-10	Graph, different levels, blip, messy images personal theories, didn't make sense, confusing
Polarised thinking	433-8	Very clear, binary logic
Sex means wanting a romantic relationship	423-4 446-7	Does like me... having sex

4.2.2.1.   Superordinate theme 1: Gender and sexuality

Gender and sexuality, although different concepts, were grouped together because, in Claire's experiences, her understanding of the two were interlinked.

4.2.2.1.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Self as gender non-binary

Claire explained that she does not see herself as either a woman or a man.

"I'm not all that associated with my feminine side… I'm non-binary… I don't really identify as being a woman, but me calling myself a woman, it's just like, no. You're not! LOL. Why would you call yourself that? But I won't call myself a man either… I'm not anything" (1059-64).

Using the expression, "*LOL,*" ('laugh out loud') demonstrates that Claire sees her own identity being described as, "*a woman,*" as so incorrect it becomes laughable. By saying, *"I'm not anything,"* Claire implies that a label for who she is does not exist and perhaps rejects the idea of being forced to choose one. This word 'choice' could also reflect a feeling of her 'true' self being ignored, or not acknowledged by others.

4.2.2.1.2.   Subordinate theme 1: Pansexual self

Claire identified as *'pansexual,'* explaining:

"Some people use [the word] bisexual… I prefer pansexual… cos there's so many different words for how you… express… romantic and sexual interests… bi means "two" whereas pan means "all". For me "pan" is more inclusive… "pan" is being attracted to people regardless of their gender… I'm not bothered by… how people express themselves… or what's between their legs" (1119-31).

Claire's emphasis on the importance of, "*inclusive,*" language may imply that she herself has experienced exclusion or marginalisation. She rejects the notion that just two genders exist by refusing the term, "*bisexual,*" which would collude with and reinforce this notion, and exclude those who, like herself, do not gender conform. Stating she is, "*not bothered,*" by *either* gender expression *or* sex organs also emphasises her awareness that gender and biological sex are different.

4.2.2.2.   Superordinate theme 2: Methods of understanding relationships

Claire tried to explain her sense-making of relationship experiences. Her methods can be grouped into these subordinate themes.

4.2.2.2.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Attempts to use logic, theories and visualisations to understand romantic situations

Claire explained how she could logically go back to being just friends with an ex-partner, because:

"It's actually surprisingly easier than some people think it is… if he's my friend in the first place… I just liked him in an extra sense. Now I don't like him in the extra sense but I still like him in the friendship way. It's different levels. I kind of go to one level and come back down… like a wibbly wobbly graph' (468-77).

By contrasting her own experience with common narratives about ex-partners, Claire acknowledges that her views are different to her peers. Describing the levels in a graphical sense highlights that she interprets and processes her experiences visually.

4.2.2.2.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Polarised thinking

In contrast with a man who says he is in love with her but does not want a relationship, Claire shared:

"For me it's very clear, if I like them or I don't like them… I've got very binary logic" (433-8).

"*For me,*" again suggests that she understands romantic relationships in a different way to others; in this example, she demonstrates she does not have 'grey areas' in her level of liking someone, and so she struggles to understand the perspective of her romantic interest and how he can say he likes her but simultaneously not want a relationship with her.

*4.2.2.2.3.   **Subordinate theme 3:** Sex means wanting a romantic relationship*

Twice when asked how she knew someone liked her, Claire used sex as evidence:

"He continued being all flirty and everything and like end up having sex…. The morning after he was like, '…I still don't want to be with you.' What's that supposed to mean?" (446-50).

Claire seems confused as to why he would want to have sex with her if he did not want them to be a couple. She may be having difficulty understanding that the role of sex in a relationship may be different for others.

4.2.3. Daisy

Daisy is 26 and grew up in Greece. She was diagnosed with 'mild' Asperger's Syndrome during sixth form.

Table 8. Themes from Daisy's interview

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
1. Unassertive self		
Inability to say, '*No!*'	349-51 2252 2335-53	Push away, put him off
Self as passive	330-4 1454-5 1535-7 2425-9	Convinced, going with the flow
Reluctance to confront	577-87 643-6 1055-9	Didn't make any fuss, alright, ought to protest
2. Avoidance of sex		
Sex as essential in romantic partnerships	242-3	Of course involve sex
Sex is unwanted	243-4 246-8 1695-7 1724-5 1731-6	Abhor, hate, hurt, afraid, invade
Sex as dangerous	1685-93 2319-23 2420-2	Hypochondriac, severe mistake, danger
Unobtainable crushes	224-5 249-50 958-64 1414-6 1450-1 1465-7 1523-4 2051-3 2069-72	Celebrity crushes, girlfriend, staff
Anxiety about own lack of arousal	335-44	Cold fish, don't feel anything

4.2.3.1.   Superordinate theme 1: Unassertive self

4.2.3.1.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Inability to say 'No!'

Daisy mentioned trying to dissuade men making physical advances towards her using non-verbal communication three times. A being invited into a date's empty flat where he then started to hug her;

"It was my plan for putting him off, I go very… very limp, and not really return the hug… he was saying..., 'Hug me properly,' I said… 'I am!' even though I wasn't" (2338-53).

Daisy did not use words to communicate that she wanted him to stop. Saying her plan involved, "*putting him off,*" she emphasises attempting to change the man's desires, presumably so he will stop trying to be physically intimate with her. Perhaps Daisy felt unable to say, "*No!*" because of social pressure and believed that physical contact was expected. She seems disempowered to refuse consent and assert her own comfort boundaries about physical touch.

4.2.3.1.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Self as passive

Daisy described several incidents with men as happening *to* her, rather than taking an active role. Describing a crush, she explained:

"I might say yes, like, if he ever asked me if I want to go on a date" (1535-7).

Daisy frames her role as waiting to be asked. This could reflect gender stereotypes, where men are traditionally expected to do the asking, but Daisy did not offer any ideas of how she could be active in date initiation.

4.2.3.1.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Reluctance to confront

Daisy described three incidents where men had made her upset or uncomfortable, but she stayed quiet. For example, a trainer at her employment agency commented on her bra:

"I could just see him sort of looking my chest, and I thought, what are you doing? But… um… I didn't make any fuss, uh, at all, at the time, I didn't go, like, fetching anyone else" (1055-9).

By explaining what she did not do, Daisy implies that she knew his behaviour was inappropriate and that confronting it could have been an option, but she did not feel able to.

4.2.3.2. Superordinate theme 2: Avoidance of sex

These themes were grouped together as they implied sex was something Daisy wanted to avoid.

4.2.3.2.1. Subordinate theme 1: Sex as essential in romantic partnerships

When explaining how she feels uncomfortable with physical touch, Daisy explained:

"Relationships, uh, you know, of course they involve, like, sex" (242-3).

By emphasising "*of course,*" Daisy implies that sex is a defining and inevitable part of a romantic relationship, which cannot co-exist with her feelings about touch. She did not show awareness throughout the interview of any sexless romantic relationships, or the concept of asexuality.

4.2.3.2.2. Subordinate theme 2: Sex is unwanted

Daisy mentioned not wanting to have sex or her belief it would be unpleasant five times:

"If I'm so sensitive about touching in general, I think I'm certainly going to, um, abhor sex" (246-8).

Daisy links her reluctance to have sex with her general dislike of touching. Interestingly, she uses the future tense, "*going to,*" as if having sex with someone will eventually happen, rather than abstaining indefinitely.

"*Abhor,*" is a stronger word than *"sensitive,"* suggesting that sex would be even worse than what she already dislikes.

4.2.3.2.3. Subordinate theme 3. Sex as dangerous

Daisy's descriptions implied being alone with men is unsafe. When explaining why she went to the park with a stranger, she said:

"I thought, 'he's got a girlfriend,' so I thought, 'there's no danger'… eventually he said… could we go to my house… up to my room" (2420-42).

Daisy appears to believe that the man being (apparently) not single would protect her from sexual advances. For Daisy, men who want sex from her seem unsafe, and sex is an act to be feared.

4.2.3.2.4. Subordinate theme 4: Unobtainable crushes

Daisy describes celebrity crushes, and also talks about crushes on men in relationships and staff at an autism group. These themes were grouped together, as these men are all unobtainable. She explains,

"I like someone in a film, an actor or something, someone I can look at or watch whenever I feel like it" (1465-7).

Here, control over the scenario is important; she is able to switch the crush on or off, which she cannot do with a real human with his own wants and desires. Furthermore, there is a distance or ethical barrier preventing sex between Daisy and the types of men she has crushes on, so she can enjoy romantic fantasies and attraction in a safe way, without real or perceived pressure to have sex.

4.2.3.2.5. **Subordinate theme 1**Anxiety about own lack of arousal

Describing one of her few kissing experiences, Daisy worried about her own lack of arousal, saying:

"I felt… unnerved because I thought, I don't feel anything! … I'm an utter cold fish. And… uh, that worried me… I kissed someone… when I was 13, and I hadn't felt anything at that time either" (335-44).

Anxiety about feeling nothing implies a belief that she should have felt something, perhaps emotional or physiological arousal. The zoomorphic metaphor, "*cold fish*," contrasts with the physiological responses expected of a human woman (a warm-blooded mammal), highlighting how abnormal and unnatural she feels.

4.2.4. Ellie

Ellie is 19 and is diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and high functioning autism.

Table 9: Themes from Ellie's interview

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
1. Rejection		
Rejected, unwanted self	162-3 193-4 218-9 261-2 278-9 337-9	didn't return my feelings didn't want to talk
Self as rejecter of father	921-4	don't want to contact, don't want to see
Fantasy about future rejection of men	962-3	leave a man

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
2. Abuse and manipulation of romantic interest		
Physically abusive	285-304	Physically strike, release, abused
Manipulation of partner's emotional responses for own amusement	230-7 244-8 267-9 325-7 636-42	Enjoy scaring, frightening, scream, see different sides,
Romantic interests' functional use to self	93-5 160-1 570-1 591-2	I wanted

4.2.4.1.   Superordinate theme 1: Rejection

These subordinate themes were grouped together as they involved rejection, either Ellie being rejected by romantic interests or father figures, or Ellie doing the rejecting.

4.2.4.1.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Rejected, unwanted self

Ellie gave six examples of being rejected, for example describing boys she had crushes on at school.

"One of them just didn't want to talk to me, like period. The other, erm, he could tolerate me more" (218-9).

By describing the second boy as able to, "*tolerate,*" her, Ellie portrays herself negatively, as someone unpleasant who must be endured.

4.2.4.1.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Self as rejecter of father

Ellie explained that her parents had separated before she was born due to her father's infidelity. Nowadays,

"I know him but I just don't want to get into contact with him…. I'm thinking, 'Yeah. No. I don't want to see you as my dad'… I don't really like men that much apparently. I guess it's probably started with my dad" *(921-46).*

Perhaps Ellie is trying to regain control over the rejection she indirectly experienced from her father by rejecting him in return. She makes the explicit link between her current dislike of men and her relationship with her father, acknowledging that he is the template for her views about his gender. The use of, "*apparently,*" implies she is reflecting on the evidence she has just provided for this conclusion.

4.2.4.1.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Fantasy about future rejection of men

Ellie shared a fantasy of rejecting a man in her future:

"It's more likely that I'll leave a man at the altar than a woman… I actually did have a scenario when I'm, I'm in my wedding dress and I find out that my husband-to-be was cheating on me, and I just escape through the window just go to work in my wedding dress" *(962-8).*

Ellie implies men are more likely to be unfaithful than women. By mentally rehearsing this scenario, Ellie might be preparing herself in advance; making it into a movie scene could give ownership over a potentially heart-breaking event. Saying she would, *"escape,"* reframes the fantasy narrative, so that she is the rejecter, not rejected.

4.2.4.2.   Superordinate theme 2: Abuse and manipulation of romantic interest

These subordinate themes were grouped together as all involved Ellie causing potential harm to meet her own needs.

4.2.4.2.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Physically abusive

Ellie physically assaulted a female crush:

"I did physically strike her… The first time it was literally out of the blue, just to see her reaction… I guess it was sort of, some sort of release, umm. 'Cause… striking someone would make me feel better…" (285-304).

Ellie interprets her own behaviour in terms of the function it serves for her, i.e., finding out the reaction and coping with her own bad feelings.   She seems honest about this, and provides a clear explanation, if not an excuse. Interestingly, she later expressed confusion about why this girl had lost touch with her (339).

4.2.4.2.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Manipulation of partner's emotional responses for own amusement

Ellie gave several examples of how she enjoyed scaring (230-48), upsetting (325-7) or entertaining romantic interests because of the reaction she provoked. She suspected a current crush would say she's "*cute,*" but;

"I'm purposely doing that to just see the face he pulls when I do something cute or adorable… It's all like he's like squealing sort of like a fan-girl… it's funny to see" (636-42).

Ellie portrays her own 'cuteness' as something fake that is switched on, for effect.

4.2.4.2.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Romantic interests' functional use to self

Ellie described several crushes in terms of what they could offer her. When describing her first sexual experience, she said:

"*I wanted to lose my virginity, he offered and just got it done and over with… I didn't feel any attachment"* (160-73).

Here, the boy is described as a means to an end, who could have been anyone, since the experience was spontaneously initiated. Mentioning she felt no attachment implies an awareness that she might have been expected to.

4.2.5. Fiona

Fiona is 19 and has a diagnosis of autism.

Table 10: Themes from Fiona's interview

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
1. Freedom and entrapment		
Physically trapped in childhood	290-6	Kept in, tied up
Frightening temporary imprisonment by boyfriend	486-7 648-9	Locked me, scary
Fear of being trapped in a marriage	976-7 983-5 993-5 1002-4	Marriage… stupid, trauma, awful, stuck with him, tied to him forever, done for
Freedom when not in a relationship	1374-9	Not as much commitment, do what we want

2. Romantic partner as fulfiller of own basic needs		
Self as attention needing	525-6 568-70 878-8	Require too/so much attention
Partner as provider	625-6 1804-5	Took me, gave me, bought me, cooked for me
Care, safety and protection	677-8 875-6 1799-84 1805-6 1827-8	Safe, caring, protection, look after, take care
Saviour from sadness	867-71	Take away… problems, made me happy
Relationship providing purpose for life	449-50	Living for each other

4.2.5.1.   Superordinate theme 1: Freedom and entrapment

The following subordinate themes were grouped together since Fiona's childhood experiences and her adult relationships feature a recurring motif of being trapped or fear of feeling as if she were. The language she uses to speak about marriage emphasised this and the freedom experienced outside a serious relationship contrasted with previous experiences.

4.2.5.1.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Physically trapped in childhood

Fiona shared her early experiences of neglect, which resulted in her being taken into care.

"I was kept in a playpen for like days at a time… and I remember being tied up outside underground nightclubs... like a dog… being really cold" (290-8).

The simile comparing herself to a dog emphasised the dehumanising treatment she endured. By being kept in the playpen and tied up, Fiona was not free to move around as she pleased.

4.2.5.1.2. Subordinate theme 2: Frightening temporary imprisonment by boyfriend

Describing her ex-partner's response to her refusal to have sex, Fiona explained:

"He didn't really rape me; he just threw a tantrum… lock[ed] me in his room for four hours… that was really scary for me" (647-9).

Fiona does not emphasise a fear of rape or violence; by describing his behaviour as a "*tantrum,*" she positions him as childlike and non-threatening. The frightening part seems to be her lack of control and inability to escape (see section 4.3.1.1.4). Fiona emphasises the durations both here and when she described being trapped in her playpen (290), which seems an important part of what made the experiences traumatic.

4.2.5.1.3. Subordinate theme 3: Fear of being trapped in a marriage

Four times, Fiona spoke about marriage as negative and difficult to escape, whereas *not* being in a committed relationship felt like freedom (1374-9). Describing an ex-partner she loves and misses, she said:

"I always thought that if I… married [him]… it'd be stupid… even though I was madly in love with him, I didn't, I always felt like if I marry him I'm tied to him forever, I'm done for" (1001-4).

The phrase *"tied to him,"* evokes imagery of her being tied up as a child. It was interesting that Fiona herself did not make such a link; perhaps her sense of needing freedom to leave or escape was linked to her early experiences. "*Done for,*" further evokes a sense of inescapable doom. Maintaining a feeling of freedom in relationships seems important for Fiona.

74

4.2.5.2.   Superordinate theme 2: Romantic partner as fulfiller of own basic needs

The following subordinate themes were grouped together as they described what Fiona's partners had provided her with.

4.2.5.2.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Self as attention-needing

Fiona blamed herself for a relationship break-up, explaining that her attention needs were too much to balance with his career:

"He said that because I require so much attention, because he said he can't be there all the time, he doesn't want to upset me anymore" (568-70).

She appears to accept this description of herself as fact.

4.2.5.2.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Care, safety and protection

Fiona spoke about relationships as a safe source of care and protection, five times. She would not like a younger partner because she looks up to older people (1790) and:

"I think that might be my part of the protection of a relationship. While I think it's romantic too, for someone to look, for a man to look after a woman and stuff… Like part of why I liked [ex who locked her up] so much was because he looked after me" (1799-1884).

Fiona self-corrects, and emphasises that a *man* should be looking after a woman. She mentions protection but does not yet explain what she is being protected from. However, she then links feeling protected with feeling looked after (see below) and provided for; perhaps the protection she feels is in a very literal sense, that is protecting her from going without what she needs.

4.2.5.2.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Partner as provider

When describing how an ex had made her feel looked after, Fiona shared:

"He bought me things, he [would] take me out places, he cooked for me" (1804-5).

The evidence that Fiona gives for feeling that he cared about her involves the physical things he provided. She remembers feeling nurtured.

4.2.5.2.4.   Subordinate theme 4: Saviour from sadness
Fiona described her ex making her happy:

"He['d] pretty much take away all my problems. When I say that I don't mean he literally took away, but he distracted me from them too, so that made me happy" (867-71).

Fiona attributes the happiness she felt to being with him, implying that when she is single, her problems are harder to manage and she is unhappy.

4.2.5.2.5.   Subordinate theme 5: Relationship providing purpose for life
Although this theme only arose once, the idea that a boyfriend could give Fiona a life purpose is powerful. Explaining the difference between romantic relationships and friendships, she shared:

'we pretty much just start living for each other' (449-50).

For Fiona, romantic relationships have a unique intensity. She also acknowledges here the reciprocal nature of this intensity, suggesting awareness of what she requires from her romantic partners (see section on reciprocity in 4.3.1.2).

4.2.6. Gill

Gill is 29, with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.

Table 11: Themes from Gill's interview

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
1. Grooming and CSE		
Adult men providing gifts, drugs and alcohol	331-2 927-30 956-7 1053 1329	Cannabis, very drunk, give you things
Validation and approval from men's flattery in contrast to rejection by peers	258-64 306-9 908-10 947-59 1329-32	Interest, like me, want to know me, telling me nice things
Internet enabling contact with adult men	209 257-8 421-2	Internet, started online
Passively conceding to men's sexual advances despite not wanting to	236-9 936-47 952-6	Sex, oral, disgusting, didn't really enjoy, he wanted to, why not, go along, what people do, supposed to
Conceding to physical harm by partner	225-8 240-1 930-6 994-7	Hit, bizarre things, cut, razor blade
Sexual exploitation	1342-5	Sexual value, exploitative

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Transcript line numbers	Key words
2. Sexuality		
Complications of polyamory	339-42 355-9 635-43 1533-8	Rapidly deteriorated, not happy, complicated, side-lined, don't understand
Pointlessness of celebrity crushes	296-304	Why pretend?, not real, not practical, doesn't make sense

4.2.6.1.   Superordinate theme 1: Grooming and CSE

The following subordinate themes were grouped together because they meet the defining criteria for CSE described by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (HM Government, 2009). The quotations presented reflect Gill's early experiences with adult men (when aged around 16).

4.2.6.1.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Adult men providing gifts, drugs and alcohol

Gill described adult men she met online providing her with drugs and alcohol (while she was a schoolgirl) five times. With one man, before a sexual activity, she said:

"We went to a public place, a woodland ... smoked cannabis together. He showed me how to roll the joint and gave me this cannabis and smoked" (927-30).

Explaining how to roll a joint implies that Gill was not an experienced cannabis user and that the man initiated their drug use.

4.2.6.1.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Validation and approval from men's flattery in contrast to rejection by peers

Five times, Gill contrasted the receptions she received from classmates to those from adult men online:

"When I started talking to people online, it was kind of a new universe. 'Oh, actually people do want relationships with me.' Obviously, they just wanted to have sex with a 16-year-old, but I didn't get that" (258-64).

The words "*new"* and "*actually*" highlight the differential treatment she received; the attention from these adults contrasts with previous experiences as a rejected outcast. By juxtaposing what she believed they wanted ('*relationships*') with what, in hindsight, she realises they were motivated by ('*sex with a 16-year-old*'), she emphasises her naivety and vulnerability (see section 4.3.1.1.1).

4.2.6.1.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Internet enabling contact with adult men

Explaining how she met these adults on depression support forums, Gill contemplated:

"Men are actually really, really easy to meet and do things with online" (257-8).

Again, her use of the word "*actually"* indicates her surprise at receiving male interest. The repetition of the word "*really*" emphasises the plethora of men actively seeking opportunities to groom.

4.2.6.1.4.   Subordinate theme 4: Passively conceding to men's sexual advances despite not wanting to

Three times, Gill spoke about sexual activity with adults that she went along with, but not as an active participant:

"We only had sexual relations… once. I didn't enjoy it. It wasn't something that I was particularly into. I wasn't really interested in men at

that point. I didn't find him attractive, but he wanted to do it, so I thought,
well you know, why not? I want to be friends with him, I like him" (943-8).

It seems Gill conceded as she felt no reason not to. She does not mention consent. Meeting this man's sexual desires seems part of a transaction of getting what she wanted – a friend.

4.2.6.1.5.   Subordinate theme 5: Conceding to physical harm by partner

Gill made arrangements to meet two men who had stated intentions to hurt her; only one of these occurred:

"He asked if I would like him to cut me. And I said, 'OK. OK fair enough.'
So he cut me on my right breast… With a razor blade. So. Don't ask me
what I was thinking. I don't really remember, I just thought, 'This is
interesting. What's going on here then?'" (930-6).

"*Don't ask me what I was thinking*" implies Gill is pre-empting judgment or that, in hindsight, she is judging herself. She appears to attribute blame to her younger self for not stopping him. However, her recollection frames her concession as based on curiosity, rather than fear. Again, it seems that saying *"No!"* was not considered.

4.2.6.1.6.   Subordinate theme 6: Sexual exploitation

Gill reflected on these experiences.

"The moment you've got that sexual value it's not hard. It's not hard at all
to have relationships, but they're not really good relationships
necessarily. They're exploitative relationships" (1342-5).

For Gill, up until she developed "*sexual value*," relationships were hard for her to have. Saying they were not "*really*" good relationships suggests that they did *seem* to be good at the time. She now realises she was exploited for the men's sexual gratification.

80

4.2.6.2.   Superordinate theme 2: Sexuality

These subordinate themes were grouped together because they related to Gill's sexuality; Gill identified as bisexual (269). Sexuality will be discussed further in section 4.3. The following two subordinate themes are examined further as they were unique to Gill and also most interesting to the research questions.

4.2.6.2.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Complications of polyamory

Although Gill did not use the word 'polyamory,' the researcher suggested this label as she described an additional "*relationship*" that she and her partner were involved in, rather than just extra-relationship sex. Gill described the complications several times, for example, when she was in hospital for mental ill-health and she later discovered;

"They had cuddled naked in bed together. And I wasn't happy with that, because I said, 'I'm happy for you to do things together. I need to be there. This is OK, the three of us, fine… I'm happy to do things with her, I'm happy for you to do things with her, I'm happy to do things with you while she's there. I'm not happy for you two to have an independent relationship while I'm not there'" (635-43).

Gill mentioned this incident several more times during the interview when discussing her partner, as this was the only time she felt he had betrayed her. She makes clear that it was not the physical acts that upset her, but rather that she was not present and that what she had agreed to was not being upheld.

4.2.6.2.2.   Subordinate theme 2. Pointlessness of celebrity crushes

Gill mentioned the peer pressure she felt as a teen to choose a celebrity crush and how pointless it seemed to her:

"I was supposed to pick a boy band member and go, 'Oh, isn't he lovely?'… He's not interested in you. He likes other men…. You're never going to meet them. Why even pretend that you're interested in having a relationship with them, because this is not real. It's not practical, it doesn't make sense" (296-304).

Gill realised what her peers were doing but could not understand why.

4.3.   Findings Across Participants

As described in section 3, the superordinate and subordinate themes were analysed and grouped across participants. For validity, themes reported here occurred across three or more participants (i.e. at least 50% of the sample of six). The themes broadly fell into two groups: the participants' lived experiences and their views on what they wanted and did not want from romantic relationships (their 'aspirations'). There was some inevitable overlap, such as when participants reflected on positive or negative traits of previous partners, however – for clarity, and to tie in with research questions 1 and 3 – these themes are reported separately. As there is limited space for reporting quotations, the reader is signposted to transcript lines (in the attached CD) for relevant supporting participant quotations. Tables 12 (at the start of section 4.3.1.1) and 13 (at the start of section 4.3.1.2) show summaries of the themes generated from the combined analysis described in step 6 of section 3.7.7. The participants' who contributed to these themes are shown with ticks.

4.3.1. Participants' common lived romantic relationship experiences and aspirations

4.3.1.1. Common lived experiences

Table 12: The themes generated from the combined analysis across participants regarding the participants' common lived experiences

Super-ordinate theme	Subordinate themes	Participants contributing to this theme					
		Becca	Claire	Daisy	Ellie	Fiona	Gill
Identity and sense of self	Poor self-esteem/ self perception	✓	✓			✓	
	Rejected and excluded self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Hiding true self via 'acting' NT	✓	✓				✓
	Vulnerability	✓		✓		✓	✓
	ASD diagnosis helping self understanding	✓			✓	✓	
	Positive traits in self and resilience	✓		✓		✓	✓
Influence of others on own understanding of self in romantic relationships	Other relationships as comparisons	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Need for friends and family as confidants and advisors		✓	✓		✓	✓
Gender	Non-typically feminine gender identity and expression		✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Influence of societal pressures on young women	✓	✓			✓	
Sex and sexuality	Non-typical sexual orientation		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Unimportance of sex		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Role of physical, non-sexual touch		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Difficulties with social communication	Difficulties initiating and sustaining conversations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Impact of sensory difficulties	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Preference for online/ text communication		✓		✓		✓
	Need to monitor own behaviour and body language	✓		✓			✓
	Flirting difficulties		✓	✓			✓
Theory of mind (ToM)	Perspective taking	✓			✓		✓
	Literal thinking			✓		✓	✓

4.3.1.1.1.   Superordinate theme 1: Identity and sense of self

4.3.1.1.1.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Poor self-esteem and self-perception

Both Fiona and Claire described viewing themselves negatively and doubting whether potential friends or romantic partners would be interested in them.

"I don't think I have a very high perception of myself, to be honest. Like, if I was to meet myself in person I'd just be like, 'OK, no.' But that's probably because I have low self-esteem" (Fiona, 1172-4).

Fiona seems interested in this view of herself and why she holds it. She is currently receiving psychiatric care for anorexia, so perhaps therapeutic interventions have supported such self-reflection. Although only these two participants articulated the feeling so clearly, given the themes below (involving rejection and being different), the researcher felt the other participants probably also had low self-esteem.

4.3.1.1.1.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Rejected and excluded self

All participants spoke about experiencing rejection in relationships. Gill and Daisy also both described being excluded by peers and their conversations throughout school life, which Gill believe made her more vulnerable (285-364). Fiona linked romantic rejection to the onset of anorexia:

"I really wanted him to go back out with me and I thought there was something wrong with me. I think that's how I became anorexic because I know that's when I stopped eating 'cause I thought I must be fat or something" (Fiona, 843-7).

Fiona blames herself for the end of the relationship, implying she felt not good enough for her ex-partner. Fiona often spoke about her need for control and by stopping eating she perhaps regained control, over her appearance at least, after a romantic rejection, which she could not control.

4.3.1.1.1.3. Subordinate theme 3: Hiding true self via 'acting' NT
Becca, Gill, and Claire felt they needed to monitor their own behaviour in order to act in socially appropriate or NT ways. Gill pretended she had a crush on a male celebrity so she could join in with peers, Becca pretended she was a celebrity to gain confidence in conversations and Claire learned to control her sensory-induced behaviours.

"My family… say, 'Why do you keep on nodding your head? You're not a nodding dog…' …it makes me embarrassed and ashamed to act the way that I feel is natural… I just ended up kind of observing how other people did stuff. And if I was told off for doing something…. That was my way of being told that's not how 'normal people' act" (Claire, 605-15).

Claire implies that the message from her family was that she should act like, and be, a *"normal"* person, and that being different is wrong. In contrast, while Daisy was aware of her differences, she claimed not to care if she came across as normal or not (1901-26).

4.3.1.1.1.4. Subordinate theme 4: Vulnerability
Four of the participants discussed how they felt more vulnerable than other people. Reasons included because of their mental health difficulties (Becca and Gill); their gullibility (Becca and Fiona); being targeted by older men

(Becca, Daisy and Gill); and feeling younger or slower at developing than their peers (Daisy and Fiona). Gill also highlighted that the lack of earlier relationship experiences meant that she was potentially naiver than her classmates at age 16:

> *"It's… so easy to get taken advantage of… when you don't have that same thing that goes off in your head that perhaps other girls get of, "ooh- be careful!" When you haven't had that experience of sort of play relationships at junior school with boyfriend and girlfriend but pretending… And then perhaps snogging your boyfriend at… 13 and that gradual introduction. What I found is that I had absolutely no experience until I got old enough for adult men to take an interest in me… I was involved in far too much sexually with… experienced people… who perhaps were taking advantage of my naivety quite early. Whereas the men I know that's not been the case, they've struggled to find any interest."* (Gill, 1310-39)

Gill reflects on why she might be more vulnerable than "*other*" (neurotypical) girls; as well as lack of experiences and learning opportunities, she highlights that she does not have a sense of intuition alerting her to danger that she realises other people have. It is interesting that only Gill recognised the absence of earlier romantic relationship experiences contributed to her naivety, and also she cannot intuitively 'read' situations. Perhaps the other participants were not aware that they lacked such an intuition or perhaps, as Gill was the oldest, she could reflect on the past with more life experience. The other girls may have had more of the learning experiences Gill lacked (see section 4.3.1.1.3)**.** Gill highlights a potentially unique female perspective: she feels that she was targeted in a way that autistic men would not be.

4.3.1.1.1.5.   Subordinate theme 5: ASD diagnosis helping self understanding

Some participants were able to reflect on how autism could explain their behaviour with romantic relationships, for example being obsessed with boys (Becca, constantly text messaging, and Ellie, following crushes around) and not

understanding others' intentions (Fiona). Becca explained how finding out more about her diagnosis aided her self-understanding:

> *"I only became aware of this because I watched a programme [about autism and girls] there was a girl… one of her obsessions was boys and I thought – that is so, me... I didn't think that you could be obsessed about boys… I fall in love really quickly"* (Becca, 141-57).

Becca highlights how, with the knowledge of a diagnosis, she was able to compare and contrast her own behaviour with others. It seems that before this was framed on the programme as an autistic trait, Becca had not noticed this behaviour in herself or wondered why she did it. Mentioning what one *"could"* be obsessed with suggests that her previous knowledge of autism might have involved a more rigid view of what constitutes obsessions. It seems that many participants have, since receiving their diagnoses, researched the meaning of autism, and used what they learned as a tool for self-reflection, so that their previous life experiences can be understood in a new light.

4.3.1.1.1.6.   Subordinate theme 6: Positive traits in self and resilience
Despite the negative self-perceptions described above, and criticism received from others, four of the participants were able to recognise some positive traits in themselves: Becca as being caring and committed (1216-9), Fiona as well-intentioned (917-21), Gill as being found attractive, (1430-2) and Daisy described the unimportance of a man's criticisms:

> *"He'd also even complained to me that he didn't like my personality or the way I dressed or, or my hair or anything… so it was kind of like water off a duck's back, I thought basically, you don't like anything about me, so what's the point?"* (Daisy, 356-71).

The simile, *"water off a duck's back,"* implies his criticisms did not affect Daisy's view of herself or harm her. Rather than believing she should change, she rejects the prospect of this man being in her life. In many ways, Daisy appeared to have the most positive self-image of all participants and she was also the only one who had not sought help from mental health services.

4.3.1.1.2.   Superordinate theme 2: Influence of others on own understanding of self in romantic relationships

4.3.1.1.2.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Other relationships as comparisons

Participants were explicit in how other relationships in their lives helped them understand romantic relationships. Claire and Fiona compared and contrasted experiences of family love and friendship bonds to romantic relationships. Becca compared the mother-child bond to romantic love. Daisy described feelings of pride that she had romantic relationships to witness and examine (her parents, her brother and his girlfriend and characters on screen), and Ellie mentioned her parents' relationships with each other and subsequent partners. As well as reflecting on her own relationship with her mother, Ellie attributed her difficulties relating to others on her parents' unsuccessful romantic relationships, wondering:

"I don't know what I'm using as...a ... template ... what a good relationship is… it might've been different if… my mother had got… me a stepfather… if I was... around… maybe a healthy relationship, maybe I would've been better… at socialising" (Ellie, 1004-20).

Ellie can reflect on why she is how she is by drawing on attachment theory from her Psychology A Level. "*Got me,"* suggests a healthy relationship template is something she feels entitled to, or that her current situation is worse because she lacked this. It also seems an egocentric view of her mother's situation; her mother's own romantic needs are not considered. Ellie is aware she lacks social skills and seeks a reason for this. Interestingly, she had dismissed the suggestion that autism had affected her relationships (618-20)

4.3.1.1.2.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Need for friends and family as confidants and advisors

Only Claire and Fiona both mentioned having friends with whom they had discussed relationships. Claire, understood that a common narrative in her friendship circle was that one could not remain friends with an ex-partner. Perhaps their younger age and college attendance provided them with wider social circles than the older, unemployed women (Becca, Gill and also the pilot,

Annabelle) had access to. Ellie did not mention confidants or recall another's perspective on her romantic life. Apart from saying her family did not approve of her, "*cross-dresser,*" boyfriend, Becca did not mention any sources of information or peer advice either. Gill was explicit in noting this gap in her resources growing up. Daisy spoke about attempts to confide in another autistic girl (1520-8), but her main source of information and advice was her mother, whose opinion she quoted frequently (e.g. 1104-5). She described how she was texting a boy late one night when she was 18:

> *"My mum came into my room and I tried to hide the, the mobile under my bed… But she saw the light and tried to wrench it out of my grasp and I said, 'It's alright!'"… I'm going to stop.' So, she let me have it"* (Daisy, 404-10).

Daisy appears to accept the authority of her mother regarding control of telephone use. At 18, many women might expect privacy and autonomy over whom they contacted and when. Daisy referred to herself as a, "*late developer,*" (2001), and it seemed as though her mother played a protective role, maintaining involvement in Daisy's romantic life longer than would be expected in neuro-typical women, perhaps because of a lack of a peer-group alternative.

4.3.1.1.3.   Superordinate theme 3: Gender

4.3.1.1.3.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Non-typically feminine gender identity and expression

Claire, Fiona and Ellie described ways in which they did not conform to a feminine stereotype, including clothes and interests. Although Gill did not mention this specifically, her style and clothing on the interview day seemed the most 'masculine-presenting' of the sample. Daisy also mentioned that her female peers seemed more interested in hair and clothes (367, 1944-51) than she was. Fiona mentioned mostly male friends and typically male interests and behaviours:

> *"I don't really enjoy doing my hair all day and putting on make-up, I'd rather just put my clothes on and leave the house. When I was younger I used to… have short hair… enjoy playing football…. I did enjoy playing*

with dolls… I'm still a girl, it's not like I'm transgender …" (Fiona, 1100-10).

Fiona searches for clues to her gender identity in her own behaviour. By saying that she is, "*still a girl,*" and is not, "*transgender,*" she asserts that, despite being unlike other girls she knows, she is still confident in knowing which labels she identifies with. She seems aware there is a difference between what she *does* and who she *is*.

4.3.1.1.3.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Influence of societal pressures on young women:

Claire was able to reflect positively on society becoming more accepting of difference (1164-6). Fiona spoke of girls being under more pressure to look perfect (1641-77) and both Becca and Fiona were aware of the pressures on them due to societal expectations about how women should behave:

'there's a lot more peer pressure on girls... you're expected to be social' (Becca, 1381-3).

Becca had mentioned elsewhere in the interview that she found socialising and group conversations difficult. In the context of the interview, it appears Becca is reflecting on how this difficulty is magnified for women such as herself, because it is coupled with the expectation that socialising is something she should be able to do successfully, in contrast with men, who she feels are not under the same pressure.

4.3.1.1.4.   Superordinate theme 4: Sex and sexuality

Although no specific questions were asked about sexual experiences, history or preferences, all participants mentioned sex, highlighting the importance of sex, or lack thereof, to their lived experiences of romantic relationships.

4.3.1.1.4.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Non-typical sexual orientation

Over half the participants (Claire, Ellie, Fiona and Gill) described romantic experiences with other females, as well as men. Becca also had a

partner who did not present as stereotypically masculine, who she described as a "*cross-dresser*" (953-4). "*He was living as a woman, basically,*" (980) she said, and joked she should become a lesbian (1150). Of those who defined their sexuality, Claire identified as pansexual, Ellie as bisexual, Gill previously believed she was gay (but is now in a relationship with a man), Daisy did not offer a definition (she suggested she had never had sex, 247-8) and Fiona referred to herself as both bisexual (726) and asexual (404). When asked about the future, Gill said that after her (older) partner dies:

> "*I might have a relationship with someone else then… I don't know whether it would be a man or a woman or somebody in between. Somebody who hadn't decided. I'm not that bothered*" (Gill, 1509-12).

Gill emphasises that a romantic partner's gender is irrelevant to her. By suggesting the possibility someone could be "*in between,*" Gill might view gender as non-binary (like Claire, in section 4.2.2.1). Considering the possibility of being "*undecided*" could imply belief that gender identity involves choice, or that it can be explored or discovered as a person develops, like her discovering an attraction to men later in her teenage years (245-8).

4.3.1.1.4.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Unimportance of sex

For different reasons, none of the participants seemed to view regular sex as an important part of their lives. Daisy and Fiona preferred celibacy, Claire wanted to be faithful to a man who lived abroad, Ellie seriously considered a long-term, non-sexual relationship and Gill admitted to an unsatisfactory sex life, but did not try to make changes. Fiona, who had researched reasons for not wanting sex and discovered the term, '*asexual,*' which she identified with (699-74), explained that this had caused problems with an ex-boyfriend.

> "*He thought that I was weird for not wanting to have sex with him. Although I am weird I don't think I am weird for that reason*" (Fiona, 465-7).

Fiona seems assertive in her right to refuse sex in romantic relationships (see also 1539-41), despite pressure from men. She also does not allow his judgment to negatively impact upon her sense of self. Within the context of the whole interview, perhaps her knowing, and being able to use, the term "*asexual,*" provides a validation for her decision, in comparison to Daisy, who believed sex is inevitable in romantic relationships (242-3). Fiona also emphasised later (605) that she will have sex to please a partner she trusts. For Fiona, sex is a way of meeting her partner's needs, rather than her own.

4.3.1.1.4.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Role of physical, non-sexual touch

While Claire (180-3) and Ellie (526) enjoy the intimacy of cuddling, Fiona and Daisy mentioned their discomfort with being touched:

"*I don't really like being touched for anything. Like I feel uncomfortable unless…. I know the person or I have first call. If someone's touching me or something, I feel really scared and like, my heart. I just feel really scared of them*" (Fiona, 1320-4

Fiona later emphasised, again, that feeling in control of touch is important (1873-82). She mentioned "*my heart*"; although she did not explain this further, it could be that she noticed the physiological response of a racing heartbeat, recognising that this scenario evokes a panicked 'fight or flight' state in her, signalling danger and therefore fear.

4.3.1.1.5.   Superordinate theme 5: Social communication difficulties
4.3.1.1.5.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Difficulties initiating and sustaining conversations

Every participant mentioned conversational difficulties, highlighting the anxiety they can provoke. Ellie attributed stalking behaviour to lack of conversation starting skills (202-3). Conversations were easiest for Ellie and Fiona (1775-7) if about a specialist interest. Some participants, including Claire, mentioned the potential for missed romantic opportunities because of these difficulties.

"I have the whole problem of over-thinking what I'm saying… I just don't know how to say it… I end up being stressed about how to talk to someone and then I end up not talking to them, missing the opportunity… it's very annoying" (Claire, 871-85).

Emphasising the "*how*" part of conversations highlights an awareness that the delivery of communication is as important as the content, but this skill does not come naturally to her.

4.3.1.1.5.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Impact of sensory difficulties

Becca and Fiona described their dislike of noisy nightclubs, which could impact on meeting new partners or going on dates, and Gill and Claire mentioned the sensory experiences accompanying face-to-face interaction.

"You're just so aware that they are another person… they have all these things … going on… like somebody giving off… like…. Sound… it's being shouted at you… like invisible words" (Claire, 264-78).

Claire attempts to explain how she perceives the presence of another person and their energy in a physical, sensory way. The sensation of being "*shouted at*" seems stressfully unpleasant. Experiencing sensory overload could make her less capable of contributing to a discussion.

4.3.1.1.5.3.   Subordinate theme 3: Preference for online/text communication

Ellie, Gill and Claire found online/text communication easier. Gill explained:

"All of my relationships have been online, where you can get to know somebody through text, which is my favourite medium. I love text. It's perfect. It's my native language. Sorry" (Gill, 1142-6).

Calling text her "*native*" language implies that spoken conversations feel like a foreign language to her. This could reflect the effort that is required, as spoken conversations do not come naturally to her, or it could mean that she

feels foreign or different when communicating face-to-face. Apologising could reflect an acknowledgment that the interview was face-to-face and the researcher might be disappointed that Gill was not enjoying it as much as she would enjoy a texting interaction.

4.3.1.1.5.4. Subordinate theme 4: Need to monitor own behaviour and body language

Becca, Daisy and Gill mentioned the effort needed to monitor their eye contact during the interview, and Claire talked about restraining herself from fiddling with things. Following on from the quotation above, Gill explained that face-to-face communication requires her to:

"Translate it… from verbal speech into text in my mind. Come up with a response and then translate that back into speech like I'm doing now, which is a very long, tedious process… utterly exhausting. There isn't time to think properly about what I want to say… Because I'm focusing on holding the right amount of eye contact, but not too much and not for too long, and getting the right inflection in my voice… Am I gesturing enough?… too much?" (Gill, 1159-83).

Again, Gill's word choice "*translate,*" positions herself as a foreigner navigating another culture. Her concern about getting inflection *"right,*" and body language "*enough,*" but not "*too much,*" highlights her awareness that communication can be done 'wrongly' but it is difficult to do it 'correctly.' The description of text in her mind could imply that Gill processes language using the visual imagery of text.

4.3.1.1.5.5. Subordinate theme 5: Flirting difficulties

Claire, Gill and Daisy mentioned difficulties interpreting and recognising flirting. Gill acknowledged the possibility someone may have flirted with her and she did not realise, Daisy became analytical of flirting techniques in films she watched, while Claire used friends as translators. Mentioning an interaction with a barista she found attractive, Claire wondered:

"What does this mean? Is this a flirting technique? Some people just seem to know what flirting is, I'm just like, 'How do you flirt?' I don't get what casual flirting it… what's the difference between being nice to someone and flirting?… what if I've completely misread it?" (Claire, 909-28).

Claire acknowledges that while others seem able to understand flirting intuitively, without a need for explanation, she remains confused. It is as though she is the only one who is not 'in on' a secret. Worrying she may "*misread,*" situations highlights that much flirting behaviour is unspoken and intuitive, with cues that need to be picked up on, rather than direct, clear and honest communication. She is aware that she lacks that capacity to, 'read,' such signals. Repeating the questions that she asks herself at such times is suggestive of an internal dialogue that is confused and constantly questioning.

4.3.1.1.6.   Superordinate theme 6: Theory of mind (ToM)

4.3.1.1.6.1.   Subordinate theme 1: Perspective taking

Participants expressed confusion when trying to interpret the behaviour of their romantic interests. Gill read books to research others' though processes (835-59), and all participants struggled to answer a question about how they think partners or potential partners view them. Those who tried to answer directly quoted what had been said to them (e.g. Gill 1430-45). Discussing two boys, Ellie explained:

"All I've heard him say is 'adorable and cute'…   I haven't exactly asked about [the other man's] opinion about me… I mean I suppose he'll say I'm. I'm not sure" (Ellie, 635-52).

Stating that she has not asked him, Ellie implies that she believes this is the only way to find out. Although trying, she does not seem able to guess or imagine how she could come across to him. When she was asked again, she said he would see her as a cat, because she uses cat emoticons (661-5). Perspective-taking beyond the literal appears difficult.

4.3.1.1.6.2.   Subordinate theme 2: Literal thinking

Gill, Fiona and Daisy (2365-9) described tendencies to take things literally or preferences for others to communicate with them literally. Nuances and guesswork were difficult and unappealing. Fiona described why she had agreed to date someone after he threatened suicide:

"I thought [he] was actually going to kill himself when I wouldn't go out with him, and then when I look back that was so stupid, but at the time I was thinking, 'I don't want him to die,' and, 'I need to do this for him'" (Fiona, 903-7).

Fiona took him at his word and felt responsible for keeping him alive. Calling herself *"stupid"* suggests recognition that others would have realised he was manipulative. She blames herself for believing him, rather than him for the deceit.

4.3.1.2.   *Aspirations for future romantic relationships*

The following themes were grouped together as they involved what the participants wanted from a romantic relationship. These were either derived from the traits they had liked in successful partners or partnerships, the opposite of what they had disliked or their responses from being specifically asked about their future hopes. These themes are summarised in table 13, below.

Table 13: The themes generated from the combined analysis across participants regarding the participants' common aspirations for romantic relationships in the future and desired traits in their romantic relationships

Aspirations for romantic relationships in the future and desired traits in romantic relationships	Participants contributing to this theme					
	Becca	Claire	Daisy	Ellie	Fiona	Gill
Desire for a long-term relationship	✓			✓		✓
Contentment with staying single			✓	✓	✓	
Need for communication and clarity about expectations	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Importance of labeling relationship type	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Need for honesty, trustworthiness and predictability	✓	✓			✓	✓
Importance of reciprocity	✓			✓	✓	
Importance of being truly understood and acceptance	✓	✓			✓	✓
Role of love and romance		✓			✓	✓
Relevance of physical attractiveness of partner		✓	✓	✓		
Emotional intimacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enjoyment of romantic interests' company		✓	✓			✓
Shared interests		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Consideration of motherhood	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

4.3.1.2.1.   Desire for long-term relationship

Half the participants (Becca, Ellie and Gill) expressed a desire for a long-term relationship. Becca was dating someone she hoped to stay with, Claire wanted to "*end up*" with her online crush (1338-9) and Ellie expected to find a long-term relationship in the future (732-3). Gill explained:

"I suspect I will probably be with [her long-term partner] for another 20, 30 years until he dies. And then maybe have a relationship with someone else if I find someone who's interested" (Gill, 732-3).

Gill did not use language of hope or desire; the word '*suspect*' implies this is her best guess at what will happen. She does not express active choice, rather she seems resigned to staying with him. Indeed, she later admits that change would be an "*upheaval*" (1417-9), implying that comfort keeps her in this relationship. Her manner of speaking about his inevitable death appears unemotional; finding a replacement for him would be a practical task to do later.

4.3.1.2.2.   Staying single

Daisy, Ellie and Fiona were single and content to stay that way for now. Claire was also single despite being "*in love*" with an online romance and although she wanted to be in a relationship with him, her long-term aspiration was to be happy, irrespective of relationship status (1366-9). Becca, Claire and Ellie emphasised the exhausting aspect of relationships. Describing an unexpected breakup text, Ellie said:

"I was very tired… I was going into Upper Sixth and I thought our relationship will probably weigh me down, so I'll try and, it's OK to just not go [out] with anyone" (Ellie, 132-141).

The expression "*weigh me down*" portrays the relationship as a potential burden. Mentioning the stage of her education suggests that Ellie felt she should focus her energy on exams, not a boy. Perhaps she is convincing herself that she agreed with his decision to end their relationship. Explaining that she thought *"it's OK"* to be single suggests that she had to assert this belief to herself, against perceived pressure to be dating.

4.3.1.2.3.   Need for communication and clarity about expectations

Becca, Fiona and Ellie explained that communication is necessary for each partner to understand the other and their expectations. Becca, Claire, Ellie and Gill mentioned fidelity and 'cheating.'   However, to Ellie and Gill open relationships were acceptable if mutually agreed. Becca (407-8) and Fiona

(540-2) described arguments arising in the past due to un-clarified expectations while Ellie described how she had managed this.

"I told him before I went to uni, that I'm going to meet a lot of other people and I'm not sure if I want to keep this exclusive, whatever 'this' is...I'm gonna keep my options open." (Ellie, 509-13)

Ellie is clearly 'anti-cheating' (811) yet is able to consider a non-exclusive relationship (891-895). By explicitly stating that their relationship does not have a title, Ellie emphasises that she is not obliged to be faithful. It seems that if everyone understands and no deception is involved, this is acceptable.

4.3.1.2.4.   Importance of labelling relationship type

Following the theme above, four participants (Becca, Daisy, Ellie and Fiona) discussed whether relationships could be considered "*real*," "*official*," or something else, such as, *"friends… with benefits"* (Ellie, 566-7). This seemed to be determined by both mutually agreed titles and how serious the relationship was judged to be in hindsight. For example, Fiona shared;

"Although I had four boyfriends and one girlfriend, I think the only 'real' relationship I had was with [name of long term boyfriend]." (Fiona, 506-9).

Using the labels, "*boyfriend"* and *"girlfriend,"* which are generally only used by young people in 'official' relationships, and then discounting those relationships as being not "*real,"* suggests that Fiona is questioning whether the agreed title makes a relationship real, or something else. In the context of the rest of the interview, it could be that her trust and the feelings she had were what made this relationship "*real"* for her.

4.3.1.2.5.   Honesty, trustworthiness and predictability

Becca (374) and Gill (679) both described themselves as non-liars, Claire (1109-1202) and Gill (656-9) mentioned honesty as a quality they admire and Fiona, Becca and Gill described their hurt due to betrayals of trust. Fiona explained her feelings about her ex's behaviour.

"I was really upset… only because I felt like I really trusted this guy and I really cared about him and he was treating me that way because I didn't wanna have sex with him… just the way he changed so much… it's like he wasn't the same person any more, like he was angry and he was scary whereas before he was all calm and kind… he suddenly changed recently became angry and, and mean and scary." (Fiona, 479-82 & 661-7)

Saying *"only because,"* implies Fiona's upset is less about the specifics of her ex-partner's behaviour and more that he was acting out of character and he was therefore betraying the trust she had in him and ruining the sense of security and safety she previously had.

4.3.1.2.6.   Reciprocity

Becca, Ellie and Fiona (545-6) emphasised the reciprocal effort required in relationships. Fairness and getting back the efforts they put in seemed important. Becca compared past and present partners.

"He wanted me to take the kids… he didn't bother to come over… [I thought] I don't think I'm going to [come over], because you've upset me so much." (Becca 312-6)

In contrast to:

"He works long hours… he still makes that effort, which is nice." (Becca, 1186)

The word "*bother*" suggests that effort is something she feels a partner should make for her (and their children). When he has not done this, she is unwilling to reciprocate. It seems that being aware of what she did not like about her previous partner has enabled her to recognise this positive trait in her new partner, and by mentioning the long hours he works, she acknowledges that it might be more difficult for her new partner to travel to see her.

4.3.1.2.7.   Being truly understood and accepted

In contrast to experiences of rejection and having to 'act' neuro-typical (section 4.3.1.1.2), acceptance and understanding were mentioned by Becca, Claire, Fiona and Gill as what they appreciated or wanted in romantic relationships.   Describing a man she loves, Claire says that, compared to her family and former schoolmates,

> *"I'm very, very myself with him…not afraid to be just natural... saying my… really weird things."* (Claire, 668-677)

Repeating *"very"* suggests her behaviour changes dramatically in his presence.   Being *"not afraid"* suggests feeling safe from criticism or shame. Being "*natural*" around him, in contrast to wearing a *"mask"* (563) with others, implies he enables a feeling of relaxation that she does not often experience. Indeed, Claire earlier described a romantic partner as a "*coming home place*" (189-90), illustrating the sense of belonging, security and permission to be her true self.

4.3.1.2.8.   Role of love and romance

Fiona, Claire and Gill described being "*in love*" with Claire emphasising love's unconditional nature (1175-91) whilst Becca described "*loving*" behaviour (1230-1).   Daisy (222), Fiona (1009-11) and Gill (1470-2) did not see themselves as "*romantic*" as the others, and Ellie preferred the term *"intimate relationships"* (61) because of the stereotypical connotations the word "*romantic*" evokes.   Explaining her lack of interest in receiving nude photos from her male friends, Fiona shared that whilst she does not want sex:

> *"I just don't think I fit, I feel like I'm romantically attracted to people. Like if I'm in love if I feel I love someone."* (Fiona, 603-5)

For Fiona (unlike Daisy, 242-3), love and romantic attraction can be separated from sex and sexual attraction. Describing that she does not "*fit*" could show a recognition that others do not think like her**.**

Half the participants (Claire, Ellie and Daisy) described noticing crushes' physical appearances, whereas the others did not mention what initially attracted them; it seemed these women had been chosen/pursued by men rather than actively selecting those they noticed and were attracted to. Gill amusingly described peer pressure to have a celebrity crush when she was at school, and not yet attracted to men.

> *"Who, as a 14-year-old-girl, in the year 2000, shall I pick to demonstrate that I'm a normal girl, just like everybody else? I know. He's got big muscles, he's very manly. Arnold Schwarzenegger. I'll pretend I fancy him. This was apparently the wrong answer. I was supposed to pick someone who wasn't ancient, hideous and amusing"* (Gill, 279-94)

Gill demonstrates some awareness of the physical features other young women find attractive (muscles) but her confusion about conventional attractiveness, and her later description of her partner as "*overweight*" (385) suggests that a conventionally attractive physique is not of high importance.

4.3.1.2.10.   Emotional intimacy

Feelings closeness, connection and comfort were mentioned by five of the six participants, using words such as, "*connection,*" (Daisy, 470), "*clicks,*" "*spark,*" "*bond,*" (Claire, 513, 1132-3), "*in sync,*" "*bond,*" (Ellie, 29, 861) and "*connect*" (Becca, 1692-5). Fiona explained,

> *"I think it is a kind of spiritual thing when you are with someone you feel like your minds are like connected in a way so you care, so you're always concerned about each other and stuff." (Fiona,* 1834-8)

"*Spiritual*," evokes a divine, otherworldly, feeling of attunement and communicating without speaking. Fiona's description of a couple knowing that they were thinking about each other's well-being implied that being held in mind was important, which was interesting given her experience of early neglect (283-99).

4.3.1.2.11.   Enjoyment of romantic interest's company

Daisy, Gill and Claire mentioned getting on well with partners/crushes and finding them funny. A man at a party, who Daisy later developed a crush on, made a joke with another man and she described his behaviour towards her.

> *"He sort of, uh, he was sort of looking at me, for my reaction… And I, I would sort of smile back… it was very funny." (*1322-36)

It is interesting that a short, shared moment resonated with Daisy so strongly. Perhaps the feeling of being included or part of the joke is one she does not experience often and enjoyed, hence her attraction developing.

4.3.1.2.12.   Shared interests

Common interests were mentioned by Fiona, Ellie, Claire and Daisy. Daisy said doing activities together (213-4) is part of being in a romantic relationship, but she was cautious about how this could impact on her enjoyment of alone time and her own interests. Ellie described meeting people at a comic convention and Claire had found a love interest online through special interest forums.

> *"We're both equally just as weird as each other… lots of similar interests, … we really like.. Victorian science fiction… we're… beginning to like literature, like art." (*Claire, 728-32)

Repeatedly using the pronoun "*we*" suggests that although they are not in an official relationship, Claire is starting to see them in terms of what they have in common. Sharing "*weird*" interests gives the impression of a shared identity of being outsiders together. Indeed, Claire later described those interested in Victorian science fiction as being *"in a steampunk community… a sub-culture."* (815-24). It seemed that shared interests help her have a sense of belonging when she enjoys them with others.

4.3.1.2.13.   Consideration of motherhood

Motherhood was mentioned by all except Claire. Becca was a mother, Ellie was certain she wanted to become one but Fiona and Gill (because of concerns about their parenting skills, 1549-58 & 1492-7) and Daisy were doubtful. Daisy compared herself to the pirate Captain Jack Sparrow, saying;

> *"I'd… think of myself as… a free spirit…I'm not going to get tied down to anyone… I'm not sure if I'd like the experience…. settling down into family life and, yeah, you know, like, the adventure's over before it's even properly begun."* (Daisy, 1842-50)

Daisy seems pleased to have found a role model who enjoys life but does not appear to want to be in a relationship. The idea of comparing herself to a pirate, who is free to go and do as he pleases, suggests that freedom and a lack of responsibilities are aspects of Daisy's life she values, which she feels would be compromised by having a serious relationship or children.

4.4.   Chapter Summary

This chapter has described and interpreted the most relevant and interesting themes arising for individual participants, highlighting various aspects of their unique experiences. The common themes arising across half of more of the participant sample have then been described and interpreted. The next chapter will discuss the meaning of these findings in view of the research questions and existing and future literature, theory and practice.

5.   Discussion

5.1.   Chapter Overview

The findings from the process of IPA will first be summarised. These will then be discussed, according to each of the three research questions, in the light of existing literature and psychological theory. There will next be a section on reflections and reflexivity and the importance of the research findings for EPs. The researcher will explain how the findings will be disseminated. Other important findings from the data, which were not relevant to the research questions, but were nonetheless important and novel contributions to existing knowledge on this topic, will be briefly summarised. The limitations of the current research and implications for future research will then be described. Last of all, a conclusion for the entire thesis will be offered, where they key message of the thesis will be stated.

5.2. Discussion of Findings in view of the Research Questions and Existing Literature and Psychological Theory

5.2.1. Summary of key findings

Figure 1: A figure to show the superordinate themes derived from i) the idiographic analysis, ii) the combined lived experiences (shared by more than 50% of participants) and iii) the combined aspirations and desired traits in romantic partners and relationships (shared by more than 50% of participants).

i — Idiographic analysis

- Participants' identity and sense of self
- Male romantic partners causing emotional and physical harm
- Awareness of past experiences influencing present relationships
- Attempts to understand and explain relationships
- Unassertiveness and passivity
- A participant being a perpetrator of abuse
- Feelings of freedom and entrapment in relationships
- Romantic partners meeting basic needs
- Grooming and child sexual exploitation

ii — Lived experiences (more than 50%)

- Participants' identity and sense of self
- The influence of others on participants' understanding of their relationship experiences
- Gender identity
- The impact of societal pressures on girls and women
- Non-heterosexual identity or experiences
- Asexuality or lack of importance attached to sex
- Physical touch
- Social communication difficulties
- Theory of mind

iii — Aspirations and desired traits in romantic partners and relationships (more than 50%)

- Long-term relationships vs. staying single
- Motherhood
- Communication and clarity about expectations
- The importance of honesty, trust and predictability of a partner
- The importance of reciprocity
- Feeling understood and accepted by a romantic partner
- Emotional intimacy
- Enjoying company and shared interests
- The relevance of physical appearance of romantic interests

5.2.2. Research question one: What are the lived romantic relationship experiences of young women who identify with a diagnosis of ASD?

All participants had romantic experiences of some kind, which they were able to share and discuss. This section will describe the themes generated from interpretation of these experiences and include information from both the idiographic and group level of analysis.

5.2.2.1. Participants' identity and negative view of self

Participants were self-critical, describing themselves as different, weird and awkward. Although they were not asked specifically about early or current peer or family relationships, all participants chose to do so, perhaps as their

way of sense-making about their subsequent romantic experiences. They spoke about attempts to hide their 'true' selves from others and pretending to be normal or neurotypical, changing the behaviour that felt natural to them, or acting the role of someone with confidence. Such acting or imitating is also described in Attwood's (2007) descriptions of clinical experience. Becca asked, *'Who am I? What am I?'* (610-1); similar questions were asked by participants in Aston's (2003) research, suggesting that identity may be a common concern for this population.

There was a sense of feeling shamed or blamed, by family or peers, and of getting things wrong. This links with Stokes et al.'s (2007) findings that parents held concerns that their young adult children with ASD behaved inappropriately; it is probable that parents would criticise and try to change behaviour that they view as incongruous in their children. Sperry and Mesibov (2005) also found that autistic adults raised concerns about the appropriateness of their own behaviour around the opposite sex. Such negative self-views could be linked to all participants except Daisy reporting mental health difficulties. It is estimated that one in three autistic adults experience mental health problems (Rosenblatt, 2008).

5.2.2.2.   Lack of friendships, rejection and limited opportunities for learning about romantic relationships

The participants' feelings of abnormality were coupled with experiences of rejection and exclusion by peers during their schooling. This finding is consistent with previous research that found that autistic adolescents have poorer quality of best friendships (Whitehouse et al., 2009) and lower friendship satisfaction (Cottenceau et al., 2012). Previous research has also suggested that friendships are difficult for autistic adults (Muller et al., 2008; Mehzabin and Stokes, 2011; Sperry and Mesibov, 2005). Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasise the fundamental human need for a sense of a belonging, and how lacking this can lead to emotional distress, loneliness and an intense desire to form relationships (see, *'A sense of belonging,'* in section 5.2.3). MacDonald and Leary (2005) found that social exclusion can be experienced in a similar way as physical pain and Muller et al. (2008) found that the adults with ASD

indeed reported intense isolation, depression and anxiety, and distress about a lack of emotional intimacy.

Social rejection is also relevant, because of the participants' potential missed opportunities for learning about relationships via a peer group; according to Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) attending to live models (observing a behaviour) and verbal models (being told how to behave) and their consequences are two important stimuli for learning in a social context. Only two of the (younger) participants (Fiona and Claire) mentioned discussing romantic relationships with friends, but they also explained they were mostly friends with boys (Attwood, 2007, describes that autistic adolescent girls could gravitate towards male friends after rejection by female peers, because of their common interests with male peers). Gill was keenly aware of how her lack of both a friendship group with whom to discuss relationships, and of earlier experiences of "*play*" romantic relationships, had left her more inexperienced and naïve than other girls would have been by age 16.

5.2.2.3. Unassertiveness and passivity

Both Daisy and Gill described how they had gone along with situations instigated by men that they were uncomfortable with or, with hindsight, recognise were dangerous or predatory. The unassertiveness of these participants could be linked to earlier experiences of being dismissed as doing wrong things in social situations, described above, leading them to ignore their intuition; indeed, both Gill and Daisy recognised they lacked alarm bells that other girls seem to have. Gill also described staying in her current relationship due to "*inertia*" and lack of motivation to change, which is consistent with Jobe and White's (2007) findings, that AQ scores predicted longer relationships, perhaps due to a preference for sameness.

5.2.2.4. Ways of understanding romantic relationships

Despite their dearth of peer role models, participants reported finding other ways of learning about and making sense of relationships. Gill analysed the character's decision-making processes in books and Daisy watched films to analyse flirting between characters. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) calls this process symbolic modelling. None of the participants mentioned

pornography as a source of information; perhaps they did not watch it or they had learned it was a 'taboo' for women to admit watching it.

The explicit use of theory was helpful for Ellie's self-understanding; she had studied attachment theory and was interested in the effect her parents' relationships with each other and subsequent partners had on her own relationships.

Becca, one of the oldest participants at 28, described learning by reflecting on the past; Frith and Happé (1999) suggest that self-awareness increases by adulthood for those with ASD. Daisy's main source of guidance and advice was her mother, consistent with the findings of Cottenceau et al. (2012): adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome reported confiding in their parents more than their peers. As Daisy still lives with her family, this has continued through to young adulthood.

Finally, Claire described using visualisations and mental graphs to help her understand her experiences, which is consistent with some previous research findings (Hulburt et al., 1994) and autobiographical accounts (Grandin, 1995), that adults with Asperger syndrome describe predominantly visual styles of thinking. Williams (2004) argues (based on IPA analysis of autobiographical written accounts of lived experiences of autism) that these compensatory strategies should be called a Theory of Mind. This is because she believes that whilst typically developing children can intuitively see from another's perspective, the lack of such intuition is what leads autistic individuals to develop logical strategies for understanding others, with varying degrees of success.

5.2.2.5. *Vulnerability to exploitation and abuse*

Given the participants' experiences of rejection, criticism and negative self-image; their limited opportunities for learning about romantic relationships from peer models or conversation; their tendency to passively concede in uncomfortable situations; and their difficulties understanding other's intentions (described below, '*Difficulties with understanding the theory of mind*'), it is understandable that they might be considered to be vulnerable to abuse and

manipulation. Indeed, Gill made this link explicit, Becca and Fiona both described their tendency towards gullibility, and Daisy and Gill both mentioned being incapable of recognising warning signs in the same way as others. Vulnerability due to their trusting nature was found to be a concern raised by young adults with ASD discussing online dating (Roth and Gillis, 2015) and mothers of teenage girls with ASD (Cridland et al., 2014). Half the participants of this study (Becca, Fiona and Gill) experienced physical, emotional and sexual abuse or threats from men they were romantically involved with, including Gill's experiences of online grooming and CSE. Daisy and Becca also described experiences of being targeted by or sexually involved with significantly older men when they were teenagers. The increased vulnerability of autistic females to sexual abuse and assault has been described by Attwood (2007), Hendrickx (2015) and Holliday Willey (2012, 2014).

5.2.2.6.   Gender identity and expression

Although no specific questions were asked about the participants' gender identity, all participants except Becca mentioned ways in which they felt non-stereotypically feminine, including preferring typically masculine interests or dress and being less interested in what their female peers enjoy, such as hairstyles or make-up. Claire specifically identified as *"gender non-binary*," Fiona described herself as like a tomboy but "*still a girl"* (1109) and Gill raised the possibility that someone might still be "*deciding*" their gender. The concept of a "*third sex*" has been described by Hendrickx (2015, p.15) based on her interviews with autistic women who described feeling neither female nor male, or male in their way of thinking but feminine in their interests; whereas Simone (2010, p.61) explains that she herself and the, '*Aspergirls*,' she interviewed felt '*androgynous.*' Indeed, in Davidson and Tamas' (2016) analysis of autobiographical accounts from blogs and online survey responses by autistic adults, they compare gender to a 'ghostly presence' in the lives of people with autism. This was because it seemed as though gender was felt as hardly present to the autistic writers; it could not be tangibly located internally or externally, yet it affected their lives. The authors describe how responses to gender ranged from ignoring the concept completely, attempting to conform and play the role of ones assigned gender for the social benefits this brought, or actively rejecting the notion.

Research findings suggest that there could be higher rates of '*gender dysphoria*' and 'transsexuality' in autistic women than in neurotypical controls (Pohl et al., 2014), which is supported by De Vries et al. (2010) who found that 7% of children and adolescents assessed at a gender dysphoria clinic met the diagnostic criteria for ASD (versus an estimated 1% prevalence of ASD in the general population). Gender dysphoria could be seen as a more extreme end of the spectrum of gender identity than what the current participants described. Furthermore, it is a medical term which pathologises non-typical gender identity. The participants in this study, in contrast, seemed at peace with their gender identity, even though they recognised it made them different to their peers.

Ingudomnukul et al.'s (2007) androgen theory of autism states that autism is partly caused by an increase in foetal exposure to male sex hormones, and the authors reported that autism was linked to higher rates of, '*tomboyism*' in women. Likewise, Bejerot et al. (2012) reported that, not only did adult autistic female participants have higher levels of testosterone than controls and a tendency to present as more '*masculine*' but the autistic men in their sample were also judged as presenting as less masculine. Attwood (2007) also described autistic men in his clinical experience as being more effeminate. Hendrickx (2015, p.154) argues that autism may involve feeling '*less gendered*' rather than more like the opposite gender. It could be that biological causes affect gender identity or it might be an effect of socialisation, both in terms of expectations of girls (for example, to be empathetic and sociable, which are less expected of boys), and the friendships (with boys) that these young women are exposed to. From a feminist perspective, gender is considered a social construct, which is learned. According to social learning theory, imitation, modelling and reinforcement (both directly being rewarded or observing others) would be necessary for gender roles to be learned (Mischel, 1966). It could be that because of their difficulties with social communication, autistic girls not only have less access to female peers but are also less susceptible to being '*socialised*' in all areas of their selves, including their gender identity (Davidson & Tamas, 2016).

5.2.2.7. Non-heterosexuality, asexuality and the role of or absence of sex

Participants were not asked to specifically define their sexuality; although none used the word 'lesbian' three described themselves as bisexual or pansexual. Five of the six participants described same-sex romantic experiences, with the remaining participant (Daisy) presenting as what the researcher would describe as 'heteroromantic' (as she was still romantically interested in men and had crushes on them), but asexual. This reflects findings from Gilmour et al. (2012) that autistic females showed less heterosexuality than autistic men; parental reports that their daughters seemed gay or asexual (Cridland et al., 2014); and findings that autistic women were more likely to report bisexual interest than controls (Ingudomnukul et al., 2007). Although this is a small sample, there does seem to be more non-heterosexuality among these participants than in the general, non-autistic female population; the Office for National Statistics (2014) found that 92.8% of people surveyed identified as heterosexual. However, sexual identity and experiences are different; a YouGov survey (2015) found that 43% of young people aged 18 to 21 described themselves as bisexual *'to some degree'* (compared with only 7% of those age 60+). Hendrickx (2015) suggests that autistic women might have a more pragmatic approach to sexuality, rather than seeing it as a defining part of their identity. Furthermore, given that some of the participants' gender identity might be considered less binary or more fluid, as explored above, it could be that some participants perhaps also placed less importance on the gender identity of others, including romantic partners. Indeed, Gill explained the rules of her polyamorous relationship as agreed with her (male) partner.

> *'He just doesn't want me having relationships with other men. I don't personally see what the difference is, but it's something to do with penises'* (Gill, 1526-9).

She appears to accept her partner's rules on relationships and gender, but not fully understand them. For Gill, the only relevant difference she seems to see between men and women is their sexual organs. Sexual organs also dismissed as unimportant by Claire.

Two participants either identified as or seemed asexual; Fiona, who did not enjoy sex, and Daisy, who had never had sex and did not want to. A higher prevalence of asexuality amongst autistic women is consistent with tentatively drawn findings by Gilmour et al. (2012), Marriage et al. (2009), (Ingudomnukul et al., 2007) and Cridland et al. (2014). Interestingly, previous research has reported increased prevalence of female bisexuality and asexuality together, as though they are similar concepts, possibly reflecting a hetero-normative male-centric viewpoint (historically present in psychological research [Burr, 2003]) that heterosexual attraction to men is the 'norm,' and differences from this norm are grouped together as 'other.' However, this researcher would argue that bisexuality and asexuality are different phenomena and should be researched separately. Both participants who did not want to have sex also reported a dislike of being touched; it could be that these sensory issues make sex seem impossible or unpleasant, as suggested by Attwood (2007) and Hendrickx (2015).

Although the other participants did not seem to be asexual, they (except Becca) did not seem, for various reasons, to enjoy regular, fulfilling sex lives, and seemed accepting of long periods of abstinence. It could be that their passive natures meant they did not know or feel they could explain what they wanted in the bedroom, or it could be due to their anxieties and sensory issues. This is consistent with Byers et al.'s (2013a) finding that higher ASD symptomology was associated with lower sexual satisfaction and sexual esteem, and higher sexual anxiety. Aston's (2003) interview research and clinical experience also suggested that sex is unimportant for the Asperger partner; sexual infidelity is rare and motivation for affairs that do happen is rarely sexual. Aston also states that men with Asperger syndrome often have lists of ideal partner qualities, and sex is rarely mentioned. Although these claims were mostly based on studies of men, in this current study a similar pattern is emerging with female participants.

Again, although there was no direct question about sex, all participants mentioned it. Some showed recognition that is was a taboo subject: Claire was concerned she might embarrass the interviewer, Fiona was aware she might sound like a "*creeper*" and Gill discussed her thoughts about whether or not to

make eye contact when talking about sex. Becca, on the other hand, mentioned using sex to feel connected to people.

5.2.2.8.   *Social communication difficulties*

Difficulties with social communication were reported by many of the participants, which would be expected given that these are a defining characteristic for autism diagnosis, as explained in the introduction. Participants described these difficulties as impacting upon both romantic relationships and friendships, highlighting that there is much overlap to different kinds of relationships. Communication and interaction difficulties were also reported by participants in Roth & Gillis' (2015) qualitative research. A common difficulty involved initiating and sustaining conversations and the impact this could have on missed romantic opportunities. Ellie also described her "*stalkerish*" behaviour, consistent with parental concerns about stalking or misunderstanding boundaries reported by Stokes et al. (2007) and Cridland et al. (2014). While the previous studies attributed the stalking behaviour to misreading social cues, Ellie believed it was because she did not know how to start a conversation. Explanations given by, 'stalkers,' would be another area for future research.

The need to be aware of and monitor their own body language and restrict sensory stimulatory behaviour so to appear normal was also described by participants as an exhausting concern when interacting; inappropriate behaviour was also a concern held by parents in previous research (Stokes et al., 2007). Online, written communication was preferred by this study's participants, due to the clarity and time to think it enabled, and the lack of sensory distractions. This is consistent with the findings of Roth and Gillis (2015), whose participants found it easier to express themselves in writing.

Flirting was another area of difficulty for participants, both in recognising signals (which they recognised could lead to missed romantic opportunities) and knowing *how* to flirt. There is a dearth of previous research on autism and flirting, but the current findings were consistent with parental concerns reported by Cridland et al. (2014). Given the nature of their social communication difficulties, it is unsurprising that the nuanced subtleties of

114

flirting, including non-verbal communication, would be difficult for autistic young women to interpret. Claire's friends acted as social translators for her, pointing out signs that someone liked her romantically, but the others did not appear to have this helpful resource.

5.2.2.9. Difficulties with understanding the theory of mind (ToM)

Participants described various difficulties involving perspective taking and understanding why romantic partners behaved in certain ways. Gill reported reading fiction to learn about the reasoning behind other people's thought processes. No participants were able to easily answer the question, *"How* do you think your romantic partner sees you*?"* with most either not answering, or guessing based on what their partner had directly told them. Some, such as Ellie, expressed surprise that the researcher would ask this and others, such as Becca, commented that it was "*really hard.*" Only Gill was able to make an inference, that she provided company and her partner would be lonely without her.

Ellie also implied a lack of perspective taking skills when she was confused about a girl she had abused terminating contact with her. Participants also expressed confusion that others did not share their own logical thinking, such as Claire's confusion that someone could want sex but not a relationship and Gill not understanding 'the point' of celebrity crushes. They did not seem able to realise how forces other than logic might motivate others. As described in the introduction, perspective taking based on ToM is well established in research literature as a skill that the autistic population find difficult. The impact that a lack of perspective taking skills has had on romantic relationships has not yet been researched, but it would be reasonable to hypothesise that difficulties empathising with a partner could lead to misunderstandings, upset and conflict. Indeed, Aston (2003) found that the men with Asperger's Syndrome that she interviewed often had difficulties understanding their wives and how to make them happy. It is possible that women are under greater pressure to be successful empathisers because of societal expectations; it would be interesting for future research to gather partners' perspectives, and to compare and contrast their views on the relationship.

As Fiona expressed, she thinks people have the same intentions as her and several participants described themselves as gullible. This is another reason why these young women could potentially be vulnerable, as they could be less able to recognise and pre-empt malicious or predatory intentions.

5.2.2.10.   *Perpetrating abuse*

Ellie admitted emotionally and physically abusive behaviour during her school years towards her female best friend, for whom she also admitted a romantic attraction. She explained this abuse as being a way to get to know her, by testing her reactions. Ellie did not appear to empathise with this girl or be able to take her perspective, even expressing surprise that the friend did not keep in touch once they left school. Although experiences of being a perpetrator of abuse were only mentioned by one participant, other participants were not asked directly about it, so it cannot be ruled out. In Aston's (2003) small sample of interviewees, 75% of the autistic women admitted to being violent towards their partners. Conflicts in relationships will be another important area for further research.

5.2.3. Research question two: How do these young women perceive their experiences, as females, in comparison to what they believe would be the experiences of young autistic men?

Participants found the question, *'how do you feel your experiences as an autistic young woman differ to an autistic man, regarding romantic relationships?'* difficult to answer. This could be due to difficulties in with perspective taking, described in section 5.2.2; it requires either knowledge or the ability to empathise with men and guess what their experiences might be, which would likely have been a difficult task for the participants. The question might also have been difficult because of the three dimensions of experience they were required to reflect on: being a woman, being autistic and having romantic relationship experiences. As evidenced in the transcripts, the participants were often just able to reflect on one or two of these (such as Becca's comparisons of how male and female specialist interests differ) or made guesses based on what they had read about autism, rather than their own experiences. In hindsight, it would have been better for the researcher to

116

use visual strategies such as a Venn diagram to show that the inter-sectional aspect of their lived experience was of interest, rather than expecting them to guess and compare what a male experience could be. Therefore, the findings reported here will reflect how participants were able to answer, and also how the researcher has interpreted their experiences, from an intersectional feminist perspective.

5.2.3.1. *Impact of autism diagnosis*

The participants varied in terms of when they had first heard of the condition 'autism/Asperger's Syndrome,' what age they received a diagnosis (or when they self-diagnosed, in Claire's case), and how long ago, and whether a diagnosis was something they researched and then pursued, or was assigned to them by professionals. There is not space to explore these experiences fully in this thesis, but receiving or discovering a diagnosis did seem to have a significant impact on the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences. As described in section 4.3.1.1.1, participants were able to use their diagnoses to research their condition and reflect on their own experiences and behaviour in a new light. It was also interesting how the language changed of those who had researched their condition, with some participants referring to 'autistics' and 'neurotypicals' and others referring to themselves and 'normal,' people. As well as helping them gain further insight into their own experiences, it is possible that having a label for the feelings they had long held of being different could provide a new sense of identity. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) a sense of belonging to a group is an important source of self-esteem. Mesibov et al. (2004, p.19-32) describe "*the culture of autism*" as differences, not deficits. A diagnosis therefore seems helpful in allowing autistic women to move away from a sense of blame or shame and towards curious self-reflection and increased understanding.

5.2.3.2. *Impact of societal expectations of women*

Fiona spoke about the pressures that she feels to look and be perfect, thin and hairless, that boys do not have. Ways in which teachers, parents, peers, the media and pornography have been shown to contribute to the sexualisation of girls, pressurising them to self-objectify and strive for an impossible appearance are summarised by Rae (2015). Young women with

autism may be as susceptible to these pressures as their neurotypical peers; indeed, autism and anorexia have indeed been linked in previous research (Gillberg & Råstam,1992).

Becca also described the pressure to be sociable as being greater for girls. Given that females are stereotypically expected to be nurturing, sociable and empathetic, and that socialising and perspective taking are areas this population finds difficult, as already discussed, it is possible that others who are not aware of the implications of autism may be less tolerant towards these young women. As Simone (2010, p.62) explains *"though we may not feel particularly womanly, others will still see us as such as measure our behaviour against nonautistic females… men are not expected to be socially adept."* Baron-Cohen's (2003) Extreme Male Brain theory states that (at a population level) a typical male brain is good at logic and systemising, whereas a typical female brain is a successful empathiser; he claims that autistic people have Extreme Male Brains, making them good at thinking systematically but not at empathising. What is not explored in this theory is how having a 'male brain,' whilst living in a female body, could impact on how the person is seen and treated by others and the consequences this would have.

5.2.3.3. The potential vulnerability of autistic girls to sexual exploitation

The participants' sense of their own vulnerability was explored in section 5.2.2. Only Gill was able to compare and contrast her own experiences with autistic males, based on what they had told her about their experiences.

> *"As a woman, I think my experience is that I was involved in far too much sexually… with people who perhaps were taking advantage of my naivety quite early. Whereas the men I know that's not been the case, they've struggled to find any interest and that continues right through their teens and … twenties"* (Gill, 1132-9)*.*

Gill's experience could highlight the gender roles and norms created in society surrounding heterosexual dating, where men are traditionally expected to be the pursuers and women are expected to wait to be approached or asked

out. Although the participants found starting conversations difficult, it has not prevented men approaching and pursuing them. McIlwee Myers (2006) also argues in an autographical account that predatory men will seek vulnerable young girls or women, and she believes that autistic young women are likely to stand out as such. Furthermore, the participants spoke about passivity and a reluctance to say *"No!"* or inability to decipher when to say it. McIlwee Myers (2006, p.113) links this to having '*compliance*' on individual education plan (IEP) targets; she argues that autistic girls may be unintentionally taught that to be 'good' requires obedience. At a general, societal level, young autistic women could perhaps be made to feel that they are expected to do things that make them feel uncomfortable to please others; if they have not been brought up to understand the meaning of consent in other areas of their life, it could be that they would be less able to determine how to apply this concept with dating and sexual situations. However, it cannot be assumed, based on these participants' experiences, that autistic boys/ men are not as vulnerable to sexual exploitation; boys are also victims of child abuse. To best answer this research question, it will be important for future research to also explore the lived experiences of men with autism, and to compare and contrast the findings with those of women.

5.2.4. Research question three: What are the hopes and aspirations of these young women, regarding romantic relationships?

This research question will be answered by examining themes generated about what participants explicitly told the researcher they wanted from a romantic relationship, and also what the researcher inferred through the IPA process, based on qualities they had admired in other or previous relationships or the opposite of what they had criticised in unsuccessful relationships.

5.2.4.1.   Staying single vs. being in a relationship

Around half the participants wanted a long-term relationship. Gill was in a nine-year relationship and did not anticipate it ending. This is consistent with previous research by Jobe & White (2007), who found that autistic traits were associated with having longer relationships, which they felt was due to a preference for sameness, and findings by Marriage et al. (2009) that some autistic adults had been able to find long-term relationships. Social exchange

theory (Cook & Rice, 2003) takes an economic view of relationships, focusing on the outcomes that an individual can obtain from a partnership vs. the costs of leaving and predicts that commitment to a relationship involves both satisfaction (which promotes staying) and dependency (where the individual feels unable to leave). It may be that Gill is dependent on her current partner (see, '*Romantic partners as providers of basic needs,*' below*). As for the other two that wanted a long term-relationship but were currently in the beginning stages of dating men, they seemed hopeful, unlike Muller et al.'s (2008) participants that were distressed about their lack of a romantic relationship.

The other half were content with being single, for the short-term future at least, citing happiness (Claire) or career (Daisy) as more important than being in a relationship. Although Fiona was taking a break from relationships because of recent traumatic experiences, she acknowledged she might change her mind in the future. Despite fantasies and crushes, Daisy expressed concerns about maintaining her 'alone time,' which was also emphasised by Muller et al.'s (2008) participants. As described in 5.2.2., Daisy seemed asexual, and Fiona explicitly identified as such; it could be that knowing and being able to use this label enabled Fiona to imagine the possibility of a sexless romantic relationship, which Daisy did not seem aware was possible. There is a dearth of research on asexual partnerships in both the general population and with autistic participants, and studies such as Byers et al.'s (2013b) did not include 'asexuality' as a possibility to select; it could be that participants in the same situation as Fiona who have had previous sexual experiences but identify as asexual were not identified as such in this and similar research.

Marriage was not a strong desire of any participant. None of the participants were or had been married, and several took a pragmatic approach to describing it; Gill explaining it as a route to gain inheritance when her partner died and Fiona and Ellie questioning the sensibleness of being legally tied to someone forever, given the difficulties involved in divorce. This is interesting, given that both Fiona and Ellie discussed their parents' break-ups. Previous research has not focussed on the meaning of marriage vs. long-term relationships or cohabitation with the autistic population, but it is possible that, since several participants described themselves as non-romantic, if the

romantic connotations are of little interest to some autistic women, the institution might be regarded by them as a burdensome legality.

Claire focussed on the importance of happiness over a relationship, and her desire to avoid stress. The sense that the researcher got from participants who did not explicitly aspire to a long-term relationship was not that they were uninterested in one, but more that they had doubts about whether they could cope with or manage the effort or compromise it would require.

5.2.4.2. Motherhood

Most participants mentioned motherhood. Becca was able to reflect on how her romantic relationships had changed since becoming a mother and she wanted more information about autism and motherhood; whilst there is much research on the experiences of parents of autistic children, research where both mother and child are autistic is lacking. Aston (2003) suggests that the societal pressure on women to be the nurturing parent is likely to cause stress for autistic mothers. She also suggested from clinical experience that the experience of being parented by an autistic mother may be different for girls and boys.

Half the participants did not want children. Ingudomnukul et al. (2007) also found autistic women were less interested in motherhood than participants in their control group. The current participants cited their perceived lack of parenting ability or preference for freedom as reasons. As Hendrickx (2015) explains, pregnancy and childbirth are times when women lose control of their bodies and babies are nonconforming to routines; this lack of control and unpredictability could be stressful given the nature of autism. Again, qualitative research on decision-making about parenthood amongst autistic adults is lacking; it is not yet clear whether autistic women are less likely to feel a maternal instinct or desire for children, or whether it is concerns about their abilities or the impact on their lives that are most relevant. Motherhood is an individual decision and it is likely that there are as many reasons for and against this life choice amongst the population of autistic women as in neurotypical women.

5.2.4.3. Romantic partners as providers of basic needs

As discussed in section 4.2, preferred partners met the needs of participants in different ways. For Fiona, they were a source of comfort, food, care, safety, protection and happiness. Gill also explained how her partner provided her with a home. These themes could be mapped onto theories of human needs such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) or the emotional and physical needs in Human Givens theory (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2013). Previous research has not explored these kinds of benefits of relationships for autistic women.

5.2.4.4. Sense of belonging

As discussed in section 5.2.2. ('*Lack of friendships, rejection and limited opportunities for learning about romantic relationships'*) having a sense of belonging is essential for emotional wellbeing. Bearing in mind their experiences of rejection, the following aspects (a-c) of romantic relationships that participants craved all seemed to contribute to gaining a sense of belonging.

5.2.4.5. Sense of belonging (a): The importance of shared interests

Shared interests, such as amine (Japanese animation), computer gaming and steam-punk, were described by participants as both ways of meeting partners (and friends) and ways of enjoying time spent with them. Specialised interests are a recognised characteristic of autism (Attwood, 2007). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) could explain the relevance of specialist interests to relationships; being part of a, '*subculture,*' with a partner or friends would give a sense of identity and of belonging to a group. Given the participants' experiences of rejection, this group identity could be especially valuable. Participants such as Fiona also explained how conversations (a reported difficulty) were easier when about special interests; it is likely that they are also more enjoyable and rewarding. Aston (2003) also found that shared interests were important for couples where at least partner had Asperger's Syndrome.

5.2.4.6. Sense of belonging (b): Understanding and acceptance

Following on from the theme above, participants valued or aspired to relationships where their true selves were accepted, understood and valued, where they did not need to feel ashamed or pressured to pretend to be 'normal.' Again, this could be especially important given their on-going experiences of rejection. Daisy also emphasised that a 'crush' (a support worker) understood autism. Feeling 'understood' in autistic romantic relationships has not been researched, but Robledo and Donnellan (2008) explored aspects of supportive relationships for *academically successful individuals with autism*. Their participants described being understood as important, both in terms of people not underestimating them due to the autism diagnosis and being aware of their specific social skills difficulties.

5.2.4.7. Sense of belonging (c): Enjoyment of partner's company and shared sense of humour

Participants mentioned getting on well with partners and finding them funny. A 'Good Sense of Humour' is often mentioned in personal dating adverts. There is little research into humour and autism, but given the triad of impairments, it could be hypothesised that some kinds of humour, for example involving sarcasm or innuendo, might be difficult. However, Daisy expressed pride at her developing understanding of innuendo (1141-78). Lyons and Fitzgerald's (2004) findings suggest that autistic women may have a greater understanding of humour and ability to be humorous than autistic men. The role humour plays in autistic romantic partnerships could be an area for future research.

5.2.4.8. Emotional intimacy

Feelings of closeness, connection, attunement and comfort were all appreciated or aspired to in the participants' romantic relationships. This was consistent with findings from Muller et al. (2008), whose participants craved greater emotional intimacy in their relationships in general. However, Lau and Peterson's (2011) research suggests that this could be harder for autistic adults to obtain; these participants were found to "*prefer self-sufficiency to intimacy*" (p.397) and be mistrusting of dependency with their partners. Emotional intimacy was also found to be a mediator between the correlation between

autistic traits and relationship satisfaction for husbands, but not wives, in Pollmann et al.'s (2010) research. Baron-Cohen (1997) argues that autistic individuals could not experience *true* emotional intimacy, as this requires feeling as though one understands the other person's thoughts. From a phenomenological perspective, however, it is arguably possible to still truly *feel* this way, even if the guess about the partner's mental state is not factually correct.

5.2.4.9. Communication and clarity of expectations

Participants described the importance of communicating and having a mutual understanding about what type of relationship they were in, and also how miscommunication can lead to misunderstanding, upset and conflict. This was based on experiences of when miscommunication had occurred (e.g. Ellie not recognising an implied invite to play badminton and Gill's partner crossing a boundary that she had thought was established). Communication was an area that participants were aware was difficult for them, so it is understandable that they would have awareness that this was something they would have to work hard at, rather than making assumptions or guessing what the other thought. Aston (2003) found that communication was cited as a problem in Asperger's-neurotypical partnerships by neurotypical partners, and Robledo and Donnellan (2008) found that autistic students described good communication as an essential, but challenging, characteristic of supportive relationships.

5.2.4.10. Honesty, trust, predictability and fairness

Trusting a partner to keep promises, stay faithful (unless mutually agreed otherwise) and to stay consistent in their behaviour was important to participants. This would be expected, given the preferences for rules and organised, understandable routines that are associated with autism. This theme was generated partially through participants' descriptions of their upset when these qualities were not maintained. Trust was also an essential component of supportive relationships described by Robledo and Donnellan's (2008) participants, and trust in partner was also associated with relationship satisfaction for autistic married partners studied by Pollmann et al. (2010).

Reciprocity in relationships was mentioned by several participants; there was a sense that effort was required of them and therefore their partners should reciprocate this effort. Although there is little research on understanding of 'fairness' in romantic relationships, this researcher has found in her practice that insisting upon fairness and rule following is a common trait in autistic young people, which can cause difficulties in friendships. Whether this need causes conflict in romantic relationships would be interesting for future research.

5.2.4.11. Love and romance

Love was described by Claire as unconditional, which could reflect a desire for it to not change and stay consistent. Gill mentioned loving her partner, and Fiona her ex-boyfriend, but it was not a recurring theme in their interviews. The concept of 'love' was not emphasised by participants. It could be that they took a more pragmatic view to relationships and the feeling of being in love was less relevant to them, or it could be that they took it as given, and chose to speak about the nuanced components of romantic love. Several participants described themselves as un-romantic, which could be linked to their feelings of being different and non-stereotypically feminine, described earlier. Again, questions about whether the participants had ever been in love, how they knew this and what it felt like, would have been helpful, to explore these possibilities further.

5.2.4.12. Having a physical 'type'

Some participants mentioned qualities they were attracted to, such as Ellie admiring long hair and Daisy discussing the physical characteristics that intrigued her in her crushes. However, conventional physical attractiveness was not emphasised by participants as being a relevant trait in romantic partners. It could be that physical appearance is of less importance or interest to them, or it could have been that participants did not feel the relevance of mentioning it to the interviewer; as there was no specific question about this, conclusions cannot be drawn.

5.3. Reflections and Reflexivity

During the process of IPA, it has been important to 'bracket' assumptions or previous beliefs, to allow the findings to emerge from the data in a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' manner. However, this researcher makes no claim to be objective, nor does the IPA method require this. Instead, the researcher recognises that, as a part of the hermeneutic cycle, she will bring to it her own previous experiences, biases and assumptions. In order to maximise trustworthiness of the data, the researcher will now examine her position and key learning during the process. Because of the personal nature of this section, it will be written in the first person.

5.3.1. Researcher's positioning

As explained in the introduction, I am a white, middle class, 29-year-old neurotypical woman and a trainee educational psychologist (TEP). I am also, 'straight' and 'cis-gender,' (meaning I identify with the gender I was assigned at birth). Whilst I aim to support the participants' storytelling, I am not their peer, but would position myself as an advocate for helping the voices of this community to be heard and represented in academic research and EP practice. I felt that most participants spoke to me as if I was a peer and equal. However, in hindsight the youngest participants (Fiona and Ellie) seemed to be aware of an age gap between us (perhaps viewing me as a professional, rather than a teenage student) but I believe I was successful in coming across less as an authority figure and more as an 'older-sisterly' supporter.

5.3.2. The intersectional feminist perspective

I have taken an intersectional feminist stance during this research; I hold the belief that the experiences of women are different to those of men and that this is in part due to the societal expectations placed on them. I also acknowledge the social model of disability, recognising that the way society is organised can promote or restrict the ability of people to function effectively. Presently, I do not view society as autism-aware or tolerant, although this is slowly changing. Therefore, I argue that the experience of living with autism will 'intersect' with the experience of being or presenting as a woman; this is also true for physical disability status, socio-economic group, ethnicity and religious identity, age, sexuality, gender identity, etc. I recognise that being a member of

more than one group that is discriminated against will mean such individuals experience oppression in multi-layered facets, which should be explicitly acknowledged and explored (the diversity and homogeneity of the sample will be discussed in more detail below).

5.3.3. Researcher's bias and the audit trail

The process of IPA was explained in the methodology section and a clear audit trail was kept, including files of all the quotes that contributed to superordinate and subordinate themes. Quotes and line numbers and signposting to the transcript will enable readers to check this audit trail. The Findings section has been checked for peer credibility by another graduate student; some of the wording was changed, and two sub-sections were combined, as a result of this feedback.

A research diary was kept in order to record my decision-making throughout this journey, helping me to choose the most appropriate methods to answer the research questions effectively. I also recorded surprises, thoughts and emotional responses immediately after conducting interviews, which were reviewed during the analysis process to aid interpretations. This diary has been useful to reflect upon towards the end of my research journey. For example, when designing the interview schedule I had been worried that participants would not speak much during interviews and would not understand my questions. My research diary helped me to recall the process of planning these questions, through advice seeking from professionals working with young autistic adults and through email consultation with an autistic young woman who has published a book on the topic of relationship safety.

5.3.4. Reflections on the research process

This research journey has been a fascinating one. I enjoyed the experience of meeting the participants and found listening to their stories humbling. I was inspired by their resilience and their positive attitudes and hopefulness about the future. I would like to continue to conduct research and give voices to young people in the future. I am aware that this thesis and its research questions were guided by my own personal interests and gaps in existing academic literature. Now that the 'initial' exploring has begun, in the

future I would like to include the population of autistic young women in the formulation of the research questions, methodology and write up, empowering them to conduct emancipatory research on specific topics of importance to them.

5.3.5. Critique of the research methods used

I found that semi-structured interviews (SSIs) worked well with this client group; I had feared they would not have much to say, but they talked a lot (although sometimes going 'off topic' for considerable lengths of time). Given their feedback about face-to-face communication being exhausting, and their expressed preference for written communication, in hindsight it could have been helpful to offer a typed instant message conversation as an alternative interview format. This might also have enabled more 'voices' to be heard (see 5.3.6, below).

IPA was an appropriate method to use, as it enabled me to first study the idiographic nature of each participant's lived experiences and then to compare themes across participants. Both of these aspects were interesting and relevant to the research questions, therefore I am glad I chose a method that enabled them both to be explored. The fact that some common experiences emerged, which connected with the existing previous research, will inform future larger scale, or more specific, research. IPA also enabled me to uphold one of my core values as a future EP, my belief that young people are the experts on their own experience.

5.3.6. Reflections on sampling

IPA requires some homogeneity of sampling for the analysis across participants to be relevant. The participants were all English speaking and 'white passing' (although Ellie was half South East Asian and Daisy was half Greek), identified with an autism spectrum diagnosis and were aged 19-29. There was little identified diversity in terms of race or religion (none except the pilot, Annabelle, mentioned religion) and it would have been interesting to explore the impact of culture in more detail (only Becca reflected on culture differences between herself and her daughter's father). There were some participants who were identified by gatekeeper staff or their parents who did not

want to take part. They were not required to give a reason, but those who did included a fear of new people coming into the home in case they cough, and a young woman who was anxious and selectively mute. In hindsight, using other methods such as open questionnaires or online chat might have been a way to include a wider range of voices in the sample.

5.3.7. Researcher's key learning for future practice

Some key learning points to inform my EP practice have been:

- I now appreciate the value of consulting with those who know client groups well before commencing work with them;
- It is important to carefully plan the language I will use and consider how this could be understood by others;
- I now realise I held an assumption that individuals identified with one gender. My participants have taught me the concepts of non-binary gender identity and pansexuality; I am now more aware of my pronoun use and avoiding making assumptions about people's gender identity based on their presentation or biological sex;
- It is important to maintain validity by avoiding leading questions, and the process of audio recording and transcribing my interviews, has taught me the value of enabling clients to tell their stories. Reflecting on my interview style also allowed me to reflect on the value of establishing rapport and demonstrating empathy. I also was able to note various points where I could have asked for more information, so in future I will be careful not to move on too quickly during consultations or information gathering meetings. I plan to continue to use audio and video recording to reflect on my consultation and therapeutic skills in my practice (with the informed consent of clients);
- Through this journey, I have learned about the concept of intersectional feminism vs. 'white feminism' (which only addresses oppression of women from a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied woman's perspective) which I had not previously considered. I aim to apply this learning to my EP practice by maintaining awareness that the young people and their families may be experiencing multifaceted difficulties and discrimination. I will also be aware that, because of how I am positioned, they may

assume I will not understand their situation, so it may be that careful and sensitive questioning is required to enable them to reflect on their experiences and different areas of their lives;

- Participants' experiences of rejection and exclusion by peers at schools were sad to listen to, but they have reminded me of the important role that EPs can play in consultation and intervention work of helping pupils feel included and having a sense of belonging at their schools and colleges. I also believe that society can and should be more inclusive of neurodiversity and I hope to continue to 'give psychology away' and play some role in this in my future career, for example through providing training and dissemination of my research (see this section below).

- I was aware of a sense of regret expressed by some participants that they had not been diagnosed, and appropriately helped, earlier. Staying aware of the possibility that all schools will have female students with undiagnosed autism who may be suffering in silence, is something that I will hold in mind during my planning, consultations and training with school staff and others.

5.3.8. Dissemination of the findings

The researcher believes that research should empower and advocate for the population it studies. Therefore, it is important that the research findings are disseminated to the participants themselves, the wider autism community, and those who support and align with them. Research can inform both practice and future research, so the researcher will also aim to inform the wider academic community about these findings.

5.3.8.1.   Dissemination to participants

Participants were keen to know the findings of the research and they were asked what medium would be most helpful. All preferred written correspondence. After this thesis is completed, all participants will be emailed with a one-page-summary of findings and a link to the final thesis on the British Library's EThOS website (http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do). Those who requested a copy of their transcript will be sent one; the researcher will send an initial email, confirming that the email address is confidential, before doing so and post a

hard copy if preferred. The researcher is mindful that the interpretations could come across as judgmental therefore this email will also contain a reminder that the interpretations are solely the views of the researcher. It is also possible that re-reading the transcripts or the interpretations may be trigger uncomfortable feelings for participants who discussed traumatic experiences (another reason that the participants will be asked again whether it is safe to email a copy of the transcript and they will be invited to ask questions from the researcher). If needed, the researcher will risk assess and signpost to appropriate support sources again. Potential participants who had been interested in the research but could not take part due to timings will also be emailed a one-page summary and online link to this thesis.

5.3.8.2. Dissemination to other stakeholders

At a local level, dissemination will be to various stakeholders that have assisted with the research, which will consist of an email with the one-page summary and an invitation to ask questions or discuss the research further. These include a local Asperger's support group and an Asperger's young adults' youth club, and a group for parents of autistic girls. A summary of the findings will also be sent to the Research Autism organisation. The researcher has already presented findings as part of a local training course for family support workers and she will also present the findings to educational psychologists in her service and trainee educational psychologists at the University of East London. A poster about this research will also be presented at the educational psychology autism specialist interest group (EPASIG) conference on July 15th, 2016. The researcher will consult with the NAS about the best ways to share these findings with the autism community and consider publication in other sources.

5.3.9. Implications for EP practice and other professionals working with this population

- EPs are, in this researcher's opinion, very well placed to provide support to this population, both with the indirect work they do (including consultation around organisations, policy and practice and for supporting staff with concerns around groups or individual students, training and work with parents and carers) and the direct work they do with young

people, such as individual therapeutic work, statutory psychological assessment and delivery of group interventions such as those targeting resilience and 'giving away' information about cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

- EPs are therefore in a position to help schools and colleges support this population to build resilience and self-esteem.

- Friendships and social exclusion/rejection was a lived experience of many participants; EPs can support schools with strategies to nurture the development of friendships and help this population to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion at their schools.

- Gender identity may be an important part of the identity and lived experience of autistic young women. It is important that EPs, and other professionals working with this population, develop an awareness and understanding of the concept of gender identity.

- EPs and others working to obtain the 'voice of the young person' may benefit from awareness of gender/trans-inclusive language and unintentionally marginalising such groups further. For example, it may be important to ask young people which pronouns they would prefer to be used to describe them.

- Families and parents may need support helping their autistic daughters to navigate romantic relationships. They might also benefit from help to understand the possibility that their daughters may be diverse in gender identify and sexuality.

- Professionals supporting young people with gender identity and sexuality related questions (such as helplines, charities or medical staff) should be made aware of the potential links with autism.

- Professionals should remember that there may be undiagnosed autistic girls at school, who may be suffering from anxiety and social exclusion. It is possible that these girls might not ask for help and anxiety and depression may be difficult for staff to identify. Therefore, EPs may be in a suitable position to support schools in identifying young people who are potentially vulnerable to mental health difficulties and assist schools in supporting their pupils' mental health.

- Difficulties with romantic relationships for this population can be understood in context of a history of rejection and friendship failures. It is

possible that providing support for these relationships earlier on will help autistic women have more successful relationships, romantic and otherwise, later on in their lives. It is possible that supporting this population to develop friendships may also help to provide a protective factor in terms of any potential vulnerability.

- Romantic relationships are indeed an area of interest and an aspiration for many autistic women. Given the new legislation described in the Introduction, which focuses on aspirations, romantic relationships may be integral in EHCP and other outcome-focused work.

- Autistic young women may be likely to benefit from specific sex and relationship education (SRE) before they reach an age where they are online and in the community independently, where vignettes or situations can be discussed to help them learn about predicting others' motives. They may also benefit from being taught assertiveness and the concept of consent, using clear and specific examples and language. Visual strategies such as video clips or cartoons might work well as resources, given the participants' preference for these.

- The young women interviewed were all diagnosed either in secondary school or as young adults and many spoke of feeling let down by teachers or professionals who had not recognised their ASD earlier. Many described using their ASD diagnosis as a way of understanding their experiences (as described in section 5.2.3). Therefore, it will be important that EPs continue to support staff and parents in recognising that ASD manifests differently in adults and girls, so that those young people who would benefit from exploring the possibility of a diagnosis can be supported in doing so.

5.3.10.   Other findings not reported or explored in this thesis

The interviews conducted in this thesis produced significant amounts of rich data on the lived experiences of autistic young women. There were many interesting and new themes, which have not yet been reported in peer-reviewed qualitative research, that emerged as other important and relevant aspects of the participants' experiences. The researcher plans to write about and publish

these findings separately, as due to limited space, they could not be analysed here. Some of these themes include:

- All but one participant had a history of mental ill health and some reported that they had received previous, incorrect diagnoses such as borderline personality disorder before their autism was diagnosed. It is understandable that this could have occurred, given the confusion that some participants experienced about their sense of identity. It could be that autistic women are more likely to experience mental ill health, and it could also be that this sample received their diagnoses because their mental ill health concerns enabled contact with a psychologist, who was better able to recognise autism in females than school staff had been.

- Motherhood and parenting as an autistic woman was a theme raised by participants which is also underrepresented in research.

- Participants in this group discussed their friendship difficulties at school and in young adulthood. This could be an area which could benefit from further research.

- How romantic relationships progress in older autistic women will be of interest to clinical and counselling psychologist colleagues, as well as relationship counsellors. Several older women (in their 30s and 40s) were responded to advertisements but were not included in the current research. Their enthusiasm could imply they have stories they want to be known.

- Unemployment was experienced, and a cause of concern, by the three oldest participants, who all mentioned wanting jobs

5.3.11.   Limitations of the findings and implications for future research

This research was only at the initial, exploratory stage and used a small sample of participants. Some further limitations involving sampling have been discussed already in sections 5.3.5-6. The sample had a degree of homogeneity in respect that they were all young women who had been diagnosed (or self-diagnosed, in the case of Claire) with ASD. However, there was a broad variation on various characteristics. The age range of participants (19-29) was wide. They were recruited from various geographical areas from the South East of England and one (Daisy) had been brought up abroad.

Cultural, race and religious factors were not explored in any depth; these were not mentioned by the participants, but they were also not included in the SSI questions. It may also have been useful to explore the impact of social class. As discussed earlier, it is possible that the participants reflect a certain subsection of the female autistic population; those who are interested in romantic relationships, confident to talk about their own experiences and are willing to meet someone knew to be interviewed. It is likely that the voices of other subsections of this population were missed, which could be in part to do with the SSI data collection method.

Having a single SSI to collect data also has associated limitations. Although some participants spoke about current romantic relationships, much of the data collected involved retrospective accounts of past relationship experiences. Having more than one SSI, or additional methods to collect further data such as diary or text messaging correspondence with the participants might have enabled date to be obtained about such experiences as they occurred.

A further limitation of this research is that the methodology does not enable readers to determine which aspects of the participants' experiences could be considered 'uniquely female.' In future research, comparison groups, such as autistic men and/or neurotypical women, would allow exploration of the extent to which the current findings are unique to the population of young, autistic women.

Despite the research's limitations, there were numerous overlapping themes which arose amongst more than 50% of the participants. These would benefit from further, more specific and targeted and perhaps larger scale research. Furthermore, this research focused on a specific population. It is possible that other populations might experience similar difficulties to those reported in this thesis.   These might include others within the autistic community, such as males, adolescents and older adults. The current study did not include any participants with learning difficulties or physical disabilities and it might be appropriate for future research to focus on these populations. Neurotypical young women with mental health difficulties may also experience

some of the difficulties experienced by the current study's participants and could therefore also be included in future research.

As mentioned above, emancipatory research where the participants were involved in exploring research questions relevant to their own romantic lives could also be an appropriate next step for researchers working in this area.

5.4. Conclusion to Section 5

This discussion section has explored the meaning of the research findings with regards to the research questions, in the context of psychological theory and existing research. The researcher described the reflectivity and reflexivity applied to the research process and emphasised the relevance of these findings to her own, and other EPs' and professionals' practice. The steps taken to disseminate the findings, and the limitations of the findings and implications for future research were discussed. Other interesting and novel findings (which were not related to the research questions) were summarised.

6. Final conclusions

This thesis has made a novel contribution to existing research in the area of the lived experiences of autistic young women and romantic relationships. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first research study where young autistic women have spoken about their non-typical gender identities and sexualities. The findings from this research also provide some initial evidence that this population may be vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation, as well as other kinds of abuse and rejection. It seems that some young autistic women may not have a full understanding of consent or their right to say, '*No!*' to unwanted sexual advances. Mental health difficulties were a relevant component to the lived experiences of most these young women and it is significant that mental health ill health both hindered some and helped others in obtaining an autism diagnosis. This research also provides an exploration of the aspirations for romantic relationships for young autistic women. Some participants in this sample did aspire to long-term relationships. Motherhood was something that most had considered, but held concerns about their capabilities or the possibility becoming a parent. Factors that were considered important or valuable in romantic relationships by more than half of the participants included trust, reciprocity and clarity around expectations. Romantic relationships also seemed to offer participants the possibility of obtaining a sense of belonging and of meeting other basic needs.

Finally, the researcher would like to express thanks and gratitude to all the young women who gave their time to contribute to this research. It is hoped that the experience was a helpful one for you, and that your stories will go on to help others better understand your community.

7. References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorder*s: DSM-V (5th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM- IV*. (4th ed). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Aston, M. (2003). *Asperger's in love.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Aston, M. (2012). Asperger syndrome in the bedroom. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *27*(1), 73-79. doi:10.1080/14681994.2011.649253

Attwood, T. (2007). *The complete guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Baird, G et al. (2006). Prevalence of disorders of the autism spectrum in a population cohort of children in South Thames: The Special Needs and Autism Project (SNAP). *The Lancet*, 368 (9531), 210-215.

Bandura, A. (1977). Social Learning Theory. Oxford: Prentice Hall.

Baron-Cohen, S. (1997). *Mind blindness: an essay on autism and theory of mind.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Baron-Cohen, S. and Wheelwright, S. (2003). The friendship questionnaire: an investigation of adults with Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism, and normal sex differences. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 33(5), 509-518.

Baron-Cohen, S. (2003). *The essential difference: Men, women and the extreme male brain.* London: Penguin.

Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., Skinner, R., Martin, J., & Clubley, E. (2001). The Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ): evidence from Asperger syndrome/high-functioning autism, males and females, scientists and mathematicians. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 31*(1), 5-17.

Baumeister, R. F. and Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 117(3), 497-529.

Bejerot, S., Eriksson, J.M., Bonde, S., Carlstrom, K., Humble, M.B. & Eriksson, E. (2012). The extreme male brain revisited: gender coherence in adults with autism spectrum disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 201,* 116-23.

Birnbaum, G.E., & Reis, H.T. (2006). Women's sexual working models: An evolutionary-attachment perspective. *Journal of Sex Research, 43*, 328-342.

Boland, A., Cherry, M. G., & Dickson, R. (2014). *Doing a systematic review: A student's guide.* London: Sage.

BPS (2014). Professional practice guidelines: Division of Child and Educational Psychology. Retrieved Dec 6, 2014 from http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/professional_practice_guidelines_-_division_of_educational_and_child_psychology.pdf.

BPS (2010). Code of Human Research Ethics. Retrieved June 29, 2016 from http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_human_research_ethics.pdf.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism* (2nd ed.). Hove, UK: Routledge

Byers, E. S., Nichols, S., Voyer, S. D., & Reilly, G. (2013a). Sexual well-being of a community sample of high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum who have been in a romantic relationship. *Autism, 17*(4), 418-433.

Byers, E. S., Nichols, S., & Voyer, S. D. (2013b). Challenging stereotypes: Sexual functioning of single adults with high functioning autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 43*(11), 2617-2627.

Byers, E. S., & Nichols, S. (2014). Sexual satisfaction of high-functioning adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Sexuality and Disability, 32*(3), 365-382.

Carver, C. S., & White, T. L. (1994). Behavioral inhibition, behavioral activation, and affective responses to impending reward and punishment: The BIS/BAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 319-333.

Cook, K. S., & Rice, E. (2003). Social exchange theory. In J. Delamater (Ed.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 53-76). New York: Klewer Academic/Plenum.

Coon, D., & Mitterer, J. (2010). *Introduction to psychology: Gateway to mind and behaviour (12th ed).* New York: Wadsworth/Cengage.

Cottenceau, H., Roux, S., Blanc, R., Lenoir, P., Bonnet-Brilhault, F., & Barthélémy, C. (2012). Quality of life of adolescents with autism spectrum disorders: Comparison to adolescents with diabetes. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 21*(5), 289-296.

Cridland, E. K., Jones, S.C., Caputi, P. & Magee, C.A. (2014). Being a girl in a boy's world: Investigating the experiences of girls with autism spectrum disorders during adolescence. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 44,* 1261-1274.

Davidson, J., & Tamas, S. (2016). Autism and the ghost of gender. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 19, 59-65.

De Vries, A. L. C., Noens, I. L. J., Cohen-Kettenis, P. T., van Berckelaer-Onnes, I. A., & Doreleijers, T. A. (2010). Autism spectrum disorders in gender dysphoric children and adolescents. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 40(8), 930–936.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis.* New York: Norton.

Fine, M. (1992). Passions, politics, and power: feminist research possibilities. In M. Fine, (Ed.), *Disruptive Voices* (pp.205-231)*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.*

Fombonne, E. (2005). The Changing Epidemiology of Autism. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 18*,* 281–294.

Frith, U., & Happé, F. (1999). Theory of mind and self-consciousness: What is it like to be autistic? *Mind and Language*, 14(1), 1-22.

Gallitto, E., & Leth-Steensen, C. (2015). Autistic traits and adult attachment styles. *Personality and individual differences, 79,* 63-67.

Gilmour, L., Schalomon, P. M., & Smith, V. (2012). Sexuality in a community based sample of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *6*(1), 313-318.

Gillberg, C., & Råstam, M. (1992). Do some cases of anorexia nervosa reflect underlying autistic-like conditions? *Behavioural Neurology*, 5(1), 27-32.

Gould, J. (2014). The diagnosis of women and girls on the autism spectrum. Presentation at the Autism in Pink Conference, Lisbon, May 2014. Retrieved December 1, 2014, from https://player.vimeo.com/video/101526708.

Grandin, T. (1995). *Thinking in pictures: And other reports from my life with autism*. New York: Doubleday.

Griffin, J. & Tyrrell, I. (2013). *Human Givens: The New Approach to Emotional Health and Clear Thinking.* HG Publishing, Chalvington.

Hazen, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52,* 511-524.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Hendrickx, S. (2015). *Women and girls with autism spectrum disorder*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

HM Government (2014a). *The Children and Families Act.* Retrieved November 19, 2016 from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted

HM Government (2014b). *The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0-25 Years.* Retrieved November 19, 2016 from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf.

HM Government (2014c). *Think autism*. Retrieved June 30, 2016 from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/think-autism-an-update-to-the-government-adult-autism-strategy.

HM Government (2010). *The Autism Strategy.* Retrieved June 30, 2016 from https://www.gov.uk/government/news/fulfilling-and-rewarding-lives-the-strategy-for-adults-with-autism-in-england.

HM Government (2009a). *The Autism Act.* Retrieved December 1, 2014, from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/15/contents.

HM Government (2009b). *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation.* Retrieved November 5, 2016 from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278849/Safeguarding_Children_and_Young_People_from_Sexual_Exploitation.pdf

Holmes, L. G., Himle, M. B., & Strassberg, D.S. (2016). Parental sexuality-related concerns for adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and average or above IQ. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 21*(1), 84-93.

Hoon, E. F., Hoon, P. W., & Wineze, J.P. (1976). An inventory for the measurement of female sexual arousability: The Sexual Arousability Inventory (SAI). *Archives of Sexual Behaviour, 5,* 291-300.

Holliday Willey, L. (2014). *Asperger syndrome in the family*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Holliday Willey, L. (2012). *Safety skills for Asperger women: how to save a perfectly good female life.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Howlin, P. (1997). *Autism: Preparing for adulthood*. London: Routledge

Hulburt, R. T., Happé, F. & Frith, U. (1994). Sampling the form of inner experience in three adults with Asperger Syndrome. *Psychological medicine, 24,* 385-395.

Husserl, E. (1927). Phenomenology. For *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (R. Parmer, Trans. And revised). Available at: http://www.hfu.edu.

Huws, J.C. & Jones, R.S.P. (2008). Diagnosis, disclosure, and having autism: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the perceptions of young people with autism. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 33(10), 99-107

Ingudomnukul, E., Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., & Knickmeyer. R. (2007). Elevated rates of testosterone-related disorders in women with autism spectrum conditions. *Hormones and Behavior*, 51(5), 597-604

Jobe, L. E., & White, S. W. (2007). Loneliness, social relationships, and a broader autism phenotype in college students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *42*(8), 1479-1489.

Johnston, C. & Mash, E. (1989). A measure of parenting satisfaction and efficacy. *Journal of Clinical and Child Psychology, 18,* 167-176.

Kirtley, P. (2013). Report of a grass roots survey of health professionals with regard to their experiences in dealing with child sexual exploitation. Retrieved August 30, 2016 from http://www.nhs.uk/aboutNHSChoices/professionals/healthandcareprofessionals/child-sexual-exploitation/Documents/Shine%20a%20Light.pdf

Konstantareas, M. M., & Lunsky, Y. J. (1997). Sociosexual knowledge, experience, attitudes, and interests of individuals with autistic disorder and developmental delay. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *27*(4), 397-413.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* London: Sage.

Lamport, D., & Turner, L. A. (2014). Romantic attachment, empathy, and the broader autism phenotype among college students. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory On Human Development*, *175*(3), 202-213.

Lau, W., & Peterson, C. C. (2011). Adults and children with Asperger syndrome: Exploring adult attachment style, marital satisfaction and satisfaction with parenthood. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *5*(1), 392-399.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern.* New York: Routledge.

Lawson, W. (2004). *Sex, sexuality and the autism spectrum.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Lesseliers, J., & Van Hove, G. (2002). Barriers to the development of intimate relationships and the expression of sexuality among people with developmental disabilities: Their perceptions. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *27*(1), 69-81.

Lyons, V., & Fitzgerald, M. (2004). Humor in autism and Asperger's Syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 34(5), 521-531.

Marriage, S., Wolverton, A., & Marriage, K. (2009). Autism spectrum disorder grown up: A chart review of adult functioning. *Journal of The Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry / Journal De L'académie Canadienne De Psychiatrie De L'enfant Et De L'adolescent*, *18*(4), 322-328.

MacDonald, G. & Leary, M.R. (2005). Why does social exclusion hurt? The relationship between rejection and physical pain. *Psychological Bulletin, 131(2),* 202-223.

Maslow, A.H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review, 50*(4)*,* 370-96.

McIlwee Myers, J. (2006). Aspie do's and don'ts: Dating, relationships and marriage. In T. Attwood (Ed.), *Asperger's and Girls* (pp. 89-116). Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

Mesibov, G.B., Shea, V. & Schopler, E. (2004). *The TEACCH approach to autism spectrum disorders.* London: Springer.

Mehzabin, P., & Stokes, M. A. (2011). Self-assessed sexuality in young adults with High-Functioning Autism. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *5*(1), 614-621.

Mischel, W. (1966). A social-learning view of sex differences in behavior, in E. Maccoby (Ed.) *The development of sex differences* (pp.3-72). London, Tavistock.

Mosher, W.D., Chandra, A., & Jones, J. (2005). *Sexual behavior and selected health measures: Men and women 15-44 years of age, United States, 2002*. Advance Data, 362. Atlanta: Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Müller, E., Schuler, A., & Yates, G. B. (2008). Social challenges and supports from the perspective of individuals with Asperger syndrome and other autism spectrum disabilities. *Autism*, *12*(2), 173-190.

National Autistic Society (2014). *What is autism?* Retrieved December 6, 2014, from http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/autism-and-asperger-syndrome-an-introduction/what-is-autism.aspx

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2012). Autism in adults: diagnosis and management: Clinical guidelines. Retrieved June 30, 2016 from **https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg142.**

Nichols, S., & Blakeley-Smith, A. (2010). 'I'm not sure we're ready for this …': Working with families toward facilitating healthy sexuality for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Social Work in Mental Health*, *8*(1), 72-91.

Norton, R. (1983). Measuring marital quality. A critical look at the independent variable. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 45,* 141-151.

Oliver, M. & Sapey, Bob. (2006). *Social work with disabled people.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Office for National Statistics. (2014). Sexual identify in the UK [ONS infographic explaining the lesbian, gay and bisexual population]. *Integrated household survey Jan-Dec 2012*. Retrieved November 19, 2016 from: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/integrated-household-survey/integrated-household-survey/january-to-december-2012/info-sexual-identity.html.

Pohl, A., Cassidy, S., Auyeung, B. and Baron-Cohen, S. (2014). Uncovering steroidopathy in women with autism: A latent class analysis. *Molecular Autism*, 5(1), 5-27

Pollmann, M. H., Finkenauer, C., & Begeer, S. (2010). Mediators of the link between autistic traits and relationship satisfaction in a non-clinical sample. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *40*(4), 470-478.

Rae, T. (2014). Supporting the well-being of girls. *Education and* Health, 32(2), 42–47.

Reis, H. T., & Rusbult, C. E. (2004). *Close relationships: Key readings in social psychology*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Robledo, J.A. and Donnellan, A.M. (2008). Properties of supportive relationships from the perspective of academically successful individuals with autism. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, 46(4), 299-310.

Robson, C. (2011). *Real world research: A resource for users of social research methods in applied settings* (3rd ed.). Chichester: Wiley.

Rosenblatt, M. (2008). *I exist: the message from adults with autism in England.* London: The National Autistic Society.

Roth, M. E., & Gillis, J. M. (2015). 'Convenience with the click of a mouse': A survey of adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder on online dating. *Sexuality and Disability*, *33*(1), 133-150.

Sapin, C., Simeoni, M.C., & El Khammar, M. (2005). Reliability and validity of the VSP-A, a health-related quality of life instrument for ill and healthy adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 36,* 327–336.

Saucier, G. (1994). Mini-markers: a brief version of Goldberg's unipolar big-five markers. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 63*(3), 506-16.

Simone, R. (2010). *Aspergirls: Empowering females with Asperger's Syndrome.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis*: Theory, method and research.* London, Sage.

Smith, J.A. & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J.A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Methods* (2nd edn) (pp.51-80). London: Sage.

Sperry, L.A., & Mesibov, G.B. (2005). Perceptions of social challenges of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism,* 9(4), 362-376.

Stiles, W. (1999). Evaluating qualitative research. *Evidence Based Mental Health, 2,* 99-101.

Stokes, M., Newton, N., & Kaur, A. (2007). Stalking, and social and romantic functioning among adolescents and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *37*(10), 1969-1986.

Tajfel, H., and Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In Hogg, M.A. and Abrams, D. (Eds.), *Intergroup relations: essential readings* (pp. 33, 47). New York: Psychology Press

Van Son-Schoones, N., & van Bilsen, P. (1995). Sexuality and autism: A pilot-study of parents, health care workers and autistic persons. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, *8*(2), 87-101.

Whitehouse, A.J., Durkin, K., Jaquet, E. & Ziatas, K. (2009). Friendship, loneliness and depression in adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32(2), 309-322

Williams, E. (2004). Who really needs a 'theory' of mind? *Theory and Psychology*, 14(5), 704–724

Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press.

Wing, L. & Gould, J. (1979). Severe impairments of social interaction and associated abnormalities in children: Epidemiology and classification. *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia, 9,* 11-29.

Wolcott, H. (1990). On seeking and rejecting validity in qualitative research. In E. Eisner & A. Peshkin (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate* (pp.121-152). New York: Teachers' College Press.

YouGov., (2015). 1 in 2 young people say they are not 100% heterosexual. Retrieved from https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/08/16/half-young-not-heterosexual/

Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Which diagnosis do you identify with?

> - can you tell me a bit about how you realised?

How would YOU describe a romantic relationship?

> - What kind of things do you think we might discuss?
>
> - [if they don't understand or they are unclear] 'By this I mean a relationship between people who are more than 'just friends' and the relationship will probably involve physical attraction, and maybe also physical affection or sexual intimacy. '

Do you think you understand what I'm talking about or do you have any questions?

> **1. What are your experiences of this kind of relationship?**

- How did the relationship begin?
- How would you describe the relationship?
- If ended: could you tell me about the ending of the relationship,
- If still together: could you tell me about what's helped you to stay together.
- In no experience: can you tell me more about that (ask about others that they know about/have witnessed if needed)

> **2. You mentioned that you identify with the diagnosis of _____. Could you describe how this affects your romantic relationships?**
>
> **3. How do you think your romantic partner(s) see you?**

- or potential partners?

> **4. I've been interested in hearing about your experiences as a young woman who identifies with _____. What about your experiences might be unique or different for a woman, rather than a man with _____.**
>
> **5. What are your hopes or expectations for the future, in terms of romantic relationships?**

- What qualities would you look for in a partner?
- What kind of relationships would you like to have?

> **6. Is there anything else that you want to share or explore further?**

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Young women with Asperger's Syndrome and their views on Relationships: Interview participants wanted!

Who are you?

I am Shona Landon, a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East London (UEL).

Why are you contacting me?

I am doing a research project about the views of young women with Asperger's Syndrome/ASD, about relationships. I believe the best way to find out about young people, is to speak to them directly.

Can I take part?

Yes, if you are:

- Aged 18-30,
- Female
- You identify as having Asperger's Syndrome, ASD or a social communication disorder.

You do not need to be interested in or have experience of 'being in a relationship.' The views of young women with no interest or experience in romantic relationships are equally as important and your participation would be extremely valued. (If you are 17 but you will have your 18th birthday in the next 2 months, you can take part after your birthday).

What will happen if I take part?

We will meet at a quiet location that you can choose – this might be your home, a room at a college or organization you attend, or in the office building where I work, which is in Chessington.

We will have an interview probably lasting between 1-2 hours, where I will ask questions about what relationships mean to you. I'm interested in finding out your views and what your experiences, aspirations and expectations are.

What if I don't want to answer your questions?

It is completely ok to 'pass' a question or answer it later. You can have a break or stop the interview if you want to and you won't have to give a reason. You choose what you wish to say.

What will happen after the interview?

These interviews will be recorded and later I will type up our conversation and write about what we have talked about. This write-up is my thesis, and will be given to my

be used, so people will not know that the information came from you. Only the research team at UEL will have access to the recorded interviews, and these will be stored in password-protected files.

If you change your mind about taking part after the interview has finished, you need to let me know within two weeks. I will email you after the project has finished and let you know what I have found out.

What are the benefits of taking part?

I hope that the interview will be a rewarding and enjoyable experience for you. You might find out some things about yourself! You will also help provide information about the views of young women with Asperger's Syndrome about relationships, which is something that researchers do not know a lot about at the moment. Finding out more about these issues might make people who work with girls and young women with ASD more able to understand and support them better. I will also provide snacks of your choice on the day we do the interview!

What are the disadvantages of taking part?

It is not expected that this interview will put you at risk. If things you share give me cause

for concern about your wellbeing, I will try to give you information about services that you could contact for help.

I'd like to take part, what should I do?

That's great! Please email me on ShonaLandon@hotmail.com so we can arrange a time to meet. Before we start the interview, I will explain again what is involved and ask you to sign a consent form. You will also be able to ask questions and change your mind, if you want to.

I'm still not sure – what should I do?

You could discuss taking part with a friend, family member or partner. They could also come with you to the place where the interview takes place and be with you when I explain the process and the consent form. You can also email me on ShonaLandon@hotmail.com or my academic supervisor at UEL, Dr Miles Thomas, on M.Thomas@uel.ac.uk or 020 8223 6396. Someone can contact me on your behalf if you'd prefer. If you decide not to take part, that's completely fine! If you know another young woman who could take part, you are welcome to pass this information sheet to her.

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Consent form for participants

Please tick either YES or NO:

	YES	NO
Shona has explained to me what the project is about and what will happen if I take part.		
I have read the information sheet and I have been given a copy to keep.		
I understand that the interviews are voluntary and that I don't have to do them.		
I understand that I don't have to answer questions I feel uncomfortable with, and I can ask to pass or come back to questions later if I want to.		
I know that I can change my mind about taking part and I won't need to give a reason for this.		
I know that I can stop the interview if I want to and I won't need to give a reason for stopping.		
I understand that Shona will record the interviews, and that these recordings will be kept secure on a password protected file.		
I understand that Shona will write about the interviews and that the research team at her university will see this writing, but my name will be changed so people will not know it was me. (If I decide that I *do* want Shona to use my real name, I will tell her).		

I understand that Shona will start to write about the interviews soon after the interview has finished, and so I will need to contact her within two weeks of my interview if I would no longer like my interview to be used in the study. After these two weeks, Shona may write about the interviews, but will not identify me by name.		
I know that if I have any more questions about this research, I can contact Shona on shonalandon@hotmail.com and she will email or call me back, or I can contact her academic tutor who is supervising the project, Dr Miles Thomas, on m.thomas@uel.ac.uk or 020 8223 6396.		

Signed   _____

Please print full name   _____

Contact email/number   _____

Date   _____

Appendix 4: Confirmation of Ethical Approval

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

For research involving human participants
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

SUPERVISOR: Miles Thomas   **REVIEWER:** Jane Lawrence

STUDENT: Shona Mairi Landon

Title of proposed study: An exploration of the lived experience of romantic relationships of young women diagnosed with social communication disorders

Course: Professional doctorate in child and educational psychology

DECISION *(Delete as necessary)***:**

*APPROVED

APPROVED: Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.

APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED <u>BEFORE</u> THE RESEARCH COMMENCES (see Minor Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is <u>not</u> required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made <u>before</u> the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED (see Major Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

Minor amendments required *(for reviewer)*:

Major amendments required *(for reviewer):*

```
```

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments *(for students)*:

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before
starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name *(Typed name to act as signature):*
Student number:

Date:

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER *(for reviewer)*

If the proposed research could expose the <u>researcher</u> to any of kind of emotional,
physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

	HIGH
	MEDIUM
X	LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any):

Reviewer *(Typed name to act as signature)*: *Jane Lawrence*

Date: 1st March 2015

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (moderator of School ethics approvals)

PLEASE NOTE:
*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/

Appendix 5: Debriefing Sheet

Thank you!

Thanks very much for your time today participating in my study. I will contact you via email over the next few months in order to feedback the information I have gathered from the interviews. If you change your mind about taking part in the research and you would prefer your interview not to be used, please let me know within two weeks of your interview date. After this time, it will be too late for the interview to be removed from the study (because I will have begun data analysis), but your name will never be used in the write up of my thesis or any following discussion or writing about the research.

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments about the research: ShonaLandon@hotmail.com or my academic supervisor, Miles Thomas, m.thomas@uel.ac.uk

I hope that the interview has been an interesting experience for you. These organisations and books might be a source of further support and/or information:

Organisations providing information about autism and Asperger's Syndrome:

The National Autistic Society www.autism.org.uk
Ambitious about autism www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk
Autscape (organizes a three-day conference, run by and for adults of the autism spectrum) http://www.autscape.org/

Organisations providing support for domestic violence and abuse:

http://www.refuge.org.uk
http://www.womensaid.org.uk

Websites and articles:

Aspie Village, a friendly UK-based social group for adults with Asperger syndrome and similar conditions http://www.aspievillage.org.uk/

http://www.asd-forum.org.uk/

http://asperclick.com/forum/7-friendrelationship-advice/

http://wrongplanet.net/asperger-love-searching-for-romance-when-youre-not-wired-to-connect/

Video clips of Robyn Steward speaking about friendships and relationships and the autism spectrum: http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/understanding-autism/are-you-age-16-25-and-on-the-spectrum/myvoice/relationships

Asperger United Magazine: http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/our-publications/asperger-united.aspx

The Curly Hair Project: 'A social enterprise aiming to help girls and women with Asperger's Syndrome and their neuro-typical loved ones' based in Richmond, UK. http://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk

Books written by/for women on the spectrum:

(it might also be worth searching for the authors of these books, to see them speaking at conferences or online videos or read other articles written by them)

Asperger's Syndrome, A Love Story. By Sarah Hendrickx

Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder. By Sarah Hendrickx

Love, Sex and Long-Term Relationships: What people with Asperger's Syndrome really want. By Sarah Hendrickx

Asperger's in Love. By Maxine Aston (includes a useful question and answer section)

Ultraviolet Voices: Stories of women on the Autism Spectrum. Edited by Elizabeth Hurley

The girl with the Curly hair. By Alis Rowe

22 Things a Woman with Asperger's Syndrome Wants Her Partner to Know. By *Rudy Simone*

22 Things a Woman must know if she loves a man with Asperger's Syndrome. By Rudy Simone.

Aspergirls: empowering females with Asperger Syndrome. By Rudy Simone

Books written by or for professionals or parents:

The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome. By Tony Attwood

Asperger's and Girls. By Tony Attwood and Temple Grandin.

Girls Growing up on the Spectrum: What parents and professionals should know about the pre-teen and teenage years. By Shana Nichols, Gina Marie Moravcik and Samara Pulver Tetenbaum.

Appendix 6: Tables of all Subthemes for all Participants B-G

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript …. = Omitted text [ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
Previous male romantic partners as harmful	Partners as physical abusers	431	[ex-partner] *tried to kill me*
		797-9	*all kinds of physical stuff to me… thought I was going to die… beat me up*
		857	*he'd done so much damage to me*
		866	*raped me*
	Partners as source of emotional/ negative feelings	219	*didn't do me any good… being in that relationship, with him behaving like that*
		294	*I felt suicidal*
		276-7	*he started seeing someone else… I felt that my heart was being ripped out*
		367-8	*emotionally.. I was all over the place*
		427	*really scary… made me really anxious*
		1179-80	*hope I'm not gonna get hurt but… we'll see*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript …. = Omitted text [ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Partner as intentional manipulators of emotions and behaviour	227-9	*he knew how to get things…press my buttons*
		350-65	*I'm usually… nice, kind… calm… patient... he knew what buttons to press… brought out a side of me… which… I don't like… jealous… controlling, short tempered*
		434	*he... knew about that… he says things cos he knows that it's gonna... trigger something*
		478	*he knows I have Asperger's… he was saying... "that autistic cunt" and other… really nasty things*
		910	*trying to get to me emotionally*
		1164-5	*it felt weird why he's being so nice to me*
	Partners as controlling	789-90, 836	*he became more controlling*
		884-5	*threatened me… made me change the surname*
		1651	*talked me into having an abortion, even though I didn't want it*
Self as vulnerable	Vulnerability due to depression and anxiety	756	*[at point relationship started] I was so low I felt I had nothing to live for*
		764	*'because of how I was feeling, I actually went back'*
	Niceness as vulnerability	1260	*when you're nice…people…always…take advantage*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Gullible self	242	*he'd…say all the right things.. "I'm going to change"… make promises*
		290	*he was saying... "oh I wanna marry you"*
	Past vulnerability due to young age	1530-9	*people take advantage when they can see someone's more vulnerable… 12, 13… it horrifies me, stuff that I did when I was that age*
		1626-8	*just 16… people that I hung around with... were a lot older*
		1633	*I always went for [older men*
		1640	*he was probably… taking advantage of me… but you don't see it at the time*
		1647	*he [aged 30] thought, hang on, I'm going to get in trouble*
	Vulnerability due to language barriers	771-2	*he totally changed. I was over there like, no one spoke English*
		801	*I couldn't go to the police or anything because they didn't speak English*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	Subordinate themes 1	Line number	Illustrative quotes from transcript …. = Omitted text [ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher
Diagnoses helping to understand relationship experiences	Asperger's as way to understand self in relationships	27-28	*other diagnoses, they didn't explain some of the other things that I had like the sensory issues*
		141-50	*I only became aware of this because I watched a programme [about autism and girls] there was a girl… one of her obsessions was boys and I thought – that is so me… I didn't think that you could be obsessed about boys*
		480-2	*she's [also] got autism but she's got something else… severely disabled*
		629-40	*no one else there [at Asperger's group]… thought this thing… maybe it's not an Asperger's thing*
		693-5	*since I've been diagnosed… I think… oh that's why I do that*
		705-11	*I always struggled socially… but even though [my daughter] has autism, she is overly social... she doesn't know the boundaries*
	Asperger's as way to explain self to partners	1297	*the good thing is now… I know it's to do with the Asperger's like I just tell him… he accepts that which is good*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Other psychiatric diagnoses as a way to understand romantic partners	182	*he's definitely got some attachment issues… he would struggle to commit*
		195-6	*hasn't been diagnosed… but I know there's a lot of mental illness in his family*
		1083-1107	*he has bipolar… he ended up… getting sectioned and… then... saying… "oh it's your fault"*
		1300-2	*he doesn't think like that….he has ADHD as well [as her having Asperger's], which is good*
Understanding of self and identity through relationship experiences	Relationships enabling self-reflection	113-115	*I like to learn about myself… over time*
		215	*In that relationship I was… more adaptable*
		724-5	*Meet different people... discover myself*
		1216-9	*when I'm in a relationship... I'm a very loving person… I'm committed*
		1719-1722	*Because I've had so many experiences… I feel like I'm too old for games*
	Questioning identity	610-11	*people say "be yourself"…who am I? What am I?*
	Gaining confidence through pretense at being another self	713-719	*…pretended to be someone else… just to give me that confidence*
	Effort required from self	192-3	*I tried to make the relationship work... it was constant hard work*
		1028-30	*it'd be nice to... build like a friendship... but I still find that really hard*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	Subordinate themes 1	Line number	Illustrative quotes from transcript …. = Omitted text [ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher
	Effort expected from romantic partner	314	*he didn't bother to come over*
		1186	*he works long hours… he still makes that effort, which is nice*
		1199-200	*he came all the way over*
Relationships requiring effort	Difficulties with understanding others' perspectives	279-81	*it just doesn't make sense to me that, if you can't.. look after your own son, but you can take on four children with someone else*
		618-20	*A lot of things people don't talk about so it's hard to know… what people were actually thinking*
		792-3	*I don't know. I don't know what happened*
		1256-1270	*[when asked how partners would describe her] that's a really, really hard question…. He said I'm the loveliest woman…[PAUSE] I don't know*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Paranoia about others' views about self and behaviour	137	*well, that's the thing I'm <u>aware</u> of*
		558-65	*I don't feel very comfortable… I really have to… concentrate on what I say and do…*
		599-602	*It makes me… paranoid... thinking they can see what I'm thinking… I'm struggling and I'm… I feel different to other people*
		629-648	*I've always thought… I know it's not real…I can think something and people can see what I'm thinking…it might be something really inappropriate*
		666-8	*eyes might gaze down… I get paranoid that they think I'm staring at… You know*
Theory of mind	Self as a poor communicator	82-5 & 575-6	*not just in my romantic relationships but in all my relationships, I find it hard to know what to say…I get to a certain point and I'm like, what do I say now?*
		1689-90	*it's hard for me to connect with people*
	Own inappropriate social communication behaviour	672-88	*I get really paranoid I'm like, how long do I make eye contact with people for… if I don't look enough it's… rude… then I'm staring… should I be looking at them?*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
Communication	Importance of communication with romantic partners	384-5	*the problem is like he doesn't like communicate*
		407-8	*Arguments that we had had been… by text... because he doesn't usually communicate*
		571	*...that's being yourself… you can just say whatever*
		1170	*he listens, he talks*
		1231-1240	*being able to communicate with them… you can talk to each other about stuff… rather than… when people just aren't straight with you*
	Social anxiety	698-9	*I am really shy.. in groups and to go out and stuff*
		705	*I've always struggled socially*
		730-732	*[pretending to be someone else] got me into that routine of actually going out and putting myself in them [social] situations*
		1454-5	*when I went there and there was a room full of people I had a total meltdown*
		1555-6	*I couldn't cope... the socialising*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Importance of partner's relationship with her/their children	307-9	*I was still trying to arrange something for him to come and see the kids... he struggled to stick to that*
		341	*he always let the kids down*
		441-2	*I've always had to encourage him to have a relationship [with their son]*
		831-3	*he first met [their daughter] when she was like 4 months old and I actually paid for him to come over and stay*
		1172-9	*[newest partner has] taken the kids out… he's brilliant with the kids… interacts better than [son's father] ever did with [son]... and when you've been with someone like a month that just shows you*
		1663-4	*I remember thinking I can't be with you cos you're not even upset that I've… lost a child*
	Relevance of partner's own children	964-5	*he had four kids, err one… the same age as me*
		1074	*he had a son, who didn't live with him*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
Dual role as mother and romantic partner	Self as a protector of children from being harmed by romantic partners	412-5	*I could tell we were going to get into an argument. But obviously the kids were there… so I just left it*
		437-8	*I was worried that he was actually going to try and take [their son] from nursery*
		470	*I don't feel that he's safe to be around the kids*
		511	*I'm worried about obviously is around the kids*
		842-51	*he went to hit her… I'm not going to let you do that to my daughter… I ended the relationship*
		875-7	*watching my back all the time… I didn't want to leave [their daughter] anywhere*
		919-21	*I've blocked all of them [ex's family]… I don't put pictures of the kids [on Facebook]*
		1122-8	*[social workers] were saying things like I have poor judgment… based on my relationship with her father… I'd never do anything... to put her in danger*
		1660-1	*even if I'm on my own I can't go through with that [abortion] again.*
	Gender and culture	805-7	*women [in North Africa] don't have the same rights as over here... you can't go out on your own… you'd get attacked*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	Subordinate themes 1	Line number	Illustrative quotes from transcript …. = Omitted text [ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher
	Masculinity associated with violence	953	*he's a cross-dresser… total opposite [of previous partners]… I thought… "He's not gonna hurt me," because he was… gentle*
		1150	*I should become a lesbian*
Gender	Impact of societal expectations about gender roles	982-3	*he was living as a woman… that causes problems in a lot of places you go*
		1381-3	*there's a lot more peer pressure on girls... to be… social… you're expected to be*
		1407-1412	*girls… get obsessed with… things that aren't so wacky… like princesses.*
	Relationship experiences as numerous	54	*um yeah. I've had quite a lot of experiences GIGGLE*
		549-50	*I've obviously been in lots of relationships now*
	Repression of previous traumatic relationship experiences	819-21	*because it was so traumatic... blocked out what he'd done*
		1006-9	*I've been through a lot I've kind of learned to block things out... I kind of become numb to everything*
		1045-6	*I had to block myself off emotionally because of all the hurt and stuff I'd gone through*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
Influence of past relationship experiences on present romantic relationships	Caution due to past	71-3	*because of all the bad experiences I've had, part of me is thinking, why is he being nice to me? I'm waiting for something to happen.*
		1205-7	*at the moment, he seems like… fingers crossed*
		1246-7	*trust is really hard when you've had lots of really bad experiences*
	Desire to prevent past influencing future	105-7	*I'm trying to kind of not let… the past like dictate what's happening now*
		1009	*I've had to kind of, like try and un-numb myself so I can feel good things*
		1161-3	*[I] was thinking why is he being so nice to me? And then I tried to stop myself thinking that… I was just putting myself down*
		1364-66	*cos I didn't wanna get hurt I kind of then started withdrawing from people… I try not to do that now*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Importance of partner's reliability and consistency	197-8	*he says one thing and he does something else*
		206-8	*he'd say things but then he wouldn't do it… which… bugged me*
		224-5	*he'd say he'd come round and he wouldn't come round*
		249	*made me more anxious, coz I never knew what was going on*
		318-9	*he promised to pay for a taxi which he never did*
		469-71	*I don't feel he's safe to be around the kids cos... his behaviour's been unpredictable.*
		994-8	*he'd turn up to places he knew I'd be at... it made me really anxious*
		1170-1	*he says things and he does them*
		1198	*he didn't cancel me*
	Importance of honesty	374	*I don't lie, I'm not a liar*
		385	*you can't expect me to sit in a room and act like everything's OK*
		1077-84	*he kept things from me… he didn't tell me*

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	Subordinate themes 1	Line number	Illustrative quotes from transcript …. = Omitted text [ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher
Important attributes of a romantic relationship	Importance of long-term commitment	140-156	*I… fall in love too quickly… I get so carried away… from the moment I date them, I start imagining... what It'd be like to live with them and get married*
		240-260	*he wouldn't make that commitment… I can't have this, like not being stable*
		1722-3	*I'm too old for one night stands… what's the point*
		1730	*I would like to get married one day*
	Importance of reciprocity	312-6	*he wanted me to take the kids… he didn't bother to come over… [I thought] I don't think I'm going to [come over], because you've upset me so much*
		1219	*I'm committed to them [men she has relationships with] and I want someone who's got my back… if I'm there for them, then they're going to be there for me*
	Importance of respect	305-6	*if you're not going to treat me with that respect then I can't be with you*
		1076	*he was very respectful to me*
		1230-1	*being kind, respectful and loving*
	Need for physical proximity	86-9	*when I'm not with that person, I'm thinking… what are they doing... get really paranoid*
		788-9	*a lot of the time he'd just go out on his own and I stayed in*
		1191-2	*we'll spend a few hours together even if he sleeps for the whole day*
		1343-62	*I seem a bit clingy… I get obsessive about things because of my anxiety*

174

Interview B - Becca			
Super-ordinate theme	**Subordinate themes 1**	**Line number**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript** **…. = Omitted text** **[ ] = Explanatory information added by researcher**
	Sex as tool to form connections with people	47	*[a romantic relationship is] someone you're intimate with*
		1558-62	*to try and fit in… sleeping with people*
		1692-5	*I use like sex as a way to connect with people cos I didn't know how to kind of feel close to people*
		1703-4	*mostly the connection was probably based on sex*
		1708-9	*I feel closer to like someone when… we've had sex*

Interview C - Claire			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers in transcript**	**Illustrative quotes from transcript**
Gender and sexuality	Own non-binary gender identity	700-2	*I'd be odd… not talking about make-up and boys*
		1059-64	*I'm not all that associated with my feminine side. I'm non-binary.. I don't really identify as being a woman, but me calling myself a woman, it's just like, no. You're not! LOL. Why would you call yourself that? But I won't call myself a man either… I'm not anything*
		1079-86	*I love feminine things, but I don't associate how I think and how I act and kind of me, myself as feminine… I love dresses and things.. but what I am inside doesn't refl- isn't dresses and things like that.. [it's me in a] coloured tux.. with really wicked eye make-up*
		1219-22	*in terms of pronouns I'm not really bothered. I don't mind, she, her, they, him*

	Self as pansexual (attraction to people, not their gender)	898-904	*I identify as pansexual, so... it's less about people's gender but more about just the individual… I just don't really care about what's down there.*
		1119-25	*some people use bisexual… I prefer pansexual..cos there's so many different words for how you… express… romantic and sexual interests… with the literal sense bi means two whereas pan means al. For me pan is more inclusive*
		1128-31	
		e.g. 189, 1159, 1181	*pan is being attracted to people regardless of their gender…I'm not bothered by… how people express themselves… or what's between their legs or what's in their head*
			[pronoun use for singular romantic interest] they
	Societal and cultural gender role constructs	1164-66	*we're in the kind of age of trying to be more understanding about sexual, uh, differences, and things like that*
Identity	Self as different and weird	563-4	*growing up, I was obviously very different*
		665-6	*my parents are just like you're so weird*
		677-81	*saying my really weird things.. talking about something really random*
		700-1	*I'd be odd and say odd things*

	Pressure to hide true self and pretend to be neurotypical	15-6	*I'm capable of acting neurotypical*
		64-5	*I've learned to pretend to be neurotypical*
		565-8	*I was taught to act neurotypical through the shaming process… being like no stop doing that*
		600-7	*everything that I would have done to be.. that would appear different… all my family kept on laughing and joking… you're such a.. stop being a bull… you're not a nodding dog*
		614-6	*I just ended up kind of observing how other people did stuff… if I was told off for doing something... that was my way of being told that's not how normal people act*
		642-5	*[if showing inner self] I would be able to like not my head, like all the time… overly expressive with the way I move... what I used to…*
	True self shamed by others	608-9	*it made me embarrassed and ashamed to act the way that I feel is natural*
	Self-esteem	848-50	*I kept on thinking... why would he want to talk to you?*
	Contrast of self-perception vs how perceived by others	985-989	*he just thinks I'm really cute.. I'll say, "shut up. I'm not cute [giggles] I'm scary!" In my head I'm like some super scary hench beast or something*
		997-1002	*when I ask people like what they think of me, people.. say.. I'm kind of cool but in a casual… relaxed kind of way… I don't get how that is cos to me I'm just here struggling… stressed*

Understanding of relationships	Attempts to understand romantic situations via theories, logic and rational reasoning	165-73	*there's that triangle… graph for different types of relationships. intimacy. passion… friendship…for me it has to be all three of them… to really have… a… quotation marks best relationship*
		441-450	*I was confused and kind of cross that he didn't make sense.. he showed that he wanted to be with me and then he redacted it…what is that supposed to mean?*
		470-8	*if he's my friend in the first place.. I just liked him in an extra sense. Now I don't like him in the extra sense but I still like him in the friendship way. It's different levels. I kind of go to one level and come back down… like a wibbly wobbly graph*
		530-3	
			in my mind, personal theories of how things are, that I still need to kind of think about more and develop
		788-92	
			it's just very confusing for me because I'm a bit binary. And I'm just like if you love me why do you not want to be with me. It doesn't make sense... I just don't understand
		807-10	
			doesn't make sense that he'd rather be with someone he doesn't have as much a connection with as he does with me… very confusing
	Attempt to understand relationships through visualisation	525-6	*it's messy images in my head that's hard to translate it into words*
		543-51	*a blip sort of [gestures drawing a drop in a graph]… I have messy images.. I'm not really a word person*
	Polarized thinking	433-8	*for me it's very clear, if I like them or I don't like them… I've got very binary logic*

	Belief that wanting sex equates to wanting a romantic relationship	423-4	*cos he does like me a lot… ended up having sex with me*
		446-7	*[he showed he wanted to be with me by] being all like flirty and everything and like end up having sex*
	Understanding romantic relationships via comparison with other types of relationship	494-99	*you can have someone that means the world to you but not be in love… like having a mother or a child or a sister or something. It's like that kind of intimacy where it's like they're part of me*
	Contrasting own views on relationships with commonly held narratives	464-69	*a lot of people go on about… you can't be friends with them because you've slept with them.. it's actually surprisingly easier than some people think*
Important traits in a romantic relationship	Importance of sexual exclusivity/ monogamy	796-805	*being exclusive… not seeing other people… I, myself am not polyamorous*
		1315-18	*they said they really, really liked me. And then at one point they revealed that they were seeing like two other people… made me very, very distraught*
	Love	1388-9	*hopes are that eventually I'll end up being with the guy that I'm in love with*
	Sense of closeness	494	*having that really, really close bond*
	Physical non-sexual intimacy	180-3	*it doesn't have to be sexual intimacy, it can literally just be, just being intimate, like cuddling or TV watching or like brushing each other's hair, or bathing each other.*
		486-7	*you can have intimate friends… you braid each other's hair and paint each other's nails*

	Connection	174-80	*having a relationship without friendship… at the end of the day it's gonna be like you don't have anything to connect yourself with them*
		504-13	*it just feels… you will always have that connection… it just clicks*
		1132-3	*if I have that spark with that person*
		1155-6	*I had that spark with him but not with the other guy*
	Being understood	508-1	*it's natural to like them… or be with them…it just feels like you've always known them*
		746-9	
			he understands… mental differences…that some people have difficulty with certain things
		1189-90	
			just seeing everything who they are, and understanding that

	Ability to be true self	185-8	*showing your inner self to another person and not being afraid to show that.. not being afraid to be yourself*
		218-20	*It's very hard, um, meeting someone and being able to completely be myself with another person*
		659-61	*'I want to show people what I'm like but at the same time, I just know that people would be like, what is she doing? What, what is wrong with her?*
		668-677	*I'm very, very myself with him…not afraid to be just natural... saying my… really weird things*
		718-20	*hard to be yourself… if you say things and you can't trust them to be nice or understanding*
		1156-61	*it's just that kind of natural feeling of wanting to be entirely yourself with them… If you get that feeling… It just doesn't make sense to ignore it*
	Acceptance of whole, true self	1182-84	*I see this guy for everything that they are, all the good bits, all the bad bits, all the in-between bits. And I accept that*
		1189-90	*seeing everything who they are, and understanding that*
	Unconditional commitment	1175-77	*you love them, you can't not love them, you can't stop loving them because you'll always love them*
		1184-5	*I will love every single bit of him, no matter what.*
		1190-1	*being able to be with them through thick and thin*

	Sense of belonging	189-90	*they should be kind of... your being at home kind of place… where I hang my hat*
	Uncomplicated	1366-9	*[longer term hopes are] If I am in a relationship I'm happy. If I'm not in a relationship I'm happy…I just wanna feel comfortable and not have complicated relationships, because it is, it's very kind of tiring, cos I have to have all that energy into being confused*
Important traits in desired romantic partner	Shared interests	392	*watching Game of Thrones*
		729-32	*lots of similar interests, … we really like.. Victorian science fiction… we're… beginning to like literature, like art*
		815-24	*we're both involved in a steampunk community… a sub-culture*
		834-41	*he does videos about his group... I was just like, I like your videos. Your videos are cool*
	Outsiders together	725-29	*he's totally as nuts as me. He's fantastic... he loves the fact that I'm completely and utterly nuts as well.. we're equally… weird*
	Physical attractiveness	341-2	*this guy who is at my university, and like he's all right looking.*
		905	*there was this, really cute barista girl… smiling*
	Honesty	1109-1202	*And he is a very honest person anyway. And he … cos I know his friends and they're just like, "He's a very good guy. He's very genuine."*
Social communication	Self as poor communicator	854-5	*I'm not that great on talking to people, like new people*

	Anxiety about how to portray self in communication	850-7	*I was overthinking the way of introducing myself, being very, very careful... how do I work this just right, so I don't seem like… some creepy fan… versus really boring*
		871-2	*I have the whole problem of over thinking what I'm saying… I just don't know how to say it*
		882-3	*I end up being stressed about how to talk to someone*
	Online written communication easier than spoken	242-3	*I initially met online... I was able to get to know them before hand and then meet them*
		946-8	*I'm not very good at witty things in person but I'm quite witty when I'm talking to people online*
		931-940	*I prefer the internet... time to think things through… if you're…. talking… and they make… an interaction that you have to quickly do, I just don't know what to do... I just kind of freeze*
		1305	*The internet's so easy…much easier for me to use*

	Physical presence of others as overwhelming and stressful sensory experience	218-226	*it's hard… aware of everything that is them… that's quite overwhelming…I can physically feel…. the energy and thoughts and brainwaves and everything*
		264-78	*you're just so aware that they are another person.. they have all these things that just going on… like somebody giving off… like…. Sound… it's being shouted at you... like invisible words*
		283-290	*massive crowds [are]… easier because it's just everyone all in one go… I can imagine that I have a bubble around me… I don't have to worry.. but like a small kind of intimate group, it's very like person there, person there, person there..*
		292	*I have to get used to them doing their things*
		303-314	*everyone has like some kind of energy... you can kind of feel their confidence… you can feel all that… autistic people… read people too much.. so much information*
	Development of coping mechanisms for stress of social interaction	1023-6	*I've…channelled my stress.. I probably get extra ticky*
		1036-41	*less capable of interacting with people.. kind of go into… minimalistic mode, where I'll give one worded answers or not at all, or give grunts.. like if I'm like, stressed.. people think I'm being.. chilled,, whereas actually.. I can't cope.. my functions are shutting down, I literally do not have the energy to give full detailed responses*

	Difficulties interpreting social cues and signals from romantic interests	254	*I didn't even realize he liked me at the time*
		356-7	*I had no idea... I think he was trying to be really, really obvious*
		897	*I can't pick up on anything like that*
		909-917	*what does this mean? Is this a flirting technique? Some people just seem to know what flirting is, I'm just like how do you flirt? I don't get what casual flirting it... what's the difference between being nice to someone and flirting?*
		927-8	*do they even swing that way? … What if I've completely misread it?*
	Others serving as translators of social cues from romantic interests	255	*it was my friends who were like "ooooh he likes you!"*
		354-7	*my friends… trying to lure me into realizing that he liked me*
		365-77	*they had to tell me… they had to literally say, "he likes you…isn't it obvious… he's. been trying to flirt with you?" …I didn't notice*
		909-11	*is this a flirting technique?... I had to ask like a variety of different people... I just don't know*
		960-963	*they'll notice that I haven't "ooh why didn't that happen? Such and such was into you" and I was like "Whaaat?"*

	Poor social communication skills causing missed romantic opportunities	884-5	*I end up being stressed about how to talk to someone and then I end up not talking to them, missing the opportunity... it's very annoying*
		889-890	*there's a couple of people who've liked me and I've had absolutely no idea*
		922-5	*I just don't understand how it works… so I do tend to lose out of a lot of opportunities that way*
		942-4	*I think that makes them think I'm not interested… because I'm casual*
		964-66	*it might even be that someone might have been into me and my friends didn't even notice… coz they haven't met*
	Theory of mind	984-97	*[asked how romantic interests see her] I don't really know…he'll say oh you're just adorable… people kind of say…I'm… relaxed*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
Sex	Sex as essential and inevitable in romantic relationships	242-3	*relationships, uh, you know, of course they involve, like, sex*
	Sex as unwanted and probably unpleasant	243-4	*Sex… and I'm not sure I want that*
		246-8	*if I'm so sensitive about touching in general, I think I'm certainly going to, um, abhor sex*
		1695-7	*I suppose just afraid that it wou– that it would hurt, and… would I... really want him to*
		1724-5	*I might experience it, uh, ah, as horrid if I've got someone's hands and everything all over me*
		1731-6	*when people invade your personal space, I think, well that is rather more than that… how... could I possible put up with it?*
	Stopping at kissing	1806-12	*I'd go and then, uh, go and leave someone, probably at the… vital moment, like when you're, uh, possibly about to kiss or where things are about to get heavy.*
		2359-60	*And he, and he went to try and kiss me, I said, "Uh, no. No." I sa– I said, "I'm sorry," I said, "I can't."*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Sex as dangerous to health	1685-93	*a hypochondriac about certain things, and I, and I also do obsess, I, I always think, I'll make sure the other guy had a condom on, and, uh, ah, even if he did, I'd take a contraceptive pill afterwards, and... I'd like to make sure that everything was fine, and that, that's one of the reasons, as well, why I wouldn't like to do it, 'cause I think, you know, I'd probably fuss about everything.*
	Anxiety about own lack of emotional and sexual arousal when kissing men	335-44	*the first thing we did was kiss and… I felt… unnerved because I thought, I don't feel anything! … I'm an utter cold fish. And... uh, that worried me… I kissed someone… when I was 13, and I hadn't felt anything at that time either, except … I thought it was rather slobbery.*
Physical touch	Physical touch as essential and inevitable component of romantic relationships	207	*deep affection, uh, a lot of touching*
		1663-4	*when I think relationship, I think kissing, cuddling,*
	Romantic physical touch as undesirable	228-9	*I think my main problem in real life is that I'm not very keen on touch*
		355-6	*enough was enough, like, he kept trying to get off with me*
		1460-1	*I don't know if, if I'd have liked the outcome, like... all the touching*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Physical touch tolerable in some platonic relationships	240 1217-20	*it's not like I detest... [handholding with female friend] It feels a bit alien to me* *I'm very affectionate, like, with my mum… giving each other hugs or like a kiss*
Men as threatening	Sexual advances from men as dangerous	2319-23 2420-2	*we went upstairs and my mum was saying afterwards that this … could have been a severe mistake, but I do have a thing sometimes where I will... I've had it since I was small, I will talk to strangers.* *I thought, he's got a girlfriend, so I thought, there's no danger.*
	Nonverbal communicatio n from men interpreted as having mean or malicious intent	804-19 977-9	*I thought, you're done now. I thought, well, 'cause that's something, I suddenly got déjà vu about some boys who used to pick on me when I was at school… just that, just the look in his face and his tone of voice and the way he said it, everything.* *I can just see when it comes into their face, you know, it's sort of like, a bit condescending*
	Women as safer than men	1239-41	*The woman won't interpret… [a hug] wrongly, I mean, uh... unless of course she's a lesbian,*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
'crushes' on unavailable men	Celebrity crushes	224-5	*I think my romance goes... I get what I call "celebrity crushes."*
		249-50	*I get crushes on a lot of actors and musicians*
		1465-7	*I like someone in a film, an actor or something, someone I can look at or watch whenever I feel like it*
		2051-3	*I've always had a thing for... like, again, referring to TV, things about bad boys.*
		2069-72	*I wouldn't like to be in a relationship with a, a bad boy, or, or at least someone who's very bad, of course, 'cause I, I know it can be, you know, sort of quite dangerous*
	Crushes on men in relationships	958-64	*we made friends at university, and I used to have a bit of a crush on him.... But he, ever since... uh, at that time, and he still does have a sort of wha– on and– like an on and off girlfriend.*
		1414-6	*he'd met some girl, like, when he travels and he's not sure if he likes her very much.*
		1450-51	*sometimes I'll get a bit jealous, like, if I've found that someone I've liked has suddenly got a girlfriend or they've got married or something, but I think... why should I get jealous? I thought, it's not like I'd have done anything about it.*
	Crushes on staff members	1523-4	*when I told her about that, she said to me, "But he's staff!"*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
Desirable qualities in a crush or object of romantic interest	Humour	1322-36	*he sort of, uh, he was sort of looking at me, for my reaction… And I, I would sort of smile back… it was very funny*
		1518-9	*he seems quite funny, he's got a good sense of humour*
	Feeling a connection	468-70	*I don't know that we'd have a good, um... uh, such a good connection,*
	Shared activities	213-4	*Just doing activities together.*
	Physical appearance	306-7	*the grandson's friend was pretty attractive*
		526-38	*I didn't think he was good looking at all, but I just thought he had, um... I thought he had something interesting about him… He probably just looked a bit unusual*
		269-70	*he's ok looking, I thought, he's not, uh, what I'd called typical handsome.*
		1517	*he's got that sort of rock or pop look*
		2267-8	*I didn't fancy him at all, like physically*
	Her type	281-88	*He wasn't at all my type… I just thought he was too corny… Like a bit, uh, like a bit poncy*
		721-22	*I don't know, I thought, if he's, if he's really my type*
	Niceness	1272	*he seems nice*
		1553-4	*he's got a fun personality and he seemed quite kind*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Uncritical	356-61	*he'd also even complained to me that he didn't like my personality or the way I dressed or, or my hair or anything… And I thought, well, you don't like me, there's no point in carrying it on.*
	Understanding about autism	1548	*he's got that understanding of autism.*
Self as younger and vulnerable	Seeming young and innocent	486-9 870-72 2001-2 2349-51	*sounded very dignified and so grown up….I mean, I know at 22, I, uh, I am supposed to be rather grown up* *he may have thought I was younger than I was, which is why he decided to go out with me* *I've always been a late developer in, in everything* *I continued try– be– being pathetic like this, like, like a small kid*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Relevance of age gaps between self as men who have romantically pursued her	325-6	*He was five years older than me at the time, he was 23 and I was 18*
		711	*9 years older than me*
		729-32	*I noticed him looking at a couple of groups of, uh, of girls, uh, at the age of 18, who were 18… and he was, uh, like in the mid-30s or something*
		858	*"He sounds like a borderline paedophile,"*
		997	*this guy… was, uh, sort of 50s*
		1154-6	*I was barely 20 at the time and he was, um, late-30s, and it seemed to be an aw– an awfully big age gap*
		1287-8	*I've since found out, is eight years older than me*
	Vulnerable to being taken advantage of	860-62	*I said, "I do know how to pick them," and she said to me, "Well…they pick you,"*
		887-90	*I wonder if I might have a bit of a vulnerable look, or like, if it, or, if not vulnerable then possibly innocent*
		1221-3	*I'd be afraid that, um, you know, of being taken, like, advantage of*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
Romantic relationships as unappealing	Anxiety about own behaviour being interpreted as flirting or seductive	1223-6	*my friend, when I was at university, I always wanted to give him, like, a friendly hug, but I thought he might misinterpret it.*
		1312-7	*I said to him, "Will…your flatmates be there?" …he said, "No…, j– just the two of us," and he said it in a kind of smug way, and I thought, oh god… I didn't mean it to sound like that.*
	Self as unromantic	222	*I've never been very romantic myself.*
		289-91	*he tried to do the, do the "gentleman thing" and he kept referring to himself as a gentleman, you know, trying to do th– this and that and uh*
		482-3	*even though I'm not one for romance, I thought it sounded quite romantic*
		1459-46	*[the crush's girlfriend is] a bit silly… like "I'm the little bunny and you're... my cat, and we're going to snuggle together," and I was like, "eeewh," … I couldn't really... I don't believe I could start having talks like that with him.*
	Ambivalence towards romantic interests	433-35	*I never fall so much into affection, I don't think, you know, as to a point of caring, like a lot*
		1555	*I don't really see it like blind love.*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Serious commitment as undesirable at present	474-5 1822-5 1842-50	*I'm too young for that. I thought, I can't be like somebody's mother* *[Jack Sparrow the pirate is] … afraid of getting too committed… And I believe I'm the same.* *I'd… think of myself as… a free spirit…I'm not going to get tied down to anyone… I'm not sure if I'd like the experience…. settling down into family life and, yeah, you know, like, the adventure's over before it's even properly begun.*
	Importance of own interests and routine	1591-7 1615-6 1649	*like, say if they wanted to go out with their mates to the pub or something… I mean it's not like I don't want them ever to be at home, but... just like I might like to go out with friends or shopping* *I wouldn't want us to be stuck together like glue.* *all that's very suffocating*
	Inexperience	275-7 341-2 1656	*I've only had two, sort of, two relationships, but they weren't what I'd call "proper relationships," they weren't at all serious* *I kissed someone at, um, at a party in a kind of Truth or Dare game when I was 13* *if I ever do have a proper [relationship]*
	Importance of own routine	392-4	*He used to say to my mum, I said, "Why's he texting me now?" I said, you know, "I'm... I, uh, I, uh, I'm watching TV!*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Importance of time alone	291-2	*he was a bit too clingy*
		1462-4	*I do have times when I like to be by myself, so I don't know if I'd like someone by my side all the time*
		1474-6	*if I spend a day… at a big event, I'll be happy to get h– home to some peace and quiet*
		1482-3	*I especially get uncomfortable if we, if we're sharing the same room, because I really want sometime by myself.*
	Career as more important than a relationship	1767-70	*don't know about the relationship, the thing is, um, what I think at the moment is just to keep on with the whole work thing, and find something consistent*
		1776-8	*I'm not that fussed, really, about [relationships]... I think I'm more keen on… career-wise*
Self as unassertive and easily swayed	Using body language to show 'no' to men's physical advances instead of words	349-51	*I didn't say to him, like, stop then, but it's just, uh, I, uh, push him away, like, if I thought it was getting too... too much*
		2252	*I've tried to put it off in my own unique way*
		2335-53	*he kept trying to give me all these hugs. And, um, and, and I, I did the thing where, um... which I have tried before, but it's, it's not very good, but it was my plan for putting him off, I go very... very limp, and not really return the hug….he was saying, like, "Hug me properly," I said… "I am!" even though I wasn't.*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Line numbers	Quotes from transcript
	Reluctance to confront	577-87	*he said, "I haven't got any money. But I've got the credit card." But he didn't use the credit card. And, uh, I thought, Uuck… So I said, well, I said, "It's alright," I said, "I'll pay,"*
		643-6	*I probably ought to protest a bit more sometimes than I do, but I thought, oh god, so I went, I went to pull out my purse*
		1055-9	*I could just see him sort of looking my chest, and I thought, what are you doing? But... um... I didn't make any fuss, uh, at all, at the time, I didn't go, like, fetching anyone else*
	Passive, non-proactive self	330-34	*he was getting all, like, sort of touching, you know, trying, trying to kiss and hug and all that…. I think he would have gone… you know... like... the whole way*
		1454-5	*it's not like I'd have made any advances,*
		1535-7	*I might say yes, like, if he ever asked me if I want to go on a date, but I don't consider the chances very high*
		2425-9	*he somehow convinced me to go across the road with him, and into the park. And... I can't quite describe how I was convinced into going, it was almost like I was going with the flow*
	Ignoring or lying to end contact	664-7	*I just used to ignore them. And, uh... I'll, um, well in the end, I, I just told him on Facebook that, uh, I'd met someone, uh, it was just a way of getting rid of him*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Feeling obligated to respond immediately	399-402	*he'd, uh, text me, you know, way into midnight, he'd keep sending me texts, and at the time I felt obliged to answer each of those texts.*
Self as an outsider	Groups conversations as difficult	1905-9	*when I'm a bi– in a big group… they tend to look at me funny sometimes, because I believe they don't think I talk as much as, uh, the average girl.*
		1956- 9	*At…parties…I wouldn't usually sit around chattering so much I'd usually just be on the outskirts just listening.*
		2005-6	*I can't always... yeah, take part in a conversation or what's going on*
	Feeling excluded	439	*I used to be a bit of a loner at school*
		1943-53	*they'd often talk about hair styles and clothes… and I think, did I miss something out … to do with boys or hair…*
		2005-6	*I can't always... yeah, take part in a conversation or what's going on and... um... sometimes there's a tiny bit of regret*
		2607	*I felt a bit annoyed not being included*
	Contentment with being alone	23-5	*my mum was concerned because I never seemed to be very bothered about mixing socially with other people*
		1965-6	*I was a bit confused about it all, but I suppose, at the same time, I wasn't so bothered*
		2008	*I'm happy to be myself and do my own thing*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
Self as appears to others	Difficulty imagining others perspectives	890-2	*I don't really know how I appear to other people... very much, I'm not, I'm not good about, not very good at defining that.*
		899-901	*I spend hours looking at myself in the mirror sometimes, and trying to decide what I see*
	Appearing awkward and shy to others	131-33	*they just usually go by the fact that I look a bit awkward and that doesn't seem to make a very good impression*
		903-6	*Let's see, quiet, serious... um, reserved. I, I, I don't know how I come across when I'm a bit awkward, maybe, maybe a little bit stiff.*
	Seeming unconfident	150-51	*I'm just not confident enough, so it's... it's almost like there's no pleasing them*
	Self as passable as non-autistic	142-6	*it's a bit contradictory, because sometimes people tell me that I come across as, um, as quite normal, if I tell them I have autism and they do vaguely know what it is, they say, "Oh, you don't look like you have it."*
	Defensive of self	773-87	*He seemed to think that I had a habit of talking to myself. You know, like a mad person…. I said to him, "That's utterly different," I said, you know, "That man was obviously off his head."*
	Different but not changing self to fit in	1901-3	*I've never bothered so much in social interactions, like whether I come across as normal or not.*
		1922-6	*I don't really care if somebody thinks I'm too quiet or... um, or too loud. I, uh, I think I'm more, um, a bit more... um, aware of, like, social appearances, but if I don't feel like talking a lot, I won't.*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Unaffected by boyfriends' criticisms of her appearance and personality	356-71	*he'd also even complained to me that he didn't like my personality or the way I dressed or, or my hair or anything… so it was kind of like water off a duck's back, I thought basically, you don't like anything about me, so what's the point,*
Social communication	Ongoing improvement in body language over time	908-9	*What I've tried to improve over the years is my eye contact*
	Pride in achievements with social communication and understanding	825-7 1166-8 2443-4	*I felt, you know, that I, I had just done quite well, you know, I barely batted an eyelid.* *"…. do you like to be dominant? I bet you do." And... I dunno, I think maybe some people wouldn't have got that, but I gathered he meant... like, in bed* *something I think I'm very proud of, where I keep my head, and I said, "No we couldn't,"*
	Literal thinking vs awareness of hidden meanings	1203-4 2365-9	*some things I d– I do tend to take literally* *I said to him, uh, I said, "I told you I said I didn't fancy you." "Well I didn't believe you," he said. I said, "Well…I can't help that, can I?... You… should have taken me at my word."*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Developing understandin g of innuendo	1168	*I gathered he meant... like, in bed*
	Naivety about connotations	542-7	*I wanted to get… a snack… in a coffee shop and I thought, I'm not interested in him like a date…But, uh, I just asked him did he want to, uh, have something with me*
		2319-20	*we went upstairs and my mum was saying afterwards that this was a mistake*
		1032-36	*we'd had… to be dressed as, to dress as we would for an interview. under my white blouse I'd worn, like, a sort of flowery bra, and I had thought… it shows a little bit, but I thought… I think it's quite nice.*
	Missing subtler social cues	1045-48	*I thought, oh my god… he's hitting on me… I didn't realise it… it never came across like that before to me.*
		2327-29	*my mum thinks I sometimes forget about warnings, like, of not... going into, into– you know, speaking to strangers in cars*
	Flirting as difficult to understand	928-47	*it's like they've got an interest in me, but they sort of, I think, like to tease me a bit and like to see how far they can push it…. are they picking on me or do they like me.*
		986-7	*I'm still not very sure sometimes if, um, people are flirting or not*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Analytical of men's non-verbal communicatio n	615-6	*he seemed to freak, he, he sort of twitched.*
		716-18	*I just picked up some signals, uh, I had a feeling he was looking at me and that he was going to come over to talk.*
		728-30	*during our date and everything, I noticed him looking at a couple of groups of, uh, of girls*
		845-47	*"Yes," I said, "I saw you hitting on that group of girls in the lifts as well," and he, uh, and he seemed to balk*
		1312-4	*I noticed… sort of smiling at me, and I sort of smiled back*
		1322-3	*he sort of, uh, he was sort of looking at me, for my reaction*
		1367-70	*he suddenly gave me a big bear hug… I really appreciated that, and I thought, well he must like me after all*
	Online social media to communicate	1374	*We sort of speak on Facebook*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
Learning as ongoing	Learning via films and relationships and social cues	985-6	*sometimes when I people-watch or see something in a film*
		1117-32	*Is Tweedledee flirting with Alice? … he's sort of staring at her and... he said it a bit like this, and, um, you know, he just sort of whispers something to her... [pause] I can't explain it much better than that, but, um... it's almost what I'd call a seductive tone.*
		1800-7	*uh, he doesn't end up with her, like, like people would in a typical romantic film, he actually goes and just leaves her in... um... just... just goes off the instant, just as they're about to kiss and, yeah, leaves her where she is, and of course she, she has a big tantrum, but I think that's, um... you know, that, like that could be "the me," you know, I'd go and then, uh, go and leave someone*
		2508-18	*I did watch a video, even though it's meant for kids, about stranger danger I thought they were very good, very apt…'Cause it's not like… you know, utter creep comes up to talk to you, these were quite clever, like, could try and help you with your bike.*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Learning about self via comparing and contrasting to others with diagnoses	46-51	*my grandmother was sending the clippings detailing her, um, her characteristics, you know, the autistic characteristics….they made the connection that…my character is very similar to hers*
		1076-80	*nearly everybody else in the class has a disability, sort of like my Asperger's Syndrome, but I'd say... most of them are probably a little bit worse than me*
		1288-90	*I have this strong suspicion that he may have autism as well. But he's done awfully well*
		1375-79	*he... admitted to me once that he did think he had, um, slight autism… 'cause we were comparing our personality traits.*
		2078-84	*I'm interested in what's more "me" and what's more my autism… I don't know if it's the autism that causes, uh, my character to be in, uh, a certain way.*
		2140-5	*I think it's all me, I just sometimes, um, some things about the autism I think I could do without is the, uh, excessive anxiety, or the obsessions about unpleasant things, they're the– they're, they're the only things I'd like to be able to do without.*
		2196-2200	*most of them seemed to have it [autism] quite badly…I thought, does that mean that I'm really bad?*
	Learning from own past experiences	1060-2	*I wasn't traumatised about it, but it's almost like it prepared me for that kind of thing happening again*
		1101-2	*I'm sort of on my guard about that sort of thing now*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Self as curious learner	1192-1200	*I think also I've taken more of an interest in people…I do like to research and things, which is actually one of the reasons why I sa– why I called you up about this interview, I like anything to do with a bit of research, especially when it comes to films and... and autism and all that, I like to look into things*
Struggle to understand and explain men	Confusion about perceived inconsistencies in man's behaviour	829-30	*I just thought it was rather immature, the way he acted*
		1337-41	*we got quite friendly at the time, but I used to get a bit confused after that … he was often very guarded, he didn't used to say much to me*
		1405-6	*things seem to be a bit... sort of hot and cold, like, sometimes he wouldn't respond much*
	Judging intent based on dating behaviour	458-60	*I did appreciate that, and I thought it was nice, 'cause it's the first time anyone had actually asked me about dinner.*
		517-9	*usually I feel I can tell after one or two dates whether I like the person much or not*
		564-66	*I thought, uh, well just the fact that he wants to go Dutch, I thought, uh, that must mean he's only interested in me as a friend.*
	Critical of his choice of text topics	660-662	*hey weren't, uh, ever anything very interesting, it was just something like, oh, "Hello." Or "Sunny today"*
Family	Mother as confidante and advisor	392-3	*I used to say to my mum, I said, "Why's he texting..?"*
		594-5	*my mum said afterwards that even that sounded a bit cheap*
		1104-5	*I mentioned that to my, to my mum a bit yesterday, 'cause I tend to tell her most things.*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordina te theme	Subordinate theme	Line numbers	Quotes from transcript
	Mother as controlling protector	404-410	*my mum came into my room [when I was 18] and I tried to hide the, the mobile under my bed…But she saw the light and tried to wrench it out of my grasp and I said, "It's alright!"…. I'm going to stop. So she let me have it*
		1569-73	*I want someone who can calm me down… 'Cause at the moment, that's mainly my mum's job.*
		2473-76	*[Mum] said "You went with him, to the park with him?" and I said, "I know…I'm sorry… I know it was stupid."*
	Other family members as advisors	681-3	*my brother had looked him up on Facebook, and he said "Him!?" He said, "Look at him!"*
	Parents as social translators	1189-91	*my parents'… since they found out about my Asperger's… they tried to explain things to me,*
	Teasing acceptable from men in family context	689-91	*my brother and my dad sometimes tease me about boyfr– boyfriends, or guys that I've liked.*
		970-2	*he does tease me quite a bit, sort of, but in a, in an elderly broth– brother way.*

Interview D - Daisy			
Superordinate theme	**Subordinate theme**	**Line numbers**	**Quotes from transcript**
	Family's romantic relationships as a template for understanding others	1601-5	*that also comes from growing up… with my parents… my mum goes out often for a coffee with her friends, my dad will go to karate or... or for a coffee with his… mates.*
		1618-20	*that's something that I've noticed with… my brother and his girlfriend*
		1651-4	*I'm quite proud that I've been witness to quite a few other relationships, like, in my life, say, whether they're people in my family or, or friends. And I feel like I pick up tips.*
		2532-5	*I found it very interesting this summer with my brother and his girlfriend, especially when she's being, uh, very difficult*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Rejection	Rejected, unwanted self	162-3	*I guess he didn't quite like it [after she lost her virginity to him], 'cause he said 'Let's not do that again',*
		193-4	*they would get freaked out and think 'Please stop, and stay away from me'.*
		218-19	*one of them just didn't want to talk to me, like period. The other erm, he could tolerate me more*
		261-2	*she didn't return my feelings and I. It was very heart-breaking*
		278-9	*whenever she didn't turn up, I would be very upset*
		337-9	*I thought we were gonna be friends…and she hasn't replied*
	Rejection as upsetting	125-7	*It was a bit of a shock to me. I mean I was a bit upset when he text me he said that he wanted to end the relationship.*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Rejection as tolerable	180	*I didn't really care that much*
		383-7	*He said he was going to meet me yesterday, but he said 'Actually can you make it next Wednesday, I'm going to be busy this week?'. And erm, he's done that quite a few times and I suppose I'm upset, but not upset enough to like cry about it.*
	Self as rejecter of father	921-4	*I know him but I just don't want to get into contact with him…. I'm thinking 'Yeah. No. I don't want to see you as my dad'.*
	Fantasy about future rejection of men	962-3	*It's more likely that I'll leave a man at the alter than a woman.*
Influence of parental relationships on own	Negative views about men attributed to father	945-6	*I don't really like men that much apparently. I guess it's probably started with my dad*
	Parents' relationship as opposite of ideal future relationship	902-3	*I just think of the opposite of what my parents had [is a good relationships]*

Interview E: Ellie

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
romantic relationships	Father's and 'stepfather's infidelity vs. importance of sexual fidelity and trust	913-4	*He cheated on her and then she left when she was pregnant with me.*
		946-57	*my dad 'cause, he's had four wives. He's cheated on three of them... why would you do that? Were you not happy with that person? You could've like, I dunno. There's something called a divorce or a breakup. Before cheating on them, because that, that is actually worse to be honest. Like to cheat rather than just break up*
		872-3	*you should be able to trust your partner… to be faithful*
		881	*[I: Yeah. So is not cheating also an important part of a relationship?] Obviously.*
	Anticipating infidelity of future male partner	965-68	*I actually did have a scenario when I'm, I'm in my wedding dress and I find out that my husband-to-be was cheating on me, and I just escape through the window just go to work in my wedding dress*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Avoidance of conflict	30	*[people in a stereotypical romantic relationship will] work together and not like rarely get into arguments maybe*
		906-9	*So they can be a bit grumpy and probably a bit moody one day. You should at least try to put up with them and maybe try to say, when they're out of that mood, to say how you felt about their actions, maybe.*
		922-3	*he was really disrespectful to my mum just shouting at her.*
	Regret at lack of role models	1008-12	*It might've been different if, erm, maybe if, if, if maybe my mother had got us, got me a stepfather or something… if I was like around… a healthy relationship maybe I would've like been better,*
		1062	*maybe if I had a closer stepfather*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Own attachment with mother influencing future relationships	90-2	*I've never had like a close relationship with many people. I suppose you could say my mother, but I still personally don't feel like we've got a bond to be honest*
		996-7	*I don't feel that close to her as like daughter and mother would.*
		1037-50	*children can use, erm, can use the like, sort of the relationship with their mother as a sort of like template to build other relationships with other people… like different interactions that a baby has to like get closer to mother… I realised erm, that breast feeding could like happen one of them and my mum told me that I just refused to, refused to drink milk… I'm not sure if it's affected that or not.*
	Retrospective desire for siblings	1052	*Maybe I could've got a younger stepsibling*
		1077-79	*I would've been able to like erm, I dunno, help look after her and look after a child and yeah.*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Gender and sexuality	Bi-sexuality	259	*I crushed on a girl.*
		735-80	*I have two different scenarios in my head… Either I'm living with a man… [or] I'm with a woman,*
		939	*Bi-sexual*
	Changing self in relationship depending on gender of romantic partner	738-784	*Either I'm living with a man and I'm giving, I've got children. His children, but I don't think I would want to marry him, 'cause. I don't really fancy going down the aisle… If I'm with a woman… if she wants the wedding then I'd happily oblige, 'cause really I think it's down to the woman's, decisions, if she wants to have that big special day*
		942-5	*I would rather concede with female partners wishes than man's… I guess I don't really like men*
	Romantic and gender stereotypes as irrelevant to self	39-63	*You think romance, you think roses and petals and red and chocolates… but you have other romantic couples, mean that don't sway to like roses or chocolates…. I would call them intimate relationships… I prefer that word.*
		787-94	*don't put me in a wedding dress… Probably like a suit, maybe [instead]*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Understanding gender differences through biology	724-6	*any biological differences would be probably due to the hormone levels. Men probably get, be, are more aggressive, than women.*
Closeness	Importance of knowing a romantic interest well	47	*know what the person's interests are*
		268-8	*just to see different sides of her*
		323	*I wanted to get to know her better*
		374-5	*I really want to get to know him better.*
		856-8	*I guess you need to get to know them that well. I mean, I if you can't live with, erm, that certain person, then you shouldn't really marry them,*
	Attunement with romantic interest	29	*they can sync, like they're in sync*
		861	*You need to have that strong bond*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Importance of shared activities and interests	106-8	*shared a few interests in common and recommend like animé and games and stuff.*
		279-80	*I enjoy writing stories. She enjoyed writing stories. We enjoyed writing together*
		525-6	*We've got quite a bit in common, we can play like co-op games together*
	Importance of non-sexual physical touch	97-98	*jealous of how, like, easy they can just snuggle together.*
		526	*he's really good at cuddles*
		550-54	*he offered me a cuddle and then it just somehow went, led, and we ended up touching…It didn't go further than that 'cause he finds erm, sex disgusting.*
		585	*he's a good cuddle.*
Social communication	Difficulties initiating conversations with crushes	202-3	*I was too scared to go over and talk to them.*
		623-4	*I didn't know how to go over and talk to other people if I wanted to be like interested in them*

216

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Conversation starting easier within clear context	406-10	*[comic book convention is] an opportunity to meet lots of people… I dress up and that gives me, gives a clear sign to anyone else since like 'I'm a fan of what you're a fan of probably, please talk to me'.*
		462-3	*I jumped into a few photo shoots and joined the group and that's how I met new friends and meet new people*
		468-9	*he took a picture of me and we just began talking.*
	Talking with partner	106	*we talked most of the time*
		111	*enough, to like, to hold a conversation*
	Own inappropriate behaviour	189-90	*I did not know how to act.*
Need for shared understanding	Labeling relationship type	65-66	*I have had a couple [of intimate relationships] in the past. But I would say, I only had one official boyfriend*
		114-16	*He's the only person I could call my boyfriend at that time. Whereas the others it was just an encounter that wasn't that kind of relationship.*
		566-7	*We're not exactly in a relationship, we're just friends I suppose with benefits*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Importance of clarifying expectations	119-29	*he said 'Are we going out?' and I said 'Yes'. And it just seemed established.*
		509-11	*I told him before I went to uni, that I'm going to meet a lot of other people and I'm not sure if I want to keep this exclusive, whatever this is.*
		746-9	*[instead of marriage] I would probably sign an agreement to be with him for five years and if at the end of five years I want to stay with him, I'll sign another agreement to stay with him for another five years.*
		891-895	*If I'm not satisfied with my partner then I might suggest [an open relationship]… like, I told erm, the radio presenter guy, I do want to keep my options open*
		952-4	*You could've like, I dunno. There's something called a divorce or a breakup [instead of infidelity]*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Avoidance of miscommunication	817-21	*I tend to have a few miscommunications with some people, and erm, I would rather like to be able to know what it is my partner would want, like from me. If they want me to take the children like to school instead of them, then they need to make sure that I know.*
		832-38	*someone told me its 'Oh badminton…tonight'. I'm like 'Oh. OK'…He said 'me and [name of friend] are going over.' OK, have fun. And then the next day he said 'Why didn't you come to see, to play badminton?' I didn't know it was an invitation! It didn't feel like an invitation.*
Changes in self over time	Maturing and developing self	255	*Haven't done that [scaring people] recently though, I must be growing up*
		306-10	*[no longer striking people because] I just give them a playful shove or, like, not too harsh to hurt them and I always try to like keep back, or… turn to video games. That's a good idea.*
		826-7	*I have tried to learn to think 'Right just wait through the pain'. You can adjust this.*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Learning from past relationship experiences	395-7	*felt like with my ex, with, went a bit fast, probably for him. And I've tried to make, like, be slow like try to be slower with him.*
		534-43	*I'm trying to like not push myself on to him… Like sort of what I did with the other boys*
Emotional responses and relationships	Avoidance of stress	140-50	*I thought our relationship will probably weigh me down… I guess like the social stress and the work stress would probably be too much*
		741-2	*I've seen weddings are very stressful affairs and there are too many people around*
		757	*without the stress of a divorce or paperwork*
	Violence as coping mechanism for anger	299-303	*I guess it was sort of, some sort of release, umm. 'Cause. As being younger I always got teased and angry and striking someone would make me feel better… guess I got that from her.*
		310-12	*Or turn to video games. That's a good idea… you can kill stuff basically*
	Physical experience of emotions	377-8	*it made me all fuzzy inside*
	Communicating responses via social media characters	667-9	*To portray my emotions. If I'm sad, 'cause he doesn't want to meet up with me, I like send a pusheen, sort of like, crying*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Relationships developing over time	Beginning with social media friendships	77-9	*began, like, friends on Facebook, began talking back and forth and eventually tried a relationship.*
		375-77	*we message back and forth like during the last year and erm, he, whenever I go to sleep he would say 'Sweet dreams, babe'.*
		474-5	*He wanted to be friends with me on Facebook, so we did.*
	Initial feelings less strong	391-97	*I mean we're not too close, but erm. I'm attracted to him. I'm fond of him… Well, come on, we've only met like twice. And erm, I like, since I felt like with my ex, with, went a bit fast, probably for him. And I've tried to make, like, be slow like try to be slower with him.*
	Caution	865-9	*everyone just wants weddings… they seem to want to get hitched like really soon. I'm thinking 'Can't you just wait a little?' You know to get to know them, before it ends up in flames.*
Obsessional self	Self as stalker	201	*I… [be]came sort of stalker-ish*
		543-4	*what I did with the other boys… I don't want to stalk him*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Seeking regular physical proximity to crush	205	*I would literally follow them around the school playground*
		355	*I did want to erm, like sort of be with her every day.*
		364	*I just wanted to be with her.*
	Crush as obsessional object	202	*I guess I got obsessed a little bit.*
Importance of routine	Awareness of crush's routines	207	*I got to know their routine*
	Maintenance of own routine	272-276	*She got me really frustrated… she would always be unreliable, 'cause during routines, erm, I didn't have a phone…so she wouldn't be able to text me to say that she wouldn't be able to meet me*
		384-6	*he said 'Actually can you make it next Wednesday, I'm going to be busy this week?'. And erm, he's done that quite a few times and I suppose I'm upset*
		823-6	*we can establish a routine for the week… If that disrupts, if my routine does get disrupted I do get a little bit upset.*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Empathy and theory of mind	Lack of empathy indicated by manipulation of crush's emotional responses for own satisfaction	230-7	*I always enjoyed making him scared as well. I enjoy scaring people and his reactions were pretty funny… It's just the face, he pulled*
		244-8	*I suppose it's the initial scream and I guess it happened when I was, started when I was younger, I always enjoyed frightening my nan… She made the funniest noises*
		267-9	*I sometimes would be abusive towards her just to see different sides of her.*
		325-7	*I saw her cry for the first time. I saw her get angry for the first time. It was really interesting. What I didn't see was her getting scared for the first time*
		636-42	*I'm purposely doing that to just the face he pulls when I do something cute or adorable…It's all like he's like squealing sort of like a fan girl… I suppose, and erm, it's funny to see.*
	Lack of empathy indicated by confusion at abuse victim's reluctance to maintain contact	334-7	*I left school. She didn't even bother trying to get back in contact with me. I. Even though I reached out for her… I thought we were gonna be friends*

Interview E: Ellie

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
	Romantic interest's functional use to self	93-5	*guess I wanted to experiment and try and like 'cause all my friends are going out and, like, having partners.*
		160-1	*I wanted to lose my virginity, he offered and just got it done and over with*
		570-1	*I was cold. I just wanted a warm hand to be honest.*
		591-2	*Humour is like, erm, a lot of girls are attracted to a good sense of humour. It can be healthy… Laugh relieves stress.*
	Empathy shown to current crush	531	*I don't want to like, erm, I don't want to push him or, or make him uncomfortable.*
		554-5	*he's still a virgin and I don't want to make him uncomfortable.*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Importance of empathy in relationships	32-4	*Like sort of they know what the other person is feeling in different situations and if they're in distress maybe they try to make it right, 'cause they don't like that.*
		47-9	*know what the person's interests are and they give them like erm, opportunities or whatever to make them happy I suppose.*
		851-4	*I guess understanding like. If you're with your partner, try to understand what it would be like to be in their shoes, in their situation and try to sympathise with them.*
	Unable to inference or imagine self-as-seen-by-others unless directly told	86	*I'm not sure [what] his motive was*
		162-3	*I guess he didn't quite like it, 'cause he said 'Let's not do that again'*
		635-6	*all I've heard him say is 'adorable and cute'.*
		652-5	*We haven't really like. I haven't exactly asked about his opinion about me… I mean I suppose he'll say I'm. I'm not sure.*
Self as abusive	Self as physically abusive	295	*I did physically strike her a couple of times*
		301	*Striking someone would make me feel better.*

225

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Self as emotionally abusive	267-9	*I sometimes would be abusive towards her just to see different sides of her*
		286	*[I'd] say "I don't want to be friends with you anymore."*
		290-1	*She did get upset the first time, but eventually she got desensitized to it.*
Applicability of autism diagnosis	Autism as irrelevant to present relationships	618-20	*once I got over that I suppose, entered, like got into relationships and erm, I guess it didn't really affect it then.*
	Autism as cause of past stalking	616-24	*I would say it [autism] affected the way I behaved with crushes…. I didn't know how to go over and talk to other people*
	Others used to reflect on autism, not self	602-4	*I'm not entirely sure to be honest. I... I don't know, I mean. The other girl that I know with Autism, who I'm close with, she's got a boyfriend who's also Autistic… So erm, so I'm not entirely sure how it affects relationships.*
		708-716	*Everyone saying [the TV character] Sheldon's got Autism… Displaying typical symptoms of Autism… He seems to be. And erm, I guess that's, it's interesting to watch, I suppose… Cos erm, there are probably people out there like that who do act the way he does sometimes*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Current relationship aspirations	Currently being single is ok	139-41	*I thought our relationship will probably weigh me down, so I'll try and, it's OK to just not go with anyone.*
	Careers as more important than dating	389-391	*Well I understand that he's got his career. Careers should come first. I mean if you've got a dream and I shouldn't really be getting in the way*
	Fear of missing out on romantic opportunities	509-13	*I'm going to meet a lot of other people… so I'm gonna keep my options open.*
		896	*I don't want to focus all my efforts on you*
Future relationship aspirations	A long term relationship	575-79	*when I look into the future, like future, I'm thinking, well if it does go somewhere then erm, he's going to leave uni before me, if, if I pass and if I like, stay at the uni, and erm he, when he does, he's gonna go back to [another country in the British Isles], cos that's where he's from.*
		732-3	*one day I'm going to have a partner and maybe children.*
	Importance of children	86-8	*I had a feeling like sort of practice to, erm, be with someone if I wanted to, like, start a family.*
		803-5	*With the children, so I could be with the children and then they go off to school and maybe I'll go and find a job somewhere.*

Interview E: Ellie			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Desired traits in a romantic interest	Sense of humour	228 & 474	*he was funny*
		374	*he's funny he makes me smile*
		522-3	*He's really funny. But he teases me a lot and I tease him back.*
	Physically attractive	228	*I found him attractive*
		499	*he's got long hair. I've got a thing about long hair.*
		573	*I find him attractive.*
Sex as unimportant	No emotional attachment felt towards first sexual partner	160-173	*I wanted to lose my virginity… he offered… just got it done and over with… I didn't feel any attachment to him.*
	Sex as a disappointing	175	*I didn't feel like, the world didn't really move,*
	Accepting of celibacy in a potential long-term romantic interest	553-577	*It didn't go further than that 'cause he finds erm, sex disgusting. And erm, he's still a virgin and I don't want to make him uncomfortable... when I look into the future… he's going to leave uni before me*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Gender identity and societal gender expectations	Self as tomboy	1027	*I think I'm kind of a tomboy*
		1100-3	*I don't really enjoy doing my hair all day and putting on make-up, I'd rather just put my clothes on and leave the house. When I was younger I used to I always wanted to have short hair*
		1177-8	*I'm kinda like manly personality.*
	Masculine interests	1057-61	*I've always liked boyish things than girly things… gaming, playing with trucks and wearing boy clothes and getting dirty.*
		1106	*I used to enjoy playing football and sports and stuff.*
		1113	*I just enjoy doing boyish things*
	Attitude to commitment as stereotypically manly	1170-74	*I notice that a lot of boys who also share my opinions on marriage… I saw this shirt that said 'game over'. There was a girl in a wedding dress and a boy with sad face. And like that's how I feel. I'm the bride and the groom's the happy one getting married, and I'm like the bride, that's urgh.*
	More male friends than female	1028-9	*my male friends way outweigh my female friends.*
		1112	*all my friends are mostly boys,*
	Identifies as a girl	1109-10	*I'm still a girl, it's not like I'm transgender but…*
		1116-20	*at the same time I think I have the personality of a girl…Like I think I, I still like, I still enjoy dressing up and everything*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Societal pressures on girls' body image	1641-7	*I don't know. I hate to sound like a feminist, but I think men, kind of, have a lot, have a bit easier than girls… Boys don't have to have periods. They don't have to shave. They don't have to look perfect all the time. They don't have to diet.*
		1655-8	*just think men in general have it so much easier than girls do. Like I always feel under pressure to look good and to not eat, and to. And although that's probably due to being anorexic*
		1660-2	*Even though I'm not impressing anyone, I still want to be shaved all the time, so I look perfect.*
		1675-7	*I'm under pressure to look good all the time. Whereas boys don't have that problem.*
	Balancing expectations of girls with own personality	1677-80	*also have to socialise all the time and I have. And it's not. It's just like, I have a hard time doing things, like making eye contact.*
		1694-700	*girls are expected to be emotional as well, whereas boys don't have to be emotional. I, everyone's surprised when I'm not emotional about things…Whereas I am emotional. I do feel upset, I just don't want to cry about it in public. I want to cry in my room, when I'm by myself.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Sexuality	Self as asexual	402-6	*he used to think that things like sex were romantic but I think those things are just stupid. But then again I think I'm starting to identify as asexual… I'm not interested in having sex.*
		583	*don't enjoy sex or anything.*
		596	*overall I don't feel sexually attracted to people.*
		699-74	*I looked into why I don't want to have sex with people like that and it said something like you're probably asexual which means like you don't want to have sex with anyone and I'm like, you know, I always felt like I don't actually want to do that.*
		1537	
		1545-6	*I don't want to have sex with them.*
			I just don't see the point in it.
	Pressure to have sex	470-77	*he threw a tantrum I wouldn't have sex with him… saying I was weird because I wouldn't have sex after 4 months*
		641-2	*he said like "everyone else like does it three times a week and you don't do it with me at all, don't you not love me"*
	Perceived as weird for lack of sexual desire	465-7	*he thought that I was weird for not wanting to have sex with him. Although I am weird I don't think I am weird for that reason.*
		685-7	*he said that I was weird for not wanting to have sex I thought maybe I am weird for not wanting to have sex.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Assertiveness about refusing sex	632-44	*I was just like, "I don't really want to do that this time,"…. I was like, "Well, I love you but I don't know if I want to go into that."*
		691-2	*when I was going out with the other two they wanted me to have sex with them but I didn't feel comfortable.*
		1539-41	*from now on if I ever get into a relationship, I'm going to assert my want to like, not want to have sex with anyone.*
	Nude photographs as uninteresting	598-600	*Like if a boy starts sending me pictures of their dick I don't feel anything I'm just like, "OK I'm going to delete these now."*
		1021-23	*I think sending nudes is stupid even though it's a big thing with people of my generation everyone is sending naked pictures.*
		1037-9	*I'm like, "You know you know me for like this many years and you know that that's not something I'm interested in,"*
	Enjoyment of non-sexual, romantic physical affection	418-19	*I feel I can sleep in the same bed next to him and kiss him and stuff.*
		606-7	*I want to do things like sleep in the same bed with them, or hug them, and kiss them*
		829-32	*he wanted to have sex with me … I was going along with him but then I changed my mind at the last minute.*
		1130	*I enjoy hugs, I like it when I'm doing it.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Freedom and entrapment	Physically trapped in childhood	290-6	*I was kept in a playpen for like days at a time… and I remember being tied up outside underground nightclubs. For some reason I remember being like tied up like a dog.*
	Frightening temporary imprisonment by boyfriend	486-7	*he locked me in his room for 4 hours and that was kind of scary.*
		647-9	*he didn't really rape me he just threw a tantrum just lock me in his room for four hours and that was really scary for me.*
	Fear of being trapped in a marriage	976-77	*most people thinking getting married is romantic and stuff, I think it's stupid.*
		983-5	*If I married [name of boyfriend who locked her up] I'd be in so much trouble right now, cause I'd be stuck with him.*
		993-5	*if you're married you have to go through a big messy divorce and it cause a lot of trauma*
		1002-4	*even though I was madly in love with him, I didn't, I always felt like if I marry him I'm tied to him forever, I'm done for.*
		1374-9	*we're close friends now, we're just not going out… So there's not as much commitment there's just we can do what we want*
Romance	Romantic self	582-3	*I feel I can have romantic relationships and I enjoy romance and stuff*
		603-5	*I feel like I'm romantically attracted to people. Like if I'm in love if I feel I love someone*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Self as atypically romantic	396-8 985-6 1009-11	*there are things that other people find romantic but I think are just stupid.* *And everyone else like, oh, getting married, that's so romantic, but I just think that's stupid.* *that's another way where I think romance, think of romance differently than everyone else.*
	Self as bi-romantic	406-9 725-8	*I describe romantic relationships as someone who's kind of like. A boyfriend or a girlfriend who's kind of like a best friend.* *Basically she asked me out kind of. 'Cause I was telling her I think I was bisexual and stuff she was like, "Oh, I think I am as well I think you're really pretty,"*
Childhood abuse and neglect	Ongoing influence of trauma in early childhood	11-12 140	*because of the abusive childhood* *they said that I was traumatized*
	Attachment	145-8	*I still have Attachment Disorder, but they said that the Education Psychologist… said that's what my problem was.*
	Neglect	291-2	*for like days at a time without being cleaned or changed or fed or anything.*
	Fear of replicating own childhood	1549-58	*I don't want to have kids. In all fairness I have a fear I'm going to be just like my mum and they're going to have horrible lives… They might end up being homeless, when they're older and it's just. I don't want to have kids because I don't want to do to a life, similar to mine, but probably worse.*
Rejection	Can cope when understandable	711-2	*at the time I was kind of upset, but now I think about it I understand she was just trying to experiment with me*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Desperation to reunite	852-8	*I want him back I tried doing things to get him back and it was just looking back it was really embarrassing… I was just like, "OK, whatever you want, I'll do them," it was just like that kind of thing*
	Dieting and anorexia onset in response to romantic rejection	843-7	*I really wanted him to go back out me and I thought there was something wrong with me. I think that's how I became anorexic because I know that's when I stopped eating 'cause I thought I must be fat or something.*
		2067-73	*it started after I stopped going out with [early boyfriend 1]. I stopped eating, I started dieting 'cause I know my step-sisters were on diets at the time and I was like well if I go on a diet he'll like me more… And I went from dieting to eating nothing but celery to eating nothing at all.*
Romantic partner as fulfiller of basic needs	Self as attention needing	525-6	*he said I require way too much attention*
		568-70	*he said that because I require so much attention, because he said he can't be there all the time he doesn't want to upset me anymore.*
		878-8	*he had to break up with me 'cause I demanded way too much attention off him*
	Partner as provider	625-6	*Like he took me places he bought me things, he gave me stuff when I needed them*
		1804-5	*he bought me things he take me out places he cooked for me*

Interview F: Fiona

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
	Care, safety & protection	677-8	*I felt like, "OK if he wants it I feel safe with him,"*
		875-6	*he was really caring*
		1789-91	*I look up to older people, I feel like I'm more secure because they can look after me*
		1799-84	*think that might be my part of the protection of a relationship While I think it's romantic too, for someone to look, for a man to look after a woman and stuff… Like part of why I liked [ex boyfriend who locked her up] so much was because he looked after me*
		1805-6	*I felt like I was really looked after.*
		1827-8	*I think it's an important thing in a relationship if we take care of each other.*
	Savior from sadness	867-71	*I started going out with [name of long term boyfriend] and he pretty much take away all my problems. When I say that I don't mean he literally took away, but he distracted me from them too, so that made me happy.*
	Relationship providing purpose for life	449-50	*we pretty much just start living for each other.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Importance of emotional intimacy in romantic relationships	Feeling comfortable with partner	412 519-20 587-88 832-33	*You feel comfortable* *I was really comfortable with him and he felt comfortable with me* *he made me feel comfortable enough* *he was trying to act comforting: he wasn't locking me in his room.*
	Sense of closeness	417-8 1378	*I like to think of them as someone who I can feel close to.* *we are still close*
	Understanding and feeling understood	233-4 520 874-5 883	*The friends that I have already are actually really understanding. I think I'm lucky to have them.* *really understanding of each other.* *I told him exactly how I felt, like he understood.* *I told him things and he was understanding*
	Acceptance	1363-73	*he'd been around autistic people his whole life so he was really accepting… I felt really happy because I, well, OK, I'm being accepted. He knew all along*
	Sense of connection	411-12 1834-8	*you share like a connection with them that's really deep.* *although I'm not a spiritual person I think it is a kind of spiritual thing when you are with someone you feel like your minds are like connected in a way so you care, so you're always concerned about each other and stuff*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Mutual effort and reciprocity	442-9	*If I'm in a romantic relationship with someone I always want to go out of my way to make them happy, and…whereas it comes to my best friend I just kinda think ah well she knows me. But if I have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, I'm just like, I need to do all this to make them happy. I think they feel the same way*
		545-6	*Like I expect a romantic partner to be there whenever I call him, like. Whenever I want him to be there and like, I feel I put myself to the same expectation, if he wants me to come to his house for something I drop all my plans and be like "OK sure, I'm coming."*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Expectations from a good romantic partnership	Mutual and reciprocal effort to prioritize each other	442-9	*If I'm in a romantic relationship with someone I always want to go out of my way to make them happy, and…whereas it comes to my best friend I just kinda think ah well she knows me. But if I have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, I'm just like, I need to do all this to make them happy. I think they feel the same way*
		545-7	*Like I expect a romantic partner to be there whenever I call him, like. Whenever I want him to be there and like, I feel I put myself to the same expectation, if he wants me to come to his house for something I drop all my plans and be like "OK sure, I'm coming."*
		561-5	*I feel like because this person is special in my life now I have to do something…. and I expect the same thing from them.*
		626-8	*I felt like, "oh man here's a guy that goes above and beyond like I wouldn't even do any of this."*
		1818-22	*I always went out of my way for him… And I felt like he did the same for me and that's what made it so perfect*
		1848-51	*after a while and I'm like, oh wow. I really want to look after this person, I want to go out and do everything for them, and I feel like they're doing the same thing for me, so.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Trust	418	*I feel like I can trust him enough*
		613-5	*it's just a thing that shows trust I guess. Like the only person that I've actually trusted enough to have sex with, was [name of long-term-boyfriend].*
		896	*I don't feel if I can trust him that much*
		1378	*we still trust each other and that.*
Control	Need for control over own possessions	1911-13	*I want to have control over how messy and clean my room is over what order my things are in or how many all my possessions over how many things I have.*
		2027-8	*I just. I want to be in control of how many of them I have.*
		2053-61	*I want to be in control of my decisions. Like I don't care what their decisions are. If they decide they want to throw away all my soft toys, I'll be angry at them. Because I wouldn't, I wouldn't have that decision. My decision is no… I want to get rid of them when I'm good and ready.*
	Need to control how self is perceived	2143-7	*I think that might be another thing with me wanting be in control. I want to be in control of how I look and how. And what I eat, how, I how others perceive me. I just want to be in control of everything, I guess.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Need for control over physical touch	1320-4	*I don't really like being touched for anything. Like I feel uncomfortable unless. Unless I know the person or I have first call. If someone's touching me or something, I feel really scared and like, my heart. I just feel really scared of them.*
		1873-75	*I feel I need to be in control of who does the touching… if I feel comfortable with the person, if I initiate the hug.*
		1878-82	*but if the boy does it by surprise… I feel angry and scared and anxious. I feel like something terrible is going to happen*
Need for predictability and consistency in romantic relationships	Partner's sudden behaviour change as frightening	661-7	*It's just, it's just the way he changed so much, I don't know how to explain it but it's like he wasn't the same person any more, like he was angry and he was scary whereas before he was all calm and kind and stuff before he was really kind and caring, after he just, it's like he suddenly changed recently became angry and, and mean and scary.*
		925-6	*he just turned into a completely different person, I found that really scary*
	Broken trust upsetting	479-82	*I was really upset I think and I was really, only 'cause, only 'cause I felt like I really trusted this guy and I really cared about him and he was treating me that way because I didn't wanna have sex with him*
		494-7	*tried to fight with my dad out of nowhere and he tried to get my dad arrested and I think I made a huge mistake with him. Like I thought I could trust him but obviously not.*

Interview F: Fiona

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
	Fear of another romantic relationship due to past experiences	651-3	*after that I don't think I want another… I don't think I want to be in another romantic relationship ever again.*
		891-4	*after [boyfriend who locked her up] I don't think I want to go out with anyone else ever again, I mean that's probably a lie, I'll probably get over it eventually, but…*
		930-3	*I think, it's just put me off going out with anyone ever again. But that might be just how I feel now though, because it's only happened about 6 months ago so, I might get over it eventually.*
		966-8	*romantic relationships are probably going to be off the hook for a while, like I don't think I'm going to bother getting into another one.*
	Importance of clarifying expectations	540-2	*when we were going out I would be expecting things from him, and it would cause lots of arguments.*
		1539-42	*I think from now on if I ever get into a relationship, I'm going to assert my want to like, not want to have sex with anyone. So they can run before they get serious like. And if they break up with me I understand*
Attachment to objects and specialized interests	Attachment to special interests	183-200	*different phases of liking different things... And then it became celebrities and stuff and it's just like, I don't know. I feel like I get too attached to things even though they're not even that important.*
	Attachments to objects or things associated with people	2007-16	*he got me a lot of stuffed Bears and things when he was with me, and even though I got them from [name of boyfriend who locked her up], I don't want to get rid of them…. Because I feel like, I kind of have, I feel like they're friends to me and they're not going to abandon me.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Social communication difficulties	Self as seeming shy with poor social skills	11	*They said that I was just shy*
		19-22	*in school, when they said that I was traumatized and shy.*
		140-1	*we think she's just shy and she's suffered quite a lot of trauma… So maybe that's why she can't socialise,*
		154-55	*'Cause I was so scared. But that's why I can't socialise it's because I'm so shy.*
	Specialist interests as interesting conversation topic to some which helped start conversations	168-71	*I went through lots of different phases when I was younger and I would talk about them non-stop, it would be fine with the people who enjoyed those things*
		1278-80	*when it's about the same things I like like if someone's talking about fashion or animé or something or cartoons and stuff I'm like, 'oh, ok I like this stuff! I understand!'*
		1294-99	*Well that is kind of rude but that is probably how I make most of my friends because like they overheard, I overhead them, and then like, 'oh I've got the same interest!' and then I can start talking to them about it. And they're like, 'oh wow, she knows a lot about this subject, I like this girl!' and that's pretty much how I made most of my friends, so.*
	Specialist interests can bore conversational partners	209-11	*While it makes me happy, they probably make everyone else bored and stuff or that's probably why I'm so awkward to socialise with.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Difficulties initiating conversations with new people	215-7	*I can't really start conversation by myself. Someone else needs to be asking questions.*
		1257	*I have a hard time introducing myself to people*
		1775-7	*if I meet a potential, if I'm meeting someone who I like, I, well I will like the look of them. I wouldn't know how to talk to them, because I don't know what their interests are, I don't know what they are, who they are, what they are like.*
		2173-4	*that's partly due to me not being able to start a conversation, so.*
	Difficulty sustaining conversations with new people	219-25	*if I see someone who I don't know, all I can really say is "Hello" and "What's your name?" and then the conversation kind of dies, 'cause I can't think of anything else to say… And it's very awkward when they just stare at you and wait for you to walk away*
		1258-63	*I can't keep a conversation going unless they do it, so… and as well as that I think the school's right about me being shy because I am too scared to go up to people most of the time and talk to them but that's mostly because I know that's how it's gonna be, it's just gonna end with me walking away and them staring at me blankly*
	Relationship difficulties attributed to poor conversation stating skills	1307-10	*I hate introducing myself to people and that's probably why I have a hard time getting into relationships in the first place, because I don't know how to introduce myself to someone who I don't already know.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Difficulties understanding tact	174-9	*someone was saying, "hey I look so pretty in this," or, "oh you look gorgeous in that," I'd be like, "no. I don't really like it." And now, now looking back, it's not a nice thing to say*
		214-5	*although I try to be like, less upfront, I'm still kind of too upfront with people*
Autism diagnosis as tool for self understanding	Autism diagnosis aiding metacognition	1889-94	*part of me is like, think the logical part of me is just like, think, 'he's just hugging you Fiona, he's just trying to wind you up,' but then there's I think it's the autistic part of me or the Post-Traumatic Stress, or the mentally ill part... I guess it's thinking, 'he's kidnapping me, you're going to die!'*
		815-17	*I guess I have a hard time knowing what people, I guess a part of autism is not knowing what people's intentions are*
		915-7	*from what I've heard people with autism including me, usually think that people have the same intentions as them.*
		1178-82	*also kind of being autistic and not understanding social cues and why things are so, why things that just so normalised like that… I look at things more critically*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Understanding self via comparisons with other autistic people	37-43	*I only know the two extremes, I know that one is people like me who can handle normal life and situations where you're just a little bit awkward to be around… And I know that the other half can't even stand up or walk or talk or anything.*
		1364-8	*He said that he seen both ends of the spectrum. He's seen people who can't even get dressed by themselves and he's seen people like me who can get on normally, but who are just slightly awkward.*
		1575-80	*one of my close friends has autism, and… he's, he's much the same as me*
		1870-3	*I heard autistic people don't like being touched very much… I feel I need to be in control of who does the touching,*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Understanding self in romantic relationships via other important relationships	Step-sisters as a 'normal' contrast to 'abnormal' self	172	*someone normal like my step-sister*
		364-72	*she's normal so even though my step-mum used to pretend, go round pretending we were twins and she used to dress us in the same clothes and everything, we used to look very similar as well so everyone used to think we were a twins. But, I always noticed like, she was more normal than I was. She had an easier time making friends and talking to people. She was always really popular whereas I was a kind of a loser at school.*
		381-4	*I've always noticed how much more normal she was than me. So I guess that was kind of the first clue as to how I was so different.*
		556-9	*my step-sisters, if they have boyfriends. They wouldn't be same, they wouldn't be dedicated as I am. Like they wouldn't drop everything so they could go visit him or something. Whereas I would.*
		1058-61	*my step-sister who is the same age as me, has always enjoyed being a princess and dressing up and going out and having fun. I've always preferred gaming, playing with trucks and wearing boy clothes and getting dirty.*
		1070-75	*I don't really care that much. I just know that we're just two different children, even though my step-mum used to pretend we were twins, and tell everyone, "Oh, they're twins." And we used to be the same age and live in the same house we're completely different I guess.*
		1212-15	*whereas a normal person like my step sister would probably look at that and think, OK, this is stupid I need to wait a while before doing this kind of thing.*
		1136-43	*I think really differently than other people….I think things like, I think certain things are stupid and I'm going to stick to those decisions…While are my step-sisters all think, 'oh getting married that's so romantic!'*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Comparison of best friends and romantic partners	413-15	*I think of them as a best friend and a parent or a family member, kind of. But it's hard to explain without sounding creepy.*
		436-38	*I know the ones that I have had romantic relationships with I've always felt closer to them than my best friend.*
		539-41	*it's good that we are friends 'cause I'm not expecting anything from him. But when we were going out I would be expecting things from him*
	Real vs. not real romantic relationships	506-9	*I think the only real relationship, although I had 4 boyfriends and 1 girlfriend, I think the only real relationship I had was with [name of long term boyfriend].*
		700-3	*it was more like a cute little relationship thing. Like, we didn't really do anything other than kissing and hugging, like, and we were going out for a grand total of, I think, a month.*
		826-7	*it was just kind of another cute childhood relationship that isn't really a big deal.*

Interview F: Fiona

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
Impact of autism diagnosis on perception of self by others	Identity: autism vs 'me'	122-4	*I feel like… [the diagnosis has] almost changed everyone's views of me as a person.*
		130-33	*I kinda feel like my family sees me as a different person sometimes. Even though I'm still the same person, just now I have a label attached to me.*
		1373-5	*I felt really. I felt really happy because I, well, OK, I'm being accepted. He knew [that I was autistic] all along and yet he sees me as the same person. '*
		1388-95	*But I still kind of like feel like they still don't see me as the same, like. Before they just saw me as normal whereas now they just see me as, "OK we need to do all this for her cause she's autistic." Whereas like… I don't think. I don't think they see me as me anymore. They just see me as autistic*
		1414-6	*I don't really think it makes me different as a person. I'm still the same person.*
		1435-6	*I'm happy about least he doesn't see me as being different cause he kind of knew that all the time.*
	Secrecy about diagnosis	126-8	*I haven't really told my friends, but like I feel like if I tell my friends, they'd be like "Oh. She's autistic. Better be careful around her, then.*
		241-43	*I haven't told them I'm autistic either but I think they just think, or I think they already know from looking at me, well they think that my personality is like just like that.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Expectations of others about self lowered post-diagnosis	117-22	*ever since she found out I was autistic she's kind of been pushing it around and saying, "Oh don't worry about her, she's autistic"… before… I would have got a…. telling off for that kind of thing but now it's like, "Oh, she's autistic, she doesn't know any better,"*
		1383-6	*Now that I've got a diagnosis, I feel like they think like 'Oh god that explains why she acted like that this whole time. I guess we need to make exceptions for her now'.*
		1423-6	*I feel like maybe she wants me to tell everyone in advance, so that if I do something stupid I can have an excuse. But whereas before is just me doing something stupid without an excuse.*
		1455-9	
			If I do something that's a little bit stupid, they'll be like, "Ahh, it's just 'cause she's autistic," whereas before it would be like, "Why are you, why did you do this stupid thing, like? Fix it."
	Asperger's guessed by others	245-6	*a few people have asked if I have Asperger's before I got the diagnosis.*
		1348-9	*he knows I'm autistic. I told him and he said he kind of knew already*
			one of the IT crowd was like, "do you have Asperger's or something?" he said, "I was just curious 'cause, you seem to act like someone like that." So basically, I know that people suspect it the whole time, but.
		1441-52	

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Theory of mind	Difficulties understanding others' intentions	915-	*people with autism including me, usually think that people have the same intentions as them… If I did want to have sex with someone… I wouldn't pressure them. I'd just be like, 'oh that's OK, whatever you want'. I thought he'd be the same, but he wasn't*
	Self as too gullible and trusting	758-60	*He was just like, "Ah, well if you need someone to talk to, that's cool," I saw, "Ah that's cool he wants to be friends with me," and then I realised he was kind of a creeper*
		818-9	*am really gullible and always have been.*
		898-99	*I'm like, so gullible, I believe anything, any sweet nothings anyone says*
		902-3	*I trusted him, anything he said, and I trust, like, anyone with anything they say.*
	Literal believer	781-5	*[he said] if I don't go out with him he was going to kill himself and so basically asked me if I'd go out with him and I didn't know what to say so I was like, "Yeah, OK." But I don't think I ever actually liked him I think I just didn't want him to die.*
		903-7	*I thought [early boyfriend 2] was actually going to kill himself when I wouldn't go out with him, and then when I look back that was so stupid, but at the time I was thinking, I don't want him to die and I need to do this for him.*
Negative self perception	Low self esteem	1770-4	*I was to see, meet myself in person, I'd probably just ignore myself. I don't think I have a very high perception of myself, to be honest. Like, if I was to meet myself in person I'd just be like, "OK, no." But that's probably because I have low self-esteem*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Self as awkward	158	*I was awkward*
		210-1	*I'm so awkward to socialise with.*
		241-4	*I think they just think, or I think they already know from looking at me, well they think that my personality is like just like that. "OK, she's gonna be awkward…"*
	Doubting self and insight into own experience	1426-7	*I don't know. I think that's probably just the way I see it*
		1431-33	*maybe it's just me looking at things too critically. Maybe it's just me looking too deeply into it.*
	Internalising blame for break-ups	453	*it always ends breaking up because I'm so awkward to be around*
		495-7	*I think I made a huge mistake with him. Like I thought I could trust him but obviously not.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
		522-3	*the reason we broke up was because I was an idiot, but like it was my fault*
		560-1	*Maybe it's just my problem. And maybe it's just because I'm really awkward and stuff.*
		843-5	*I really wanted him to go back out me and I thought there was something wrong with me.*
		878-9	*I understand like he had to break up with me 'cause I demanded way too much attention*
		1204-7	*if I analysed the good and the bad I wouldn't have got in all that trouble I did in the first year of college but because I. Because I thought, oh god he's going to die if I don't do something. OK I'll go out with you.*
	Guilt	181-2	*I look back when I was like ten years old and I'm thinking that I was horrible.*
		812-5	*I still feel bad for saying that because now that I look back it's just that was a horrible thing to say that I was just so angry at him. What if he did do it, I would have killed him.*
	Self as too immature	1997-2000	*they think I have too many dolls, and stuff. They think I need to grow up and stuff and although I understand that I'm 19, and I do think I need to grow out of them.*
	Embarrassment	853-4	*I tried doing things to get him back and it was just looking back it was really embarrassing.*
Negative perception of self by others	Annoying self	162-4	*I talk a lot about things I like…And that kind of annoys people.*
		322-23	*I think I used to annoy him but he was nice to me at least.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Own opinion judged as less valid	1586-91	*he actually got married to a girl in our college, and I did tell him that was stupid…Of course, because I'm different to everyone else he didn't believe me.*
	Self as subject of rumours	795-9	*he was also saying really mean things about me… that I was a slut* *He's trying to talk to my friends and say things about me.*
		939-60	*he kept calling the police on me… he kept, if it wasn't family doing horrible things to me, it was me doing horrible things to him… And then I'd be like, "no, I haven't done any of this."*
	Self as embarrassment to others	374-6	*we were like the geeky girls that no one wanted to talk to. And she was always embarrassed by me.*
	Self as weird	465-7	*he thought that I was weird for not wanting to have sex with him. Although I am weird I don't think I am weird for that reason.*
		1761-2	*Well, I think they [potential romantic partners] see me as weird. Like flat out awkw-.*
Positive traits about self	Self as relatively normal	29	*I think I'm pretty normal though.*
		62-3	*other than that I think it, I, I'm actually pretty normal.*
		1535-7	*if I like someone and they like me it's pretty much normal, other than I don't want to have sex with them.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Self as helpful and well-intentioned	917-21	*I have good intentions, well I think I have good intentions, I like to help people and if I think, if I'm making someone feel uncomfortable, I want to take, I don't want them to make them feel uncomfortable anymore, so I, I'm really regretful about that.*
	Liked by close friends	1763-4	*my friends, they think I'm fun some. I'm fun and interesting and smart.*
	Self as analytical and critical thinker	1182	*I think I look at things more critically.*
		1195-7	*I just think of everything critically I analyse everything before jumping into a situation.*
		1199-2001	*if I feel I'm rushed into making a decision I jump into a stupid decision then I think well if I looked at this more critically then, I wouldn't be in this much trouble right now.*
		1217-9	*because I analyse everything critically, like I don't want to break up with a guy even though I hate him*
		1427-8	*again I look at things more critically.*
Sensory issues	Avoidance of crowds	1086-7	*to go to a nightclub, which I'll probably hate, because I hate loud noises and large crowds.*
	Avoidance of loud places	1120-22	*I think its stupid spending the whole day putting make-up on just to go to a club where you can't even hear each other speak because the music's so loud.*
Previous partners as source of distress	Fear	649	*that was really scary for me.*
		937-40	*apparently he keeps trying to talk to my friends. I hate that… I just find it really horrible and scary.*

Interview F: Fiona			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Upset	852	*at the time I was like really upset*
		962-4	*even though, even though I tried to forget about him he still in my life and I just find that really distressing and upsetting.*
	Splitting – 'good' and 'bad' boyfriends	594-5	*name of long term boyfriend] made me feel really comfortable, whereas he made me feel really uncomfortable*
		883-6	*I told him things and he was understanding and he didn't spread rumours about me and he didn't say mean things to me, and he didn't try to make me have sex with him. So he was really nice I guess.*
		973-4	*Well hopefully I'll find somebody who's decent and not a horrible person.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Vulnerability and naivety	Vulnerability and naivety due to young age	224-7	*when I was 16, I was incredibly naive. Um, I agreed to meet up with one guy, who I didn't know. He said he wanted to meet up with me in town, and he would like to hit me and have sex with and I should pretend to not want to.*
		308-9	*Obviously they just wanted to have sex with a 16-year-old, but I didn't get that.*
		612-15	
			that's not something that I thought about when I was 16. It was just, "Oh, I'm in love with him. He's in love with me. We're in love together. Everything will be fine."
		1005-7	
			I don't know why I agreed to all of this crap. I was 16. I don't understand my 16-year-old self. My 29-year-old self is a little bit more sensible....I probably wouldn't agree to meet up with random men, that I found online who were interested in 16-year-old inexperienced girls.
		1030-1	
			sometimes I think, well, did he take advantage of me, when I was young and naïve?
	Vulnerability and naivety due to lack of awareness of social cues implying danger	213-14	*I agreed to meet with him. He came to my house actually*
		1310-15	*It's so easy and it's so easy to get taken advantage of... when you don't properly ... when you don't have that same thing that goes off in your head that perhaps other girls get of, 'ooh- be careful!'*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Vulnerability due to own mental ill health	209-11	*I met him on the internet in a depression support group…at the time I wasn't mentally very well*
		248-58	*When I was around 15, I became mentally quite unwell. I had, um, I don't know whether it was a hyper-manic episode or mixed episode, or what it was. But I was doing all kinds of utterly bizarre things. Believing strange things in my head. Psychotic experiences where I believed the world wasn't real, and maybe to kill myself in order to prove that I was living in a simulation and to demonstrate that I had this knowledge. So I was unwell at the time and discovered that men are actually really, really easy to meet and do things with online*
		992-6	*I met him on the same depression forum I met [her long term partner] on and I met this other guy on, that I met once and then promised to meet up with him again so he could, hit me*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Autistic girls as more vulnerable than boys	1300-10	*They [autistic men she knows] want relationships with women, but they don't know why they don't get interest…. and for me it's been very, very different. I found very early on it's extremely easy to get men to be interested in you. All you have to do is be 16 and willing and there will be men who do not care how socially inept you are, do not care what you look like really.*
		1132-9	*As a woman I think my experience is that I was involved in far too much sexually with far too many experienced people. Well, not many of them, but with people who perhaps were taking advantage of my naivety quite early. Whereas the men I know that's not been the case, they've struggled to find any interest and that continues right through their teens and through their 20s in a way.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Vulnerability due to lack of age-appropriate romantic relationship experience with peers	311-5	*Having been through school and not having had any interest from anybody, and not having much interest in other people, sexually or romantically, it was something where I was completely naive, completely didn't understand it.*
		1317-25	*when you haven't had that experience of sort of play relationships at junior school with boyfriend and girlfriend but pretending… And then perhaps snogging your boyfriend at the age of 13 and that gradual introduction. What I found is that I had absolutely no experience until I got old enough for adult men to take an interest in me and then I was like, Oh, this is how you do a relationship.*
		1375-80	*I wish I had stayed at school, had a nice short term boyfriend or girlfriend, another longer term boyfriend or girlfriend and then maybe met somebody at university or a bit later that I could have a relationship with, but in the context of having had more experience. Because I don't have that and it is something that I struggle with.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Grooming and child sexual exploitation (CSE)	Adult men as providers of gifts, drugs and alcohol	331-2	*gave me cannabis and got me into all those kinds of things.*
		927-30	*we went to a public place, a woodland or something and smoked cannabis together. He showed me how to roll the joint and gave me this cannabis and smoked*
		956-7	*He sent me cannabis through the post I think once or twice after that.*
		1053	*one night I got very drunk*
		1329	*They give you things*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Validation and approval from men's flattery in contrast to rejection by peers	258-64	*If you're a 16-year-old girl and you're getting a lot of interest from people it's like, "Oh, people like me. The people at school, they don't like me. I don't get on with people at school." I've never had a boyfriend, never had a girlfriend, never had anything like that at school. But suddenly all these people want to know me, and want to talk to me.*
		306-9	*When I started talking to people online, it was kind of a new universe. "Oh, actually people do want relationships with me." Obviously they just wanted to have sex with a 16-year-old, but I didn't get that.*
		908-10	*He would email me and tell me how intelligent I was and how interesting I was and how special I was and how much he would like to perform oral sex on me.*
		947-59	*I want to be friends with him. I like him. He's interesting to talk to, he seems to like me and thinks that I'm interesting. He's always telling me nice things about myself.*
		1329-32	*they're interested in what you have to say. It didn't get until quite a bit later [until I realised] they're not interested in what I had to say. I was 16 years old and not particularly interesting to be around*
	Internet enabling contact with adult men	209	*I met him on the internet*
		257-8	*men are actually really, really easy to meet and do things with online*
		421-22	*All my relationships have been started online or through somebody else.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
	Passively conceding to men's sexual advances despite not wanting to	236-9	*he basically wanted to have sex with me and we ended up doing various things, but because he had erectile dysfunction, we didn't.*
		936-48	*And then he performed oral sex on me. I don't … I didn't … I thought that is really disgusting actually, why would you want to put your mouth on someone else's genitals. OK, he wants to do it, fine. I didn't really enjoy it. It wasn't very nice. Erm, I tried to return the favour. He couldn't get it up. That didn't happen. Erm, I think I only met him 3, maybe 4, times in total and we only had sexual relations once or twice. Twice. I didn't enjoy it. It wasn't something that I was particularly into. I wasn't really interested in men at that point. I didn't find him attractive, but he wanted to do it, so I thought, well you know, why not? I want to be friends with him. I like him*
		952-6	*So I'd better just go along with this, because, I mean, it's what people do, isn't it? They meet up with people and they have sex with them. That's what you're supposed to do. I'm 15, 16, grown up. Have sex with people. That's what we do*
	Sex with older, adult men	335-7	*He's 21 years older than I am. And that, went down about as well as you would expect with my parents.*
		904-5	*I think he was about 30 when I was 16. So yeah, 15 years older say.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Conceding to physical harm by partner	225-8	*He said he wanted to meet up with me in town, and he would like to hit me and have sex with and I should pretend to not want to.*
		240-1	*he cut me and did all kinds of bizarre things.*
		930-6	*he asked if I would like him to cut me. And I said, "OK. OK fair enough." So he cut me on my right breast, there. Scar about that long, about that wide. Very strange… With a razor blade. So. Don't ask me what I was thinking. I don't really remember, I just thought, "this is interesting. What's going on here then?"*
		994-7	*I… promised to meet up with him again so he could, hit me and do other kinds of- I don't know why he wanted to do that. Very peculiar.*
	Sexual Exploitation	1342-5	*the moment you've got that sexual value it's not hard. It's not hard at all to have relationships, but they're not really good relationships necessarily. They're exploitative relationships*
Sexuality	Unimportance of partner's gender	269	*I'm bi-sexual*
		1509-12	*I might have a relationship with someone else then. I might not. I don't know whether it would be a man or a woman or somebody in between. Somebody who hadn't decided. I'm not that bothered.*
		1524-9	*I sometimes consider having other relationships. [her long term partner] doesn't mind me having relationships with other women while I'm with him. He just doesn't want me having relationships with other men. I don't personally see what the difference is, but it's something to do with penises.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Attraction to men developing later than attraction to women	245-8	*This [sexual activity with men from internet] was all not what I expected at all, because when I was 14 or 15, I believed that I was gay. I went to an all girls' school, I wasn't remotely interested in men.*
		270-1	*I am interested in men sexually, but that didn't manifest as early as the interest in women.*
	Complications of polyamory	339-42	*I've been more or less monogamous with him. I did have, well, we both had a relationship with another woman that we knew quite early on.*
		355-9	*I got back in touch with this woman and began a sexual relationship with her and also with my boyfriend involved, which rapidly deteriorated. I say deteriorated, deteriorated into me sitting on the sofa watching them together*
		635-43	*it turned out they had cuddled naked in bed together. And I wasn't happy with that, because I said, "I'm happy for you to do things together. I need to be there. This is OK, the three of us, fine. I'm OK with this going on. You know. I'm happy to do things with her, I'm happy for you to do things with her, I'm happy to do things with you while she's there. I'm not happy for you two to have an independent relationship while I'm not there*
		1533-38	*those [polyamorous experiences] can be very complicated. The one with [the other woman] that started getting to the point where she became less interested in me and more interested in him and I became side-lined and it all gets really complicated and I don't understand what's going on*

Interview G: Gill

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
	Previous pretense at straight crush to appear 'normal'	279-94	*They were talking about who they fancied, and I thought, Oh God. Okay, I finally worked out by this age, 14 or so, that I'm supposed to fancy boys… and I was supposed to talk about them and go, "Ooohh, aren't they gorgeous. Isn't he lovely?" And I thought, well, in order to prove that I'm normal like the rest of them, I will pick a sexually attractive male in order to demonstrate, that I have normal wants and desires and I'm, just like everybody else… Who, as a 14-year-old-girl, in the year 2000, shall I pick to demonstrate that I'm a normal girl, just like everybody else? I know. He's got big muscles, he's very manly. Arnold Schwarzenegger. I'll pretend I fancy him. This was apparently the wrong answer.*
	Pointlessness of celebrity crushes	296-304	*I was supposed to pick a boy band member and go, "Oh, isn't he lovely?" I did not get that, because you're meant to go and meet him. He's not interested in you. He likes other men. Most of the time the ones they pick, Steven Gately, you know that kind of thing, cos I'm that kind of age. You're never going to meet them. Why even pretend that you're interested in having a relationship with them, because this is not real. It's not practical, it doesn't make sense.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Own and partner's medication and mental and physical ill health negatively impacting sex life	386-7	*I'm on anti-depressants at the moment, which completely kill my sex drive*
		594-7	*I'm not always in the mood either. Because I have to take anti-depressants at the moment and that messes with sex drive, ability to orgasm and all those kind of things that are really important to sex.*
		384-6	*He and I don't have sex really, almost at all very often cos he has health problems. He's quite overweight and he struggles*
		593-4	*he struggles physically with that side of things*
		1082-91	*I wish we had a better relationship sexually, but it's, it's something that's dependent on a lot of factors that aren't necessarily to do with how healthy your relationship is emotionally…His physical health, my physical health, his mental health, my mental health. Both of our medications. Because we're both on SSRIs they really screw you up sexually. They really, really do*
Honesty and trust	Self as truthful	679-81	*I don't like lying. I don't like doing it. I'm not very good at it. It makes me feel uncomfortable, having to lie. It makes me feel like everybody can tell I'm lying.*
		1086	*it's nice to have somebody that I'm always 100% honest with*
		1472-4	*we're very, very open with each other and that's good to have someone you can be open with 100% all of the time*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Need for honesty in relationships	628-31	*We're both completely honest with each other, apart from the time when he wasn't completely upfront honest with me with this woman. He's never lied to me. He doesn't lie.*
		656-9	*that's really, really, really important to me, is honesty. It's something that I value above almost anything else, I think, in a relationship. It's something that I valued all my life.*
	Importance of adherence to agreed boundaries	642-4	*I'm not happy for you two to have an independent relationship while I'm not there, because I don't think that that's part of the agreement that we had."*
	Hurt at betrayal of trust	363-70	*they got together and I trusted them. I trusted them both completely. Because [name of long term partner] pretty much, he's almost never lied to me…and so, they did meet up and then I discovered they had cuddled and then I discovered cuddling was cuddling naked in bed. And, he hadn't told me this. I was pretty upset.*
		682-4	*When other people lie, it makes me angry and it makes me doubt myself and it makes me mistrust them forever.*
Love and romance	Romance associated with beginnings of relationships, not long term partnerships	154-8	*I do associate that particular word more with the sort of wooing… Courtship, that sort of thing, flirting.*
	Unromantic self	1470-2	*he did propose to me once but we never got around to it. Romantically I'm not a romantic person.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Mutual love with partner	614-5	*I'm in love with him. He's in love with me. We're in love together.*
		1022	*We love each other.*
		154& 1419	*I love him*
		1445-6	*He tells me he loves me about 30 times a day.*
Romantic partnership enabling needs to be met	Partner as provider of home and financial security	615-18	*he's got a house, he's got a mortgage. I'm in a lot better condition financially than a lot of people my age*
		1396-99	*[if they split] I'd have to go back and live with my parents. Find somewhere else to live. Find another way of getting around. Because he does all the driving.*
		1419	*he's got a house*
	Self as happier in relationship	1074-79	*[My parents] said that I seemed happier away from them and so they decided not to … They didn't want to force me to come back [to my home town when I moved in with my partner]*
		1514-5	*I would probably not be happy on my own long term.*
		1547-8	*I wouldn't want to be on my own forever, I don't think.*
	Self as provider of companionship	1464-9	*What I think I bring to the relationship is probably that he likes being in a relationship. I don't do much practically. I don't earn. I don't clean. I don't cook. Don't have sex often, but it's, he's better in a relationship. He would be very … He finds when he's on his own he struggles a lot.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Self as entertainer	1420-1	*What have I got? I'm entertaining to be around. That's what I am.*
	Self as surprisingly attractive to partner	461-2	*I've kind of spent my life assuming that nobody is sexually attracted to me*
		1421-2	*I'm decorative.*
		1430-2	*He tells me he fancies me a lot…I don't understand it but apparently he does.*
	Partner as listener	1021	*We talk to each other all the time.*
		1515	*I need somebody to talk at. To talk at, not to*
Factors in current long term relationship that keep them together	Convenience and ease of sameness	1392-95	*Inertia [keeps us together]…. anything else would be more effort and I do love him and I do like him, but there is a certain aspect of, "I have this sorted out now. I have this part of my life"*
		1417-9	*it would be a big upheaval to change. And I'm happy with how I am and I'm happy with my relationship and I love him and it's convenient for both of us*
	Current contentment	153	*we have a good relationship*
		1022-4	*It all seems OK… Everything's fine.*
		1384-5	*Everything seems to have worked out for the moment.*
		1423	*So it works and I'm happy with that.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Feeling comfortable	570-3	*he doesn't count as people in terms of difficulty having to be around people. Having to, erm, perform to a certain extent, and be around people.*
		586-7	*We're just very, very comfortable with each other really.*
		1403-5	*I'm comfortable with him and I'm happy with him.*
	Feeling known and understood	579-84	*He knows everything about me… He knows what I'm thinking half the time. I know what he's thinking half the time. We say the same things at the same time, the way people do when they've been together for ages and ages.*
		628	*We know each other very well*
		1021-2	*We talk to each other all the time. We know each other very well.*
		1095-7	*it's nice to have somebody that I'm always 100% honest with, who always understands what I'm talking about 95% of the time.*
	Ability to be her natural self	570-3	*Obviously he's a person but he doesn't count as people in terms of difficulty having to be around people. Having to, erm, perform to a certain extent, and be around people.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Getting on well	154	*I get on with him*
		627-8	*we get on very, very well.*
		1040-1	*we seem to get on all right, so it works.*
		1082	*We do get on very well, my partner and I.*
Lost opportunities for learning about relationships	Regret at missing life experiences	1351-66	*I wish I'd stayed at school. I wish I'd had any idea of how to have these early practice relationships where you know you have a boyfriend at school for 3 months and then you learn how to break up nicely. And you learn how to flirt and how to start a different relationship and then you learn how that relationship goes away over time gradually and how to deal with that. I haven't really dealt with any of that. I've gone straight into long term co-habiting with somebody much older and I really, really wish that I'd done that whole school dating…You know maybe going to university and having a boyfriend or a girlfriend there, clubbing or going out drinking, flirting, learning about those kinds of things. Cos none of that really happened for me, and I still feel really inexperienced.*
		1375-80	*I wish I had stayed at school, had a nice short term boyfriend or girlfriend, another longer term boyfriend or girlfriend and then maybe met somebody at university or a bit later that I could have a relationship with, but in the context of having had more experience. Because I don't have that and it is something that I struggle with.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Social isolation restricting opportunities for relationship experience	478-85	*I've spent quite a lot of the last decade or so being extremely socially isolated. So, erm. I was very, very overweight. I didn't go out the house except, to go to the supermarket and then with my partner, so the only time I spoke to people would have been people working perhaps in the supermarket or the occasional doctor's appointment. So, any opportunities for flirting just weren't there.*
		540-2	*I haven't had really any opportunity to experience flirting, initiation of relationships, anything like that.*
		1135-8	*Until very recently I essentially did not meet people, I was completely socially isolated. And so any romantic relationships…I could have had…there was no opportunity for them.*
Future relationships: expectations and aspirations	Practical considerations about partner's mortality	1483-1502	*My expectations is that I would probably stay with [her long term partner] until he dies. That's most likely. He needs to make a will first because of the way his family will inherit the stuff and I probably won't unless I make an application to the courts and that would be awkward…. he's nominally obese and he's got a family history of heart problems, so he's probably going to live another 25 years or so. Not much more, 25 or 30 years at most. At which point I'll be 50 or 60, something around there.*
		1539-42	*I suspect I will probably be with [her long term partner] for another 20, 30 years until he dies. And then maybe have a relationship with someone else if I find someone who's interested.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Extra relationships: possible but complicated	1531-9	*he's happy with me to have relationships with women where he's not involved as well as where he is involved. Although that hasn't happened. But those can be very complicated. The one with [the other woman] that started getting to the point where she became less interested in me and more interested in him and I became side-lined and it all gets really complicated and I don't understand what's going on, so that's probably something I'm not keen on exploring in future*
	Lack of own knowledge and skills to start new relationship	1366-72	*If something happened to [her long term partner] now, if we broke up I wouldn't have the slightest clue how to find a relationship or whether I'd want a relationship, or how to start one, how to sustain it, how to … I have very specific knowledge of how to interact with my partner, I don't have any generalised knowledge about relationships or dating*
		1424-6	*If something does happen in the future I don't know what I'll do. I don't have the experience with relationships but something will come up.*
	Children unlikely	620-1	*I don't know if I want to have children. I don't think I do.*
		1492-7	*I doubt whether I'm going to have children. I don't think I will. It's possible, but I also think that it's possible that Social Services wouldn't be impressed with my housekeeping and child rearing capabilities and might remove any children that I chose to have.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
Theory of mind	Reading fiction to help understand and predict others' perspectives	835-59	*huge amounts of what I know about the world and my techniques that I use for interacting, are probably based on reading huge amounts of fiction, because the fantastic thing about fiction, especially children's fiction is they tell you what's going on in people's minds… And you know when you read a novel that here is another person with another mind just like yours who has their own internal thought processes. So I never had any trouble with the idea that other people are thinking their own things and they are their own people, which is supposed to be a problem people have with ASD… I can't tell you what kind of person I would be and how much I would understand about other people without fiction, because everything about what I see in the world is mediated by my knowledge of what I've read…. in terms of relationships, my understanding of other people probably comes a great deal from what I read. Because they don't tell you face-to-face what they're thinking.*
		886-7	*people are like characters, but obviously they're a lot bigger than characters and a lot more complicated.*
	Conscious effort to logically determine others' perspectives	1243-65	*trying to work out for myself, why don't people like me? What is it about me that they are not appreciating? And, therefore, I wouldn't be very happy if somebody else thought they were better than me. Do they think that I think that I'm better than them and I think I'm too good for them? ... I'm thinking, well, maybe, maybe they do…. although I would like my spellings to be corrected, other people might not like to be reminded that they sometimes spell things incorrectly… No, to them it feels like it's a criticism of them as a person, so I worked out that that doesn't make me popular.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Modesty as difficult concept to grasp	1218-26	*I naturally thought, OK, I'm very intelligent. And I didn't pretend that I didn't think that I was very intelligent. And I didn't understand that to other children with other interests and other things that they're good at, this just comes across as the most unbearable, overweening, overbearing, arrogance. And nobody wants to be friends with the dick who thinks that they're cleverer than anyone else. I didn't think I was better than anyone else, but I thought I was cleverer.*
	Reliance on partner's explicit words to determine his perspective	1430-45	*He tells me he fancies me a lot…. I don't know how he sees me. He thinks that I'm clever and interesting and funny and …[I know that] Because he tells me so. He tells me, "You're much more intelligent than I am. You're so good at Scrabble."… he read it [my story], and he said, "You know, I think you're one of my favourite writers. You write so well." And I thought, that's deeply embarrassing. But at least now, you know, now I know that you think I write well. So he just tells me things very directly.*
Communication difficulties	Desire for literal clarity	428-38	*I don't want people to play games. I would like them to say, "I'm sexually interested in you." That would be nice, you know. Or, "I'm romantically interested in you but I'm not sexually attracted to your physical body type." Or, "I'm interested in being a really good friend. I like your personality, but I don't like women." … Nobody says that… Nobody actually ever says what they mean. It drives me nuts.*
		445-9	*My communication style, I guess, is quite direct. I don't like hinting. I don't like not knowing what's going on. Not knowing what to say. Accidentally saying something that's inappropriate, It's just, it's just a minefield, you know.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Self as non-flirter	158-9	*…flirting. All things I'm terrible at.*
		420-28	*Flirting I've never done. Don't do flirting… I don't essentially know what it is, what it's for, how to do it, anything like that. I can't do it. I don't get it. I don't understand it. I'm not interested.*
		451-54	*I've never flirted, I can't tell you anything about that unfortunately. It's … I can't give you any useful information on my failures or success in flirting because it's not something I've done.*
	Potential inability to recognize flirting social cues	460-4	*Maybe they have and I just haven't noticed. I've kind of spent my life assuming that nobody is sexually attracted to me, because I've never noticed any signals, from anybody. But maybe I'm just not seeing them.*
	Face-to-face communication: exhausting and sensory overload	527-8	*I struggle with social interaction at the best of times, that was just so incredibly stressful.*
		532-6	*over the last year and a bit, the amount of social interactions that I've been having has vastly, vastly increased… It's very, very tricky actually. It's … I get very tired.*
		567-3	*I need a lot of alone time to cope…But he doesn't count. Obviously he's a person but he doesn't count as people in terms of difficulty having to be around people. Having to, erm, perform to a certain extent, and be around people.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Need to monitor nonverbal communication = exhausting	406-9	*try and stop wiggling my fingers about. You're writing down at this point this person's wiggling her fingers.*
		974-8	*I'm gazing off to the distance, I don't like looking at people, especially when I'm talking about embarrassing things… I guess that's quite normal. Normal human behaviour is not to look at someone when you're talking about sex.*
		1159-84	*Looking at your body position, looking at your facial expression, looking at where you're looking with your eyes, and looking at what you're doing with your hands and then thinking about what I'm doing with my hands and whether it's matching you sufficiently, but not enough to make you feel creeped out because I'm doing your exact…. I need to be similar in body position and I need to be doing the right things with my face. I need to be doing the right things with the tone of my voice, the pitch of my voice, the speed of my voice, the texture of my voice, the specific words I'm using, all that kind of crap…. It's exhausting. It's utterly, utterly, utterly exhausting. There isn't time to think properly about what I want to say and the information I want to get across and the information they're trying to get across. Because I'm focusing on holding the right amount of eye contact, but not too much and not for too long, and getting the right inflection in my voice and am I moving my hands enough? Am I gesturing enough? Am I gesturing too much? Am I twiddling my fingers and is that distracting them?*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Written communication preferable	1142-46	*all of my relationships have been online, where you can get to know somebody through text, which is my favourite medium. I love text. It's perfect. It's my native language. Sorry.*
		1190-1200	*Text is one single very focused type of communication…Which comes right in and I can just look at that and I do need to, you know, you still need to tease out the subtext. Tease out ambiguities and all the rest of it. But you're not having to constantly filter out everything else to try and concentrate on what the person actually means, which might not be what they're actually saying because they expect you to get something else from what they're saying, and it drives me bonkers.*
Passivity	Passive during sexual experiences	947	*he wanted to do it, so I thought, well you know, why not?*
		968-70	*He used to like to give me orgasms and actually he still does. It's his thing, he really likes giving me orgasms. It's his thing.*
	Passive role in maintenance of relationship	1381-3	*I'm in a long-term stable relationship; it's something that people congratulate me on as if I've done something to make it happen.*
Conflict	Arguments rare	1407-15	*We don't really massively argue… That happens once every few months. Sometimes it happens in spates. It might happen two or three times in a month.*
	Ignoring arguments	1411-13	*three hours later we're sort of pretending none of it happened and watching Madmen together on the sofa.*

Interview G: Gill			
Superordinate theme:	**Subordinate theme:**	**Line numbers:**	**Quotes from transcript:**
	Own mental ill health as cause of conflict	1109-18	*I was quite unwell. And I did try and leave the house with a knife. I don't know what I was doing. I was mad at the time, proper mad. Erm, so he kind of grabbed me and wrestled the knife off me and I tried to stab him. But it wasn't that I wanted to attack him, it was, it was, I needed to get out of the house, and I needed to have my knife with me and he was standing in the way, so. I don't really remember that time, I was a little bit mad.*
Impact of autism diagnosis	Understanding self via autism diagnosis	75-9	*Part of me was like, yes, this fits. This is great. This explains a lot. Then I thought actually it doesn't explain anything, it's a description, and I fit the descriptors really well, and I found a group of people that actually, Oh, yeah. They're like me and my family.*
		81-2	*This is how I fit into the world, you know. I'm not defective, I'm just autistic.*
		1131-3	*I'm still quite new to the whole ASD diagnosis thing, really to me it makes a lot of sense, the fact that I don't have a big social circle*
	Autism diagnosis as a route to improve own wellbeing by guiding interventions	62-7	*with the increasing sort of focus on women with ASD, I started to think you know, maybe this is something to look into a little bit more. And to think about whether this is going to be help for my mental health team in dealing with erm, my mental health problems, because this could be a massive factor in it*
		89-93	*Now I know what's going on I can look at, I can talk to other people, find out what's worked for them and, use this information to work round what difficulty I have, take advantage of strengths I might have and so I'm kind of feeling fairly positive about it at the moment*

Interview G: Gill

Superordinate theme:	Subordinate theme:	Line numbers:	Quotes from transcript:
Mental health	Own mental ill health	46-7	*I've been involved with mental health services since I was around 14*
		490-6	*I became quite unwell mid-late 2014, I was high, very high, dancing down the middle of the road, singing Madonna songs with my eyes shut, directing the traffic, with my mind high. Crashed into depression, tried to kill myself, ended up in hospital, and I started coming here. So, I've got more social contacts through this place. But this is a mental health drop-in centre*
	Own mental health affecting relationships	125-9	*it [mental health] probably is relevant because I have a mood disorder, so that affects things like relationships and sexual behaviour and interpersonal communication and that sort of thing. Umm, so there are probably aspects of it that are relevant.*
		351-7	*completely monogamous with [long term partner], who's my partner. Me and [long term partner], until last summer, when I had quite a severe hyper-manic shading and demonic episode over summer and autumn 2014, when I got back in touch with this woman and began a sexual relationship with her and also with my boyfriend involved*
	Partners' diagnoses of autism of mental illness	373-9	*she identifies as having an ASD…. She is quite unwell, she has delusions and hallucinations. She hears "God" and sees great amounts of significance in colours and this classic kind of system of beliefs and, I suppose, delusions. It sounds really bad to say it. But she is, she's not well.*
		551-5	*he wasn't very well at the time. This is getting a bit of a theme, isn't it? So and so wasn't very well at the time. I seem to spend most of my time around people with mental health problems. They're great. I like them.*