

An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the lived professional experiences of autistic educational psychologists.

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Abstract

There is a lack of research eliciting the voices of autistic educational psychologists. The present study explored the professional lived experiences of five autistic educational psychologists (EPs). Semi-structured interviews were conducted which were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Personal Construct resources (Ideal Workplace) were used within the interview process to support autistic EPs share their experiences. Although each participant had unique experiences, three Group Experiential themes (GETs) were identified by the researcher: ‘autistic strengths and support needs are inseparable’, ‘adaptations and adjustments, and ‘prejudice, stereotypes, lack of safety, masking’. The findings suggest that autistic educational psychologists are assets to the EP profession especially considering the ‘Double Empathy Problem’ and ‘Triple Empathy Problem’, which suggests that Autistic EPs may play a unique role in supporting Autistic clients and families. Even though Autistic EPs are assets to the profession, they often feel it is risky to disclose their autistic identity widely and therefore environmental changes in the workplace and broader culture of the EP profession would be beneficial so that autistic EPs can feel safer to ask for support, irrespective of whether they disclose their autistic identity. These findings are relevant to educational professionals (including EPs), especially those who are in leadership and management positions, so that autistic EPs can be better understood. Key implications and areas for future research are identified.

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List of acronyms

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder
CAS: Critical Autism Studies
CYP: Children and Young People
BPS: British Psychological Society
DfE: Department for Education
CR: Critical Realism
EPS: Educational Psychology Service
EP: Educational Psychologist
EST: Ecological Systems Theory
GET: Group Experiential Theme
HCPC: Health and Care Professions Council
IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PET: Participant Experiential Theme
PT: Positioning Theory
SENCo: Special Education Needs Co-Ordinator
SEN: Special Educational Needs
SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TEP: Trainee Educational Psychologist
UEA: University of East Anglia
YP: Young Person

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Chapter 1: Introductory Chapter

This chapter will outline the key rationale for the current study. The chapter will aim to contextualise the study within the research field, consider its relevance, purpose and contribution to knowledge and practice; and give an overview of the research approach. The chapter will end by indicating a structure for the rest of the thesis, providing a map of what the reader can expect in each chapter.

1.1 Research Field

This thesis considers the professional lived experiences of autistic educational psychologists, and is broadly situated within the field of equity, diversity and inclusion in the professional workplace (Wang et al., 2024). It is also situated within the field of autism research by prioritising those in the autistic community's interests (that is, by conducting research that focuses not only on autistic individuals across the lifespan (as opposed to only children) but also improving support for autistic individuals across the lifespan (rather than only on causes of autism) (Roche, 2020).

1.2 Context

This research seeks to ask the question: what is the professional lived experience of being autistic while working as an educational psychologist (EP)? This question is simultaneously important and timely. At the time of writing, the UK government policy paper Every Child Achieving and Thriving (Department for Education (DfE), 2026) outlines a programme of reform aimed to support and strengthen inclusive practice in schools. The government has committed to spending £40 million over the next three years to expand the EP and speech and language therapy workforce, acknowledging a national shortage of EPs (Zuccollo et al., 2026). With regards to increasing the EP workforce, it is important to understand not only how to increase the quantity of professionals coming into the field, but also consider issues related to retention. One way to do both is to ensure the profession is accessible and inclusive to professionals with diverse neurotypes. Exploring the experiences of autistic EPs can offer valuable insight into the cultural conditions that shape inclusion in EP practice.

While Every child achieving and thriving (Department for Education (DfE), 2026) seeks to foreground inclusion for children and young people, it also raises questions about the inclusivity of the broader education system, including accessible support for parents, and an inclusive workplace culture for professionals and practitioners who deliver these reforms. This research draws on systemic theories to understand and situate the autistic psychologists lived experiences situated within multiple

systems, such as the immediate workspace but also the broader cultural norms and values in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006).

Additionally, the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015) states EPs work with children and young people from 0-25, reflecting an understanding that inclusion extends beyond compulsory schooling and on into adulthood. It can therefore be argued that meaningful progress when it comes to inclusion requires a more holistic perspective, encompassing pupils, their parents and adults who work within educational systems. Therefore, with the backdrop of current policy reforms, this is a critical moment to consider inclusion within the EP profession and understand how it might better support and include autistic practitioners. In summary, developing genuinely inclusive educational systems can be said to need a broader approach that critically examines the inclusivity of the professional environments in which educational practitioners operate, and one that challenges dominant norms within the field of education.

1.3 Purpose and significance

The purpose of this study is to foreground the lived experiences of autistic educational psychologists to inform inclusive practice within the field of education. This will hopefully lead to managers and colleagues understanding, with more depth, about the professional lived experiences of their autistic colleagues. This study also seeks to identify how autistic EPs can be more effectively supported within the profession, say for example increasing the felt safety of autistic EPs in their teams and in their supervisory spaces (group and individual). Although this research does not come up with a framework to support neuroinclusive supervision, this research provides an appropriate backdrop in which to do this (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). Future research can consider how the relational process of supervision can be adapted to support autistic individuals who give and receive supervision as part of their role as an EP, either during TEP supervision, or across their career as an EP (Virji, 2024). Future research such as this may be transferrable to when EPs (autistic or non-autistic) are giving supervision to other professionals in schools (again, who may be autistic or non-autistic) (Lawrence, 2020; Talking Heads Supervision, 2026).

This research also contributes to the growing literature on triple empathy theory (Josefson, 2025; Shaw et al., 2024). Building on Milton's double empathy theory (Milton et al., 2022; Milton, 2012b), which describes mutual misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals, triple empathy theory includes an important next step: power imbalances between professionals and clients can deepen and compound this misunderstanding, or mis-attunement. Therefore, these findings emphasise the importance of increasing neurodiversity within the EP profession to foster mutual learning and reduce power differentials in practice.

1.4 Research approach

This research utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022). IPA is a well-established qualitative method drawing on theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. IPA allowed the researcher to focus on exploring personal accounts of lived experiences, and the meanings that the participants constructed about those experiences. By using semi-structured interviews to understand their lived experience, the researcher also focused on utilising personal construct psychology to investigate the participant's constructions of their role in relation to their workplace environment (Moran, 2001). This was chosen to gain depth of insight into their experiences and to foreground their internalised maps of their own experiences (also known as constructs). Within this approach, the researcher's active role in interpreting the data is explicitly acknowledged. This creates an additional layer of understanding: the researcher makes sense of the participant, who is also making sense of their own experiences (referred to as double hermeneutic). Rather than undermining the research, this is a fundamental and valued aspect of IPA. However, reflexive strategies are still necessary to bracket the researcher's preconceptions and minimise their influence on the analysis. One way to do this is to use direct quotations from the participant's when analysing the data, not straying too far away from their choice of words while also positioning the quotes in relation to the broader context of their interview transcript (Nizza et al., 2021). The IPA approach is deemed highly appropriate when considering the lived experiences of autistic educational psychologists as indicated by the growing research base that uses IPA in understanding the lived experiences of autistic individuals (Howard et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2025; O'Neill & Kenny, 2023).

1.5 Thesis roadmap

This thesis is divided into four key chapters: 1) an overarching summary introduction; 2) a review of the literature; 3) an empirical chapter; and 4) a critically reflective account. The first chapter has aimed to contextualise the thesis. The second chapter will introduce key terminology used in the research, such as 'professional' and 'autism' while also situating the reader within the overall research about autism generally. After this it hones in on the narrative review of research about the broad field of professional research about autism with part two providing an increasingly narrow focus on autistic professionals in the caring and helping professions including counselling, teaching and medics. Thirdly, the empirical chapter presents a qualitative study which used semi-structured interviews and personal construct psychology to explore the views and experiences of five autistic educational psychologists (EPs). Following analysis of the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the empirical chapter discusses the findings in relation to broader literature and considers implications for practice and future research. Finally, the reflective chapter provides a critical account of the research journey, with a particular focus on the process of designing, conducting, and analysing the current study. The reflective chapter also explores plans for dissemination.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

A literature review aims to give a summary of current understandings, while also highlighting what has been achieved already in a particular knowledge area (Grant & Booth, 2009). This supports the researcher to identify relevant theories, methods and gaps when it comes to existing research and literature. There are various established methodologies for conducting a doctoral literature review which include (but are not limited to) narrative and systematic reviews, and each offer a distinct approach to reviewing and synthesising existing research in an identified area. The systematic review attempts to give an unbiased appraisal of relevant literature using a reproducible and systematic search method and criteria (Collins, 2005). This tends to be used when there is plenty of literature, and therefore there is the need to have a narrow focus (Higgins, 2024). Although the aim of a systematic review may reduce the bias nature of the review, which can be seen as a strength for some research aims, it may offer too narrow a focus that is not necessarily a strength when a fuller scope is needed. A narrative review, conversely, is a comprehensive review that does not necessarily use or reveal a systematic search criteria (Collins, 2005) and may be more suitable when the aim of the review is broad and exploratory (Gomez-Bernal et al., 2019). It was clear from initial scoping searches that there was a very limited research base examining the experiences of autistic professionals and none exploring the experiences of autistic educational psychologists, so a broader scope was prioritised, and a narrative approach was selected.

2.1.1 Literature search strategy

Since a narrative review of the literature was chosen, this review will not give full detail of the search strategy and studies included. The library search database was used (EBSCO) and the terms ‘autistic’ and ‘professional’ as well as ‘autistic’ and ‘psychologist’ were inserted into the advanced search feature in the title of the literature. Since this tended to yield results about professionals working with autistic individuals, as opposed to autistic professionals, careful sifting for relevance was necessary. It was decided that, instead, using full phrases such as: ‘autistic professional’ ‘autistic doctor’ ‘autistic teacher’ to appear in the abstract allowed for more relevant research to be available. The abovementioned journey towards gaining useful and relevant research from the results chimes with literature that suggests that it has only recently been recognised that some professionals themselves might be autistic (Doherty et al., 2024). Furthermore, the database search revealed a vast amount of research about autism focusing on children rather than autistic individuals who are in the full array of age groups, demographics - including autistic people employed as professionals too (Amanullah et al., 2020). A ‘snowballing technique’ which involves identifying articles from reference lists was also

used to identify relevant articles (Naderifar et al., 2017). Grey literature (such as unpublished doctoral theses) was used too, since they are assumed to be reviewed by external examiners and there was a recognition that they are helpful when exploring topics not widely researched (Hartling et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Structure of review

The review starts by outlining the terminology. A narrative review of the existing research evidence relating to the lived experiences of autistic individuals in professional work is provided. The review is organised into two sections, the first section is concerned generally with research about autism and employment, considering adaptations at work, hiring practices, and strengths that autistic individuals bring to the workplace. The second section is organised by specific professions and focuses on autistic software engineers; performing arts professionals; clinicians in health care settings; medical students and professionals; psychiatrists; speech and language therapists; speech and language pathologists; counsellors; school staff; clinical psychologists and educational psychologists.

2.2 Terminology

2.2.1 Profession/ professional

The terms profession and professional may mean different things in different contexts (e.g. across time and across the globe), so it is important to consider different conceptualisations of the term ‘professional’ as well as outline the accepted meaning in this study. Early theories around professionalism discuss what is meant by professional as opposed to amateur, recognising the skills and therefore payment for doing what others might do for free (Brint & Ilhan, 2022; Evetts et al., 2006). Other conceptualisations of the term convey a more ‘honorific’ sense of professionals being people who have a lifelong calling (rather than ‘simply’ a job); Moline refers to physicians, attorneys and members of the clergy as such professionals (Moline, 1986). Trait theorists have argued that professions share characteristics that make them distinctive in relation to other occupations such as high levels of formal education; work that requires non-routine expertise and judgement; significant levels of autonomy at work because of the expertise; codes of ethics and status in society as a result of these traits (Saks, 2021). Brint and Ilhan suggested the opposite and argue that the term is best understood as a constructed or mythical concept to gain and maintain status in society through seeking protection via educational and licensing requirements (Brint & Ilhan, 2022).

Brint describes three conceptualisations of professionalism; the neo-classical thesis; the divergence thesis and the hybridization thesis (Brint & Ilhan, 2022). The neo-classical thesis represents a traditional understanding of professionals, where professionals ought to maintain ‘arm’s length’ from bureaucratic management and profit seeking corporate interests; the success of a profession is measured by the social function that it performs, e.g. providing health, justice or

knowledge (rather than monetary gain) (Brint & Ilhan, 2022; Philip, 1972). The second, divergence thesis, argues that the professional world has split into two tiers (expert professionalism and social trustee professionalism). It argues that expert professionals are mainly found in the private sector (engineering; accounting and corporate law) and that these professionals prioritize service to their organizations and are comfortable with market logic and managerial controls. Social-trustee professionals are found in public and non-profit sectors (e.g. social work; education; the arts) and these professionals remain at arm's length from business and emphasise servicing social purposes (Brint & Ilhan, 2022). Finally, the hybridization thesis supports a newer construction bringing together traditional professional ethics with specialised expertise while actively embracing managerial and entrepreneurial objectives (Mirko, 2015).

Given the many conceptions of professionalism, it is important to remain attentive to this diversity, and the present literature review aims to explore autistic individuals' experiences when occupying professional roles. It could be argued that educational psychologists are a hybrid construction as they hold social trustee professional status while also increasingly working within traded models of service delivery (Lee & Woods, 2017). A critical approach highlights how dominant constructions of professionalism are embedded within capitalist and normative understandings of workplace cultures. The present review and subsequent empirical chapter aim to be critical of such definitions, emphasising the importance of exploring autistic individuals' experiences of occupying professional roles and attending to how expectations of professionalism may function to reproduce and enforce standards of normality (Chapman, 2023).

2.2.2 Autism

There are multiple ways of considering autism. While it is generally agreed that autism is a neuro-cognitive difference that is developmental in nature and can lead to divergent (from the majority norm) cognitive and social processing (Chapple et al., 2022), the term has changed over time (Asperger, 1991; Chawner, 2022; Kanner, 1943; Manouilenko & Bejerot, 2015; Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2022; Waltz, 2022) and cross culturally (Bruno et al., 2025). Current clinical understandings of autism derive from western populations; however, definitions and understandings of autism vary across different cultural groups (Tupou et al., 2021).

Tied into the cultural and politicised nature of Autism, there are a variety of 'lenses' or 'models' by which to understand Autism, which in turn has affected (and is affected by) the research that is funded, prioritised and undertaken; by whom; and with what methodologies. The medical model of disability positions Autism as difficulties with social communication and repetitive behaviours and restricted interests (Murray et al., 2005). As such, the medical model categorises Autism as something to be 'cured' or 'fixed'. This is the dominant model and has been the driving force of much research into the causes and 'treatments' for autism (Chapple et al., 2022). However,

this model is critiqued for implying that autistic individuals need treatment. It is also reductionist as there are a variety of other lenses to understand and see autism through, (e.g. the neurodiversity movement; and the social model of disability). Other lenses such as the neurodiversity movement would advocate for altogether different research priorities, such as understanding the lived experiences of autism, as well as the strengths of autistic people and in gathering insight from the autistic community themselves about the practical support they may need (Rosqvist et al., 2023; Chawner, 2022; Oliver, 1996; Rosqvist et al., 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2022).

The neurodiversity movement (pioneered by autistic activists) challenges the conception of autism as a medical syndrome defined by functional deficits, and instead as a variation, within a diversity, of minds and ways of being (Chawner & Owen, 2022). The neurodiversity movement positions autism as a combination of disability, difference and identity (Rosqvist, 2020). It posits that various types of human minds and ways of being are considered important for the survival of human species (Singer, 1991). The Social model of disability is concerned with how restrictions are imposed upon autistic people from institutional discrimination; inaccessible buildings; segregated education and exclusionary work arrangements (Oliver, 1996). The social model advocates that these barriers are removed (Rosqvist, 2020). However, some authors critique the social model of disability, positing that it may deny the challenges faced by disabled (including autistic) individuals irrespective of how well they are supported by the environment (Chapman, 2022). Alternatively, a value-neutral model is an alternative that can help overcome the above-mentioned problems associated with the social model (Barnes, 2016). Barnes (2016) rejects the distinction between impairment and disability, saying that the two are intertwined; that disability is socially constructed to an extent, and that whether you are disabled is part determined by what your body is objectively like.

The term autism and its ontological status has been scrutinised with shifts in thinking towards the double empathy problem, suggesting that there is a double communication barrier between neurotypical individuals and neurodivergent individuals, where it is recognised that each are not seeing the other's perspective (Milton, 2012). This counters the previously held theory of mind framework positing that it is autistic individuals who lack empathy or have delayed development of empathy (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). The double empathy problem challenges the idea that autistic individuals should adapt to neurotypical norms, instead emphasising that both autistic and non-autistic people share a responsibility for fostering mutual understanding and creating a more inclusive environment for all neurotypes. (Milton et al., 2022; Milton, 2012).

Adding to the nuance, the term autism has become politicised (National Autistic Society, 2025). This was recently demonstrated when Donald Trump used the phrase 'horror show' to discuss the rising statistics of individuals identified as Autistic in America. This narrative put forward by a highly influential and powerful leader is challenged as harmful (National Autistic Society, 2025). Trump's statements are perhaps particularly worrying when reflecting on the history of eugenics in

relation to autism; Hans Asperger's complicity with the Nazi regime led to the removal of 'Asperger Syndrome' from the DSM-5 in 2013 and the ICD11 in 2019 (Czech, 2018).

2.3 Research about autism

The amount of published research about autism is growing (Botha & Cage, 2022). Between 2005 and 2014, Sweileh et al., (2016) found 18490 studies investigating the topic. The research that most often receives funding is on scientific/ positivistic topics such as brain, behaviour, genetics and causes (Pellicano et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2009). However, these are not the research priorities of those in the autism community; Roche, (2020) conducted a systematic review of studies to investigate the priorities for autism research from key stakeholders within the autistic community. Their research priorities include those that support real-world changes in the lives of autistic individuals (Roche et al., 2020); post-diagnostic support; mental and physical health; employment; improving public understanding of autism; lifespan and wellbeing research on all ages of individuals including adults and the elderly as opposed to only children and young people (Amanullah et al., 2020). However, research about autism often ignores the wellbeing of individuals throughout the lifespan and has a rare focus on adults or the elderly (Giedd & Rapoport, 2010; Wallace & Rogers, 2010). Furthermore, when research is about autistic adults, often participants are family members rather than autistic individuals themselves (Roche, 2020). This is despite it being argued that Autistic individuals are best equipped to define their experience (Yergeau, 2018a). Some have also problematised the historic neurotypical dominance when it comes to academic knowledge production by questioning boundaries between the predominant neurotypes and 'others' (Rosqvist, 2020).

2.3.2 Literature Review part one

2.3.3 Research about autism and employment

A growing area within the field of autism research centres on autistic adults in employment and their experiences of work. This is aligned with the research priorities of the autistic community (Roche, 2020) and is arguably an important area for research given that research by Davies et al. (2023) showed underemployment is common in the autistic population (Davies et al., 2023). 225 autistic adults and 64 non-autistic neurodivergent adults and 88 neurotypical adults were asked to share their experiences via an online interview. Although all groups identified frustration with hiring processes focusing on social skills and a desire for more clarity; unique barriers for autistic individuals were in the pressure they felt to mask their autistic traits due to fear about stigma and discrimination. Therefore, considering the experiences of autistic individuals who are professionals is important. By learning from their experiences, including their strengths and challenges, both as individual employees and with a more systemic view (e.g. to understand the workplace more generally through an autistic lens) then the research priorities of the autistic community can be furthered.

2.3.4 Adaptations at work

The Equality Act, (2010) seeks to protect autistic people from discrimination in the workplace. Under the Act, autistic individuals have the right to reasonable adjustments to be made for them. Some research has focused on reviewing evidence and has therefore considered what makes employment successful for autistic individuals (e.g. the environmental adaptations). For example, Hendricks, (2010) reviewed evidence related to employment for individuals with Autism, and found self-reported high stress and anxiety in the workplace, often related to the environment being over-stimulating and leading to sensory-processing difficulties. The review highlighted that successful employment was more likely when the time was taken to match unique skills of individuals with the job at hand. Other elements that made for success was when employers and co-workers collaborated to provide a supportive environment. Some research included in the review suggested a range of interventions to support the autistic worker including behavioural modification or picture charts, errorless learning or modelling and giving step-by-step instructions. However, behaviour modification interventions are highly controversial, potentially harmful and abusive to autistic individuals. Some argue that they are still useful as more recent interventions only include rewards rather than punishments and are helpful for autistic individuals to reduce anxiety (Leaf et al., 2022).

Other research has considered how autistic employees can be supported to thrive at work. Raymaker et al., (2023) conducted a piece of research into autistic adults who were employed, resided in the U.S, and had a diagnosis of autism by a professional. Participants were recruited via social media, word of mouth and professional and community connections. There was also media attention in the Portland and Oregon area which increased the responses from that region. 45 Autistic employees and 11 supervisors took part in interviews via a range of modes either email, telephone, video or in person to maximise the number of participants who could take part. The researchers asked the autistic employees a range of questions about their career timeline: successes; difficulties; things that helped; and whether autism had impacted their experiences at work in any way. They were then asked about what successful employment means to them and what services and supports they wished were available to them. For the supervisors, the same sorts of questions were asked but this time the questions were related to employing an autistic individual. Researchers used a thematic analysis to ascertain key themes. One theme was the mental health challenges related to sensory, and social and communication differences associated with autism, but also co-occurring mental health conditions from histories of bullying and abuse at work. This theme was replicated by supervisors who emphasised the need for trauma-informed approaches and mental health support for autistic employees. Another theme was how their lived experience as an autistic person made them better at their job or love their job more. For example, their special interests may help them enjoy their work more if they have been employed in an area that they are interested in or passionate about. Alternatively, some perceived that their lived experience of being autistic may have helped them

attune to others they worked with. An example of this is that one employee who worked in the field of education spoke about how they are good at building rapport with a hard-to-reach child that other staff members had struggled to support. Autistic participants said that workplace cultures that allowed them to be openly autistic were key to their success. Supervisors added that they advocated being creative with hiring and job matching to fit the unique strengths and passions of the individuals. They also advocated accommodating autistic differences; providing mentorship that is authentic and being direct about feedback and expectations. This research has increased validity as both the individuals and supervisors are reporting, and there seems to be agreement among their responses, suggesting strong inter-rater reliability. However, the sample size is relatively small and in a specific area of America. However, the criticism about the small sample represents a positivist viewpoint, where the reliability, replicability and generalisability of data in research is esteemed, perhaps at the expense of gaining rich and in-depth details of participants' experiences. Contrastingly, an interpretivist perspective places greater value on developing an exploration of participants' experiences. Therefore, the research can be understood as a strong piece of qualitative research when evaluated from an interpretivist standpoint rather than a positivist position.

Another piece of research considered enablers for success at work for both autistic and non-autistic individuals (Hayward et al., 2019). They surveyed 46 autistic adults and 32 non-autistic adults and asked them questions about things that help them sustain work and employment. A thematic analysis was used to draw out themes followed by a quantitative analysis to determine if themes were more, or less, likely to be reported by the individuals with autism. Results showed that autistic individuals were more likely to describe the following things that enabled them to succeed in their work; harmonious working relationships with colleagues; the physical space being supportive to their sensory needs; and having limited contact with others. Although the qualitative elements of the research provide interesting examples, the quantitative differences between the two groups may have been skewed by the small sample sizes. This critique aligns with a positivist position however, which centres on generalisability of the sample. An interpretivist positionality can see the strengths in the piece of research as it showcases the experiences and ideas of autistic and non-autistic adults, gaining a rich depth of information about how the workplace and employment is perceived by adults of differing neurotypes.

Khalifa et al., (2020) explored workplace accommodation for autistic adults (Khalifa et al., 2020). A scoping review of peer-reviewed articles that were published between January 1987 and March 2018 was undertaken by three independent reviewers. Selected studies were included if they had autistic participants and described support for autistic workers. 25 studies met the criteria, and each study was categorised into an area of the World Health Organisation (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (these are (1) natural environment; (2) products and technology; (3) support and relationships; (4) attitudes; (5) services, systems, and policies). Most of the studies depicted interventions that support employment and relationships, including job

coaching using a variety of strategies, and the potential of technology to enhance working environments. Reducing noise and supporting co-workers and employers also contributed to positive work environments for autistic workers. This research considered the results of many studies investigating workplace adaptations and can be considered to shed a light on the existing good practice in workplace adaptations.

Ohl et al., (2017) aimed to predict the status of autistic individuals being employed. They used a cross-sectional study by distributing an online survey to examine the employment characteristics and histories of employed and unemployed adults and the contributing factors. 254 adults with autism participated in the study and 61.42% were employed while 38.58% were unemployed. Participants who disclosed their ASD diagnosis to their employer were more than three times likely to be employed than those who did not disclose, with the researchers suggesting that disability disclosure may contribute to employment status (Ohl et al., 2017). However, as this is a correlational piece of research, with many possible extraneous variables, causality such as this cannot be assumed. For example, being able to disclose disability may indicate a more inclusive workplace in the first place. Despite this, a huge strength of the research is the relatively large sample size of 264 autistic adults.

Another study saw that earlier diagnosis and disclosure of diagnosis was related to successful self-esteem at work as well as lower levels of discrimination. Johnson & Joshi (2016) sought to understand the impact of diagnoses for those in employment. There were two studies, the first included in-depth interviews with 30 adults to understand how individuals respond to a diagnosis. An inductive analysis was used as there was no guiding theory for this and a phenomenological analysis was used to construct themes. It was shown that the event of being diagnosed had some positive elements and some really difficult elements to it with regard to work, influenced by factors such as the age at which the diagnosis was made, as well as some work specific elements such as disclosing or not disclosing their diagnosis at work; policies to support them at the organisational level and the social demands of the job. The second phase of the research used findings from the first study to explore hypotheses by conducting a survey from autistic workers. Compared with individuals diagnosed later in life, individuals who were diagnosed at an earlier age experienced greater organization-based self-esteem and lower perceived discrimination when they disclosed their disability, worked in jobs that placed lower social demands on them, or were employed in organizations that offered policies to support autistic workers (Johnson & Joshi, 2016). However, again this is a correlational finding so cause and effect cannot be inferred. Despite this criticism, which represents a positivist evaluation the research highlights the experiences of 30 adults via in-depth interviews and construction of themes and therefore, from an interpretivist standpoint, this research can be seen to contribute to an important and under-developed knowledge base about the experiences of autistic adults in employment and the links with self-identification and diagnosis.

Walkowiak (2021) considered the digital transformation (including Artificial Intelligence) and whether this can be harnessed to promote inclusion of all neurotypes in the workplace. An exploratory IPA study was used to understand the experiences of those in the Information and Technology field who were also leaders in neurodiversity initiatives in their institution. 16 participants were interviewed (note, participants were not autistic, they were working with or leading neurodiversity initiatives in their workplaces). The results of the analysis suggested that Autistic workers offer a wide range of skills which are in high demand in IT roles as part of the digital transformation. However, they found that some autistic workers are at risk of their jobs being taken by AI (known as automation). The researchers also investigated the use of technology to reduce and remove stigma when it comes to neurodivergent employees and hiring processes, including using digital technology to support training employers on neurodiversity inclusion as well as harnessing technology to support developing an ergonomic and supportive environment for autistic people to work, for example using headsets that adapt the environment easily for neurodiverse individuals who may have sensory processing difficulties in the work environment. However, this piece of research focused not on the views of autistic individuals at work, but instead on people who see themselves as ‘experts’ in leading neurodiversity initiatives at work. This may cause the research to be irrelevant as the data that has been captured is not a valid depiction of the use of technology to aid, and support, inclusion of autistic individuals from their perspective. From a Marxist perspective, this research may be seen as undermining the neurodiversity movement by framing autistic differences as economic assets, ultimately benefiting neurotypical interests rather than the autistic community (Chapman, 2023).

2.3.5 Barriers for autistic individuals at work

Considering the barriers to autistic individuals gaining and maintaining employment is important (The Equality Act, 2010). Some research has looked at potential barriers to being employed for autistic individuals. In a study exploring barriers for autistic individuals at work, 66 autistic employees were surveyed online, and barriers included a variety of elements including communication differences. The individuals reported using a variety of strategies and resources to help themselves (Lorenz et al., 2016). This research foregrounds voices of autistic employees and highlights the barriers and bridges to employment.

2.3.6 Economic benefits of employing autistic individuals

A systematic review conducted by Jacob et al., (2015) sought to understand what the costs and benefits of employing autistic adults may be. By searching 8 databases, the researchers reviewed the literature in the field related to their search criteria and found that enhancing opportunities for autistic adults to join the workforce is beneficial from both an inclusivity standpoint and an economic

standpoint (Jacob et al., 2015). There were only three studies that met the inclusion criteria for the review, and these were from UK, USA and Sweden, suggesting a limited sample population lacking representation. Viewed through the lens of Marxism, this study can be understood as short sighted in its endeavour to be neuro-affirmative or neuro-inclusive since it focuses on the economic benefits rather than focusing on holistic autistic community advocacy and support (Chapman, 2023).

2.3.7 Strengths of autistic individuals

Some research has investigated the strengths that autistic individuals may bring to employment. Cope & Remington, (2022) asked 66 autistic participants to complete an online questionnaire that asked about their views about work related strengths. A thematic analysis was used to identify common themes across the participants' experiences and areas where they may have an advantage over nonautistic colleagues. Common experiences were that autistic individuals perceived some advantages such as increased creativity, focus and memory; increased personal qualities such as honesty and commitment; and being able to offer a unique perspective. This piece of research was mostly conducted with females who worked in education so the views expressed may not be generalisable to all autistic people. The criticism about the lack of generalisability reflects a positivist assumption about research. The research has some key strengths in how it specifically foregrounded the strengths that autistic individuals themselves see in their own work. This research therefore contributes towards understanding a more holistic picture of autism by focusing not only on the challenges but also the strengths of the work that they themselves identify. This research can be said to be an asset to the research area as it not only contributes to a shift away from deficit-based research but also puts autistic individual's insights at the forefront.

Praslova et al., (2023) commented about the need for caution regarding 'type casting' autistic individuals into certain careers (Praslova et al., 2023). They wrote a commentary about the problems with typecasting or identifying 'environmental niches' (in other words, employment best suited to autistic individuals). This is because this line of thinking does not reflect the complexity of neurodivergence and implies ableism since it limits the sorts of jobs that those in the neurodivergent community can gain, as well as assuming all autistic people have similar vocational interests and strengths. The writers advocate that researchers could instead investigate industries where there are effective policies already in place, where work cultures contribute to a more inclusive environment (for example, they may use work samples instead of interviews or have flexible working environments, considering their sensory differences). Therefore, they propose that research could examine best practice and offer opportunities to promote the inclusion of neurodivergent employees across industries. They also recommend 'job crafting' which advocates for the participation of neurodivergent employees to shape the relational, task and cognitive components of their jobs to maximise the fit. This is arguably crucial for all employees and may be especially so for some

neurodiverse individuals who may have ‘spiky’ profiles characterised by strong areas as well as real difficulties in other areas when it comes to their employment. Furthermore, Praslova et al. (2023) recommends support in developing and advancing neurodivergent employees in all areas and encourages them in becoming leaders within their field. Although this is a commentary rather than a piece of research, it is credible and well-researched since it includes and references up to date research. It also offers reasonable and logical alternatives as a way forward, so is therefore pragmatic, meaning it is important to review in the literature.

2.3.8 Hiring practices

Other research by Davies et al., (2023) considered access to employment by exploring hiring processes. Davies et al., (2023) compared autistic and non-autistic experiences of hiring processes in the UK by collecting qualitative and quantitative data from 225 autistic adults, 64 non-autistic but neurodivergent adults and 88 neurotypical adults. There were some similarities including a shared frustration with the focus on social skills; a perceived need for more flexible hiring processes; a desire for more clarity; and the importance of the environment. Autistic individuals also spoke about the perceived pressure to mask autistic traits to succeed, as well as concerns about stigma and discrimination. Although this is a relatively large sample of participants, the researchers acknowledge that their sample may not be representative since most of the sample were educated and white. This is important given that those in minority ethnic groups often face unique barriers to employment (Shore & Forrester 2021). Moreover, there is an inter-connected element of intersectionality whereby individuals experience compounding disadvantages due to being autistic and from a minority ethnic group as well as any other minority group that that individual may belong to (Doyle et al., 2022). Doyle et al., (2022) distributed an online survey for 576 autistic people. Researchers analysed whether their identities and backgrounds made it more or less likely that they were in work. Of the 387 employed people within this group, they were asked about their experiences at work. Researchers compared their experiences by identity and background to see whether these made a positive or negative difference to them being employed. It was found that White Autistic people living in western countries such as the United States and Europe were more likely to have jobs. They were also more likely to have jobs specifically designed for Autistic people. Researchers found that women, non-binary, and transgender autistic people felt less included at work. Researchers also found that feeling that someone cares is more important than any adjustments to work scheduling (such as flexible working).

2.3.9 Managers’ and peers’ knowledge of autism

Vincent et al., (2024) aimed to understand how knowledgeable individuals are about autism and hiring attitudes in the UK (Vincent et al., 2024). 101 professionals in the UK responded to a survey that included the Autism Stigma & Knowledge Questionnaire (ASK-Q). These consisted of open and

closed questions. Nine respondents took part in further semi-structured interviews. The results of the research suggested that adequate knowledge about autism is associated with reduced stigma. However, in the qualitative analysis, researchers noted knowledge gaps among those interviewed. For example, organisations viewed hiring autistic individuals as ‘risks’, displaying prejudicial stigma. Another theme was concerned with enabling change, and there were four identified sub-themes: commitment to cultural change; supporting positive disclosure; individualised workplace adjustments; and aligning autistic strengths with the role. This research allowed for a focus on gathering the views and understandings about autism within the workplace, from the perspective of 101 professionals and then nine further detailed semi-structured interviews. However, this research did not foreground the views and experiences of autistic individuals themselves, which means that there is a weakness in that there is some level of epistemic injustice with this research.

2.3.10 Employment interventions and outcome research

Fong et al. (2021) focused on reviewing the literature on the effectiveness of employment interventions in securing and maintaining employment for autistic individuals. Fong et al., (2021) conducted a systematic review to identify relevant studies from various databases. They selected three studies that fit their selection criteria: each study had to be a randomized controlled trial, or a quasi-experimental design; have a measurable employment outcome and have a population of individuals with ASD. Since only three studies were included, a narrative analysis was chosen. The review found that all three studies suggested work-focused programmes can have positive impacts on the employment outcomes for autistic individuals. This research is only on a small sample due to the strict and specific selection criteria, however this can be seen to offer an in-depth consideration of the research that is in this field. Furthermore, the language of deficit and pathology is used throughout the review analyses, indicating that the researchers’ positionality may be to view autism through the lens of a medical model with its assumptions that autistic individuals need to have ‘interventions’ or ‘treatments’ to succeed at work. This outlook may have informed their choice of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) as this would show whether a treatment or control would have different outcomes. While this is not wrong to have held this view, it is worth holding in mind when considering their aims and outcomes of the research, especially when considering the multiple lenses which can be used to understand autism.

Black et al., (2020) conducted a study as part of an International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) policy brief which set out to improve employment outcomes for autistic individuals. They used a survey of 687 individuals in Sweden, USA and Australia. Among those surveyed, there were 246 autistic individuals. The other participants in the sample included the family members of the autistic individuals (n=233), and their employers (n=35). Clinicians and Service providers working with the autistic individuals made up the rest (n=123). Therefore, this study used a multiple informant design. The results showed that perceptions of facilitators and barriers to employment differed

significantly across both key stakeholder groups and countries. A good job match and a strengths-based approach were important for success across all groups and countries. Key barriers to employment included stigma, lack of understanding about autism, and communication difficulties. From a positivist lens, the study has strengths in its use of a large sample, and in addition, the multiple informant design supports validity and inter-rater reliability. Despite the large sample, there is a limitation in that the data was yielded from a survey rather than from an in-depth interview where follow-up questions could be asked, and so there are some key limitations with the research especially when evaluating using an interpretivist lens. However, the sample is ethnocentric (focusing on Sweden, USA and Australia) so the data is not necessarily generalisable to other cultures.

Torquati et al. (2019) looked at how work can support the wellbeing of autistic individuals as well as promote inclusion in employment. Social agricultural projects have been used to give a sense of social community and by working in the outdoors and establishing good relations with the farmer, there have been notable benefits. Torquati et al., (2019) investigated such a project as it was set up for 9 adults with ASD who attended a day centre in Italy. The individuals preferred being indoors in green houses than outdoors picking vegetables. Also, the tasks that autistic individuals were most successful in (measured by higher evaluations/assessments by their supervisors) were the tasks involving the autistic person relating with other people or animals. This research is limited in its generalisability and transferability since it focused only on 9 individuals. However, this criticism assumes a large sample is preferable which fits with a positivist evaluation.

2.3.11 Autistic experiences of work including special interests related to employment; communication preferences at work; and how autistic individuals develop self-awareness at work

A small amount of research has been conducted to understand autistic ways of being related to employment. One piece of research sought to understand autistic special interests with a focus on employment and mental health outcomes (Bross et al., 2022). The researchers defined special interest areas as those characterised by significant depth and breadth of knowledge in a particular topic. 72 autistic adults completed an online survey describing their special interest area engagement, their employment status and their current mental health. The open-ended responses that gathered qualitative data indicated that autistic adults have a variety of special interest areas that are rarely used in their work. Special interest related bullying (i.e. resulting in the individual feeling shame about their special interest, and then trying to mask it as a result) was understandably associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Special interest employment was associated with depression since those who were not currently employed in their special interest area reported higher levels of depression. The researchers concluded that special interest areas enhance the lives of the autistic individuals in the study, and that special interests should be highly valued in society not only to enhance the quality of life of autistic adults but also to contribute to the lives of neurotypical

individuals in broader society. There are limitations with this research since the questionnaire was distributed online so only autistic people with internet access could complete the survey, thereby reducing the effectiveness and generalisability of the findings of this research. Despite this, the open-ended responses allowed in-depth and detailed viewpoints to be captured, providing a platform to understand the nuances in the participant's thoughts and ideas that may not have been captured in a more quantitative piece of research.

Cardon, (2025) focused on communication preferences among autistic people in the workplace. 324 autistic professionals completed a survey, and the results showed autistic workers preferred to work with close and well-known colleagues and reported feeling more confident in these situations, especially when others offered support and encouragement to speak up. Autistic professionals also felt more confident when they were given adequate preparation time to develop their ideas and content. Autistic individuals showed professionals experience high communication apprehension relative to the general population. The more unpredictable a communication situation is, the higher the communication apprehension. This research provided useful insights about the views of over 300 autistic professionals, however it does not seem to have gathered any sort of in depth or detailed viewpoints which can be viewed as a key limitation of the research.

Another piece of research explored self-awareness among autistic employees in Sweden (Rosqvist et al., 2023). Researchers conducted 12 qualitative interviews with four autistic adults and a rich set of reflections came about, showing autistic individuals develop self-awareness by seeking support from others and learning from previous experiences. The researchers used a qualitative content analysis and coded the transcript using a grounded theory approach. The researchers suggested that employers should engage with their employees' journeys of self-awareness as a vital part of understanding and supporting them. This research was strong due to the four participants each bringing rich and detailed unique perspectives. For example, one participant was female and three were males. Additionally. each participant also had different work experiences, such as one was an archivist, one was a manager with customer responsibility, and another worked in the IT sector.

2.3.12 Concluding Literature Review part 1

This section has focused on reviewing the literature about autism and the workplace, and has considered hiring practices, supports, barriers, special interests, managers and colleague's knowledgeability about autism, strengths that autistic individuals bring to the workplace, and the economic benefits of employing autistic individuals. Overall, the research has been evaluated considering the various strengths and limitations and a balanced critique has been given taking into account both a positivist critique and an interpretative one.

2.4 Literature Review part 2

The following part of the literature review is specifically about autistic professionals and their experiences in specific industries. Although the initial aim was to review the literature available about Autistic Educational Psychologists, the lack of research conducted in this area meant that the search had to be broadened to other professional careers. Most of the research is about autistic professionals in helping professions (Graf, 2014) for example doctors, teachers, health care clinicians, however there is also one study on software engineers and one on performing arts professionals; although these occupations may not seem particularly relevant to the broader aims of this research, since they were found in the search strategy it was deemed important to include this as key context showcasing the research that is currently in existence concerning autistic individuals' professional lived experiences.

2.4.1 Software engineers

Some research has been conducted on Autistic software engineers (Morris et al., 2015). Morris et al., (2015) interviewed 10 neurodiverse technology workers to understand the challenges they face as employees in the software engineering industry. Based on the findings from the interviews, the researchers went on to create a survey which they were then able to distribute to 846 engineers at a large software company. 59 neurodivergent colleagues and 781 neurotypical colleagues responded, and the researchers reflected on the differences between the two groups. Various strengths and barriers were identified that impacted the neurodiverse participants including relating to sensory differences, and communication preferences and future implications for employers were given.

2.4.2 Performing arts professionals

One study explored the impact of professional mentoring with autistic performing arts professionals. Buckley et al., (2022) examined whether professional mentoring could have a good effect on the occupational self-efficacy of autistic performing arts professionals. One group received mentoring, and the other was on a waitlist control. 15 autistic mentees and 11 mentors took part, three of whom were also autistic. The programme was perceived to be helpful in terms of supporting the mentee's occupational self-efficacy.

2.4.3 Clinicians in health care settings

Some research has been conducted on autistic clinicians working in health care settings in the UK (Smith et al., 2025). A qualitative study recruited 82 autistic clinical professionals via social media. The questions explored the challenges they faced and reasonable adjustments they required. Using a content analysis, 8 themes were identified including gaining employment; reasonable adjustments; connecting and integrating with other professionals; executive functioning; navigating change;

working environment; working practices and the consequences of autistic clinical professionals. In their discussion, the researcher noted that this research could support autistic clinical professionals which would in turn benefit autistic patients in the light of Shaw et al.'s 'triple empathy problem' which argues that there is a cultural divide between non-autistic clinical professionals and their patients by virtue of the professional's immersion in years of clinical culture and training. The researchers are suggesting there is less of a cultural divide between autistic professionals and autistic patients.

2.4.4 Medical students and professionals

Shaw, et al., (2023a) interviewed 5 autistic medical students and recorded the interviews. They were transcribed and then analysed using IPA. Different themes were seen including autistic profiles and stereotypes; sensory processing and the learning environment; masking; the social world and navigating the system and structures in medicine as a professional and a learner. Participants reported feeling isolated and anxious due to bullying. Most felt they were expected to adapt themselves to appear non-autistic. All participants reported strengths associated with being autistic.

According to McCowan et al., (2022), 1% of general practitioners and 1.1% of psychiatrists identify as being autistic. The authors state that this means around 3000 UK doctors may be autistic, and that this may be more. Their paper highlights a recent publication of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Equality Action Plan 2021 and asks for autistic doctors to be included in this action plan.

Doherty et al., (2021) considered and commented on a peer-support and advocacy group for medical doctors who identify as autistic called Autistic Doctors International (ADI). It was founded in 2019 with 7 members and now has 300 members (according to the study, however, may now have more since the study is from 2021). At the time of the study, over half of the members were based in the UK, and others are in US, Canada, Australia and Europe. Again, at the time of the study, GPs made up around a 1/3 of the membership and psychiatry was the second most common. According to Doherty, (2021) the narrative themes of the peer support group have moved towards successful practice rather than difficulties and challenges. They noted that many have at some stage, experienced some difficulties at work. Most of the difficulties mentioned are not about patient care (since this is usually well structured and predictable to an extent) but instead the challenges they face are around the unstructured and sometimes confusing interactions with colleagues or organisational hierarchy where social conventions of neurotypical norms could bring about misunderstandings. Members are also now beginning to use the platform to gather evidence on autism in doctors, and care for the wider autistic community.

Shaw, et al., (2023b) conducted a cross-sectional study focusing on autistic doctors. 225 participants took part in a survey that was adapted with permission from the Autistic School Staff

Survey, which was developed by three autistic school staff to explore the experiences of autistic school staff in the UK. The survey was a mix of open and closed questions and there were 32 core questions with additional questions being added depending on the answers given by the participants. Although the paper references the original survey by the Autistic School Staff Survey, the published article does not give explicit access to the questions used, meaning it is difficult to understand whether the questions are led the respondents to give a certain answer (for example). A team of five autistic doctors adapted the survey to an international medical context. Of those that participated in the study, 64% had a formal diagnosis of autism. Most were currently working as doctors (82%). 29% had not disclosed being autistic to anyone at work. 46% had requested reasonable adjustments in the workplace but of these, only half had them actioned. Three quarters had considered suicide (77%), one quarter had attempted suicide (24%) and half had engaged in self-harm (49%). 80% reported having worked with another doctor they suspected was autistic, but only 22% reported having worked with another doctor they knew was autistic. Having never worked with a potentially autistic colleague was associated with having considered suicide. Most preferred to be called 'autistic doctors' (64%). Most considered autism to be a difference (83%). Considering autism to be a disorder was associated with preference for the term 'doctors with autism', and with having attempted suicide. The results suggest that having colleagues that are autistic is a benefit to belonging and inclusion and positive mental health if you are autistic too. The research has a strongly medical and mental health lens attached to it perhaps therefore demonstrating the researcher's own lens by which they view autism. A limitation of this research is that the questions are not available to see, therefore it is impossible to understand how much the answers given by the survey respondents are due to closed questions. Additionally, given the sheer number of questions and the self-report nature of the survey, there would have been presumably limited (or no) opportunity for the respondents to ask for clarity on potentially ambiguous questions, therefore diminishing the validity of the research.

In recognising that autistic people have barriers to accessing health care due to health care professionals having negative biases, Bernard et al., (2025) created training for hospital doctors and nurses on the topic of reducing healthcare barriers so that autistic people can be better included (Bernard et al., 2025). The team included two neurodivergent, disabled doctors and two researchers. Meetings were held with hospital education leaders to find out what kinds of training was preferred, and the training was made on guidelines about quality hospital care, supporting autistic people and the experiences of neurodivergent doctors. Three groups of people accessed the training (doctors, junior doctors, and nurses). Most of the post-training survey responses said that the training was relevant and helped increase their confidence in supporting and accepting autistic people. Since the training was devised, and led, by autistic doctors, this action research has increased ecological validity since the training reflected the true experiences of neurodivergent doctors, which may have helped the training be even more engaging. The survey responses, though overwhelmingly positive, may have been subject to response bias, or the please-you effect, which is where participants tend to write answers

that they think are expected (especially since they likely knew that their survey responses were to be read by those delivering the training). This may reduce the validity of the results of the study.

2.4.5 Psychiatrists

McCarron et al., (2021) wished to raise awareness of the existence and value of autistic doctors in psychiatry and to also signpost psychiatrists who are or suspect they might be autistic towards peer support. By considering the increasing number of individuals accessing the ADI (Autistic Doctors International) peer forum, McCarron et al., (2021) highlighted the growing number of autistic psychiatrists, as the researchers used a poll to understand what speciality the doctor was (out of 180 respondents to their poll on the forum, 24 identified themselves as psychiatrists). Although it is unclear the methodology behind the analysis, the authors presumably looked at posts on the forum and aimed to analyse the themes. From this, they state that autistic doctors and psychiatrists are safe and competent clinicians, not ‘doctors in difficulty’. This research highlights the increased number of psychiatrists who are autistic, however, beyond this, the methodology is unclear.

A study conducted by Doherty (2024) explored how autistic psychiatrists recognise autism in themselves and others, and what facilitated or held back this process. Eight senior UK psychiatrists who are autistic participated. Some had formal diagnoses, while others self-identified. Many of the participants began to question their own neurodivergence after their children were identified as autistic, or after working closely with autistic patients. A key barrier was that their training had focused on deficit based and stereotyped presentations. Therefore, the researchers position that moving towards a more neurodiversity affirming approach in medical education and clinical practice may support clinicians and patients (Doherty et al., 2024). This research is on a relatively low number of UK based psychiatrists who may have all trained at different universities and at different times, and therefore their conclusion about training going forward may not be based on valid findings.

2.4.6 Speech and language therapists

Some (not-yet peer reviewed) research has been conducted on autistic speech and language therapists (Gréaux et al., 2023). Researchers interviewed eight autistic SLTs (6 diagnosed; 2 self-identified) practising in the UK and USA, using their preferred mode of communication (e.g. interviews or written responses). The researchers analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis. Results showed a range of themes and revealed that being autistic in a profession oriented towards disability and communication creates a unique set of experiences and practices. Promoting the recruitment, retention, and wellbeing of autistic SLTs requires nuanced understanding from colleagues and managers; specific recommendations included the use of understanding intersectionality, workforce training on neurodiversity, addressing ableism and providing reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

A key limitation of the research is the limited sample of 8 SLTs, and the ethnocentric nature of the sample. Furthermore, the use of both UK and USA participants may have posed problems when comparing the data since the expression and general responsibilities of the role may be different in the UK and the USA.

2.4.7 Speech and language pathologists

Oates and Bean (2023) conducted research focusing on autistic speech and language pathologists (SLPs) (Oates & Bean, 2023). Five female SLPs, each of whom had a formal autism diagnosis or self-identified as autistic, engaged in a one-to-one semi structured conversation and a grounded theory analysis was used. Since the interviews took place on video call (Zoom) and the participants were recruited via social media, geographic location was not a restriction. All participants were from the United States of Canada. Four themes arose from the analysis. In the first, participants described their outlooks on their autistic identities and how these have changed over time. The second theme concerned interpersonal tensions and specifically the conflicts related to communication differences across neurotypes. In the third, participants reflected on the stigma and ableism that they face in their careers, and the concerns they had about disclosing their autistic identity in the workplace. The fourth comprised participants' neurodiversity-affirming approaches to clinical practice with autistic clients. All participants were female or assigned female at birth, and therefore there is a limitation to the transferability of the perspectives given by the five SLPs. Another limitation of the study is that the participants are all from either the US or Canada, creating another ethnocentric sample. Furthermore, the role of the SLP is not one that is globally recognised. Nevertheless, the data collected was rich, qualitative, data that highlighted some key elements to consider when thinking about autistic individuals who work in careers where they are placed in a dual bind: 'being perceived as a poor communicator because of an autism diagnosis who is also considered an expert in improving communication in their role as an SLP' (Oates & Bean, 2023).

2.4.8 Counsellors

Some research has been conducted to understand autistic counsellors' experiences, strategies, challenges, strengths and support needs (Taylor & Sims, 2025). Seven autistic counsellors (either self-identified or diagnosed by a professional) completed semi-structured questionnaires. A thematic analysis identified four themes: the practical differences of working as an autistic counsellor; working with a similar neurotype; understanding and accommodation within the counselling profession; and representation. Participants felt that being autistic brings unique strengths to the counselling process, and it was identified that while they have been trained to work with allistic (non-autistic) clients, they found strength in supporting and being supported by those of a similar neurotype. Participants

challenged the deficit depiction of autism and, subsequently, the lack of recognition, understanding, accommodation and representation of autistic counsellors within the profession. The participants called for a change in training within professional bodies; counselling organisations; workplaces and colleagues in terms of understanding autism and representing autistic counsellors. Since this was a phenomenological piece of research, there are limitations to the validity and reliability of the research, for example the researcher's own positionality may have impacted on the interpretation. However, the researchers aimed to be cognisant of their positionality by being reflexive and aware of their biases in a reflective journal throughout the process, thereby supporting the validity of the research. Further, researchers aimed to use thick descriptions (significant extracts of the participant's response) so that readers can discern whether the overall findings are consistent with the participant's accounts.

2.4.9 Autistic school staff

(StEvens, 2024a) reviewed the literature on the lived experience of autistic teachers and explored the experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings, revealing both the strengths and challenges they encounter. The review highlighted that autistic teachers are more prevalent than previously thought, with many choosing to conceal their autism due to negative stereotypes and discrimination. The researchers spoke about how autistic teachers possess unique strengths, such as divergent thinking, honesty, authenticity, and a heightened ability to empathize with marginalized groups. Also, their perspectives can enhance inclusive education practices, allowing them to identify students' strengths and challenges that other colleagues may overlook. Researchers found some barriers such as negative stereotypes, communication challenges (e.g., engaging in small talk), sensory sensitivities, and social anxieties hindering autistic teachers' success. Many reported feeling compelled to mask their autism to avoid jeopardizing their positions, and they recognised that disclosure does not always guarantee acceptance or support. Furthermore, the impact of disclosure of being autistic was mixed with some teachers experiencing discrimination and mistreatment after revealing their diagnosis, while others found they felt others valued their opportunity to provide expert knowledge about autism, and the ability to mentor autistic students. Another theme was that inclusive school environments are crucial for supporting autistic teachers, enabling them to teach successfully, enhance colleagues' understanding of autism, and mentor autistic students. The review emphasized the importance of including autistic voices in research and practice to address the disconnect between inclusive education theory and real-world implementation. Autistic teachers' lived experiences offer valuable insights into creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students. The review suggests that negative stereotypes and low expectations are the most significant barriers to success for autistic teachers. Researchers concluded that by addressing this negative bias, and fostering a more strengths-based perspective, autistic teachers would be further included. A key

limitation of this review was that the studies included in the review were those written in English and therefore the review is limited due to its ethnocentric bias.

O'Neill & Kenny, (2023) used an IPA research method and conducted four semi-structured interviews with autistic teachers in Ireland. They situated their research within the undergirding theories of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which they felt permitted flexibility to situate the very much shifting paradigms when it comes to conceptualising autism (e.g. considering the neurodiversity paradigm compared to deficit and medicalised models). Researchers noted that the IPA research acknowledges the researcher's self-hood as a valuable tool in and of itself, and for example one of the authors is an autistic teacher-researcher. They posit that her perspective provides a valuable subjectivity, highlighting the greater depth of the analysis and findings because of her 'insider-status'. They also felt that the autistic author reduced epistemic injustice in the production of the findings. Epistemic injustice is a form of systemic discrimination relating to the creation of knowledge and occurs when people from marginalized groups (such as autistic people) are denied capacity as agentic creators of knowledge and are diminished or excluded from the process of creating meaning. Such exclusion creates conditions in which the lived experiences of marginalized people are primarily interpreted by people who do not share their social position (Fricker, 2007). Participants in the research were formally assessed or self-identified as autistic schoolteachers and ranged in ages from 21-65 and worked, or had previously worked, in a school in Ireland. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to present the themes from the findings from the IPA, organised into superordinate and subordinate categories. For example, superordinate themes included: autistic teacher as an individual and autistic teachers and school relationships. Within the first superordinate theme, there were accounts of two subordinate themes 1) 'Monotropism to Me is a Core Feature of Autism' and within this theme, participants discussed how their monotropic way of being and perceiving the world helps them invest in their pupils. One teacher spoke about how they supported an autistic child attend school when they shared in the child's own intense interest in model cars. Another participant drew on monotropic interests to build relationships with autistic individuals, supporting a kind of flow state, supporting them to retreat into an inner world within the busy school environment. Another subordinate theme was 'The Embodied Experiences of Autistic Teachers' and researchers situated this within Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied cognition, and the autistic phenomena of burnout, inertia, meltdown and shutdown, shared by participants in this research. Another theme was 'The Autistic Teacher and School Relationships', which researchers situated in the microsystem of their school. One participant noted that being part of a staff group was positive, since there were some highly empathic people, however even despite this, one participant spoke of their high masking and holding in physical stims. Within the theme, participants also considered their attuned relationships with children with additional needs, especially the emotional attunement and connections with neurodivergent pupils, highlighting the vital role of Autistic teachers in supporting Autistic children and young people. A key limitation of the research is the fact that there are only four participants.

Therefore, although the data was rich and supports a full understanding of those four individuals, the generalisability to other autistic teachers is low.

Wood & Happé, (2023) conducted an online survey in the UK with autistic teachers and other autistic education staff (n = 149). They developed an online survey with a committee of three autistic adults who work in schools. Recruitment was through an autistic-led charity based in the UK. To be included in the study the participants had to be over 18; working, or have worked, in a school in the UK; have a diagnosis of autism (medically or self-diagnosed, or be seeking/ awaiting a diagnosis of autism). It was considered important to include individuals who self-identified and were not formally diagnosed to ensure the inclusion of potentially undiagnosed autistic females (who statistically are more likely to be undiagnosed since autism in females is often undetected). Some of the themes in the analysis included a lack of understanding; sensory impacts; mental health issues; and complexities associated with revealing an autism diagnosis to colleagues at work. These issues can represent significant impediments to either entering or remaining in the school education profession. Positive experiences were also found for example autistic school staff constituted a role model for autistic CYP and to facilitate their educational inclusion. The online survey was open for only four weeks and therefore the sample was limited to those with internet access during that relatively short time.

Wood, (2024) analysed the language of former autistic school staff in the same sample and it was revealed that they had experienced different forms of exclusion and marginalisation when working in schools. Not all participants knew that they were autistic when working in schools. Those who did know, had mixed experiences of telling others they were autistic. Participants felt they had autism-specific strengths they brought to their work, including a non-hierarchical approach to interacting with pupils. Researchers noted that these strengths could be of benefit to pupils at risk of exclusion. Providing autistic-led training was considered essential to improving understanding and support for autistic school staff.

Lawrence (2019) used a single case study of a student teacher named Greg (pseudonym). Both the researcher and Greg co-created a 1-hour unstructured interview. The case study research came about because Greg disclosed that he was autistic to a lecturer after a lecture on Autism. The lecturer asked Greg if he would share his experiences of being an autistic trainee teacher for the purpose of research. A transcript from the interview was given back to Greg to add or change anything and ensure that Greg felt this was a true reflection of his views and experiences, demonstrating neuro-affirming research practice and strengthening the validity of the findings. There were five themes: positivity; the need for joined up practice around autism; the need for autistic pupils to be happy; the issue of time and ways to meet the challenges faced by autistic (trainee) teachers. The researcher is somewhat reflexive, speaking about his lived experience as a parent of an autistic person. Even with such reflexivity, it can limit the objectivity of the research. The key limitation of this research is that the single case study is very limited in terms of the generalisability of Greg's views and experiences.

Davis et al., (2018) used a single participant case study research methodology of an autistic teacher known as CJ. Multiple sources of data were used, such as informal interviews, meeting notes, field notes, memos, academic transcripts, documents, participant observations, direct observations, and course assignments. The research team used CJ's 'Why I want to be a teacher?' essay, autobiography, and other assignments as data sources. Four main themes describe CJ's journey to navigate his programme of study as an English education major. The themes that emerged from the research team were a) influences to become an English teacher, b) field experience issues, c) inconsistent academic performance, and d) post-secondary academic adjustments. The first theme, influences to become an English teacher, describes what swayed CJ to be an English education major. The second theme, field experience issues, describe CJ's challenges and experiences trying to apply and secure a field experience and the research team's concerns with placing him in a school. The third theme, inconsistent academic performance, describes CJ's experiences pursuing his degree in English education. The last theme, postsecondary academic adjustments, describes the collaborative meeting, concerns about CJ's academic performance, the accommodations and adjustments made to support him. Besides the fact that this is a single case study and therefore generalisability is low, the research also has limitations in its use of secondary data, for example data that CJ has given for other purposes (e.g. academic assignments) being used for a different purpose. This has limits on the validity of the research findings as it is being used to draw conclusions about CJ's experiences of being an autistic teacher.

2.4.10 Clinical Psychologists

There are some personal reflections made by autistic clinical psychologists that have been published in the clinical psychology forum, but to the best of the researcher's knowledge there has not yet been any research conducted (Hawker, 2017; Muggleton & Johnston, 2016; Welsh, 2020). The personal reflections offer a range of perspectives about the clinical psychologists professional experiences with a diagnosis of autism.

2.4.11 Educational Psychologists

There is currently limited research concerning the experiences of autistic educational psychologists. A 2024 study used reflexive thematic analysis to consider the experiences of 5 autistic educational psychologists (Lucking, 2024). The research used semi-structured interviews and identified three overarching themes; the threat of disclosure (i.e. that Autistic EPs have to consider the potential benefits of disclosing or identifying themselves as autistic against the risk of stigma, prejudice or misunderstanding such as being perceived as less competent); the benefits and risk of autistic identity (i.e. being autistic can provide strengths, insight, connection with others but also on the other hand

there can be increased judgements from others, misconceptions and pressure; and the implications of effective support and reasonable adjustment (i.e. reducing the need for masking, reducing burnout and enabling autistic EPs to more fully participate in opportunities). The researcher comments that their research focuses on the experiences of five female autistic EPs and therefore it may be beneficial to add to the research base considering also the experiences of males in the EP profession too.

There is also a commentary piece written by a group of autistic educational psychologists (The British Psychological Society, 2022). The piece highlights some of their experiences of stigma and discrimination. Contrastingly, some highlighted their experiences being supported by very understanding colleagues who do not assume incompetence simply because they are autistic. One of the authors said that they are often asked the question of whether the individual would be better off in a career with more limited interaction with people. However, the commentary maintains that, as autistic psychologists, they believe they have something valuable to offer and often their motivation to be a psychologist has stemmed from their lifelong observations of social situations and people to try and work out how other people think and behave. They also make the point that often service users value autistic professionals who they feel might understand them better.

2.4.12 Educational Psychology Profession

The role of the Educational Psychologist is a relatively new one and began when Cyril Burt was appointed as the first Educational Psychologist and his role was in identifying the needs of London school children to support their teachers. In England, the 1870 Education Act implemented compulsory education for all children from ages 5-12. (Leadbetter & Arnold, 2013). The Education Act in 1944 introduced the concept of educational sub-normality and established maladjustment as a handicapping condition. This led to an increase in categorisation, labelling, discrimination and selecting (Leadbetter & Arnold, 2013). This means that there has been a backdrop of medicalised and pathologizing language within the role of Educational Psychology. However, Gilham, (1978) advocated for a new perspective away from the long-standing approaches such as standard intelligence testing, and a move towards children's rights and interactionist perspectives (Gillham, 1978). Topping (1978) suggested that, even though many EPs were beginning to question a medical model of professional practice, the medical premise: *'...remains firmly part of the cognitive map of the teaching profession, and teachers' expectations of psychologists in many areas are still couched in terms of the 'assessment and treatment' of individual children, who, by virtue of needing such attention, must be 'abnormal'* (Topping, 1978). With Topping's remark in mind, even if the profession has moved away from focusing on categorisation and testing using standard cognitive assessments, the teaching profession itself expects psychologists to assess and treat individual children. So, there is an argument that the profession of Educational Psychology has been pre-occupied with categorisation for several reasons especially the ways in which local authorities have utilised EPs. Even when EPs

have wanted to carry out more systemic or proactive work, they have been at times met with resistance when the dominant discourse has been that of a within-child deficit or problem (Topping 1978). It should be said that many EPs disagree with the pathologizing discourse and move towards a more positive and person-centred, systemic stance. However, this is not necessarily always straightforward since other professionals that they work alongside, as well as parents may have different sets of assumptions when it comes to the work of the Educational Psychologist.

Psychology as a career path has limitations when it comes to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, in that there is a high competition and rigorous training requirements which mean that only a small fraction of psychology graduates progress to become registered psychologists (Palmer et al., 2020). Within this select number, certain minority ethnic groups, those from lower socio-economic status backgrounds and those with a disability are less likely to progress in a psychology career than others.

One problem is that people with disabilities; from minority ethnic groups; or from low socio-economic groups may not often see themselves represented in psychology professions, which in turn prevents them from picturing themselves in that career. This may be even more complex and nuanced when it comes to invisible disabilities, since there may be individuals with such disabilities in the workplace, who do not feel able to disclose their disability due to stigma (Hassard et al., 2024). This may be so for autistic individuals, since stigma is still attached to neurodivergence, which makes visibility in professions difficult (Rosqvist et al., 2023) This could be applied to aspiring Educational Psychologists who are autistic, who do not necessarily have the chance to see people in the profession who are autistic for the above nuanced reasons. Therefore, the current research aims to simultaneously highlight and draw attention to autistic educational psychologists, increasing their visibility, while also spotlighting their experiences in order to consider implications to increase the inclusivity of the workplace for autistic EPs.

This section of the literature review has highlighted the limited but growing field of research examining the experiences of autistic professionals. This has focused primarily on autistic professionals in the helping and caring professions and has highlighted a notable gap in the literature regarding autistic educational psychologists.

Chapter 3: Empirical chapter

3.1 Abstract

There is a lack of research eliciting the voices of autistic educational psychologists. The present study explored the lived experiences of 5 autistic educational psychologists. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five autistic educational psychologists with the data generated being analysed

using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Personal construct methods derived from the ideal school and adapted to the ideal workplace were used to support the autistic educational psychologists to share their views. Each participant had unique experiences; however, three Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were found: ‘Autistic Strengths and Needs are inseparable’, ‘Adaptations and Adjustments’, ‘Prejudice, Stigma, Lack of Safety and Masking’. These findings are relevant to all EPs especially those in leadership positions, and those who supervise other professionals since the implications for practice include considering how the needs of autistic professionals can be supported so that they can add their unique value to the profession, fulfilling the potential. Key implications for EP practice are identified.

3.2 Introduction to the broader literature

This section aims to give a precis of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 with the aim of situating the current study within the broader literature base. The aim of this section is to help build the foundation for a strong rationale for the current research. For a detailed review of the literature base, please see Chapter 2.

There is an increasing amount of research focusing on autism, however it is mainly focused on scientific causes, often overlooking the priorities identified by autistic people themselves, such as real-world support, wellbeing across the lifespan, and inclusion of autistic voices within research (Amanullah et al., 2020; Botha & Cage, 2022; Roche, 2020).

Research that has focused on autistic individuals at work has often been focused upon adaptations to the working environment (Hayward et al., 2019; Hendricks, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2020; Raymaker et al., 2023). Some research has aimed to predict what makes autistic people successful at work, including whether being able to disclose ones autistic identity is an enabler for success (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Ohl et al., 2017). Further, there is a relational element to adaptations, with feeling that someone at work actually cares is more important than other practical adaptations (Doyle et al., 2022). Other research has focused on barriers autistic individuals face at work such as communication differences (Lorenz et al., 2016). However, research focusing on autism at work has not always focused on the perspectives of autistic individuals themselves (Walkowiak, 2021).

The strengths of autistic individuals as well as the economic benefits of employing autistic individuals has been explored too, (Cope & Remington, 2022; Jacob et al., 2015). However there needs to be caution around ‘type casting’ autistic individuals into certain careers or identifying niches, as this perpetuates stereotypes and undermines the nuance and unique nature of autistic individuals (Praslova et al., 2023). It is hoped that the current research will support a more holistic understanding of autistic people and their diverse strengths, preferences, and potential.

Other research has considered a variety of elements of employment including hiring practises and masking to succeed as well as manager’s and peer’s knowledgeability of autism (Davies et al., 2023; Vincent et al., 2024). A systematic review related to employment and autism has investigated

the use of employment interventions (Fong et al., 2021). However, the research conducted by Fong (2021) uses deficit language throughout, suggesting this research assumes the medical model is superior than environmental and systemic understandings. Black et al. (2020) considered other supportive practices such as job matches and relational support by having surveyed a large sample of 687 individuals and used multi-informant design (Black et al., 2020). The use of a multi-informant design may reveal prejudices that Autistic individuals cannot be relied upon to speak for themselves, and therefore the current research seeks to centre autistic voices.

Other research has delved into the experiences of autistic people at work by using surveys including communication preferences and special interests (Bross et al., 2022; Cardon, 2025). While these pieces of research have used a large sample by distributing surveys, the same detail that can be captured in an interview was not present. On the other hand, other research by Rosqvist used in depth interviews on a sample of 12 participants to consider their experiences of building self-awareness in the work context (Rosqvist et al., 2023).

At the time of writing, there is currently no formal research on the experiences of autistic educational psychologists that is known to the researcher, although a commentary piece written by a group of autistic educational psychologists highlighted some of their experiences of stigma and discrimination, as well as times when they felt supported from colleagues who saw their strengths as autistic professionals (The British Psychological Society, 2022). This commentary piece is valuable as it is written by a group of autistic educational psychologists themselves, which aligns with the current research's commitment to exploring lived experiences.

Chapter 2 part 2 gave an overview of the research conducted on a range of autistic professionals such as software engineers (Morris et al., 2015) and performing arts professionals (Buckley et al., 2022) as well as those in helping professions such as clinicians in health care settings (H. Smith et al., 2025), medical students and professionals (Bernard et al., 2025; Doherty et al., 2021b, 2023; C. Shaw, Doherty, et al., 2023a; S. C. K. Shaw, Doherty, et al., 2023b); psychiatrists (Doherty et al., 2024; McCarron et al., 2021), speech and language therapists (Gréaux et al., n.d.), Speech and language pathologists (Oates & Bean, 2023), counsellors (Taylor & Sims, 2025), and clinical psychologists (Hawker, 2017; Muggleton J. & Johnston, 2016; Welsh, 2020).

As well as this, a plethora of research has been conducted about autistic school staff: (Davis et al., 2018; Lawrence, 2019; O'Neill & Kenny, 2023; StEvens, 2024b; Wood, 2024; Wood & Happé, 2023).

3.3 Educational Psychology Profession

This section aims to build a strong rationale for the current research by considering the field of Educational Psychology. The history of Education psychology in England has historically been associated with the medical model (Leadbetter & Arnold, 2013). The Education Act, in 1944,

introduced the concept of educational sub-normality and established maladjustment as a handicapping condition. This led to an increase in categorisation, labelling, discrimination and selecting (Leadbetter & Arnold, 2013).

However, Gillham, (1978) aimed to focus on children's rights and interactionist perspectives (Gillham, 1978). Despite this, the teaching profession itself, as well as parents and the overall dominant medical model arguably still expects and positions educational psychologists' roles to be primarily to do with assessing and treating individual children (Topping, 1978).

The profession of psychology has limitations when it comes to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (Palmer et al., 2020). Those from minority ethnic groups, lower socio-economic status and those with a disability are less likely to progress in a psychology career than others. This may be due to the individuals who are in these groups not being well represented in professions, which in turn prevents them from picturing themselves in that career. This may be even more complex and nuanced when it comes to invisible disabilities, since there may be individuals with such disabilities in the workplace, who do not feel able to disclose their disability due to stigma (Hassard et al., 2024). This may be so for autistic individuals, since stigma is still attached to neurodivergence which makes visibility in professions difficult (Rosqvist et al., 2023). This could be applied to aspiring educational psychologists who are autistic, who do not necessarily have the chance to see people in the profession who are autistic for the above nuanced reasons.

Therefore, the current research aims to simultaneously highlight and draw attention to Autistic Educational Psychologists, increasing their visibility, while also spotlighting their experiences to consider implications to increase the inclusivity of the workplace for autistic educational psychologists.

3.4 Aims and Rationale

This research aims to understand the perspectives and experiences of autistic educational psychologists to centre autistic voices and shape inclusive workplace in the field of educational psychology and education more broadly. Therefore, the research question informing this study is:

What are the lived experiences of Autistic EPs?

It is important to understand the experiences of autistic people in professional spaces. A scoping review of 33 studies highlights underemployment is common in the autistic population (Davies et al., 2023). Therefore, considering the experiences of autistic individuals who are professionals is important to learn from their experiences, including the strengths and challenges they face, individually and on a systemic level. This research is situated within the broader field of literature that seeks to understand the professional lived experiences of individuals who are protected under the Equality Act 2010.

The researcher considers the term ‘autism’ to be nuanced and complex due to a variety of models used to understand it (e.g. social model and medical model). Since Autism is complex in nature, the research in this area is arguably most useful when it seeks to understand it from a rich, in-depth and qualitative stance. This is to understand the unique perspectives of Educational Psychologist professionals in the Autistic community.

3.5 Theoretical Frameworks

Chapter Two is informed by theoretical ideologies which have guided the process from interview design, recruitment of participants, interview schedule and structure, results and analysis.

Autism researchers are increasingly using neurodiversity affirming paradigms to conceptualise autism, moving away from ableist perspectives to research that involves more meaningful participation from autistic individuals (O’Neill & Kenny, 2023). Such theories include the Neurodiversity Paradigm (Fenton & Krahn, 2007; Fox, 2025); Neurodiversity orientations (Rosqvist et al., 2022); Neuro-queer theory (Walker, 2021) and Critical Autism Studies (Woods et al., 2018), which sits under the umbrella of Autism Studies. As well as this, the research draws on the Double Empathy problem (Milton, 2012b) and Monotropism (Murray et al., 2005) when making sense of the data.

Despite this, the researcher acknowledges that conceptualisations of autism and ways of researching autism is in many ways an ever-shifting landscape. Therefore, an overarching ecological systems theory is utilised as it allows an interactionist perspective which is shared by the neurodiversity paradigm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006). This provided a robust framework that can withstand the potentially shifting landscape of the conceptualisation of autism.

The following section will introduce the various paradigms and theoretical frameworks that help inform underpinning conceptualisations and understandings of autism.

3.6 The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The Neurodiversity Paradigm is an underlying philosophy aiming to reflect the preference of autistic individuals and sees being autistic as an identity rather than something to be ‘suffered from’ (Fenton & Krahn, 2007). Therefore, the neurodiversity paradigm rejects the medical model, instead drawing upon the social model of disability, which recognises that the environment may be disabling for autistic people (Fox, 2025). This paradigm is important for this research which considers the nuanced and holistic perspectives of autistic EPs, including their strengths, challenges and other important perspectives to discuss in relation to the broad, and exploratory aims of this research.

3.7 Neurodiversity Orientations

Neurodiversity orientations (underpinned by disability studies and critical disability studies) position that a non-normative pattern of neurodevelopment is not ‘psychologically unhealthy’ (Rosqvist et al., 2022). Neurodivergence is understood as an identity, not an impairment (Yergeau, 2018b). The neurodiversity orientation is committed to ‘decentring’ or ‘troubling’ the cognitive, affectual, and sensory norm (Rosqvist, et al., 2022). Therefore, this orientation is tilted towards seeing differences as healthy and celebrating different neurotypes.

In a similar way, neurodiversity studies work to query the rules that govern and produce ‘normal’ and ‘other’ according to scientific, cultural, and social practices. This is an open and iterative process as new forms of cognitive divergence are recognised, and scientific and cultural developments provide further evidence of the diverse biopsychosocial configurations of the human. The first wave of neurodiversity studies sought to reconceptualise meanings of autism, often opposing groups of parents of autistic children and professionals seeking a cure for autism. This orientation challenged the parent dominated movements and any research not informed by autistic people themselves. It stresses difference not disorder (Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008). Although this wave often paved the way for improvements to autistic people’s sense of self-worth, this approach has been criticised as it may contribute to ‘cognitive othering’ of different forms of neurodiversity, especially those where no obvious ‘benefit’ can be found (e.g. when there are no ‘strengths’ or ‘advantages’ associated with being neurodivergent) (Rosqvist et al., 2022).

The second orientation highlighted the risks of reproducing an us-them attitude between neurotypical and divergent neurotypes (Hughes, 2015) and (Runswick-Cole, 2014). So, rather than looking for neurological divergence, the value of working towards a society that is grounded in neurological pluralism (Perry, 2011) and critically questioning what constitutes normalcy (Milton, 2014a, 2014b).

3.8 Neuro-queer theory

Neuro-queer theory is an approach that aims to understand the unique oppression faced by autistic people and draws on the understanding of intersectionality related to the multiple and myriad ways in which autistic and other people are oppressed or marginalised (Walker, 2021). Neuro-queer theory offers an approach to understanding and responding to the unique gender-based oppression faced by autistic people. Neuro-queer feminism as a tool for enhancing existing feminist theory and praxis in relation to creating space for autistic experiences of womanhood, diverse expressions of gender and addressing gender-based ostracism. This is important since most of the participants identify as female.

The current research proposed seeks to understand this topic in the light of intersectional oppression: one way to tackle oppression is by understanding perspectives and experiences of those

being oppressed, and therefore this research draws on the importance of this acknowledgment when considering its aims.

3.9 Critical Autism Studies

Critical Autism Studies (CAS) is a paradigm that seeks to unsettle mainstream conceptualisations of autism, and instead reclaims autism narratives (Woods et al., 2018). This is important in this research given the researcher's aim to understand the experiences and perspectives of autistic individuals within the EP profession. CAS is concerned with critical thinking; new perspectives and opening dialogue and debate (Arnold, 2013). It is critical since it seeks to investigate power dynamics that operate in discourses around autism, and actively questions deficit-based definitions of autism, considering ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce 'disability' (Waltz, 2014). Therefore, CAS is deemed a helpful theoretical framework to make sense of the potentially disabling environment of the workplace for autistic educational psychologists. It is also a useful due to the way in which it questions the deficit-based definitions of autism, something that this research is tilted towards especially in the interview design which aimed to understand both strengths and challenges faced by autistic educational psychologists.

Within the abovementioned paradigms, there are developing theories such as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a) and monotropic cognition (Murray et al., 2005) which will be detailed and drawn upon in this research.

3.10 The Double Empathy Problem

The double empathy problem aims to make sense of the autistic experience and refutes the archaic notion that autistic people are unable to empathise, depicted by some authors and researchers (Barnbaum, 2008). The double empathy problem positions that the difficulty many autistic people have with empathy and communication is when they are interacting with non-autistic people, and that non autistic people experience a similar difficulty when engaging with autistic people (Milton, 2012b). Milton asserts that autistic people often develop a greater understanding of non-autistic social interaction than the other way around.

3.11 Monotropism

Monotropism is a central theory to explain the cognitive and sensory experiences associated with autism. The authors of the article developed the theory with autistic individuals from an insider perspective (Murray et al., 2005) and so may offer increased internal validity when considering conceptualising the autistic experience. The theory posits that an atypical distribution of attention, characterised by a deep focus on a restricted range of interests underlines the diagnostic criteria. This

intense concentration of mental resources explains why autistic individuals may excel at specific tasks while struggling with other things like shifting focus or social interaction. In viewing autism through the lens of attentional allocation, the researchers advocate for educational and clinical practices that respect and utilise an individual's unique focus to foster better communication and engagement (Murray et al., 2005).

3.12 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

The overarching theory for this piece of research is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) which is being used as an organising framework to bring coherence when using the aforementioned theories neurodiversity paradigm (Fenton & Krahn, 2007; Fox, 2025); neurodiversity orientations (Rosqvist et al., 2022); neuro-queer theory (Walker, 2021); critical autism studies (Woods et al., 2018), the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012b) and monotropism (Murray et al., 2005) to make sense of the data.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory puts forward that individuals develop within a set of nested environmental systems from close relationships to broad cultural forces which all interact over time (chronosystem). The relevance of the chronosystem is perhaps particularly salient when it comes to conceptualising autism, since it has been conceptualised in different ways over time, and there have been shifts in societal attitudes which have, and continue to, shift. From this ecological systems perspective, understanding autism is shaped by the interactions between different environments and people. For example, a GP, a parent, a teaching assistant, a music teacher and a social worker may each have different interpretations of autism based on their roles and experiences. These differing perspectives can influence how autism is understood and supported, particularly as they interact with one another across home, healthcare, and school contexts. Likewise, it has also been helpful to consider the participant's immediate environment (e.g. colleagues, families and schools that they work with as an Educational Psychologist) and the interconnections between these (mesosystems) as well as the exosystems (such as workplace inclusion and diversity policies; current practice when it comes to diagnosis of autism) and even more broadly looking at Macrosystems (beliefs, social norms, economic systems, policies). This theory aligns with the ontological and epistemological stance of critical realism as it does not negate the individual experience, while also recognising the impact of the social and contextual world in which the individual's experience is nestled. The ontology and epistemology of this thesis will now be discussed.

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1. Ontological and epistemological stance

Being clear about ontology and epistemology support coherent and effective research, since it provides transparency and a rationale for a chosen methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A researcher

needs to make clear their beliefs about a) reality and b) how to know that reality. Ontology refers to the first; an understanding of reality (what is claimed as true), whereas epistemology refers to how best to go about knowing and investigating reality (and what is possible to know). Historically, psychology has tended towards epistemological explorations but neglected ontological considerations (Koch, 1981).

Ontology can be understood on a continuum from realism on one end and relativism on the other. Ontological Realism is the premise that the world exists independent of our understanding of it. The world is simply there; it is not a product of human thought. Ontological Relativism on the other hand, is the philosophical position that what exists (ontology) is not independent of conceptual schemas or linguistic frameworks, but instead is relative to them (Quine, 1969).

Positivist epistemology was popular in the field of psychology since the beginning of the 20th Century (Gergen, 1990; Pilgrim, 2017) and asserts that reality (realist ontology) can be discerned through research (primarily laboratory research producing results that can be quantified and replicated reliably: objective epistemology). Post(positivism) acknowledges that it is difficult to have an entirely clear view of reality, but objectivity remains the ideal

Social Constructionism (SC) is an epistemological stance that maps onto relativism and asserts that researchers actively construct truth through the language they use; the methods they choose to use; and even the priorities of their research. SC acknowledges the active role of the researcher in producing the findings rather than searching for them. Social constructionism situates autism as socially constructed rather than existing independently of such social construction. The researcher considered utilising an SC stance, as they recognised the importance of being aware of their active role in producing the findings, especially as a trainee EP researcher. However, substantial reading of the literature around disability studies led the researcher to consider the criticisms of SC when considering disability, and arguably autism (Pilgrim, 2019). Criticisms of SC include the claim that it negates or undermines lived reality by stating all phenomena is simply ‘constructed’ (Pilgrim, 2019). This criticism is relevant when researching the perspectives and experiences of autistic educational psychologists, since Social Constructionism potentially negates the experiences and perspectives of autistic individuals. This connects with the social model of disability, which highlights the disabling environment whilst potentially denying the hardships arising from cognitive divergences (Barnes, 2016).

CR strikes a balance between positivism and SC, by stating that while there is a knowable truth (realist ontology), the way we enquire about this truth is necessarily nestled within the broader social and political context (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006). Bhaskar & Danermark (2006) stipulate that the balance CR provides is optimal for research, citing the example of disability research, and how it is important to move beyond reductionist medical (positivist) and social (social constructionist) models, and instead move towards CR which balances biological as well as social, cultural, and political understandings (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006). Critical Realism was adopted as the ontological and

epistemological position for this research since the researcher accepts enduring features of reality existing independently of human conceptualisation whilst recognising that individuals (including the researchers, see and experience phenomena differently depending on their personal beliefs and expectations). In other words, critical realism was felt the most appropriate since the researcher situated their understanding of autism as a real and enduring phenomena that exists beyond human social construction. This was crucial to the researcher given their reading of Chapman's Marxist understanding of autism within the reality of a capitalist society, with its real implication for autistic individuals (Chapman, 2023). Therefore, it was important that the ontology could anticipate the reality of Autism as a separate and enduring phenomena rather than something constructed socially, otherwise the researcher felt that she was undermining the lived experiences of the autistic individuals.

3.3.2 Qualitative Methodology

In line with the researcher's ontological and epistemological position, a qualitative design was adopted. This is appropriate because the research question is about the lived professional experiences of autistic professionals, therefore, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the most appropriate qualitative method. While Reflexive Thematic Analysis was considered, and is potentially more versatile than IPA, the fact that IPA aims to get 'experience close' and focuses on exploring deep and complex lived experiences meant that IPA was deemed appropriate for the research question. Additionally, IPA allows for a smaller sample and does not seek to gain broader patterns of meaning across the sample, but instead chooses to dive into the unique qualities of the individual accounts. Given that all autistic individuals are unique, it was appropriate to use IPA to understand their lived experiences.

IPA is one of a group of phenomenological approaches (Shinebourne, 2011). For example Ashworth, 2003 and Giorgi, 1997 (Ashworth, 2003; Giorgi, 1997). IPA differs from other phenomenological approaches in its commitment to idiography as well as interpretation (known as hermeneutics). This contrasts with Giorgi's (1997) approach which is committed to simply descriptive phenomenology which tends not to use details of the actual words, phrases and quotes used by the participants. IPA, by contrast, weaves extracts from participants' accounts in the interpretative commentary (Shinebourne, 2011). Ashworth's (2003) approach again differs from IPA in the importance that it places on life worlds (individuals unique projects that they are engaging in).

IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by three key areas of psychological and philosophical knowledge: phenomenology; hermeneutics and ideography. (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of subjective experiences and investigates the nature of subjective and conscious lived experience. Phenomenology began as a philosophical movement in the 20th Century that provided an alternative from phenomenalism (which reduces mental states of being to sensations). According to Smith et al., (2022), there are four key thinkers who are associated with phenomenology Husserl (Husserl & Palmer, 1977); Heidegger (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996) ; Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 2010) and Sartre (Sartre, 1943). Each of these philosophers extend the study of phenomenology in unique ways. Phenomenology is applied to qualitative research and provides a way to understand the rich lived experiences of individuals.

Husserl said that to examine every day lived experience, one is required to step back from the ‘natural’ or the ‘taken-for-granted’ world, something he called ‘attitude’; (Husserl & Palmer, 1977). According to Husserl, to step into the phenomenological attitude involves a series of systematic steps called ‘reduction’. This term ‘reduction’, according to Husserl, involves looking towards how the object appears to consciousness, and turning away from the unreflective and unexamined experience. IPA research can methodically reflect on everyday lived experience or consciousness which is either first order or second order; second order activity can be things like remembering, regretting and desiring and so forth, whereas first hand order is experiencing or being conscious of an object (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.4 Heidegger

Heidegger added to the philosophy of phenomenology by underscoring the importance of grounding our lived experiences in the context of the lived world (involving things, people, relationships and language). In *Being and Time*, ‘Dasein’ means ‘there being’, the state of being a human (not the noun), so considering perception, awareness and consciousness. (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996). So, Heidegger was interested in the ontological question of existence itself. Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology is that of the embodied in the pre-existing work of people, objects, language and culture, and cannot be extracted from it. The Heideggerian concept of worldliness affords the embodied intentional actor a range of physically possible meaningful options. Crucially for Heidegger, this is always within context, so situated in the environment (Smith et al., 2022).

Therefore, human beings are thrown into a world of objects, relationships and language; being in the world is always perspectival, temporal and in relation to something, and that the interpretations of people’s meaning making activities is central to the phenomenological inquiry of psychology (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.5 Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty also shares the importance of being in the world, like Husserl and Heidegger. However, for Merleau-Ponty, a commitment to contextualising the study of phenomenology in relation to the embodied self is important (Merleau-Ponty, 2010). For him, humans interact with the world through the body first and foremost, from that perspective. For example, Merleau-Ponty stresses the importance of understanding the way humans see themselves as different to other objects in the world, and it is through the embodied perspective that we meet and interact with the world. For Merleau-Ponty therefore, it is important to note that though we can think about, and have empathy for, another person, we can never truly understand or share another's experience because it is specific to their own perception of the world, impacted by their own embodied perspective. Similarly, when one experiences another person, it is always from a point of difference. Therefore, for qualitative researchers, physical bodily sensations are an important element to explore, just as critical as more cognitive and thought perceptions that someone might have. Merleau-Ponty's work can support IPA research in its position of understanding people's experiences and vantage point through considering their body within the world. The lived experience of being a body in the world is an important part of understanding someone else's perspective. This may be apparent when an interviewee describes embodied language, or feelings and sensations (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.6 Sartre

Sartre highlights the importance of becoming rather than being, saying that existence comes before essence (Sartre, 1943). For Sartre this is because, as humans, we are action oriented or caught up in what he called projects in the world. Therefore, for Sartre, we are existing in relation to others who are also themselves outworking various other projects. In turn we are perceived and, for Sartre, the idea that we are perceived by others, and aware of this perception by others highlights the interpersonal nature of our existence. Our perception of our experiences relies on the presence and absence of our relationships with others. Therefore, this has impacted upon the salience of the being-in-the world experience of our existence, shared by Heidegger (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.7 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation and is an older tradition of thinking associated with biblical text interpretation, however, is now applied to other texts and documents. Hermeneutic philosophy queries and questions the intention of an author (and whether it is even possible to uncover and tease out the intentions or original meanings of the author); the historical political and social context within which a text was created. Heidegger, Schleiermacher and Gadamer are

hermeneutic thinkers and Heidegger brought both phenomenology and hermeneutics together (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.8 Double Hermeneutic

The double hermeneutic refers to the fact that the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world. The researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world. It is the task of the IPA researcher to assess critically and reflexively how their previous experiences and knowledge influences the research. Although this is seen as a potential challenge and critique of IPA, this refers to the very fact that the researcher's ability to access the participant's experience is through the participant's accounts as well as the researcher's own fore conception. Therefore, this school of thinking sees the process of the researcher's pre-understandings alongside the participants experiences as of equal importance (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2022).

The researcher remained astute to the double hermeneutic throughout the research process, by recognising that participants were making sense of their experiences while the researcher was at the same time attempting to make sense of each participant's meaning making (Smith et al., 2022). After each interview the researcher maintained a reflective journal to write about their initial impressions interpretations and make sense of their underlying assumptions. The researcher also sought to bracket their preconceptions by approaching each interview as a unique account and remaining as open as possible to the meanings that may have emerged from each participant's experience. In this context, bracketing was not seen as a complete removal of preconceptions but an on-going process of actively identifying and managing the potential influence of their own assumptions on the interpretation of participants' accounts. The researcher also made sense of their own experiences and how this may influence and shape their understanding of an individual participant's account, and therefore discusses these reflections openly in research supervision to support the reflexive bracketing process. During analysis, the researcher remained closely grounded in participant's accounting by keeping original wording and using direct quotations to support interpretations. This enabled the researcher to view participants' quotations alongside corresponding codes, so remaining connected to the participants accounts.

3.3.9 Schleiermacher

Schleiermacher considered interpretation to involve the objective textual meaning (grammatical interpretation) as well as the unique quality of the author (psychological interpretation) (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998). In this way, a writer is not only influenced by the conventions of

grammar associated with the linguistic community, but also by the individual work that they do with that language. So, there is something unique about the intentions of a particular author, and this can be interpreted by a reader, but that the wider context within which the text is produced must be acknowledged. Therefore, interpretation is a craft that necessarily involves a range of skills, including intuition. So, part of the aim is to understand the writer and the text. So, the IPA analysis can come to a perspective on the text which the author is not able to (through perhaps the analyst engaging with a larger data set and drawing on psychological theory). For Schleiermacher, the possibility of such an interpretation depends on sharing some similarities with the person being interpreted: ‘every person, besides being an individual themselves, has a receptivity for all other people...everyone carries a minimum of everyone else’. (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.10 Heidegger

Heidegger advocated that Hermeneutics is a necessary pre-requisite to phenomenology (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996). For Heidegger, there being (Dasein) is accessed only through our interpretation, in other words by engaging with hermeneutics. For example, Heidegger in his writing of *Being and Time*, looked at the etymological definition of Phenomenology and observed that the word phenomenon can be translated as appear or show. Heidegger asserts that the term ‘appear’ can be a verb, which would suggest that something is entering a new state, in contrast to a previous state. Furthermore, Heidegger speaks of the dual nature of appearance; things have certain visible meanings for us, which can be concealed or hidden. So, for Heidegger, the idea of analysing phenomena is to study how something shows itself. In other words, the phenomenon appears, and the phenomenologist makes sense of this appearing. Heidegger also states that the phenomenologist, when analysing, always brings their prior experience and assumptions and preconceptions and cannot help but look at any new stimulus in the light of their own prior experience (Heidegger refers to this as fore-ception). However, Heidegger also suggests that one can and does make sense of these fore structure in an iterative and non-linear way. Therefore, Heidegger’s work helps the Interpretative Phenomenologist to consider the bracketing as a cyclical process which can only ever be partially achieved (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.11 Gadamer

Gadamer engages with Heidegger’s hermeneutics, and particularly fore-ception, promoting the need to allow the new stimulus to speak in its own voice, and that our own preconceptions can hinder the process, but are inevitably there (Gadamer, 1960). So, there is a dialogue between what we bring to the text, and what the text brings to us. Therefore, when interviewing, as an IPA researcher, it is

important to hold this tension to be open to the possibility of considering the weight of the other person's opinion and strengthening their voice. (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.12 The Hermeneutic Cycle

The Hermeneutic cycle refers to the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, to understand a given part you look to the whole and vice versa, to look at the whole you refer to the parts. For example, a single interview is a part of a research project (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.13 Idiography

IPA is also informed by idiography, which refers to one being concerned with the individual experience in detail rather than nomothetic, which refers to making claims at the group or population level. Therefore, with ideography, there is a pre-occupation with the detail and depth of analysis. (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.14 Discourse

Another element that is linked to phenomenology is that of discourse. Discourse refers to the original ways in which humans communicate with others, which is always partially covered up (Shinebourne, 2011). For example, discourse is what comes beneath interpretation and assertion, and is therefore colloquially known as the meaning, and is expressed in language. Heidegger (1962) as referenced in Shinebourne (2011). As discourse refers to a human capacity to disclose and communicate, this is always immersed in the context of the world, meaning that the thing in question already has been understood and has already been partially interpreted. Therefore, it is impossible to separate the meaning that is being interpreted from any prior understandings.

3.4 Participants

Participants were recruited by the researcher placing an advert on EPNET (an email-based forum for educational psychologists working in the United Kingdom). A total of two posts were sent to this forum (see appendix 1 for research recruitment poster). A total of five participants were recruited with an additional pilot participant. When a participant responded to the recruitment poster, a participant information sheet and consent form was emailed to the participant for them to read more information about the research and to decide whether or not to take part.

3.4.1 Recruitment

The research used convenience sampling to recruit participants using social media and professional network (see recruitment poster in appendix 1). Convenience sampling is a type of random sampling where members of a target population who meet certain criteria are recruited, participants are often easily accessible to the researcher (Golzar & Tajik, 2022). Participants have been fully anonymised and given pseudonyms.

3.4.2 Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Diagnosis
Lizzie	F	Formally diagnosed three years ago whilst studying on the Educational Psychology doctorate training course
Janine	F	Formally diagnosed (after many years of self-identifying)
Caleb	M	Self-identifies (has not been formally diagnosed)
Emeline	F	Self-identifies (has not been formally diagnosed)
Kristy	F	Self-identifies (however at the time of interview was going to have an assessment). Has a formal diagnosis of ADHD.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Individual intersecting characteristics of the participants such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic background were not discussed in detail in the study due to concerns about protecting the participant identities. Although these intersecting characteristics may provide valuable context for understanding participants' experiences, confidentiality and anonymity was prioritised and felt ethically necessary. Therefore, demographic characteristics have been presented selectively and only where relevant to the analysis, to balance the value of the intersectional analysis with the responsibility of the researcher to protect participant identities. Overall, the group represented different age groups, religious backgrounds, socio-economic and genders.

Interviews took place on Microsoft Teams which was convenient for both the researcher and the participants, allowing for flexibility with interview schedules. Video conferencing enables facilitation of both visual and virtual interactions, capturing data through audio and video recording. Additionally, research shows that power imbalances related to navigating public and private spaces are mitigated when virtual methods are used (Just et al., 2024). Having acknowledged the benefits of virtual data collection, the researcher reflected on potential concerns related to communicating over Teams, for example loss of internet connection. Any concerns were addressed at the start of the interview to mitigate for any potential difficulties such as the sound and video quality.

3.4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were facilitated to explore the experiences of autistic educational psychologists. Semi-structured interviews allowed the discussion to flow naturally and gathered detailed accounts of an individual's experience.

3.4.4 Semi structured interviews

The researcher drafted an interview schedule with a list of open-ended questions and prompts (see interview schedule in appendix 2) The researcher conducted a pilot interview with their original set of questions, and asked the pilot participant for feedback regarding the ambiguity of the questions, wording of the questions, and to check that the questions made sense (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) (please see pilot interview schedule in appendix 3). There were some changes to the interview schedule after the pilot interview, as per the feedback given by the pilot participant.

3.4.5 Person-centred thinking tool Ideal Workplace

As well as some questions there was also the opportunity to complete an activity adapted from the ideal school (Moran, 2001). This is based on personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955). This included a series of questions to understand the participant's views about what makes a non-ideal workplace and what makes an ideal workplace. Although the task requires the participant to draw their ideal and non-ideal workplace, for the purposes of the analysis it was the things that they say during this activity that were to be analysed. This tool was chosen as it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's constructions of the workplace which, although may be more aligned with a social constructionist ontology, can be helpful to understand considering a critical realist perspective. That is to say that the participant's constructions of the workplace are constructed but aligned with critical realism, there is also a tangible reality that is mixed with this construction. Therefore, this tool was deemed an appropriate and helpful exercise to aid conversations around the workplace. Please see appendix 2 for the semi structured interview questions, including the ideal workplace activity.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using IPA. The researcher followed the seven-step process recommended by Smith (2022) (Smith et al., 2022). While this process is presented step-by-step, this is an iterative process. Please note that this research uses the new terminology introduced by Smith et al. (2022) in the second edition of their book. (Smith et al., 2022).

3.5.1 Prior to 'officially' starting the analysis

Immediately after each interview, the researcher wrote down her initial thoughts and impressions in a research diary (see extract in appendix 4). These aided reflexivity during the later stages of the analysis process. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

3.5.2 Step one: reading and re-reading

The first step of the IPA process required the researcher to immerse herself in the data. Initially, this was achieved by listening to the audio-recording while reading the transcript for the first time. Subsequently, the transcript was read and re-read multiple times. This promoted active engagement with the data and ensured that the participant became focal (Smith et al., 2022). During this stage, the researcher also recorded her initial impressions of the transcript in a research diary.

3.5.3 Step two: Exploratory noting

The second step of the IPA process required the researcher to “explore the semantic and language content on a very exploratory level” (Smith et al., 2022, p.79) while staying close to the participant’s account. This involved writing exploratory notes on one margin of the transcript (refer to appendix 5 for an example). As suggested by Smith et al, (2022), the researcher aimed to conduct a free textual analysis. In this step the researcher began identifying how the participant thinks, understands and talks about the phenomenon being explored.

3.5.4 Step three: Constructing experiential statements

The third step of the IPA process required the researcher to consolidate and crystalise her thoughts by developing experiential statements (analysing exploratory notes to develop experiential statements whilst preserving the complexity). This was achieved by focusing on the exploratory notes, rather than the transcript. An experiential statement is a statement that articulates the main claim that the researcher is making about the meaning of the participant’s experiences around a particular phenomenon. These statements reflect both the participant’s original words and the researcher’s interpretations (see appendix 6).

3.5.5 Step four Searching for connections across experiential statements

This step required the researcher to look for connections between experiential statements. In practice this involved cutting the experiential statements into separate pieces of paper and scattering these on the floor in no specific order. The researcher then proceeded to cluster related experiential statements together. This involved spending a considerable amount of time looking at the experiential statements, moving them around and trying different clustering (See appendix 7).

3.5.6 Step five: Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them in a table

This step involved assigning a title to each cluster of experiential statements. These clusters then became the participant's Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). Following this, the researcher created a table to organise and consolidate the PETs.

3.5.7 Step six: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases

The sixth step of the IPA process involved moving to the next participant's transcript and repeating the process. In line with the idiographic principle of IPA, the researcher made a conscious effort to 'bracket' her ideas and assumptions from the previous case so that each case could be treated on its own terms. It is acknowledged that the findings from the previous case will inevitably have somewhat influenced the other cases. However, to reduce this, Smith et al., (2022) recommends following the steps outlined above systematically for each participant.

3.5.8 Step seven: Working with Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) to develop Group Experiential Themes (GETs) across cases

Once the researcher analysed all the transcripts individually and identified PETs for each participant, the aim is to generate Group Experiential Themes (GETs). This required the researcher to look for patterns of convergence and divergence across the PETs. As suggested by Smith et al. (2022) the researcher placed each table of PETs onto a large surface and looked across them to find patterns and connections (see appendix 7).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the UEA Ethics Committee (see appendix 8). Ethics was fully considered in ongoing research supervision, and this study was completed in line with the Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2021) and the guidelines written by the British Educational Research Association (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2024). Participants were provided with transparent information about the study and possible ethical issues were addressed within participant information literature and consent forms. At the beginning of the interview there was an opportunity for participants to ask questions and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw their data from the research up until the point that the data was being analysed. A follow up debrief email with references to support if they needed it after the interview was emailed to the individuals.

3.6.1 Informed consent

Before undertaking interviews, potential participants were sent information sheets via email (please see appendix 7). The information sheets outlined what the study would involve so that they could decide if they would like to participate before consenting to take part in the study. The researcher obtained a signature from the participant to ensure written consent. Additionally, verbal consent was gathered at the beginning of each interview. Throughout the interview process, participants were reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the research any time up until the point where their data was being analysed. Therefore, obtaining informed consent was an ongoing and relational process rather than a solo event (Balkin et al., 2023).

3.6.2 Confidentiality

Participants' data was handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation Act (United Kingdom., 2018) and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy, (University of East Anglia, 2025). Participants' data, including personal and contact details, were only used for the purpose that participants agreed to, and will be destroyed upon completion of the doctoral programme. Audio-recordings were encrypted and stored securely in the University's OneDrive, and transcripts were fully anonymised to ensure confidentiality. During the transcription process, participants were only referred to by number and letter and all their personal information was removed.

3.6.3 Duty of care

The needs of the participants were considered (communication preferences; learning style; sensory needs). As part of considering each participant's needs, the researcher asked participants to let them know of any adaptations they would require throughout the process. All participants were given the questions ahead of the interview so that they had time to process and make any notes that they liked. The researcher ensured all participants were told they could take a break by switching off their camera and microphone. Only two participants took a break however each participant was actively asked, not just at the start of the interview but throughout, if they required a break at least once per semi-structured interview. The researcher aimed to explain carefully and clearly the method and procedure as well as answer any questions that they may have before commencing the research and throughout the research. This information is clear on the participation information sheet and was re-iterated verbally at the beginning of each interview.

It was recognised that the topics being asked about during the interview about autism and the workplace could have caused distress or discomfort if participants had negative experiences related to this. At the end of each interview, each participant was emailed a debrief sheet with key information

about what to do if they were feeling distressed and who they could contact (please see appendix 9). The researcher adhered to the duty of care and safeguarding procedure defined by the Health and Care Professions Council (Health Care Professions Council, 2016).

3.7. Quality of the research

Assessing and demonstrating validity in IPA research is best considered by looking at Yardley's Criteria (Yardley, 2017) and (Yardley, 2000). Their criteria asserts that the research must be sensitive to context; have commitment and rigour; be transparent and coherent and have impact and importance. Yardley's criteria were followed as recommended by Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, (2011).

3.7.1 Sensitivity to context

At all stages of the research, the researcher was sensitive to the context. A comprehensive review of the literature enabled the researcher to explore the existing empirical and theoretical literature and formulation of research questions were guided by the gaps in the literature.

This research methodology was also sensitive to the context by giving the participants access to the interview schedule so that they had the option to read beforehand or not, thereby demonstrating sensitivity to the communication preferences of the participants. Also, with regards to the drawing activity, there was the option to either draw or simply tell me about their ideal workplace, providing sensitivity to the communication needs of the participants, as suggested by Howard et al., (2019). The researcher also asked participants if they required any reasonable adjustments such as having a break during the interview. Some participants made use of such adjustments while others chose not to. During the analysis stage, the researcher aimed to remain sensitive to the participants' contexts by using direct quotes to stay close to each participant's accounts.

3.7.2 Commitment and rigour

Commitment and rigour were demonstrated by engaging in a thorough exploration of the research topic and providing a comprehensive literature review as well as completing an in-depth analysis. In addition, interviews were lengthy and lasted between 1 hour 30 and 2 hours, demonstrating a thorough and adequate time with the participants. All semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data analysis itself was systematic and thorough, again adhering to Yardley's criteria of commitment and rigour.

3.7.3 Transparency and coherence

To demonstrate transparency and coherence, the researcher clearly described how the study was completed so that others could understand and evaluate the work, for example how participants were recruited and the steps of the analysis. The researcher also reflected on their own influence on the research by keeping a reflexive diary and using research supervision to consider their own assumptions to bracket and reflect on preconceptions and or foreconceptions with their research supervisor and peers (please see reflective chapter for further discussion of this). In this way the researcher could address the double empathy problem in their research by being transparent about their reflections.

3.7.4 Impact and importance

For research to be considered quality, it needs to be able to make a difference. The researcher believes that this current research highlights and magnifies the voice of autistic EPs. Importantly, this challenges the deficit model that has been the status quo in much autism research, making way for more holistic understandings of autism across the life span. This is important to offer representation of different neurotypes which will hopefully in turn challenge ableism. It will also hopefully support a more diverse workforce going forward as aspiring EPs will see themselves represented in the literature. Finally, the recommendations will support future research and practice.

3.8 Individual participant analysis

This section gives an overview of the phenomenological and interpretative findings of the current study. Keeping IPA's idiographic principle of remaining close to each participant's experience, the researcher's individual analysis of each participant is presented first as a participant profile, before moving onto cross-case analysis. The reader will bring their own fore-conceptions adding an extra layer of interpretation to the participant's and the researcher's sense of the process (Smith et al., 2022).

3.8.1. Participant profiles

3.8.1.1. Lizzie (transcript 1)

Lizzie identifies as female and received an autism diagnosis three years ago and was then in the middle of her doctorate in educational psychology. Lizzie is open with her colleagues in the service that she works in regarding her diagnosis, however not with school staff. When Lizzie gives training as part of her EP role, she will usually speak about her sources of information, one of which is her own lived experience, which includes her being autistic. She has a friend and colleague who is autistic who she finds it helpful to share her experiences with. She met this individual when they were on the

doctorate together and they naturally gravitated towards each other. Lizzie spoke about her ongoing concern regarding whether or not to share that she is autistic with parents that she works with as part of her role, giving the example that she often wonders if she should be transparent, but then reflects it does not feel relevant to do so.

Lizzie spoke about being part of a neuro-diverse WhatsApp group of psychologists (some EPs, and some clinical psychologists and some researchers). Even though she said that she does not tend to say much on the group, she finds it helpful to navigate the challenges that she sees at work. For example, hearing others on the group talk about difficulties with driving led her to feel validated regarding the challenges she herself experiences with driving. Lizzie reflected on how she values being able to make her own diary rather than be micromanaged as this gives her the opportunity to drive at quieter times or to take public transport instead.

Lizzie reflected a lot about how she feels her colleagues are all genuinely inclusive and how this has meant that she feels a lot of safety at work. Despite her own felt safety, she reflects on the fact that she believes there must be many more autistic EPs who do not yet feel safe to disclose their autistic identities. She goes on to reflect that as to whether EPs are neuro-affirming as a profession, practice can be quite inconsistent when it comes to the resources used by some colleagues and EP services, e.g. ABA type approaches and social skills training being recommended. Lizzie also reflects on her studies during her doctorate and how this was inconsistent; some lecturers demonstrated a neuro-affirmative stance in their work while others did not.

Lizzie describes being able to remain very focused on her work, and to read and research in a lot of depth about areas of psychology. She attributes these skills and qualities to being neurodivergent and recognises this as being conducive to her completing her role effectively. Another strength she associates with her neurotype is being highly empathic, and therefore attuned, towards others which she acknowledges can be challenging at times too, as she may over-relate or become too responsive.

3.8.1.2 Janine (transcript 2)

Janine identifies female. Janine began identifying as autistic for several years before receiving a formal diagnosis. There was a gap of twenty years where she self-identified as autistic until she was formally diagnosed. During her interview she described feeling as though she is still on a journey with the experience of being an autistic EP. She continues to mask and finds masking necessary in her job as an EP. When she first identified as autistic, she kept it very hidden due to the stigma being stronger than it is now. Due to the language, theories and dominant narratives about autism, she felt there was initially no way she could admit that she and her family were autistic because it was seen as a tragedy. She also reported feeling that EPs in the profession can position themselves as superior as though they are chosen for the work due to their ‘super social skills’, which she points out is context dependent in any case. She feels that some aspects of being autistic are just not tolerated by other EPs

in the profession, e.g. talking directly; perhaps more honestly; a removal of the hedging and fluffy language often used by professionals in the profession. She feels that others may perceive her as being rude and challenging. She also feels her sensory needs are not understood or supported well by others she works alongside with in the profession. She finds being exposed to stigmatised language to be particularly difficult. She feels that in general they are required to put in more work to fit into their teams. She reflected on the double empathy problem, and how she feels that other EPs, if they were to join an autistic group or something like that, would have the tables turned, and they would have to give more effort to fit in.

Despite this, she sees strengths such as memory and factual knowledge of HCPC guidelines as something that she can bring to the profession as a strength. However, she does feel that sometimes this knowledge base is perceived by colleagues as somehow policing, despite her intentions to use her knowledge to be helpful and raise awareness.

She has had some open and honest discussions about her diagnosis with SENCOs at some schools which has been helpful. Some parents in the local area are aware that she is autistic, and actively seek to have her work with her child, as they value the input of a psychologist with lived experience who understands their child. In some cases, where parents are aware she is autistic she asks for reasonable adjustments, such as arriving in comfortable clothes instead of smart workwear, for example. Conversely, when asking for reasonable adjustments, she sometimes perceives that others are questioning her resource worthiness.

3.8.1.3 Caleb (transcript 3)

Caleb identifies male. He also describes himself as a Christian. He has not received a formal diagnosis however self-identifies as autistic. When he first identified as Autistic, he described it feeling like a hard hit. Caleb reported delays in speaking, until the age of five; difficulties making friends; and passionate interests.

Caleb discussed using a triangulated and scientific approach in his psychological formulations, considering multiple angles to his work with children and young people.

He also described the experiences on his doctoral training course, considering how his peers were understanding of his way of being and that he felt accepted.

Caleb described a range of sensory difficulties in the job, and how he camouflages these; for example, telling colleagues he needed movement breaks for a medical reason (instead of his neurotype). Caleb says that others notice he is very passionate, for example when giving training on a topic he loves. Caleb often checks in with a colleague or line manager about the tone of his communication, for example in an email or similar. This is because he doesn't want to be misunderstood. Caleb has accepted that something he finds challenging is finding the moment for turn

taking in a meeting or conversation and considers that he might have tried to work on this for another 25 years had he not come to terms with it and now accepts it. He usually raises his hand to speak.

Caleb spoke of getting on with most of his colleagues, and on the rare occasion that he has not got on with someone it has been another neurodivergent colleague, and he wonders if this is because they have different expressions of neurodiversity, thereby causing tension.

Caleb often feels unable to attend work socials with colleagues, since the location of the socials are usually quite central to the city, and he finds getting there very difficult. If they have a social that is not in the city centre, then he will likely attend but he doesn't want them to change their plans for him.

Caleb describes having an excellent memory and knowledge base about theories, studies and percentiles for some of the assessments he carries out as part of his work.

Caleb accesses his own therapy to support him with his emotional regulation.

3.8.1.4 Emeline (transcript 4)

Emeline identifies as female, and self identifies as autistic. She speaks about having a group of friends who identify as neurodiverse. Her reasoning for not wanting to have an assessment is since she is quite familiar with the ADOS assessment. She felt that receiving a diagnosis might feel strange and was concerned about how she would tell others she is autistic and how it might affect her relationships. Because of this, she felt she probably would not disclose it anyway, making a formal diagnosis seem irrelevant to her. She does wonder about the legitimacy of her self-identification at times. Although she tends not to tell people at work, she has had conversations with a couple of work friends who self-identify as being autistic. She is clear that she would not tell her current manager that she is autistic whether she has a diagnosis, or not.

Emeline describes feeling at ease and at her happiest when working with neurodivergent children and young people and seeks opportunities to work in this area. Emeline described her work to feel close to her own experiences at times, due to her own lived experience. Emeline brings these cases to supervision but does not always find her supervisor helpful, so she accesses her own personal therapy. Emeline finds her manager leans towards procedural and managerial supervision, focusing on a to-do list rather than allowing E to co-construct what she needs from the session (e.g. sometimes she doesn't need action, she needs space to ruminate, or the rumination could be the action).

Emeline described worrying about the office environment, often wondering how close to sit to others, for example. She would like for there to be more space for her to have comfortable or break out areas that are more informal. She also worries when plans change and for example a schedule was made and then it doesn't follow through due to staff absence or children and young people not necessarily being available. Emeline describes that she sort of enters a space of what she refers to as

‘self-supervision’ (where she embodies a more relaxed state, puts less pressure on herself to be routine bound, and go with the flow a bit more). She tends to try and notice the anxious experience and then simply let it go, likening this to a mindful experience.

Emeline described some language differences with her colleagues, highlighting her preference for clear communication, and can sometimes misinterpret communication. She often feels that the responsibility for her not understanding is something that is put on her, rather than the other person perhaps accepting responsibility for the fact that they may not have been clear (for example). She would like the other person to check in with regards to whether her message has been clear enough.

Emeline values autonomy and agency in her role and see this as a reasonable adaptation.

Emeline found psychology to be a helpful special interest that she has found useful in deciphering, for example, people’s behaviours.

Emeline describes feeling like a lone wolf at times and prefers solitude. When she is with others, (like for a team meeting) she can be completely emotionally drained and describes a fuzzy, foggy feeling, like brain fog.

Between schools and activities in the job, Emeline values decompression time, and makes use of voice notes in her car between visits to externalise her thoughts. She described using loud music to help her regulate between sessions too.

Emeline describes yearning for a sense of belonging at work, and as a team. Emeline feels the team meetings can be very chaotic and difficult, and would like team meetings to perhaps use more person-centred planning such as PATHs.

3.8.1.5 Kristy (Transcript 5)

Kristy identifies as a female. While she self identifies as being autistic, she has a formal diagnosis of ADHD. At the time of the interview, Kristy was due to have an autism assessment in two weeks’ time. She said that they were in fact due to have had their assessment of autism prior to the interview, however this had not been possible at the last minute, so it had to be rescheduled. Kristy has two Autistic grown up children. Kristy reflects on how she does not feel she legitimately can say she is autistic without a diagnosis. In the same way, prior to having her ADHD assessment, Kristy felt that she could not fully identify.

3.9 Cross-case analysis: Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Three GETs and fifteen sub themes were in the data (see table). The four GETs are: ‘Autistic strengths and support are inseparable’, ‘adaptations and adjustments’ ‘prejudice, stereotypes, lack of safety, masking’ and ‘Autistic Identify and belonging’. Each GET and sub-theme is outlined below with verbatim quotes from the participants to capture the complexities of their experiences and stay close to their accounts. Although themes are presented in isolation, they are inter-related. In the

hermeneutic cycle, it is important to look at the whole and then the individual parts (Smith et al., 2022).

Participant's quotations are presented in the following way:

- Verbatim quotes are italicised
- Participant's pseudonyms preface quotes

GET 1: Autistic strengths and support needs are inseparable

- Joy and desire to engage in ongoing learning; sharing knowledge generously.
- Monotropic cognition is a strength and a challenge
- Attunement and relating with autistic families, children and young people
- Creative thinking and considering multiple angles

GET 2: Adaptations and adjustments

- Environmental difficulties and needs
- Adaptations
- Supervision
- Decompression time

GET 3: Prejudice, stereotypes, lack of safety, masking

- Old fashioned views
- Some EPs positions themselves as experts on neurodiversity
- Neurodiversity model is in conflict with EHCP process
- Internalised stigma
- Prejudice and stereotype
- Perceived obligations from others
- Feels dangerous to disclose autistic identity

Table 2: Group Experiential Themes

3.9.1 GET1: Autistic strengths and support needs are inseparable

During the interview, participants were asked about what strengths or advantages they felt they brought to their role and the wider profession (see appendix 2 for interview schedule). Considering strengths and needs was positioned as complex since strengths can also be challenges in different contexts.

Sub theme: Joy and desire to engage in ongoing learning; sharing knowledge generously.

Participants demonstrated feeling joy and desire to learn and share knowledge, adding strength and value to the profession. However, some accounts suggest that this drive to learn could at times be fatiguing.

Lizzie spoke emphatically about her desire to learn. She spoke about her choice to use public transport on the way to settings to capitalise on the time she can spend reading up on topics of interest within psychology:

Lizzie: *'I find that really enjoyable and relaxing. I'm always learning when I'm reading'*
(p69)

Here, Lizzie highlights her special interest in reading and how she finds this to be enjoyable and also a way in which to relax. Another time she also further emphasises her energy to learn through reading:

Lizzie: *'I will never reach the end of my energy to do it, that I could just keep keep on going with it and find out more and more and more'* (p31)

Here, Lizzie's repetitive use of 'more' suggests learning is a process that she wants to keep on doing, deeply enjoys, which in turn happens to be useful in her role. However, there is a hint of burn out, in the way she uses the word 'end' relating to 'energy' implying an acknowledgement that one's energy is finite.

Emeline echoes Lizzie's meaning when she says she cannot get enough of psychology

Emeline: *'My love of psychology, I think the fact that it's just I just cannot get enough of psychology and I think it'll that it'll always be my special interest and my love of learning more generally'* (p58)

Here, Emeline's statement suggests that she sees her special interest in psychology as central to her life, expressed as a need to live, and that there is always more room to continue pursuing her special interest.

Caleb reflects on his diligent and conscientious attitude to his work, and his adherence to deadlines:

Caleb: *'never missed a deadline unless obviously it wasn't physically possible'* (p50).

This is like Lizzie's comment about lacking in energy and reflecting on the physical limitations that inevitably come with any sort of learning.

Janine talks similarly about her experiences of enjoying learning:

Janine: *'We read a lot of things that we're interested in in psychology, so we can bring that knowledge to the team and that can be free CPD for colleagues'* (p31).

The theme of generosity when it comes to sharing her knowledge is furthermore exemplified when she comments that autistic educational psychologists are generous knowledge sharers.

Janine: *'quite generous in what we share about our work as well and and knowledge because we want ultimately want the children to benefit'* (p31)

Janine seems to experience her generosity to be important due to the desire to use that to directly impact the children. Janine expects her sharing knowledge to have a benefit for the children.

Janine similarly talks of her love for training but considers the impact of training for changing the broader systems and changing the lives of autistic people by shifting the narrative during training:

Janine: *'People have come up afterwards and said that was life changing. Thank you. You know, because it's about explaining what autism is in a different way because they've been fed pathologizing narratives and theories'* (p19).

Here, Janine's experiences of offering training has led to tangible changes in terms of how people think about autism, opposing the pathologizing narratives. Her use of the word 'fed' suggests that she likens knowledge and information to be sustenance for practice.

Sub theme: Monotropic Cognition is a strength and a challenge

Janine talks about her ability to get into a flow state:

Janine: *'cognition can lead to flow states, which is something pretty good, actually'* (p95)

Here, Janine speaks about the flow state as something that is good. The use of the word 'actually' showcases that Janine perceives that her experiences may be unexpected, which is why she says 'actually' in order to try and showcase a different narrative.

Caleb describes a similar experience:

Caleb: *'nobody's taking you out of that zone'* (p38-40).

In this statement, it seems as though Caleb experiences the zone as a place he can go where nobody can take him away or distract him. His experience is that once he is in that zone he is difficult to reach.

Janine talks about her monotropic cognition style when considering her strong attention to detail in her casework and formulations

Janine: *'being sort of detailed in our casework and I think schools appreciate that'* (p15).

Here, Janine seems to suggest that the detail she is able to bring to her casework due to her strong detail brought about by her monotropic cognition is experienced as appreciated by schools.

However, Kristy speaks about her challenge making reports about CYP succinct as it all feels relevant

Kristy: *'I feel like I need to include everything about the child'* (p6).

Janine talks about professional monotropic cognition as a real challenge, when they talk about being interrupted from their flow when they are at the office:

Janine: *'People grab you while you are at the photocopier' (p47)*

The word grab highlights the affront that Janine feels when they are brought out of their flow by someone.

Janine also speaks about an emotional looping effect:

Janine: *'looping effect that going over things so that it's quite hard to switch off from our work and particularly if there's an emotional aspect of it as well when children are not having their needs met.'* (p11)

This looping effect may highlight a monotropic cognition style of autistic individuals and therefore may symbolise a difficulty that comes with that cognitive style, emphasising that the same mechanism that offers strength and focus for the work of the educational psychologist, can also bring about difficulties with the emotional elements of the monotropic cognitive style.

Janine feels that her monotropic cognition can help drive up ethical standards by attending to detail on policies

Janine: *'I think we're quite hot on ethical practise'* (p16). However, Janine emphasises a perception that others (e.g. colleagues) can be suspicious:

Janine: *'They think that you're sort of policing'* (p14).

This emphasises the burden of the monotropic cognition style for Janine, highlighting that she feels shamed for correcting others and they worry how they may come across as policing when they are trying to drive up standards.

Caleb describes a similar element when he reflects on his memory and knowledge base:

Caleb: *'that's, that's not you know, I've always thought it was typical. It's not typical'* (p48)

This suggests that he has internalised a feeling of being othered in his life regarding his ability to demonstrate his strong knowledge base.

Sub theme: Attunement and relating with autistic families, children and young people

All participants showed a deep care, empathy and understanding for the clients they work with. For example, Emeline reflected on her ability to attune to the children and young people:

Emeline: *'If they want to be really chatty and they want lots and lots of language input and they are quite animated and excited, I'll kind of match that energy. But equally if they're not, I will. I'll try and match you know the kind of quiet calm energy'* (p26).

Emeline goes on to further reflect that she's happiest when working with Autistic CYP:

Emeline: *'it's where it's my comfort zone I think it's where I feel most at ease and erm happiest. I think when I'm working with young people that are neurodiverse'* (p6).

Here, Emeline uses words like comfort and ease to describe how she feels working with neurodiverse young people.

Emeline further reflects on her ability to let neurodivergent children and young people be themselves:

Emeline: *'if you want to chat loads and you want to info dump on me, that's absolutely fine. We'll chat about your interest. Equally, if you just want to be and we'll just sit in silence or we'll play together or, you know, I think I think I'm very kind of just, not tolerant, that's the word. Like just you can just kind of be. Just be with me. And and I think I'm quite responsive.'* (p6)

Emeline wants to home in on the fact that she is responsive to the needs of the children and young people she works with. She is cautious about the word tolerant, perhaps because she wants to show that it's beyond mere tolerance and that she feels honoured to let them be themselves.

Janine also speaks about being able to build rapport with autistic children and young people in particular

Janine: *'rapport that I think we often have with autistic young people'* (p16)

Janine is not only speaking for himself, but uses the inclusive pronoun we, highlighting that the rapport that can be built is seemingly universal.

Caleb talks about how he can adapt and attune to others

Caleb: *'clued in as to, you know, what you know how to support and help'* (p17)

Here, Caleb is talking about being clued in, and that shows a level of being in the know or discerning about how the best or most effective way might be to help.

Lizzie goes on to highlight her ability to attune to CYP, adults and families:

Lizzie: *'establishing a rapport with a young person when you first work with them or with adults and you know family members and teachers and so on, that bit is I feel like that's a strength'*. (p38)

However, in a similar breath she reflects on her propensity to relate too strongly to others

Lizzie: *'my difficulty is sometimes relating too much to people or over empathising with them and becoming too, erm, I don't know, too responsive'* (p36).

Caleb also mentioned that on the flip side of being able to attune, he sometimes feels the stress from others he is attuned to, perhaps demonstrating a sense of transference, or an impermeable sense of self in relation to others that is redolent of what L says in relating to her propensity to feel a lot

Caleb: *'I've learned to listen to my body so I can feel my carotid pulsing quite heavily. I could feel my heart rate increasing. So, I'm looking at it, this is stressful'* (p55). This is in relation to a consultation he described having where a parent was neurodivergent.

Lizzie reflects on the mechanisms behind her finesse when it comes to supporting and attuning to others. She says that throughout her life, she did not always understand people, and therefore she had a determination to try and solve this.

Lizzie: *‘determination from a really young age to understand other people and make them feel predictable I suppose’* (p35).

This, she feels has developed her ability to attune to others very quickly:

Lizzie: *‘deeply sensitive to other people’s feelings and very keen to understand how other people feel’*. (p35).

Similarly, Kirsty speaks about feeling things very deeply

Kristy: *‘I feel every I feel absolutely everything deeply to the Nth degree’* (p9)

In a similar way, Emeline describes how it can be challenging when she encounters autistic children and young people who go through similar experiences to herself, such as when it is close to home i.e. suicidal

Emeline: *‘It can be quite tricky because certainly recently I’ve had a couple of cases working with young people that have been very close to home in terms of my own experiences growing up and that’s been tricky I think, because it was highly emotive anyway I suppose, but it was even more there was an additional layer to it in that their experiences so resonated with my experiences when I was younger that kind of like either diagnosed or not diagnosed with autism, but very high functioning but very kind of socially anxious, often really struggling with school and either not attending school or or going. But real anxiety around school and erm self-harm and, you know, suicidal ideation’* (p7)

Here, Emeline describes her own experiences at school, demonstrating the difficulty she has when she hears of other autistic young people going through the same, or similar, emotional turmoil that she herself went through.

Perhaps on the contrary, Emeline speaks about her ability to remain calm in emotionally charged situations:

Sub theme: Creative thinking and considering multiple angles

Janine commented on the strength she brings with approaching tasks with new and creative perspectives

Janine: *‘We process information in a different way, we might approach something from a different angle. And I think sometimes bringing that into teams, I think it’s good when you’ve got a team you know, a diverse team with different neurotypes.’* (p26)

Janine uses the inclusive pronoun we, demonstrating feeling of solidarity in being able to considering things from different angles.

Caleb talks about how he aims to consider many perspectives

Caleb: *'I listen very carefully to what everyone says, and we have to look at everyone's perspective.'* (p6)

Caleb may feel that he is defending his professional listening by insisting that he does listen carefully. His use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' may suggest that he feels in allegiance to other neurodivergent EPs. He goes on to elaborate at another point during the interview:

'I have to constantly look at a situation multiple from multiple angles'. (p51)

Caleb describes his having to, and constantly, suggesting that this is a compulsion rather than a choice, something he feels he must do, perhaps reflecting a perfectionism, or representing the effort he is making to showcase his ability to consider all the angles, and essentially to empathise with different people. On a more practical level this ability to look at multiple angles supports Caleb to consider the need for contingency plans:

Caleb: *'I've got a contingency in place already'* (p52) when it comes to consultations, for example.

So, Caleb may recognise his need to have back up plans in case the original plan does not go to plan.

3.9.2 GET 2 Adaptations and adjustments

Sub theme: Environmental difficulties and needs

In the context of a question about Janine's non-ideal and ideal workplace to understand her constructs. Janine spoke about her non-ideal workplace being exhausting, and including the sensory overwhelm in the school without a break and having to rush:

Janine: *'sensory overwhelm in the school with no break rushing back to the office, which is very crowded, very busy'* (p46)

Although Janine is talking about an imaginary place rather than reflecting on a real place, the description may be made up of a real memory or construct that Janine has.

Similarly, Lizzie comments on the difficulty she has noticing when she is dysregulated:

Lizzie: *'It can have got quite far along like I guess, like being dysregulated on some levels before the penny drops for me.'* (p44).

The use of the metaphor 'before the penny drops' suggests a sudden or sharp drop in ability to be regulated rather than a gradual thing, suggesting it comes as a surprise to her. Similarly, Lizzie says

Lizzie: *'before I know it, it's like the bike lock theory. One thing is all right, one number. But if they all click into place then you've just had it'* (p45)

the analogy highlights that Lizzie takes time to recognise that she is out of synch; dysregulated.

Janine goes on to share about her own experience when she says

Janine: *'Just not sustainable. You know it, well, I know from experience'* (p56)

Her pause (after well) suggests a moment of reflection on her own experiences when struggling with the environmental and sensory overwhelm. Her option to change from 'you' to 'I' know may represent a shift in her perspective; that now she is aware of the fact that not everyone may share her same experiences. She reflects that

Janine: *'systems are set up for them'* (p10)

And in so doing she is cognizant of how the systems and office spaces are typically set up for neurotypical employees, rather than employees like herself who are neurodivergent. This may suggest a perceived scarcity of resources when it comes to adaptations to work spaces.

Emeline speaks similarly about the office environment:

Emeline: *'there's too many people talking, there's too many smells, it's too bright. I don't know where, because we do hotdesking, I don't know where I'm supposed to sit, which then brings up all sorts of anxiety around should I be sat here, have I sat too close to somebody'* (p11).

Emeline speaks about the physical toll this creates for her; being around others can be exhausting, which she says leads to fuzzy, fog descending and hard to find words

Emeline: *'if I have like a really full-on day of like meetings being in the office team meetings, I just completely, completely emotionally drained, I'm totally overwhelmed, and I can become almost like erm like fuzzy and I like I kind of can't find my words and it's almost like a kind of fog. Brain fog descends.'* (p32)

Emeline also speaks about how the environment contributes to her disablement, where she lacks autonomy. She also speaks more about a chaotic environment where she found it difficult to make sense of what was happening to fit in. She uses the metaphor of a pin ball in a machine to describe this.

Emeline: *'if you're in like a busy, cluttered environment with people that are talking about their problems all the time, it's really hard to like, get a sense of what's going on and understand. And the kind of nuances of the situation and the how I can fit into that, can almost kind of I feel like just a pinball, sort of at the mercy of everybody else's stuff that's going on and you just sort of being pinballed around, but you don't know'* (p42).

The pin ball analogy is a striking metaphor which emphasises Emeline's difficulties remaining with a sense of control and agency. The power dynamics here are shifted as Emeline recognises that the environment reduces her sense of autonomy.

Sub theme: Adaptations

Participants spoke about adaptations to the physical space and environment, for example

Kristy discussed how she would like to have:

Kristy: *'quiet, comfortable and low lighting'* (p56)

Conversely Lizzie talks not about the office space, but about how the ability to work from home is important to her. Lizzie says that she appreciates, and benefits from, the autonomy she has in the role of being an EP compared to, for example, if she was a shift worker or in a different role where the same freedom and autonomy would not be so practical.

Lizzie: *'I do feel really fortunate as an EP that we're fairly autonomous and I can, as long as I do what I need to do in schools, and nobody really micromanages how I get there'* (p9)

She recognises this as something that has only become possible since Covid-19 pandemic:

Lizzie: *'before the pandemic, so going back a long time now, five years, we used to be in the office more before home working'* (p42).

Lizzie's comment recognises that such adaptations were only implemented when the majority required them. This will be considered in further detail in the discussion section.

Janine expressed a similar sentiment when she speaks about her experiences of having the autonomy to schedule decompression time:

Janine: *'timetabling appointments so that there's enough time in between to decompress'* (p58).

Like Lizzie and Janine, Caleb appreciates the autonomy that comes with the EP role. He finds flexible hours and having his own calendar autonomy to be incredibly helpful.

Caleb: *'if someone was really rigid saying you need to start this time and finish this time, actually I'd be looking at you do realise I'm going to be useless for about two hours and that, but that's up to you'* (p96).

Here, Caleb talks about the mutual benefit of adaptations being made for him, in that his productivity will be better if he is supported to work autonomously in terms of the time he works.

Emeline speaks similarly about a need for autonomy and agency:

Emeline: *a little bit more agency within that* (p43)

Lizzie talks about how she feels her adaptations are somewhat undercover. For example, she says

Lizzie: *'I don't think they relate that to me being autistic, I think they just think I'm really, I don't know, really specific about my diary and times'* (p52)

Again, in a similar way, Caleb attributes his sensory needs to other elements as opposed to his neurodivergence:

Caleb: *'I always tell people it's sciatica is actually not sciatica because I've had this this, I was a child'* (p13).

Both Lizzie and Caleb highlight their needs and adjustments as autistic EPs can be hidden by explaining their needs to be unrelated to autism, but instead a personal need for specificity on Lizzie's part, or sciatica on Caleb's part. This will be discussed later in relation to the literature on camouflaging.

In a similar way, Emeline speaks of her desire to feel able and safe to share her needs (even if not necessarily letting others know she is autistic). E.g. ask for clearer communication

Emeline: *'more able to if I wanted to talk about my needs that I was able to do that/ So whether that's you know, talk about autism or or less specifically autism and more like actually I need you to be clearer with your communication or you know?'* (p50)

or ask for clearer instructions

Emeline: *'If you need me to do something, you need to tell me and you need to be really, really clear'* (p17/18).

Here, Emeline speaks of the adaptations she needs and the desire to ask for them even if she is not yet able to disclose her autistic identity. This means that, for her, it is important for her to focus on her needs above a label.

Janine talks about the halfway point between having to ask for adaptations and his manager checking in to see what adaptations are required.

Janine: *'If you're the one that has to do all the asking, you feel like you're being a pain in the backside all the time.'* (p63)

This suggests a concern with coming across as 'easy going' rather than 'difficult'. It suggests that there is a need for there to be priority placed on open communication for adaptations to be taken seriously and actively understood by manager.

Kristy mentioned that she would find it reassuring and helpful for managers to actively ask her what she needs:

Kristy: *'what can we do to help you feel safer at work?'* (p62)

This chimes with Janine's experiences and preferences for the senior leaders to take the time to proactively ask these questions.

This seems important for Kristy as she often feels somewhat guilty when asking for adaptations, e.g. she feels that working online (her adaptation) is in some ways getting out of things and/or work (p21).

This perhaps links again with the caution Kristy seems to have when it comes to having the confidence to say what she needs:

Kristy: *'I should have the confidence to say you know I'm not having a particularly good week, I know, I feel more comfortable at home' (p74).*

Kristy demonstrates that she is not fully comfortable about how open and honest she can truly be about her needs

Kristy: *'It would be lovely to have that discussion, but would that be opening ourselves up too much, making, you know, being vulnerable to those we work closely with? I don't know how I feel if I suddenly if I had to be talking to them about these sort of things that I'm talking to you' (p78).*

Kristy describes the vulnerability that she feels at the prospect of her having to discuss the adaptations that she needs. She elaborates:

Kristy: *'It would be lovely to be able to have open, honest and vulnerable conversations with those we work closely with' (78)*

Here, Kristy yearns to be honest, but there is something that she feels holds her, back, since this is not a reality yet. Wondering aloud what would help, was if differences were normalised:

Kristy: *'If everyone was vulnerable, differences would be normalised' (p82).*

Emeline recounts a time when she had a miscommunication. She talks about the responsibility to consider the adaptations needed when communicating lying entirely with her.

Emeline: *'I took that very literally because of my diagnosis and but I feel like the the responsibility kind of landed at my door for the miscommunication, rather than it being a 'oh yeah maybe it was a 50/50 thing' (p19).*

Here, Emeline reflects on how her diagnosis impacts her ability to have clear and understandable communication with others at work, and how she feels it is always her own responsibility to navigate these challenges, as opposed to sharing this responsibility. This will be considered in more depth in the discussion and considering the double empathy problem.

Emeline describes feeling as though she misunderstands the implicit or unwritten rules of the workplace.

Emeline: *'what are the rules that I need to follow? I feel it feels quite unsafe feeling like erm I can't figure out what's going on' (p41)*

This adds colour to how Emeline feels when she says she misunderstands at work; she reflects on her feeling of danger when she cannot understand what is going on. It can be understood that Emeline does not feel confident to ask for help, or ask for what the rules are.

In a similar way, Janine does not know if she can ask for adaptations for fear of being seen as unhelpful.

Janine: *'people think you're not being helpful' (p48).*

Janine delves into a bit more when she says,

Janine: *'If I was to say, could you talk a bit slower, I don't know how people would take that' (p53).*

She seems to have good reason for this when she said that she has received comments from managers who have responded to Janine asking for adaptations with:

Janine: *'We all have to put up with that' (p27).*

Similarly, Kristy spoke only very tentatively about her hopes for her accommodation needs being met:

Kristy: *'I would hope that that would be met with yes of course not with you know it's really good to see you face to face and you've managed that before' (p.94).*

This suggests that Kristy is unsure whether her desire to be able to meet online and work from home would be honoured.

Sub theme: Supervision

Caleb reflects on supervision as a helpful way to understand and explore the, at times difficult, emotions that come up for him while completing his role as an EP.

Caleb: *'but it alerts then again if I hit a nine for frustration that means something's really winding me up and I need to talk about it and vent it' (p68).*

Here the use of the word 'alerts' supports an understanding of the urgency attached to Caleb's frustration and how supervision, for him, offers a containment by helping him to add a number to this feeling. He can vent it if things are winding him up. This means that Caleb uses the supervisory space in a restorative way to support himself when he is feeling frustrated.

In the absence of her own supervision not necessarily meeting her needs, Emeline speaks about using 'self-supervision' to support herself

Emeline: *'I had to really have a word with myself about, you know, it doesn't matter if something gets cancelled or if you're not sure what you're doing on Thursday afternoon, or you know because I'm very like this is happening at 9am.' (p12)*

Here, Emeline reflects on her aim to embody a more relaxed state through self-supervision as a process for herself:

Emeline: *'I've kind of really had to recognise that that's a thing for me and then just embody this kind of ability to kind of be OK with the uncertainty.' (p41)*

Self-supervision, as Emeline describes it requires a striving to enter a relaxed state

Emeline: *'I feel like I'm trying to enter a state that is a little more relaxed, that I'm putting less pressure on myself to be so routine bound because it does create a certain level of anxiety for me.'* (p15)

Here, Emeline grapples with the feeling of wanting routine, but then in some ways detaching herself from the routines, which she says can add to her level of anxiety.

Emeline elaborates that she has developed something akin to a mindful process of noticing the anxiety and letting it go:

Emeline: *'it's almost like a mindfulness process. It's almost like that. I recognise that anxious thought about that plan, but I'm just going to notice the anxious thought experience, the anxiety for a minute, and then let it go. And that has been quite liberating'* (p15)

She feels that this is quite a freeing and liberating experience.

It could be said that both Emeline and Caleb decided to have therapy to support themselves further than supervision can, or self-supervision can, for example Caleb speaks about using personal therapy to support himself, suggesting that he takes care of his mental wellbeing as a high priority:

Caleb: *I have been in counselling since I was 21 so and I still go to counselling once a month now and I think those sort of things that are things that you acquire over time and with a skilled counsellor'* (p59).

Emeline also attends therapy:

Emeline: *'I've been in therapy for about a year and I think that's definitely helped a lot because there's only so much self-supervision you can do before you kind of need somebody else to be there as well'* (p16)

Here, Emeline seems to feel frustrated that she has had to resort to self-supervision in the absence of adequate supervision from her supervisor, and therefore, expresses her need for therapy to support her wellbeing.

Sub theme: Decompression time

Emeline talks about how she supports herself regarding transitions and decompressions:

Emeline: *'I think sometimes, like if you've got, if you come out of a consultation and you've got loads of ideas flying through your head or like loads of things that you would like to do next as a result of that. But then you almost have to. I found voice notes are quite helpful. So, like in the car, I'll just voice note.'* (p33)

Emeline describes ideas to be flying around in her head, which gives an insight into how she experiences the part after consultations where she has so many thoughts. The use of the present tense continuous verb 'flying' supports an understanding that, for Emeline, the ideas feel difficult to pin down. Her desire to voice note suggests that she finds it helpful to externalise the ideas in order to make sense of them. This may relate to her desire to have supervision where she can ruminate about the ideas she has.

Further, Emeline elaborates that transition and decompression between schools is important and valuable

Emeline: *'like transitions between activities can be quite hard as well. I need a bit of a, I need to like kind of decompress between things and that's not always possible. Like often you're kind of running between schools or meetings or like coming in and out of lots of meetings.'* (p33)

Emeline talks about how her car journey offers decompression time

Emeline: *'I need that like decompression and sometimes it can just be a car journey between one place and the next can be like a decompression, but not always'* (p33).

She reflects that if she is feeling heightened, loud music helps

Emeline: *'I don't know energy or like you know you're a bit heightened, like just putting some really loud music on can help and just having like, just driving between whatever is but like, just some loud music to kind of get rid of some of that energy can be helpful'* (p34).

This may suggest that the feeling of listening to loud music, or even with hearing loud music being played may support Emeline when she feels heightened. The use of the word 'heightened' may suggest that in that moment Emeline does not feel 'grounded' and stable and therefore the sensory experience of listening to very loud music helps her to regain a sense of stability while also expelling some energy.

3.9.3 GET 3 Prejudice, stereotypes, lack of safety, masking

Sub theme: Old fashioned views

Lizzie reflected on some of the external lecturers on the doctoral training course who she felt had dated and archaic views about neurodiversity:

Lizzie: *'Some of it was really negative and really, well, offensive, really. And some really old kind of myths and stereotypes that were still being churned out'* (p23)

Lizzie finds and feels offended by the really negative and old myths, which she describes to be 'churned out'. The adverbial phrase 'churned out' suggests that these myths are being distributed to others, almost in the same way a news story is distributed.

Lizzie also stated concern about some EPs still recommending social skills training and behaviourist approach such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA)

Lizzie: *'basically like recommending like social skills training and stuff that we know is really damaging to young people and ABA type approaches.'* (p17)

Lizzie feels that the recommendations are damaging, and uses the inclusive pronoun 'we' to suggest that she feels exasperated that, despite the common knowledge of such damage caused by

behaviourist provisions, some EPs are still recommending they be used. Lizzie reflects on this felt sense of exasperation when calling for genuine inclusivity; she feels EPs should be better than any other profession:

Lizzie: *'we should be better than any other profession'* (p12)

However, this statement showcases Lizzie's dissatisfaction with some EPs in the profession. This is reiterated when Lizzie discusses that she can only hope that all EPs are neurodiversity affirming in their philosophy:

Lizzie: *'I'd like to think this is all EPs, but it isn't who are really neurodiversity affirming in their philosophy and their thoughts and approaches'* (p12)

Here, she appears less exasperated than before and instead more resigned and nonchalant in asserting that not all EPs in the profession are neurodiversity-affirming.

Subtheme: Some EPs position themselves as experts on neurodiversity

Some participants spoke about the concerns they have when EPs position themselves as experts on neurodiversity.

Lizzie stated that in her non-ideal workplace, colleagues would present themselves as so-called experts:

Lizzie: *'talking about it really knowledgeable, but being really out of date and being really being really emphatic and forceful with their expertise, which I which was really negative and that would be really awful to be around that all the time I think'* (p61)

Lizzie would feel that it would be really awful to be around that all the time, perhaps as it may be that Lizzie finds this to be negative, and out of date, and she feels that the knowledgeability would be jarring and forceful. Lizzie seems concerned that the knowledge that would likely be presented would be negative which in turn Lizzie would find it hard to be in proximity of all the time.

Lizzie feels that it is dangerous when EPs make out to be experts on neurodiversity without actually speaking to those with lived experience.

Lizzie: *'if you're not able to see that and you think that you are an expert, that's quite dangerous, I think'* (p113).

Chiming with Lizzie's concerns about EPs who positions themselves as experts, Janine also mentioned that she sees some EPs that she works with may seek to control the narrative for example, applying the work of an EP to an employee:

J: *'controlling the narrative and also almost like applying the work of what an EP does to an employee'* (p23).

Janine is concerned about the control of the narrative and feels that other EPs are inappropriately using their own position to speak about the experiences of colleagues and employees.

Another point during the interview, Janine said she has experienced people who give their opinion about how autistic they think you are:

Janine: *'you don't look autistic, or never would have guessed or or then they make a judgement about how autistic they think you are' (p53).*

In this moment, Janine may be upset and appalled about the types of comments made by others when they talk about her being autistic. Janine goes on to speak about colleagues who invalidate her adult autistic experience simply because she is an adult.

Janine: *'don't think that your lived experience is relevant because you're an adult' (p54).*

Here, Janine uses the word relevant to show how she may be feeling dismissed simply because she is an adult.

Subtheme: Neurodiversity model in conflict with the EHCP processes

Janine notices a surface level neurodiversity affirming stance by some people that she comes across in the profession:

Janine: *'the language of neurodiversity has filtered into discourse but it's not when you look at the practice, it's still based on the medical model' (p89)*

J notices there is a conflict with EHCP processes being inherently not very neuroaffirming as it seems to position needs to arise from within the child rather than considering environmental factors:

Janine: *'the assessment process starts with the child' (p86)*

Janine associates focus on environmental and adult understanding to be a better stance and wants for there to be:

Janine: *'less on intervention, more on support structures, more on understanding of adults around a child and young person, there's just more awareness in society as well' (p86)*

Here, Janine seems to assume that neuroaffirming approaches are more likely to focus on environmental factors.

Sub theme: Internalised Stigma

Both Caleb and Kristy seem to demonstrate an element of internalised stigma, this is when perhaps they have grown up in a society that is prejudiced against being neurodivergent and have then directed some of this stigma inwards. This will be discussed in further depth as part of the discussion.

Caleb demonstrated internalised stigma when he spoke about having to apologise for himself:

Caleb: *'I usually have to apologise at the start of meetings' (p4)*

This seems to suggest that even before the meeting has commenced, he feels he must apologise beforehand. Caleb also explains himself and apologises:

Caleb: *'I still get that in meetings now but it's not, I use. I have to sometimes say look, this is not a nervous habit. This is because of this' (p13)*

This seems to suggest that Caleb has experienced negative feedback about how he is in meetings, and therefore aims to explain himself or apologise for himself.

Caleb lets people know about his differences:

Caleb: *'I sometimes get quite carried away and when I do I do sometimes lose the sense of the volume of my voice. So please just let me know I won't take it personal'* (p19)

Here, Caleb is more nonchalant in his expression of his difference when it comes to the volume of his voice and seems happy for others to pick up on it and let him know. Albeit there is an undertone that he makes this sort of apologetic statement at the beginning in order to protect himself from external criticism (i.e. if he says it first, and acknowledges it, perhaps others will accept him for his differences).

Caleb also struggles with self-doubt and reassurance. For example, he has a concern over whether he has the right way to think about something:

Caleb: *'checking in and making sure that my thoughts are sort of not too far off the ballpark'* (p27)

Here, Caleb assumes other people are more reliable than his own, and that he himself would be likely to be off the ballpark, whereas others would be able to help him not to be too far off.

Further, he experiences self-doubt and checks himself against others

Caleb: *'Everyone working in that seeing is experiencing the same, which tell me. Actually, my radar is correct. So, I reference those'* (p70).

Furthermore, Caleb considers his tone may be off in an email:

Caleb: *'I always CC in managers and you know, so they're always aware I'm always open. And the reason for that I think they do know that actually what I'm doing is I'm just checking to make sure everything's right'* (p66).

Here, Caleb seems to feel the need to be open about his communication via email and copy in managers in order to give them the ability to give him feedback. He suggests that he wants to check that things are 'right' to support him feel at ease that he is doing things correctly. Underlying this is an assumption that there is a right and a wrong way of doing this and that he is likely to do things incorrectly. In a way, Caleb wants to draw attention to his email communication, so that he can gain the feedback he wants to check he is on the right track.

Similarly, Kristy discusses the constant self-criticism that she experiences (p7). On one occasion, Kristy recalls that she sent a clarifying email to her manager, but immediately had second thoughts:

Kristy: *'And I just froze, I thought what have I done? What have I done?'* (p15)

The use of the double interrogative sentences demonstrates the level of self-doubt that Kristy recalls experiencing in that moment.

Furthermore, Kristy battles with herself, when considering how to communicate her point:

Kristy: *'continuous battle with myself. Am I? Am I right? Am I wrong? But I ned to get my point across.'* (p18)

This represents the concern that Kristy has in terms of communicating her needs, and the self-doubt is exemplified in the three interrogative questions repeated after each other.

Kristy also recounts a discussion with a Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) who asked her to keep things closer to her chest, and has since learned to not overshare:

Kristy: *'my principal even said to me she said you know at one point she said we need to keep things closer to your chest' (p6)*

Here, Kristy refers to the principal educational psychologist asking Kristy to stop being so outward and external in her communication preferences and this left to Kristy worrying about her communication. Kristy expressed that she now worries about sending an email or not

Kristy: *'Do I send this e-mail? Do I not? Should I send, it should you know? So, it's it's almost become a fixation, you know' (p16).*

Sub theme: Prejudice and stereotype

Unfortunately, both Janine and Kristy experienced prejudice. Janine expressed concerns about diminishing opportunities, since promotion is linked to neurotypical socialisation:

Janine: *'and I just think a lot of autistic people just don't get promoted. And I think part of that is because they don't particularly want to hang out with us as or they don't connect with us as a sort of a mate, you know, a mate in the office, it's they prefer nonautistic colleagues and they're the ones that get promoted' (p37-38).*

Here, Janine feels as though there are diminished opportunities which she attributes to the preference that non autistic colleagues have for certain types of socialisation in the office environment, for example. Janine goes on to suggest that rights diminish when coupled with being autistic.

Janine: *'professional plus autistic equals your rights just disappear' (p41)*

Here, Janine expresses that her rights have disappeared, suggesting a focus on the legal element of rights and equates this to being autistic. In another breath she mentioned that some managers take away any autistic case work if they know you are autistic, since they assume this means you are bias (25).

Kristy comes across ableist language in her role:

Kristy: *'even sitting in an ELSA supervision session yesterday, one of the ELSA's said something about this child. You know, he's bringing up his ADHD again, as if it's an excuse that I'm doing' (p38)*

This demonstrates the day-to-day ableism that she witnesses in school and education settings. This may then be very difficult for Kristy, and seems to resonate with what Lizzie says about feeling like a

double agent when she is in the uncomfortable position of hearing or being exposed to professionals speaking of Autistic CYP negatively, especially when she has not disclosed her autistic identity.

Lizzie: *'If I haven't shared that with people, then that's a bit like almost you almost feel a bit like a double agent like I'm I'm secretly one of them'* (p40).

Like Kristy, Lizzie feels she is in an uncomfortable position, and her choice of language (e.g. secret and agent) speaks of her level of discomfort such that she feels she is not being true to herself and is having to go undercover.

Kristy also speaks about feeling in some way judged by others, and in this case, she feels that society in general judges her:

Kristy: *'I think society, I don't like this word, but I can't think of any other word than like the neurotypical population'* (p85)

Perhaps more specifically, Kristy is aware of a stereotypical understanding of autism where there are archaic ideas around theory of mind and empathy:

Kristy: *'I think especially as women, we tend to have too much empathy and I and that is overlooked'* (p9)

In this moment, Kristy has decided to directly counter the archaic assertion. Furthermore, Kristy feels that her true self is not acknowledged or taken seriously. She feels sidelined, and her feelings and emotions are not validated:

Kristy: *'the me that I am is is not being acknowledged is not being taken seriously. It's being sidelined my fee my feelings and emotions are not being validated'* (p16)

In this moment, Kristy feels that she is viewed as not a valid individual and is sidelined by her feelings. Linked to this, Kristy feels unable to be her true self for fear that this makes others uncomfortable

Kristy: *'we need to leave those at the door and then get on with our lives and not share and not be vulnerable because you know and also because we are mindful that we might make others uncomfortable'* (p81)

Kristy demonstrates a concern for her own work. Although she reflects that her current managers know she is up to the job, she worries other employers may view her as incapable due to being autistic:

Kristy: *'because they might think to themselves. I'm thinking about my team now. Can she? You know? Can I mean this? They know I can do. But then say I went to another job. Can they? Can she empathise with parent?'* (p38)

This emphasises the pervasive and insidious nature of ableism in society, suggesting she would be seen as incapable of empathising with a parent, despite her own claim that her real struggle is empathising too much rather than too little.

Subtheme: Perceived Obligations from others

Kristy speak about how others state their preference to be in the office and see people. She wants to fit in so doesn't admit that she hates it:

Kristy: *'I don't feel I can say, oh, no, I hate it because you know, need to fit in' (p51)*

Kristy desperately wants to fit in so tries to blend in with the wants and needs of others. The use of the phrase 'I hate it', suggests very strong feeling that she is squashing to fit in.

Kristy speaks about how her manager suggested that she could join ADHD working group to share her experiences:

Kristy: *'if I was in that ADHD group, I would have been I would have felt forced to divulge my I would have felt not that they would have made me. I would have felt not forced to. That's a very strong word, but I would have felt it would have been helpful to the group. But then? You know, I would have made myself vulnerable and I and I think I've done that too much already, you know, especially with my manager' (p36).*

Here, Kristy demonstrates the pressure she feels to join the group to share her experiences but feels she has been given mixed messages by managers who seem to simultaneously want her to open up and be vulnerable about her experiences while also creating a dangerous environment to do so.

Subtheme: Feels dangerous to disclose autistic identity

Unfortunately, Lizzie, Emeline, Janine and Kristy all discuss feeling fearful to disclose their autistic identity.

A felt lack of felt safety feeds into Lizzie's desire not to disclose

Lizzie: *'then people who can shock you coming out with kind of bizarre prejudices or misconceptions in written publications and correspondence and in verbal conversations. So, my default is to be quite reticent and hold a lot of stuff back' (p101)*

This then impacts on the support she receives:

Lizzie: *'you don't get support because you're not approaching people or sharing information. So I guess you miss out on something there in order to keep yourself a bit more safe and protected' (p101).*

Emeline expresses doubt as to whether colleagues would extend support to her:

Emeline: *'everyone says the right things. But then I don't know like for myself if I was to say I'm autistic I don't know whether they that would be extended to colleagues' (p67)*

Emeline further reflects:

Emeline: *'I wouldn't tell my manager either way with it or without a diagnosis' (p5)*
which suggests a fear when telling others about her autistic identity.

Emeline expresses a desire to hide or keep a secret her autistic identity from others, for example she worries about how other people would react if she had a formal diagnosis. She therefore considers not telling anyone:

Emeline: *'I worry that if I was to be given that label, what would I do with it? I don't know that I think I would be so worried about how would I tell someone that I am autistic? What would they think? What would? How would that then impact our relationship that I would probably not bother telling them anyway'* (p3)

Emeline's use of multiple interrogatives highlights the fear that she feels, she is asking so many questions of the experience highlighting the doubt she feels.

Janine perceives that she should hide her autistic identity in a different way, by masking. Janine feels that masking has and continues to be needed to get by to protect against prejudice:

Janine: *'I don't think I would, you know, be able to get by if I wasn't masking'* (p3)

She comments on the dominant tragedy narratives that she sees, which are outdated and act as a real barrier to 'admitting' you or your family are autistic, it feels like you are a criminal

Janine: *'A lot of hiding it and in the end I just thought, no, I'm not a criminal. You know I just have a different way of processing things'* (p4, 5)

Here, Janine's use of the word 'criminal' brings home the stark reality that the way she feels is as though she has committed a crime, rather than simply processing things differently. She makes a resolve to be real with herself that in fact she is not a criminal at all, even though at times that is how she feels.

However, Janine also feels that if they are hiding their autistic identity this in itself is acting as a barrier to autistic educational psychologists reaching their personal and professional goals

Janine: *'Again, it comes down to stigma, isn't it, that people shouldn't feel the people shouldn't feel pressured to talk about that if they're neurodivergent, but shouldn't feel that they have to hide it, which is what it feels like at the moment. And I think that is a big barrier.'* (p76)

Kristy speaks about having to mask to fit in with the EP world (4)

Kristy: *'I think it's because I've learnt to mask that it's been the masking has become my new identity'* (4)

This suggests that Kristy has had to put on a new identity in order to be in the EP world. Her choice of the word learnt suggests that this is something that has not necessarily come naturally to her. She prefers to not have to mask and would rather work unsociable hours in order to avoid people and socialising.

Kristy: *'I prefer working at night. Especially towards like 10, 11, 12, 1 because there's no expectations then I'm not going to, you know, I don't have. Obviously, I'm I don't I'm not*

expected to be at work. I'm not expected to socialise at work. I'm not expected to answer'
(p101).

3.10 Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the current study in relation to the research question, by using chosen theoretical frameworks, broader literature and research. Following this, implications and limitations of the study are outlined, with suggestions for future research considered.

3.10.1. What are the lived experiences of autistic educational psychologists?

The study explored the professional lived experiences of autistic EPs. This was investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews with five autistic EPs. The data were analysed using IPA and three GETs were identified (Autistic Strengths and Needs are inseparable; Adaptations and Adjustments; Prejudice, stereotypes, lack of safety, masking). It will be argued that autistic EP's experiences are shaped by how they are positioned within a neurotypical professional context. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model will be used as an organising framework to understand the overall context in which Positioning takes place. Therefore, Positioning Theory, the Social Model of Disability, The Double Empathy Problem, as well as research concerning masking and camouflaging are used within the organising framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model.

3.10.2 Bronfenbrenner EST

Bronfenbrenner's EST asserts that an individual is nestled between various systems (see Figure 1 for a visual representation related to the topic). This model would place the participant at the centre, who interacts directly with their microsystem. Their microsystem includes daily contacts such as colleagues; friends; children and young people who they work with; parents; doctoral training; educational psychology research; broader research; newspaper headlines; mass media as well as social media. The mesosystem refers to the connections between these daily and immediate environments, such as the social media post interacting with the parent who then speaks to a Teaching Assistant who shares the latest headline in the news that depicts or reinforces broader exosystemic attitudes toward autistic individuals (for example). The exosystem refers to broader frameworks that may indirectly influence the participant such as diagnostic pathways; access to support; workplace policies; supervision; training and legislation like the Equality Act 2010 which may, in turn, shape the microsystem. The macrosystem refers to societal attitudes, cultural views of autism, which may influence the felt safety to which a person can disclose their autistic identity, therefore impacting the support they receive as well as their professional experiences. Finally, the outermost circle refers to the chronosystem which may include life transitions for individual participants but also broader shifts

in time, considering zeitgeist (the defining spirit of period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is helpful alongside Positioning Theory (PT) to support and decode understandings of the way in which EPs take up or are assigned differing positionalities in different contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

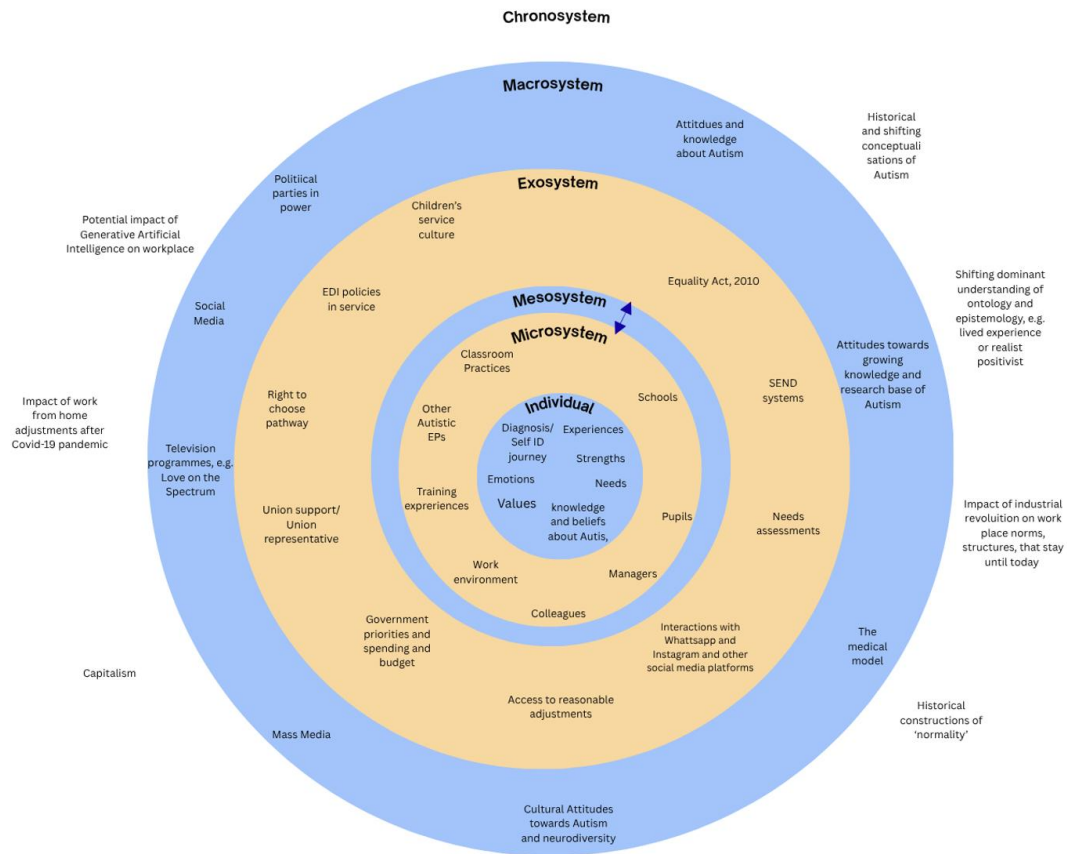


Figure 1: A diagram of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory related to participants in the current study

3.10.3 Positioning Theory

Positioning Theory (PT) was developed by Van Langenhove & Harré, (1999). It examines the relationship between what people can do or say, what they believe they are entitled to do or say and how they act based upon these beliefs (Harre & Slocum, 2003). A 'position' refers to a set of temporary, context dependent and negotiable rights, duties, and obligations that individuals hold within an interaction. This is poignant in the current research since each of the participants take up and account for their position as autistic, but also their position as educational psychologists. Individuals may self-position by claiming rights or accepting duties, while others may impose positions that assign obligations. Therefore, PT can aid an understanding of the findings both in relation to how the participants positioned themselves, and how they experienced being positioned, e.g. by colleagues, managers, peers or clients. Lizzie's description of herself as a 'double agent' (both

autistic and an EP) led the researcher to interpret the findings using positioning theory, as she was both being positioned by others, and positioning herself.

Unlike Role Theory, PT asserts that positions are dynamic, context-specific, and open to negotiation or contestations; therefore PT provides a helpful framework to understand the unique, and potentially shifting, position of autistic EPs, as seen in the findings (for example their recounts of how they are positioned, or the position they take up in schools, with colleagues, in the office, or within the broader network of the EP community of professionals). To position someone as an EP will also mean it is possible to position another as a client and vice-versa. Individuals, and for example the participants in this study itself, can occupy multiple positions simultaneously. This is important given the participant groups are both autistic, as well as EPs. Positioning can be used strategically to exercise power, and positions can be placed on an individual and either rejected or assumed. The theory also distinguishes between first order (performative) and second order (accountantive) positioning that often extends beyond the immediate interaction. In this research, it is interesting that the researcher herself is positioned, and positions herself, as researcher (and the participant the participant) (representing a first order position). Additionally, the individual participants are offering their account of their own positioning, (e.g. how they position themselves) but also how they experience being positioned (second order, accountantive, positioning) (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). In this discussion, PT is used alongside Bronfenbrenner's EST since they are both concerned with the overall context in which the participant is nestled within, while EST considers the interacting systems, PT focuses on the way in which others in those systems position and are positioned, which may of course be impacted by the systems themselves.

3.10.3 GET 1: Autistic strengths and support needs are inseparable

This GET explored and referenced several instances where participants recalled the strengths that they bring to the EP role. Interestingly, the focus on strengths and challenges may have come from the fact that the researcher included these in the interview schedule. This position to focus on strengths may derive from the researcher's own rejection of the deficit model. However, each of the participants framed strengths as, at times, becoming challenges when in a particular context which shows the re-negotiation of this position. This highlights the importance of recognising how environmental influences shape their experiences, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's EST. For example, Emeline, Lizzie, Caleb and Janine speak about their joy to consume knowledge about psychology and their love of sharing that generously as free training for other colleagues (J, 31). Here, participants reflect on their specialised interest in psychology, which is instrumental in building up other colleagues when they share their knowledge generously. However, participants acknowledge the physical limit to the energy needed to do this well (C, 50; L, 31). They synthesise their knowledge into free training, influencing their Mesosystem. Interestingly, when Caleb and Lizzie discuss their physical limitations

regarding their energy to share their knowledge, this may reflect a Mesosystem shaped by conflicting influences, making it harder to express a (perhaps) counter-cultural perspective (i.e. non pathologizing and neuro-affirming in a society that is more tilted towards the medical model of understanding Autism).

Monotropic cognition is another experience that participants suggested can, in certain situations and contexts, be seen as both a strength and a challenge. For example, Janine reflects on her ability to get into flow states and how the schools she works with appreciate the detail she can give in case work (J, 95). Therefore, Janine positions her monotropic cognition style as a difference, not a deficit. It is when the environmental factors are not set up for Janine that this cognitive style is then a challenge (i.e. ‘people grab you while you are at the photocopier’ (J, 47). This can be understood considering the social model of disability; if there were spaces set up in offices that allowed those (such as Janine) who may have a monotropic cognitive style, an uninterrupted space and time, then the difficulty associated with task switching and other interruptions would pose less of a challenge. This again can be framed within Bronfenbrenner’s EST since the participant (in this case Janine) speaks about her interactions with the workspace and others in the office mesosystem who wish to speak to her while she is working at the photocopier. This challenge is therefore highlighted as a symptom of the mesosystem not being set up for monotropic cognition style, which may come from broader macro and exosystemic levels where infrastructure and office space is made for neurotypical cognition styles.

All participants described strong attunement to the autistic children, young people, and families that they support. This aligns with the Double Empathy Problem, suggesting autistic EPs may be more attuned to autistic CYP, challenging assumptions that autistic people lack empathy. It also connects to the Triple Empathy Problem, where misattunement can occur between autistic CYP/families and non-autistic EPs (since the EPs not only find it challenging to attune to the autistic families and young people due to differing neurotypes, but the EPs are also submerged in an academic, acronym heavy landscape which could put more of a wedge between the EP and the client. The combination of a shared neurotype may therefore enable autistic EPs to relate more effectively to autistic clients than their non-autistic counterparts (Shaw, Doherty, et al., 2023b).

Participants described their creativity as stemming from differences in how they process information. Janine emphasises the advantages of this, particularly when working in a neurodiverse team where varied ways of thinking allow for a broader range of perspectives. Similarly, Caleb highlights the value of approaching situations from multiple viewpoints. Although Caleb presents his approach positively, it may also reflect an effort to shape his narrative, possibly in response to awareness that autistic individuals are sometimes perceived as rigid thinkers, which may be related to the macrosystemic level of assumptions within society that Caleb is actively speaking against.

Overall, GET 1 highlights the unique role that Autistic EPs play in reducing the alienation felt by some clients who are autistic when they are supported by neurotypical EP professionals, as

highlighted by the triple empathy model (Josefson, 2025; Shaw, Doherty, et al., 2023). Considering how the participants position their strengths and challenges, both rejecting a deficit model, while also not denying their challenges, is helpful when considering models of disability. The experiences of autistic educational psychologists are both complex and nuanced, especially considering how they position themselves within their roles and how others, including colleagues, and the researcher herself position them. Bronfenbrenner's EST model underscores the relationship between various levels of the contextual environment and the impact it has on the experiences of autistic EPs. It therefore forms a basis to understand the EPs strengths and needs as inseparable due to the environment being a changing variable.

3.10.4 GET 2: Adaptations and adjustments

This Group Experiential Theme considered the various environmental adaptations, including supervision, that participants speak about. This GET can be understood by considering the Social Model of Disability which assumes that barriers are from the environment, rather than the individual; in other words, the participant's need for adaptations reflects structural exclusion, not personal deficit. Therefore, considering the participant's experiences nestled within their mesosystems is also helpful when understanding this GET.

Participants discuss feeling dysregulated, and this is attributed to the chaotic office environment which is 'too many people talking, there's too many smells, it's too bright. I don't know where, because we do hot desking, I don't know where I'm supposed to sit', says Emeline (E, 11). Janine states that 'Systems are set up for them' (J, 10) making it not 'sustainable' (J, 56). Therefore, Janine speaks about how the office environment does not cater to her needs as a neurodivergent employee. This can be understood considering ecological systems theory which denotes the interactions between mesosystems, the office environment in this case, is not experienced by Janine as being supportive to her needs as an employee (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The participants referred to adaptations being informal and self-created (for example, the autonomy they have as an EP allows them to timetable decompression time). The responsibility is experienced on the individual managing or coping. Lizzie and Caleb also try to get adaptations without necessarily drawing attention to their neurodivergence or autism, for example Caleb's sensory needs are disguised as sciatica, while Lizzie's need for predictability and routine is disguised as mere personal preference or choice. Participants therefore demonstrate a positioning of their adaptations and adjustments as self-created, possibly disguisable, and their own responsibility (rather than managers). Participants feel that managers do not actively support them to voice their adaptation needs, instead they constantly feel they must ask for the adaptations. Kirsty wishes for a manager to ask: 'what can we do to help you feel safer at work?' (K, 62). Instead, the responsibility is felt to be on the part of the autistic EP; Emeline says: 'I took that very literally because of my diagnosis and but I

feel like the the responsibility kind of landed at my door for the miscommunication, rather than it being a “oh yeah maybe it was a 50/50 thing” (E, 19). Again, this may be understood using the Double Empathy theory, whereby it is suggested that neurodivergent individuals are always expected to make changes so that they can fit in with neurotypical expectations. Janine feels that there is an undertone of managers not seeing the necessity for adaptations, and Janine posits that some seem to have the attitude that ‘we all have to put up with that’ (J, 27) (Milton, 2012b). The participants’ experiences are shaped by environmental influences, including societal norms that discourage support-seeking and place responsibility on individuals to request adjustments. For autistic adults who mask or camouflage their needs, this can make accessing support more difficult despite protections under (The Equality Act, 2010).

Supervision is seen as a supportive and restorative space for Caleb, a safe space to explore emotions he feels when carrying out his role. However, Emeline on the other hand finds that supervision does not meet her needs, and so she engages in what she terms self-supervision. Considered through the lens of the Double Empathy theory, it may be that the supervisory relationship between a neurodivergent psychologist as supervisee and a neurotypical supervising psychologist may have its challenges if there is a miscommunication arising due to the Double Empathy problem.

Emeline discusses her use of decompression time, and how she deals with the many ideas that she has in her head after an event at work, (e.g. a consultation or a school visit). Emeline perceives and finds her own solutions by listening to loud music in the car between tasks to regulate or by sending herself voice notes to get her ideas out of her head. Emeline therefore positions adaptations as her own responsibility. This may be an example of her own response to masking and dealing with excessive cognitive load. To maintain her professional positioning as a competent educational psychologist, Emeline engages in these private and under-cover adaptations, indicating camouflaging to fit in with others (Cook et al., 2021, 2022). When Emeline describes these adaptations, they are very much undertaken in private ‘I need that like decompression and sometimes it can just be a car journey between one place and the next can be like a decompression, but not always’ (E, 33). However, since she does this inconspicuously, she highlights that she may ‘not always’ have the time nor space to do this. Therefore, in this case, Emeline highlights the precariousness of the supports being available to her. It also highlights the tension between professional norms and authenticity in that if she is truly authentic, she may not need to regulate in the privacy of her car, yet this may feel dangerous and therefore she may not want to let others know about this. In this way, adjustments are not simply supports but highlight the negotiation navigated between authenticity and professional norms.

3.10.5 GET 3: Prejudice, stereotypes, lack of safety, and masking

This GET explored how Autistic EPs are positioned within stigmatising storylines that are either rejected or internalised by the participants themselves. For example, Lizzie reflected on offensive stereotypes stated by external lecturers when she was training on the doctoral course. She also reflects on her concern that some EPs recommend social skills training and behaviourist approaches like Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), which she demonstrates exasperation about since she reflects that the profession really should know better than to be recommending such provision. Lizzie may feel disappointment that other people have not updated their knowledge base, and this can be understood considering EST which suggests that we can understand the influences of the environment and societal attitudes, recent research papers, and news headlines and articles, upon attitudes to autism (Lin et al., 2026).

Lizzie describes finding it difficult to sit through lectures that frame autism as a deficit and promote interventions aimed at making autistic children and young people appear more neurotypical. As a result, she views educational psychologists who recommend such interventions as acting inconsistently with the knowledge she would expect them to hold. This can therefore reflect the discrepancy between Lizzie's own knowledge base and beliefs compared to ones shared by other EPs in other environments.

Linked to this, Lizzie positions some EPs as elevating themselves as experts on neurodiversity. This can position autistic EPs as less authoritative, and experiential rather than 'professional' knowers. For example, Janine reflects that some individuals are 'controlling the narrative and also almost like applying the work of what an EP does to an employee' (J, 23). This shows that some EPs are using their 'expertise' to somehow come across as more knowledgeable than the Autistic EP who has the lived experience. Their positioning means that the autistic EP reflects on feeling like a client, rather than a colleague. This has implications when considering the legitimate expert and helps consider what forms of knowledge are valued within the EP profession, for example lived experience or more objective 'experts'. Janine points out that, in her experience, professional knowledge is privileged over lived experience. In this sense, her experiences of non-autistic EPs positioning themselves as neurodiversity experts may reflect broader professional storylines that privilege formalised, professional knowledge over lived experience. Within this dynamic, autistic EPs risk being positioned as possessing experiential insight that is not afforded the same authority as professional knowledge, highlighting an imbalance in epistemic power. This may be exemplified when Janine says: 'professional plus autistic equals your rights disappear' (J, 41). This dynamic can be further understood through the concept of 'epistemic injustice', which refers to the ways in which individuals may be wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2007). For example, testimonial injustice relates to when someone's knowledge is given less credibility. In this example, the autistic EPs' insights are seen to be questioned, overlooked or treated as less 'objective'. This is relevant when Janine speaks about managers seeing her as biased and, therefore, unable to undertake

case work where there is an autistic CYP (J, 25). Positioning Theory could explain that autistic EPs are situated within a narrative that questions their credibility, meaning their knowledge is undermined. Consequently, autistic EPs may be simultaneously positioned as both subjects of expertise and excluded from contributing to it, demonstrating an imbalance in epistemic power within the profession.

Furthermore, Janine draws attention to the current Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) process being somewhat incompatible with neuro-affirming practice, reflecting a systemic problem where the system enforces a deficit positioning since evidence of clear difficulty is required for the EHCP to be granted (Bodfield & Culshaw, 2023). Again, this can be understood by considering Bronfenbrenner's EST since the EHCP process is impacting the ways in which professionals, parents and others position and are positioned by the processes derived from Government Policies and the SEND Code of Practice. Therefore, considering neuro-affirmative practice through the lens of both EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006) and Positioning Theory (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) can explain Janine's experiences of neuro-affirmative practice.

Caleb and Kristy highlight the impact of internalised stigma, which demonstrates the way that they position themselves (which is ultimately and understandably shaped by dominant narratives). This demonstrates the psychological impact of positioning. For example, Kristy highlights a moment where her principal told her to refrain from sharing too much of herself in a professional context (K, 6), which seems to have led to Kristy questioning whether or not to send an email, for example (K, 16). This can be understood considering neuro-queer theory, which aims to trouble neuro-normative accounts of what is deemed as 'normal' or acceptable behaviour (Walker, 2021). In her account, Kristy is positioned as abnormally oversharing, and needing to cease doing so, at least in the work context. The impact of this positioning by her principal may have contributed towards the doubt that Kristy now experiences when considering what to share and what not to share. Bronfenbrenner's EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006) can also shed light on this finding, since it could be seen that Kristy's sharing of her personal information would be entirely acceptable in a different context such as supervision, for example, where it is important to reflect in a 360 manner (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010b; Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). So, while the principal is asking Kristy to refrain from sharing personal information in the professional context, the nature of the work of a psychologist, and the need for ongoing self-reflection troubles this altogether given the ever-shifting context in which EPs work in.

Janine, Kristy and Lizzie experience anticipating judgement from others. For example, Kristy wonders if she moved jobs would her new team, knowing she is autistic, wonder if she can competently carry out the job; she gives the example that she anticipates they could wonder 'can she empathise with parents' (K, 38). This relates to the previous point about the archaic ideas about Autistic individuals lacking theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), which made such an effect on the overall narrative of autism depicted in the media. This may have led to Lizzie internalising the

stigmatised positioning which, in turn, has resulted in self-doubt. Again, Bronfenbrenner's EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) gives colour to these findings, since even though the double empathy problem has problematised the theory of mind definitions of autism which pervaded, there are clearly overhangs from old theories, suggesting a lag in the chronosystem.

Kristy wants to fit in with others, and blend in (K, 51), which results in her not feeling able to be clear that she does not always appreciate being in the office and being sociable at work. She also recounts being asked to be part of an ADHD working group as suggested by her manager, and here she can be argued to have been in this moment positioned as an expert by experience. However, Kristy feels she would have felt forced, or that it would have been helpful to share and divulge her own diagnosis of ADHD in that moment, even if she did not necessarily want to. Therefore, Kristy's decision not to join this working group demonstrates her rejection of this position by her manager.

Four out of five of the participants mentioned feeling fear of disclosing their autistic identity. This may be because disclosure is linked to no longer being deemed professionally legitimate. For example, by being an openly autistic EP, the participants feel positioned as less credible. Poignantly, Emeline says: 'everyone says the right things. But then I don't know like for myself if I was to say I'm autistic I don't know whether they that would be extended to colleagues (E, 67). This demonstrates the doubt Emeline feels regarding other's understanding her autism, and fear of others not understanding her. This is consistent with research considering the fears and challenges of disclosing her autistic diagnosis with others in the workplace (Au-Yeung et al., 2025). In this sense masking, non-disclosure, and internalised stigma can be understood as responses to unsafe positioning within professional and systemic contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that the experiences of autistic educational psychologists are best understood as the product of how they are positioned within neurotypical professional, relational, and systemic contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006). The discourse, norms and power played out through positioning theory is perpetuated by structural barriers which is considered by the social model of disability to be a disabling environment. Moreover, the relational mismatch between autistic and non-autistic EPs, which is possibly played out in the difficulties arising in supervision (highlighted by the double empathy problem), as well as the epistemic injustice highlighted when autistic EPs do not feel afforded with the same legitimacy of knowledge as non-autistic EPs and are positioned as bias. Masking, non-disclosure and camouflaging needs can be understood as an adaptive response to positioning.

3.10.6 Implications

Autistic EPs have the potential to add significant value and knowledgeable expertise to the overall profession of Educational Psychology. They also have the potential to provide less alienating support and care for neurodivergent clients, considering the triple empathy problem that suggests that autistic

professionals may relate better to autistic clients than their neurotypical counterparts (Josefson, 2025; Shaw et al., 2024). However, it is arguably only with added support and adaptations that this can be realised. Although each participant recognised key strengths that they bring to the role and in particular an ability to attune and empathise with autistic children and young people, these strengths can tip into challenges if the right support is not there. It is recognised that all psychologists require supervision in order to carry out the role as a psychologist effectively (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010b). Supervision needs to be a safe space for the supervisee to be honest about the challenges of their work, and there are multiple functions of supervision: normative (linked to line managerial functions), formative (skills building, education and theoretical knowledge development) and supportive (with a focus on wellbeing) (Cutcliffe et al., 2011). Furthermore, research understands that effective supervision centres on relational safety established, yet increasingly research in the practise of clinical supervision has considered power dynamics interacting with the relational safety needed for effective supervisory relationships (Hernández & McDowell, 2010). Further (Hernández & McDowell, 2010) propose a postcolonial framework for clinical supervision that moves beyond traditional multiculturalism to focus on power, privilege, and intersectionality and highlighting how overlapping identities shape supervisor and trainee relationships. By emphasizing relational safety, the framework promotes open dialogue, critical awareness, and accountability, urging both supervisors and supervisees to examine their social positions and challenge inequitable systems.

Virji, (2024) outlines a framework to improve clinical supervision for neurodivergent medical professionals and trainee doctors, who make up an estimated 15–20% of that professional population but are often disadvantaged by one-size-fits-all approaches. It translates 12 Practitioner Values into practical strategies across five key pillars. These include 1) fostering psychological safety by respecting diverse communication styles and reducing anxiety; 2) using active listening to help learners feel understood and able to ‘unmask’; 3) delivering feedback with sensitivity, particularly for those experiencing rejection sensitivity; 4) balancing accountability with curiosity to address barriers and support strengths; and 5) promoting authentic leadership to build learner confidence and independence. Overall, the framework encourages inclusive, supportive supervision that enables neurodivergent learners to thrive in demanding clinical environments. The framework may be a helpful starting point for improving the effectiveness and inclusivity of supervision for neurodivergent educational psychologists. Since the supervision needs of educational psychologists may differ from those of medical doctors, it may be important to consider conducting further research into accessible and supportive clinical supervision for Educational Psychologists. Considering the findings of the current piece of research relating to supervision will also be important, and it may be important for the current thesis to be published and therefore accessible to senior EPs, and others who supervise EPs. Similarly, some autistic EP led training may support those who are in a position of supervising others to consider the nuanced challenges for autistic EPs and what they may need from supervision for it to be helpful.

3.10.7 Autistic Led Training for managers and supervisors

Another implication for practise is for managers to have autistic led training (i.e. that delivered by Autistic individuals), that highlights the danger that many feel in disclosing their autistic identity, and build in awareness of masking and camouflaging so that managers are aware of the needs of potential employees who may not yet feel comfortable with asking for adaptations, since they do not feel that they will be treated fairly and with inclusivity if they do so. Managers can be encouraged to ask employees what they need to feel safety which may help all practitioners to be able to offer person-centred support to employees. The current thesis can be used as part of the evidence base of this training, and for example may be cited in the training, or used to showcase the needs of autistic EPs.

This research suggests the current EHCP process is not fit for purpose, perpetuating outdated, deficit-based models of neurodiversity. Educational Psychologists should play an active role in shaping policy and practice to better reflect diverse experiences often absent from dominant narratives. Without more balanced representations, deficit-focused views risk reinforcing stigma around autism. The consultation process of government white paper on inclusion, Every Child Achieving and Thriving may offer the opportunity for a new perspective to be taken, however this will need active advocacy on the part of EPs and other professionals impacting policy by voicing their ideas (Department for Education (DfE), 2026). The current thesis can be used as part of the evidence base when considering the direction of the EP profession in the light of inclusion. Therefore, publishing the thesis will form an appropriate way to foreground and utilise the study so that the implications for practice can be actioned.

3.10.8 Limitations

A key limitation of this study is the small sample size ($n=5$), which restricts the generalisability of the findings. The absence of detailed demographic information further limits the ability to contextualise participants' perspectives or explore how factors such as age, ethnicity, or professional experience may have shaped the results. In addition, the voices of non-verbal or situationally non-verbal individuals were not captured, meaning the findings may not fully represent the breadth of communication experiences within the population. There was also a lack of homogeneity in participants' professional contexts, as they worked across traded, non-traded, and private services, introducing variability that is difficult to control for.

The gender imbalance within the sample (four female, one male) may also constrain representativeness. However, on the other hand this can be viewed as a relative strength, given the limited research exploring the experiences of autistic adult women, alongside the fact that the EP workforce is predominantly female.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the analysis is subject to researcher interpretation, and potential bias cannot be eliminated. To mitigate this, the researcher engaged in regular research supervision, maintained a reflexive journal, and actively bracketed assumptions in line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology.

3.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study addresses a notable gap in the literature by foregrounding the voices and lived experiences of autistic EPs. Through semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, it highlights both the individuality of participants' experiences and the shared themes that shape their professional lives. The findings demonstrate that autistic strengths and needs are deeply interconnected, that meaningful adaptations and adjustments are essential for effective practice, and that ongoing challenges related to prejudice, stigma, lack of safety, and masking persist within professional contexts.

These insights carry important implications for the field of Educational Psychology, particularly for those in leadership and supervisory roles. Creating supportive, inclusive working environments is not only a matter of equity but also enables Autistic professionals to contribute their distinct perspectives and strengths to the profession more fully, which will hopefully in turn bring about better outcomes for clients, especially considering the triple empathy problem. By recognising and responding to the needs of autistic EPs, the profession can move towards more inclusive practices that empower autistic EPs to thrive and reach their full potential.

Chapter 4: Research-Practitioner: a critically reflective account

4.1. Introduction

This chapter will endeavour to inform the reader of selected reflections about the research process. The chapter will focus on salient areas such as the choice of topic; key methodological considerations, such as participant recruitment and analysis; positionality; theoretical underpinnings and future directions for research as well as dissemination plans.

4.2 Positionality

Positionality can be understood as a researcher's perspective of the world and where the researcher stands in relation to their research participants (Yip, 2024). This important section considers my own positionality, which considers who I am in relation to the research, and how my perspective shaped my decisions and perceptions within the research. This is especially important when it comes to IPA research where my role in interpreting the participant's meaning is important and active rather than passive.

4.2.1 Insider-outsider

Part of the nuance regarding positionality was that I was on a journey with my own neurodivergence, and during the research, underwent my own autism and ADHD assessments and received diagnoses. This was discussed in supervision, since the researcher started the research self-identifying as neurodivergent, but by the end of the research, had received a formal diagnosis of first ADHD and then autism. In speaking about this during supervision, I realised that perhaps this was part of why I was so intrigued by the topic, and part of why I decided to pursue this topic in the first instance. I did not disclose my own neurodivergence with participants unless asked directly by a participant as I did not feel it was relevant since it was about their experiences.

I also had other elements that impacted my positionality. For example, I was speaking with participants who were fully qualified EPs, while I was still underway with my training, therefore I felt that this impacted the power relations in that the participants would hopefully not perceive me as expert, and therefore esteem their own experiences as expert. Despite this, I acknowledged that this topic was my own project so I had an element of being in a strong position of power relating to practicalities including what would happen and when (in the interviews, for example). So, I took opportunities to reduce this e.g. I decided to ensure that the interview questions were shared with participants ahead of time in order that they could prepare if they wanted.

My own positionality as a neurodivergent person may have impacted the sorts of questions and follow up questions that I invited participants to speak about, for example considering strengths as well as challenges. This was something that felt important to me to promote the inclusion of a more

holistic understanding of autism that could move away from a pathologizing and medicalised stance. I did not want to only focus on strengths as this was something that felt difficult in a world that often holds prejudice and barriers towards neurodivergent and autistic individuals. My own personal experiences and beliefs meant that I wanted to highlight strengths of being an autistic EP but in fact participants highlighted a real variation in experiencing strengths but also facing significant challenges and discrimination.

At times, I felt a distinct emotional heaviness when hearing some of the challenges and barriers faced by some of the participants in their workspaces and yearned for things to be better. I was approaching the research from the perspective of being new to the profession, and therefore I was still training, and perhaps in something of a ‘honeymoon’ phase; seeing most of my colleagues writing in such neuro-affirmative ways, being part of a learning set that was seeking to pioneer and audit the practice in her placement service, etc. So, when I heard some of the challenges and discrimination faced in a profession that I felt (and still feel) should know better, it was difficult to comprehend. It had an impact on me and led me to not want to disclose my own diagnoses widely. I took my concerns to research supervision to try and comprehend this a bit more, and to offload some of the heaviness.

I made use of various strategies when it came to actively addressing my own positionality, such as keeping a reflexive journal, making use of supervision and being transparent in the analysis process (Yip, 2024) (see appendix 4).

4.3 Choosing a research topic

A salient point of reflection is how I chose my research topic. I began thinking about the research topic for a range of personal and professional reasons.

4.3.1. Neuro-affirming Learning Set

In their second year of placement, I attended a learning set focusing on Neuro-affirming practice. This group met throughout the year to share reading and come up with a guiding document for the wider EP service to use when writing reports, selecting assessments and working with clients and their families. So, this group focused on how EPs currently use assessments; support clients and their families; write reports and use their skills and knowledge to write statutory advice and non-statutory advice about provision and outcomes, within the lens of neuro-affirming and neuro-inclusive practice. The learning set was instrumental in my ever-increasing curiosity and desire to understand more about neurodiversity. Increasingly, I began to see the practice of EP through a lens of neurodiversity affirming practice and became increasingly enthusiastic about the direction of the profession in terms of this. I also began to engage in unpicking the societal ideas and medical models of autism and compared these with more strengths-based understandings of autism and other neurodivergences. A

key element of the learning set was the way in which the group was set up and attended by senior EPs, trainees, and main grade EPs. There did not seem to be a hierarchy and quickly it became clear that the group itself valued creating a safe space for all in the learning set to speak and take space. This provided a rich ground to discuss openly. There was also a set of guiding frameworks built into the beginning of each learning set meeting that allowed people to make mistakes, to get things wrong, (e.g. use terminology like identity first or diagnosis first language) and this again allowed me to feel at ease in journeying on the learning alongside the broader group.

4.3.2 Lecture about therapeutic interventions

At a similar time, I attended a lecture at my university about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and I was discussing with my peers on the course the drawbacks of CBT for autistic individuals. The lecturer was an external lecturer and prompted the researcher to think about the drawbacks of CBT when it comes to negating someone's thoughts and experiences. For example, they mentioned a time when they used CBT as a tool to support an autistic young person, who was being bullied, and they were being told to reframe their thinking about the bullying. But either way they looked at it, they felt that it was unfair and almost disingenuous to continue with the reframing when in fact this young person's reality and experiences were occurring daily; no amount of reframing would change his experience. This led me to consider, further, the ways in which professionals may unwittingly reinforce and negate young people's experiences when it comes to their lived reality, and especially how various assessments, training, interventions, provisions and outcomes may be negative for the lived reality of autistic individuals.

4.3.3 Link school neurodivergent staff member

On the same year and at a similar time of placement, I was supporting a primary school, and the SENCo informed me of his neurodivergence and how this helps him to relate well with neurodivergent learners, seeing things from their perspective and advocating for their needs effectively. His openness struck me as refreshing and bold, and left me considering how many other neurodivergent professionals are in the education profession and caring professions more generally, what it is like for them, and how this impacts their work. I therefore initially decided to consider conducting research investigating the experiences of autistic school staff. However, after speaking through my ideas with my research supervisor I realised that this may be difficult as there could be a huge deal of participants come forward and it may be difficult to contain such a large participant group. So, with the help of my research supervisor, I decided to consider the option of considering the experiences of neurodivergent EPs. I narrowed this focus to Autistic EPs in the first instance with initial plans to broaden this out to other neurodivergences like ADHD, Bipolar etc, if there were not enough participants. However, the recruitment of participants was not a challenge.

4.4 Recruitment of participants

Recruitment of participants was a straightforward process, as I put out an advert on EPNET (an online forum network for EPs). Within a very short space of time the researcher had the participants she needed to conduct the research (I aimed for 4 participants but had 6 agree to take part with one as a pilot interviewee). I asked the first participant who got back to me if she would like to be the pilot participant, which would mean that their data would not be analysed (instead, the pilot would help clarify the questions for subsequent participants).

There was a small dilemma in that the pilot participant expressed interest in her data being used in the main study, however since this would have likely involved there being amendments to the research ethics, it was deemed important to continue as planned without using their data, reflecting the constrained time scales of the research timeline. In addition, there was a lot of responses coming through from other potential participants and so it was not deemed necessary to use the pilot participant's data at this point. It did feel like a difficult dilemma, though, as I did not want to close off the opportunity for the pilot participant's voice to be included, however, nonetheless, I communicated my gratefulness for the way in which the pilot participant was able to shape the questions for the following participant interviews.

4.4.1 Analysis

A key point of reflection for the analysis was that I found that I was going back and forth with analysis and writing and vice versa. For example, though I had analysed the data, and had moved onto the writing up process, I would then find myself returning once again to the analysis. In some ways this felt 'wrong' as it felt as though it should be clearer cut, however I was reassured when I re-read the Smith book which allowed me to realise that the analysis continues during the writing phase. Smith says:

'Just as with every other stage of IPA there is not a single right way to write up an IPA analysis. Writing is a creative process, and authors, just like participants, have voices which will come out in the constructing of the account (...) it is also the case that analysis continues into the writing phase so that as one begins to write up a particular theme, one's interpretation of it can develop. You might find yourself, for example, going back and forth through your analysis right back to the original data.' Page 109, Chapter 6 (Smith et al., 2022).

During the write up phase of the analysis, I considered using a quotation from a participant as part of the overall thesis title (sometimes included in IPA research). The quote was: *E: everyone says the right things. But then I don't know like for myself if I was to say I'm autistic I don't know whether they that would be extended to colleagues' (67).*

Even though this quote is important and, in many ways, stark about Emeline's experiences as an autistic EP, I felt that by her perspective would still happen even if not situated as part of the overall title of the thesis. Additionally, I felt it was important to shift focus from a blaming culture, to a more collaborative, strengths-based moving forward together as a profession. I felt that if I was to include that quote as a title, this may in some ways have acted as an accusatory stance.

This decision is an interesting outworking of my positionality since it demonstrates my desire to remain positive and strengths-based, erring away from inflammatory comments or questions. This may be due to my position as a trainee EP, and my training in positive psychology and strengths-based approaches. This can be referred to as the science-practitioner model, where the researcher's role is impacted by their practice and vice versa (Drugaş, 2023).

4.4.2 Discussion and theoretical underpinnings

When writing the discussion, I used the wider literature and theoretical underpinnings to make sense of the findings. One dilemma I faced was that an influential piece of work that impacted upon my viewpoint was the work of Robert Chapman (Chapman, 2023). His work queries notions of normality, suggesting that neurodiversity inclusion needs to confront historical and Marxist capitalist ideologies. There is a convincing argument put forward. Therefore, this impacted upon my own ideas around Autism and led me to consider using Marxism as an organising framework, nestled within a critical realist Ontology and Epistemology. For a period, this seemed to make sense since Marxism highlights the very real and tangible environment in which the individual is part of, and the constraints this creates for those immersed in capitalist structures.

However, I reflected on this and decided against this as an organising theoretical framework, since it could potentially be narrow in its approach. Therefore, a broader and more robust framework (Bronfenbrenner's EST) which would potentially, if it needed to, encapsulate Marxist underpinnings to aid the understanding of the findings. This was something that I drew on momentarily, and further research may consider foregrounding the Autistic EPs experiences nestled within a Marxist viewpoint.

4.7 Plans for dissemination

There are some key considerations when it comes to dissemination, such as considering the target audience, and target messages (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020). I anticipate a range of EPs at different stages of their EP career, (e.g. those who supervise others, manage others, and those who are part of diverse teams in local authority services) will all likely benefit from understanding the perspectives and experiences of autistic colleagues. Therefore, I plan to disseminate the research by getting the research published in Education Psychology in Practice (EPIP). I also plan to disseminate by creating some overall training for managers with regards to inclusive practice at work. This will likely start

with my own local authority but hopefully branch to others. Finally, I plan to contact Universities that provide the EP doctoral training to hopefully share findings and develop training as well.

I also plan to use non-traditional methods like blog posts, visual and video abstracts and social media outlets to reach individuals in a memorable way (Bik & Goldstein, 2013). This could be via various platforms.

4.8 Future directions for research

Future directions of research could go in several directions. For example, it could focus on the experiences of other neurodivergent professionals within teams, such as ADHDers. Also, future research may seek to understand supervision processes that can support all EPs effectively, considering best practice when it comes to person-centred supervisory relationships, which would benefit all EPs who are supervised, as well as autistic EPs. A neuro-affirmative supervision framework could be developed, as has been the case for NHS clinical supervision for neurodiverse trainee Medical doctors (Virji, 2024). Finally, there could be further research considering the factors which impact a person being able to disclose their neurodivergence at work, and or during their doctoral training.

4.9 Conclusion

This section has endeavoured to provide a transparent reflection of the process I undertook when completing the thesis and recognises the complexity and nuance with which I as a researcher engaged with the data and participants at all stages of the thesis planning, collection and write up. For example, considering the choice of research topic as well as my positionality relating to it. I also reflected on the recruitment of participants and overall analysis including theoretical underpinnings as well as the reflexive strategies I employed.

Given the explorative aim of this research, it can be seen as a positive initial step to foregrounding the voices of Autistic EPs, while having its limitations since the results are on a small sample of individuals and therefore the results are not generalisable. Future directions for research (e.g. developing a neuro-inclusive framework for supervision) have been suggested, and plans for dissemination also.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment Research Advert

What are the professional lived experiences of Autistic Educational Psychologists (EPs)?



Purpose:

- explore the professional experiences of autistic EPs
- centre autistic voices, insights and perspectives to shape a more inclusive workplace and profession

You are eligible to take part if you are:

- Autistic (you self-identify as autistic or have received a diagnosis from a professional) &
- Currently working as an EP in the UK (either in a local authority or independently in private practice &
- Have been employed as an EP for at least 12 months

Study requirements:

- semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams Call to answer questions about your experiences as an autistic EP (1 hour).

Ethics:

- To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. UEA Ethics Committee application number: ETH2425-1851)

For more information please email:
bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk

Bethan Brown – Y2 Trainee Educational Psychologist – University of East Anglia.



Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

POST PILOT ADAPTATIONS

Guiding theoretical framework that informs the questions:

These questions are guided by a neuro-affirmative theoretical framework meaning they seek to draw out and highlight the unique strengths of autistic professionals while also seeking to understand their experiences and challenges too (CIPD, 2025). The questions assume and give space for participants to reflect and appreciate what they bring to their role and the wider Educational Psychology workforce, and what it means to them to be an autistic professional working as an EP. As such, the questions are also situated within a framework known as Appreciative Enquiry and positive psychology (Seligman, 1998; 2011), which focuses on strengths and human flourishing. While the focus is on strengths, the questions are also leaving space for the participants to discuss challenges associated with being Autistic and an EP.

Preamble

"Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Bethan Brown and I'm currently training to become an educational psychologist. As part of my thesis towards my professional doctorate, I'm conducting interviews to learn more about people's experiences and perspectives as Autistic Educational Psychologists.

The purpose of today's interview is to explore your thoughts and experiences being autistic and being an Educational Psychologist. There are no right or wrong answers – I'm really interested in your personal views and experiences.

This is a semi-structured interview, which means I've prepared some guiding questions, but we can follow the conversation wherever it naturally leads. If there's anything you're not comfortable answering, that's absolutely fine– just let me know.

Everything you share will be treated confidentially, and any identifying information will be anonymised, and pseudonyms will be used. I will also take care to ensure that the way I write the findings will mean you cannot be identified. With your permission, I'd like to record the interview so I can listen back to it and make sure I've captured your thoughts accurately. I will use the transcribe function on Microsoft Teams and will listen back to ensure accuracy.

Do you have any questions before we begin? And are you happy for me to start recording now?"

The interview schedule:

- 1) Please tell me about your experiences of being autistic.
- 2) Please let me about your experiences of being an autistic professional (specifically an autistic educational psychologist).
- 3) Can you tell me how you feel being an autistic professional may differ from the experiences of your colleagues who are not autistic?
- 4) What are the experiences you deem important to highlight about your experiences of being both autistic and an Educational Psychologist?
- 5) Could you tell me about your experiences of sharing being autistic with others when in your role - if you have done so? (Colleagues, managers, clients, parents, teachers etc).
- 6) In what ways do you feel being autistic is an advantage to you in your role as an EP?
- 7) In what ways can being autistic present challenges for you in your role as an EP within the workforce and/or workplace.
- 8) 'Ideal workplace' activity which is an adaptation of The Ideal School/ Ideal Self (Moran, 2023) and is taken from the field of personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955). This includes a series of questions to understand the participant's views about what makes a non-ideal workplace and what makes an ideal workplace. Although the task requires the

participant to draw their ideal and non-ideal workplace, for the purposes of the analysis it will be the things that they say during this activity that will be analysed.

<https://doverstls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Drawing-the-Ideal-School-Prompt-Sheet-1.pdf>

Part 1: Drawing the kind of work place you would not like. (3 mins)

The workplace:

Think about the kind of work place you would not like to go to. This is not a real workplace. Make a quick drawing of this workplace in the middle of this paper. What kind of workplace is this? Tell me three things about this workplace.

The office and physical space:

Think about the sort of office/ physical space you would not like to be in. Make a quick drawing of this office/ physical space. Draw some of the things in this office/ physical space. Tell me three things about this office/ physical space. This can also be about other places beyond the office, e.g. school visits, home visits etc.

The colleagues:

Think about some of the colleagues at the workplace you would not like to go to. Make a quick drawing of some of these colleagues. What are the colleagues doing? Tell me three things about these colleagues. Remember you can tell me about different colleagues e.g. other EPs, other members of staff at the local authority, admin staff, supervisors, school staff.

Me:

Think about the kind of workplace you would not like to go to. Make a quick drawing of what you would be doing at this workplace. Tell me three things about the way you feel at this workplace.

Part 2: Drawing the kind of work place you would like.

The workplace:

Think about the kind of work place you would like to go to. This is not a real workplace. Make a quick drawing of this workplace in the middle of this paper. Tell me three things about this workplace. What kind of workplace is this?

The office and physical space:

Think about the sort of office/ physical space you would like to be in. Make a quick drawing of this office/ physical space. This can also be about other places beyond the office, e.g. school visits, home visits etc.

Draw some of the things in this office/ physical space.

The colleagues:

Think about some of the colleagues at the workplace you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of some of these colleagues. What are the colleagues doing? Remember you can tell me about different colleagues e.g. other EPs, other members of staff at the local authority, admin staff, supervisors, school staff. Tell me three things about these colleagues.

Me:

Think about the kind of workplace you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of what you would be doing at this workplace. Tell me three things about the way you feel at this workplace.

- 9) What adaptations, if any, do you require as an autistic professional?
- 10) In what ways do you feel the workplace and wider professional EP community support you to fulfil your personal and professional goals.
- 11) Is there anything that the workplace and wider professional EP community can do to better support your needs?
- 12) Is there anything that the workplace and wider professional EP community currently do to support your needs?
- 13) How would you describe neuro-affirmative EP practice and what does it mean to you personally and/or in your role?
- 14) To what extent do you consider the professional EP community to be supportive of all ways of thinking and being (i.e. being neuro-affirmative and or neuro-inclusive)?
- 15) Is there anything else you think would be helpful to share about your experiences of being autistic related to your professional role or the Educational Psychology profession more generally.

Interview Closing – Trainee Educational Psychologist

"That brings us to the end of the questions I had planned – thank you so much for sharing your time and thoughts with me today. I really appreciate your openness and the insights you've shared.

Before we finish, is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered, or anything you'd like to ask me?

Just a quick reminder that everything you've said will be kept confidential, and any information I use in my work will be anonymised. If you think of anything later that you'd like to add or ask about, you're very welcome to get in touch. Remember you retain the right to withdraw your data up until the time I have started to analyse the data.

Thanks again – I really appreciate your contribution."

References

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https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/guides/neurodiversity-at-work_2018_tcm18-37852.pdf

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Appendix 3: Pilot Interview Schedule

Guiding theoretical framework that informs the questions:

These questions are guided by a neuro-affirmative theoretical framework meaning they seek to draw out and highlight the unique strengths of autistic professionals while also seeking to understand their experiences and challenges too (CIPD, 2025). The questions assume and give space for participants to reflect and appreciate what they bring to their role and the wider Educational Psychology workforce,

and what it means to them to be an autistic professional working as an EP. As such, the questions are also situated within a framework known as Appreciative Enquiry and positive psychology (Seligman, 1998; 2011), which focuses on strengths and human flourishing. While the focus is on strengths, the questions are also leaving space for the participants to discuss challenges associated with being Autistic and an EP.

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"Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Bethan Brown and I'm currently training to become an educational psychologist. As part of my thesis towards my professional doctorate, I'm conducting interviews to learn more about people's experiences and perspectives as Autistic Educational Psychologists.

The purpose of today's interview is to explore your thoughts and experiences being autistic and being an Educational Psychologist. There are no right or wrong answers – I'm really interested in your personal views and experiences.

This is a semi-structured interview, which means I've prepared some guiding questions, but we can follow the conversation wherever it naturally leads. If there's anything you're not comfortable answering, that's absolutely fine— just let me know.

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Do you have any questions before we begin? And are you happy for me to start recording now?"

The interview schedule:

- 1) Please tell me about your experiences of being autistic.
- 2) Please let me about your experiences of being an autistic professional.
- 3) How do you see being autistic and a professional (specifically an Educational Psychologist?
- 4) Can you tell me how you feel being an autistic professional may differ from the experiences of your colleagues who are not autistic?
- 5) What are the experiences you deem important to highlight about your experiences of being both autistic and an Educational Psychologist?

- 6) Could you tell me about your experiences of sharing being autistic with others when in your role - if you have felt you can? (Colleagues, managers, clients, parents, teachers etc).
- 7) In what ways do you feel being autistic is an advantage to you in your role as an EP?
- 8) In what ways can being autistic present challenges for you in your role as an EP within the workforce and/or workplace.
- 9) 'Ideal workplace' activity which is an adaptation of The Ideal School/ Ideal Self (Moran, 2023) and is taken from the field of personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955). This includes a series of questions to understand the participant's views about what makes a non-ideal workplace and what makes an ideal workplace. Although the task requires the participant to draw their ideal and non-ideal workplace, for the purposes of the analysis it will be the things that they say during this activity that will be analysed.
<https://doverstls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Drawing-the-Ideal-School-Prompt-Sheet-1.pdf>

Part 1: Drawing the kind of work place you would not like.

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Think about the sort of office/ physical space you would not like to be in. Make a quick drawing of this office/ physical space. Draw some of the things in this office/ physical space.

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Think about some of the colleagues at the workplace you would not like to go to. Make a quick drawing of some of these colleagues. What are the colleagues doing? Tell me three things about these colleagues.

Me:

Think about the kind of workplace you would not like to go to. Make a quick drawing of what you would be doing at this workplace. Tell me three things about the way you feel at this workplace.

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The workplace:

Think about the kind of work place you would like to go to. This is not a real workplace. Make a quick drawing of this workplace in the middle of this paper. Tell me three things about this workplace. What kind of workplace is this?

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Me:

Think about the kind of workplace you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of what you would be doing at this workplace. Tell me three things about the way you feel at this workplace.

- 10) What adaptations, if any, do you require as an autistic professional?
- 11) In what ways do you feel the workplace and wider professional EP community support you to fulfil your personal and professional goals.
- 12) Is there anything that the workplace and wider professional EP community can do to better support your needs?
- 13) Is there anything that the workplace and wider professional EP community currently do to support your needs?
- 14) How would you describe neuro-affirmative EP practice and what does it mean to you and your role?
- 15) To what extent do you consider the professional EP community to be neuro-affirmative?
- 16) Is there anything else you think would be helpful to share about your experiences of being autistic related to your professional role or the Educational Psychology profession more generally.

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Before we finish, is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered, or anything you'd like to ask me?

Just a quick reminder that everything you've said will be kept confidential, and any information I use in my work will be anonymised. If you think of anything later that you'd like to add or ask about, you're very welcome to get in touch. Remember you retain the right to withdraw your data up until the time I have started to analyse the data.

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https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/guides/neurodiversity-at-work_2018_tcm18-37852.pdf

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Appendix 4: Thoughts in reflective diary after each interview

Pilot Interview

After the first interview I did want to include the pilot participant as part of the data set because I felt that she said so many interesting things. I brought this to supervision to ask whether that would be possible and the overriding feeling was that this wouldn't be a good idea because I would have to go

back to the ethics board. The fact that she had asked however to be part of the main participants made me feel, ethically, should I explore this option. However, after supervision I decided that this wouldn't be a good idea, and later on I did wonder about whether it would be a good idea to potentially include this in my reflective chapter. This participant in the pilot interview had not had a formal diagnosis but were self-identifying at the time of the interview however a few weeks later she had at received a diagnosis of autism and she had emailed me to let me know and stated that at some point she might want to spend some time with and meet with other autistic EPs.

First Interview

This interview felt quite positive, and I felt I came away feeling as though this person had created a support network of people who could really support her later on however when I was analysing it I read between the lines a bit and gathered that potentially there was some querying needed as neuro-affirmative practise and some archaic views potentially being come up against. This was interesting to me because initially I had felt so positive coming out of this interview, so I wondered how about extra lens supports of watching it back supports the analysis process and depth of understanding of what the participant is trying to get across.

Second Interview

During the second interview I came away feeling quite sad about the prejudice that was faced by one of the individual participants. This was the second participant but the third overall if you include the pilot. This particular participant was showing real concern around being identified and potential identification and she at different points asked for the assurance that she wouldn't be able to be identified and which bits to take out which bits to leave in. I noticed the real sense of concern about risk which linked with some other participants as well who mentioned about the risk involved with participating in this piece of research even on an anonymous level since the world of the educational psychology profession is so small.

Third Interview

I had some interesting reflections after this interview and my perspective changed when I read back through the transcript.

Fourth interview

This was the first interview that I felt really that my style of interviewing was detached but also purposefully supporting a clear intention to understand the deeper experiences of the individual.

Therefore, I do feel as though this was my best interview so far, as I felt as though I was much calmer and more attached and dispassionate, almost, and I believe this led her to really feel listened to as it wasn't about me it was about her and her experiences. This made me worry that my previous interviews would not be very valid however I do think it this is part of the learning process, and I did aim to get experience close however I am a new researcher and also comparing my work as a researcher to that of a practitioner has been a difficult balance.

Fifth Interview

Probably the most emotional person I spoke to. I found this the most relaxed I had been in any of the interviews (maybe because I felt that I could and did know how to get 'experience' close and it was really much easier to let me follow her lead. I felt I attuned to her slower style of communication and tried to remain as neutral as possible.

Analysis 23/12/25

I followed step 1-6 for each individual transcript.

Some of the time I felt that I did not know whether I was doing it right, I took the analogue approach and had paper all over the floor of my bedroom. Each case I did the initial exploratory notes and then on the left hand side I set out the experiential statements. Then I wrote all the experiential statements onto a piece of paper. This gave me an opportunity to then look for groups of experiential statements, and to put them into PETS (personal experiential themes (PETS) and consolidating them into a table.

As per page 98 of the blue book (Smith et al., 2022), I aimed to organise the themes in terms of similarity, e.g. masking, or challenges associate with autism, prejudice perceptions. Then I looked at individual sub themes. As per page 99 of the blue book I also aimed to treat each interview analysis as a separate and bracketed off (Smith et al., 2022). One very pragmatic way of doing this was to conduct each analysis with a few days apart where possible.

Step 7: working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes across cases.

Appendix 5: Transcript example

Participant finds it reassuring/ validating to have identical approach to another autistic colleague (which they came to independently from each other), perhaps showing need to be scientific about it regards to managing openness to disclose diagnosis in an authentic way	Talk to my schools about it. Funnily enough, I was just discussing this the other day with another autistic EP and we'd both reached almost identical approaches independently of each other, which was quite interesting, which is that if it feels important that it's authentic. For example, if I was doing a training for staff. B (Researcher) Hmm. Yeah. None. L And and I would start my training usually by talking about what my source of information are and what what I draw on and I would share	Other autistic professionals. Desire to be the same, belonging, word identical. Disclosing during training
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Appendix 6: Personal Experiential Themes

Example of Table of Personal Experiential Themes for L

A EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY COMMUNITY/ PROFESSIONALS NOT CONSISTENTLY NEUROAFFIRMING

Feels dangerous to disclose autistic identity

Participant has sense of danger when disclosing her autistic identity (p.14)

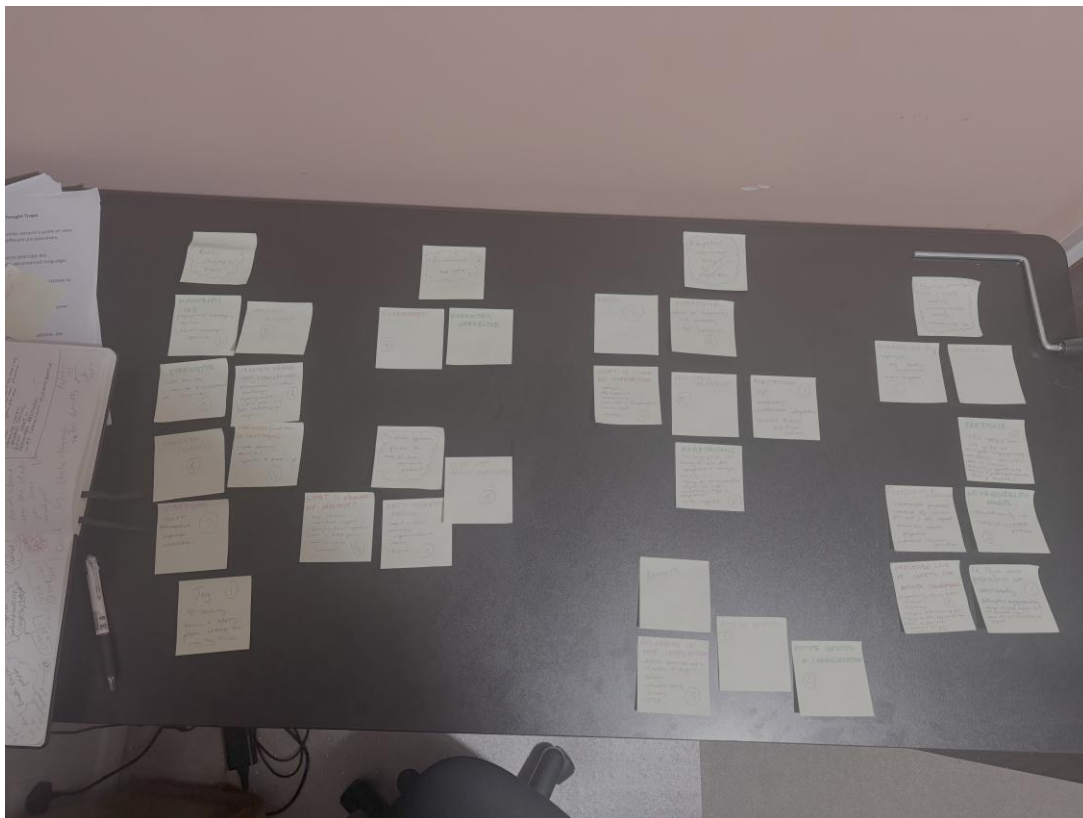
‘I think that’s probably because people don’t feel safe sharing that information’

Lack of consistency among EPs causes L to hold back, mask, but the downside is you don’t get the support (p101).

‘Then people who can shock you coming out with kind of bizarre prejudices or misconceptions in written publications and correspondence and in verbal conversations. So, my default is to be quite reticent and hold a lot of stuff back’

Appendix 7: GETS

In order to get the Table of GETs together I ended up writing all the PETs on post-it notes and then colour coding them so that I knew which ones were which. This helped me to distinguish between the different participant’s PETs and then I was able to see them at a glance.



At one point I had five GET’s:

- 1) Autistic Strengths and Needs
- 2) Environmental Difficulties
- 3) Adaptations and adjustments
- 4) Prejudice stereotypes, lack of safety, masking, concealing autistic identity, neurodiversity lite, and
- 5) belonging

however, after reconsidering, I collapsed 1 2 and 5 into one GET and named it: Autistic Strengths and support needs are inseparable. This was because belonging was a strength, and also the environmental difficulties represented a lens to understand strengths and needs and why they are inseparable due to differing contexts.

GET1: Autistic strengths and needs are inseparable

GET 2. Adaptations and adjustments

GET 3: Prejudice, Safety, lack of stereotypes and masking.

AUTISTIC STRENGTHS AND SUPPORT NEEDS ARE INSEPARABLE (GET 1)

Interview 1

B Desire to learn, and joy that comes with doing so

Love of learning

Writing, reading and research make up ideal working day (72)

‘doing writing, just doing writing with a bit, maybe a bit of reading and research in between’

Using public transport gives time to read up on topics (69)

‘I find that really enjoyable and relaxing. I’m always learning when I’m reading’

Deep dive into a topic, depth of understanding (31)

‘I will never reach the end of my energy to do it, that I could just keep keep on going with it and find out more and more and more’

Productivity and love of admin/ ever learning process linked to hyperfocus. Recognition that some may pathologise this (29).

‘It makes me extremely productive.’

Love of training and helping people change the way they think

Training and consultation are enjoyable especially when you can visibly see by people's body language/ questions they ask that they are starting to think differently (74)
'when people engage with a topic and start thinking about it differently'

Delivering training for staff is the favourite part of the job (71).
'training staff on stuff. That's my favourite'

C) STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES ARE NOT SO BINARY

Attunement to others

Not always having understood others has led to a concerted effort to develop understanding, leading to heightened attunement to other people, e.g. spotting patterns to predict other people's behaviours (p.35)

'determination from a really young age to understand other people and make them feel predictable I suppose'

Attunes to others very quickly, directly impacted by other's feelings (p.34)

'always been from my earliest memories, very deeply sensitive to other people's feelings and very keen to understand how other people feel'

Able to establish rapport with CYP, adults and families (p.38)

'establishing a rapport with a young person when you first work with them or with adults and you know family members and teachers and so on, that bit is I feel like that's a strength'

Propensity to over-relate to others, become too responsive, needing to put in boundaries (p.36)

'my difficulty is sometimes relating too much to people or over empathising with them and becoming too, erm I don't know, too responsive'

Challenges

Neuroaffirmative practise is a tight rope to walk as it acknowledges strengths while not ignoring challenges. EPs are generally very strengths based (p.105)

‘there’s a bit of a tightrope there to walk with neurodiversity because it can tip over in to an almost, like, ludicrous, dismissive positivity of, like, the language of kind of superpowers’

Sees herself as the dream employee in terms of productivity but hints of fear of burnout (p.30).

‘that’ll work for me as long as I enjoy my job and I enjoy working’

Some pathologise her keen interest as ‘obsessive’ p.31

‘I guess it seems obsessive to some people in an unhealthy way’

It’s hard not advantageous to be an Autistic Educational Psychologist (27)

‘I’m bogged down sometimes in how hard things are’

Realising it is OK to experience challenges as other Autistic Educational Psychologists do too (8)

‘it’s made me think about things’

Dysregulation

It’s easy to ignore signs of dysregulation (44)

‘it can have got quite far along like I guess, like being dysregulated on some level before the penny drops for me’

Packed office, noisy, chatty, overhead lights no ear loops (60)

‘If I lost my loop earplugs as well’

Unpredictable and last minute changes of plan

Frantic, caffeinated and dysregulated (64)

‘being quite caffeinated that feeling, which isn’t always enjoyable’

Experience of dysregulation likened to bike lock, one number out of place and you’ve had it (45)

‘before I know it, it’s like the bike lock theory. One thing is all right, one number’

Travelling somewhere new every day is the worst

Is her ideal day simply about staying regulated or peak enjoyment (80)

‘Just. Yeah, just trying to not deplete my battery too fast. That’s a little bit, yeah.’

online peer supervision feels challenging or exposing

Difficult to get into the zone to do peer supervision, especially if expected to bring a case (88)

‘very rarely relish it. I don’t ever feel like in the zone to do that, but it’s fine. I can manage it’

Online peer supervision can feel exposing, in person spotlight feels better distributed (90).

‘more diffuse when it’s in real life’

Interview 2

B MONOTROPIC COGNITION

Professional Monotropic Cognition

Choosing focus time and time for interruptions (59)

‘not to have interruptions unless it’s a time where I can have interruptions’

People grab you while you are at the photocopier (47)

‘people grab you when you because I think ah opportunity they want to discuss a case with you or a school or something like that’

The emotional Element of EP role can lead to looping effect i.e. Autistic Cognition (11)

‘looping effect that going over things so that it’s quite hard to switch off from our work and particularly if there’s an emotional aspect of it as well when children are not having their needs met’

School Monotropic Cognition

Focus should be on cognitive processes (monotropism) rather than social communication (80)

‘it’s understanding that autistic children and young people process information in a different way.

Curriculum may need to be delivered in a different way (80)

The curriculum may need to be delivered in a different way, because I just think it really doesn’t suit monotropism’

C STRENGTHS

Strengths for the role

Approach tasks with new and creative perspective (29)

‘We process information in a different way, we might approach something from a different angle. And I think sometimes bringing that into teams, I think it’s good when you’ve got a team you know, a diverse team with different neurotypes’

Monotropic cognitive flow (95)

‘cognition can lead to flow states, which is something pretty good actually, but you know, in schools kids are pulled out of their attention tunnels, aren’t they?’

Autistic Educational Psychologists are generous knowledge sharers and team players (31)

‘quite generous in what we share about our work as well and knowledge because we want ultimately want the children to benefit’

Monotropic cognition can be like free CPD for other colleagues and allows Autistic EPs to feel they are thriving. Feel useless if stopped from doing this (31)

‘We read a lot of things that we’re interested in in psychology, so we can bring that knowledge to the team and that can be free CPD for colleagues’

Building rapport with Autistic Children and Young people (16)

‘Rapport that I think we often have with autistic young people’

Driving up ethical standards by attending to detail on policies (16)

‘I think we’re quite hot on ethical practise’

Changing the lives of autistic people by shifting narrative during training (19)

‘People have come up afterwards and said that was life changing. Thank you. You know, because it’s about explaining that autism is in a different way because they’ve been fed pathologizing narratives and theories’

Schools/ staff/ parents value attention to detail (15)

‘being sort of detailed in our casework and I think schools appreciate that’.

Can be misconstrued as ‘suspicious’

Having strengths like being able to recall HCPC standards is perceived by others as ‘policing’ instead of as bringing up standards (14)

‘they think that you’re sort of policing’

Interview 3

A STRENGTHS

Cognition

Memory and knowledge makes him feel othered /not typical (48)

‘that’s that’s not, you know, I’ve always thought it was typical. Actually it’s not typical’

Considering many different perspectives (triangulation) (6)

‘I listen very carefully to what everyone says and we have to look at everyone’s perspective’

Knowledge and memory are protective factors (31)

‘my knowledge base is pretty good’

Monotropic cognition (39-40)

‘nobody’s taking you out of that zone’

Perspective taking (51)

‘I have to constantly look at a situation multiple from multiple angles’

Attunement

Adapts and attunes to others (17)

‘clued in as to, you know, what you know how to support and help’

Interoception, learned to listen to his body – sensitive to other’s emotions (55)

‘I’ve learned to listen to my body so I can feel my carotid pulsing quite heavily. I could feel my heart rate increasing. So I’m looking at it, this is stressful’.

Attuned to trainee acknowledges diversity in the supervisory relationships (71)

‘works for me. Doesn’t mean it works for you, and that’s OK. We’re all different.’

Working with neurodiverse parents and understanding (55)

‘mum was obviously neurodiverse’

Supervisor

Addresses power imbalance effectively in supervisor role

Navigate uncertainty through contingency (52)

‘I’ve got a contingency in place already’

Conscientiousness

Desire to keep to deadlines (50)

‘never missed a deadline unless obviously it wasn’t physically possible’

Interview 4

STRENGTHS (and can be CHALLENGES)

ever learning

CPD, WFH, Podcasts, festivals (55)

‘That EdPsyFestival day thing recently and that was really good and that gave me loads of like kind of ideas in terms of my professional goals’

Tapping in to EP network (she actively does this (57)

‘I guess it’s me tapping into that rather than somebody facilitating that for me, it’s all it’s kind of me that’s made that happen’

Psychology as her special interest, will always enjoy reading more, learning more (58)

‘My love of psychology, I think the fact that it’s just I just cannot get enough of psychology and I think it’ll that it’ll always be my special interest and my love of learning more generally as well as the fact that I don’t ever want to just sort of stagnate and just keep doing the same things. ‘

‘I always want to be learning and doing finding new ways to do things’

Psychology at A-Level was helpful to make sense of others

Desire to take career in a more therapeutic direction (57)

‘maybe going down a bit more of a therapeutic role at some point in the future maybe not remaining as a full time EP. So kind of chatting to other people that I know have done a similar things and but that’s all’

Emotions

Can be calm in otherwise emotionally charged situations (27)

‘I can go into emotionally charged situations and be quite calm.’

Aims to match the energy of the CYP she supports (26)

‘So like I said, if they want to be really chatty and they want lots and lots of language input and they are quite animated and excited, I’ll kind of match that energy. But equally if they’re not, I will. I’ll try and match, you know, the kind of quiet calm energy.’

Empathy and understanding of the CYP (3)

Can be challenging when encounters Autistic CYP who go through similar experiences to herself, close to home, suicidal (7)

‘It can be quite tricky because certainly recently I’ve had a couple of cases working with young people that have been very close to home in terms of my own experiences growing up and that’s been tricky I think, because it was highly emotive anyway I suppose, but it was even more there was an additional layer to it in that their experiences so resonated with my experiences when I was younger that kind of like either diagnosed or not diagnosed with autism, but very high functioning but very kind of socially anxious, often really struggling with school and either not attending school or or going. But real anxiety around school and erm self harm and, you know, suicidal ideation’

Reflects on how, in this job, there will always be something that resonates (8)

‘in the job that we do there will always be something that resonates’

Has personally always struggled with her emotions (27)

‘I’ve always really, really struggled to make sense of my emotions’

Anger could be helpful for her (as there’s an energy to it) 29

‘maybe sometimes I do need to become more angry about situations that are unjust’

Not always sure what to do if and when individuals are tearful / cry (30)

‘I find it really, really difficult when people cry’

Supportive to autistic CYP

Respectful of Autistic ways of being, and adapts to needs, e.g. ‘just be’ or ‘info-dump’ etc (26)

‘if you want to chat loads and you want to info dump on me, that’s absolutely fine. We’ll chat about your interest. Equally, if you just want to be and we’ll just sit in silence or we’ll play together or, you know, I think I think I’m very kind of just, not tolerant, that’s the word. Like just you can just kind of be. Just be with me. And and I think I’m quite responsive.’

Happiest when working with Autistic Children and Young People – it’s her comfort zone (6)

‘it’s where it’s my comfort zone. I think it’s where I feel most at ease and erm happiest. I think when I’m working with young people that are neurodiverse’

Autism magnet Children and Young people – (5)

‘I’ve for an autism magnet because if I’m in a room and there’s there’s a young person that’s quite clearly autistic, they will just sort of beeline towards me’

Clear communicator for other professionals

SENCO’s parent’s EP’s she represents in AEP appreciate her clarity of communication and plans (22)

‘we really that we really appreciate how clear you are and we like, we know exactly what’s happening’

Supports trainees (who she supervises) to put in boundaries (28)

‘she’s becoming very emotionally overwhelmed by that and so we are doing quite a lot of work around like, how can you almost draw a line on that’

Interview 5

CHALLENGES (ASSOCIATED WITH BEING AUTISTIC)

Difficulty speaking in groups, even things like introducing herself on a teams meeting (49)

‘I do find it difficult to speak up in large groups’

Lip biting finger picking sensory stims (5)

‘When I get anxious I bite my lips I’ll pick my pick my fingers’

Social expectations to attend team meetings is challenging (48)

‘it’s the expectations in our roles about needing to attend team meetings’

Going out, even to do the bins can be exhausting (40)

‘difficult to go and put my bin out during the day because people are watching’

Focus on eye contact is physically painful (8)

‘every time I look at them and they’re looking at me, I feel it’s a physical, awful discomfort’

Feels things very deeply (9)

‘I feel every I feel absolutely everything deeply to the Nth degree’

Being an EP flies in the face of being Autistic, having to socialise and meet new people etc (21)

‘our role of an EP is such that we need to it’s everything that goes against that flies in the face of being autistic we need to socialise we need to meet new people’

Describes challenge making reports about CYP succinct as it all feels relevant (6)

‘I feel like I need to include writing about the child’

ADAPTATIONS AND ADJUSTMENTS (GET 2)

Interview 1 L

D) ADAPTATIONS

Wfh

Ability to wfh is associated with Covid-19, adjustments made by government when they had to (42)

‘before the pandemic, so going back a long time now, five years, we used to be in the office more before home working’

Sensory overload means L feels lucky she can WFH (41)

‘I’m really lucky that we work from home a lot in my service’

WFH allows opportunities to have routines before work (67)

‘bits of housework I want to do’

Autonomy

Autonomy to build sensory breaks (43)

‘that’s just on me really’

Autonomy of the role of the EP is an adaptation in and of itself (p.9)

‘I do feel really fortunate as an EP that we’re fairly autonomous and I can, as long as I do what I need to do in schools, and nobody really micromanages how I get there’

Freedom, trust and autonomy are most important adaptations (83)

‘being able to manage my own diary and the fact that I do have it is fantastic’

Undercover adaptations

Staff don’t equate specific adaptations for breaks to being autistic (52)

‘I don’t think they relate that to me being autistic, I think they just think I’m really, I don’t know, really specific about my diary and times’

Interview 2 J

A ADAPTATIONS

Half way point between having to ask for adaptations and manager checking in

Not always being the one who has to do all the asking (63)

‘if you’re the one that has to do all the asking, you feel like you’re being a pain in the backside all the time’

Half way mark you asking for what need/ manager asking you what you need for accommodations (60)

‘we’re not the problem and that actually they need to meet halfway at least’

Autonomy to schedule decompression time (58)

‘timetabling appointments so that there’s enough time in between to decompress’

Asking for accommodations judged as rude

Stating needs depicts you as unhelpful (48)

‘people think you’re not being helpful’

Communication styles accepted and not automatically seen as rude (73)

‘I might communicate in a different way and if I am being honest and direct I am not intending to be rude. That’s just my way of communicating’

Unsure how others would take it if asked for them to speak slower (53)

‘If I was to say, could you talk a bit slower, I don’t know how people would take that’

Not to be judged would be supportive from EP community (75)

‘not be judged’

Comments like: ‘we all have to put up with that’ (27)

‘comments like, well, we all have that. We all have to put up with that. You’re no different. So its really sort of playing down’

Unmasking helps with adaptations

Being our allows SENCO to make adaptations e.g. literally being able to adapt uniform (21)

‘will ask if I need any accommodations you know anything like that’

Union support

Lack of union support (40)

‘I would have thought that the AEP would have followed up on that...’

AEP could advocate more by understanding challenges (77)

‘I think the AEP could be doing a lot more’

Interview 3 C

NEEDS

Autonomy to work in the morning (57)

‘Because by about 4pm I’m just useless’

Supervision as space to explore emotions and frustration (68)

‘but it alerts them again if I hit a nine for frustration that means something’s really winding me up and I need to talk about it and vent it’

Flexible hours (96)

‘if someone was really rigid saying you need to start this time and finish this time, actually I’d be looking at you do realise I’m going to be useless for about two hours and that, but that’s up to you’

Counselling support to now take things personally (59)

‘I have been in counselling since I was 21 so and I still go to counselling once a month now and I think those sort of things that are things that you acquire over time and with a skilled counsellor’

Collaborative ability to multitask, friendly and compassionate people, and to be respected and acknowledged (91-94)

‘other thing that I can do at the same time listening to’

‘friendly, compassionate’

‘Respected’

‘Acknowledged’

Discrete praise (97)

‘praise recognition discretely’

Interview 4 E

WHAT IS/ COULD BE SUPPORTIVE

Self Supervision

Engages in self-supervision to manage anxiety that comes with certain plans (12)

‘I had to really have a word with myself about, you know, it doesn’t matter if something gets cancelled or if you’re not sure what you’re doing on Thursday afternoon or you know because I’m very like this is happening at 9am’

She sees herself as aiming to embody this more relaxed state through self-supervision as a process for herself and therefore doesn't consider it to be an example of masking, (which she considers is for other people).

'I've kind of really had to recognise that that's a thing for me and then just embody a different space'

'had to sort of had a word with yourself and you were like, oh, I'm going to embody this kind of ability to kind of be OK with the uncertainty'

'I feel like I'm trying to enter a state that is a little more relaxed, that I'm putting less pressure on myself to be so routine bound because it does create a certain level of anxiety for me'

Therapy is helpful as there is only so much self-supervision you can do on your own (16)

'I've been in therapy for about a year and I think that's definitely helped a lot because there's only so much self-supervision you can do before you kind of need somebody else to be there as well'

Mindful process of noticing the anxiety (15)

'it's almost like a mindfulness process. It's almost like that. I recognise that anxious thought about that plan, but I'm just going to notice the anxious thought experience, the anxiety for a minute, and then let it go. And that has been quite liberating'

Transition and decompression

Uses voice notes to get rid of thoughts flying around head (33)

'I think sometimes, like if you've got, if you come out of a consultation and you've got loads of ideas flying through your head or like loads of things that you would like to do next as a result of that. But then you almost have to. I found voice notes are quite helpful. So like in the car, I'll just voice note.'

Transition and decompression between schools is important and valuable (33)

'like transitions between activities can be quite hard as well. I need a bit of a, I need to like kind of decompress between things and that's not always possible. Like often you kind of running between schools or meetings or like coming in and out of lots of meetings'

Car journey offers decompression time (33)

‘I need that like decompression and sometimes it can just be a car journey between one place and the next can be like a decompression, but not always’

If feeling heightened, loud music helps (34)

‘I don’t know energy or like you know you’re a bit heightened, like just putting some really loud music on can help and just having like, just driving between whatever is but like, just some loud music to kind of get rid of some of that energy can be helpful’

Share needs

Would feel able and safe to share her needs (even if not necessarily her being autistic) e.g. ask for clearer communication (50)

‘more able to if I wanted to talk about my needs that I was able to do that. So whether that’s you know, talk about autism or or less specifically autism and more like actually I need you to be clearer with your communication or you know?’

ask for Clear instructions (17/18)

‘if you need me to do something, you need to tell me and you need to be really, really clear’

Agency

Would like more agency (43)

‘a little bit more agency within that’

Interview 5 K

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Would like to be away from distractions at home (68)

‘I wouldn’t have my things to distract me at home’

Hopes for affirmative support but isn’t sure this would readily be given (94)

‘I would hope that that would be met with a yes of course not with you know it’s really good to see you face to face and you’ve managed that before’

Quiet, comfortable and low lighting (56)

Comfortable clothes (5)

‘I come home and the first thing I do is take off my clothes and I’ll put on my, you know, house clothes... they’re comfortable’

Managers query/ question need to WFH (74)

‘you know they would understand that if somebody wanted to to to do a meeting at home they wouldn’t be questioned.’

To have flexibility and acknowledgement (61)

‘the flexibility and that acknowledgement’

Expectation for her to buy her own remarkable which invalidates her needs (29)

‘it’s like you’ve just invalidated my difficulties and I’m expected to go and buy one (remarkable) whereas maybe it should be a reasonable adjustment that I could get one through access to work’

Would like to meet in smaller teams, ideally (56)

‘I’d be able to meet in a small little team’

Ability to work remotely in own space to feel safe (60)

‘the ability to work remotely in my own space that I feel safe’

Prefers written communication over spoken as there is more time to process/ find words (20)

‘word finding’

Would like some reasonable adjustments (25)

Would like for the questions: What can we do to help you feel safer at work? To be asked (62)

Feels that working online is getting out of things (21)

Ideal workplace is somewhere she sees complete 100% safety (56)

‘somewhere that I feel completely safe’

Clothing -professional from top up casual bottoms half (e.g. sleep trousers) (23)

‘I could be professional from top up but I can still have my socks and my sleep sleep trousers on or what’

Ideal is to work alongside others who don’t expect you to engage in small talk while trying to work (67)

‘who wouldn’t come up to you’

Doesn’t know how it might feel to be open and honest about her needs (78)

‘it would be lovely to have that discussion but would that be opening ourselves up too much, making, you know, being vulnerable to those we work closely with? I don’t know how I feel if I suddenly if I had to be talking to them about these sort of things that I’m talking to you’

Preferences to deliver training online (22)

Would like to have the confidence to say / make reasonable adjustments requests in terms of working form how (74)

‘I should have the confidence to say you know I’m not having a particularly good week, I know, I feel more comfortable at home’

Pursuing coaching for ADHD (26)

Applying for autism assessment in two weeks (from the time of this interview) impetus to go for an assessment is difficulty at work (1)

Would be lovely to be able to have open, honest and vulnerable conversations with those we work closely with (78)

If everyone was vulnerable, differences would be normalised (82)

Be this strong person who professional people who can deal with it all and you know we need to so you know any issues we have or any yeah differences not issues differences we have we need to leave those at the door and then get on with our lives and not share and not be vulnerable because you know, and also we are mindful that we might make others uncomfortable how they you know how would they respond and it's avoiding that discomfort

'If everyone did it, then it wouldn't. Differences would be normalised'

Interview 2

D EXHAUSTING WORKPLACE

Sensory overwhelm in school and rushing (46)

'sensory overwhelm in the school with no break rushing back to the office which is very crowded, very busy.'

Impossible to sustain work (56)

'just no sustainable. You know it well, I know from experience'

The workplace is exhausting as it is not set up for the autistic individual (10)

'systems are set up for them'

Natural lighting, informal open plan (61)

Natural lighting, but also an open plan bit where people can go and it can be a bit more informal'

Busy, crowded office (47)

'very crowded, very busy'

Interview 4

ENVIRONMENT

In chaotic environment, difficult to make sense of what is happening in order to fit in; so feels like a pin ball in a machine – at the mercy of everyone else's stuff (42)

'if you're in like a busy, cluttered environment with people that are talking about their problems all the time, it's really hard to like, get a sense of what's going on and understand. And the kind of nuances of the situation and then how I can fit into that, can almost kind of feel like just a pinball, sort of like at the mercy of everybody else's stuff that's going on and you just sort of being pinballed around but you don't know.'

The office is overstimulating (11) 'there's too many people talking, there's too many smells. It's too right. I don't know where because we do hotdesking I don't know where I'm supposed to sit, which then brings up all sorts of anxiety around should I be sat here, have I sat too be close to somebody'

Bright lights, noise people, smelly food (38)

'bright lights, very noisy people eating smelly food and that kind of thing'

Cluttered environment (37)

'cluttered lots of kind of stuff everywhere'

Break out spaces, chilled out areas (45)

'break out spaces that are a little more chilled out like you know a kind of nice sort of café type area.'

Lone wolf, time on own valuable and precious (31)

'I'm a lone wolf and I do prefer having time on my own'

Being around others can be exhausting, leads to fuzzy, fog descending and hard to find words (32)

'if I have like a really full on day of like meetings being in the office team meetings, I just completely, completely emotionally drained, I'm totally overwhelmed and I can become almost like erm like fuzzy and I like I kind of can't find my words and it's almost like a kind of fog. Brain fog descends.'

Everything in office space is very formal, lacking in casual and café like spaces (36)

'so not kind of like areas where like breakout spaces and comfy area like none of that very kind of like formal'

Big and busy team with lots of strange people (36)

‘lots of people really big and not very inviting’

Colleagues are problem focused (39)

‘very kind of problem focused’

Long drive is not ideal (37)

‘about an hour and a half drive’

PREJUDICE, STEROTYPES, LACK OF SAFETY, MASKING (GET 3)

Interview 1 L

A EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY COMMUNITY/ PROFESSIONALS NOT CONSISTENTLY NEUROAFFIRMING

Feels dangerous to disclose autistic identity

Participant has sense of danger when disclosing her autistic identity (p.14)

‘I think that’s probably because people don’t feel safe sharing that information’

Lack of consistency among EPs causes L to hold back, mask, but the downside is you don’t get the support (p101).

‘Then people who can shock you coming out with kind of bizarre prejudices or misconceptions in written publications and correspondence and in verbal conversations. So, my default is to be quite reticent and hold a lot of stuff back’

‘you don’t get support because you’re not approaching people or sharing information. So I guess you miss out on something there in order to keep yourself a bit more safe and protected’

Danger disclosing, worry, needed to be step by step (p21)

‘It just took me a long time to feel like it was really one step at a time’

On edge, high alert, have to be ready to assert herself, but wonders about her energy to do this (63)

‘I think I’ve been a state of kind of high alert all the time trying to navigate that, prepare myself, think about ways to assert myself and choose when to do that.’

Gendered stereotypes based on androcentric research saying Autistic people lack empathy (33)
‘...rather than that model that we used to have that came from boys and men of being somehow like, detached and lacking empathy which isn’t even true anyway’

Coming into contact with non-flattering stereotypes of autism is a disadvantage (40).
‘there are still misconceptions people have about autism and autistic individuals, and some of them are like non non flattering. So that’s I guess that’s a bit of a disadvantage coming up against that and hearing or hearing people speak about autistic students and young people and their negative assumptions about those’

EPs are going to become wary of talking about neurodivergence with family, underpinned by assumption that neurodiversity is tragic (128)
‘I predict that EPs are going to become more and more wary of talking about it with families or suggesting it. I know I’ve got colleagues who’ve made a little veiled references to not wanting to ever suggest that to a school or family and waiting for them to bring it up. Underneath that there’s an assumption isn’t there that that’s bad news to hear, I guess’

On the verge of a culture war when it comes to neuro-affirming practice (125)
‘I think we’re probably on the verge of a culture war if I’m being really paranoid about it and really scared about it, where this will become the next thing that people fight over and argue over in social media and more widely, and because I think there’s a whenever, anything, any change happens, there’s always a push back and I think the push back is coming and it will be around everybody’s autistic now who’s left? That isn’t autistic, everybody’s getting loads of advantages from it, and it’s not fair’

Old fashioned views

Dated and archaic external speakers (p.23)

‘Some of it was really negative and really, well, offensive, really. And some really old kind of myths and stereotypes that were still being churned out’

There are objections to archaic recommendations (ABA) from Autistic community, but not all Autistic Educational Psychologists feel they have a voice (p. 17)

‘there was a lot of objections about it, which was great from the autistic community and autistic professionals but anybody who’s not got that voice or feels able to speak up as an autistic practitioner then isn’t able to affect change when it comes to situations like that’

Old fashioned ideas and views on neurodiversity (p.60).

‘really like old fashioned in their views about neurodiversity and were constantly talking about it really knowledgeably’

Some EPs still recommending social skills training/ ABA approaches (p.17)

‘basically like recommending like social skills training and stuff that we know is really damaging to young people and ABA type approaches’

Course director was safe to disclose, but external speakers were jarring – experts in Autism but not neuro-affirming (p.22)

‘not that neuro-affirming at all’

Updating service documents to be neuroaffirming (85)

‘I did ask quite a while ago, ages ago actually, about going through all of our service documents to look at like neurodiversity affirming language.’

Having to do emotional labour of what to let go (61)

‘having to do the like emotional labour of like just filtering that to let go and what to challenge and do all of that work? That would be my worst nightmare, I think.’

Precarious and lacking in consistency in terms of neuro-affirming colleagues

Wants genuine inclusivity, feels EPs should be better than any other profession (p.12)

‘We should be better at that than any other profession’

L has colleagues who are genuinely neurodiversity affirming, but she doesn’t take these colleagues for granted (p.12).

‘I’d like to think this is all EPs, but it isn’t who are really neurodiversity affirming in their philosophy and their thoughts and approaches’

There’s patchy and inconsistent neuro-affirmative practice within the EP profession (p 16, 101).
‘but it’s quite patchy, like it’s quite inconsistent’

Some EPS position themselves as experts on neurodiversity

Staff positioning themselves as knowledgeable experts on neurodiversity – are forceful and emphatic (61)

‘talking about it really knowledgeable, but being really out of date and being really being really emphatic and forceful with their expertise, which I which was really negative and that would be really awful to be around that all the time I think’

It’s dangerous when EPs make out to be experts on Neurodiversity without actually speaking to those with lived experience (113)

‘if you’re not able to see that and you think that you are an expert, that’s quite dangerous, I think’

Supervision and training linked to increased neuro-affirming practice

Doctoral training may support growth in ability to recognise defences and feelings of threat and be able to sit with it (116, 109)

‘Becoming comfortable with feeling a bit uncomfortable about things and feeling like you maybe don’t know things or recognising if you are feeling a bit defensive or a bit threatened or a bit out of your depth or whatever, it might be being able to recognise that and feel able to sit with that’

Supervision supports ongoing reflection, supervision should be explorative not just formative (117).

‘Supervision is a big part of that, isn’t it is because that creates that space where people should be exploring their own thinking. What it’s not just about the practicalities. It’s not just the kind of formative aspect of supervision that’s important’

Interview 2 J

E PREJUDICE

EPs applying their role of EP to colleagues inappropriately

People give their opinion about how autistic they think you are (53)

‘you don’t look autistic, or never would have guessed or or then they make a judgment about how autistic they think you are’

Some EPs seek to control the narrative e.g. applying the work of an EP to an employee (23)

‘controlling the narrative and also almost like applying the work of what an EP does to an employee’

Invalidation of adult autistic experience (54)

‘don’t think that your lived experience is relevant because you’re an adult’

Non-autistic socialisation seen as superior

There’s a perception that EPs think of themselves as having supreme social skills (5)

‘and there’s a sort of supremacy about, well, we’re, we’re the one we’ve been chosen for this work because we’ve got, you know, super social skills and aren’t we so great socially, which I don’t, I think it’s always context dependent anyway’

Certain communication styles are seen as superior (94)

‘having double meanings for things they’ve seen as better’

The power is with non-autistic professionals (92)

‘they feel that they’re empowered, superior, more of an expert and all that’

Non-autistic social communication is absolute ideal, and this view is shared by EP profession (95, 97)

‘deeply entrenched view which is so hard to shift about social communication and that there, and that non autistic social communication is the absolute ideal’

‘non autistic sociality is superior’

Authentic communication (i.e being unmasked is seen as both rude and challenging) (8)

‘if you unmask and speak as the way your mind is working, you’re perceived as being rude and challenging’

Surrounded by ableism (47)

‘surrounded by ableism’

Exposure to pathologizing discourse (59)

‘pathologizing discourse’

Diminishing opportunities

Promotion linked to neurotypical socialisation (37)

‘quite low in the hierarchy of things’

Rights diminish when coupled with being autistic e.g. not seen as a ‘real’ professional (41)

‘professional plus autistic equals your your rights just disappear’

Some managers take away any autistic case work if they disclose, since they assume this means you are bias (25)

‘you’re biased because you’re autistic’

Masking to protect from prejudice

Masking has and continues to be needed to get by (3)

‘I don’t think I would, you know, be able to get by if I wasn’t masking’

Hiding autistic identity is a barrier to Autistic Educational Psychologists reaching their personal and professional goals (76)

‘shouldn’t feel that they have to hide it, which is what it feels like at the moment. And I think that is a big barrier’

Dominant tragedy narratives that are outdated and act as a barrier to ‘admitting’ you or your family are autistic, it feels like you are a criminal (4, 5)

‘tragedy’

‘a lot of hiding it and in the end I just thought, no, I’m not a criminal. You know, I just have a different way of processing things.’

You have to mask all the time (75)

‘you just have to mask up all the time’

Risk of exploitation

~~Concern that there could be exploitation with such generosity (36)~~

~~‘the whole lived experience thing is not regulated yet’~~

~~Co-production can be exploitation (research) 42~~

~~‘co-production that it’s not really co-production and when you look into it, it’s exploitation’~~

G NEURODIVERSITY MODEL

Neurodiversity Lite

Surface levels neurodiversity affirming, but still trying to change the individual (81, 83)

‘the language of neurodiversity has filtered into discourse but it’s not when you look at the practice, it’s still based on the medical model’

Neurodiversity model is intertwined with social model of disability, moves away from DSM criteria which is behavioural outcomes, rather than cognitive processing differences (85)

‘DSM criteria which is essentially just behavioural outcomes, it’s nothing to do with the cognition’

Neurodiversity affirming practise is more than just a change of language (87)

‘quite often people think that if you write a neuroaffirmative report, that’s OK but that in itself is the outcome of neuroaffirmative practice’

Conflict with EHCP processes

EHCP process is within child (89)

‘the assessment process starts with the child’

Better to focus on environmental and adult understanding (86)

‘less on intervention, more on support structures, more on understanding of adults around a child and young person, there’s just more awareness in society as well’

Interview 3 C ****

INTERNALISED STIGMA

Apologetic

Apologises at start of meetings (4)

‘I usually have to apologise at the start of meetings’

Lets people know about his differences (19)

‘I sometimes get quite carried away and when I do I do sometimes lose the sense of the volume of my voice. So please just let me know I won’t take it personal’

Reflects on his honesty (14)

‘as I say, I suppose it helps that I’m always very open and honest and it’s taken a long time to get to that stage to be that open’

Explains himself and apologises (13)

‘I still get that in meetings now, but it’s not. I use. I have to sometimes say look, this is not a nervous habit. This is because of this’

Self doubt and reassurance

Concern over whether he is got the right way to think about something – assumes he does not and others do (27)

‘checking in and making sure that my thoughts are sort of not too far off the ballpark’

Seeks reassurance (78)

‘On reflection, having spoken with my line manager, we felt actually in this instance you know my my feedback was very fair and actually appropriate’.

Self-doubt and checking self against others (70)

‘Everyone working in that seeing is experiencing the same, which tells me. Actually my radar is correct. So I reference those’

Self doubt related to tone of email

‘I will always CC in managers and you know, so they’re always aware I’m always open. And the reason for that I think they do know that actually what I’m doing is I’m just checking to make sure everything’s right’

Feels exposed

Feels he is not subtle (121)

‘it’s really obvious’

‘everyone really kind of knows it’

Masking to him means hiding his facial expressions and being neutral (45)

‘when I’m working I’m neutral but when I’m comfortable you know I let go, you know and that’s the other thing I’ve learned over the years is where I can be comfortable, where, where to be put up the mask a bit’

Sensory needs disguised as sciatica (13)

‘I always tell people it’s sciatica is actually not sciatica because I’ve had this this I was a child’

Interview 4 E

PERCEIVED LACK OF SAFETY FOR AUTISTIC COLLEAGUES

Responsibility lies with autistic individuals

Old fashioned resources that nobody has taken responsibility to organise/ update (38)

‘And I think like old old resources and think, you know like, when you go into an office and they’ve they’ve got like this, they’ve got a resource cupboard but there’s books from the 80’s that you’ve been so out of date that you just think, who is look at these now’

Responsibility for miscommunication has landed with her (rather than 50/50) (19)

‘I took that very literally because of my diagnosis and but I feel like the the responsibility kind of landed at my door for the miscommunication, rather than it being a ‘oh yeah maybe it was a 50/50 thing’

Tends to follow a communication/ social script for herself, but finds it frustrating when others don’t follow it (21)

‘I can be really put about when people don’t follow the formula’

‘I find that really kind of jarring’

‘they’ve not followed the script’

Taught herself eye contact (21)

‘I taught myself eye contact and like how how long he’s supposed to look at somebody and then how long you’re supposed to look away.’

Preference to sit quietly, but recognises in EP role, small talk is very important for relationship building (20)

‘I’m still would happily sit in silence. I don’t need to do , you know, like at the start of a consultation, all the how are you all of that?’

Feels unsafe as cannot get the measure of what is going on as doesn’t know the rules (41)

‘what are the rules that I need to follow? I feel it feels quite unsafe so sort of feeling like erm I can’t figure out what’s going on’

Exploitation

Worries that she/ some of her friends work ethic is exploited (71)

‘I feel like it’s not fair that certain colleagues are allocated more work or certain people have got more schools’

Surface level neuro-affirming practise

While EPs seem generally neuro-inclusive, towards CYP, unsure if this extends to neurodivergent colleagues (67)

‘everyone says the right things. But then I don’t know like for myself if I was to say I’m autistic I don’t know whether they that would be extended to colleagues’

Reflects that she wouldn’t tell her manager (5)

‘I wouldn’t tell my manager either way with it or without a diagnosis’

Notices a surface level neuro-inclusivity (67)

‘she makes the right noises and she would obviously talk about neuroinclusive practice and but then there’s a few times where she has said to me, I want you to go and do a cognitive assessment for this young person which and it’s been highly inappropriate.’

What people know say doesn’t always translate to action (in terms of neuro-inclusivity) (69)

‘Sometimes what people say and what people know about what, how is the right way to practise doesn’t always translate into action’

Desire to hide or keep secret her autistic identity from others

Worries about how other people would react if she had a formal diagnosis (considers not telling anyone (3)

‘I worry that if I was to be given that label, what would I do with it? I don’t know that I think I would be so worried about how would I tell someone that I am autistic? What would they think? What would? How would that then impact our relationship that I would probably not bother telling them anyway?’

Reflects that she wouldn’t tell her manager (5)

Getting a formal diagnosis feels redundant if she is going to keep it a secret anyway (4)

‘makes me think, well, then what would be the point if you’re just going to get it and keep it a secret and not tell anybody anyways, then why would I even bother?’

Not currently motivated to seek diagnosis/ not safe enough to get a diagnosis (3)

‘At the moment I’m not motivated enough I don’t think to seek a diagnosis’

Self Identifies as the diagnosis is scary long intense, and redundant since she wouldn't ask for adjustments (2)

'I wouldn't ask for any adjustments at work or you know it's not something that I talk about at work'

Emotional Contagion

Chaotic team meetings with no agenda, everyone feels bad at end (49)

'they're a bit chaotic and there's never really an agenda and it always ends up being no matter how positive everyone kind of tries to be at the start because it's such they're usually such a mess by the end of it everyone ends up feeling rubbish'

Emotional contagion, anxiety spills over into the collective space and time (40)

'everyone is stressed, and everyone is busy but I think when when other people bring all of that into like team meetings or into like office spaces, or that emotional contagion can happen'

Lack of support

Downfall of not telling other people her autism is she can't ask for clearer communication from others (17)

'the downfall of me not letting people know that I identify as autistic or that if I were to seek a diagnosis because I feel like I would, then if I did have a diagnosis, I would then say right and because of that I need you if you need me to do something, you need to tel me and you need to be really really clear.'

Interview 5 K

PREJUDICE AND STEREOTYPE

Some people in society simply expect people to get on with x, y, z, they think you shouldn't have any adaptations (87)

'you should just be able to do xyz, yo know just what's what's what's the problem?'

Reiterates that EPs are generally amazing but small hint of judgement stuck with her (97)

'I mean but they're amazing, so you know, but I'm just but that little comment about the remarkable sort of stuck with me, yeah'

Speaks of a judge and the judge is neurotypical population (85)

'I think society, I don't like this word, but I can't think of any other word than like the neurotypical population. I know there's some'

Doesn't want to divulge given that people speak so flippantly regarding labels (55)

'Oh he's got ADHD you know so why is it that I am going to divulge?'

Aware of stereotypical/ understanding of Autism around lack of empathy and how she think that, especially autistic women have too much empathy (9)

'I think especially as women, we tend to have too much empathy and I and that is overlooked'

Her true self is not acknowledged or taken seriously. She feels sidelined, and her feelings and emotions are not validated (16)

'the me that I am is is not being acknowledged is not being taken seriously. It's being sidelined my fee my feelings and emotions are not being validated'

Feels she can hear a hint of judgement when it comes to reasonable adjustments, e.g. the remarkable (91)

'there was that hint with my current manager about the remarkable you know when it comes to doing things differently'

Her current managers know she is up to the job, but she worries other employers may view her as in capable (38)

'because they might think to themselves. I'm thinking about my team now. Can she? You know? Can I meant this? They know I can do. But then say I went to another job. Can they? Can she empathise with parent?'

Comes across ableist language (e.g. CYP is using ADHD as an excuse/ means she doesn't want to be open about her neurotype (38)

'even sitting in an ELSA supervision session yesterday, one of the ELSA's said something about this child. You know, he's bringing up his ADHD again, as if it's an excuse that I'm doing.'

Communication preferences

Why can't we be vulnerable? (81)

'Why not be vulnerable? You know why? Why do we need to?'

Has to leave any vulnerabilities at the door otherwise we might make others uncomfortable (81)

'we need to leave those at the door and then get on with our lives and not share and not be vulnerable because you know and also because we are mindful that we might make others uncomfortable'

Internalised the Self-criticism and self-doubt and self-judgement around her own communication preferences

Constant self-criticism (7)

'constant self-criticism'

Difficult to let this experience go very upset by this and began questioning what she had done (15)

'And I just froze, I thought what have I done? What have I done?'

Battles with herself/ am I right/ wrong (18)

'continuous battle with myself. Am I ? Am I right? Am I wrong? But I ned to get my point across.'

Via email brought up lack of pay point for extra responsibilities to manager and response was that this is shocking to bring this up (15)

'She basically said I am total shocked'

Now worries about sending an email or not (16)

Do I send this e-mail? Do I not? Should I send, it should you know? So it's it's almost become a fixation, you know'

Supervisor said 'maybe should have spoken to her instead of sending an email (16)

Recounts oversharing with a PEP who asked her to keep things closer to her chest, and has since learned to not overshare (6)

‘my principal even said to me she said you know at one point she said we need to keep things closer to your chest’

Perceived Obligations from others

Others state their preference to be in the office and see people. She wants to fit in so doesn’t admit that she hates it (51)

‘I don’t feel I can say, oh, no, I hate it because you know, need to fit in’

If she sees familiar people, she may feel obliged to talk/ make small talk (71)

‘if I’m going to our cupboard to get something and I know there’s other EPs there No I Can’t do that because I’ll have to stop and talk’

Manager suggested that she could join ADHD working group in order to share her experiences, but she felt forced to divulge (not by others) but by her own expectations (36)

‘if I was in that ADHD group I would have been I would have felt forced to divulge my I would have felt not that they would have made me. I would have felt not forced to . That’s a very strong word, but I would have felt it would have been helpful to the group. But then? You know, I would have made myself vulnerable and I and I think I’ve done that too much already, you know, especially with my manager and I don’t.’

MASKING

At home I can completely unmask (39)

‘at home I can completely just unmask, be me by the covers over my head’

It’s expected of her to socialise (24)

‘it’s expected of me to to be be with others, to socialise you know’

Is a different person at work than at home. When home she unmask, bed covers on, regulates in safe space (5)

‘when I go out to work, I’m this different person’

Empathy with the autistic experience e.g. masking (45)

‘understanding, when someone says, oh, my child’s masking, I know what that is’

All day service meeting and having to mask all day. Needs to decompress after such a day (98)

‘if we have an all day service meeting and I’ve had to, you know, mask throughout’

Kindness and teamwork is difficult and comes at a cost (25)

‘You’re always so kind. You’d so caring. You’re such a lovely team member, you know. Well I don’t want to detract from that. Obviously I’m not saying I’m not, but it’s just I can say to her.

Look, I find this really difficult’

Prefers to not have to mask and would prefer to work unsociable hours in order to avoid people and socialising (101)

‘I prefer working at night. Especially towards like 10, 11, 12, 1 because there’s no expectations then I’m not going to, you know, I don’t have. Obviously I’m I don’t I’m not expected to be at work. I’m not expected to socialise at work. I’m not expected to answer’

Masks to fit in with the EP world (4)

‘I think it’s because I’ve learnt to mask that it’s been the masking has become my new identity’

Unmasks at home (4)

‘When I come home, that is when I completely unmask’

Eye contact is challenging but has learned to unmask this (7)

‘Eye contact, again, I mean I’ve found that I’ve learned to mask that’

Appendix 8: Participant Information Sheet

Ms Bethan Brown Faculty of Social Sciences
Trainee Educational School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Psychologist (Doctoral University of East Anglia
Researcher) Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
8 August 2025 United Kingdom
Email: bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

What are the professional lived experiences of Autistic Educational Psychologists?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the perspectives and professional lived experiences of autistic Educational Psychologists. You have been invited to participate in this study because you either self-identify or are diagnosed as being autistic and are currently working as an Educational Psychologist and have been for at least 12 months.

This Participant Information Sheet aims to inform you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask me questions about anything that you do not understand or want to know more about.

The purpose of the study will be to understand your perspective and professional lived experience of being autistic and working as an Educational Psychologist. Participation in the study involves taking part in a semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams. This interview will then be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022)*. This is because the intention is to understand your experiences.

* Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research (2nd ed.). SAGE

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

- The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Ms Bethan Brown. This is being conducted as part of the Educational Psychology Doctorate at the University of East Anglia (EdPsyD).
- This will take place under the supervision of Mrs Imogen Nasta Gorman (i.gorman@uea.ac.uk,).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Completing a semi-structured interview with the researcher via Microsoft Teams Call to answer questions about your experiences as an autistic EP (1 hour). As well as some questions there will also be the opportunity to complete an activity adapted from The Ideal School (Moran, 2023). This is called the Ideal Workplace, and it is hoped that this will help me understand your professional and workplace constructs.

Please also note that an Audio/ Video recording will be taken unless you turn your camera off.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

Approximately one hour of your time will be needed. This could be slightly longer or shorter depending on the answers you give.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this by emailing the researcher (bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk) with a statement that says: 'I wish to withdraw my consent to participate and would like my data to be removed and not analysed'.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. It is possible that reflecting on being an autistic Educational Psychologist may be difficult if you feel you have been treated with discrimination. Please see the list of support services on the debrief sheet emailed to you and you will be able to contact them if you wish. When presenting the findings of this research your data will be pseudonymised and anonymised, and every effort will be taken to ensure that you are not identifiable (e.g. by ensuring findings are written in a way that does not allow individual comments to be tracked back to you). However, there is still a possibility that you could be identified particularly as the EP community is so small and the number of autistic EPs may also be small.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

By being involved in the study, you may feel the benefits of discussing your experiences and perspectives. You may feel satisfied that you are supporting others who may be in similar positions to you to feel 'heard' and 'seen'. You may feel satisfied that you have supported a clearer understanding of what it means to be a professional who is autistic. You may feel content that you supported research that highlights to others the unique contributions of autistic EPs. I also hope that reflecting on your career as an autistic EP can affirm your unique contributions to Educational Psychology.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

If you agree to the interview being audio-recorded, the audio-recorded data will be transcribed by hand or via the MS Teams transcription software. This data will be securely stored on a password protected laptop and secure UEA One Drive folder shared only with my supervisor. Examiners of my thesis may ask to review my data as part of the examination process. The information you provide during the interview will be used to write my thesis and may be used for articles in peer-reviewed journals or presented at conferences.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018)

and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used. The study findings may be deposited in a repository to allow it to facilitate its reuse. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Ms Bethan Brown (bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk, 07429423955) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by You can pick up a summary of the findings by emailing the researcher.

This feedback will be in the form of This will be in the format of a one page summary

This feedback will be at the end of the study

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Ms Bethan Brown
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich NR4 7TJ
bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor: Dr Imogen Nasta Gorman (i.gorman@uea.ac.uk)

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Imogen Nasta Gorman & Andrea Honess (i.gorman@uea.ac.uk; A.Honess@uea.ac.uk,).

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6 (1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

The data controller is the University of East Anglia. For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#). If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to the following email:

bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last reviewed on 18.7.25. If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], am willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

-Audio and video recording. YES/NO (please delete as appropriate)

-Answering questions and completing activities as described in the participant information sheet.
YES/NO (please delete as appropriate)

-I would like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? YES/NO (please delete as appropriate)

-If you answered YES, please indicate your email address:

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], am willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

-Audio and video recording. YES/NO (please delete as appropriate)

-Answering questions and completing activities as described in the participant information sheet.
YES/NO (please delete as appropriate)

-I would like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? YES/NO (please delete as appropriate)

-If you answered YES, please indicate your email address:

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

Appendix 9: ethics approval

Ethics ETH2425-1851 : Ms Bethan Brown

Date Created	23 Mar 2025
Date Submitted	09 Apr 2025
Date of last resubmission	29 Jul 2025
Date forwarded to committee	05 Aug 2025
Researcher	Ms Bethan Brown
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Mrs Imogen Nasta Gorman
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved after amendments made

Ethics application

Applicant and research team

Principal Applicant

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Primary Supervisor

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[Mrs Imogen Nasta Gorman](#)
Primary Supervisor's school/department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project details

Project title
What are the professional lived experiences of Autistic Educational Psychologists
Project start date
31 Jul 2025
Project end date

Appendix 10 Debrief sheet

Participant Debrief Sheet: Support Organisations for Individuals Feeling Distressed After the interview

Title of Project: What are the professional lived experiences of Autistic Educational Psychologists?

Thank you for taking part in this research project. The study aimed to understand the perspective and professional lived experience of being autistic and working as an Educational Psychologist in order to centre autistic voices, insights and perspectives to shape more inclusive workplace.

If you have any questions regarding this study or if you have any worries or concerns about the research, please contact the researcher bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk or supervisor i.gorman@uea.ac.uk.

What happens next?

Your data will be transcribed and you will have the opportunity to review the transcript. It will then be analysed in line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to extract themes and meaning with the aim to understand your experiences.

If you subsequently wish to withdraw from this research, you can do so by emailing the researcher (bethan.brown@uea.ac.uk) with a statement that says: 'I wish to withdraw my consent to participate and would like my data to be removed and not analysed'. Please be aware that if data analysis is already underway then it may not be possible for your data to be withdrawn.

What if I am feeling distressed?

If you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed after the interview, please know that support is available.

You could seek support from:

- Your professional union (e.g. <https://www.aep.org.uk/>)
- Employee Assistance Programme that you may have access to as part of your employment.
- If you have individual or group supervision as part of your role as an Educational Psychologist (EP), you could bring up with them how you feel too (if you feel comfortable).
- At the end of this debrief letter there are some organisations that can provide support.

Once again, I thank you for taking part in the research.

1. Samaritans

Phone: 116 123 (Free 24/7 helpline) **Website:** www.samaritans.org

Samaritans offer a 24/7 helpline to provide emotional support to anyone who is struggling to cope. Their volunteers are trained to listen without judgment.

5. Citizens Advice

Phone: 03444 111 444 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) **Website:** www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Citizens Advice offers free, confidential advice on a range of topics, including mental health, employment rights. They can guide you through available options and legal support if necessary.

8. NHS 111 (Mental Health Support)

Phone: Dial 111 and select the mental health option **Website:** www.nhs.uk

The NHS offers mental health services through their 111 helpline, including crisis support and advice. They can guide you to local services or provide immediate support if you feel you are in distress or crisis.

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