

Lived Experience of Friendship and Mate Crime in Autistic Adults

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Abstract

Mate crime is a specific subset of hate crime in which the perpetrator is known to the victim. To date, there is very little research into the perception and experience of mate crime in autism. The aim of the current study was to examine perceptions of friendship and mate crime in autistic adults, using semi-structured interviews. Five adults were interviewed about their experiences of social interactions, friendships and mate crime. Participants described distancing themselves from the 'disability' label whilst growing up to avoid condescension and being perceived as vulnerable, whilst learning to camouflage their social difficulties. Feelings of anxiety were associated with socialising, and participants valued relationships that did not place too many overwhelming demands on their time or energy. Finally, all participants had prior experiences of bullying. They understood the concept of mate crime but were unsure as to whether they would be able to identify it in their own lives if it occurred. However they could identify potential support networks in close friends and family. Results highlight the importance of further research into positive and negative aspects of social relationships in autistic adults, and the need to provide support to those who are socially vulnerable.

Keywords: Autism, Mate Crime, Relationships, Friendships

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with differences in the processing of social information (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Some autistic people can find it hard to interpret social information, particularly when interacting with neurotypical (NT) individuals (Chambon et al., 2017; Cole, Slocombe, & Barraclough, 2018), which may leave an individual vulnerable to exploitation or harm (Portway & Johnson, 2005). The aim of this paper is to examine the lived experience of social interaction and friendship in a small group of autistic adults, in relation to mate crime.

Mate crime is a subtype of hate crime in which the perpetrator is known to the victim (Thomas, 2011). It refers to deliberately abusive actions against a person by someone known to the victim, often someone considered a friend although family members and carers can also be perpetrators (Bell, 2002; Thomas, 2011). A disturbing feature of mate crime is that it encompasses acts of cruelty, humiliation, servitude, exploitation or theft (Quarmby, 2011) and is often aimed at vulnerable individuals (Landman, 2014)

Landman (2014) gathered information to appraise the frequency and nature of mate crime, amassing a body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that many vulnerable people struggled to recognise what being exploited looked like. Naivety provides a springboard for the gradual process of abuse and exploitation (Sin, 2015). Doherty (2015) and Landman (2014) both point out that a lack of awareness of appropriate behaviour or what constitutes a positive relationship, due to poor previous experiences, can lead vulnerable individuals into making unsound judgements of character and situations. Research has suggested that autistic people may find it difficult to work out the intentions of others (Cole et al., 2018; Edey et al., 2016; Morrison et al., 2019), which could contribute towards social vulnerability. Roth and Gillis (2015) examined how autistic people communicate and build romantic relationships over the

internet. They found that individuals unwittingly broke social norms due to naivety and misreading situations. Portway and Johnson (2005) noted that autistic people may find themselves at risk due to nuances of social communication such as grasping implicit communication, and responding to spontaneity and change. This research revealed that autistic people were concerned about the potential for being abused on the internet or groomed and misled. However, no investigation was made into the potential for abuse in face to face interactions.

Mate crime does not occur in a vacuum. Doherty (2017) acknowledges that offences can become 'blurred' due to familiarity between an offender and victim. Recent research has begun to examine experience of friendship in autistic adults (Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Mazefsky, & Eack, 2018; Müller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008; Sosnowy, Silverman, Shattuck, & Garfield, 2018), looking at how autistic adults navigate social relationships and what they value within friendship. Studies have shown that autistic adults desire relationships with others yet can experience difficulty in initiating and maintaining these relationships (Müller et al., 2008). Müller et al. (2008) found that participants had an intense desire to connect with others, and to be accepted. A longing to connect with other people could lead to accepting inappropriate or exploitative relationships out of a sense of belonging.

Differences in communicative styles, relating to the 'Double Empathy Problem' (Milton, 2012), raises the bi-directional nature of social communication issues between Autistic and NT individuals by pointing out that NT people may find it just as difficult to recognise the socio-communicative nuance of autistic people. This idea has recently gained empirical support from (Edey et al., 2016; Sasson et al., 2017). Sasson et al. (2017) found that NT participants are more likely to make negative judgements about an Autistic peer in a 'thin

'slice' paradigm (very short clips of social interactions). This could lead to negative stereotyping and dehumanisation of autistic people. Stereotyping and dehumanisation in turn feed into marginalising and differentiating those who are different and creates opportunities for rejection, exclusion, discrimination and resentment to flourish (Armstrong, Morris, Abraham, Ukoumunne, & Tarrant, 2016; Gerstenfeld, 2017). Perceptions about normality and diagnoses of disability are "heavily laden with able bodied assumptions and prejudices", i.e. that normality is the ideal all ought to strive towards (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

Worryingly, research suggests that labelling people as disabled or vulnerable may play into the hands of power dynamics which enable 'normal' members of society to view those with impairments as socially dysfunctional and exploitable (Miller & Gwynne, 1972).

In order to address mate crime, it is important to involve those who may be particularly vulnerable. A report from the Wirral Autistic Society (2015) found that over 80% of autistic adults in their survey had been victim to behaviours linked to mate crime (Papadopoulos, 2016). Research into raising awareness of crime by Spink and Steward (2011) found most resources and/or training to enable people to maintain their personal safety overlooked abuse in domestic settings perpetrated by people well known to the victim. The involvement of service users in the production of the few resources that exist was scant, a factor that can make them less effective or relevant (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005).

Thus to pinpoint possible risk factors for mate crime, and develop ways to provide support to victims, it is important to gain insight from the populations that may be disproportionately affected. The current study seeks to learn from the lived experience of autistic adults and provide a detailed snapshot of their experience of friendship, awareness of mate crime, and how it might manifest in their own lives.

Method

Methodological Approach

This research was idiographic in nature; focusing on the personal experiences of individuals. Deconstructing normative assumptions and the imposition of non-autistic meanings requires entering into the mindset of the participant (Howard, Katsos, & Gibson, 2019), understanding their experiences and worldview (Milton & Bracher, 2013). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the interview data. IPA allows for a detailed analysis of personal accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While it is not claimed that generalisations can be made to a wider cohort of Autistic people, the individual experiences are informative because ‘Everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themselves’ (Schleiermacher, 1998). To ensure that our interpretation accurately reflected participants’ experiences, they were sent the results and invited to respond.

Participants

Five autistic adults aged between 22-25 years (two female, three male) took part in this research (see Table 1). Diagnosis was confirmed through self-report, and all but one of the participants (who was diagnosed in 2017) were diagnosed in childhood. They were recruited through opportunity sampling via personal networks and online (Twitter, and the North East Autism Facebook group).

Table 1: Participant demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Age at diagnosis
1	M	22	7
2	M	24	5
3	F	22	5
4	M	22	9
5	F	23	22

Procedure

This study received ethical approval from the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee, and participants provided informed written consent to participate. Semi-structured interviews were developed, including questions about social interactions, relationships and mate crime (see supplementary materials). Interviews were held at venues where participants felt comfortable, or conducted via an online chat system. Questions were generally asked in the order found in the interview schedule, unless conversation prompted an additional spontaneous question or it was natural to ask a question from later in the schedule at an earlier point. Interviews lasted between eighteen and thirty minutes and were recorded to enable subsequent transcription.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and all identifying data removed. Both researchers read and re-read each transcription several times, making notes around salient content, context and initial interpretations. Once initial identifications had been coded,

emergent themes were identified. From undertaking an analysis of these subordinate themes, it was apparent that elements of these clustered together around three superordinate themes (Table 2).

Results

Three superordinate themes were identified, with subordinate-themes as shown in Table 2. These are discussed in detail in the following sections. Numbers are used to denote which participant the quote is taken from.

Table 2: Table of Themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Perceptions and ‘learning the formula’	1.1. Self-Perceptions and labels 1.2. Time and practice 1.3. Through the eyes of others
Socialising..... ‘It’s more complicated than that’	2.1. Reading social signals 2.2. A lot of effort 2.3. Reciprocity and like-mindedness
‘Taking Advantage of You’	3.1. Worse than bullying 3.2. More Vulnerable

1. Perceptions and ‘learning the formula’.

Participants discussed the impact of a label on their self-perceptions (1.1). *“So I probably wouldn’t tell people that didn’t (have a diagnosis) as I don’t know... they might see me as less of a person.....I know that I am (autistic), but I don’t want people to recognise it and I don’t want to be treated differently because of it.....but...I don’t mind having a label.....it’s been helpful knowing why I act a certain way.”* (P5)

Another participant noted their academic status alongside their diagnosis: *“I’m pretty sure I’m high functioning though, I’m doing a maths degree at present.”* (P3)

It is important to understand the impact of a diagnosis on somebody as it is also symbolic. Once a diagnosis has been made that person bears the label of the condition and to many it becomes an aspect of their identity. A label such as Autism can both unlock benefits such as services as well as construct obstacles to opportunities or rights (Attwood, 2006). While learning disabilities can be co-occurring within Autism (Lundström et al., 2015) it is interesting that the participants felt it pertinent to mention their academic achievements as implicit evidence that they did not have a learning disability. This may be connected to self-esteem and societal attitudes towards people with disabilities. Participants expressed the desire to not be patronised or viewed as ‘lesser’. Distancing oneself from those with learning disabilities also occurred in the dialogue with the one participant who was diagnosed with learning disability.: *“I’m not being hard, but I want to be on the mainstream side, not the learning disabled side, I just want to be like everyone else and not treat differently, like being patronised. I find it embarrassing when it happens in front of lots of other people and it gets me upset and depressed.”* (P2)

These comments are symptomatic of a negative discourse about disability, as is feeling the need to distance oneself from being learning disabled. It can be uncomfortable to acknowledge having a label or disability. When this is added to reading everyday situations differently it is bound to impact upon the person who 'seesaws between 'marginal normality' and 'not quite fitting in' (Portway & Johnson, 2005). Chang, Quan, and Wood (2012) found that the more people are aware of their difference, the more it can affect their willingness to engage or impact on their confidence. Goffman (1963) noted that a perceived difference from the norm can make a person experience shame, low self-esteem and self-degradation (Milton, 2013) which appears true of the participants. Many appear to perceive being disabled as a failing they need to compensate for. Given the prevalence of bullying, disability hate speech and lack of accommodation made towards those who are physically or cognitively different at a societal level it is perhaps unsurprising that bearing a label of being disabled is something people may find hard to embrace.

Many of the participants discussed the role that aging (1.2) has played in their ability to form and maintain relationships with others: *"I did have friends, certainly when I was younger in primary school, I went through a good quarter of high school not figuring out how to make friends. It took me a couple of years in sixth form to actually form friendships and its only really now that I'm at the end of my degree that I've formed friendships with a couple of people."* (P4)

Research into social relationships indicates that Autistic pupils can experience fractious relationships with their peers (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Humprey & Lewis, 2008), which some participants had experienced: *"Back in school it was often a*

problem as I wasn't sure if I said things that would upset or offend people..... Thankfully I can catch myself a lot better now.” (P1)

“It gets easier and easier as you grow up. I find it easier now to make friends than when I was at school and I found it harder in primary school than when I was at high school.” (P2)

Here the participants suggest that things got easier as they got older. Two distinct pathways appeared to emerge from these statements: ‘learning’ about how to ‘read’ other people and fit in (1.2), and having more control over social interactions (see 2.3). Some of the participants discussed how they had learned over time how to interact with others: *“The more you get to know someone the easier it is to read them..... it's like a formula..... It's something you learn.” (P5)*. According to Milton (2012) many autistic people sidestep the urge to blend in by mimicking non autistic behaviour and developing ways of being that are compatible with their disposition: *“I feel like I've taught myself just through loads of very strict, conscious practice over the years. I had to practice how to be a student in mainstream education, it is like playing a role.” (P4)*.

Many of the participants discussed ‘fitting in’ or camouflaging their behaviours, i.e. *“I certainly don't talk about special interests.” (P4)*. Camouflaging appears to be a common coping mechanism used to ‘fit in’ socially, and avoid ostracism (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017), often achieved through rehearsal, practicing and observation from the periphery to assimilate actions into an imitation of ‘normal’ behaviour (Holliday Willey, 1999), and avoid being identified. During the interviews participants expressed engagement with frequent self-monitoring during social interactions, suggesting that they found it difficult to ‘be themselves’: *“ I'll often get worried are they bored of what I'm saying and are they tired of me blathering on. More recently I've got into the habit of asking people if I know*

them well enough, sorry if I'm being boring because I know I could blather on for ages."
(P1).

This impacted on their ability to seek out social interaction: *"I like to get involved with other people, but sometimes I'm being a pain and repeating myself and I don't know I'm not doing it properly."* (P2).

Research has shown that NT peers are more likely to make negative judgements of autistic social behaviours (Sasson et al., 2017) and participants seemed highly aware of how others might perceive them (1.3): *"But I do find it quite difficult to say no to people as well, it's quite challenging as I don't want to be rude as that one thing autistic people are often classed as rude and that's one thing I don't want to be rude, so I try extra hard not to be rude."* (P5). These observations reject the notion that autistic people are 'mindblind' (Baron-Cohen, 1995) and lack insight into the social judgements of others. The participants in this study acknowledged that they had difficulty with picking up on social signals (2.1) but had worked hard to develop their understanding of others. Here the participants appeared to be seeing the world from the viewpoint of the 'generalised other', and were aware that their intentions and how they were perceived by others may not be in alignment.

2. Socialising..... 'It's more complicated than that'

Misreading signals or not picking up on attributes which the neurotypical person grasps implicitly (Oikawa & Oikawa, 2010) is key to why Autistic people might be seen as easier to groom and exploit (Roth & Gillis, 2015). This difficulty 'reading' NTs has the potential to make communication and building relationships more demanding (2.1). All of the

participants in this research were able to relate to and give examples from their own lives:

“I’d say I’m not very well versed at reading people. So if it’s very obvious body language like their face shows they are irritated or interested I can tell quite easily.” (P1)

“In the past where I’ve had friendships that went wrong I guess because I’d done something that has kind of made them a bit uncertain or uncomfortable, but because they haven’t told me about that.” (P4)

Lack of transparency can make it harder for Autistic people to predict how others are going to act, especially if people act in surprising or novel ways (Happé, Booth, Charlton, & Hughes, 2006). This was noted by one participant: *“Everyone else would think ‘I know exactly what they mean’ but I would either not notice it or it would take me a little longer..... Sometimes I don’t have the energy to really try (to interpret meanings).” (P4).*

Here the participant notes the psychologically demanding nature of social interactions (2.2).

Many of the participants noted that interacting with others could have a negative effect on their mental wellbeing, and lead to feeling overwhelmed and anxious: *“My mind is like a washing machine stuck on a spin cycle, struggling to spin.” (P2)*

“I always find that hugely overwhelming.....I hang around with them in that way, but for me I do find that talking to people kind of wears me down. I can’t really have friends that I talk to every single day.” (P4). Here the participant inferred the need for ‘low maintenance’ friendships, and people who are understanding of the toll that social interactions can take.

Most of the participants stated that meeting someone new for the first time was particularly hard for them: *“I don’t like talking to new people as it makes me nervous. I generally try to avoid talking to new people if I can help it.” (P3).*

“The thing that makes me most uncomfortable is being expected to interact with people I don’t know.” (P1)

One of the participants explained that it was the multi-faceted nature of first time interactions that can be difficult: *“I used to think it was as simple as going up to someone and saying ‘Hello! Do you want to be my friend?’ Then you come to realise it’s a bit more complicated than that. I certainly do when I first meet somebody, there can be a lot of apprehension, yes.” (P4).*

However not all of the participants had issues with meeting new people: *“I find easy; I don’t have a fear of talking to people, I’ll talk to anybody and that might be a bit of a problem. I don’t find it easy to know what to think about someone.”(P5).* For this participant, it was the ongoing demands of friendship that were the most draining: *“It’s a lot easier if it’s quiet and there’s not much else going on. I find that a lot better.....Less distractions and not having to pay attention to too many things all at once.I dislike having to remember so much about people. People expect you to know stuff about their life, and that means having to concentrate in conversations and really care about what they say, not in a mean way”.*

The comments of the participants paint a picture of how mentally tiring it can be deciphering a mass of sensory data and subtle nuances beyond the literal semantics of language. Their remarks suggest that interpretation adds an additional mental weight to the process of

engaging with others. If interaction is overwhelming due to being bombarded by multiple sensory inputs simultaneously, it is not surprising that many autistic people may avoid crowds and noise as well as spending a lot of time with other people. What some may interpret as isolation or avoidance may be a coping strategy that makes socialisation manageable.

A common misconception about autistic people is that they lack interest in other people; numerous studies have shown that autistic people are not uninterested in other people and relationships (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Müller et al., 2008; Sedgewick, Hill, Yates, Pickering, & Pellicano, 2016). The participants in this study found friends important, and gained enjoyment from engaging with them: *“I enjoy having the company, having people to talk to, I’m a big gamer.” (P1).*

This is inconsistent with the premise of social motivation theory (Chevallier, Kohls, Troiani, Brodtkin, & Schultz, 2012) which suggests that autistic people may gain less pleasure in social interaction and devote less effort into maintaining relationships, neglecting social opportunities as a result (Jamil, Gragg, & DePape, 2017). Some participants did mention their preference for infrequent contact *“I’m happy having friends I only speak to once a year and I’m not sure if you ought to talk to them more often than that.” (P5).*

“There’s having to make sure you see people, but if people are your friends they won’t mind if they don’t see you that often.” (P3).

However, our participants comments suggest that lack of engagement is not down to motivation, but the draining nature of having to remain aware of all aspects of communication used by the neurotypical population as demonstrated in theme 2.2. Several of

the participants spoke about finding people who are ‘like-minded’(2.3), as they are easier to spend time with: *“Knowing where to be and where I’ll find people similar, or meeting friends of friends who would be like minded.” (P1).*

One participant in particular noted the importance of their autistic friends: *“My autistic friends, though not in some ways as they have their views and opinions and particular interests that they like to go on about again and again but at the same the time there’s not so much pressure to remember everything and have to do that like, formula about how to have a conversation with a person.” (P5).* Here like-mindedness stretched beyond similar interests, as the participant inferred that they could get bored of hearing about topics that didn’t interest them, but they appreciated the ability to ‘be themselves’ and interact in a way which came more naturally to them.

Reciprocity was also highly valued. When speaking about the ways in which mate crime may manifest, one participant spoke of a friend who will often ask the participant to buy him a drink, but was quick to mention: *“He never goes without returning the favour” (P1).*

This reciprocity was not limited to tangible items, but also included emotional support: *“My friends generally cheer me up when I’m in a bad mood I guess. I try to do the same in return.” (P3)*

Some of the participants spoke about turning to the internet in order to make and maintain friendships. Nichols, Moravcik, and Tetenbaum (2009) found that many Autistic people appreciated not having to focus on body language or maintaining eye contact. It also afforded them more control over self-presentation and the slower pace of communication gave them longer to process information. The statements from the participants supported this sentiment: *“It’s easier online.....I guess, because you can’t see their facial expressions or*

tone of voice and that makes it easier as it takes a lot of the complication out of it. It's a lot easier messaging you than it is talking to you." (P3)

"Yeah, I do (find it easier), I like being with my friends on Facebook." (P2).

Participants were aware of the risks of online communication (consistent with Roth and Gillis (2015) and were mindful that trust is central to managing personal risk (Zinn & Taylor-Gooby, 2006).

3. 'Taking Advantage of you'

In an attempt to gain insight into the relationship between friendship, bullying and mate crime participants were asked about their experiences with all three. All participants had at some point in their lives encountered actual crimes against them or bullying whilst at school. Findings from Papadopoulos (2016) suggest that bullying of Autistic people is commonplace during adolescence, especially at school (Cook, Ogden, & Winstone, 2016). *"I never got on with people while at this school, I had some days at school where I had a miserable time."(P4)*

"I got a lot of hassle at school." (P3)

"The bullies I had in high school would just assume I didn't know what was going on and they assumed I wouldn't recognise they were very obviously manipulative, it was so transparent." (P4)

Some of the participants were familiar with the term mate crime: *“It’s when you befriend a disabled person in the guise of caring about them but actually aim to exploit their trust in a way that they might not be able to recognise.” (P4)*

“When they take advantage of someone with a mental disability because they are terribly trusting and they use that to abuse them somewhat, to hurt them or to make them the constant butt of all their jokes and take advantage of their trust and doing it over and over again. (P1)”

One participant was able to appreciate it might not be friends but others close to them who are a risk: *“I’d rather have CCTV in the home to catch bad people such as bad carers and abuse or anything like that.” (P2)*. This participant had the highest support needs amongst those interviewed and had also been assaulted previously by a gang of unknown youths. They seemed very aware of their personal vulnerabilities (both currently, and in the future when their family may not be around to support them) and had strategies in place to help them negotiate daily living.

One participant identified being taken advantage of by a ‘friend’. *“I was really close friends with a girl but my dad pointed out that I kept doing things for her but I didn’t see it. Like we’d go out for lunch and I’d pay and she wouldn’t pay.”(P5)*

All participants were able to see parallels with bullying (3.1), and acknowledged that bullying could be more ‘obvious’: *“Bullies tend to be obvious from the get go...but they might think it’s slightly more effective to pretend to be a friend.” (P4)*

“It’s probably worse, like bullying is generally pretty direct, but this is like... tricking you into thinking that you are a friend. It’s more like manipulation and its worse because you’re doing it deliberately.” (P3)

“If it’s more severe like taking advantage of themthen it is worse than bullying. If it’s on the school yard it’s bullying”. (P1)

All of the participants were able to pinpoint risk factors (3.2) for mate crime: *‘People who are more vulnerable are more likely to be victims of crime if they have less social skills and are less able to interact with people and then you are the more likely you are to be a victim of crime anyway.’ (P5)*

They noted that this vulnerability was not limited to autistic people: *“I think people with other disabilities would also be more vulnerable, not just autism, people with anxiety, mental illnesses, children the elderly.” (P3)*

“Someone with a more trusting nature would be the victim of it” (P1)

Some felt there was a greater stigma attached to being exploited: *“I would feel a bit embarrassed at being duped and upset with myself.”*

“Most people would not get themselves in such a situation so I would feel more ashamed of it.”(P5)

Whereas others felt that stigma should lie with the person doing the exploiting *“No, the one taking the advantage is the one who should be ashamed” (P3).*

However, all participants said they would discuss their concerns either with friends or their family which was reassuring. Most also had some ideas or strategies that would help them to prevent being susceptible to abuse in future: *“When I meet up with friends, I stay away from the city centre when I’m on my own as there could be some horrible idiots there.”*(P2)

General Discussion

The findings from this study illustrate some of the difficulties that autistic people can face trying to develop genuine friendships, navigating the sometimes overwhelming social world, and avoiding exploitation and harm. Our participants highlight some key issues that could be considered in attempting to establish risk and prevention of mate crime in autism.

The majority of the participants were diagnosed in childhood, and their diagnosis impacted on how they viewed their interactions with peers as well as how they attempted to present themselves within social situations. Participants expressed an aversion to being labelled as ‘disabled’. This aversion is consistent with internalisation of disability as a negative, and something to hide to avoid being viewed as lesser (Reeve, 2004). Milton and Moon (2012) argue that seeing autism framed as ‘personal tragedy’ (French & Swain, 2004) or something to be normalised, can have a negative effect on the autistic person, resulting in diminished self-worth and a struggle to understand one’s place in the world. It is certainly the case that not all autistic people view their label (or disability) as a negative (Milton & Sims, 2016). However what these comments do show is the need for greater understanding of the autistic experience and a wider discourse about the effects of ableist attitudes impacting on self-acceptance, and recognition of one’s own support needs.

Participants comments were consistent with previous research demonstrating that autistic people may develop strategies to camouflage their difficulties in an attempt to ‘fit in’ with peers (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017). Though camouflaging can help autistic people to attain and maintain friendships, it can also be detrimental to mental health (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016; Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2018). Our participants stressed the need for ‘low maintenance’ friendships in adulthood, with low demands and understanding peers. The trepidation participants expressed about meeting new people and ‘getting it right’ demonstrated that they valued friendship and wanted to be liked, but the overwhelming nature of communication could increase anxiety or lead to difficulties of processing and interpretation. Participants describe in their own words how tiring it can be, how it can make them feel anxious or reluctant to socialise and impact on their self-esteem. This is consistent with research showing that Autistic people are not asocial (Bargiela et al., 2016; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2008; Sedgewick et al., 2016), but experience barriers that make socialising difficult or intolerable. Interestingly, we found that both our male and female participants engaged in self-monitoring for similar reasons: not being perceived as ‘boring’, and fitting in with peers (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017). Our findings also do not support the suggestion that autistic men are less interested in friendship than autistic women (Sedgewick et al., 2016); both male and female participants were engaged with forming and maintaining friendships. This may be in part due to the age of the participants interviewed. Most participants mentioned that social interaction had become easier with age, making it possible for them to form meaningful friendships.

All participants had experienced bullying or abusive behaviour at some point in their lives, and could see a difference between bullying and mate crime. They acknowledged that

autistic people may be particularly vulnerable due to an inability to recognise subtle indicators of exploitation, however also recognised that other disabilities (i.e. mental illness) and factors (such as age) could put people at higher risk of victimisation (Landman, 2014). One of the participants (P5) was able to identify a clear example of being exploited by a ‘close friend’. This participant also discussed the impact that outside perceptions of autism had on their behaviour, not wanting to be labelled as ‘rude’. This statement was particularly concerning, given the amount of interventions that focus on ‘social skills training’ and being ‘compliant’ (Chandler, Russell, & Maras, 2018). It is possible that these types of interventions could impact on the ability of an autistic person to trust their own judgement or express concern when faced with inappropriate social behaviours from others. This is consistent with issues raised by the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), where we might see a focus on training autistic people to conform to what NT people demand instead of creating a bidirectional understanding.

Some participants said they would might feel ashamed if they were exploited which appeared to relate back to ideas around internalised ableism. However all participants were able to identify people in their lives (parents and friends) that they could reach out to if they were unsure about another’s intentions. This demonstrates the importance of good quality support networks for autistic people who may find themselves targeted by unscrupulous individuals.

Limitations

All of the participants in this research currently have low/no support needs and were a fairly similar group (all aged 22-25). Though the aim of this research was not generalisability, it would be worth exploring mate crime across a wider population of Autistic adults, to ensure that experiences informing any support meet the needs of as many people as possible. It is

likely that there are some additional issues faced by those with higher support needs that are not captured here. It is also imperative to understand the experiences of those who rely more on non-verbal means of communication to make sure that their ‘voices’ are heard. Evidence suggests that those with a learning disability may be particularly at risk from mate crime (Doherty, 2017; Landman, 2014), due to their perceived vulnerability.

Though this research never intended to establish the prevalence of mate crime; this *is* necessary. It is likely that many cases are never reported (Sherry & Neller, 2016). This study has demonstrated the kind of questions that might enable greater exploration of what mate crime is and who it affects. We also show the necessity of including the concept of friendship in mate crime research, since this provides the context for mate crime to occur.

Conclusion

The current study is to our knowledge the first to examine lived experience and perceptions of mate crime within the autistic adult population as well as building upon current research into friendship in autism. There is still much research and intervention necessary to ensure that mate crime is met with an appropriate response and minimised effectively. However the current study suggests that it is important to ensure that mate crime research includes the ‘mate’ aspect, examining how potentially vulnerable populations define good quality relationships and distinguish those which may be exploitative.

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