

Exploring the life stories of autistic men convicted of sexual crimes

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Background: Autism

- **Autism is a very diverse, lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition, prevalent in approx. 1-2% prevalence in the general population** (APA, 2022)
- **Diagnostic criteria:**

Differences in social communication and interaction

E.g., social-emotional reciprocity and reading others, non-verbal communication and unwritten social rules, literalness, processing verbal information, developing/maintaining relationships

Differences in thinking and behaviour

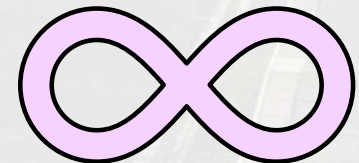
E.g., repetitive patterns of behaviour and/or thinking, adherence to routines/rituals, preference for sameness and difficulties with sudden change, highly-focussed interests

Sensory Differences

E.g., hyper/hypo sensitivity, sensory seeking/avoidance



- **Autism is an example of 'neurodivergence'**
- **Many in the autistic community challenge the diagnostic criteria, as they feel it does not *truly* encapsulate what it means to be autistic**



Background: Autism and the Criminal Justice System

- **Prevalence of autism in the criminal justice system is yet to be reliably established, but evidence suggests an overrepresentation of autistic individuals in CJS generally**

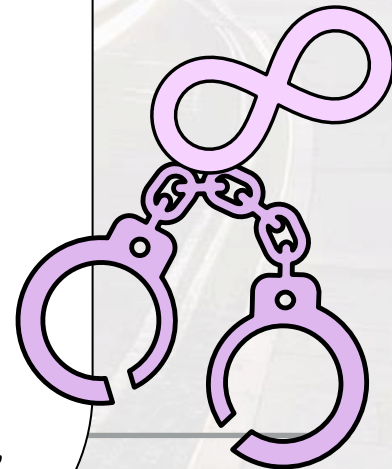
(Ashworth, 2016; Enyati et al., 2008; Fazio et al., 2012; Hare et al., 1999; Robinson et al., 2012; Rutten et al., 2017; Scragg & Shah, 1994; Siponmaa et al., 2001; Söderstrom et al., 2005; Söderstrom et al., 2004; Søndena et al., 2014; Young et al., 2018)

- **Autistic individuals are no more likely to offend than the rest of the general population, and are likely to become victims of crime** (Griffiths et al., 2019; King & Murphy, 2014; Mouridsen et al., 2008)

- **HOWEVER; in the minority of autistic individuals who *do* offend, being autistic can provide some useful context for understanding their offending**

(Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Browning & Caulfield, 2011; Ledingham & Mills, 2015; Sabet et al., 2015)

- Common examples of offences can include: sexual offending, property destruction (e.g., arson and criminal damage), assault, stalking, cyber-crimes



Present study: Method

The present study aimed to qualitatively explore the life stories of autistic individuals with sexual convictions

Design and data collection was informed by a forensic participatory autism research design with members of the prison autism community

Data collection stage 1: Pre-interview exercise

- Asked all participants to:
 - Conceptualise life as a book, split into chapters (roughly structured by age boundaries)
 - Use exercise books to summarise what key episodes (i.e., things that happened) occurred during these periods
- Offered list of topics they *could* include any or none of, according to what was most important to them balance between flexibility/freedom and supportive structure

Pre-interview exercise 1: "My Life Chapters"

In this task I would like you to please think about your life as if it was a book or novel, that has been categorised into four main chapters, each composed of 1-3 sub-chapters (or episodes).

These four main chapters are listed below:

- **CHAPTER 1** Childhood (Age: Birth - 12 years old)
- **CHAPTER 2** Adolescence (Age: 13 years old - 18 years old)
- **CHAPTER 3** Young Adult (Age: 19 years old - 25 years old)
- **CHAPTER 4** Adulthood (Age: 26 years old - present)

What do I need to do?
I'd like you to please tell me what the sub-chapters/episodes in each chapter of your life would be, by writing them in your exercise book.

For each sub-chapter/episode, please provide a title and a description summarising what each sub-chapter/episode is about.

For example:
CHAPTER 1: Childhood (Age: Birth - 12 years old)
- Episode 1: [Title] [Description...]
- Episode 2: [Title] [Description...]

Your sub-chapter/episode descriptions may be as detailed as you like, but please try to write or list two sentences for each sub-chapter/episode. If you are under the age of 26, do not write anything for Chapter 4 "Adulthood", instead you are permitted to add 1-3 extra sub-chapters/episodes to the chapter 3 "Young Adult" chapter.

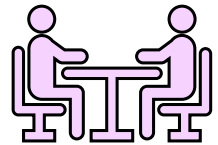
For each chapter, try to think about and include some of the following details:

- The people who were in your life at the time (such as family, caregivers/guardians, friends, romantic partners, role models) (note: models can be real people or fictional)
- Education/organisations (such as school, college, sixth form, university, leisure and sports clubs)
- Work and career
- Your Autism/Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis
- Other conditions you may have been diagnosed with (e.g. ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, epilepsy, personality disorders)
- Your offences, arrests, court trials, sentencing and prison
- Other people and organisations (such as doctors, nurses, support workers, carers, psychologists, police, lawyers)
- Important events (positive and/or negative)
- Challenges you have faced
- Positive and/or negative influences on your life (e.g. a single person, pet, group of persons, organisation/institutions)
- Your interests, hobbies and achievements/accomplishments

Your spelling and grammar is not important. In addition to written descriptions, you may also include drawings, diagrams and/or timelines, if you find this helpful.

Data collection stage 2: Life story interviews

- Bespoke, individualised, semi-structured life story interview schedules, adapted for each participant
- Interview(s) covered questions designed to elaborate on what participants had written in their pre-interview exercises and attempted to fill in noticeable gaps in the story
- Participants engaged in 1-3 interviews overall, according each individual's preferences and comfortability on the day.



Present study: Method

- **Participants:**

- 4 autistic adult males, aged 27-33, serving prison sentences for sexual offence convictions at

- **Ideographically analysed data using a narrative analysis** (Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 1993, 1995;

Murray, 2015)

- Identified areas of commonality (convergence) and diversity (divergence) in life stories



- **Today, we'll focus on some patterns identified in stories of pre-offence life and the offence(s) itself**

Participant Pseudonym	Offence type	Victim Type	Total interview time (hrs:mins)
1. 'Sam'	Contact & Images	Child	3:49
2. 'Jamie'	Contact & Images	Child	3:16
3. 'Liam'	Contact	Adult	3:19
4. 'Dylan'	Images	Child	2:31

Findings: Patterns in pre-offence stories

- **Different to others and often unsure of why**
 - Difficulties understanding self and being understood by others
 - Late diagnoses for some
 - Faced with concerns of being “normal”
- **Challenging transition from primary to secondary school age amplified difficulties in social world**
 - Increased complexity of social environment
 - “idiosyncrasies” and “eccentricities” no longer “tolerated” by others
 - Experiences of bullying
- **Isolation and/or distancing from others**
 - Finding comfort in interests
 - Retreating to the ‘safety’ of the online world

“Because I behaved slightly different to other people my age I began to get picked on, called names and was never asked join in any games that other children played, so I would just sit on my own... I felt different, felt like no-one cared and always wondered why I was different” (*Jamie*)

“I mean, in school I was very unpopular... I used to get bullied by girls and boys, they used to take the piss out of me, and... erm, didn’t really have any friends” (*Liam*)

“Moving to high school was initially, and for some time thereafter, a disaster... where I had been able to ‘pace myself’ at primary school, and catch-up socially with peers, the rapidly changing complexity and dynamism of these older children was incoherent... Boundaries sprang up, it seemed, quite arbitrarily, and many of these still seem frankly absurd. Nuancing skills I’d learned at a younger age were now meaningless, and I had to try and learn an entirely new and even more convoluted array of obstacles... Because of my relative intelligence, many people began to lose patience with my poorer social skills- they couldn’t understand how someone could be both ‘clever’ and ‘stupid’” (*Dylan*)

Findings: Patterns in offence stories

- **Knowledge and comprehension of rules:**
 - Legal rules (e.g., age of consent, producing vs consuming)
 - Social rules and socio-sexual conventions (e.g., consent and withdrawal of consent)
- **Difficulties understanding (*and being understood by*) others, perspective-taking and identifying thoughts, feelings and intentions**
 - Reciprocity and consent during sexual interactions
 - Identifying harm, age and emotions in CSEM
- **Falling “down a rabbit hole” in pursuit of other interests, collecting and getting trapped in a “spiral”**

“At school, it had come to my attention that peer-to-peer software could be used to download music for free... the ‘point of no return’ was Guns n Roses, search results were based on individual words, not necessarily strings, and what came of ‘Sweet Child of Mine’ is [now] pretty self-evident. Curiosity and devilment compelled me to look, and what I recall seeing did not strike me as being in any way offensive- I didn’t know how broadly the issue was defined in law... I’d seen normal pornography... I didn’t see any difference between it, really, frankly... I didn’t really see any difference at all... there was obviously no chest, erm, but I didn’t- when you then have people explaining, for example, “oh gosh, you know, you see tears in their eyes”, I don’t recall that... I didn’t fully understand, I mean, from what I’d seen of pornography, which is to say adult pornography... I thought that it would be pretty much the same thing... but, without wanting to be rude, shorter and smaller” (*Dylan*)

“maybe we’ve both got confused and we’ve crossed wires, and she thinks she’s been raped... it’s a perspective thing, innit... at no point did I think to myself “she doesn’t want this”, you know, at no point did I think “oh, she’s making me aware that she’s not consented”, every step of the way, she made it clear to me that she’s was consenting, but, like I say, because of the autism thing now, maybe, it’s a perspective thing” (*Liam*)

“we had that conversation in which [university mentor] gave insight into why, erm, deriving gratification from, err, images of children suffering is itself a harmful act, which is the insight I lacked, which, I think, after that point I thought “why the hell am I getting done for this?”, you know, “I’m not making anything, it’s just pictures”... it was after that that I felt guilty, but also more at peace with the, err, process I was going through... I saw that what I’d done was wrong. But before that point I just thought I was being not prosecuted, but persecuted” (*Sam*)

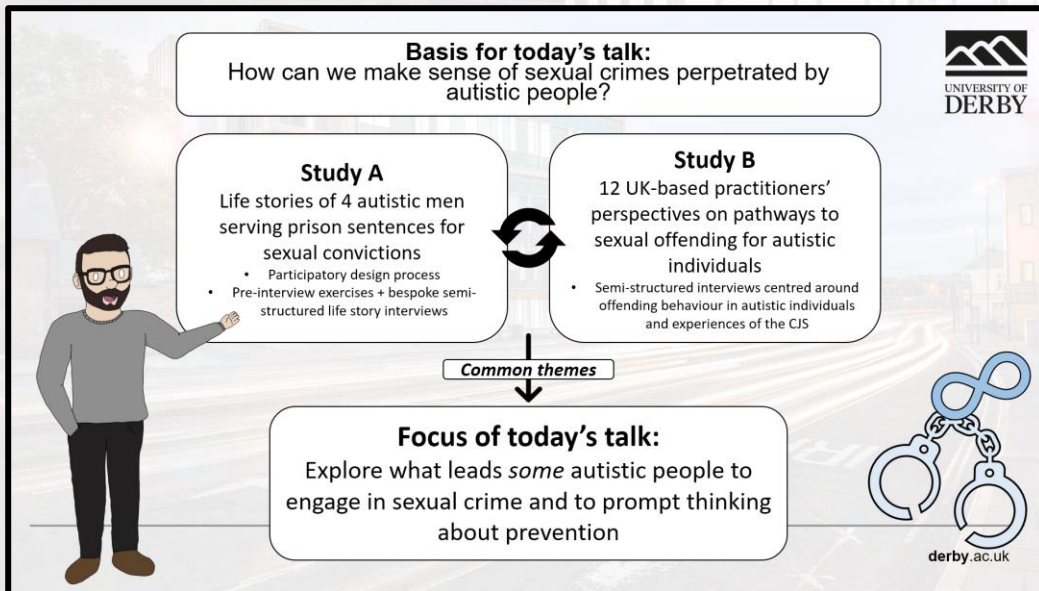
Discussion

Features of these life stories resonated with other evidence relating to how autism can provide useful context for making sense of offences perpetrated by autistic individuals*

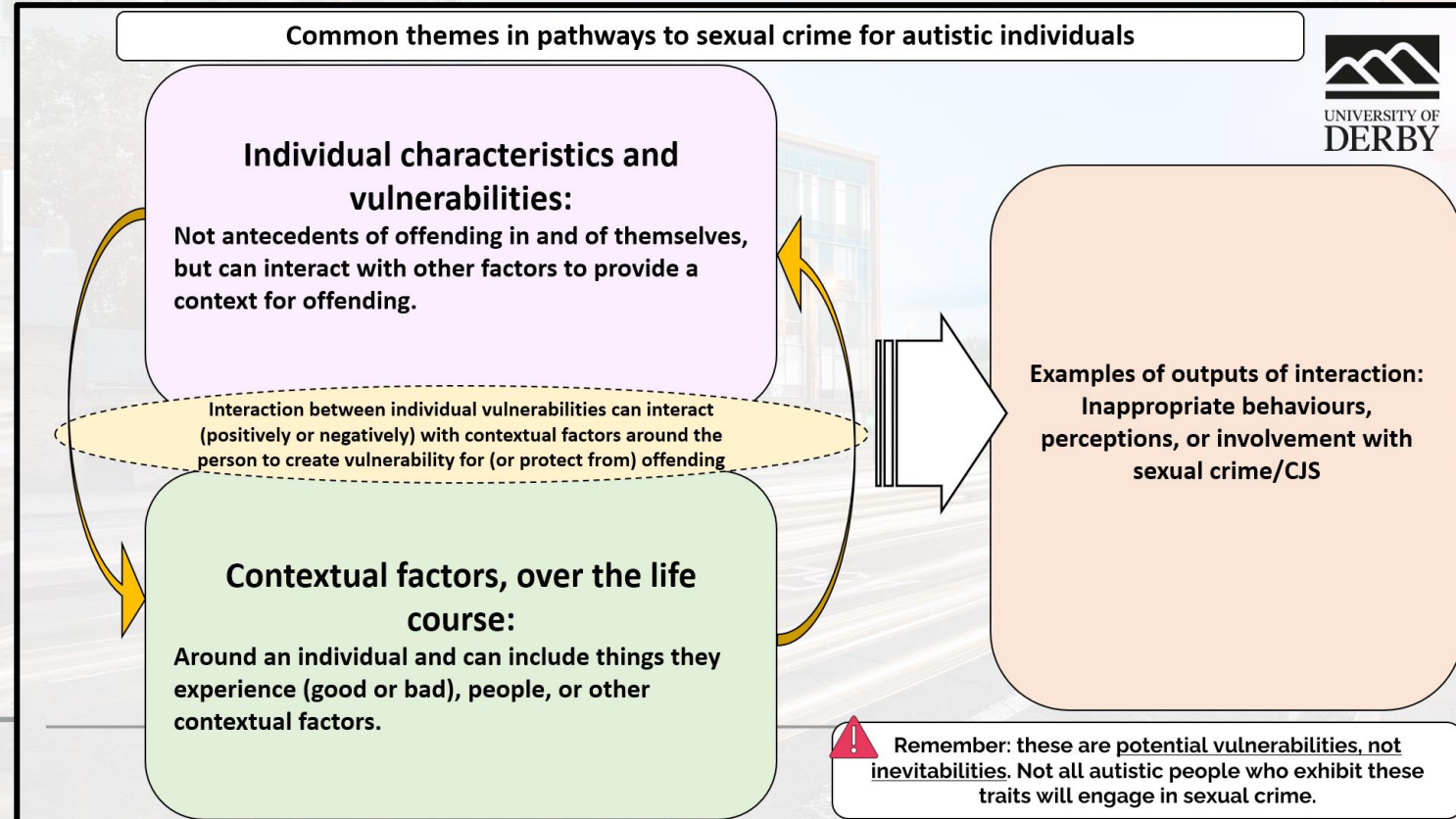
*(Al-Attar, 2019; Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Allely & Dubin, 2018; Archer & Hurley, 2013; Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004; Chan & Saluja, 2011; Davey et al., under review; de la Cuesta, 2010; Griffin-Shelley, 2010; Hannah & Stagg, 2016; Haskins & Silva, 2006; Higgs & Carter, 2015; Hollomotz et al., 2018; Katz & Zemishlany, 2006; Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011; Milton et al., 2002; Murrie et al., 2002; Payne et al., 2020; Ray et al., 2004; Sevlever et al., 2013; Stokes et al., 2007)

Putting it all together:

“Exploring pathways to sexual offending for autistic individuals and considerations for prevention” (Vinter, 2024**)



Common themes in pathways to sexual crime for autistic individuals



**Special thanks to collaborators on 'Study B' and pathways model above: Deanna Davy, Sarah Brown, Clare Allely, Natalie Mann, Elise Orofino, Samantha Lundrigan

Examples of common themes in pathways to sexual crime for autistic individuals

Individual characteristics and vulnerabilities:

Not antecedents of offending in and of themselves, but can interact with other factors to provide a context for offending.

- Difficulties interpreting and understanding nonverbal communication, social cues, 'rules' or 'norms' in the way neurotypical people do
- Literal (or narrow) interpretation of information and/or understanding of rules and information
- Difficulties perspective-taking and intuiting others' intentions and/or feelings and/or age
- Highly focussed (*sometimes regarded as obsessive*) areas of interest and desires to collect
- Impulsivity, risk-taking and difficulties appreciating potential consequences

Interaction between individual vulnerabilities can interact (positively or negatively) with contextual factors around the person to create vulnerability for (or protect from) offending

Contextual factors, over the life course:

Around an individual and can include things they experience (good or bad), people, or other contextual factors:

- Neurotypical peoples' interpretations and misunderstanding of individual, their communication and/or behaviours (inc. counterfeit deviance)
- (Un)reciprocated desire to make friends, and experiences of loneliness, socially isolation, othering, bullying and/or abuse
- Online spaces environments easier to understand, more comfortable and predictable (also- 'free access' to illegal material)
- Communication of 'rules' regarding relationships, sex, laws etc. (e.g., not explicitly explained)
- Opportunities for sexual education and experience
- Susceptibility to manipulation, exploitation and abuse from others

Examples of outputs of interaction: Inappropriate behaviours, perceptions, or involvement with sexual crime/CJS

- Inappropriate behaviours (e.g., public masturbation) and/or actions towards others (e.g., touching, initiating sexual contact)
- Obsession (with an individual, or collecting illegal materials- though not always sexually motivated) and not seeing people shown on internet as 'real' or actual victims
- Mismatched communication, interpreted as menacing/threatening or too intense, leading to police contact
- Inclination to identify and inappropriately interact with children/younger people
- Do not understand illegality of actions
- Misinterpreted during the Criminal Justice process



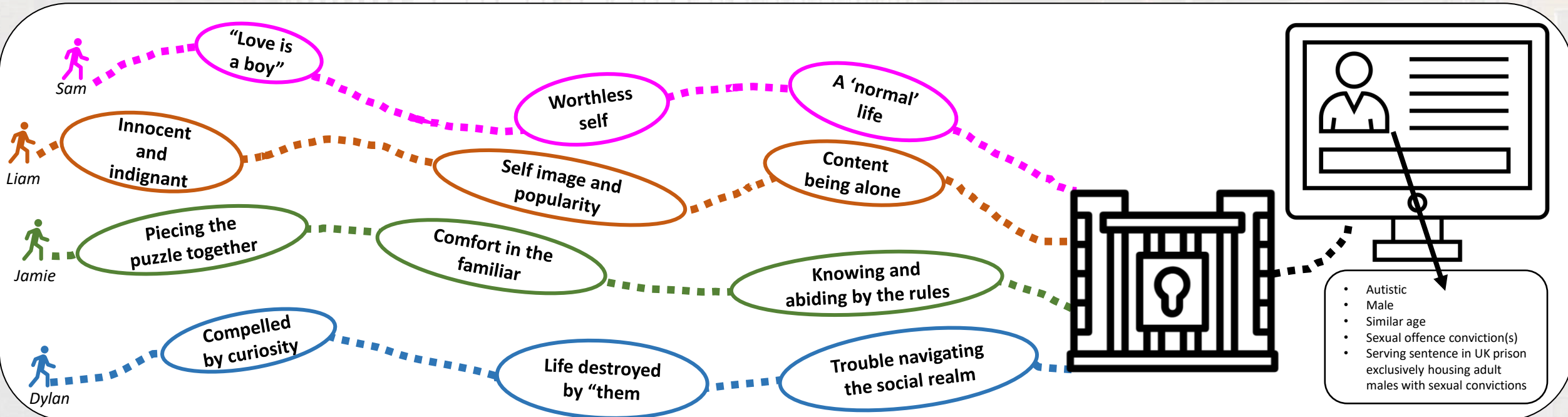
Remember: these are potential vulnerabilities, not inevitabilities. Not all autistic people who exhibit these traits will engage in sexual crime.

Findings: Diversity in life stories

Despite 'on-paper' commonalities, we need to avoid the temptation to overgeneralise or assume in practice based on these issues alone

- Ideographic analysis of life stories also identified uniqueness and diversity in individuals' pathways towards offending and prison, motivations that were associated with their offending behaviours, what being autistic meant to them, and how they construed their present circumstances/futures

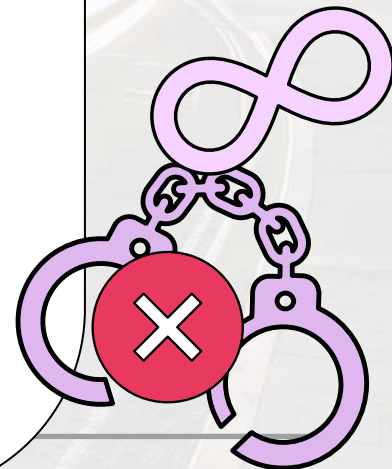
It's important to recognise diversity in pathways, individual sense-making of those pathways, consider what that means for needs and receptiveness, and adapt ways of working with those individuals accordingly (Vinter et al., 2023)



Discussion: Early opportunities for support and intervention(?)

Areas to consider for primary and secondary prevention of sexual crime for autistic individuals:

- **Enhancing early autism identification AND ensuring specialist support for children and parents (remember: diagnosis alone is not enough!)**
inc. appropriate intervention for overlooked behaviours in early life that would be tantamount to offending in adulthood (e.g., public masturbation, inappropriate touching)
- **Developing autism awareness and acceptance in others to address some of the challenges posed in the social world, and removing the onus from autistic individuals**
- **Appropriately responsive, age-appropriate sex education in schools**
inc. healthy sexual relationships and behaviours, nuances of consent, reciprocity and legal rules regarding off/online (with clear communication of potential harms and/or consequences).
- **Sufficiently responsive internet safety education, guidance and regulation for young autistic individuals**



Concluding thoughts

REMEMBER: Autistic people are NO MORE LIKELY to engage in sexual crime than anyone else

- **BUT, when they do, it's important we understand what unique factors could have led that minority to offend and appreciate how those individuals make sense of their own stories, to inform best practices for prevention**
 - Not always about identifying single isolated factors, but appreciating and making sense of the bigger picture context of why some engage in sexual crime
i.e., focus on the whole mosaic, rather than a single tile
- **That said, contextual factors underpinning sexual crime perpetrated by autistic people are not necessarily entirely unique to being autistic (*e.g., see overlaps with dimensions ITSO, Ward & Beech, 2016*), but the root of these factors, how/why they're experienced, and what those factors mean cannot always be assumed to be the same**

Take home message:

Ultimately, in our pursuit of understanding and preventing sexual crime, we must not lose sight of the *individuals* we work with



Thank you for listening!
Any questions?



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