

A KINK IN THE SPECTRUM:
AUTISTIC ADULTS EXPERIENCING EMPOWERMENT DUE TO PARTNERED KINKY
ACTIVITIES

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DOCTORAL PROJECT ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

The undersigned, appointed by Modern Sex Therapy Institutes,
have examined a doctoral project entitled

**A KINK IN THE SPECTRUM: AUTISTIC ADULTS EXPERIENCING
EMPOWERMENT DUE TO PARTNERED KINKY ACTIVITIES**

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Abstract

A Kink in the Spectrum:

Autistic Adults Experiencing Empowerment Due to Partnered Kinky Activities

There is a known intersection of Autistic adults being interested in kink and BDSM. Previous research on Autistic individuals has primarily been conducted through a deficit-based lens and with Allistic (non-Autistic) researchers at the helm. The aim in this qualitative study was to fill the need for Autistic-centered research and to explore Autistic experiences of empowerment due to partnered kinky activities. This research was rooted in neuroqueer theory and the neurodiversity paradigm. Heuristic inquiry was used to interview six co-researchers and interpret their data, with individual follow-up interviews to ensure understanding and accuracy. Data analysis resulted in four main themes for Autistic experiences of empowerment due to these activities: healing, self-actualizing, connecting, and playing. Twenty subthemes were also identified: sensory regulation, emotional regulation, subverting norms, autonomy, reclaiming trauma, generational change, knowledge, personal growth, focusing on self, authenticity, partnership, comfort, structure, understanding autism, communication, community, novelty, challenge, special interests and shared interests, and sensory joy and stimming. These results show that Autistic adults find empowerment from participating in partnered kinky activities in a variety of ways and highlight specific experiences that led to empowerment for the participant co-researchers. These results should be considered when exploring and discussing Autistic empowerment and strategies to promote Autistic empowerment.

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Lay Summary

Why is this topic important?

There is currently limited research about Autistic adults and kink. Many Autistic individuals report having kinky fantasies. Online and in certain communities, Autistic adults talk about participating in kinky relationships or activities. However, Autistic adults in the United States have not been directly asked about their experiences of empowerment due to participating in kinky activities with a partner. There is little known about how kink supports Autistic empowerment.

What was the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research was to find out what Autistic experiences of empowerment have happened due to engaging in partnered kinky activities.

What does the researcher conclude?

I conclude that there are four main themes of Autistic empowerment due to partnered kinky activities: healing, self-actualizing, connecting, and playing. The participant co-researchers described many different elements within those themes, which included: sensory regulation, emotional regulation, subverting norms, autonomy, reclaiming trauma, generational change, knowledge, personal growth, focus on self, authenticity, partnership, comfort, structure, understanding autism, communication, community, novelty, challenge, special interests and shared interests, and sensory joy and stimming.

What does the researcher recommend for future research on this topic?

I recommend that future research focus on learning about Autistic adults of color and their empowerment due to kink, as well as older Autistic individuals (age 58 years and older) who were not represented in this research. Researchers should continue to uplift Autistic

participants and correctly represent them in their papers. Future research should be conducted by Autistic researchers with Autistic participants.

How will this research help Autistic adults now and in the future?

I hope that this research will let kinky Autistic adults know that they are not alone and that many of us feel empowered because of kink. It may also encourage Autistic individuals to explore their own interests in kink or to see if they can incorporate some of these empowering elements into their current relationships or life in other ways. I hope that it allows many more Autistic people to find empowerment for themselves and encourages them to get in touch with their wants, needs, desires, and who they truly are. I also hope that professionals read not only the results, but also the experiences shared in this research and gain more understanding and compassion for Autistic individuals.

Chapter I

Introduction

An estimated 5,400,400 U.S. adults are Autistic (Dietz et al., 2020). While Autistic people have their own distinctive styles of information processing, attention, and communication, studies have found that they are just as likely as Allistic (non-Autistic) people to have sexual desires and fantasies (Stokes et al., 2007). In one study by Allistic researchers, approximately one quarter of Autistic participants were found to have paraphilic fantasies (Fernandes et al., 2016). (For the purpose of this study, the terms kinks, kinky, and BDSM were used instead of paraphilia and paraphilic.) In another study, Autistic individuals reported “more hypersexual and paraphilic fantasies and behaviors than [Allistic participants]” (Schöttle et al., 2017, p. 390).

Minimal research highlighting Autistic thoughts, needs, experiences, and feelings (hereinafter referred to as research centering Autistic people) has been conducted on how Autistic people engage in dyadic kinky or paraphilic activities. This research is especially lacking in the realm of empowering experiences. This chapter contains a discussion of the need for this research, the research questions, context, and background to help clarify the importance of this study and the research objectives and significance. Definitions of terms used in this study are also included.

Need for This Study

The current state of research regarding Autistic individuals and their interest and engagement in dating (e.g., sex; kink; and bondage, discipline, domination, sadism, submission and masochism [BDSM]) is minimal and created from a perspective that views Autistic people as disordered, problematic, and perverse (Atkinson, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2016; MacKenzie,

2018; Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021; Sullivan & Caterino, 2008; Tellier, 2017). As such, sex education, support programs, social curricula, and medical and mental health professionals are underequipped to help Autistic people engage in satisfying, safe, and fulfilling sexual activities (MacKenzie, 2018; Ousley & Mesibov, 1991; Smith, 2013). As a result, there is a need for further research to help improve these services and increase provider knowledge (Bernardin et al., 2021; Finch et al., 2022; Ismiarti et al., 2019; Koller, 2000; MacKenzie, 2018; Pecora et al., 2016; Simner et al., 2019).

The Autistic community and allied individuals also seek additional Autistic-centered research, resources for support and education, and discussions of both successes and challenges of Autistic people (Ousley & Mesibov, 1991; Wiorkowski, 2015). This request extends to exploring Autistic experiences of sexuality, sex, and kinky interests in ways that do not generate shame (Atkinson, 2021; Gibson & Douglas, 2018; Ousley & Mesibov, 1991; Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021; Wignall et al., 2023). There is a similar need for further research regarding the general population that engages in BDSM and kink, although a wider base of affirming research has grown over the last 10 years (Bezreh et al., 2012; Hansen-Brown & Jefferson, 2022; Sprott & Williams, 2019).

There is a significant need for studies and research situated in the neurodiversity paradigm, which is an affirming perspective that views autism as one of many possible variations for the human mind. There is no value judgment placed on being Autistic in this paradigm. A majority of past researchers have assumed social delays or deficits in Autistic people instead of recognizing that autism is a natural variation in neurology. Common Autistic traits often do not match current social norms in the United States, but that is not due to Autistic people having social deficits (Crompton, 2020). This deficit-based view created a gap in understanding Autistic

people in past research. It may have also caused miscommunication between Allistic researchers and Autistic participants, as researchers have found that “difficulties in autistic communication are apparent only when interacting with non-autistic people, and are alleviated when interacting with autistic people” (Crompton, 2020, p. 1710).

There is a call for Autistic-led research where researchers endeavor to understand what is important to their Autistic participants, intentionally communicate in ways that align with the participants’ needs, and center the participants’ experiences instead of drawing conclusions without Autistic feedback (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Kaplan-Kahn & Caplan, 2023; MacKenzie, 2018; Ousley & Mesibov, 1991; Wignall et al., 2023). Comparing Autistic behaviors to Allistic standards sets inaccurate benchmarks for what is considered “normal” or “excellent” (Egner, 2019). To address the issue of comparisons based only on neurotypical norms, researchers are urged to instead “view young, queer, trans, disabled, and autistic forms of desire and agency as substantial resources for destabilizing dominant narratives of temporality, growth, relationality, and human potential” (Gibson & Douglas, 2018, p. 21). New research can still compare and contrast Allistic and Autistic experiences, but neither should be considered the norm.

An additional gap in research exists regarding empowerment for Autistic people and empowerment regarding people who participate in kink and BDSM. Empowerment, as a sociological concept, aims to create a more equitable and just society by addressing the structural inequalities and barriers that prevent individuals and communities from realizing their full potential (Hur, 2006). On an individual level, empowerment can improve mental well-being, self-esteem, and a sense of one’s own personal power (Damm et al., 2017; Peterson, 2010; Tellier, 2017). Empowerment research for the Autistic population can help reduce stigma and

discrimination by highlighting the strengths and abilities of Autistic individuals. The findings could also provide targeted data that can improve professional support for Autistic individuals.

Focusing on empowerment in those who participate in BDSM and kink activities can also advance professional care and reduce stigma. My hope for this study was that if kink activities were found to be empowering for Autistic people, this knowledge would be useful to members of Autistic community as a whole as they explore their own empowerment. I hoped that the data would reveal fresh avenues for empowering Autistic individuals unfamiliar with kinky practices and could uncover common themes of empowerment that inspire new ideas. Ideally, this type of research will continue to destigmatize nonnormative hobbies, interests, and ways of living, which will support the Autistic community in being more openly authentic without as much shame and stigmatization from society.

There are also few studies regarding BDSM and kink in the general population, regardless of empowerment as a possible outcome of these practices. Researchers have called for more studies to dispel stigma around BDSM as well as to further understand and better support people who are drawn to and engage in kinky activities (Bezreh et al., 2012; Tellier, 2017; Weiss, 2006). Most existing research on BDSM and kink has not indicated whether Autistic individuals were included in the sample sizes. Therefore, this research does not reveal differences or similarities in experiences between Allistic and Autistic individuals and does not center Autistic voices. To help specify and explore Autistic experiences, targeted research is needed (Wignall et al., 2023).

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was, What experiences of empowerment do Autistic people have due to dyadic kinky activities? I explored the main question in more depth by also asking the following questions during the semistructured interviews:

- What does it mean for you to be empowered?
- How does being Autistic intersect with your interest in partnered kinky activities?
- Please share examples of times you felt most empowered due to dyadic kinky activities.
- What role do kinky activities play in your empowerment? What role do they play in relation to feeling empowered with a partner? What role do they play in relation to feeling empowered within yourself?
- What ways do these activities and feelings of empowerment relate to your Autistic traits?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of empowerment and dyadic kinky activities?

Theoretical Framework

I approached this research with the *neuroqueer theory* as its theoretical framework and the neurodiversity paradigm as a foundation. *Neurodiversity* references the phenomenon of variation among minds. These variations include neurocognitive functioning, such as how minds process information, interact with the world, and develop, as well as “every aspect of perception, cognition, emotion, memory, psyche, and consciousness” (Walker, 2021, p. 53–54).

Neurodiversity also includes the physical embodiment of these variations like movement, breath, posture, gaze, and any physical expressions. The *neurodiversity paradigm* allows viewing this

diversity among humans as valuable and natural. According to Nick Walker, in an interview with Dora Raymaker,

Neurodiversity is an axis of human diversity, like ethnic diversity or diversity of gender and sexual orientation, and is subject to the same sorts of social dynamics as those other forms of diversity—including the dynamics of social power inequalities, privilege, and oppression. From this perspective, the pathologization of neurominorities can be recognized as simply another form of systemic oppression which functions similarly to the oppression of other types of minority groups. (Walker & Raymaker, 2021, p. 5)

Neurodivergent is a term used to describe people who have minds that diverge from the societal norm, which includes Autistic people. Autistic people are considered to be a *neurominority*, as they experience prejudice and misunderstanding from the *neurotypical* majority based on their innate neurocognitive differences (Walker, 2021).

Neurotypical is defined as “having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2021, p. 40). The neurotypical norm also underpins the *pathology paradigm*. This neurotypical norm and the pathologization of neurodivergent individuals leads to a form of oppression that diminishes the value and abilities of neurodivergent people, as previously discussed.

The pathology paradigm is a perspective that views Autistic and nonneurotypical individuals as abnormal, disordered, defective, and unnatural (Walker, 2021). The pathology paradigm is usually used in the medical model, which is why it is often at the foundation of past research. The medical model, commonly used in U.S. medical settings, defines mental and emotional health differences as physiological disorders or diseases that the practitioner is supposed to cure or eradicate for the benefit of the client and society. Practitioners using this lens

and working within the medical model often actively try to change neurodivergent clients to be “more normal” and tend to view this action as helping the client.

In contrast, practitioners rooted in the neurodiversity paradigm would see their neurodivergent clients’ neurocognitive variations as natural and look for ways to provide any needed accommodation and support. Those who shift to the neurodiversity paradigm do not require anyone to be forced to change or conceal neurodivergent traits to appear more neurotypical. Instead, they promote neurodivergent people to participate and exist in society in equitable ways (Walker, 2021).

As early as 2008, Walker began using the term *neuroqueer* as a verb to describe subverting both neuronormativity and heteronormativity. This usage paralleled the usage of the word “queer” from queer theory (Walker, 2021). In the mid-2010s, Athena Michaels-Dillon, Walker, and M. Remi Yergeau further coined and defined neuroqueer as both a verb and adjective. In *Neuroqueer Heresies*, Walker (2021) provided an eight-part definition for neuroqueer as a verb, which is ever-evolving as more neurodivergent individuals adapt and use it:

1. Being both neurodivergent and queer, with some degree of conscious awareness and/or active exploration around how these two aspects of one’s being entwine and interact (or are, perhaps, mutually constitutive and inseparable).
2. Embodying and expressing one’s neurodivergence in ways that also queer one’s performance of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or other aspects of one’s identity.
3. Engaging in practices intended to undo and subvert one’s own cultural conditioning and one’s ingrained habits of neuronormative and heteronormative performance, with the

aim of reclaiming one's capacity to give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations.

4. Engaging in the queering of one's own neurocognitive processes (and one's outward embodiment and expression of those processes) by intentionally altering them in ways that create significant and lasting increase in one's divergence from prevailing cultural standards of neuronormativity and heteronormativity.

5. Approaching, embodying, and/or experiencing one's neurodivergence as a form of queerness (e.g., in ways that are inspired by, or similar to, the ways in which queerness is understood and approached in Queer Theory, Gender Studies, and/or queer activism).

6. Producing literature, art, scholarship, and/or other cultural artifacts that foreground neuroqueer experiences, perspectives, and voices.

7. Producing critical responses to literature and/or other cultural artifacts, focusing on intentional or unintentional characterizations of neuroqueerness and how those characterizations illuminate and/or are illuminated by actual neuroqueer lives and experiences.

8. Working to transform social and cultural environments in order to create spaces and communities—and ultimately a society—in which engagement in any or all of the above practices is permitted, accepted, supported, and encouraged. (pp. 161–163)

As an adjective, neuroqueer can be used as a social label to reference individuals who are shaped by their engagement in neuroqueering; this could appear in their gender expression, neurocognitive style, inherent selfhood, and so on. Neuroqueer theorists challenge normative discussions where neurodivergence, gender, sexuality, and disability are generally viewed as

abnormal and are pathologized (Egner, 2019). Neuroqueer theorists reject dominant discourse to instead honor actual living experiences and individuals' complex identities.

To adhere to the neurodiversity paradigm, I used identity-first language throughout this study (i.e., “Autistic people,” “disabled people,” etc.) This phrasing is respectful of the preference of a majority of Autistic academics and the Autistic community at large as it acknowledges that the person is Autistic at their core and that they are not able to disregard or “lose” their autism over time (Botha et al., 2021). While I acknowledge that many Autistic people consider themselves as disabled or impaired in current American society, I did not include functioning labels in the required criteria for participants, and I did not discuss them at length in this study. By not including these labels or discussions, I recognized their being harmful to the Autistic community and that they overgeneralize the support needs of Autistic people, erase the skills and capabilities of these same Autistic people, and are not scientifically valid (Kapp, 2023). I used Allistic to reference non-Autistic people (e.g., Allistic people).

Finally, *queer theory* is a critical way of looking at nonheterosexual people and nonheterosexual ways of existing as equally valid and valuable; it is a perspective that allows reevaluating and challenging what society considers “normal” and “natural” (Cheng, 2014, p. 1). Proponents of queer theory disregard heterosexuality as the standard that others are held to and encourage exploration of queer perspectives. Similar to neuroqueer theory, queer theory is difficult to define because it is an ongoing discourse and queerness inherently resists firm labels and structures (Cheng, 2014). Queer theory is important to highlight as the same exploration underpins the neuroqueer theory that I used as a lens to view the experiences discussed in the current study.

Language and Definitions

Regarding the research question itself, *dyadic* means a group of two. *Partnered* also means a group of two and was how I defined dyadic if co-researchers did not understand that term. *Kinky activities* refers to any activity that a person engages in that does not conform to social, religious, or psychiatric norms (Rubin, 2011). This can include sexual activity. This definition includes what laypersons know as BDSM as well as paraphilia definitions from the 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. Paraphilias are defined as “any intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physiologically mature, consenting human partners” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 685). Therefore, in the present study, *dyadic kinky activities* or *partnered kinky activities* refer to any activity, as previously defined, that two people engage in.

There is debate in the psychological research community on whether empowerment is internal, external, or a mixture of both. How it can be measured or if it can be measured is also debated (Peterson, 2010). For the present study’s purposes, empowerment was defined primarily by the participants. During the recruitment process, empowerment was loosely defined as a feeling of power over oneself, a feeling of power over the situation, self-efficacy, and/or freedom to explore (Damm et al., 2017; Peterson, 2010; Tellier, 2017). Co-researchers were invited to redefine empowerment for themselves during the study.

The term *co-researchers* was used to refer to the study participants, as is typical of heuristic inquiry (Sultan, 2019). In heuristic inquiry, the participants are not just individuals who are being surveyed; they are living and experiencing the phenomenon. The present study’s co-

researchers were actively engaged in sharing about their experiences. Their role also involved clarifying the themes of their stories to ensure I accurately reported their experiences.

The phrase *Autistic traits* refers to the *DSM-5* criteria for autism spectrum disorder, though I referred to these traits differently throughout this study to be more neurodiversity affirming. Autistic refers to people who identify as Autistic, meaning that they embody the traits shown in Table 1 and were either professionally diagnosed or self-identify as Autistic. Autistic was capitalized as I discussed the culture first and foremost, with the diagnosis as a secondary consideration. The *DSM-5* criteria wording and the neurodiversity affirmative language used in this study are shown in Table 1. The *DSM-5* wording appears on page 50 of the manual.

Table 1

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) Wording for Autism Spectrum Disorder Versus Neurodiversity Affirmative Language in the Present Study

<i>DSM</i> wording	Study wording
Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts . . .	Communication style
Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).	Sensory avoidance, sensory seeking, or sensory sensitivities
Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).	Stimming
Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).	Hyperfixations or special interests (“SpIns”)
Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).	Expectation management

Significance

Findings from this study contributed to the well-being of the Autistic community, to the fields of sex therapy and sexology, and to academic research in general. Study findings may help

normalize diverse sexual and kink-based experiences and provide new ideas for how to meet the needs of kinky Autistic people. They also shed light on other important information that could personally benefit Autistic people who are interested in exploring kink.

This research provided insights on what Autistic people find empowering, particularly regarding partnered kinky activities, and may help reduce shame felt by Autistic people who engage in these activities. This research may particularly benefit the sex therapy and sexology fields in further understanding Autistic experiences, both in general and specifically around kink. This study added to the body of neurodiversity affirmative, Autistic-centered research. Specifically, it added to a currently small database of neurodiversity affirming research centered on Autistic people and headed by an Autistic person and committee. Finally, this study helped to widen a foundation for future research to build on.

Personal Significance

One key aspect of heuristic inquiry as a research method is that the primary researcher has an initial internal discovery that leads them on a path of investigation (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). Often, this involves the researcher being part of the community that is being studied. Heuristic inquiry is an inquiry process from within a phenomenon, and as such, is as much about self-discovery as it is about making connections with co-researchers and exploring their experiences. As heuristic processes continually relate back to the researcher's internal frame of reference, it is important for the researcher to openly "locate" themselves in this research so the reader may understand this underlying perspective (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

As someone diagnosed as Autistic in my early 30s, I am passionate about dispelling myths and stigma that surround the Autistic community. Reducing stigma drives me to research the community to find what empowers us and to help normalize authentic Autistic expressions,

mannerisms, and ways of being, especially if the results can help strengthen Autistic people and allow us to be more openly authentic. This initial inquiry came to mind when reflecting on my experiences of going through life undiagnosed and feeling so disempowered, despite working diligently to meet and exceed as many neurotypical expectations as possible.

Conducting this study gave me the opportunity to explore empowerment through a different lens: the lens of sexology. The concept of kink has always felt empowering to me. I had personal interest in kink since before I had the language to describe it—not just participating in it, but learning about it and educating others about it as well. I have consistently been drawn to nonheteronormative, nonneurotypical, and noncisgender ways of engaging with others and living in this world, and kink is an empowering extension of that.

My interest in nonnormative practices is also why I gravitated toward using neuroqueer theory for this project. Neuroqueer is an essential part of my identity, alongside Autistic, transgender, genderqueer, demisexual, demiromantic, and other terms. My presence neuroqueers the spaces I exist in and, by showing up authentically, my acceptance of my neuroqueer self provides comfort and community for others. Although I no longer try to live my life strictly adhering to norms, I do find it important to also note that I am a White American and the lens I look through is one I continually work on decolonizing.

In addition to my personal interest in the study topic, selecting heuristic inquiry as the research method holds personal significance as well. I feel that the style of heuristic inquiry most closely aligns with the way I interact in personal relationships, in professional relationships, and with my clients in therapeutic settings. Heuristic inquiry is a unique method created to center and uplift the voices of those experiencing the phenomenon, and it allowed me to have confidence that this research would represent Autistic people accurately and compassionately. The phases of

heuristic inquiry also match the process of many deep philosophical and existential discussions I have organically had with other Autistic individuals, which gave me confidence that heuristic inquiry would meet the needs of my co-researchers as well.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I examine previous literature on empowerment and discuss empowerment concepts as they relate to other relevant research. This discussion includes a brief overview of past literature that has added to the disempowerment of Autistic, disabled, and kinky communities. I discuss research on Autistic experiences in socializing, Autistic people expressing and exploring sexuality, and Autistic people having interest in kinks, including an examination of old myths and flaws in past research. General research on BDSM and kinks is discussed, with a focus on the strengths of kink participants that researchers have found.

I then look more broadly at the intersection of disability, sexuality, and kinks, with a particular focus on themes of empowerment for disabled people engaging in kink. The chapter ends with a summary of emerging research that expands on neuroqueering kink and empowerment and positions this study among the existing literature. Notably, there is only a small amount of peer-reviewed literature on Autistic people engaging in kink. This is also true of Autistic people and their interests in kink, disabled people engaging in or interested in kink, and both groups regarding empowerment. As such, I supplemented the peer-reviewed research with a variety of sources, including doctoral dissertations and other forms of media created by people who are living or have lived in these intersections.

Examining Empowerment

Past researchers have explored empowerment on personal psychological and community-based levels (Peterson, 2010). The definition of empowerment itself is elusive. Some theorists state that they will know it when they see it. Others insist that it is impossible to measure, and

some have attempted to define it in two ways: power to (an internal powerful feeling) and power over (externally holding power over resources; Peterson, 2010).

Further, empowerment is often defined as a process of gaining self-determination (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2018). Literature on personal psychological empowerment is often tied to themes in other literature discussing sex, BDSM and kink, autism, and disability. Researchers have discussed core concepts relating to both personal psychological and sexual empowerment: these concepts include self-actualization, a feeling of power over oneself, a feeling of power over the situation, self-efficacy, involvement in collective and/or political action, and the freedom to explore (Damm et al., 2017; Döring et al., 2022; Peterson, 2010; Tellier, 2017). These concepts must be kept in mind in any examination of the literature since researchers often discuss these concepts in their studies but do not always name them as empowerment.

While some individuals think of sexual empowerment as “an ongoing and collective process of negotiating the norms that both surround and incorporate us” (Ryberg, 2013, p. 141), others consider it as more of a personal matter. Kink may be part of sexual empowerment through the process of gaining the self-awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to become an active participant in one’s own sexuality. People may achieve empowerment by engaging in consensual BDSM practices and exploring their sense of self in playful, safe and supportive environments (Turley et al., 2017). In a master’s-level thesis by Nybakk (2018), women listed four main themes surrounding sexual empowerment: the ability to communicate, self-esteem and body image, equality, and the choice to not prioritize sexual pleasure with a partner. Kinky individuals often find empowerment through setting boundaries, communicating desires, and creating fulfilling relationships in the BDSM community. Based on existing literature, the importance of respecting individual preferences and consent, creating a safe and supportive

community, and challenging societal stigmas against alternative sexual practices are all additional methods of achieving general empowerment for kinky individuals (Reynolds, 2007).

It is also important to examine Autistic perceptions of empowerment. Autistic advocates define empowerment as individuals having access to resources, the rights and abilities to make decisions about themselves, and being able to pursue their personal goals and interests (Precious, 2020). Many Autistic advocates say they experience empowerment when they are able to participate in decision-making processes that affect them, when they are recognized for their unique strengths and abilities, when they have access to resources and support, and when their needs and preferences are respected (Nicolaidis et al., 2013).

Disempowering Beginnings: BDSM and Kink Research

Research on BDSM is steeped in myths and stigma, though the field is moving toward more affirming research for this community (Hansen-Brown & Jefferson, 2022; Turley et al., 2011). Analysis of the previous literature shows that mainstream ideas of kink and BDSM have been rooted in pathologizing the participants and practitioners, stirring up fear around the topic and community, and alienating those who engage in kinky activities (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Health care providers often have bias when treating patients who engage in BDSM, such as confusing BDSM with abuse and assuming that the patient has a history of family or spousal abuse (Bezreh et al., 2012). A review of popular media featuring kink and BDSM in the United States shows that BDSM is seen as scandalous, perverse, and deviant. BDSM is highly misunderstood, and creating media representation that appeals to the general public and shifts these mindsets is difficult (Weiss, 2006). These misconceptions have affected people when it comes to discussing their fantasies and kinks with their partners for fear of judgment or being misunderstood (Bezreh et al., 2012). It was not until the 2000s that people in the BDSM

community were able to give researchers more input and explain their interests and actions from their own perspective (Turley et al., 2011).

Emerging Research on BDSM and Kinks

Moving forward from older literature where researchers pathologized people engaging in kinky activities and BDSM, there are newer studies that focus on this population in a more positive and inquisitive light. In reporting on demographics in a national web-based study ($N = 4,148$) conducted in Norway that assessed people who were interested in BDSM, kinks, and fetishes, Strizzi et al. (2021) noted that nonheterosexual participants were more likely to be BDSM-oriented than heterosexual participants. Bezreh et al. (2012) found that participants in their study generally became aware of their interest in BDSM-related fantasies between ages 10 and 15 years. Research by Wismeijer and van Assen (2013) found that

BDSM participants as a group, compared with non-BDSM participants, [were] less neurotic, more extraverted, more open to new experiences, more conscientious, yet less agreeable. BDSM participants also were less rejection sensitive, whereas female BDSM participants had more confidence in their relationships, had a lower need for approval, and were less anxiously attached compared with non-BDSM participants. Finally, the subjective well-being of BDSM participants was higher than that of the control group . . . These findings suggest that BDSM practitioners are characterized by greater psychological and interpersonal strength and autonomy, rather than by psychological maladaptive characteristics. (p. 7)

These findings directly challenge negative stereotypes about kink practitioners from past researchers and dated popular American media.

Starting in the early 2000s, researchers began creating space in literature for kinky participants by putting BDSM participants at the center of studies, becoming curious around why they do what they do and who they are, and being open to viewing the participants with a less pathologizing lens (Carlström, 2018). In Bauer's (2018) qualitative study, queer participants described heightened levels of embodiment and transformation through engaging in kink; they described it as producing a new reality through "intimate theater" as "they left ordinary reality

behind” (p. 252). The participants essentially defined empowerment as each person claiming their own agency as well as examining their power in their kink dynamics (Bauer, 2014).

A participant in Carlström (2018) stated that he felt “[BDSM] has evolved from just being a set of emotions that I could not put words into being an important part of my personality” and that it allowed him to view his own sexuality and preferences with less shame (pp. 407–408). Additional analysis of more recent literature reasserted that there are other benefits to participating in kink and BDSM activities “such as feelings of pleasure or enjoyment, fun, an escape from the demands of everyday life, personal growth, improved relationships, and self-expression” (Williams et al., 2016, p. 1). Strizzi et al. (2021) found that kink participants reported other “spiritual, cathartic or therapeutic benefits” as well (p. 132). These additional benefits include higher levels of relationship closeness between partners who engage in kink/BDSM activities in which both participants say it went well (Strizzi et al., 2021).

Another shift in research findings over the last decade is that many participants view BDSM as leisure, so researchers are beginning to acknowledge it as possible recreation instead of a psychopathological urge (Spratt & Williams, 2019; Williams et al., 2016; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). This leisure-based shift also involves looking at BDSM and kink outside of a purely sexual lens and moves further away from seeing it as deviant behavior. Instead, kink can be seen as a form of play and self-expression (Turley et al., 2017). Some researchers are taking this a step further and suggesting that BDSM should be and is often considered “serious leisure,” meaning that participants expend a significant amount of time and energy toward these activities and topics (Wignall, 2018, p. 35). Serious leisure includes characteristics that casual leisure does not, such as “the need for perseverance; the leisure pursuit as a career; effort involving the

acquisition of knowledge, training, experience and/or specialized skills; durable benefits; unique ethos; and a personal identification with the leisure activity” (Wignall, 2018, p. 36).

Sprott et al. (2020) noted that a clearer division between sexual kink and nonsexual kink was especially true for their queer and transgender study participants. The participants “more often described sharp distinctions between kink and sex, and more often valued kink over sex in their kink identity” when compared to heterosexual cisgender participants, “who were more likely to blend kink and sex and hold both as equally important in their kink identity” (Sprott et al., 2020, p. 19). Many BDSM practitioners of varied sexualities regard kink and BDSM activities primarily as “playing with power” instead of as primarily sexual (Williams et al., 2016, p. 1). Among practitioners, BDSM is viewed as a way to explore themselves, their bodies, their sexuality, and their power, as well as many other dynamics (Bauer, 2014, 2017; Rainey, 2018; Strizzi et al., 2021; Turley et al., 2011).

Disempowering Beginnings: Autistic and Disabled Sexuality Research

Strengths-based research has been slow to emerge for disabled communities, which often include Autistic people. The lack of strengths-based research creates an additional challenge when searching the small pool of literature to find nonpathologizing research. Meta-analysis of past literature makes it clear that the history of research on autism, disability, BDSM, and empowerment are full of standards that are based on people who are heterosexual, able bodied, have an average or higher IQ, and are interested in sex for the primary purpose of procreation or intimate connection (Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021; Tellier, 2017). These comparisons underpin the majority of research published before 2015.

There is extant research on Autistic people and their sexual knowledge, their formal sex education, and their involvement in sexual relationships. There have been no definitive results

about what is effective regarding sex education curriculum tailored to the specific needs of Autistic people (Sullivan & Caterino, 2008). Findings have shown that although Autistic adults do have similar knowledge about sex when compared to the knowledge of their Allistic peers, they have more challenges communicating their knowledge effectively than their peers (Kohn et al., 2022).

In a study on Autistic people's sexual knowledge, understanding, and functioning, Pecora et al. (2016) used quantitative analysis to determine levels of overall sexual functioning and well-being. Findings showed that the Autistic women in the study experienced more adverse sexual encounters and reported poorer levels of sexual well-being than their male Autistic or Allistic peers. Data show that Autistic people are at a high risk to be sexually victimized; in past literature, 16%–25% of Autistic people have reported being sexually abused (Sullivan & Caterino, 2008). Researchers have also stated that Autistic people are more likely to engage in “inappropriate and intrusive behaviours” than Allistic people when it comes to socializing and pursuing people they are interested in (Stokes et al., 2007, p. 1981). Notably, Stokes et al. (2007) did not follow up with Autistic participants to gather their thoughts on crucial topics such as their behavior, sexual knowledge and empowerment, and protecting the Autistic community from victimization.

In a more recent study, Tellier (2017) found that disabled people often choose to hide “their true feelings about themselves, as well as their sexual needs, and may feel restricted in their physical and verbal expressions of sexuality” (p. 8). As many Autistic people also consider themselves disabled, this could be another reason their voices have been lacking in past research.

Additionally, past research on the intersection of sexuality and disability was rooted in multiple harmful myths and stereotypes. One common stigma was that receiving care was

associated with dependency, weakness, and impotence (Rainey, 2018). Myths about disabled people and their sexualities have swung from one extreme to another. On one side of this pendulum, their sexuality was largely denied because they were seen as asexual, too innocent to be sexual, or having a “child-like” sexuality (de Wit et al., 2022, p. 316). On the other side of the pendulum, they may be viewed as sexual deviants or sexually aggressive (Ailey et al., 2003). These myths and associated stigma have stifled many disabled people from exploring and expressing their sexuality and have impeded the development of literature on these topics (Ailey et al., 2003; de Wit et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2007).

Emerging Research on Autistic Sexuality, Socializing, and Kinks

Autistic adults report sexual desire at levels similar to their Allistic peers, and they also report a greater variety of sexual identities (Bejerot & Eriksson, 2014; Pecora et al., 2016; Weir et al., 2021). When Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2021) asked Autistic participants about what drives them to engage in sex, they found that sex tends to be more led by individual functions for Autistic adults rather than driven by a need for social connection like it appears to be for Allistic adults. Individual functions can include sex that is interest driven, is specifically for reproduction, or is a way to regulate anxiety, among other nonsocial purposes (Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021). This finding aligns with literature that defines social reward by Allistic standards and states that people with Autistic traits tend to experience “reduced levels of enjoyment of prosocial interactions and sexual relationships” and that there is “reduced social reward” for Autistic people (Foulkes et al., 2015, p. 9).

Additionally, when Autistic adults were observed communicating on online dating platforms, they were not holding each other to neurotypical dating standards but instead engaged primarily in sharing and comparing points between each other (Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021).

Autistic adults have reported that they enjoy online platforms for finding partners. In Roth and Gillis (2015), they listed reasons such as having to interpret fewer nonverbal cues, additional time for processing interactions and information, and being more in control of how they present themselves. Finding explicit ways to discuss their sexual interests and preferred styles of physical engagement via kinky activities and BDSM scenarios matches with their enjoyment of preplanning, the need to process before and after, being in control of their presentation, and not worrying about social cues. In their 2023 study, Pearson and Hodgetts concluded that “the explicit communication style present in kink spaces fostered a sense of safety for Autistic adults that made intimacy more accessible” (p. 8).

Autistic adults were also found to have higher levels of paraphilic sexual fantasies than their Allistic peers in Fernandes et al. (2016) and Schöttle et al. (2017). Although Autistic people have these diverse fantasies at higher rates than their Allistic peers, the fantasies are similar to what Allistic people fantasize about and are not more deviant or perverse than those of their Allistic peers (Stokes et al., 2007). Autistic participants in Pearson and Hodgetts (2023) identified that kink provided them experiences of sensory joy and repulsion and that kinky activities allowed them to explore their sensory needs and interest. These participants also reported that they found pleasure in subverting neuronormativity, which allowed them to play with their identity and go against social and sexual norms in consensual ways that brought them joy (Pearson & Hodgetts, 2023). In a study on pup play, a kinky dynamic where one partner is the “handler” or “owner” and one partner plays the role of a “puppy” or “dog,” Wignall et al. (2023) surveyed 413 participants and found that 1 in 2 had a score indicative of an autism diagnosis on the Autistic-Spectrum Quotient-Short Form. As the strengths-based research on

Autistic and kinky intersections was primarily conducted in the year prior to the current study, there are many related topics to still explore.

Emerging Research on Disability, Sexuality, and Kinks

As previously mentioned, in combination with BDSM practitioners keeping their kinky interests quiet and Autistic people having a challenging time communicating their needs and knowledge, disabled people also often keep their sexual practices or needs hidden (Tellier, 2017). This could be due to the able-bodied standards that sexuality is held to as well as past stigma about disabled people and their sexuality (Reynolds, 2007; Tellier, 2017). Although not all Autistic people consider themselves as disabled, there is a large intersection between the two communities. As such, it is important to review the literature regarding disabled people, kink, and sexuality.

Research on the experiences of disabled individuals has shown that when they communicate their sexual needs with trusted partners, they report feeling more connected and attuned within their relationships (Rainey, 2018). Such findings provide insights into effective strategies for enhancing accessibility and empowerment in sexuality for disabled persons. Kinky disabled people list similar benefits to nondisabled people who engage in BDSM. Tellier (2017) stated that “BDSM may be a way that persons with disabilities can divert negative feelings and associations of sexual functioning and ‘normative’ performance, to explore and increase their sexuality and sexual satisfaction under their own terms” (p. 6). Study participants in Rainey (2018) stated they considered disabled partners to be better sexual partners because their specific needs may require them to communicate more and because they often engage in nonnormative sexual exploration that does not center purely on genital stimulation.

There are also elements of empowerment, as defined at the start of this chapter, in literature on disabled kinky sex. Disabled people are able to have power over the kinky acts through negotiation that happens beforehand while also keeping their specific mental and physical needs in mind. They also can experience internal power through the roles they play in these acts, how they are treated by their partners, and by engaging in the kinky activity through the lens of it being a creative, holistic, and embodied experience (Rainey, 2018; Tellier, 2017).

One example of empowerment due to dyadic kink activities is to “eroticize care,” wherein the disabled dominant partner would direct the submissive partner in care tasks related to their disability. This could look like a dominant partner requesting that the submissive partner kneel and put compression garments onto the dominant partner. Not only does this put the dominant partner in an empowering role, it also inherently flips the script on past stereotypes where disabled people are viewed as weak (Rainey, 2018).

Pain management is another way to experience empowerment for disabled people who participate in kink. Two different methods are described in literature. The first involves managing one’s pain in a sensual way; the second involves diverting one’s attention to pain that is within their (or their partner’s) control. As an example of the first method, a participant with arthritis in Rainey (2018) reported that their partner applying medicated lotion to their arthritic body parts became an act of sensual massage and intimacy for them. Bob Flanagan, a chronically ill disabled BDSM practitioner and artist, subverted many stereotypes while using the BDSM lifestyle to manage his pain and his reality (Reynolds, 2007). He embodied the second method of pain management in which he chose a sexual practice “designed to degrade and cause pain when he was obviously grappling with the humiliations imposed by medical staff and the painful physical effects of his illness” (Reynolds, 2007, p. 43). The artist viewed this method of pain

management as a way to regain temporary control of his situation and body, as physical pleasure and relief, and as a way to create both private and public art.

Another example of disabled people using kink to regain control and to experience empowerment is to subvert another long-standing belief about disabled people: the harmful stereotypical belief that they need to be “fixed” by medication, technology, or assistive devices that bolster their functioning or abilities to meet able-bodied standards (Mussies & Maliepaard, 2017). Using an aid or device in sexual practices is generally regarded as “alternative” or kinky, especially regarding common devices like strap-on dildos or vibrators. When a prosthetic or other assistive device is used for sexual purposes, it can be considered a queering (or subverting of norms) of sex for disabled people. This is especially true when these tools are not used to imitate standard able-bodied sexual practices. Ultimately, this is another way that disabled people can find empowerment in using these tools to serve them, subvert norms, and to assist in situations where it would be difficult or impossible for them to engage in the way they desire (Mussies & Maliepaard, 2017).

Conclusion

There are several key themes in the existing literature that were relevant to positioning this study. These themes highlight similarities among individuals who identify as Autistic, disabled, and kinky. The first theme is that research on these populations used to be disempowering and pathologizing, but the focus is shifting toward strengths-based and person-centered narratives. This change also involves researchers moving away from comparing everything to heterosexual Allistic nondisabled standards.

The second theme is that there are similar variations among sexual identities and orientations for all discussed populations. The reported variations in sexual orientations for

people who engage in BDSM activities is similar to the findings that Autistic people have more diversity in their sexual orientations when compared to Allistic people. For example, data from the Movement Advancement Project (2019) about LGBTQ+ people showed that 1 in 4 queer adults and 2 in 5 transgender adults also have disabilities. Wignall et al.'s (2023) survey of 413 pup play participants also showed higher levels of queer individuals and potentially Autistic individuals involved than the number of queer or Autistic individuals represented in the general U.S. population (Wignall et al., 2023).

The third theme represented in all three communities (queer, disabled, and BDSM) is subverting norms and challenging old stigma in order to feel empowered. Often, subversion of norms appears when these populations engage in activities that may be traditionally recreational or sexual, but they engage with the opposite intent. Autistic people's engagement in sex centering on their personal interests and hobbies parallels the leisure-based nature of BDSM and kink activities. Disabled people shifting their care tasks and their caregiving relationship roles into sensual or erotic activities is another example of a preconceived notion being purposefully disrupted.

Many study participants discussed how they disregard normative standards in order to be more comfortable in their bodies, to get their needs met, and to increase satisfaction in kinky experiences (Bauer, 2018; MacKenzie, 2018; Mussies & Maliepaard, 2017; Pearson & Hodgetts, 2023; Rainey, 2018; Reynolds, 2007; Strizzi et al., 2021; Tellier, 2017). Wignall et al. (2023) suggested that future research on Autistic kinky individuals should not require a professional autism diagnosis and should be both qualitative and nonstigmatizing in nature. There is a unique opportunity for new research to explore the overlaps between these populations, which may open avenues for more stories of empowerment for current and future generations of Autistic people.

Chapter III

Research Models, Methods, and Procedures

Research Design

I conducted this study using a qualitative heuristic inquiry design as detailed in Sultan (2019), with inspiration from Moustakas (1990). I focused on the living experiences of the participants (co-researchers), the meaning they made of these experiences, and the meaning that can be interpreted from what they shared during the interview process. In heuristic inquiry, experiences are viewed as *living experiences*, which means that the community and specific co-researchers will continue to have Autistic experiences of empowerment regarding partnered kinky activities during and after this study. This study was a snapshot in time of these experiences.

Research Phases

I followed heuristic inquiry's six phases of research, as described in Moustakas (1990), in this study. These phases are as follows:

1. Initial engagement occurs first. This is the phase in which the primary researcher looks inward to find *tacit knowing* (knowledge that is a form of knowledge and intuition, which is challenging to put into words and to explain to others), During this phase, the goal is to elicit an internal query that is worth researching.
2. Immersion is the second stage, where the primary researcher spends a great amount of time considering, searching for meaning within, engaging with, and becoming more intimate with the question. In this study, immersion happened during my interviews with the co-researchers.

3. Incubation is the third phase. This is when the primary researcher takes a step back from the concentrated focus on the research question and instead allows for the tacit dimension to internally expand and develop.
4. Illumination is the fourth phase. Illumination may occur as a breakthrough or gradual awakenings to new knowledge, themes, and hidden meanings regarding the question. This may also be where further clarification of the question happens as well as corrections of previously distorted information or overlooked information may be better integrated into the research.
5. The fifth phase is explication. Explication is where the primary researcher takes all of the information gathered and makes a conscious examination of the myriad of layers, themes, and experiences that were shared in order to comprehensively draw out all major components of the researched phenomenon. This phase also involves the primary researcher sharing the current conclusions with the co-researchers to ensure they match their experiences.
6. The sixth and final phase is creative synthesis. This phase is where the primary researcher compiles the major themes into a cohesive narrative depiction to present the findings while accurately representing the co-researchers' experiences, beliefs, feelings, and perceptions.

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was, What experiences of empowerment do Autistic people have due to dyadic kinky activities? Additional inquiries were asked during the semistructured interviews with co-researchers, including:

- What does it mean for you to be empowered?

- How does being Autistic intersect with your interest in partnered kinky activities?
- Please share examples of times you felt most empowered during dyadic kinky activities.
- What role do kinky activities play in your empowerment? (Subquestions: What role do they play in relation to feeling empowered with a partner? What role do they play in relation to feeling empowered within yourself?)
- What ways do these activities and feelings of empowerment relate to your Autistic traits?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of empowerment and dyadic kinky activities?

Co-Researcher Criteria, Recruitment, and Sampling

Heuristic inquiry requires a small qualitative sample size, so a minimum of five co-researchers was needed. However, anticipating some participant loss due to dropout and similar issues, my goal was to recruit 10 co-researchers. I next detail the criteria used to define the sample and the recruitment and sampling approaches used.

Co-Researcher Criteria

The co-researchers needed to be 18 years of age or older and able to give informed consent without the support of a caregiver or power of attorney. They had either received an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis from a licensed medical or mental health professional or self-identified as Autistic and scored a 6 or higher on the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ-10).

The co-researchers also needed to be able to read and understand English and be living in the United States at the time of the study. They needed to have engaged in a minimum of one kinky activity, as defined in Chapter 1, with one partner once weekly at a minimum in the 6

months before the study. They also needed to agree with the statement that they have experienced empowerment due to partnered kinky activities.

Co-Researcher Recruitment

I recruited co-researchers through posted advertisements (see Appendix A) on four different social media platforms in specific communities. These advertisements explicitly included my social positioning as an Autistic queer transgender researcher. The post to one forum was unsuccessful, and I was unable to contact the forum's moderators to troubleshoot. All four message boards are primarily text based, so the recruitment ad was also text based.

The first location was Autism/Aspergers in BDSM (<http://fetlife.com/groups/111210>), an Autistic kink-oriented community message board with over 1,800 members, hosted on Fetlife (<http://fetlife.com>), a social networking website for BDSM community members to interact with each other. The second location was Pragmatically Kinking (<https://fetlife.com/groups/72062/>), a kink-oriented community message board with over 1,300 members, also hosted on Fetlife. This group hosts THRIVE, a free annual virtual conference with presentations about the intersection of mental health/neurodivergence and BDSM/kink.

The third location was /r/autism (<https://reddit.com/r/autism/>), a general discussion board for Autistic people with over 268,000 members on the social media forum site Reddit (<http://reddit.com>). This was the forum post that was unsuccessful, and I was unable to contact the moderators to correctly post the recruitment ad.

The fourth location was /r/SexontheSpectrum (<https://reddit.com/r/SexOnTheSpectrum/>), another discussion board on Reddit, with over 9,000 members. This board's primary purpose is to connect a community of users who are interested in validating and exploring Autistic

sexuality. Following their community's rules, I requested and gained permission from moderators before posting the recruitment ad.

Co-Researcher Sampling and Screening

Purposive sampling is a participant selection approach that focuses on selecting study participants with very specific characteristics or experiences (American Psychological Association, n.d.). I used purposive sampling to ensure that the co-researchers were actively and frequently engaging in the research phenomenon and represented diversity in the Autistic kinky community. This diversity included gender, race, kink roles/identities, sexuality, romantic identities, and whether the co-researchers considered themselves disabled. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the potential co-researcher pool.

Potential co-researchers first filled out an eligibility screening tool (see Appendix B), which allowed me to narrow the search based on the inclusion criteria. They were asked for demographic information in the screener and if they met the inclusion criteria. The screener included the following:

- If they had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder from a licensed mental health or medical provider OR self-identified as Autistic. Those who identified as Autistic without a professional diagnosis were asked to take the AQ-10 as part of the screening process and needed to score a 6 or higher to be eligible to participate.
- Age.
- If they were currently located in the United States.
- How often per week they had engaged in partnered kinky activities over the last 6 months.
- If they had experienced empowerment due to kinky activities with a partner.

- Where they found the study.
- Race/ethnicity.
- Gender identity.
- If they considered themselves cisgender.
- Sexual orientation.
- Romantic orientation.
- If they considered themselves disabled.
- Kink-related roles or kink-related identity labels.

I closed the eligibility survey after receiving 41 responses (one was a duplicate) and I had contacted potential co-researchers to schedule 10 interviews. I focused first on representing the aforementioned experiences of diversity and then honed in on keeping the ratio of co-researchers similar to representing those who filled out the survey.

Co-researchers who were selected to participate in this study and consented to participate were advised that they could receive two \$10 Amazon gift cards. The first was sent through email the day of the scheduled one-on-one interview. When the co-researchers attended the Zoom meeting, they received their gift cards. They received the cards even if they withdrew their consent after the interview began.

The second \$10 Amazon gift card was sent through email the day of the scheduled data review meeting. They also received this gift card for attending, even if they withdrew their consent after the data review meeting had begun. The cards were sent to the email addresses they provided on the day of the interviews. No mention of participation in this study was included in the gift card's email message.

Measures and Procedures

The measure used in this study was the AQ-10 (see Appendix C), which was provided in the screener and used for potential co-researchers without formal diagnoses but who self-identify as Autistic. Their scores were not shared with them and were not specified in the final report. The AQ-10, which is available in the public domain, is a 10-item self-report questionnaire used to screen the general adult population for Autistic traits (Allison et al., 2012). The AQ-10 is a modified version of the original 50-item AQ but it was found to measure Autistic traits as well as the full 50-item version (Booth et al., 2013). Bertrams and Schlegel (2020) described it as an effective tool for research purposes.

The AQ-10 addresses five subdomains: social interaction, communication, attention to detail, attention switching, and imagination. All 10 items are rated on a 4-point scale, from *definitely agree* to *definitely disagree*. Both *definitely agree* and *slightly agree* receive one point, and both *definitely disagree* and *slightly disagree* receive zero points; these point values are reversed when scoring is reversed. The points are then added to form a total score. Higher scores correlate to a higher presence of Autistic traits (Bertrams & Schlegel, 2020). Allison et al. (2012) found that at a cut point of 6 on the adult version of the AQ-10, sensitivity was 0.88, specificity was 0.91, and positive predictive value was 0.85, with pretest odds 0.54. People who score 6 or higher are often referred for a full autism assessment. As such, potential self-identified co-researchers needed to score a 6 or higher to be selected.

The chosen co-researchers then engaged in one-on-one semistructured interviews with me via password-protected, HIPAA-compliant Zoom meetings. The initial interviews were scheduled for 2 hr each, although using the full 2 hr was not a requirement. The list of interview questions was available to the co-researchers ahead of time for review. The interview questions

were open ended and centered on the co-researchers' experiences, reflective of this study's heuristic approach. Co-researchers were interviewed both verbally and via synchronous live text conversations in the Zoom chat. All co-researchers preferred to speak out loud during the interviews. They were not required to use their cameras, and two co-researchers declined to turn their cameras on.

During contact with co-researchers, I took notes in a Word document and on a scratch piece of paper. The scratch paper was shredded after transferring the content into the Word document. The video and audio portions of the Zoom calls were saved directly to my computer and automatically transcribed by Zoom. I then evaluated and corrected the transcripts for accuracy once the interview was complete. The video and audio portions were then deleted. All text data were transferred and saved on a password-protected, encrypted external hard drive. De-identified information on the external hard drive will be kept indefinitely.

Data Analysis Procedures

As Sultan (2019) stated, "Data analysis begins as soon as you make your first contact with co-researchers" (p. 145). Since the primary researcher is the key instrument for data collection, it is not appropriate to use data analysis software for heuristic inquiries. Instead, I conducted the data analysis process by immersing myself in the data, taking a step away to allow for incubation, and then returning with new insights to continue analyzing, following guidance in Moustakas (1990) and Sultan (2019).

The data analysis process mirrored the phases of heuristic research. I started by adding my personal commentary as notes to the interview transcripts. I then reflected on my experience of each interview in ways that Sultan (2019) detailed: kinesthetically, cognitively, emotionally, socially/relationally, perceptually, and spiritually. Evaluating through these lenses helped me

translate each individual's experiences, identify common experiences among the co-researchers, and see patterns and similarities. I also used these lenses to observe my somatic experiences of interviewing and engaging with each of the co-researchers.

Next, I manually extracted statements with particular significance to the co-researchers that also had specific relevance to the research questions. From the complete interview data, I also noted patterns among the co-researchers' descriptions of the activities and their significance and other commonalities that arose. Through patterns in the data, I then formulated meanings based on the shared sentiments and experiences. These meanings ultimately became subthemes as the analysis continued. I rearranged the subthemes into multiple different categories until it felt like the overarching themes provided direct answers to the primary research question.

While organizing the themes and subthemes, I was also struck by how fluid each co-researcher's story was and how all of the subthemes had overlap beneath other main themes. This piece of the creative synthesis process was represented by an infinity symbol. During the identification of themes and subthemes, my mind was also creatively synthesizing both the interview data and my experiences with the co-researchers. This is where I noticed a parallel between our experiences of empowerment due to kink and the concept of the hero's journey, which led me to start to view the co-researchers through an epic fantasy lens and to determine which roles they might have in that setting.

Next, I provided a sketch and "the vibe" (a description of their qualities and the impressions they left on me) of each co-researcher to a kinky pansexual nonbinary Autistic artist. The artist then assisted me in the creative synthesis process of vividly representing each co-researcher through art based on the co-researchers' roles in the hero's journey, as if they were

protagonists in an epic fantasy story. I took these themes, art depictions, and theme explanations, and created a document to serve as a rough draft of Chapters 4 and 5.

I reviewed the document and the art with the co-researchers to ensure validity, credibility, and accuracy. This part of the process was also recorded and transcribed using the same procedures previously discussed to allow me to refer back to their feedback. Only one co-researcher declined a follow-up interview; she instead gave an excited reply that everything “looked great” and that she was represented well.

After the five follow-up interviews, I incorporated all necessary additions to better explain the co-researchers’ living experiences. I also reviewed the transcriptions from the follow-up interviews, then coded and added a small but relevant selection of additional data that arose during that process. As a final step, I hired a kinky queer transgender AuDHD (diagnosed with both autism and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) digital artist to digitize and finalize the co-researcher’s artistic representations.

Throughout the entirety of this research process, I kept a personal journal that detailed my feelings, thoughts, and related explorations and experiences. This aided in creating their representative artwork and the creative synthesis. I also created a playlist of songs that reminded me of the co-researchers throughout the process.

Internal Validity

According to Moustakas (1990), validity cannot be determined by correlations or statistics for heuristic inquiries but is instead determined by the accuracy and repeated examination of the researcher’s meaning-making. To address internal validity, I conducted follow-up meetings with the co-researchers to ensure that I correctly synthesized the meanings of their experiences. I discussed, reviewed, refined, and verified all extracted themes and meanings

with the co-researchers. I also reviewed the themes drawn from their experiences with my dissertation committee chair for further questioning and clarification prior to the follow-up meetings. This strengthened the credibility of the research.

Regarding positionality, my role as the researcher was also strengthened due to my authentic experience as a kinky Autistic adult, alongside my credentials as a licensed therapist who works primarily with Autistic individuals who are often interested in kink, my continuing education on sex therapy and sexuality, and my completing Social-Behavioral-Educational (SBE) Foundations, an ethics training course through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program. Similarly, I acknowledge that my biases cannot be separated from my research or the interpretation of the co-researchers' stories, which aligns with both neuroqueer theory and the styling of heuristic inquiry.

A benefit to using this design is that I, as an Autistic kinky researcher, am innately more able to understand my co-researchers than if I were an Allistic kinky researcher. This concept has been explored and dubbed the “double empathy problem,” which explains the communication breakdown between Allistic and Autistic people as being due to difficulties in understanding each other's unique social cues and communication styles (Milton, 2012). This concept relates to research by Crompton et al. (2020) that found that Autistic–Autistic communication is more effective than Autistic–Allistic communication.

As I hold similar identities to the co-researchers, it may have allowed me to understand more deeply what they were explaining without requiring me to act as if I am observing and discussing these concepts from outside of the community and experiences (Sultan, 2019). Acknowledging my identities and being involved in the communities was important, similar to locating myself in Chapter 1, as “transformation happens because the researcher is the primary

instrument for data collection and thus has direct access to and intimate involvement with whatever is emerging throughout the course of the study” (Sultan, 2019, p. 13).

Using this theoretical framework and design seemed to help me engage and build rapport with the co-researchers. This framework is inherently supportive of neuroqueer experiences and does not pass judgment on those who engage in activities and practices that subvert societal norms, which may have allowed more honest conversation during the co-researcher interviews and the follow-up conversations on data analysis.

External Validity

For population validity, which references the extent to which this study’s findings can be generalized to other people who share similar characteristics, there was a safeguard in place: the AQ-10 or a confirmation of an autism diagnosis. This confirmed that the self-identified co-researchers are autistic. For the co-researchers who did not take the AQ-10, they confirmed that they have been diagnosed as autistic by a licensed medical or mental health professional.

Ecological validity, which references whether this study’s findings can be generalized to real world situations, is rich in this study. The co-researchers were interviewed about their real-world experiences. They directly shared about their experiences that have occurred with others in real-life scenarios. This design increases the likelihood that other Autistic people, who engage in at least one partnered kinky activity a week, will also provide similar data if asked about empowerment due to kinky dyadic activities. In the discussion section in Chapter 5, I also compare my results to that of a similar study by Pearson and Hodgetts (2023) to see if my findings have solid transferability.

Transgressive Validity

This study also provides transgressive validity, which is the extent to which a study's results challenge or extend existing theories and assumptions. Transgressive validity aligns with the spirit of heuristic inquiry as the focus is on representing the co-researchers, self-reflexivity, and the social uses of knowledge that is gleaned from the study. There are four primary measures of transgressive validity for research, as defined by Lather (1993): ironic, paralogical, rhizomatic, and voluptuous validity.

Ironic validity is achieved through unexpected or contradictory findings. This is when the study findings challenge or contradict the researcher's initial assumptions or expectations but are still valid and useful. Despite my being open to unexpected findings, there were no ironic unexpected findings from my initial journaled musings on what this study may uncover.

Paralogical validity refers to the ability of research findings to challenge established norms and assumptions and offer new, alternative perspectives. This type of validity also involves using unconventional approaches and methods to explore a phenomenon or topic and generate novel insights. As a whole, my conducting this study provided new information, compared to previous literature that does not cover the intersection of being Autistic, kinky, and empowered. I also unearthed additional findings when compared to Pearson and Hodgetts's (2023) similar study. Through using heuristic inquiry, the co-researchers also had the chance to reflect on how they were represented and to provide additional information, which went beyond the standard amount of communication between researchers and co-researchers in other studies regarding Autistic people.

Rhizomatic validity is a concept that involves exploring multiple perspectives, voices, and interpretations in a research project rather than relying on one dominant perspective or

approach. It mirrors a rhizome, a root system where connections are made horizontally rather than vertically. This approach acknowledges the complex and interconnected nature of social phenomena and seeks to capture the messiness and diversity of human experiences through multiple angles and viewpoints. The semistructured interview style allowed my co-researchers and I to discuss related and tangential topics to view the primary research question through different lenses. Additionally, the piece in the creative synthesis regarding the infinity symbol metaphor worked with the rhizome, as all subthemes potentially merged with others and could be reorganized organically beneath one of the other main themes.

Voluptuous validity, a concept driven by a feminist perspective to counterbalance the largely male-centric body of research, references incorporating a more feminine lens in a study. Voluptuous validity emphasizes the emotional, intuitive, and creative aspects of qualitative research. I emphasized these aspects in this study by bringing marginalized and previously silenced voices to the forefront and giving the co-researchers multiple opportunities to share their experiences, both through the art that represented them and through the words they shared. I did not shy away from using emotionally charged quotes from the co-researchers, and I explicitly requested feedback on the “vibe” and “feel” of how I represented them to ensure they felt properly seen. In multiple conversations, my co-researchers and I spoke purposefully about the ways femininity and nonmale ways of being have impacted them in their empowering partnered kinky experiences.

Confidentiality

Advertisements for co-researcher recruitment contained a link to confidentiality statements from the informed consent letter to make the intention of confidentiality clear. All audio and video recordings, as well as identifying information, were kept on a password-

protected encrypted external hard drive behind one locked door with no public access until the transcriptions were edited and finalized. At that time, the video and audio portions were deleted.

Co-researchers were asked to select pseudonyms for themselves; I requested that the pseudonyms not be related to their real names, BDSM community names, or usernames. Despite two co-researchers being interested in using their actual names, we agreed to use pseudonyms as directed by the consent form. All sections of interview transcripts that were shared between multiple co-researchers were de-identified, with their pseudonyms used to clarify differences in co-researchers, prior to sharing. Their pseudonyms are also used in this report, as shown in Chapter 4.

Chapter IV

Results

In this chapter, I detail the results of the eligibility screening survey and basic information about the selected co-researchers. There are tables depicting information from the screening survey and the co-researchers' demographics. I also share the data collected for this study and the themes that were uncovered through coding the data. A table is included to visually show the themes that the co-researchers endorsed.

The chapter concludes by highlighting the creative synthesis I formed during the heuristic inquiry process. Two main creative pieces are included. The first is a narrative view of the coresearchers as epic fantasy Dungeons & Dragons archetypes on their own unique hero's journeys. The second is discussion of the symbolism of an infinity symbol used to represent the flow of data.

Eligibility Survey Results

There were 40 unique responses to the eligibility screening survey when I closed it, with one response being a duplicate. The duplicate data were removed from analysis for accuracy. Table 1 shows a synthesis of the eligibility screener's results regarding the demographics of the respondents. (See Appendix D for the full demographic responses.) I did not include their individual answers to the AQ-10. However, all self-identified Autistic respondents did score in on the AQ-10.

No comments or questions were allowed on the screener, but some were left on the advertisements. A few comments, like this one by a Reddit user, expressed feeling seen by the advertisement material and the study's concept: "Oh look, a study designed exclusively for me."

Table 1*Respondent Demographics*

Characteristic	Frequency
Race/ethnicity	
African American	2
Black	3
Black American	2
Caucasian	3
Eastern European Jewish	1
Human	1
Indigenous American	1
Japanese	1
Mixed	1
Native	1
Tejano	1
White	23
Gender identity	
Cisgender male	8
Cisgender female	10
Transgender male	1
Trans masculine	3
Transgender female	1
Nonbinary	3
Genderqueer	5
Genderfluid	2
Unable to code	3
Sexuality	
Queer	20
Asexual spectrum	7
Heterosexual	9
Unable to code	2

Characteristic	Frequency
Romantic orientation	
Queer	15
Aro spectrum	9
Hetero	8
Unable to code	2
Disability status	
Disabled	22
Not disabled	9
Mixed response	2
Kink roles and identities	
Dom/top	15
Switch	7
Sub/bottom	20
Sadomasochist	3
N/A	2

Co-Researchers

Six co-researchers joined me in this study. To protect their identities, their primary representation is through art based on the creative synthesis for this research. Their pseudonyms and the demographic information they provided during the eligibility survey and updated during the initial interview are shown in Table 2. Their artistic representations are shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 2*Co-Researcher Pseudonyms and Demographics*

Pseudonym	Characteristics
Ali	<p>Age range: 18–26 years</p> <p>Race/ethnicity: White</p> <p>Gender and pronouns: Cisgender female (she/her)</p> <p>Sexuality: Ace flux, bi curious when feeling allosexual</p> <p>Romantic orientation: Panromantic</p> <p>Autistic: Yes, diagnosed</p> <p>Disabled: Yes</p> <p>Kink roles/identities: Sub, brat</p> <p>Frequency: Over the last 6 months, she engaged in kinky activities 1–3 times per week on average.</p>
BB	<p>Age range: 27–42 years</p> <p>Race/ethnicity: White</p> <p>Gender and pronouns: Genderqueer (he/they)</p> <p>Sexuality: Pansexual</p> <p>Romantic orientation: Panromantic</p> <p>Autistic: Yes, diagnosed</p> <p>Disabled: No</p> <p>Kink roles/identities: Service switch, Daddy, Dom, servant, hedonist</p> <p>Frequency: Over the last 6 months, he engaged in kinky activities four to six times per week on average.</p>
King	<p>Age range: 18–26 years</p> <p>Race/ethnicity: Black American</p> <p>Gender and pronouns: Cisgender male (they/them)</p> <p>Sexuality: Gay</p> <p>Romantic orientation: Homoromantic</p> <p>Autistic: Yes, diagnosed</p> <p>Disabled: No</p> <p>Kink roles/identities: Top, dom, switch, slave</p> <p>Frequency: Over the last 6 months, they engaged in kinky activities seven or more times per week on average</p>
Max	<p>Age range: 27–42 years</p> <p>Race/ethnicity: White</p> <p>Gender and pronouns? Transgender male (he/him)</p> <p>Sexuality: Queer</p> <p>Romantic orientation: Queer</p>

Pseudonym	Characteristics
	<p>Autistic: Yes, self-identified</p> <p>Disabled: Yes</p> <p>Kink roles/identities: Master, owner, top, dom</p> <p>Frequency: Over the last 6 months, he engaged in kinky activities seven or more times per week on average.</p>
Milfire	<p>Age range: 43–58 years</p> <p>Race/ethnicity: White</p> <p>Gender and pronouns: Cisgender male (he/him)</p> <p>Sexuality: Heterosexual, sapiosexual, noetisexual, gynosexual</p> <p>Autistic: Yes, diagnosed</p> <p>Disabled: Yes, 100% disabled Air Force veteran</p> <p>Kink roles/identities: Dominant; exploring; evolving; toy maker; gentleman; knight; Leatherman; age player; daddy; switch; sadist; primal; rope top; impact specialist; knight; master; fountain of cum for succubi; succubus tamer; lover and protector of bunnies particularly snow, water, rope, and cottontails!</p> <p>Frequency: Over the last 6 months, he engaged in kinky activities four to six times per week on average.</p>
Ranger	<p>Age range: 18–26 years</p> <p>Race/ethnicity: African American</p> <p>Gender and pronouns: Cisgender male (he/him)</p> <p>Sexuality: Prefer not to answer</p> <p>Romantic orientation: Prefer not to answer</p> <p>Autistic: Yes, diagnosed</p> <p>Disabled: No</p> <p>Kink roles/identities: Dom</p> <p>Frequency: Over the last 6 months, he engaged in kinky activities one to two times per week on average.</p>

Figure 1

Ali the Sorceress



Ali's art depicts a smirking woman who is rolling her eyes and holding a mask away from her face, as if she is either about to take it off or put it on. She is wearing a cloak. In front of her, a Mending spell is working to stitch together a heart. The emblem is outlined in rope.

Figure 2

BB the Cleric



BB's art is outlined in angel wings and a halo, with a scroll at the bottom that states "As You Wish." Inside, the art depicts a violet wand wrapped in rope in front of a battle vest (a jacket he wears that is adorned with patches, pins, and other things that represent him and his interests), and two hands reaching out to serve.

Figure 3

King the Druid



King's art depicts a FIFA ball inside of a druid's cloak, with magical sparkles around them. This is encased by thorns (from the druid spell Thorns) that wind around the humanoid as a form of protection from outsiders. The FIFA ball represents how King and their current partner originally met through the online game.

Figure 4

Max the Rogue



Max's emblem is outlined by a leather flogger. Inside the outline, there is a leather hat that traditionally symbolizes Leathermen, a community that Max is part of, and leather gloves holding up other symbols of his interests. One symbol is a cigar, one is a knife, and the other is a book to represent the education he provides to the kink community.

Figure 5

Milfire the Paladin



Milfire's art is encapsulated in the shape of a fireman's badge. There is a firefighter helmet in the background, with a sparked stick of dynamite in intricate rope bondage in front of it to represent both his kinky and vanilla interests. In the foreground is an open book to symbolize his love for learning and knowledge.

Figure 6

Ranger the Ranger



Ranger's emblem is a badge with two Christian crosses in it to signify his religion. At the top of the image is a bow and arrow beneath two humanoid figures whispering to each other, representing his strong private connection with his partner. The focal point of the image is a lion, symbolizing pride and strength.

Research Results

The co-researchers and I identified 20 subthemes when exploring the question, What experiences of empowerment do Autistic people have due to partnered kinky activities? as well as the related questions that drove our conversations. We grouped these subthemes into four overarching thematic categories: healing, self-actualizing, connecting, and playing, which were the main experiences of empowerment that were consistently described. The wording of these main themes was intentionally left as verbs in present tense as these experiences of empowerment are living and ongoing. Table 3 shows the themes, subthemes, and the co-researchers who endorsed each. Following the table are discussions and quotations from the co-researchers that detail the themes and the many different contexts in which they were mentioned throughout the co-researchers' interviews.

Table 3*Themes and Subthemes Endorsed by Co-Researchers*

Theme	Subtheme	Ali	BB	King	Max	Milfire	Ranger
Healing	Sensory regulation		X		X	X	
	Emotional regulation			X	X	X	X
	Subverting norms	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Autonomy	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Reclaiming trauma	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Generational change		X		X	X	X
Self-actualizing	Knowledge		X	X	X	X	X
	Personal growth		X	X	X	X	X
	Focusing on self	X	X		X	X	X
	Authenticity	X	X	X	X	X	X
Connecting	Partnership	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Comfort	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Structure	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Understanding autism	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Communication	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Community		X		X	X	X
Playing	Novelty	X	X	X		X	X
	Challenge	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Special interests and shared interests	X	X		X	X	X
	Sensory joy and stimming	X	X	X	X	X	X

Healing

This theme was woven throughout each narrative and was an integral part of empowerment for each co-researcher. Elements of regulation, subverting norms and standards, an increase of autonomy, reclaiming trauma, and sparking generational change were discussed.

Sensory Regulation. Nearly every co-researcher discussed moments of feeling empowered due to regulation while engaging in kinky activities with their partner. For some, empowerment was described in regard to meeting their sensory needs. BB explained how sensory regulation showed up for them as they explore kink with their partners:

So in the process of exploration, there's different types of impact you have. I classify them as stingy or thuddy—I don't like stingy, unless I'm very well worked up and then . . . I don't care. It's funny, my girlfriend has a galley whip. It's a type of flogger, but it has very thick leather strands and it's got some weight to it, and that is my favorite thing in the world . . . I didn't really think about why until my wife explained to me the other day about how she likes it when I put pressure on her chest and it's because as an Autistic, we like that squeeze and that pressure. That's why I like that. It's because it gives me that, like almost like a kinky weighted blanket feeling. And so [I'm] understanding how to work with my autism and my ADHD while enjoying sex and finding new ways of exploration.

Milfire shared that kinky activities with his partner have actually led to him being able to manage his pain when he is overwhelmed by internal sensations:

I've got a friend that's helping me manage my pain through kink. She can bring my pain level down in half, and we can measure this at physical therapy. [This] is as out there as it gets, and I cannot explain why. I do not understand it. There is something in this connection that works, and it helps and it manages my pain, and my [vanilla relationship] does not trigger this.

Max stated that this level of sensory regulation extends to public dungeon spaces in the kink community as well. He said that hosts at the dungeon will adjust music, strobe lights and general lighting, and other sensory input if an attendee requests it. Max reported that the ability to be in charge of his sensory input was healing for him because other “vanilla” (nonkinky) spaces, such as grocery stores or restaurants, do not usually offer it. Because of the ability to get

his sensory needs accommodated, he feels more confident attending these events alone and with his partners.

Emotional Regulation. For many co-researchers, kinky activities with their partners served as an emotional outlet. Stories about emotional regulation were occasionally intertwined with sensory regulation, as many Autistic people stim with sensations to regulate. The following example from Max explains his dynamic with his sensory object partner, whose pronouns are it/they:

I'm both sensory seeking and sensory sensitive, depending on the thing we're talking about One of my S-types is a sensory object. So now we've built in a handful of my stims [that] are directly connected to their physical being, so occasionally when I'm in a space and I feel really uncomfortable, one of my stims has always been a rubbing motion. I started out doing that motion on surfaces, so I would rub the table or the chair or the wall where I was and now, I've transferred that to my property's chest [it's] now the thing that I rub. When we're in spaces and I'm super uncomfortable, I just grab it . . . and I don't think anybody really notices it as much because it kind of looks like I'm connecting with my partner instead of [seeing it as] I'm being weird and sitting here rubbing a wall.

King spoke about emotional regulation as an overall sense of well-being due to being involved with their partner in kink:

Before I started dating [my partner] and involving myself in those kinky activities, I didn't feel so happy. Like, I used to be sad. Then when it comes [to our] relationship, we studied our relationship and [we got] to know each other and then when the time goes by then you start kinky activities, now the happiness grows even more and more.

Milfire spoke about emotional regulation regarding directly during or leading into kinky moments with his partner. He explained that his partner helps him back down from “going nuclear” when he's angry or feels like he can't cope any longer. In relation to the mental health benefits he experiences, he compared his kinky conversations with her to seeing a therapist.

Subverting Norms. Another pattern that arose as the co-researchers shared more of their personal histories and experiences was that many had encountered being held to multiple stereotypes throughout their lives. Whether it was due to being perceived as different, engaging

in kink, their special interests, their sexuality, their gender expression, or their communication styles, they each listed a multitude of stereotypes and judgment they have experienced. When defining empowerment, many co-researchers described that they feel empowered when they are away from judgment and are able to go against stereotypes and societal norms.

In the follow-up interview, King explained that their local community questions how King and their partner can be in “that type of relationship.” King stated that there are many negative stereotypes that get voiced to and about them. They said they have had to remain strong and rely on their partner for support in the face of these statements so they can continue to go against the community’s norms for their own empowerment and connection.

Ranger explained that one major standard in his religious community is that one’s first sexual experience should be vanilla sex. He stated, “So my first sexual experience was BDSM. I just felt different because my first experience wasn’t the normal first sexual experience people have. . . . I told a few friends . . . and felt proud of myself and really elated.”

BB spoke about subverting these norms in a more public way with his partner, detailing a time where they went against a standard that has existed in his life since he was young:

Recently, we had a kinky party. [There were] about 20 individuals at a private home, and there [were] scenes going around: impact, needle play, sex, submission, dominance. And it’s kind of just all the way around. And me and my partner, we went off and we were doing our own thing. She’s not quiet, so it was very well known what was going on. But we were walking out and everybody’s like “Yeah!” you know, clapping. That definitely made me feel good that, you know, like I know that I did right by her and I had a good time in the process. And just [a sense of pride and community] because I’ve never had that before. I grew up where you didn’t talk about sex.

Most of the co-researchers described periods of time where they tried to adhere to society’s standards. Ali, BB, and Max explicitly discussed this as “masking,” which means suppressing and hiding Autistic traits to appear more Allistic or neurotypical. Breaking away

from these standards, they explained, has been healing and empowering as it has led them to a greater sense of self and more autonomy.

Autonomy. Empowerment was also defined as having control over one's choices, body, and environment. All co-researchers mentioned having this control as a piece of their empowerment. Many co-researchers had experienced long periods of time having to exist under someone else's rules or with others having the final say about decisions that affected them. Some co-researchers experienced authority in military life, while others experienced it in abusive vanilla relationships or in their families. Kinky activities with their partners gave them space to set boundaries, control the environment, structure the agenda for the activity, and more.

Max spoke about how partnered kink is his lifestyle and that he has a lot of autonomy now:

I think being in a situation where I have control over what happens to my body and what happens with my brain and what happens with my space has been massively empowering. And to be in a relationship where I can say, "I can't explain it" or "I don't want to talk about it but I need the lights to be off after 10—I need dark, I cannot have lights in the house after 10 p.m. . . . whatever thing it is . . . I don't have to explain it, I don't have to go through a long drawn-out process to get my partner to agree to it. . . . I've already done the work that is required for me to gain my partner's trust and my partner's obedience.

Max stated that this lifestyle is a stark contrast to his past long-term relationship where he was supposed to uphold the standards and rules of being a "Marine wife." Max also shared that the kink community "puts a lot more focus on [consent, and the reason], doesn't matter why. 'No' is a complete sentence. You don't have to explain yourself or extrapolate your reasoning."

Ali shared that the way she and her partner use a safeword to revoke consent has extended beyond just their kinky activities:

It's a way for me to communicate with my partner . . . [I've] even [used it in a] very loud environment that had me very stressed, and I couldn't think of the way to express [that] except to tell him "red," which is our safeword, and of course he recognized that that's the safeword. It took him a little bit to realize why I was saying that, which is that I was

trying to say “I need to get out of this building.” But it was a way for him to recognize, even outside of sex, that it’s a way for us to communicate.

Milfire stated that due to him and his partner respecting each other’s boundaries, he feels confident that the relationship will lead to something long term. BB, Ali, King, and Milfire also explained that their boundaries, and their partners’ boundaries, allow them to feel more safe and in control within the relationship.

Reclaiming Trauma. All of the co-researchers reported that they have found engaging in kink with their partners has helped them to reclaim trauma within the safety of these relationships. Ali explained how reclaiming her trauma occurred unintentionally for her:

One of the things I’ve found is a lot of the things [my abuser] did to me are now kinks that I have . . . They were things I had explored previously [through online roleplaying or watching videos] but because I’d never really had sex, I hadn’t really experienced them. And so for me, some of what kink is—on the trauma side of it—is it’s reclaiming those things that I already had an interest in.

Both Ali and BB shared about how they have struggled with masking and “people pleasing” throughout their lives but stated that kink allows them to “people please” in a way that also brings them pleasure. BB explained, “There’s nothing more enjoyable to me than my partner being pleased, and in a way that kinda heals that trauma because before I people pleased for their sake, and now I do it for my own.” Ali said she also uses kink as a way to play “consent games,” which were taught to her by her neurodivergent therapist who moonlights as a BDSM instructor. During these games, she practices telling her partner to stop, slow down, or continue the activities they are engaging in. This is done in a low-pressure and low-stakes environment so that she can feel empowered and confident in giving, adjusting, or revoking her consent.

BB explained how one of their relationship dynamics and the activities with that partner directly allow them to reclaim spirituality and, more specifically, religiosity. He detailed growing up Catholic and then Southern Baptist and how that affected him. He said that it caused shame

and guilt to build around his sexuality, sexual interests, his gender, and even his hobbies. With one of his current partners, he explained how he reduces his shame and increases his sense of empowerment through the roles they play:

As far as my empowerment goes, I'm still figuring out my power as a sub. I mean, it's still new to me. I do feel a measure of empowerment when I'm in the role of, as she calls me sometimes, priest. So, a priest worshipping at the altar of her divinity, so on and so forth. There's a power in that because it also heals that religious trauma. Because [she] is my religion, this is my belief system. And in a way it's taking that back because, again, it's on my terms.

In the follow-up interview, King stated that the theme of reclaiming trauma is true for them as well. King shared that when they encounter something traumatic, they turn to their partner for support. In those moments of support, sometimes they will engage in a kinky activity to put them in control of their situation and empower them further. Other times, King said that they will have deep conversations and remind each other of skills they have learned in therapy.

Generational Change. In addition to reclaiming trauma, four co-researchers spoke about their intention to do differently than their guardians did. They stated that kink catalyzes their ability to explore different ways of existing, reacting, and connecting to others. BB explained:

To be “daddy” to my wife is to me the most empowering thing I have ever felt, sexually and nonsexually. Because it's not just the bedroom thing for me. I'm her provider . . . I take care of her. I make sure she's happy and safe and she's felt needed. I want her to be able to know that she can express herself however she chooses.

To me, all of those things is empowering to me because it's a reminder. One of my biggest fears growing up was I was gonna turn out to be like my father. And my father was your typical manly man of the 1970s and 80s: You can be angry and you can be horny. That's it. “Men don't cry. Grow the fuck up.” I can't tell you the number of times growing up my father called me a pussy. Because I cried, I was an emotional . . . I've always been fairly emotional.

At one point, he got so mad at me that he grabbed me by the back of my neck and slammed me into a brick wall and broke my nose. And my mom, being absolutely terrified of the man, set my nose herself rather than taking me to the hospital because she was scared. So for me, beforehand, “daddy” was always a mixed bag for me, the term in and of itself. And so being “daddy” to my wife is healing in that regard. But it's taking it back, because to me I'm being “daddy” in the sense that that's what a “daddy” should be.

It's attentive and loving and providing and caring and emotionally safe and supportive and everything that he wasn't. And so to me that is the most I feel empowered, because to me that heals the majority of my [inner] child.

BB stated that he now feels empowered to receive pain because it is a pain that is within his control, unlike his past experiences with physical harm caused by his father. Milfire explained that engaging in kink has stopped him from getting as angry and violent as his father used to get. He said kink has helped him to avoid going down those self-destructive paths. Ranger also spoke about wanting to exist differently in his relationship when compared to how his father treated others.

Self-Actualizing

Everyone spoke at length about ways they have experienced empowerment in relation to knowing themselves better through kink. Whether it was through exploring their own limits and abilities and having a deeper knowledge of who they are, focusing more on their own interests for the sake of themselves instead of others, or being able to live more authentically as themselves, they all cited self-actualization as a large piece of their empowerment.

Knowledge. Many co-researchers reported that the knowledge that empowered them was information regarding kink, sex, their bodies, gender identity and expression, and, specifically, sexual activities. This knowledge included how to set and reassert boundaries. Most of the co-researchers also described that negotiating structure, roles, environment/setting, and expectations allowed them to feel completely informed when engaging with their partners, which in turn empowered them. Milfire explained being empowered as “That idea of making smarter decisions that will work for you, that will help you move forward, [and] help you deal with the situation as needed.” He, BB, Ranger, King, and Max listed knowledge as a necessary aspect of empowerment. BB said that empowerment through knowledge allowed them to be “fully informed and aware. . . . For me, the more I learn, the more empowered I feel about who I am.”

BB explained that his role as a submissive also gave him more knowledge of what it is like to be in that space, which allowed him to feel more confident in his dominant roles with his partners.

Personal Growth. Personal growth and self-exploration was reported by five of the co-researchers. Ranger reported that “During kinky activities, me and my partner are doing things we never thought we could do.” He added that they challenge themselves to try new activities and that he has found that he is able to do things that others are “either afraid to do or just couldn’t do,” which gives him a sense of pride. Ranger further explained:

When you do [kinky activities], it’s like a trial or obstacle that you’ve passed through and came out on top, so besides the enjoyment, I can think to myself, “I did this, I actually did it. I saw it online and people said it was bad, but I actually did it and I feel proud of myself.

King similarly shared that they feel as if their self-confidence and sense of self grows “day by day” as they continue to engage in these activities with their partner. In the follow-up interview, Max explained that he also has tested his own interests and abilities through kink. He said that he also had to do a lot of soul searching as he explored the dominant side of himself.

Milfire expressed that he is also experiencing personal growth through kink. Like other co-researchers, he reported suppressing some of his fantasies and some parts of himself throughout his life. Through kink, Milfire has been more able “to recognize that I can have those [fantasies and feelings], I can enjoy those [activities], and I’m okay.” He reported that “[Kink] has helped me grow in ways that I did not expect. It has helped me manage my pain in ways that I did not expect . . . that dynamic has been so empowering.”

Focusing on Self. Four co-researchers explained that they feel empowerment through focusing on themselves at times when it comes to partnered kinky activities. Milfire stated, “So right now, the idea of doing rope is the first thing that I will have done that is truly me, that’s not about my kids. It’s focused on me and doing something I want to do.” This is a kinky interest

that he held inside for 25 to 30 years. Max explained that the different dynamics he has engaged in primarily focus on him instead of the needs or interests of his partners, as that is what they have agreed upon.

Milfire also explained that his partner encourages him to focus on himself and share insight about his feelings, his fantasies, and what arouses him. BB's partner reportedly supports BB in similar ways:

I have been on a forward path, and it's been growth after growth. And then around 30, I met my wife, and she was the first person to love me as I am. I wasn't still quite sure who I was at that point, and I'm still learning, but I'm more sure who I am now than I ever was. She gave me the space to grow while loving me, but not like "do this or do that." She saw that I had the building blocks, and that was enough for her to stick with me as I grew, and I learned, and I became the person that I can now look in the mirror and I'm happy with who I see.

Ali expressed that exploring kink with her partner has also led her to be more confident in pursuing kink activities for her own pleasure and interest, such as Shibari (a Japanese style of bondage) or overstimulation:

That's not even something where I want it for my partner to be able to do it—I want it because: me. I want this. And that's something I've had to explain multiple times in multiple conversations that this isn't something where this is me being a people pleaser. This is something I've read about, and I want.

Ranger explained a similar path of focusing more on himself and less of what others think of him or expect him to do, stating "[Empowerment] just means that you're on top and whatever anyone says, you put your thoughts and actions above whatever anyone [else] tells you to do."

Authenticity. Empowerment also stems from the co-researchers' abilities to fully express themselves. King and BB both explained that partnered kink has allowed them to explore gender roles and expression more openly. King shared that they and their partner behave differently and

appear more confident when they engage in kinky activities together. For BB, they saw this is a place of not only authenticity but also healing:

I've only been identifying as gender queer for like the last 4 months. And my girlfriend was the one that really helped me express that . . . All my life I liked pretty dresses and pretty things and feminine things, but because I grew up as a male in the South, you know, I was only ever okay to be horny or angry. That was it, and we don't play with girl stuff. I'm 41 years old and I'm just now starting to wear my dresses. Sometimes I'll put on an outfit, and the clothes themselves give me a sense of power because I feel so pretty. It soothes that crying child that wanted those things and couldn't have them.

Authenticity through kink aligned with Max's definition of empowerment where he stated "Empowerment is a place where I feel comfortable being myself, and it's typically free from judgment." Ranger defined empowerment in a similar way, stating, "I think when you say someone's empowered, I think over all the accusations and whatever tries to bring you down, you still stand strong, regardless of what anybody says around you." This paralleled Ali's explanation of what empowerment means to her and how it applies to her experiences in kinky partnered activities:

I would say things that make me feel empowered—it's a very difficult question—but it's anything that makes me feel like I'm allowed to just be myself. I imagine you've probably seen this as a trend within the Autistic community because, you know, as Autistics, we mask a lot. We're constantly hiding who we are. So, for me to be empowered is taking that mask off and being who I really am. I don't get to do that very often.

A majority of the co-researchers described being able to be their most authentic selves, or parts of themselves, with their partners. Milfire explained that he is able to tap into the "primal hunter" aspect of himself with his partner, which he had previously ignored and suppressed. Max explained the expression of this subtheme as having different roles with different partners where he is able to get his authentic needs met and show different sides of himself. BB detailed his three different partnerships and how each partner accesses slightly different parts of himself:

So I've got three partners . . . We all have a great relationship, but each one of my relationships is just different aspects of me. You know? My girlfriend is the calm,

collected, very laid-back type. My wife is my partner in crime. She's with me for the shenanigans. She's with me when I'm worn out. She is the one that probably sees the more vulnerable side to me. But one that I can just let down all the walls and have those moments where I'm just a crying blubbering mess or I'm just being an absolute goofball because, you know, that's part of who I am.

And then my partner, she's my geeky . . . like we nerd out together. We have a lot of the same interests between *Firefly* and you know, all these other things. And so we just have the Whovian conversations and the good times. She's also a comfort to me in that regard because . . . Another thing that kind of makes me feel powerful is safety, being safe to express those parts of myself. I grew up in an era where if you were a geek or a nerd, you were a target for every bully in the world . . . And so I think that's [the] safety that they offer.

Connecting

The co-researchers each spoke about many different avenues for connection through their empowering partnered kinky experiences. They also detailed multiple aspects that led to deeper connection, strengthened by these experiences.

Partnership. All of the co-researchers mentioned a strong connection with their partners being a key part of their empowerment. Those who could compare it to a vanilla relationship stated that the depth of connection was deeper in their kinky relationships. Max and BB, who both actively have multiple partners, stated that their connections with those partners were different but equally strong. Max posited a guess as to why these connections are deeper: "I think that connection [in kinky relationships] comes from vulnerability not being immediately tossed aside. . . . [Your partner doesn't] just watch you and ask 'Why are you telling me all of this?'" Similarly, Ali shared that she built a friendship with her current partner before exploring kink, which created a solid foundation. Ranger described his connection and the intersection of kink with his partner as "our little secret or little powerhouse because it's something both of us share. It's like a little bond."

Milfire explained a specific experience of connection and empowerment with one of his nonsexual play partners. He shared about attending a rope class that did not go well for him and how his partner was very open to giving him another chance:

With the instructor, with the book open, and with my partner, I could not tie the [knot]. I was so upset, and I literally talked to my [partner] the whole drive home. She was very, very helpful. And here's the crazy part: It was so bad [at the rope class], it was probably the worst experience I've ever had, and this [other play partner] girl still wants to do [another] rope class with me. And that's who I'm gonna meet tonight. . . . So I screwed up completely, and she's still willing to go places.

King, whose relationship started long distance, explained, "When we started living together, [we engaged in bondage] . . . I don't know how to explain it but it was really good, it was fun . . . [a] deep connection." They stated:

Before I [wasn't] used to dating and . . . I didn't feel that I'm attracted to someone so there [were] those sad moments [but those don't exist now]. . . . Kinky activities in my relationship has helped me become more happy, more fun, and even express more of my feelings to the person I'm dating . . . and even become more [loyal] and [have] more open communication and discuss issues and build each other's trust. It would be too weird [to envision not being kinky with my partner].

The thought of not involving kink in their relationships was not exclusive to King. This piece of their empowerment seemed vital to their happiness and the connection they share with partners. Ali explained that she could have a sexual relationship with someone who is vanilla but stated she doesn't get "anything out of it" and that she engaged in those in the past "because it made my partner happy and that [in turn] made me happy."

Comfort. All of the co-researchers described the element of comfort in many ways. Some defined it as physical and psychological safety. Milfire expressed that he felt most empowered when "discovering that this woman and I, through [kinky] sexting, could repeatedly control my pain through basically mutual masturbation . . . and drop my pain [level] from an 8 to a 4. Okay, where the fuck do I sign up for that shit?" BB expressed comfort as both a physical and mental experience:

[During kinky partnered activities], I probably feel more normal than I do at any other point in my life. It reminds me of when I first started taking medication, back in the days of Ritalin and imipramine. So yeah, when I first started taking the medicine, it worked. I was like super focused and everything was interesting and clear and vibrant—and it's kinda how I feel in those moments.

On the emotional safety side of the dynamic, Milfire stated, “It’s like an increased sense of safety to explore, to discuss the stuff, to think about this stuff.” Ranger explained that he finds the comfort of being with his partner a good antidote to the difficulties of daily life. He stated that it rejuvenates him and empowers him to continue to face challenges and adversity.

Ali described emotional and mental safety through the trust she has built with her partner. She said that this is a requirement to engage with someone in kink and for her to feel empowered:

I really find that I can only be kinky with people that I trust. And those people that I trust completely, the way I find them is whether I feel tired after being with them. The “tired” is a measure of how much I’m masking around them, so the more I have to mask around someone, the more tired I am being around them, [and] the less I trust them. I’m not going to engage in anything [with them].

King explained that they felt safe in this dynamic with their partner, regardless of what role they are playing at the time. Max expressed that he feels like the kink community, and therefore he and his kinky partners are inherently more focused on comfort. He explained, “We focus so much more on what makes people comfortable, what makes people feel seen and feel heard, and I don’t think the rest of the [nonkinky] world feels that way.”

Ali and BB spoke about aftercare as a place where they feel most empowered and the most amount of comfort. Aftercare usually happens at the end of a kinky activity or scene, whether it is a natural ending or it is stopped short by someone using a safeword. Ali explained her experiences of empowerment, comfort, and safety in aftercare:

What’s so empowering about kinky time? It’s fun, then afterwards I’m in a safe environment. I would say the times when I feel most empowered is actually during aftercare. I just like being able to cuddle after sex. There’s no expectation for the cuddles

to become sexual . . . It's kind of like less pressure afterwards. We snuggle for a good 30 min and we just kinda talk—We talk about what was good, what maybe we could improve on in the future.

Anyone can get stressed, anyone can get triggered [whether you're dominant or submissive] so [we made sure to prepare] protocol [if someone uses the safeword] for what to do during that. For me, I keep a coloring book in my car, and I have coloring books in my room. I always make sure that my keys are somewhere they can be easily found if I'm not able to get up and move. So my partner can go to my car, get my coloring book, 'cause my coloring book is how I tend to self-regulate. It's something that's very grounding for me. We also have breathing exercises [and] the rule of "Don't close your eyes" [to prevent traumatic flashbacks]. It's not something where it's like a punishable rule but kind of a reminder for safety.

BB explained a similar experience with aftercare in that they also provide and receive comfort from their partner as well as feedback:

I like the aftercare . . . The way I grew up with sex was when you got done, you went on about your business, you know, but now aftercare's just as important to me as it is to my sub. I like the cuddles. I like the interaction, the talking, the, you know, going over things sometimes like, "Hey, how was this when we try something new? Is it something we wanna try again or is it not?" or "Did I go too far here?" To me that tickles that orderly part of my Autistic brain so much to be able to have that conversation and that moment of we're just basking in the aftereffects of it. But yet she's telling me or they're telling me where they're at.

Structure. All of the co-researchers endorsed having structure as a key piece of their empowerment as well as both understanding their partners' expectations and having their own expectations understood. King and BB both expressed that they explicitly discussed these expectations early in their relationships. King said that this discussion was a place of empowerment for them:

When I was starting dating the person I'm with right now, we were distributing the roles . . . "Now who will play who, who will play this role, who will not play this role?" [We] define[d the relationship], so I think at that time I felt like [I was] most important because I was just listening [and] the person was listening to me.

BB also endorsed these discussions as a place for him to feel empowered:

You have negotiations in scenes . . . It's very specific. For my Autistic brain, that knowing ahead of time takes so much of the worry out of sexuality, because I may like something but the partner I'm with at that moment may not like that same thing. But they

come with instructions, and that to me that is the greatest thing you can ever do to me. That removes the equation that I may inadvertently hurt them, which soothes that part of my brain, and that gives me that structure that I need to make sure that I am fulfilling their needs as well as my own.

Ranger explained that the structure in his relationship is fairly straightforward:

“[Afterwards we] close the door and close everything and go back to our normal lives.” Max stated that the structure between him and his partners is also straightforward in that he generally decides what structure looks like and has set basic guidelines and rules for his partners. Thanks to the basic structure being set, Max can also take time for himself if he needs a break from actively being in charge, and his s-types will continue to follow his rules but not request direct instruction. Max also shared that BDSM events and dungeons usually have the same structure between the gatherings: the “staff,” the way people introduce themselves, the way people start or stop activities, materials one brings as an attendee, locations, and so on.

Ali said she and her partner did agree on rules and structure, although they are loosely followed and enforced. She explained that agreement allows for expectations to be set without being extremely rigid. She also said that this helps her communicate with her partner, giving an example of if she is in the mood, then she will send him a naughty picture. She is supposed to send this daily but she often forgets and her partner does not enforce it, so when she does send one, her partner knows loud and clear that she is interested in engaging in kink with him.

The co-researchers also described different aspects of how they structure these activities and dynamics as being empowering. Milfire explained how he and his partner troubleshoot challenges: “[My partner] and I worked out [what] data we’re trying to collect to try to ‘science’ the shit out of [a sexual challenge].” BB shared that they have kinky checklists for them and each of their partners so that they are able to keep track of what everyone is or is not interested in trying regarding kinky activities. King stated that they and their partner have “dressing codes” to

show what role they are playing based on what they wear. Max expressed gratitude for the *stoplight system* (a way of slowing down or ending a kinky encounter) because it is clearcut: “It’s just ‘green, yellow, red,’ done. I love it.”

Understanding Autism. All of the co-researchers said that their own understanding and their partners’ understanding of autism is an important piece of experiencing empowerment. This understanding was a core component of being vulnerable, understood, and connecting with their partner. King’s partner and BB’s wife are also Autistic and have an intimate understanding of what it means to be Autistic, according to these co-researchers. Max stated, “I also find that having a partner that understands how my brain works and understands things that I have never—and probably would never—discuss in a vanilla dynamic [is empowering].” He went on to explain experiences where this understanding of autism that is shared among his partners and himself has empowered and comforted him:

As a person with really shitty—occasionally really shitty—executive function, there are days when I can’t think for myself, let alone for two [partners]. So some days, I wake up and my girl is like “What do I do today?” and I’m just like “I don’t know—do something—I’m going to watch TV and hang out with the puppy and eat mac and cheese.” I like the flexibility and think that it helps a lot because it doesn’t make me feel any less than. When my brain won’t let me do things, it just kind of is what it is—nobody expects anything different.

Milfire also feels very uplifted and understood, stating that this understanding allows for “the disabilities [to] fall away. I can function. I can do things. I have support.”

Milfire reflected on his life experiences: “So my autism—and I didn’t realize it at the time [due to later in life diagnosis]—is what makes me able to do some of the things that I can do.” However, Max’s reflections were not as positively charged:

Regardless of what society says about me, I’ve been in a lot of situations, especially as somebody that didn’t know I was Autistic. So, not being able to have a word to explain “This is why I do that,” I was always just considered really weird or strange or different . . . I’ve been avoided a lot in life, in social situations, and relationship situations and the like.

Both Milfire and Max expressed that this higher level of knowledge about autism and how their autistic traits show up has allowed them and their partners to move toward more empowering experiences. Ali and BB recounted tales of masking in their past where they were pleasing other people and were not necessarily connecting with those previous partners. BB explained that they see their masking abilities as “almost superhuman” regarding their ability to “read people.” With their current partners understanding their Autistic traits, they do not feel as pressured to mask. They also are more apt to get their true needs met and to feel able to communicate those needs to their partners. Ali explained that it is very important for her partner to understand that going nonspeaking is a common Autistic trait and that there is no implied meaning behind it:

I also need to be with someone who is going to understand things, like when I suddenly go nonverbal. Because of my trauma, I will sometimes go nonverbal during sex, but that is not like a situation where we need to stop for me. That’s not a revocation of consent. I need a partner who’s going to recognize “Hey, the noises have stopped, I need to check in.”

Communication. All co-researchers endorsed different aspects of communication as leading to experiences of empowerment or as being empowering in itself. Direct communication, prioritizing communication, and different methods of communicating all appeared in this subtheme.

Max and BB both detailed the communication differences they have noticed in kinky partnerships versus vanilla partnerships. Max explained,

For the most part in vanilla dynamics, it’s like “Let’s not talk about things, we don’t need to talk about things.” In a kink dynamic, I found that I talk a lot more about myself, and I ask a lot more questions about my partner. So I think there’s a lot to be said of clear communication and having more conversations around what motivates you. . . . “Why do you want this? Why do you like this? How do you know you still like this?” . . . Having conversations like that, I find, is probably one of the biggest pieces of empowerment for me in kink dynamics.

BB shared:

Kink has offered me things that vanilla sex has never offered me. In vanilla sex, it's like, to me, that is more for procreation or selfish pleasure . . . it's more of a duty, or an expectation in a vanilla-style relationship. Whereas in kink, it is about respect, consent, pleasure, communication. Like, it's so much more.

We have had more in-depth detailed conversations about us and our relationship since we became polyamorous and kinky than we've had in the entirety of our marriage. And I love it. I love that we're at that point. Because, I mean, it's not like we lacked communication. We have always been really good at communication. But now we're having and we're able to have the hard conversations and the deep conversation without people being, you know, upset or offended or, you know, "I don't want to talk about this anymore." And that's something vanilla sex never really offered.

Max stated that "In the kink world, you know that people are going to want communication—that's the norm." Other co-researchers explained that this increase in open communication has been the norm for them in the kink realm, too. Ranger stated that he and his partner will be open in discussion about what they would like to try or new ideas they have regarding kink. Max shared that he and his partners use "clear concise communication" to negotiate their activities, noting "[It's never] assumed that things would happen a certain way. . . There's a lot of explanations and making sure we have the same definitions for [a] word." Milfire expressed that he often feels like he is speaking to a therapist when he and his partner engage in "open honest communication" that "focuses on things that work." King shared that they have worked hard to build the trust and respect with their partner that is required for them to have direct conversations about their needs, especially in the face of any challenges or differences.

BB gave an example of how communication has been tailored to his and his Autistic wife's communication needs:

We are both Autistic, me and my wife, and so having that understanding about being direct, especially when you come from a place of just naturally having rejection sensitivity, we really work to speak deliberately, so we circumvent my trauma brain

trying to kick in and be like, “Oh, we’re being rejected.” Defenses up, you know, go full turtle mode.

My wife and I, we do this thing that we call . . . we speak deliberately. And that’s why [when] we’re dealing with hard things, we don’t always say what we want at that moment. We think about it so that when we finally do speak, we say exactly what we need. Because it is so easy to have an opinion about something, but to formulate it in a way that is, you know . . . “I” statements are an amazing thing. I know everybody hates them, but they work.

The co-researchers also described how they use nonverbal communication to their advantage or how they avoid it, based on their needs, in order to feel empowered in communicating with their partners. Max spoke about using other communication systems so that he is not forced to try to read body language and interpret tone or inflections. BB shared that they and their partners will use nonverbal cues to remind each other of what role they are in, such as one of his partners exposing her throat if she wants him to lean more into his dominant role, or another partner tugging on his collar to remind him that he is in a submissive role. BB stated that this form of nonverbal communication works well for both his neurodivergent and kink needs. Ali explained that she can use nonverbal communication like rolling her eyes to let her partner know she wants to engage him in kink; she stated she often uses this approach when he is being self-deprecating and she wants to pull him out of that mindset.

Another way Ali spoke about communication regarded using it to diffuse tension or emotional distress. She said she and her partner share a similar sense of humor and they will use jokes to connect with each other and change the mood. Milfire described that communication, specifically sexual texting, helps to decrease his pain and is an empowering kinky activity in itself. Max spoke about communication and kink intersecting in a way that recognizes systems of power and systems of miscommunication, explaining that flipping these systems on their heads is empowering and allows for deeper connection on multiple levels with his partners.

Community. Multiple co-researchers spoke explicitly about how the kink community has helped them feel empowered, even in their partnered dynamics. The same was said about the Autistic community and finding other Autistic friends who are also interested in or open to hearing about kink. Milfire said that with all of the stress in his life over the last year or so, he would not be coping as well without the kink community events he attends.

Because of the stigma and stereotypes they had faced in other aspects of life, the co-researchers described finding the neurodivergent kink community as healing and an antidote to feeling alone. Max explained, “[You’re] not like the weird outsider who has these feelings or these thoughts—there are other people who do these things too.” Both Max and BB insisted that the kink community likely has a majority of neurodivergent members, which allows them to feel less judgment about being authentically themselves. Ranger expressed that socializing with kinky friends became easier as he got more involved in kink with his partner. He said discussing these topics “brings down the social pressure that I get [from being Autistic].” BB stated:

To know that I’m not alone is nice. [When] you grew up in my era, mental health and mental illness, they were taboo. That was a no no, you were a weirdo because you were different. And now it’s like, no, it’s just different people, you know, experiencing life differently. . . . It’s funny because a lot of that [knowledge-related] empowerment I get is from the Autistic and kink community that I’m part of, but also the side of TikTok that I found myself on. I’ve learned more about my ADHD and autism due to TikTok than any psychiatrist has ever told me.

Max expressed that he often feels like “These are my people—this is where I’m meant to be in life.” BB stated that this community “[isn’t] just community, but it’s accepting community. Community that’s like, ‘You are you and we love you for that. Don’t fucking change.’” He expressed regret that he did not find the kinky neurodivergent community earlier in life, stating, “Kink and the community that kink has brought my into has really done a lot to help with my [neurodivergent] brain.” BB said, “The [kinky neurodivergent] family that I have built means more to me than the family I was given.”

Playing

All of the co-researchers stated that the kinky activities they engage in are not always sexual and are often more like leisure, recreation, and playing. Ranger said, “It’s like [a] different activity—it’s like a recreational activity. Just get done with it, feel good about it, and go on with your normal life.” Max stated that, due to a mixture of disability, gender dysphoria, and body dysmorphia, there are times where he has partners he never sexually engages with. He also shared details about a trip with his partners to a theme park and how they were engaged in their kinky dynamic the entire time, but they were doing recreational activities like riding the theme park rides, getting food, and exploring the theme park without it being sexually charged at all. Ali and Milfire both specifically mentioned their interests in Shibari as something potentially nonsexual. Ali said, “Honestly, I don’t really think of Shibari as being a kinky thing. It’s kind of an art form, except for the fact that you’re naked during it. But to me, it’s like painting a nude painting.”

Novelty. Both Ali and King described that a lot of time they are playful with their partners in kinky ways, but those kinky activities do not always lead to sexual encounters and are sometimes just for fun. In a similar vein, Milfire explained that he has a lot of “crazy” fantasies that he would like to try and is finally getting to explore them with his partners, whether it be sexual or nonsexual kinky activity. Ranger also said that he and his partner will try new things: “Most of the time [it’s spontaneous], and there are times where we can just see something online or we can just be talking about something and be like ‘Let’s try this later on.’” BB explained how this sense of novelty intersects with his neurodivergence:

So part of [where autism and kink intersects] for me is because of the ADHD side of things, we get bored. . . . We could do the same thing over and over again [being Autistic] and nine times it’ll be exciting to us and the tenth time we’re just “eh,” ‘cause what we’re doing essentially is we’re mining dopamine. We’re looking for that hit. And

after you do it so long, you kind of burn that out. Kinky offers the ability to continue to do a wonderful thing with my partner, but then adds a little bit of spice to kind of keep it fresh and interesting . . . I love her, and sex with her is never not on the table. But it makes it interesting. And so it keeps it lively and fresh and new—and the same thing with my other partner.

Challenge. King, Max, Milfire, Ranger, and BB all spoke about instances of empowerment due to the amount of challenge that is sometimes involved in kinky activities. Ranger shared that he feels certain new kinky activities can be an obstacle to overcome, depending on the activity that he and his partner decide to try, and that it tests their abilities. King and Milfire detailed times that they or their partners challenged them to enjoy something new while using kink as a playful vessel, such as liking country music while being tied up and teased or climaxing just from text messages. Ali shared that she gives herself small challenges in her kink dynamic to test where her current limits are and to gradually expand her abilities.

Max expressed that he feels empowered when he helps his play partners work through their own challenges, such as having a fear of knives and ultimately engaging in knife play with him. He stated that they ask him to support them in this way. BB spoke about how the challenge of being a service switch meets his neurodivergent and kinky needs:

I find a lot of fun in [kink.] It plays in[to] my ADHD and my autism and finding new ways to bring my partner pleasure. I'm very much a hedonist. It gives me great amounts of pleasure to give my partners pleasure, but I like finding new ways. So like with my wife, she's never squirted. We've figured that one out and to me I'm like, "Yes, please!" . . . It scratches both parts of my brain of the chaos and the control in the service.

Special Interests and Shared Interests. Most of the co-researchers spoke about ways that their special interests involved kink or have been turned kinky over time. They also discussed ways that shared interests have allowed them to gain more connections socially, whether with their partner, friends, or an entire community.

As we spoke for the initial interview, BB uncovered that a large part of his dynamic with one of his partners is a healing extension of his special interest in religion. They engage in

goddess and priest roleplay. That dynamic allows him to carve out a meaningful reclamation of some of the trauma he has been put through and also indulges him in his interests. BB shared that he has had a long-term special interest in *The Princess Bride* and about how he sees Westley, the leading male character, as the “epitome of a strong nontoxic masculine figure.” He shared that he often tells his wife “As you wish” both verbally and through his actions as her daddy. He also spoke about how he really enjoys building as a hobby and special interest, so this interest has shifted into a kinky one over time. He now will get ideas for building different contraptions and structures based on certain kinky activities he, his partners, and his friends are interested in trying.

Milfire detailed how his interest in rope was initially not kinky, such as volunteering time to teach Scouts and his interest in rock climbing, but that it definitely has gained a kinky side to it over time. He said that his interest in Hojōjutsu, a traditional Japanese art of restraining criminals, led to an interest in Shibari, which is popular in the kink community. He spoke about his time as a firefighter, which was a huge interest of his, and how it led to him getting excited to drive a firetruck that could spin in place and drive sideways. He shared that this turned kinky when he wanted to have sex while on it.

Ali shared that she used to be very interested in creative writing, especially in the form of roleplay. Writing about kink with others allowed her to pursue her creative interests while exploring kink and while forming friendships online. She said that this hobby led to her dating someone with a shared interest in kinky roleplay. She also mentioned that having shared interests in kink allows her to interact with her partner’s girlfriend to encourage her to be more of a “brat” and less of a “good girl.”

Kink being a special interest was also a common element for some of the co-researchers.

Ranger expressed that it allows him to find topics of conversation with certain friends. Max stated:

I definitely see an overlap between kink and special interests—kink is my SpIn [special interest]. . . . I get to lean into that as a kink educator, which I really enjoy, because when I go into spaces, I typically have the reputation of “I’ve wrote a book, I’ve taught a class, I did stuff” and “obviously I know things,” and so people will just come ask me questions. So instead of me rambling about things that people don’t want to hear about, now I’m helping people.

Sensory Joy and Stimming. All of the co-researchers spoke explicitly about how partnered kinky activities lead to them feeling empowered through getting their sensory needs met, as well as their stimming needs met. This subtheme was described in a similar vein as sensory regulation, but with more of a focus on playfulness and repetition.

In the follow-up interview, King shared that, often, one of their sensory needs is to have music playing and that they have communicated this to their partner, so now they enjoy listening to a mixture of each other’s favorite songs when they are engaging in kinky activities. Max detailed how one of his partner’s roles is to be a sensory object whose sole purpose in their dynamic is for him to use it to stim. Ali shared that kinky sex, for her, is “definitely a form of sensory seeking. I like rough, intense sex because if it’s anything less, I can’t even feel it.”

Milfire felt similarly about engaging roughly and said,

I’ve noticed that with the rope, it’s a sensory thing, that’s a repetition thing, that’s a visual thing. I’m a visual kinesthetic learner, but I’ve also noticed that yes, the sound of fucking a very wet pussy [is] a big thing to me. . . . I kink off auditory. There’s [also] some very visual pieces there.

BB also endorsed this sensory joy. They explained an empowering activity regarding stimming and sensation:

I got introduced to a violet wand the other day. I had never experienced that before but it played to that stimmy need. Like to me it was like, you remember those globes that you see at the Spencer’s? I was the globe. And so it was like the hyperfixation and that

stimming. I was like, “Yes, please.” I like that sensory over put. And in a way, like, sex and sexuality, and expressing that is kind of also a stimming behavior because it’s become comforting to me.

BB also mentioned that they use certain kinky activities as a way to stim even after the experience is over and as a joyful sensory tether to a memory:

I love to be marked and I love to be bruised, because it’s that we’re going back to that stimming . . . like I will touch those marks and those bruises and it’s like, “Oh yeah, okay, I remember”—sensory memory. It’s like, “Oh, I know how I got that. I remember what was going on.” And so it’s kind of a stimming thing for me too . . . it’s part of that meditative mindset.

Creative Synthesis

Hero’s Journey

As I interviewed my co-researchers and reflected on their experiences, as well as my own, it became clear that we have all embarked on our own unique hero’s journeys that were catalyzed by both kink and being Autistic. The journeys were furthered by engaging in kinky experiences with partners. I was specifically reminded of the condensed hero’s journey concept from Vogler (2007), with the following stages:

1. The ordinary world: The hero is experiencing everyday life and there are circumstances that cause them to be discontent.
2. Call to adventure: Information is discovered that causes the hero to feel called to explore the unknown and make a change.
3. Refusal of the call: The hero is hesitant to accept the call, to make a change, and to leave the known. The hero may feel like change is meaningless and feel some level of hopelessness.
4. Meeting with the mentor: Whether this happens consciously or unconsciously, the hero is met by a guide. This guide can be physical or as a symbol of the promise of peace or the power of destiny. This encourages them to accept the call to adventure.

5. Crossing the first threshold: This stage involves the hero finally venturing into the unknown, where there are potentially lurking dangers and risks and it is away from the safety of the known. The hero has to exhibit courage and confidence as they proceed.
6. Tests, allies, and enemies: The hero then goes through obstacles and trials. Along the way, they meet additional supportive people, receive new knowledge, experience personal growth, and build their competence.
7. Approach to the innermost cave: The hero faces intense physical and material temptations and has to persevere when they are being tempted to stray from their journey.
8. The ordeal: This stage is the peak in the middle of the story. The hero must confront whatever or whoever holds the greatest power in their life, which generally represents life or death (metaphorically or literally). This requires the hero to abandon ego, be vulnerable, and authentically give it their all. Often during this stage, the hero is receiving hope and reassurance from the mentor or a figure that represents a dialectical opposite of qualities when compared to the powerful figure they are fighting against.
9. Reward: The hero overcomes that peak challenge and receives deeper understanding, a new perspective, transcendence, knowledge, and other rewards for their efforts and persistence. It is often depicted as some type of “everlasting” reward, like an elixir of life, or a wish-granting spell that allows them to self-actualize further.
10. The road back: The hero must return to their “ordinary world” with the life-transmuting item, power, trophy, or knowledge that they gained during their journey.

The hero generally finds it difficult to accept and reacclimatize to the old environment.

11. The resurrection: This stage involves the hero acknowledging and embodying enlightenment. It highlights the hero's inner transformation and often is portrayed as a rebirth. The hero cares less about their attachment to their own self: their limitations, quirks, hopes, and fears. Instead, their focus is more on living in the moment and leaning into whatever may come to pass.
12. Return with the elixir: The final stage of the hero's journey involves them properly reintegrating into their world. They share what they have gained, improve the community and environment, and continue to experience fluidity and evolution. "The hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he *is*" (Campbell, 2004, p. 225).

These are some of the ways in which we as co-researchers have progressed or are progressing on our own hero's journeys:

1. Ordinary world: King mentioned they had often felt sad and lonely, as if they may not ever find a partner. Ali had experienced an abusive relationship in the past and became used to that treatment. BB was struggling to figure out their needs and to know or express their emotions. Max had been a "Marine wife" and struggled to meet the standards of that role. Milfire felt stagnant but confident in his role as a husband and father. I had been used to trying to navigate vanilla relationships, despite feeling ultimately unfulfilled.
2. Call to adventure: Ranger had his first sexual experience be BDSM related, despite that not being the standard in his community. Milfire recognized that there was

another way—a kinky way—to engage with a partner outside of his vanilla marriage. Ali and I both unearthed kinky content online and saw opportunities to engage virtually.

3. Refusal of the call: Ali knew that kink existed but she continued to “people please” and have vanilla relationships. Instead of ending his marriage to explore kinky relationships, Milfire attempted marital therapy to no avail. BB stuffed down their femininity and exploration of themselves, turning to substances for a long while.
4. Meeting with the mentor: Ali and I both engaged online with others who knew about kink. King branched out in their online dating and met a partner, who later moved in with them. Ranger and Milfire both learned more about kink online.
5. Crossing the first threshold: Ali started to explore a kink dynamic with her current partner; they met first as friends. I also explored at first with a trusted partner. BB began to explore kink with his wife within the safety of their marriage. King and their partner discussed and solidified their kink roles. Milfire sought out new partners to engage with nonsexually.
6. Tests, allies, and enemies: Ali navigated—and continues to navigate—trauma triggers with the support of her partner. BB met additional partners and continued to explore their interests, growing in their confidence in interacting with the kink community. Milfire ran into challenges with his medical health team as he started to navigate partnered kink. Ranger faced criticism from others but his partner stuck by his side.
7. Approach to the innermost cave: Milfire felt conflicted about leaving his marriage to explore kink more fully, although he continued to communicate boundaries and his intent with his wife. Ali knew she could easily go back to a vanilla relationship to

- make others happy, but she stuck to kink for her own happiness. King experienced criticism from the outside world but continued to deepen their relationship with their partner.
8. The ordeal: Milfire and his wife had a very difficult experience and conversations, leading to the plan to dissolve their marriage and go separate ways. He is partially in this stage of his journey, navigating next steps to dissolve his marriage so he can continue to explore empowering kinky experiences. For many of the co-researchers and myself, The Ordeal involved their own internal thoughts, ego, and working through their internalized shame to move to a space of fully accepting themselves, their interests, and the empowerment they receive from kink.
 9. Reward: BB's knowledge of himself, his deeper connection with his partners, the empowering experiences he has had, and the strengthening of his relationship with his children have been his reward. Ali's movement in processing her trauma and reclaiming her autonomy, even when traditional therapy did not help, is part of the reward for her perseverance. For myself, the reward has been the ability to express different parts of myself authentically and to be seen and valued for all aspects.
 10. The road back: Max worked diligently to build a name for himself in the kink community, with his goal to provide educational information and shared empowerment for others. Ranger navigated this stage while figuring out when and where to discuss his kinky experiences while still participating in spaces where most people would disprove of his actions.
 11. The resurrection: Max, through providing education to the neurodivergent kink community, has felt a shift in from being seen as "weird" to now being perceived as

confident and knowledgeable. BB shows up in the world as himself now, despite living in areas that still believe in stigma about people with his gender identity and his participation in kink. King and Ranger stand tall in the face of adversity and public criticism, strengthened through their empowering kink experiences.

12. Return with the elixir: BB strengthened their friendships in the kink community and is now mentoring others to help them on their journeys. BB also provides a safe space for his children to explore themselves as neurodivergent and, for his young adult child, a potentially kinky individual. Milfire plans to return to spread the word about kink as a form of pain management. Max has created and presents at national events to spread awareness about the empowerment kink can bring, especially for neurodivergent individuals. My return is bringing this study to fruition. All of us in this study made it clear that we engaged in this specific research to help the general public become aware of the potential for empowerment through kink, especially for the sake of the Autistic community.

Roles

Thinking of the co-researchers through the lens of storytelling and fantasy, I started to envision them as representations of different classes found in the tabletop roleplaying game and books of Dungeons & Dragons. This was not only due to the stories they shared but also due to the way I felt during and after my interactions with them. The values they held and exemplified also informed my choices.

Ali was full of energy when we met and had such a raw passion when it came to sharing her experiences. Her personal story of overcoming, dropping her “illusions” when she feels safe (no longer masking her Autistic traits), and her innate inner strength made me think of a

sorceress. This quote from the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook v.3.5* explains the impression Ali left on me: “A sorcerer’s power is inborn—part of his soul” (Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 51).

Sorcerers are also known for their ability to fit into multiple different roles: the face of the party, the damage dealer who harnesses powerful magic spells, and a support role to create magical distractions. Ali shared times where she had to take on many different roles in her life for others and that she is currently making a concerted effort to focus on her own needs first, which means she is now only taking on roles that empower her. She also spoke at length about how she has had to process and recover from past traumatic experiences, which reminded me of the necromancy abilities for this class. These abilities allow the sorceress to effectively alter the energy of something and harness its power for her own empowering purposes. I left our interactions truly feeling in awe of Ali’s strength and tenacity.

BB spoke at length about reclaiming his religious trauma and how much empowerment they get from serving their partner who acts as their goddess, as well as their evolution in that dynamic from an altar boy to a priest. BB is a supportive member of his family, his kink community, and in his partnerships. This mirrors the role that clerics often play: “The cleric serves as a typical group’s primary healer, diviner, and defensive specialist. He can hold his own in a fight but usually isn’t well served by charging to the front of combat” (Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 31).

BB also spoke at length about how his wife helps balance him and stops him from charging ahead when it may be dangerous or harmful. This class seemed perfect to suit his story and strengths. After my meetings with BB, I felt both energized and grateful—grateful for his

existence, but also grateful for my partner. The way BB spoke about their partners was so rejuvenating, powerful, and profound.

“The fury of a storm, the gentle strength of the morning sun, the cunning of the fox, the power of the bear—all these and more are at the druid’s command” (Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 33). This quote about druids speaks to the heart of King: tender, strong, and versatile in their dynamic with their partner. King explained how they often protect themselves and their partner from external judgment and cruelty in society, which is visually represented in their art as the Druid spell Thorns. They shared about experimenting regarding gender roles and their personal fluidity. They also spoke highly of their value regarding loyalty to their partner, which resembles how steadfastly druids hold the traditional oaths that they take. Talking with King was like a breath of fresh air. I also felt very calm during our conversations, as it was easy to know what to expect from King. They were very balanced in their emotions and in the way they spoke.

Max is the epitome of cunning, clever, and skilled, which is often what rogues are known for as well. He is an educator in the kink community and gains empowerment from sharing knowledge and helping others. In our meetings, I was ready to learn more about him and from him. I found myself leaving our conversations with mental notes of what skills I may like to acquire that he already has. I was reminded, too, of this line about rogues: “In general, rogues are skilled at getting what others don’t want them to get” (Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 49). Consensually, Max has helped many people overcome their fears of knives and of other activities in the kink scene. He is always learning and finding new ways to get his needs met, which speaks to his rogue-like versatility.

The following sentiment resonated in everything Milfire discussed:

Paladins take their adventures seriously and have a penchant for referring to them as quests. Even a mundane mission is, in the heart of the paladin, a personal test—an

opportunity to demonstrate bravery, to develop martial skills, to learn tactics, and to find ways to do good. (Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 42).

Milfire shared stories about when he had to disrupt the status quo for the greater good of humanity—the results sometimes saving lives—and making tough choices to stick to his value system. Despite all of the judgment others have passed on him throughout his life, I left our conversations cheering him on and hoping he will find the security he has brought into the lives of many others.

Ranger picked a very fitting pseudonym for himself, as it directly correlates to the class that best suits him:

A ranger often accepts the role of protector, aiding those who live in or travel through the woods. Most rangers are also chaotic, preferring to follow the ebb and flow of nature or of their own hearts instead of rigid rules. (Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 46)

The sense of pride Ranger felt about his engagement in kink with his partner was palpable during both of our conversations. Despite these activities going against societal norms and the standards of his religious community, Ranger spoke about his persistence to continue to grow and participate in kink.

The co-researchers who attended the follow-up interviews explicitly agreed with the hero's journey concept, and we discussed how it felt to see ourselves through this lens. The consensus was “empowering.” Milfire explained that he had experienced many stressful situations since our initial meeting and said that seeing himself represented as a D&D archetype and through the lens of the hero's journey was “just what [he] needed” and that it was a bright spot to know that this is how I interpreted him and his experiences. BB shared that they had shown the draft to their partners to ensure they were comfortable with the quotes and details I planned to share that involved them. BB said they were all glad to be included in this way and through this lens.

Infinity Symbol

Additionally, during coding the data, a very particular image came to mind as I parsed out the different subthemes and themes. The image is that of the infinity symbol, known by many to represent the Autistic community. This symbol loops upon itself as a sideways figure eight. Each sentence my co-researchers spoke would often fit multiple code categories, as all of the empowerment experiences tended to be intertwined. Connection led to comfort, comfort led to authenticity, authenticity led to understanding autism and their partners understanding it as well, and their statements continued to cycle between themes throughout the coding process. It was truly difficult to pinpoint the exact themes and subthemes, similar to how many of my co-researchers found it difficult to clearly express their experiences of empowerment through kink.

This infinity loop was also represented among the co-researchers' stories and my own experiences. Heuristic inquiry focuses on the relationship between all of the researchers involved, and I felt myself thinking about my co-researchers between our interactions. Thoughts would pop up when I was in professional sessions with my clients who were discussing similar experiences and concepts to those that the co-researchers and I talked about in our interviews. Other times, I could be listening to a song and have a somatic response to it while my thoughts drifted to a particular co-researcher and their descriptions of their strengths, past experiences, and hopes for the future. As I learned more about them and shared pieces of myself with them, it became clear that we are all inexplicably linked, as pieces of their experiences mirrored my own and vice versa.

Chapter V

Discussion

My aim in this study was to examine Autistic experiences of empowerment due to partnered kinky activities. The co-researchers also defined empowerment in their own words during the initial interviews. They listed tangible examples of when they have felt most empowered. The commonalities of their definitions and examples included times when they are in judgment-free spaces, when they are able to be authentically themselves, when they are informed about the situation and themselves, and when they are feeling respected and have full autonomy. These examples mirrored the working definition of empowerment I provided in Chapter I, each highlighting different aspects of the definition, primarily the feeling of internal power, self-determination, self-actualization, power over oneself and the situation, freedom to explore, and knowledge (Damm et al., 2017; Döring et al., 2022; Nicolaidis et al., 2013; Peterson, 2010; Precious, 2020; Tellier, 2017; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2018).

Many different elements of empowerment due to kink were discussed throughout my conversations with the co-researchers. Results from these conversations indicated four main components present in all of their experiences: healing, self-actualizing, connecting, and playing. The co-researchers also endorsed multiple subthemes reflecting their experiences as elements of the overarching themes: sensory regulation, emotional regulation, subverting norms, autonomy, reclaiming trauma, generational change, knowledge, personal growth, focus on self, authenticity, partnership, comfort, structure, understanding autism, communication, community, novelty, challenge, special interests and shared interests, and sensory joy and stimming. Of these subthemes, 11 were endorsed by all co-researchers: subverting norms, autonomy, reclaiming

trauma, authenticity, partnership, comfort, structure, understanding autism, communication, challenge, and sensory joy and stimming.

Interpretation and Implications of the Findings

There appeared to be no consistent differences in the co-researchers' responses hinging solely on whether they identified as disabled or not. As Max was the only self-identified Autistic co-researcher, it appeared that self-identification versus professional diagnosis also held no real bearing in different subtheme endorsements, although he did not endorse novelty, stating that being playful and spontaneous is not part of his core personality.

There were also no notable differences in subtheme endorsement based on how frequently the co-researchers engage in partnered kinky activities. Regarding their kink roles, the subthemes endorsed overlapped among the three switches. The two dominants had slight differences in whether or not they endorsed sensory regulation and novelty as empowering elements for themselves. Ali, the only strictly submissive co-researcher, did not endorse sensory regulation, emotional regulation, generational change, knowledge, personal growth, and community. However, Ali declined meeting live for her follow-up interview and instead stated that I had represented her accurately in the study draft, so there was no chance to ask her to clarify her experiences and whether or not she endorsed these subthemes.

These results suggest that there are multiple elements of empowerment for Autistic individuals due to their engagement in partnered kinky activities, regardless of their kink roles or whether they had a professional diagnosis of autism. Commonalities in the themes and subthemes occurred throughout different age ranges, with the youngest demographic represented being 18–26 years of age (Gen Z) and the oldest being 43–58 years of age (Gen X).

Another interesting finding emerged through conversation with the co-researchers. Five of the six co-researchers stated that their partners were either also Autistic or Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent themselves. Although this information is incidental to the study focus, everyone who filled out the eligibility screener and self-identified as Autistic did meet the clinical threshold on the AQ-10 screener. All self-identified Autistic respondents meeting criteria on the screening tool adds to the growing body of knowledge that suggests that Autistic individuals know when they are Autistic when they understand what it means to be Autistic (Brosnan, 2020). The use of the AQ-10 tool may not have been necessary.

Healing

Healing involved various experiences that led to a sense of well-being. Partnered kinky activities have allowed the co-researchers to become more regulated and to carve out new ways of existing that went against the norms of society or how they were raised. Many co-researchers detailed experiences of both processing and gaining narrative control over their past traumatic experiences.

The theme of healing matched past research stating that a part of empowerment in kink is the ability to examine one's own power, experience one's own sexuality and preferences with less shame, and experience sexual satisfaction within one's own terms (Bauer, 2014; Tellier, 2017). This theme also continues to disprove the old stereotype that kinky individuals are abusive or being abused by their partners (Bezreh et al., 2012). In fact, the co-researchers described the opposite: engaging in these acts with partners has been healing, allows them to regain control of past traumatic narratives, and is consensual. The co-researchers noted their autonomy as an empowering factor in and due to partnered kink. This was similar to what

participants in Pearson and Hodgetts's (2023) research shared about how they found empowerment through developing self-advocacy and boundary-setting skills in kink.

The co-researchers also discussed another aspect of healing being the empowering concept of "eroticized care" regarding their sensory needs or their partners supporting their Autistic traits. This finding was similar to Rainey's (2018) regarding disabled people finding empowerment through the pleasure of care. Neuroqueering these acts to make them kinky allowed the co-researchers to become regulated at both sensory and emotional levels. It also reportedly decreased their levels of shame around having these needs.

The theme of healing also involved the co-researchers actively subverting norms and societal standards, which is essentially the same theme of subverting (neuro)normativity in Pearson and Hodgetts's (2003) research on Autistic people engaging in kink. The co-researchers actively challenged standards held by their religious communities, geographical communities, families, and friends. They all explained experiencing empowerment through acting against those norms and carving out their own ever-evolving standards for themselves, their partners, and their dynamics. Going against norms and creating their own standards speaks to the power of embracing neuroqueering life, similar to what Egner (2019) discussed as empowerment through disidentifying from neurotypical (and other) norms. Subverting standards also involved some co-researchers making the conscious decision to do differently than their families had done when it came to relationship dynamics; notably, half of the co-researchers spoke primarily about not wanting to act like their fathers and harm or intimidate their loved ones.

Self-Actualizing

Self-actualizing experiences helped the co-researchers discover themselves, explore their potential, and foster personal growth in a similar way to Carlström's (2018) research regarding

“seeing BDSM as a process of becoming enabled through flows of desire” (p. 9). Kinky activities facilitated greater autonomy, self-expression, and authenticity for the co-researchers. These results aligned with existing evidence showing that playful, safe, and supportive environments enable kinky people to explore their sense of self (Turley et al., 2017).

Mirroring what Pearson and Hodgetts (2023) found in their study, co-researchers in the present study said they were able to let go of being in control of their sensorimotor behaviors and felt more comfortable to stop monitoring their Autistic traits within the safety of the kink dynamics with their partners. Essentially, these activities gave the co-researchers more opportunities to unmask and be themselves. Some of the co-researchers even explicitly used the word “unmasked” to describe how they presented themselves in their partnered kinky activities.

The harms of masking include Autistic people feeling disconnected from their sense of self and identity as well as increases in suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety (Bernardin et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2021). The co-researchers described reprieve from masking as an empowering benefit to kink. Some reported that their positive experiences unmasking have prompted them to unmask more often in other areas of life.

Unmasking also allowed the co-researchers to learn about themselves on a deeper level. They felt more comfortable to explore their interests, potential interests, needs, and desires. The disabled Autistic co-researchers all expressed feeling able to communicate their inner desires and true feelings about themselves to their partners, which does not match the literature on disabled populations stating that they are less likely to communicate about and express these needs (Tellier, 2017). The mismatch could be due to the kinky element and the topics of communication they regularly engage in with their partners, as multiple co-researchers said they had not spoken about these things in previous vanilla relationships. The increase in

communication, compared to past studies, may also be due to the increased sense of safety and structure in their kink dynamics. The co-researchers expressed that this self-actualization extended beyond kinky experiences, boosting their confidence in other aspects of life as well.

Similar to the benefits of Bauer's (2014) concept of intimate theater, the co-researchers also experienced transformation and increased embodiment due to kink. Transformation came in the form of personal growth as they further explored themselves and tested out different roles, abilities, and personas. Although Bauer's (2014, 2017) work centered on queer participants, the straight cisgender co-researcher in this study endorsed these transformative properties too, speaking to the power of queer forms of intimacy.

Some descriptions of self-actualizing experiences focused on how the co-researchers felt present in their bodies during kink activities. For some of the co-researchers, who explained they tend to feel disconnected or purposefully disconnect from their body signals to remain regulated in nonkinky situations, feeling embodied was described as a rarity in their life. The safety of their partnered kinky dynamics made it comfortable for them to get in touch with their internal signals and connect with their bodies more frequently.

Connecting

Connecting experiences were described as deepening the intimacy and alignment with themselves and others. The co-researchers have been able to create deep connections. For all, these connections primarily focused on their partners, but for half, they also included strong connections in the kink community. They described their empowerment in the community similarly to Reynolds (2007), who stated that a safe and supportive kink community can cultivate empowerment for kinky individuals.

Empowering connections with their partners required strong communication and conversations about how to best communicate with each other. Many of the co-researchers asserted that the communication in these partnerships was stronger than in past vanilla relationships, paralleling research on kinky people and relationship satisfaction by Strizzi et al. (2021) and research about disabled people discussing their sexual needs with their partners by Rainey (2018). This communication was not always through words, as many co-researchers found their connections were deepened by agreeing on cues, signals, and other ways of informing their partners of their intent, mood, and needs.

These connections were also strengthened by a solid understanding of autism for all parties involved. All co-researchers noted that they and their partners had knowledge about Autistic culture, traits, and specific needs related to being Autistic. In some cases, the co-researchers' partners also self-identify or were diagnosed as Autistic. Knowledge about autism was described as constantly evolving, as the co-researchers and their partners continue to learn about autism and how to support each other. Two co-researchers emphasized that the kink communities they are part of primarily consist of neurodivergent individuals who also had a better understanding of autism compared to the general public. Feeling understood on this level contributed to their sense of empowerment.

Connecting also necessitated clear expectations of themselves, their partners, and/or scenarios and a sense of comfort with their partners. These elements mirror Pearson and Hodgetts's (2023) findings regarding their Autistic participants who revealed that this intimate sense of security enabled them to be vulnerable and fully engaged in kinky activities. The explicitly agreed-upon structure offered by these relationships further enhanced their sense of comfort and safety.

Playing

Playing was typically discussed toward the end of the interviews, after the co-researchers shared about the other themes. After we spoke about the more emotionally charged topics, play seemed to follow with a sprinkle of joy, curiosity, and intrigue. This type of recreation was enthusiastically discussed, and the co-researchers provided explicit examples.

For most co-researchers, empowerment came through recreational kink activities with their partners that involved a sense of novelty and challenge. This finding regarding recreational kink is similar to the benefits of engaging in kink that Williams et al. (2016) discussed, which were fun, enjoyment, and an escape from usual daily demands. The co-researchers who engaged in kink this way explained it through a lens of leisure, which parallels findings in newer studies on kink and BDSM (Sprott & Williams, 2019; Turley et al., 2017; Wignall, 2018; Williams et al., 2016; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). The co-researchers expressed that they are not always engaging in sexual activities when being kinky with their partners and that it sometimes feels more like a hobby, such as art, or more as a way to express themselves playfully. The lack of sexual-centric kink inherently disproves the old beliefs that all kink must be perversely sexual and that disabled kinky individuals must be aggressively sexual (Ailey et al., 2003). The present study's findings align with more recent research stating that "the line between kink and sex can be a queer boundary" (Sprott et al., 2020, p. 19).

In many of the descriptions of these empowering experiences, the co-researchers explained that they and their partners incorporated their special interests or shared interests into the kinky activity. Their comments were an interesting parallel to findings in Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2021) that Autistic people are more likely to engage in sex that is interest driven, although the co-researchers in the present study were not always describing moments where sex

was included. Incorporating special interests into kink aligns with the literature stating that kink can also be considered serious leisure (Wignall, 2018), especially in Max's case where he made a career out of these passions. Several co-researchers discussed the lengths they go to in order to learn about, engage in, and teach or speak with others about their kink-centric interests and how doing so brings them both joy and empowerment.

Playing also involved elements of sensory joy and stimming. This finding was essentially identical to the empowering theme that Pearson and Hodgetts (2023) identified in their research. Sensory joy and stimming, as a subtheme, was notably different from the subtheme of emotional regulation, as co-researchers were now describing exploring sensory input or deprivation while they were already in a regulated state. The co-researchers are neuroqueering kink by using it as a vessel for feeling empowered to stim and explore their sensory needs.

Strengths

My first goal was to set up this study to center on Autistic individuals. I intentionally invited only Autistic committee members. I chose Autistic artists to create the representations of the co-researchers. These actions set a strong foundation for listening to and involving the Autistic community in research about Autistic people.

Not only was everyone involved Autistic, they all also had a level of interest in kink. The entire committee being Autistic and interested in kink allowed each of us to bring our unique perspectives to the forefront when designing, interpreting, and discussing the research and co-researchers. Had we not all shared these identities, it is possible that we would have faced communication challenges. There may have been a decreased level of understanding when it came to the representation of the co-researchers and their data. Additionally, the level of pathologizing that could have occurred may have been much higher, both in regards to kink and

autism. Pathologizing would have damaged the way that all parts of the study were perceived, implemented, and ultimately discussed. The study would no longer fully align with the neuroqueer theory or the neurodiversity paradigm.

Being Autistic and kinky myself brought another unique strength to this study. My relationship with the co-researchers was time limited, but we appeared to build rapport quickly. They shared deeply and explicitly about their experiences. They were not only open to talking about their experiences but they also were excited to speak on these topics. Some expressed a level of gratitude to have been chosen. Others were excited that this research was being done from an affirming perspective.

During my very first interview with a co-researcher, I was nervous and forgot to explicitly remind them that I am both Autistic and kinky myself. Moving forward, I made sure to include this information during the informed consent conversation at the start of each initial interview. There was a noticeable difference in how deeply the other co-researchers shared compared to the first one. At the follow-up interview, the first co-researcher had read and reviewed my draft and was much more open to communicating with more details about both their kinky experiences and their life experiences. They even stated that they now knew I understood them.

For all of the co-researchers, the follow-up interviews gave them opportunities to share even more information with me after they reviewed my draft. No one had any corrections to provide. They instead gave me additional information about all of the ways they have felt empowered due to kink and extra pieces of their lives they wanted to share. Many co-researchers remarked that they felt seen and correctly represented in my draft of Chapters 4 and 5. The opportunity to meet with them and get their feedback was a strength to gaining more data and

clarity about their experiences. It also appeared to foster a deeper connection between myself and them to allow for more authenticity.

Another strength was at play in the creative synthesis and the follow-up interviews with my co-researchers: the empowerment they felt when they saw themselves depicted as Dungeons & Dragons classes. Although it was unrelated to the reason Dungeons & Dragons initially came to mind for me, there is existing research, including Baker et al. (2022), in which tabletop roleplaying games as a therapeutic tool are discussed. Playing these games has been found to increase empathy, confidence, and creativity (Chung, 2013; Rivers et al., 2016). The different archetypes that can be used can prompt self-reflection and self-exploration in those roles, similar to drama therapy (Polkinghorne et al., 2020). I provided these archetypes for the co-researchers and received confirmation that they felt well represented and seen in those roles. Looking at them through this lens was helpful to ensure I understood and viewed them correctly.

Intentional immersion in the kink community and in the kinky Autistic community also aided me in interpreting the data to find themes. I purposefully scheduled to attend one kink conference that was oriented toward the overlap of mental health and kink, one that was a more generic service-oriented kink conference, and became more active in Autistic and neurodivergent kink spaces online during my dissertation process. The themes I noticed in the research were also often discussed at these events and in these online communities. As a personal effect and in line with neuroqueer theory, it strengthened my own sense of community and emboldened me to be even more authentic in the follow-up interviews, which may have led to more vulnerability and sharing from the co-researchers.

Personal Experiences

As I reflect on my experiences during this research project, I find that my own experiences paralleled the main themes in the data. I had experiences of healing, self-actualizing, connecting, and playing throughout the process of the study. This research was so impactful to my own well-being. It was healing to be part of an Autistic committee and surrounded by Autistic co-researchers, as I am used to academia being led by seemingly neurotypical individuals, and I have struggled with the ableist norms. This experience felt much better in my body: less anxiety when interacting with my committee, feeling excited and recharged after engaging with my committee and co-researchers, and intrinsic motivation to continue putting in long hours and working on this study.

The direct communication and ability to adapt meetings with my committee members allowed me to feel safe to experiment with my data presentation and to show up more authentically as myself when interviewing the co-researchers. I found myself often reminiscing about the time spent with my co-researchers and the sentiments they conveyed as well as comparing and contrasting our experiences. The co-researchers' stories validated so many of my past experiences and thoughts. When attending both kinky and nonkinky professional events and conferences, I would notice things in the content that would parallel topics I discussed with co-researchers, literature I read during the review portion of this study, and therapeutic approaches that mirror the heuristic inquiry format.

Leading this research allowed me to access deeper insight toward myself—both my past and present—and reflect on my current relationship and interests. The results confirmed many thoughts and feelings I had considered in the past but did not have community to discuss. They also shed light on concepts I had not put to words in the past but had definitely experienced. I felt

empowered while doing this research, and the findings and the experience itself have positively impacted my clients, the associate-level therapists I supervise, and the colleagues who consult with me about their own cases. My hope is that this research will positively impact the Autistic community and multiple professional and academic fields as well.

Limitations

Although I attempted to include a diverse sample in this study, many of the cisgender and transgender women, people of color, self-identified Autistics, and strictly submissives I reached out to were either unable to attend an interview or did not reply to schedule one. In general, there were very few people of color who filled out the eligibility survey. This could be due to a few different reasons. I myself am White, so they would not have been represented by me during the interviews and may have been less likely to engage due to the potential for harm. Also, I posted the advertisements on both Fetlife and Reddit. A 2016 Pew Research poll determined that Reddit's userbase is 70% White, 7% Black, and 12% Hispanic (Sattelberg, 2021). Fetlife user demographics regarding race have not been compiled, but it would not be surprising if similar demographics were represented on that website. Additionally, people of color tend to have less access to accurate diagnosis or culturally relevant information to know they are Autistic, so it is less likely they would be on Autistic forums (Aylward et al., 2021). Discrimination, fetishization, and racism in kink spaces may cause them to avoid or feel unsafe participating in online kink sites (Erickson et al., 2022).

Two other demographics were noticeably not well represented in this group. No nonspeaking Autistic individuals participated. Although there was an option to type instead of speak during the interviews, no co-researchers took this option when I presented it to them. I did not intentionally advertise in a way to decrease the likelihood of nonspeaking individuals

responding, though I did not have any nonspeaking Autistic people review my material prior to advertising, and I may have missed something that was unintentionally exclusionary. There were also no co-researchers who disclosed that they were intellectually disabled. This could be in part because of the eligibility requirement for co-researchers to be able to give their own consent for their participation but may also be because I did not directly ask for this information in the eligibility screen or during the interview process. The absence of the experiences of non-speaking Autistic adults and intellectually disabled Autistic people in this study does a disservice to representing the Autistic community as a whole and leaves a gap for future research to address.

Another limiting factor in this study was that only individuals with access to technology could participate. The eligibility survey, subsequent interviews, communication between meetings, and the consent document were all hosted entirely online. Potential co-researchers who may be of lower socioeconomic status and unable to reliably access the internet would not have been able to participate or to be aware of this study's existence. Restricting the study to online accessibility could have explained the lack of participation from Autistic adults in older generations (58 years of age and older) as it is difficult to know if they would be regularly accessing these specific Reddit and Fetlife spaces via technology.

Additionally, the language I initially used may have made the research less accessible than intended. A co-researcher specifically mentioned the term "dyadic," which was originally in the study's subtitle, as confusing. This confusion was echoed in other co-researchers' interviews where I was asked to define dyadic. In the definition, I used the synonym "partnered," which the co-researchers understood better. Based on the co-researchers' comments, I changed the subtitle

at the conclusion of the data collection and analysis process to be more accessible to future readers.

Another limitation was that it was difficult to schedule interviews with potential co-researchers. Three of the potential co-researchers had to cancel interviews at the last minute and were unable to reschedule. One did not arrive for their interview or respond to attempts to reschedule. Only six out of the 10 potential co-researchers were able to participate. There were also a few challenges in scheduling the initial and follow-up interviews with the co-researchers, both due to executive function challenges (losing track of time, forgetting which day we agreed on, etc.) and unexpected life events. I attempted to accommodate executive functioning needs by sending reminders 48 hr before, 2 hr before and, occasionally, 30 min before, but these reminders were not always viewed before our scheduled meetings.

Another study limitation was that since the interviews were conducted by one person (myself) and heuristic inquiry requires a small sample size, there could be other common themes of empowerment for Autistic individuals engaging in partnered kink that were not represented here. In a larger sample size with different interviewers who have different lenses and personal experiences, it is possible that additional themes may have been uncovered.

There were two other limiting factors in this study that happened during participant recruitment. First, I received public comments that people wanted to participate but were living overseas. Their unique perspectives were excluded because this study was limited to participants living in the United States as per institutional review board jurisdiction. Secondly, by excluding people who engaged in partnered kinky activities less frequently than once per week, valuable information from this demographic was not obtained.

Recommendations for the Future

There are many potential routes for future research and for development in the field of sexology based on this study and its findings. Some of the co-researchers and Autistic commenters on Fetlife and Reddit shared about studies they would appreciate as Autistic kinky people, and I feel compelled to uplift their voices and include these topics first as they relate to this population. Autistic commenters requested that this research be done with fewer geographical limits and to increase the scope to include solo and group activities.

Regarding the co-researchers themselves, Ali requested a study about how Autistic people process trauma and to find out if kink is a common way of regaining power. Milfire was interested to know about Autistic and Allistic pain management through kink. Several co-researchers wondered if a majority of those in the kink community are in fact Autistic and what implications that may have for Autistic people who have not yet been introduced to kink or for kink community members who do not yet know they are Autistic. Three co-researchers requested that Autistic researchers and Autistic-led organizations conduct more research about Autistic people and the Autistic community. They mentioned originally wanting to participate in my study to help future generations of Autistic people have more accurate information and to not feel alone in their kinky interests, Autistic traits, and their personal unique needs.

In general, findings from this study can be a call to sexologists to recognize that there are Autistic members of the BDSM community and to become, or to continue to be, informed on how to provide accessible services and accurate information. Researchers need to explore how to continue decreasing stigma about kink in the mental health and medical fields, especially regarding Autistic and disabled individuals. Research on decreasing stigma about kink in these fields was specifically requested by Ali, BB, and Milfire, who shared about their horrible past

mental health care experiences, and Milfire regarding his stigmatizing and harmful medical health care experiences.

Future research opportunities include determining if receiving education about kink and BDSM in tandem with sex education may help Autistic individuals, as many endorse kink as a vessel for empowerment. Another topic to explore is how incorporating more elements of kinky relationships into vanilla relationships could potentially increase each partner's empowerment and their overall connection. To contrast this study, exploring ways that partnered kinky activities have not been empowering for Autistic individuals would also be valuable. Examining Autistic empowerment due to partnered kinky activities when one partner is Autistic and the other partner is Allistic could be provide useful information, as well.

Another point of curiosity arose due to the special and shared interests subtheme that was uncovered during data analysis. Autistic individuals may experience less social reward (Foulkes et al., 2015), meaning that we may not gain as much mental or emotional benefit from social interactions as our peers. Future researchers should examine if this is true in social situations where these SpIns are the focal point, because co-researchers in this study mindfully incorporated these special and shared interests with their partners and community to amplify their enjoyment in engaging in partnered and communal spaces. An interesting overlap for future research would be to explore the intersection between Autistic SpIns that qualify as serious leisure and their subsequent experiences of social reward, both in general and regarding kink.

Additionally, although I did not ask co-researchers about their religious alignments, many shared about past and current religious affiliations as well as religious trauma. Research on the intersection of kinky Autistic people and their experiences with religion, as well as their

experiences with stigma and empowerment paired with their religious journeys, may provide interesting insights for the sexology community and the Autistic community.

Future researchers should actively incorporate interview processes that affirm and center their Autistic participants. In similar steps to what Kaplan-Kahn and Caplan (2023) suggested as best practice for Autistic qualitative research methods, researchers should write the protocol collaboratively with Autistic researchers if they are not Autistic themselves, establish a clear structure for how questions will be asked during the interview, and ensure the questions are provided to the participants prior to the interview. During the interview itself, the researcher's positionality should be explained and the researcher should use active listening skills when the participant is sharing. The researcher should also ask clarifying follow-up questions and reword questions when a participant seems unclear on the meaning of certain words or the intent of the question.

After the interview, the researcher should debrief with any co-interviewers and engage in data analysis with Autistic researchers. I strongly recommend follow-up interviews with the Autistic participants at a later date to allow time for them to process what they discussed and to consider if there is more information they would like to provide. The follow-up interviews I conducted for this study were very effective in eliciting more information and clarity from the co-researchers and to ensure that the data had been analyzed and was being presented correctly per their experiences.

Another place for future research is to explore different ways of presenting information about the Autistic community and Autistic experiences that are not in a written format. Incorporating different methods like mixed media art, performance art, storytelling and recordings, music, videos, or other creative formats into the way future findings are presented

could make the findings more accessible to the Autistic community and others. It is important to ensure that the information is shared in understandable ways to meet the community's differing communication needs so that the information can be used and accessed by the community. This may also make participating in research more engaging and accessible to different people in the Autistic community, whereas interview and written format may not be appealing to them in the same ways.

Further seeking out and uplifting the experiences and knowledge of Autistic kinky people of color is vital, especially older Autistic kinky people as they were not represented in this study. Researchers need to focus on the experiences of Autistic adults who are traditionally disempowered around sex, sexuality, and sexual behavior, such as non-speaking Autistic people, intellectually disabled Autistic people, as well as Autistic people who are under conservatorship, as they are also underrepresented in the current body of research. Future research should be done by individuals who share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences to highlight living experiences, establish stronger trust and rapport, and allow for more accurate interpretations of data in the heuristic process. I encourage researchers to continue to center people who are not usually heard from so that diversity is more accurately represented in the body of literature and the people who will benefit from our research will see themselves accurately represented.

Conclusion

This study is one of the first to focus on empowerment for Autistic adults, especially in relation to kink. By conducting it, I responded to the direct call by researchers such as Pearson and Hodgetts (20223) and Wignall et al. (2023) for more Autistic-led neuroqueer research about Autistic individuals who engage in a wide range of kink activities and differing kink roles. This study revealed numerous ways in which Autistic people are empowered due to partnered kinky

activities, highlighting their unique journeys to these revelations. The results speak to the power and importance of Autistic individuals leaning into their neuroqueer selves and subverting societal standards in order to experience empowerment and fulfillment. The co-researchers and I shed light on the empowering role of these activities, which opens up a new range of possibilities for promoting healing, self-actualizing, playing, and connecting for individuals who have too often been marginalized and misunderstood.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Advertisement

SUBJECT: Looking for autistic research participants who have felt empowered due to kinky activities with a partner! (Paid study participation, 18+)

BODY: Hello everyone,

My name is Kade and I'm an autistic queer trans student in a Clinical Sexology PhD program. I'm working on my dissertation research study (titled *A Kink in the Spectrum: Autistic Adults Experiencing Empowerment Due to Dyadic Kinky Activities.*) This research is being completed by the principal investigator as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree at Modern Sex Therapy Institutes. The study has been approved by an Institutional Review Board to ensure the safety and welfare of the study participants.

My goal is to interview approximately 10 autistic adults over Zoom who meet the following criteria:

- Are currently located in the United States
- Self-identify or are diagnosed by a medical or mental health professional as autistic
- Participate in kinky activities with a single partner at least once a week
- Have felt empowered/experienced empowerment due to those activities

If you're interested in learning more and participating, please click this link ([insert survey URL and link](#)) and fill out the eligibility screener. The screener should take about 2-10 minutes to complete.

Thank you for reading! I'm excited to add an autistic-led and autistic-centered study to the existing body of research and I really appreciate your help!

Appendix B

Eligibility Screener

7/12/23, 12:25 PM

Eligibility Screener

Eligibility Screener

Looking for autistic research participants who have felt empowered due to kinky activities with a partner!

My name is Kade Sharp (he/they) and I'm an autistic queer trans student in a Clinical Sexology PhD program. I'm working on my dissertation research study (titled *A Kink in the Spectrum: Autistic Adults Experiencing Empowerment Due to Dyadic Kinky Activities.*)

My goal is to interview approximately 10 autistic adults via Zoom who meet the following criteria:

- Are 18 or older
- Are currently located in the United States
- Self-identify or are diagnosed by a medical or mental health professional as autistic
- Participated in kinky activities with a single partner at least once a week (over the last 6 months)
- Have felt empowered/experienced empowerment due to those activities

Some people might read this and wonder if what they're doing with their partner counts as kinky. So, to clarify: Kinky activities, for the purpose of this study, are essentially anything relating to Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Sadism, Submission and Masochism (BDSM), any activity that a person engages in that does not conform to social, religious, or psychiatric norms (sexually or recreationally), and/or activities involving fetishes.

If you're chosen to participate in the study, you will receive an invitation to a secure Client Portal to message me, schedule the interviews, etc. There will be two interviews (the first one can take up to two hours, depending on how much or little you'd like to share, and the second should take no more than an hour.) You'll have a chance to earn up to two \$10 Amazon gift cards during the interview portions of the study. (There is no payment for participating in just this screener.)

Thank you for reading! I'm excited to add an autistic-led and autistic-centered study to the existing body of research and I really appreciate your help!

7/12/23, 12:25 PM

Eligibility Screener

If you're interested in participating, please continue and fill out the eligibility screener. The screener should take about 2-10 minutes to complete.

* Indicates required question

CONSENT TO BE SCREENED FOR ELIGIBILITY IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Research Study: A Kink in the Spectrum: Autistic Adults Experiencing Empowerment Due to Dyadic Kinky Activities

Principal Investigator: Kade Sharp, MSW

Dissertation Committee Chair: Erin Findley, PsyD

Declarations: This research is not financially supported by any organization. This research is being completed by the principal investigator as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree at Modern Sex Therapy Institutes. The study has been approved by an Institutional Review Board to ensure the safety and welfare of the study participants.

GENERAL INFORMATION

We're doing a study to learn more about autistic adults who have experienced empowerment due to kinky activities with a partner.

Before you can join the study, we'll need to make sure you qualify. To find out whether you qualify, you will be asked some questions related to the study topic, as well as demographic questions (age, location, etc.) These questions will take about 2 to 10 minutes to answer. This screening questionnaire, as well as the full study, requires participants to read and write in English.

If you appear to meet the eligibility requirements, you will be asked to provide your email address. If you do qualify and are selected to participate in the full study, you will be contacted via email and we will send you another consent form to read and sign to agree to participate in the study itself. That form will explain the study in more detail.

If you don't qualify or aren't selected to participate in the full study, you will not receive any further contact from us within the next three months.

Taking this screener to find out whether you qualify for our study is voluntary. You don't have to take part if you don't want to. Choosing not to take part won't affect you negatively in any

way. Even if you do qualify for the study and decide to join, you can change your mind later and leave the study.

Determining whether you qualify for the study won't benefit you directly.

The records we create in this study will remain confidential and protected.

What will the full study be like?

If you are selected to participate, you will receive another consent form that will detail the full study. A brief explanation: You will be interviewed over Zoom by the primary researcher about your experiences with kinky activities and empowerment, then you will later be asked to later meet again with the primary researcher to review the data. Your participation in the full study will take no more than three hours in total.

Will I be paid or compensated for my participation?

There is no financial compensation for filling out this screening questionnaire. However, participants who are selected and participate in the full study can earn up to two \$10 Amazon gift cards.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There is a risk of possible emotional and psychological distress to those who participate in the full study. This research revolves around discussing intimate topics, such as sex, sexuality, kink, BDSM, fetishes, and empowerment. Although there are no direct questions about abuse, discussing these topics may be triggering to those who have been victims of sexual assault or abuse. If you are concerned that you may find this study distressing, please do not fill out the screening questionnaire.

A possible risk for any research is that confidentiality could be compromised – that is, that people outside the study might get hold of confidential study information. We will do everything we can to minimize this risk. The protection measures we will use are described in more detail below, as well as in the full study's consent form.

How will the researcher protect my information?

The researcher will continue to use information provided by you until the study is over and will keep it secure until it is destroyed. Limited information about you, which will not include your identity, may continue to be used after the study is over for other research, education, or other activities. Use of this information would not reveal your identity.

This information will be stored on a secure password-protected encrypted external harddrive, which will be kept behind one lock with no public access. If you are eligible to participate in the full study, you will also be asked to select a fake name ("pseudonym") for yourself; this pseudonym should not be related to your real name, BDSM community name, or usernames. The primary researcher will be keeping audio/video recordings, transcripts, and chat transcripts on the external hard drive. Any sections of interview transcripts that will be shared between multiple participants or in the final research itself will use your chosen pseudonym only.

If you are selected to participate in the full study, your information will also be stored on a program that has secure servers with bank-level encryption and privacy measures designed for healthcare providers.

What if I want to withdraw from the screening process?

To withdraw during the screening process, exit the survey at any time by closing out of this site or your web browser. After you have completed this screener, I may not be able to withdraw your information.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, you can contact the Principal Investigator, Kade Sharp, MSW at [REDACTED] and the study's Chair, Erin Findley, PsyD at [REDACTED]. This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB") – an IRB is a committee that protects the rights of people who participate in research studies. You may contact the IRB by phone at (561) 379-7207 or by email at irb@modernsextherapy.com if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

- 1. If you want a copy of this consent for your records, you can print it from the screen.

If you cannot print the consent and would like a copy for your records, contact the Principal Investigator with the contact information above.

If you wish to participate and are able to consent for yourself, please click the "I Agree" button and you will be taken to the survey.

If you do not wish to participate in this study, please select "I Disagree" or select X in the corner of your browser.

Mark only one oval.

- I Agree - continue to Q2
- I Disagree - submits survey

Eligibility Screener

- 2. Select your age range:

Mark only one oval.

- Under 18 - submits survey
 - 18-26
 - 27-42
 - 43-58
 - 59-77
 - 78+
- } - continue to Q3

Eligibility Screener

3. Are you currently located in the United States of America?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes - continue to Q4
 No - submits survey

Autism Screening Question

4. Do you self-identify as autistic **OR** have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional. - Skip to question 5
 Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional. - continue to Q15
 No. - submits survey

Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ-10)

5. 1. I often notice small sounds when others do not.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
 Slightly Agree
 Slightly Disagree
 Definitely Disagree

6. 2. When I'm reading a story, I find it difficult to work out the characters' intentions.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
 Slightly Agree
 Slightly Disagree
 Definitely Disagree

7. 3. I find it easy to "read between the lines" when someone is talking to me.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
 Slightly Agree
 Slightly Disagree
 Definitely Disagree

8. 4. I usually concentrate more on the whole picture, rather than the small details.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
 Slightly Agree
 Slightly Disagree
 Definitely Disagree

9. 5. I know how to tell if someone listening to me is getting bored.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Definitely Disagree

10. 6. I find it easy to do more than one thing at once.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Definitely Disagree

11. 7. I find it easy to work out what someone is thinking or feeling just by looking at their face.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Definitely Disagree

12. 8. If there is an interruption, I can switch back to what I was doing very quickly.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Definitely Disagree

13. 9. I like to collect information about categories of things.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Definitely Disagree

14. 10. I find it difficult to work out people's intentions.

Mark only one oval.

- Definitely Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Definitely Disagree

Kinky Activities Screener

For this survey, "kinky" and "kink activities" will include:

- Activities regarding Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Sadism, Submission and Masochism
- Any activity that a person engages in that does not conform to social, religious, or psychiatric norms (sexually or recreationally)
- Activities involving paraphilias (fetishes), which are defined as "any intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physiologically mature, consenting human partners" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

15. On average over the last 6 months, how often per week do you engage in kinky activities with a single partner? (Please do not include activities where more than one partner is involved at a time.)

Mark only one oval.

- Less than once per week - submits survey
 1 to 3 times per week
 4 to 6 times per week
 7 or more times per week
 Do not wish to provide - submits survey
- } continue to Q16

Empowerment Screener

For this survey, "kinky" and "kink activities" will include:

- Activities regarding Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Sadism, Submission and Masochism
- Any activity that a person engages in that does not conform to social, religious, or psychiatric norms (sexually or recreationally)
- Activities involving paraphilias (fetishes), which are defined as "any intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physiologically mature, consenting human partners" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

16. Have you experienced empowerment due to partnered kinky activities?

For this screener: *Empowerment* is defined as a feeling of power over oneself, a feeling of power over the situation, self-efficacy, and/or freedom to explore.

Partnered means having a single partner involved during the activity.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes - continue to Q17
 - No
 - Unsure / Don't Know
 - Do not wish to provide
- } submits survey

Demographics Information

For confidentiality purposes: Please do not type your legal name, internet or social media handle or usernames, kink community name, or other names for yourself in any of the text boxes.

17. Where did you find this study?

18. Please provide the email address you would like the primary researcher to use when contacting you about the full study:

19. Race/Ethnicity:

20. Please briefly describe your gender identity:

21. Do you consider yourself cisgender? (Cisgender means that your gender identity matches what you were assigned at birth.)

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Do not wish to provide

22. Please briefly describe your sexual orientation:

23. Please briefly describe your romantic orientation:
(Romantic orientation describes who you are most likely to have romantic attraction towards and/or have a romantic relationship with. Some common labels include "heteroromantic", "homoromantic", "demiromantic", "panromantic", "aromantic", etc.)

24. Do you consider yourself to be disabled?

Kink-Related Information

For confidentiality purposes: Please do not type your legal name, internet or social media handle or usernames, kink community name, or other names for yourself in any of the text boxes.

As a reminder, "kinky" and "kink activities" include:

- Activities regarding Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Sadism, Submission and Masochism
- Any activity that a person engages in that does not conform to social, religious, or psychiatric norms (sexually or recreationally)
- Activities involving paraphilias (fetishes), which are defined as "any intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physiologically mature, consenting human partners" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

25. Please briefly list your kink-related roles or kink-related identity labels (such as "top", "Dom", "bottom", "sub", "switch", "caregiver", "little", "slave", "pet", etc.):
If you don't have any, please write N/A or None.

there is a
button here that
* submits survey

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Google Forms

Appendix C

Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ-10) Adult Version

AQ-10 for adults (aged 16+) | Autism Research Centre

The AQ-10 helps indicate whether someone should be referred for an autism assessment. This version is for anyone aged 16 or above with suspected autism who does not have a learning disability.

	Please tick one option per question only	Definitely agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Definitely disagree
1	I often notice small sounds when others do not	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I usually concentrate more on the whole picture, rather than the small details	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I find it easy to do more than one thing at once	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	If there is an interruption, I can switch back to what I was doing very quickly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	I find it easy to 'read between the lines' when someone is talking to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	I know how to tell if someone listening to me is getting bored	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	When I'm reading a story, I find it difficult to work out the characters' intentions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	I like to collect information about categories of things (e.g. types of car, types of bird, types of train, types of plant etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	I find it easy to work out what someone is thinking or feeling just by looking at their face	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	I find it difficult to work out people's intentions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Scoring guidance

Only one point can be scored for each question.

- Score one point for "definitely" or "slightly **agree**" on questions 1, 7, 8, and 10
- Score one point for "definitely" or "slightly **disagree**" on questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9

If the score is **six or above**, an autism assessment should be considered.

Please note that a diagnosis cannot be determined solely by a single score from this questionnaire. A formal diagnosis can only be made after a clinical assessment conducted by a trained professional.

This test was created by the Autism Research Centre - University of Cambridge

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Appendix D

Raw Survey Results

The following tables hold the raw survey results of only eligible potential co-researchers. If they screened out during the questionnaire, their results are not included. Their AQ-10 scores and answers are not included; all self-identified Autistic respondents who took the AQ-10 scored a 6 or higher. One duplicate result (both submitted under the same email address) was removed. The only changes to the respondents' answers were to correct spelling and redact names. Capitalization and punctuation were not changed.

Table D1*First Set of Respondent Demographics*

Respondent	Age range (in years)	Race/ethnicity	Gender identity	Identify as cisgender (yes/no)	Sexual orientation	Romantic orientation
1	27–42	white	trans man	No	Queer	queer
2	27–42	White	Genderqueer	No	Pansexual	Panromantic
3	18–26	White/Japanese	Cisgender female	Yes	Pansexual Polyamorous	Panromantic
4	43–58	white	She/her	No	pansexual	Aroma[n]tic
5	18–26	Caucasian	Genderfluid	No	Demi/pansexual	Panromantic
6	27–42	Black, Hispanic	Female	Yes	Heterosexual	Bioromantic
7	27–42	European/ white	Genderqueer (AFAB)	No	Asexual	Demiromantic
8	43–58	White	Straight male	Yes	Heterosexual male sapiosexual noetisexual gynesexual	sapiomantic noetiomatic gyneromantic heteroromantic demiromantic
9	27–42	White	Non-binary, trans masc	No	Queer. I primarily date men and am more apt to solely physically attracted to men (cis & trans alike) but demisexual with women.	Panromantic.
10	27–42	White	I am a woman	Do not wish to provide	Straight	My husband and I are married
11	27–42	white	Woman	Yes	Queer	Panromantic
12	27–42	White	Female	Yes	Bisexual/pansexual	Heteroromantic
13	18–26	White	Cis female	Yes	Ace flux, bi curious when feeling allosexual	Panromantic
14	18–26	African American	male	Yes	Prefer not to answer	Prefer not to answer
15	27–42	White	Queer	No	Queer	Homoromantic
16	27–42	Black American	Male	Yes	Male	Aroma[n]tic
17	18–26	African American	Straight	Yes	Heterosexual	Hetero romantic
18	27–42	White	Male	Yes	Straight	Heteroromantic
19	27–42	White	Nonbinary	No	Queer/demi	Queer/d[e]mi
20	27–42	Caucasian	Gender queer	No	Demisexual	Demiromantic
21	18–26	Black	Cisgender male	Yes	Heterosexual	heteroromantic
22	27–42	White	Genderfluid	No	Queer	Panromantic
23	27–42	Caucasian	Male	Yes	Heterosexual	heteroromantic

Respondent	Age range (in years)	Race/ethnicity	Gender identity	Identify as cisgender (yes/no)	Sexual orientation	Romantic orientation
24	18–26	White	Transmasculine	No	Bisexual	Biromantic
25	27–42	White	Female	Yes	Pansexual	Panromantic
26	27–42	White, eastern european Jewish	Female	Yes	Queer	Not super specific, im a bit aroma[n]tic or maybe lithoromantic? Not a huge part of my desire style.
27	27–42	White	Female	Yes	Heterosexual	Absolutely demisexual
28	27–42	Mixed: White, Native, Black, Tejano	Trans woman	No	masc-sexual - I'm sexually attracted to masculinity regardless of body parts	demioromantic
29	27–42	White	Female	Yes	Pansexual	Panromantic
30	27–42	White	Cis woman	Yes	Bisexual	Hetero romantic (my romantic partner is a man)
31	27–42	White	Male	Yes	Heterosexual	Heteroromantic
32	18–26	Black American	Male	Yes	Gay	Homoromantic
33	27–42	Human/ Indigenous American	GenderQueer/ Non-Binary/ Transmasculine	No	Pansexual	Demioromantic

Table D2*Second Set of Respondent Demographics*

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
1		Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	yes	7 or more	Master, Owner, Top, Dom
2	[Partner]	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	4 to 6	Service switch, Daddy, Dom, servant, hedonist
3	Friend in kink community sent to me	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	7 or more	Little, Student, Impact bottom, Edge Play Bottom, Pet, Wax Play Bottom, Rigger
4	Fetlife	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	yes	4 to 6	slave, pony, property, masochist
5	Fetlife	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Sub, rope switch, little, pet, slave

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
6	FetLife!	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Little, adult baby, slave, pet
7	Fetlife.com	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Dominant/Goddess, Sadomasochist
8	Fet life group	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	100% disabled air force veteran (Yes)	4 to 6	Dominant, exploring, evolving, toy maker, gentleman, knight, Leatherman, age player, daddy, switch, sadist, primal, rope top, impact specialist, knight, master, fountain of cum for succubi, succubus tamer, lover & protector of bunnies particularly snow, water, rope, & cottontails!
9	Fetlife	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes.	1 to 3	Bottom, sub, slut, little
10	Fetlife	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	4 to 6	I am a submissive, and within my marriage I “play” many roles

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
11	Fetlife	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	yes	7 or more	bottom, sadomasochist, slave, pet (kitten), little, slave, property, girl
12	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	4 to 6	N/A
13	R/sexonthespectrum	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Sub, brat
14	an ad	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	no	1 to 3	dom
15	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	1 to 3	Top
16	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	4 to 6	N/A

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
17	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	1 to 3	Bottom
18	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes and no	4 to 6	Top, dom, rigger
19	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Sub, little, pet, slave, rope bunny
20	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Little, sub
21	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	1 to 3	Dom, majesty, top, daddy

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
22	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	7 or more	24/7 sub/little/slave
23	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	In some cases/situations. Sexually, currently - no. Sexually in my past, yes.	1 to 3	Dom & Sub
24	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	4 to 6	Dom, switch, daddy, pet, puppy, sub
25	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	4 to 6	Masoc[h]ist, submissive, bottom, brat, rope bunny, degradee, exhibitionist, slave
26	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No, i feel like i have special needs due to my autism, and I'm often physically limited by pain, but I don't consider myself truly disabled or ID with that group name.	1 to 3	Bottom

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
27	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	I never did before, but after receiving both an ADHD and autism diagnosis, and reflecting on how much those traits have reduced my quality of life: yes, I do.	1 to 3	I'm a sub who desires praise and being physically controlled
28	https://www.reddit.com/r/SexOnTheSpectrum/comments/15mitx9/looking_for_autistic_research_participants_who/	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Domme, brat Tamer, pup Handler
29	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Switch, brat, bimbo
30	Reddit	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	7 or more	Sub, babygirl, good girl
31	Reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	4 to 6	Switch, service top

Respondent	How study was found	Self-identify or diagnosed Autistic	Self-identify as disabled	Average number of kinky activities per week	Kink-related roles or identity labels
32	reddit	Yes, I DO have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	No	7 or more	Top, dom, switch, slave
33	I went to a Neurodivergence and Kink conference.	Yes, I self-identify as autistic and do NOT have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a licensed medical or mental health professional.	Yes	1 to 3	Primal Hunter/Rigger/Top/Sadomasochist/Daddi