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"Bullies tend to be obvious": Autistic Adults Perceptions of Friendship and the Concept of 'Mate Crime'.

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Points of Interest:

- Mate crime is a form of hate crime in which the offender is known to the victim, and usually involves exploitation, manipulation and cruelty.

- Autistic people sometimes find it hard to read and understand how people in the non-autistic population act.

- Research has investigated bullying of autistic people, but we don't know much about autistic people's knowledge and perception of mate crime.

- Interviews with autistic adults indicated they value good friendships, but socialising can be tiring. Participants said what they thought mate crime was, and how they might deal with it if they were victimised.

- Findings show what kind of questions might be useful in investigating the 'mate' aspect of mate crime, and gives insight into how people who could be targeted might identify and deal with it in their own lives.

Abstract

Mate crime is a specific subset of hate crime in which the perpetrator is known to the victim. The aim of the current study was to examine perceptions of friendship and the concept of mate crime in autistic adults. Five adults were interviewed about their experiences of social interactions, friendships and mate crime. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis revealed three superordinate themes: (1). Perceptions and 'learning the formula' (2). Socialising... 'It's more complicated than that', and (3). 'Taking Advantage of You'. Themes highlight the importance of further research into positive and negative aspects of social relationships in autistic adults, and the need to challenge attitudes around disability and provide support to those who may be socially vulnerable.

Introduction

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

Mate crime is a subtype of hate crime in which the perpetrator is known to the victim (Thomas 2011). It refers to deliberately abusive actions against a person by someone known to them, often someone considered a friend although family members and carers can also be perpetrators (Bell 2002; Thomas 2011). A disturbing feature of mate crime is that it encompasses acts of cruelty, humiliation, servitude, exploitation or theft (Quarmby 2011) and is often aimed at disabled people (Landman 2014). A report from the Wirral Autistic Society (2015) that surveyed autistic adults found that over 80% had been victim to behaviours linked to mate crime (Papadopoulos 2016). These data suggest that autistic adults may be disproportionately targeted by perpetrators.

In order to address mate crime it is important to involve and seek knowledge from those who may be perceived as vulnerable (Fardella, Burnham Riosa, and Weiss 2018). The notion of vulnerability as a risk factor for hate crime has been heavily debated (Matthews, 2018). Vulnerability is often used as a tool to infantilise disabled people, portraying them as defenceless, and risks victim blaming by focussing on individual limitation (Matthews, 2018; Roulstone, Thomas, and Balderson, 2011). Whilst all people can be vulnerable under certain

circumstances, there are structural and societal factors (i.e. attitudes towards disability, social exclusion, poverty) that disproportionately affect the lives of disabled people and contribute towards situational vulnerability beyond the individual (Roulstone, Thomas, and Balderson, 2011). It is important to understand both the experiences of the individual and what can be done to support them, and wider systemic issues that need to be dealt with to stop mate crime. Research into raising awareness of crime by Spink and Steward (2011) found most resources and/or training to enable people to maintain their personal safety overlooked abuse in domestic settings perpetrated by people well known to the victim. The involvement of service users in the production of the few resources that exist was scant, a factor that can make them less effective or relevant (Beech and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2005). Thus individual input informing our wider understanding is essential.

Landman (2014) gathered information to appraise the frequency and nature of mate crime, amassing a body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that many people struggled to recognise what being exploited looked like. Disingenuous others may take advantage of differences in social style, making it difficult to spot the gradual process of abuse and exploitation (Sin 2015). Doherty (2015) and Landman (2014) both point out that a lack of awareness of appropriate behaviour or what constitutes a positive relationship due to poor previous experiences, can lead individuals into making unsound judgements of character and situations. Research has suggested that autistic people may find it difficult to work out the intentions of others (Cole, Slocombe, and Barraclough 2018; Morrison et al. 2019; Edey et al. 2016), which could contribute towards social vulnerability. Roth and Gillis (2015) examined how autistic people communicate and build romantic relationships over the internet. They found that individuals unwittingly broke social norms due to a difference in social style and misreading situations. Portway and Johnson (2005) noted that autistic people may find

themselves at risk due to nuances of social communication such as grasping implicit communication, and responding to spontaneity and change. This research revealed that autistic people were concerned about the potential for being abused on the internet or groomed and misled. However, no investigation was made into the potential for abuse in face to face interactions.

Differences in communicative styles, relating to the 'Double Empathy Problem' (Milton 2012), raises the bi-directional nature of social communication issues between Autistic and NT individuals by pointing out that NT people may find it just as difficult to recognise the socio-communicative nuance of autistic people. This idea has recently gained empirical support (Edey et al. 2016; Sasson et al. 2017). Sasson et al. (2017) found that NT participants are more likely to make negative judgements about an Autistic peer in a 'thin slice' paradigm (very short clips of social interactions). This could lead to negative stereotyping and dehumanisation of autistic people. Stereotyping and dehumanisation in turn feed into marginalising and differentiating those who are different and creates opportunities for rejection, exclusion, discrimination and resentment to flourish (Armstrong et al. 2016; Gerstenfeld 2017). Perceptions about normality and diagnoses of disability are 'heavily laden with able bodied assumptions and prejudices', i.e. that normality is the ideal all ought to strive towards (Barnes and Mercer 2010).

Mate crime does not occur in a vacuum, and so it is essential that we understand the 'mate' aspect of mate crime. Doherty (2017) acknowledges that offences can become 'blurred' due to familiarity and friendship between an offender and victim. Recent research has begun to examine experience of friendship in autistic adults (Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Mazefsky, and Eack 2018; Müller, Schuler, and Yates 2008; Sosnowy et al. 2018; Sedgwick, Crane, Hill and

Pellicano, 2019), looking at how autistic adults navigate social relationships and what they value within friendship. Studies have shown that autistic adults desire relationships with others yet can experience difficulty in initiating these relationships (Müller, Schuler, and Yates 2008). Müller, Schuler, and Yates (2008) found that participants had an intense desire to connect with others, and to be accepted yet struggled to maintain relationships. Sedgwick et al. (2019) found that autistic women desired and maintained good relationships in adulthood with friends and partners, however they also reported being bullied by 'friends' in childhood, and had experienced being 'taken advantage of' more than their NT counterparts. Many stated a difficulty with picking up on the 'ulterior' motives of others, and difficulty withdrawing from negative situations.

A longing to connect with other people could lead to accepting inappropriate or exploitative relationships out of a sense of belonging. A number of studies have been conducted to examine bullying and peer victimisation in autistic people (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2016; Fardella, Burnham Riosa, and Weiss 2018; Weiss and Fardella 2018; DeNigris et al. 2018), however these studies do not necessarily tap into the nuance present in victimisation that occurs within social relationships. It is important that we understand what autistic adults desire and value in social relationships, as well as whether they feel able to spot negative behaviours and what to do if they occur.

Thus the aim of the current study is to explore social relationships and understanding of the concept of mate crime in a group of autistic adults. We seek to learn from their lived experience and perceptions and provide a detailed snapshot of their experience of friendship, awareness of mate crime, and how it might manifest in their own lives.

Research process

Methodological Approach

This research was idiographic in nature; focusing on the personal experiences of individuals. Deconstructing normative assumptions and the imposition of non-autistic meanings requires entering into the mindset of the participant (Howard, Katsos, and Gibson 2019), understanding their experiences and worldview (Milton and Bracher 2013). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the interview data. IPA was considered as it gives scope to participants to express themselves freely and tell their lived story and make sense of their life experiences (Alase 2017; Flowers, Larkin, and Smith 2009). IPA allows for a detailed analysis of personal accounts (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014), typically using a smaller, homogenous sample. While it is not claimed that generalisations can be made to a wider cohort of Autistic people, the individual experiences are informative because 'Everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themself' (Schleiermacher 1998). A qualitative design also lends itself to social constructionist analysis; looking at how the individual produces their account of an experience (Willig 2013). People construct an understanding through the language they use, the culture they find themselves in, through interaction with others (Burr 2015). This is particularly relevant for analysing the experiences of autistic people, who can find themselves at odds with expectations in the neurotypical world. To ensure that our interpretation accurately reflected participants' experiences, they were sent the results and invited to respond.

Participants

Five autistic adults aged between 22-25 years (two female, three male) took part in this research (see Table 1). They were recruited through opportunity sampling via personal networks and online platforms (Twitter, and the North East Autism Facebook group). Diagnosis was confirmed through self-report, and all but one of the participants (who was diagnosed in 2017) were diagnosed in childhood. All of the participants communicated primarily through verbal means, and had low support needs. One participant lived in sheltered housing, and the rest lived with family.

Table 1: Participant demographics

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

Procedure

This study received ethical approval from the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee, and participants provided informed written consent to participate. Semi-structured interviews were developed, including questions about social interactions, relationships and mate crime (see supplementary materials). Interviews were held at venues

where participants felt comfortable, or conducted via an online chat system. Questions were generally asked in the order found in the interview schedule, unless conversation prompted an additional spontaneous question or it was natural to ask a question from later in the schedule at an earlier point. Interviews lasted between eighteen and thirty minutes and were recorded to enable subsequent transcription. The researchers were aware that autistic participants may find it overwhelming engaging in conversation with a stranger, and thus there was an effort to ensure that interviews did not last any longer than necessary. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw at any time during the interview process, and up to six weeks post-participation, however none chose to withdraw from the study. All participants were debriefed after the interview and given the opportunity to ask further questions. They were provided with the details of the researchers should they wish to make further contact.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author and all identifying data removed. Participants were provided with a pseudonym and participants number for future identification. Both researchers read and re-read each transcription several times, making notes around salient content, context and initial interpretations. Once initial identifications had been coded, these were compared between researchers and emergent themes were identified from the grouping of these codes. These formed the subordinate themes seen in Table 2. From undertaking further analysis of these subordinate themes, it was apparent that elements of these clustered together around three superordinate themes (Table 2).

Results

Three superordinate themes were identified, with subordinate-themes as shown in Table 2, which are discussed in further detail under the appropriate sub-headings. Numbers are used to denote which participant the quote is taken from.

Table 2: Table of Themes

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

1. Perceptions and 'learning the formula'.

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

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

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

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

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

 Research into social relationships indicates that Autistic pupils can experience fractious relationships with their peers (Chamberlain, Kasari, and Rotheram-Fuller 2007; Humprey and Lewis 2008), due to misalignments in social understanding, which some participants had

experienced: *'Back in school it was often a problem as I wasn't sure if I said things that would upset or offend people…Thankfully I can catch myself a lot better now.'* (P1)

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

Here the participants suggest that things got easier as they got older. Two distinct pathways appeared to emerge from these statements: 'learning' about how to 'read' other people and fit in (1.2), and having more control over social interactions (see 2.3). Some of the participants discussed how they had learned over time how to interact with others: *'The more you get to know someone the easier it is to read them…it's like a formula… It's something you learn.'* *(P5).* These statements were indicative of participants learning to socialise like one may learn to ride a bike. Instead of relying on 'implicit' social signals that neurotypicals pick up on more easily, here the participants treat socialising as a skillset to be learned. According to Milton (2012) many autistic people sidestep the urge to blend in by mimicking non autistic behaviour and developing ways of being that are compatible with their disposition: *'I feel like I've taught myself just through loads of very strict, conscious practice over the years. I had to practice how to be a student in mainstream education, it is like playing a role.'* *(P4).* Many of the participants discussed 'fitting in' or camouflaging their behaviours, i.e. *'I certainly don't talk about special interests.'* *(P4).* Camouflaging appears to be a common coping mechanism used to 'fit in' socially, and avoid ostracism (Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Hull et al. 2017), often achieved through rehearsal, practicing and observation from the periphery to assimilate actions into an imitation of 'normal' behaviour (Holliday Willey 1999), and avoid being identified. During the interviews participants expressed engagement with frequent self-monitoring during social interactions, suggesting

that they found it difficult to 'be themselves': ' *I'll often get worried are they bored of what I'm saying and are they tired of me blathering on. More recently I've got into the habit of asking people if I know them well enough, sorry if I'm being boring because I know I could blather on for ages.' (P1).*

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

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

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

Misreading signals or not picking up on attributes which the neurotypical person grasps implicitly (Oikawa and Oikawa 2010) is key to why Autistic people might be seen as easier to groom and exploit (Roth and Gillis 2015). This difficulty 'reading' NTs has the potential to make communication and building relationships more demanding (2.1). All of the participants in this research were able to relate to and give examples from their own lives:

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

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

Lack of transparency can make it harder for Autistic people to predict how others are going to act, especially if people act in surprising or novel ways (Happé et al. 2006). This was noted by one participant: *'Everyone else would think 'I know exactly what they mean' but I would either not notice it or it would take me a little longer... Sometimes I don't have the energy to really try* (to interpret meanings).' *(P4)*. Here the participant notes the psychologically demanding nature of social interactions (2.2). Many of the participants noted that interacting with others could have a negative effect on their mental wellbeing, and lead to feeling overwhelmed and anxious: *'My mind is like a washing machine stuck on a spin cycle, struggling to spin.' (P2)*

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

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

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

One of the participants explained that it was the multi-faceted nature of first time interactions that can be difficult: *' I used to think it was as simple as going up to someone and saying 'Hello! Do you want to be my friend?' Then you come to realise it's a bit more complicated than that… I certainly do when I first meet somebody, there can be a lot of apprehension, yes.' (P4)*. This links back to comments made about 'learning' how to interact. Meeting someone new means that contextual information used to guide social interaction is lacking, which could make it difficult for the autistic person to know what to say or how to act.

However not all of the participants had issues with meeting new people: *'I find easy; I don't have a fear of talking to people, I'll talk to anybody and that might be a bit of a problem. I don't find it easy to know what to think about someone.'(P5)*. Here this participant acknowledges their own vulnerability that stems from being trusting and gregarious. For them, it was the ongoing demands of friendship that were the most draining: *'It's a lot easier*

if it's quiet and there's not much else going on. I find that a lot better…Less distractions and not having to pay attention to too many things all at once…I dislike having to remember so much about people. People expect you to know stuff about their life, and that means having to concentrate in conversations and really care about what they say, not in a mean way'.

The comments of the participants paint a picture of how mentally tiring it can be deciphering a mass of sensory data and subtle nuances beyond the literal semantics of language. Their remarks suggest that interpretation adds an additional mental weight to the process of engaging with others. If interaction is overwhelming due to being bombarded by multiple sensory inputs simultaneously, it is not surprising that many autistic people may avoid crowds and noise as well as spending a lot of time with other people. What some may interpret as isolation or avoidance may be a coping strategy that makes socialisation manageable.

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

This is inconsistent with the premise of social motivation theory (Chevallier et al. 2012) which suggests that autistic people may gain less pleasure in social interaction and devote less effort into maintaining relationships, neglecting social opportunities as a result (Jamil, Gragg, and DePape 2017). Some participants did mention their preference for infrequent

contact *'I'm happy having friends I only speak to once a year and I'm not sure if you ought to talk to them more often than that.' (P5).*

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

However, our participants comments suggest that lack of engagement is not down to motivation, but the draining nature of having to remain aware of all aspects of communication used by the neurotypical population as demonstrated in theme 2.2. Several of the participants spoke about finding people who are 'like-minded'(2.3), as they are easier to spend time with: *'Knowing where to be and where I'll find people similar, or meeting friends of friends who would be like minded.' (P1).*

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

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

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

Some of the participants spoke about turning to the internet in order to make and maintain friendships. Nichols, Moravcik, and Tetenbaum (2009) found that many Autistic people appreciated not having to focus on body language or maintaining eye contact. It also afforded them more control over self-presentation and the slower pace of communication gave them longer to process information. The statements from the participants supported this sentiment: *'It's easier online...I guess, because you can't see their facial expressions or tone of voice and that makes it easier as it takes a lot of the complication out of it. It's a lot easier messaging you than it is talking to you.'* (P3)

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

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

3. **'Taking Advantage of you'**

In an attempt to gain insight into the relationship between friendship, bullying and mate crime, participants were asked about their experiences with all three. All participants had at some point in their lives encountered actual crimes against them or bullying whilst at school. Findings from Papadopoulos (2016) suggest that bullying of Autistic people is commonplace

during adolescence, especially at school (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2016). *'I never got on with people while at this school, I had some days at school where I had a miserable time.'(P4)*

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

'The bullies I had in high school would just assume I didn't know what was going on and they assumed I wouldn't recognise they were very obviously manipulative, it was so transparent.' (P4) Here the participant taps into one of the key issues prevalent in the mate crime literature, the assumption that someone with social communication differences will not pick up on manipulation and bullying.

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

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

Here ideas around exploitation and abuse of trust were seen as some of the key factors which might designate mate crime. One participant was able to appreciate it might not be friends but others close to them who are a risk: *'I'd rather have CCTV in the home to catch bad people such as bad carers and abuse or anything like that.' (P2).* This participant had the highest support needs amongst those interviewed and had also been assaulted previously by a gang of unknown youths. Their comments were indicative of a stark awareness of their personal

vulnerabilities (both currently, and in the future when their family may not be around to support them), and they spoke multiple times about strategies they had in place to help them negotiate daily living, and a desire for 'security'.

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

The behaviours described by this participant (lack of reciprocal expectations, using the participants flat as storage facility for their items and refusing to pick them up) were indicative of the exploitation associated with mate crime.

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

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

'If it's more severe like taking advantage of them …then it is worse than bullying. If it's on the school yard it's bullying'. (P1)

Here the comments show that betrayal of trust and disparity in perceived friendship value set mate crime apart from bullying or peer victimisation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The comments around shame align with early comments made around negative perceptions of disability and not wanting to appear outwardly vulnerable. Here the link between perceptions of vulnerability and mate crime can be seen as a vicious circle, in which outward perceptions of vulnerability lead to dehumanisation, which in turn leads to further shame about disability. It is clear from the comments made by participants that awareness of mate crime is only part of the battle; reducing stigma around disability is also a large facilitator of change.

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

These comments demonstrated the value of family and close friends in providing a sounding board for participants when they were unsure of others' intentions. Participants were aware of the potential for autistic individuals to be targeted due to perceived vulnerability, and thus had strategies in place to keep themselves safe.

General Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate perceptions of social relationships and knowledge of mate crime in a sample of autistic adults. Findings illustrate some of the difficulties that autistic people can face trying to develop genuine friendships, navigating the sometimes overwhelming social world, and avoiding exploitation and harm. Our participants highlight some key issues that could be considered in attempting to establish risk and prevention of mate crime in autism.

The majority of the participants were diagnosed in childhood, and their diagnosis impacted on how they viewed their interactions with peers as well as how they attempted to present themselves within social situations. Participants expressed an aversion to being labelled as 'disabled'. This aversion is consistent with internalisation of disability as a negative, and something to hide to avoid being viewed as lesser (Reeve 2004). Milton and Moon (2012)

argue that seeing autism framed as 'personal tragedy' (French and Swain 2004) or something to be normalised, can have a negative effect on the autistic person, resulting in diminished self-worth and a struggle to understand one's place in the world. It is certainly the case that not all autistic people view their label (or disability) as a negative (Milton and Sims 2016). Huws and Jones (2015) demonstrate that autistic people may rely on social comparisons to try and understand their place in the social world, which may lead to an attempt to distance themselves from a label of disability. These comments show the need for greater understanding of the autistic experience and a wider discourse about the effects of ableist attitudes impacting on self-acceptance, and recognition of one's own support needs.

Participants comments were consistent with previous research demonstrating that autistic people may develop strategies to camouflage their difficulties in an attempt to 'fit in' with peers (Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Hull et al. 2017). Though camouflaging can help autistic people to attain and maintain friendships, it can also be detrimental to mental health (Bargiela, Steward, and Mandy 2016; Cage, Di Monaco, and Newell 2018). Our participants stressed the need for 'low maintenance' friendships in adulthood, with low demands and understanding peers. The trepidation participants expressed about meeting new people and 'getting it right' demonstrated that they valued friendship and wanted to be liked, but the overwhelming nature of communication could increase anxiety or lead to difficulties of processing and interpretation. Participants describe in their own words how tiring it can be, how it can make them feel anxious or reluctant to socialise and impact on their self-esteem. This is consistent with research showing that Autistic people are not asocial (Bargiela, Steward, and Mandy 2016; Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Hull et al. 2017; Müller, Schuler, and Yates 2008; Sedgewick et al. 2016), but experience barriers that make socialising difficult or intolerable. Interestingly, we found that both our male and female

participants engaged in self-monitoring for similar reasons: not being perceived as 'boring', and fitting in with peers (Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Hull et al. 2017). Our findings also do not support the suggestion that autistic men are less interested in friendship than autistic women (Sedgewick et al. 2016); both male and female participants were engaged with forming and maintaining friendships. This may be in part due to the age of the participants interviewed. Most participants mentioned that social interaction had become easier with age, making it possible for them to form meaningful friendships.

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

Some participants said they would might feel ashamed if they were exploited which appeared to relate back to ideas around internalised ableism. However all participants were able to

identify people in their lives (parents and friends) that they could reach out to if they were unsure about another's intentions. This demonstrates the importance of good quality support networks for autistic people who may find themselves targeted by unscrupulous individuals.

Limitations

Though the aims of qualitative research is not generalisability, it is worth noting that the sample here was limited. The current study included 5 interviews, and all participants were fairly homogenous: all currently have low/no support needs and were from a similar demographic (all aged 22-25). It would certainly be worth exploring perceptions of mate crime across a wider population of Autistic adults, to ensure that experiences informing any support meet the needs of as many people as possible. It is likely that there are some additional issues faced by those with higher support needs that are not captured here. It is also imperative to understand the experiences of those who rely more on non-verbal means of communication to make sure that their 'voices' are heard. Evidence suggests that those with a learning disability may be particularly at risk from mate crime (Doherty 2017; Landman 2014), due to their perceived social vulnerability. The current study provides an initial exploration of potentially relevant issues to consider when examining positive and negative aspects of social relationships in autistic adults, but is by no means exhaustive.

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

Conclusion

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

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Interview Questions

1   Can you tell me a little bit about yourself: how old are you?

2   If you know it, what is your diagnosis?

I'm looking into the subject of mate crime. When someone who is meant to be your friend does something to hurt you that is against the law because you have a disability it is known as mate crime. But to find out about that I'm also going ask you some questions about friendship and your thoughts and experiences on that first.

3   It is often said that autistic people find some aspects of mixing with other people difficult. What is easy and what is hard?

4   What makes you feel comfortable and uncomfortable?

5   Which aspects of interacting with people do you like/dislike?

People talk about emotional intelligence and 'reading people' from their body language and facial expressions.

6   What do you understand about this/not understand?

7   What do you think you get right or wrong?

8   People often talk about 'getting a bad feeling' about some people, that they are in some way dodgy, and it doesn't feel right being around them. What's your experience of this?

9   Research has shown that lots of autistic people want to have more friends but find it hard making friends. Have you found this to be true?

10   What are the good things about having friends?

11   And what are the bad things (if you can think of any)?

12   Have you ever thought it was better to be with someone even if you didn't want to be around them rather, than be on your own?

13   Is anyone better than no one?

14   Have you ever experienced a friendship that wasn't always good- what about it makes you think this?

Mate Crime Questions

15   Have you heard of 'mate crime'?

16   What do you think this is?

17   Can you think of things that might be mate crimes?

18   Is mate crime like bullying? Is it the same or different? Could you tell them apart?

19   Are some people more likely to be victims of mate crime and why?

20   What sort of things do you think might make someone more likely to be a victim of mate crime?

21   What would being exploited by a friend look like?

22   Has anything like this ever happened to you?

23   Do you think taken advantage of something to be ashamed of? Would that make you feel less likely to talk to someone about it?

24   Would you talk about it with anyone? /Did you?

25   If so, who? /Who did you talk to about it?

26   What could you do to stop this happening to you (again)?

27   If there was some training for adults that you could attend that would help you be more aware how to not to make yourself vulnerable to mate crime would you be interested in going on it?

28   If 1 is absolutely not and 10 is definitely, where would you place your level of interest this on the scale?

29   Has this discussion made you rethink any of your friendships/relationships?

30   You've come to see someone you think of as a friend might not be. What will you do next time you come into contact with them?

At the end of the interview schedule I will sum up the conversation and ask whether it has been good/bad to talk about the things discussed and if the participant feels it has been upsetting in any way. This will enable me to assess whether they need any ongoing support/counselling to prevent/minimise harm to the participant.

Supplementary Questions if necessary:

A lot autistic people find it easier to make friends on line than in 'real life'. Is this true of you?
How would you see Real Life differ from online friends?
Good things about online and bad?
Good things about real life and bad?