Self-Reported Understanding of Romantic Relationships: High School Students with ASD Compared to Neurotypical High School Students

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Developmental Psychology and Education

Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development

University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore how high school aged students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) understand romantic relationships. This is the first study to investigate romantic relationships in adolescents with ASD with a self-report methodology. Romance was broken down thematically into five categories: Dating Experience & Desire, Romantic Signaling, Romantic Knowledge, Romantic Learning, and Consent. Students were recruited from secondary schools in Toronto and surrounding areas. Students were asked to fill in a multiple choice and short answer questionnaire. Responses from the ASD participants (N=22) were then compared to the responses of the neurotypical (NT) participants (N=20) in the control group. Responses were analyzed with chi-squares and theme analyses. Significant differences were found across all 5 themes, with answers in the Romantic Signaling and Consent themes being the most disparate between the ASD and NT groups. Implications and further research needed discussed.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Sanja Banjavcic in gaining ethics approval, designing the questionnaire, and collecting the data.

I would also like to thank Dr. Michel Ferrari for his significant contributions. I would like to thank him for consulting on every step of the process and troubleshooting any questions or concerns I had.

Lastly I would like to thank Dr. Chloe Hamza for acting as one of my Supervisory Committee members and providing me with substantial feedback throughout the writing process.
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Self-Reported Understanding of Romantic Relationships: High School Students with ASD Compared to Neurotypical High School Students

Throughout the 20th century, romance and sexuality in people with developmental disorders and disabilities were largely ignored, denied, and suppressed (Di Giulio, 2003). However, with the advent of the inclusion movement, individuals with disabilities have begun to make great strides towards the societal acceptance of their sexuality (Gougeon, 2010). People with autism specifically have long faced the stereotype that they are asexual and not interested in forming relationships with others, however this has been proven to be largely a myth (Strunz et al., 2017). In a study by Strunz and colleagues in 2017, only 7% of their sample with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) indicated zero interest in a romantic relationship. Although the vast majority of individuals with ASD express interest in romantic relationships, until recently these interests were not being acknowledged by their clinicians and families, and therefore these individuals were often left to navigate this landscape without adequate support and education.

Within the past ten years there has been a proliferation of public interest into romance and sexuality in individuals with ASD, ranging from popular media such as the television series ‘Atypical’, to the many research projects happening around the world. Research shows that adolescents with high functioning autism (HFA) engage in fewer privacy behaviours and more inappropriate sexual behaviours than neurotypical (NT) controls (Stokes & Kaur, 2005). In addition, parental reports have found that children with ASD perform more poorly on measures of social behaviour and engage in more problematic and deviant sexual behaviours than NT controls.
(Ginevra, Nota, & Stokes, 2016; Hellemans, et al. 2007). Furthermore, another study found that those with lower functioning autism perform even more poorly than those with high functioning autism on these measures (Kalyva, 2010). While adults with autism are interested in romantic relationships they express many concerns including: sensory dysregulation, poor socio-sexual expressive and receptive communication, and concerns for their futures (Barnett & Matica-Tyndale, 2015; Grandin, 2006; Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011).

Parents of children with ASD also express similar concerns for their children. Parents of children with ASD report significantly greater concern regarding their children’s sexuality and romance than parents of neurotypical children (Stokes & Kaur, 2005). Many were concerned that their children’s non-sexual actions would be misinterpreted as sexual advances, or that their child would be exploited or taken advantage of (Ballan, 2012; Ballan & Freyer, 2017; Mackin, Loew, Gonzalez, Tykol, & Christensen, 2016; Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009). Furthermore, parents reported feeling that even typical and appropriate sexual behaviours exhibited by their children would be stigmatized and feared by the public (Ballan, 2012). Most parents also reported being concerned that their children would not be able to have emotionally reciprocal and fulfilling relationships (Holmes, Himle, & Strassberg, 2016; Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009).

While many parents are concerned, they often also take active roles in providing their children with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the arena of romance and sex. Parents of children with ASD are often the main source of information regarding sexuality and romance for their children (Nichols &
Blakeley-Smith, 2009). Experts suggest that parental education is the best method of communicating sexual education curriculums to individuals with ASD (Holmes, Himle, & Strassberg, 2016; Koller, 2000). While most parents report that they are comfortable communicating with their child about sexuality (Ballan, 2012), many feel uncomfortable or unequipped to discuss certain topics, such as STIs, condom use, and birth control (Holmes & Himle, 2014; Kellaher, 2015), which can leave children vulnerable to many potentially dangerous misconceptions regarding these topics. Most parents do however report discussing private body parts, personal hygiene, appropriate public discussion topics, and what types of touches are appropriate and which are not appropriate (Holmes & Himle, 2014). Parents also report feeling unclear about what healthy sexuality for their child looks like for their children in general (Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009). Lastly many parents report that the most frequent barriers to discussions of sexual health were a lack of interest from their children as well as their children feeling embarrassed (Mackin et al., 2016). While many parents report turning to the help of health care professionals for assistance with hard to discuss topics (Ballan, 2012), many pediatricians report that due to logistical barriers, pediatrician and parent discomfort, and lack of training, many sexuality topics are not discussed with patients with ASD (Holmes et al., 2014).

When their parents and health care providers do not have the answers, many individuals with ASD turn to non-social sources of information such as the media and ‘trial and error’ to gain a better understanding of their sexuality and romance (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011). As the media, such as television, typically present very idealistic representations of romance and sexuality, this strategy likely proves
ineffective as a formal education method. Furthermore, ‘trial and error’ methods set up these individuals to potentially embarrass and humiliate themselves and the subjects of their affection.

Many suggest that the typical mainstream education and curriculum is failing these students and that more educational supports are required. Sexual education levels for individuals with HF-ASD are lower than that of NT controls, a finding that is reinforced by ASD individuals self-report that they would benefit from more sexual education (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011). Individuals with ASD in mainstream sexual education programs have also reported negative experiences with sexual education, as well as feelings of anxiety and vulnerability regarding these topics (Hannah & Stagg, 2016). These results suggest that mainstream sex education is not sufficient for individuals with ASD and that more tailored programs would be beneficial.

Similarly, when parents were surveyed, they agreed that a specially tailored program would be most appropriate, and that this program would be most effective if it was visually presented via technology and contained interactive elements (Mackin et al., 2016). While many agree that specific curriculum is needed, many of the education programs and curriculums that have been developed and are available to parents remain without evidence-based validity (Tullis & Zangrillo, 2013).

Valid education and training programs in these areas would improve the quality of life for many individuals with ASD. Research shows that relationships, both platonic and romantic, are associated with decreased loneliness in adults with ASD (Mazurek, 2014). Furthermore, in this population, loneliness has been shown to be associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, as well as lower self-
esteem and life satisfaction, even after controlling for ASD symptoms (Mazurek, 2014). These results in tandem underscore how important relationships are for ASD youth, and demonstrate the need for proper education on how to initiate and maintain both friendships and romantic relationships. These suggested potential gains in quality of life have been reiterated in a theme analysis of magazine articles written for Asperger’s United that found that personal relationships was one of the four factors related to ones sense of well-being and belonging for people with ASD (Milton & Sims, 2016). Furthermore, individuals with ASD who are in romantic relationships report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those not in romantic relationships (Byers, Nichols, Voyer, & Reilly, 2013). However, of those in relationships, those with more profound autism characteristics report less sexual satisfaction (Byers & Nichols, 2014). When compared to individuals with ASD whose partner was neurotypical, those whose partners also had ASD were significantly more satisfied with their relationship (Strunz et al., 2017). While education and training in romantic relationships and sexuality would likely increase well being for individuals with ASD, as they would improve these individuals likelihood of successfully initiating and maintaining a romantic relationship, these programs are further needed to mediate the increased rates of victimization and inappropriate sexual behaviours found in the autism community.

Risk of sexual victimization for individuals with autism (78% reporting at least one incidence of sexual victimization) is much higher than the NT population (47% reporting at least one incidence of sexual victimization) (Brown-Lavoie, Viecili, & Weiss, 2014). The same authors found that individuals with ASD are almost 3 times
more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact, and 2.4 times more likely to be a victim of rape than the NT comparison group (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014).

Furthermore, within the ASD population females are more often subject to these adverse sexual experiences than men (Pecora, Mesibov, & Stokes, 2016). Kerns, Newschaffer, and Berkowitz (2015) hypothesize that this may stem from the fact that individuals with ASD are characteristically socially naïve and often struggle with communicating their experiences to others, however more research is needed. Individuals with ASD also demonstrate increased rates of inappropriate sexual behaviour including public masturbation, inappropriate and unrequited romantic gestures, and inappropriate sexual comments (Beddows & Brooks, 2016). While some of these behaviours stem from normal pubertal changes, they are also related to poor social skills and sensory issues that are characteristic of ASD (Beddows & Brooks, 2016). Many researchers have stressed that these increased rates of victimization and inappropriate sexual behaviour ought to be of great concern to researchers and clinicians and in and of themselves warrant investigations into proper education programs to mitigate these increased rates.

**Current Study**

While it has been well established that improvements must be made in terms of sexual education curriculums, as well as increased supports for individuals with ASD and their parents in regards to sexuality and romance, there has yet to be any research completed about the subjective experience of romantic relationships of adolescents with ASD. Previous research has relied on parental reports of children’s behaviour and knowledge or on the testimony of adults over 21, but as many
individuals make romantic and sexual debut in adolescence, this period is critical to study. Studies have found that an adolescent’s level of dating experience and the quality of their romantic relationships are associated with social adaptation at age 16 (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001). Furthermore, peers groups have been shown to serve as romantic models in adolescence and are also important in the initiation of romantic relationships. (Baker, 2017). But how does the ASD phenotype interact with these factors to influence and mediate the effects of romantic relationships? In what way do these results differ within the ASD community and what implications do these differences in results have adolescents with ASD? With a better understanding of the subjective experiences and self reported knowledge of romantic relationships clinicians, teachers, and families will have a clearer understanding of how to best support adolescents with ASD on their journey into romance and sexuality.

Specifically, this study examines romance and sexuality among 22 high school students with ASD (14-21 years old) and 20 NT high school students (14-18 years old). All participants were administered a self-report questionnaire regarding knowledge of romantic relationships including both multiple choice and short answer items such as: ‘If you approach someone you like and they are not interested, would you try again?’ and ‘If you like someone who is already in a relationship with another person, would you still tell them how you are feeling?’. I have compared the two groups responses using chi-square and thematic analysis to explore understanding of consent, sources of sexuality/romance knowledge, and romantic signaling to better understand whether students with autism differ from their neurotypical peers,
and which of these differences need special attention when forming education programs and curriculums for students with autism. With the answers to these questions researchers will be better aware of what subtopics within romance and sexuality need the most attention in these programs, according to the program stakeholders and intended users themselves. When paired with the literature that uses parental report, this information will allow us to best create the educational programming and supports that so many researchers in the field are recommending. Furthermore, the decision to ask these adolescents for their first hand experiences aligns with the current self advocacy movement we are seeing in the developmental disability and autism fields. Inviting first hand experiences into the conversation responds to the push by many autism self advocates for ‘nothing about us without us’, a decision that not only acknowledges the stakeholders, but also increases the strength and quality of our conclusions, and hopefully the resulting education recommendations.

**METHODS**

**Participants**

Participants were divided into two groups, those who have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and those who do not, or neurotypical individuals (NT). All participants were recruited from secondary schools in Toronto, Canada and surrounding areas.

**Students with ASD.** All participants with ASD were students in a specialized seven-year schooling program, from four different secondary schools. Of the 56 questionnaires that were distributed 22 (39%) were completed and returned. All
students had a formal diagnosis of Autism, Asperger’s or Pervasive Developmental Disorder not otherwise specified (PDDNOS) based on the criteria outlined in the DSM –IV. The participants’ diagnoses were established before the release of the DSM 5, however in the updated manual these three diagnoses were amalgamated into Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and will be referred to as such throughout this paper. Twenty males and 2 females with ASD participated in the study. This discrepancy in gender breakdown is credited to the gender discrepancy seen in the autism diagnoses in the community (to read more on this topic please see: Kreiser & White, 2014; Kreiser & White, 2015; Rivet, & Matson, 2011). The age of student respondents ranged from 14-21 years. The median age of all participants with ASD was 17 years and 5 months of age. The youngest student with ASD was 14 years and 10 months of age, while the oldest participant with ASD was 21 years and 1 month of age. Median age in the group of the ASD participants was approximately 1 year older than TD group, due to the fact that the surveyed students from the 7 year program stay in the school longer, until the age of 21, while TD students typically graduate at the age of 18. All the students with ASD had adequate verbal faculties and are considered “higher-functioning” individuals.

**NT students.** The neurotypical (NT) students were recruited from mainstream grade 9-12 classes from two different secondary schools in Toronto and surrounding areas. Of the 32 questionnaires that were distributed 20 (62%) were completed and returned. Among the NT participants, 11 were females and 9 were males. The ratio of females to males reflects the demographic of the mainstream population. The age of the NT participants ranged between 14-18. The youngest NT
participant was 14 years and 10 months of age, while the oldest NT participants was 18 years and 1 month of age. Median age was 16 years and 3 months of age.

Measure

The questionnaire consisted of 5 demographic questions and 29 questions regarding various romantic relationships themes: Dating Experience and Desire (2 questions), Consent (8 questions), Romantic Learning (1 question), and Romantic Signaling (8 questions), and Romance Knowledge (10 questions). The full questionnaire broken down into these five themes can be found below in Figure 1. 13 of the questions were multiple choice format and asked for participants to circle the answers they believed were appropriate of the question scenario. The other 16 questions asked participants for short answer responses. Some of the multiple choice and short answer questions were paired to assess the same topic via both quantitative and qualitative means.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dating Experience and Desire</td>
<td>Q1: Have you ever had a date?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q2: If not, would you like to date?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent</td>
<td>Q7a: Is it ok to refuse to go on a date?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q7b: What could you say?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q8: How do you think a person will feel if you say &quot;no&quot; to a date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>invitation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q12: What should you do if you want to go on a date and he/she does</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 of the questions were multiple choice format and asked for participants to circle the answers they believed were appropriate of the question scenario. The other 16 questions asked participants for short answer responses. Some of the multiple choice and short answer questions were paired to assess the same topic via both quantitative and qualitative means.
not want to go?

Q22a: If you approach someone you like and they are not interested, would you try again?

Q22b: …Explain

Q25a: If you like someone who is already in a relationship with another person would you still tell them how you are feeling?

Q25b: …Why?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic Learning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q15: Where can you learn about dating, romantic relationships and similar information if you are interested? Whom can you ask? Friends, peers, teacher’s chaplain, parents, Internet, siblings, magazines, or other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic Signaling</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3: How would you ask someone on a date?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18: How can you know if someone likes you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19: Would you tell someone you like them? Yes or No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20: How long would you wait before letting someone know that you like them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21: How can you show someone you like them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q23: Whom else would you tell if you are interested in someone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q24a: If you are too shy to tell someone you like them, can you ask someone else to speak for you, on your behalf?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q24b: …Who?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4: Where would you go and what could you do on a date?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: Where would you look to find people that you could date? School,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
church, social groups, Internet, other.

Q6: How should you prepare and dress for a date?

Q9: Is it OK to date someone from your school or class?

Q10: Is it OK to date someone from your work, coop placement, work experience program?

Q11: What are the characteristics you look for in a person when dating? What should they be like/look like? Give examples.

Q13: After a date is it ok to tell others about your date? Yes or no?

Q14: What information would you share with others about your date?

Q16: Is there a difference between liking someone and loving someone? Yes or No?

Q17: Describe the difference.

Procedure

The Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board of University of Toronto granted ethics approval for this research prior to its initiation. The data was collected in May and June of 2013. Students with ASD and their parents were approached via a written letter that explained the purpose, nature, and procedures of the study. A child-youth worker involved in the schools distributed the letter to the parents on behalf of the researcher. Two consent forms were sent home, one for the students participating and one for their parents. Active consent was required from all participants and their parents, both parties being asked to return signed consent forms. To protect the anonymity of the participants, completed
questionnaires were returned separately from consent forms, in sealed envelopes. At the time of collection, the child youth worker only verified that both consent forms have been signed and that the questionnaires had been completed. The two groups of documents were kept separate and then forwarded to the researcher, who therefore, had no means of connecting participants’ names with questionnaires. Additionally, questionnaires were anonymous and requested no identifying or personal information aside from their age and gender, information that alone would not be enough to identify any specific participant from the others. A similar recruitment procedure was used for TD students. Two different individuals who acted on behalf of the researcher were used to approach the TD participants. The same procedure was followed for sending, returning, and collecting the questionnaires and consent forms. Initially, 17 questionnaires were returned, with an additional 3 being returned about a month later. The questionnaires used for both groups of participants were identical. The study relied on self-reported students’ answers. All students were capable of answering questions in writing independently. Parents and staff of the students were asked not to help the participants when answering to ensure the validity of the data. Only one of the student with ASD needed to have their answers scribed by the classroom child-youth worker, but the answers were scribed verbatim. The questionnaire was administered in an anonymous self-reported format in an effort to maximize the honesty and validity of the answering. Some of the questions in the questionnaires relied on a written short answer, while some offered preselected optional choices that needed to be circled.
and selected by the participants. Participants were given the option to skip any questions that they were uncomfortable answering.

**Analysis**

The quantitative questions were analyzed using chi-square analyzes, when the data permitted. Due to the fact that our research population is both a clinical population and a youth population recruitment can be very difficult. Furthermore, due to the innovativeness of this line of research and the exploratory nature of this paper we chose not to restrict the possibility of potential trends by applying a type 1 error alpha correction.

The qualitative data will be analyzed using a theme analysis protocol developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure. This process includes 6 steps: 1) Familiarize self with data, 2) Generate initial codes, 3) Search for themes, 4) Review themes, 5) Define and name themes, and 6) Produce a report. This procedure was applied to each questionnaire item, generating intra-theme and inter-theme connections between questionnaire items. Responses deemed unclear failed to answer the question in an apparent logical sense; responses deemed ‘incorrect’ violate well-known social customs and would seem incorrect to most adults.

**RESULTS**

**Dating Experience & Desire**

**Quantitative.** Complementary to previous studies, we found that high school students with autism are less likely to have gone on a date than their neurotypical peers. A chi-square test of independence revealed a significant relationship between having autism and having ever gone on a date ($\chi^2 (1, N = 42) = 4.77, p =$
.029); that is, 50% of neurotypical students have gone on a date, compared to only 18.2% of students with autism. However, of the students who reported never having ever gone on a date, there was no statistically significant difference between the students with autism and the neurotypical students in terms of their desire to date, $\chi^2 (1, N = 30) = .74, p = .389$.

**Romantic Signaling**

**Quantitative.** No significant differences were found between the group with autism and the neurotypical group when asked “Would you tell someone you like them?”, $\chi^2 (1, N = 42) = 2.47, p = .116$: most participants in both groups responded that yes they would tell them. Similarly, no significant difference were found in the number of participants who responded yes to the question “If you are too shy to tell someone you like them, can you ask someone else to speak for you, on your behalf?”, $\chi^2 (1, N = 42) = 1.62, p = .204$, with just over half of participants from both groups responding no. The themes that emerged in the answers to the qualitative Romantic Signalling questions are discussed below.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whom else would you tell if you are interested in someone?</th>
<th>Neurotypical Participants N=20</th>
<th>Participants with Autism N=22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>18 (90%)</td>
<td>8 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings/Cousins</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
<td>4 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative. When asked how you would ask someone on a date, both groups agreed that they would be straightforward and simple (NT n=13, 68%; ASD n=13, 59%), with responses such as: “would you like to go out with me” or “do you wanna go out sometime”. Some participants from both groups further specified that they would make sure to get to know the person first before asking (NT n=3, 16%, ASD n=4, 18%), some of the NT participants (n=5, 26%) further offering specific locations they may invite a date to, such as the movies or a restaurant. Some of the participants with ASD offered incorrect and unclear responses such as: “Ask her phone number”, “by asking their name”, or saying “Hi, how are you”.

Participants’ responses to how they could tell if someone else likes them varied greatly between the ASD and NT groups. The most endorsed theme from the NT participants was that you can tell someone likes you if they give you lots of attention (n=12, 60%), while only 1 ASD participant (5%) reported this answer. Two other popular themes, endorsed by 4 NT participants (20%) each, were that they will flirt with you or that they will be nice to you. In the ASD group, on the other hand, participants had no consistent response: the strongest theme (they will smile at you) received 5 endorsements (24%); other marginally endorsed themes included body language, similar interests, being nice to you, and eye contact. This question also provoked many seemingly unclear and inappropriate answers from the ASD participants, including: “you have to look clean and handsome”, “if someone likes
me, I know he/she likes me”, “by their feelings”, “if you tell her how you truly feel about”, and “could be anything you like if you want it”.

When asked how they can show someone that you like them, NT and ASD participant’s responses also differed: NT participants reported that you can give them your time and energy (n=10, 50%) with responses such as: “spend lots of time with them” or “always be there for them”; some NT participants simply reported that they would flirt with this person (n=7, 35%). The ASD participants didn’t largely endorsed either of these themes, rather their most common response was that they would smile at them and give them eye contact (n=5, 23%); no other theme received a significant number of endorsements. Again, the ASD participants also offered some seemingly unclear or inappropriate responses, including: “You have to be excited and you need to know the person”, “I can show them I am smart”, “by asking their name”, “You[r] honesty, integrity, and your commitment”, “You[r] interest, hobbies and stuff that are companied to them”.

When asked to name people who you could ask to speak on your behalf to ask out someone you like, of those who agreed that they may do this, participants from both groups reported that they would ask a friend to act on their behalf (NT n=6, 86%; ASD n=6, 50%); a few participants from both groups also said they may ask a sibling. Some participants from the ASD group offered inappropriate responses (n=3, 25%) including their teacher or their parent.

When asked how long to wait before telling someone you like them, responses were largely the same from both groups: Most of the participants said they either wait a few weeks to a month (NT n=6, 30%; ASD n=7, 32%) or that they
would wait until they were comfortable and confident (NT n=5, 25%; ASD n=3, 14%). However many of the ASD participants also offered inappropriate or unclear responses, including: “until I dated the person and knew the person”, “I should wait until someone else like[s] them”, “Depends on the person, or day, week, month, year”, or “Sometime”.

**Romantic Knowledge**

**Quantitative.** There was no significant difference between the ASD participants’ answers and the NT participants’ answers to the question “Is there a difference between liking someone and loving someone?” ($\chi^2 (1, N = 41) = 1.59, p = .207$), with most students agreeing that, yes, there is a difference between liking someone and loving someone. Likewise, no significant differences were found between the group with autism and the neurotypical group when asked if it is OK to date someone from your school or class ($\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = .00, p = 1.000$). with most students agreeing that, yes, it is ok to date someone from school. However, students with autism responded “no” significantly more than the neurotypical students to the question, “Is it OK to date someone from your work, co-op placement, or work experience program?” ($\chi^2 (1, N = 42) = 5.18, p = .023$). And when asked, “After a date, is it ok to tell others about your date?”, significantly more participants with autism (n=12, 55%) answered ‘no’ than did the neurotypical participants (n=0, 0%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 42) = 1.60, p < .001$.

The themes that emerged in the answers to the qualitative Romantic Knowledge questions are discussed below.
**Table 3**

Where would you look to find people that you could date?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Neurotypical Participants N=20</th>
<th>Participants with Autism N=22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>18 (90%)</td>
<td>13 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Groups</td>
<td>15 (75%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
<td>8 (36%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Qualitative.** When asked where would you go and what you could do on a date, the themes that emerged in the responses were very similar for both the NT and ASD groups. Most participants in both groups said they would go to a restaurant (NT n=11, 55%; ASD n=13, 59%) or to the movies (NT n=12, 60%; ASD n=9, 41%), or that they could talk and socialize (NT n=7, 35%; ASD n=6, 27%). Neither of the groups reported any unclear or incorrect answers.

But the themes that emerged when participants explained how they should prepare and dress for a date showed differences between the two groups. Within the ASD group, many participants explicitly reported that they would ensure that they were clean and had performed proper hygiene prior to the date, n=7 (33%), while only 2 neurotypical participants endorsed this theme in their response (10%); examples of this theme include: “shower and wear nice clothes”, “put on a clean t-
shirt…” or “…brush my teeth”. Many of the NT participants (n=9, 45%) reported that they would dress accordingly depending on the setting of the date: “depends on where we are going”, “Depends on the occasion”, while only 1 of the ASD participants (5%) had this response; on the contrary, several of the ASD participants (n=5, 23%) reported that they would wear formal clothes such as ties and tuxedos, without specifying that they would be attending a formal occasion, implying that they would wear this regardless of the setting. None of the NT participants reported that they would wear formal clothes without specifying that they would only wear them if demanded by a formal setting; some participants from both conditions reported that they would dress casually (NT n=6, 30%; ASD n=4, 18%).

The themes that emerged when participants were asked about what they look for in a partner, and what their partner should be like and look like, were very similar for the two groups. Many participants in both groups endorsed specific physical appearances (NT n=14, 70%; ASD n=9, 41%) such as: pretty, nice smile, brown hair, etc. Many participants in both groups also endorsed specific personality traits (NT n=16, 80%; ASD n=12, 55%) such as: nice, funny, kind, respectful, etc. While the general desired appearances and personalities shared many common traits across both groups, the NT group offered more specifiers in terms of both appearance and personality, on average, than did the ASD group. The two groups did however differ slightly in their responses: 45% of the NT females (n=5) reported that they want their partner to be tall, or taller than themselves, while neither of the 2 ASD females reported this. On the other hand, 3 of the ASD participants (14%) reported that they would prefer that their partner be unique or authentic, “I like the
person to look just the way she is” or “crazy personality, unlike the rest”, while none of the NT participants endorsed this notion; 3 ASD participants gave unusual or unclear answers: “same quality and committed relationships”, “Asian, European, Caribbean or African American, etc.”, or “Clean, appropriate”.

Participants who responded that it is ok to tell others about your date were then asked what type of information that they would share with others about their date. Less than half of the ASD participants answered that they would share with others about their date, while all of the NT participants agreed that it is ok to share with other about their date. Of the participants who said that they would share information about their date, the type of information they reported that they would share was very similar: The majority of both the NT and ASD participants agreed that they would share where they went and what they did (NT n=12, 60%; ASD n=5, 50%) and how the date went (NT n=7, 35%; ASD n=2, 20%). Some unclear answers were reported by the ASD group such as: “my expertise”, “parents”, “school or movies”, or “I played video games, helping people”. A few of the ASD participants who reported in the previous question that they would not share information about their date with others then went on to specify the types of things that they would share with others about there date; seemingly contradicting their original response. The themes in the responses from these participants did not differ from those of the ASD participants that reported that they would share information about their date.

When asked to describe the difference between liking and loving someone, less consistent themes emerged than in the responses to the other questions. With then NT group the two most prominent themes were that loving is a more intense
version of liking (n=5, 26%) and that love is a long term commitment while liking can be more fleeting (n=6, 32%). Within the ASD the two most prominent themes were that liking is an emotion you have towards friends and loving is an emotion you have for your partner (n=8, 44%), and that love is a romantic or intimate emotion (n=6, 33%). While no ASD participants offered incorrect/unclear responses, 2 did offer tautological answers (e.g. Liking, when you like someone. Loving, when you love someone).

**Romance Learning**

**Table 4**

Where could you go to learn about romance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Neurotypical Participants N=20</th>
<th>Participants with Autism N=22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>20 (100%)</td>
<td>14 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>10 (50%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>10 (50%)</td>
<td>15 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
<td>7 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>14 (70%)</td>
<td>11 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
<td>4 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consent

Quantitative. Within the group of questions regarding consent topics, the results were less clear. In response to the question, “Is it ok to refuse to go on a date?”, a chi square analysis revealed a trend effect between the answers of the ASD group and the NT group that was just shy of statistical significance, \( \chi^2 (1, \, N = 42) = 3.66, \, p = .056 \), with more participants with autism responding “no” than did neurotypical participants. Additionally, there was no significant difference between the response of participants with autism and neurotypical participants to the question “If you approach someone you like and they are not interested, would you try again?”, \( \chi^2 (1, \, N = 41) = 1.38, \, p = .240 \), with members of both groups responding “no” more frequently than “yes”. Furthermore, in response to the question “If you like someone who is already in a relationship with another person, would you still tell them how you are feeling?” there was no significant difference between the answering of the participants with autism and the neurotypical participants (\( \chi^2 (1, \, N = 41) = 2.20, \, p = .138 \)), with most members of both groups responding that they would not tell them how they are feeling. The themes that emerged in the answers to the qualitative Consent questions are discussed below.

Qualitative. The participants who responded that it is ok to refuse a date were then asked to explain what they might say to someone to refuse a date. Of the 14 ASD participants who said that it is ok to refuse a date 8 of them (57%) said that they would turn someone down with a social nicety such as: “I have something else, sorry” or “I’m busy. I’m sick” while only 6 (30%) of the 20 NT participants who said that it is ok to refuse a date said that they would use a social nicety. Some of the
other ASD participants (n=3, 21%) reported that they would tell the other person that they are not yet ready to date. Most of the NT participants (n=9, 45%) rather reported that they would just tell the person that they are not interested, 5 NT participants (25%) explicitly reported that they would “just be honest”; 5 of the 14 ASD participants (36%) who said that it is ok to refuse a date said that they would do so by offering to reschedule; 4 ASD participants gave inappropriate answers, including: “Yes it is so I say ‘Can I go on a date?’”, “I want you to go on a date with me”, or “Ill [I’ll] change my plans if you’re free”.

When asked how another person may feel if you were to refuse to go on a date with them, almost all of the participants in both groups responded in a similar manner. All of the NT participants and most of the ASD participants (n=19, 86%) reported that the other person would feel sad, rejected, or upset. A few individuals within both groups added that although the other person would be upset that they would understand and recover quickly (NT n=4, 20%; ASD n=3, 14%). Of the ASD participants who did not endorse the aforementioned theme, 1 of them thought that the other person would not feel upset, and 2 gave unclear answers: “They can feel alright to it, because it is just one date cansoling [sic]” and “I feel a bit fine and ill keep my inner peace”.

By contrast, when asked how they would deal with someone turning down their offer to go on a date, the ASD group and NT group had very different themes emerge in their answering. The NT group overwhelmingly said that they would get over it and move on (n=12, 60%), some (n=4, 20%) specified that they would respect the other person’s decision. However only a few of the ASD participants
(n=3, 14%) said that they would move on, most rather reporting that they would ask again or try to reschedule the date for some other time (n=12, 55%). The responses from the ASD participants revolved more around staying calm, and trying to make the date time and activity work for the other person. The NT participant’s responses however revolved more around reputation management and moving on.

Still, when participants were then explicitly asked if they would re-approach someone who had previously turned them down, there was no significant difference between the number of people who said yes between the two groups. The themes that emerged when the participants were asked to explain their reasoning were not very strong nor consistent. Of the 18 NT participants who said that they would not re-approach 6 (33%) said that they would be too embarrassed, while another 5 (28%) said they would respect the other persons original decision. Of the 16 ASD participants who said that they would not re-approach, no clear themes emerged. However, none of the 16 ASD participants who said that they would not re-approach said that it was because they would be too embarrassed. The themes that were marginally endorsed included: move on, respect the decision, you could ask someone else, and that re-asking may make the other person uncomfortable. Of the two NT participants that said that they would re-approach someone after being turned down, both offered sufficient explanations: “only if I really love them”, and “Maybe they don’t feel the same way but one day they will”. Of the 5 ASD participants who said that they would re-approach someone after being turned down, 1 offered an clear answer: “Yes because maybe they had a bad day, or just don’t wanna talk” 3 of them offered unclear explanations: “Because if I like that
person I will try my friendship”, “Just not the same boy/girl a different person”, and “I would do something different”, and 1 simply repeated that they would ask again but did not explain their decision: “I would ask again at another time”.

When participants were asked if they would tell someone that they had feelings for them even if the other person was already in a relationship most of the participants in each group said no, however some from both groups did said yes. Of those who said no the most endorsed theme for each group was that they wanted to respect the other persons relationship and wouldn’t want to interfere or ruin it (NT n=10, 63%; ASD n=5, 36%). Aside from that main theme, a few other themes were marginally endorsed, including: it would be awkward, it would be a waste of time, and just move on. Within the ASD group a few unique themes emerged: it would upset their partner (n=3, 21%), and the person is taken already (n=3, 21%). Of those who said that yes they would still let the other person know how they feel no reoccuring themes emerged. 2 of the NT participants and one of the ASD participants reported that they would want to get it off their chest or express themselves; 5 of the 8 ASD participants responded with unclear answers such as: “I would tell if I was nice”, “it would increase my chances for later on”, “because a person is my friend”, “I could tell them I like them as a friends”, and “tell them about what happened”.

Discussion

While this study is exploratory in nature, it was hypothesized that there would be differences in responding between the ASD and NT participants, which indeed
were found. Within-theme trends in responding will first be discussed and then more general trends from responses across all themes.

**Dating Experience and Desire**

As found in previous studies (Strunz et al., 2017), most of our ASD sample reported wanting to go on a date; no difference was found between the level of desire expressed by the ASD sample and the NT sample. However, while half of the NT sample reported having previously gone on a date, less than one fifth (18%) of the ASD sample reported having ever gone on a date. The fact that these desires are not reaching fruition is a large part of what is discussed in this paper; why do individuals with ASD go on less dates than their NT peers when they express equal amounts of desire? The themes discussed in the following sections can help to explain this disconnect.

**Romantic Signaling**

Within both the NT and ASD samples, most participants agreed that they would tell someone that they like them, and that you should not ask someone to do this for you on your behalf; however their reports on who they would tell if they liked someone did differ: The NT sample overwhelmingly reported that they would tell their friends (90%), with just under half reporting that they would tell their siblings and cousins (40%); none of the NT sample reported that they would tell their parents or teachers. This contrasts drastically with the ASD sample, who only moderately endorsed that they would tell theirs friends (36%) or their siblings/cousins (18%), and also moderately endorsed that they would tell their parents (32%), and their teachers (5%). This is interesting as it suggests that many ASD youth have a
propensity to rely on their parents/other adults in their life as confidants rather than their same age peers. This demonstrated reliance on adults rather than peers strips a whole layer of experience from their repertoire as a parent’s understanding of modern teen dating is inherently incomplete due to their distance from the subject matter.

When asked how one could signal romantic interest to others as well as recognizes romantic signal from others, the ASD sample’s responses were very different from those of the NT sample. The most commonly reported romantic signal from the ASD sample was smiling. Most people would agree that smiling is a fairly platonic gesture, something you can appropriately offer to a co-worker or stranger; one can imagine the confusion a student with ASD could experience if they were to interpret someone’s smile as a romantic gesture, as this could lead them to believe that their romantic gestures are being encouraged and welcoming, when truly the other person is simply offering them a nominally kind gesture. Furthermore, this could lead someone to believe that they were appropriately signaling romantic interest and eventually being let down when the other person does not respond to their gesture, when in actuality they have yet to make a romantic advance. Both sides of this misconception could lead a student with ASD growing frustrated with the mixed connections. This type of signaling misconception might help to explain why individuals with ASD persist in their pursuit of a romantic interest longer than their NT peers, as they may be misinterpreting social niceties from the subject of their affection as romantic gestures. These misconceptions were in contrast to
answers from the NT sample such as offering someone lots of your time, giving someone repeated compliments, or flirting.

**Romantic Knowledge**

Both groups agreed that the movies or a restaurant is an appropriate place for a date, somewhere you can socialize. Furthermore both groups offered similar descriptions of what they look for in a partner. While both the ASD and NT samples endorsed similar physical appearance traits (handsome, pretty, nice smile, etc.) and similar personality traits (nice, funny, kind, etc.), the ASD group reported less physical and personality specifiers than did the NT sample on average. This may be because ASD students are less confident with their ability to attract a partner and therefore keep themselves open to a wider variety of potential partners. It may also be because they are less social motivated (Corbett et al., 2014), and therefore may be less motivated by the many social customs regarding what makes a potential partner attractive. For example, one such societal norm would be that in a relationship with a man and a woman, the man should be taller than the woman. This theme was reflected in the answering of the NT females, with 45% reporting that they prefer their partners to be tall, or taller than themselves. However none of the ASD participants responded this way. Perhaps these types of societal expectations are less motivating for students with ASD than their NT peers. However, even with this wider range of potential partners, students with ASD still go on fewer dates than NT students.

Both students with ASD and NT students agree that there is a difference between liking someone and loving someone, however, they conceptualized this
difference differently. NT participants described liking as a more intense version of loving, or more of a long-term commitment than liking. The ASD students however reported that liking is an emotion for friends while loving is an emotion for your partner, and that love is a more romantic and intimate emotion. While one could speculate that the more categorical distinction of the ASD participants is a product of their concrete rigid thinking, more research on this topic is needed (Noens, 2005).

While the survey topic likely primed the participants to consider romantic love specifically, it is interesting that neither groups mentioned platonic or familial love in their descriptions.

While both NT and ASD participants agree that it is ok to date someone from your class, students with ASD reported that it is not ok to date someone from work/co-op more so than did NT students. This could be due in part to some workplaces discouraging company romances combined with the rigid and literal thinking characteristic of ASD (Noens, 2005); some NT students may feel that this rules only applies in certain circumstances, or perhaps this applies to adults in career positions more so than students in part time jobs. Further investigation is needed for a conclusive understanding of the topic.

Discussions from the ASD participants regarding completing proper hygiene when asked how they would prepare themselves for a date were noteworthy. Maintaining proper hygiene is an area that many youth with ASD struggle with, and is a subject often explicitly taught in school and in life skills programs (Stokes, Cameron, Dorsey, Fleming, 2004). This provides hope that any supplementary curriculum developed from studies such as this one and delivered to students with
ASD would be absorbed, remembered, and applied when the opportunity presented itself.

Another discrepancy between the ASD and NT participants in regards to preparing for a date was the fact that the ASD participants failed to report that they would consider the occasion/setting when planning how they would prepare and dress. While many of the NT participants reported that their preparation would depend on the date setting, none of the ASD participants mentioned this as a factor to consider. Many said they would dress formally or wear a tie, when—depending on the situation—this might seem inappropriate and awkward. Trouble recognizing social contexts is a deficit characteristic of ASD (Greimel et al., 2012), so while this finding is not surprising, it ought to be addressed when developing romance and sexuality curriculums.

**Romantic Learning**

When explicitly asked where they go to learn more about romance, NT high school students and high school students with ASD responded very differently. While every single NT participant reported that they would go to their friends for information on romance, only 64% of ASD participants said the same. This trend also extended to peers with 50% of NT participants reporting that they would turn to peers for information on romance while only 14% of ASD participants reported so. Conversely, more ASD participants (68%) reported that they would turn to their parents than did the NT participants (50%). Of the ASD participants, 18% also reported that they would go to their chaplain, while zero NT participants reported that they would do go to their chaplain. These comparisons considered together
demonstrate that ASD participants indicate a propensity for adult support while their NT peers overwhelmingly indicate a preference for peer support. Similar to the comparison on romantic interest disclosure, the ASD participants seem to rely on their parents and other adults in their lives much more than their peers, a finding that has been replicated in parental report studies as well (Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009).

Consent

One of the most alarming results in this study was the finding the trend effect showing that participants with ASD are more likely to report that you cannot turn down a date when asked by someone else as compared to the NT participants. This finding may help to explain some of the increased sexual victimization rates we see in the ASD community (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014). Additionally, the fact that ASD participants responded “no” significantly more often than did the NT participants when asked if after going on a date you can tell others about your date. ASD adolescents desire to please other people, a general social naivety, and an idea that you must keep you dates a secret creates a very problematic circumstance. Not only do some individuals with ASD feel that they are not allowed to turn someone down, they further believe that they are not allowed to tell others about their dates; this creates a very vulnerable circumstance that may expose a person to experience abuse and/or assault while cut off from their support network in a cone a silence. Compounded with the fact that many of the ASD participants report opting for parental support over peer support, their reference point for a healthy relationships may be absent as they may not be associating with many same age peers, after
whom they can model their own relationships. Furthermore, of those who said that they would feel comfortable turning someone down, the participants with ASD preferred to use social niceties (e.g., “Sorry I’m busy”), while the NT participants insisted that they would be honest about how they were feeling. This implies that even when they are feeling able to turn someone down, they try and let them down lightly, blaming the circumstance rather than their lack on interest. This apparent pressure not to upset the other person was not expressed explicitly or implicitly by the NT participants. This extends this idea that ASD youth may be feeling uncomfortable with being straightforward and may lack the confidence to express their feelings of disinterest; a discomfort that may lead to self-sacrificing compromises.

Quantitatively, the ASD and NT groups were in agreement that they would not re-approach someone after being turned down, and that they would also opt not to tell someone that they had feelings for them if that person were already in a relationship. However, when asked how they would deal with being turned down, the majority of the ASD participants stressed that they would try and reschedule, try and make it work better for the other person—one even claiming to try and “just remain calm”. Perhaps this extends the idea that the participants with ASD have a desire to please their potential partners, or perhaps it is simply a plea of desperation. Many of the NT participants stressed that feeling awkward and embarrassed would stop them from re-approaching someone who previously turned them down, however none of the ASD participants reported this. Perhaps it is this inhibitory embarrassment that the participants with ASD lack; they don’t realize that some
people find re-approaching someone humiliating. These repeated attempts at romantic gestures would undoubtedly grow to annoy some of their potential partners, which would actually lower their chances at securing a date. Furthermore, this persistently repeated pursuit of one individual would consume time and energy that could be invested into pursuing other potential partners; not only are they frustrating the subjects of their affection, but they are also failing to pursue other options. Both of these could help to explain why individual with ASD seem to have less dates than their NT peers.

**General Discussion**

Across all of the themes, and many of the questions, the ASD participants offered more inappropriate or unclear answers than did the NT participants. The ASD participants often struggled with the answers to qualitative questions that gave participants an opportunity to explain their previous quantitative answer. For example, to explain why they would choose to tell someone they have feelings for them even if this other person was already in a relationship, one participant said: “tell them about what happened”. Or, when asked how long you would wait to tell someone you like them, one participant answered: “until I dated the person and knew the person”. These follow-up answers failed to explain their initial responses in a readily apparent manner. These types of responses contrasted the clear follow up answers offered by the NT participants; for example, one NT participant said that they would re-approach someone after being turned down, but offered the explanation of: “Maybe they don’t feel the same way, but one day they will”. These more frequent unclear answers offered by the ASD sample may reflect an issue with
social communication (Noens, 2005). It would be worthwhile to probe these apparently unclear answers in a more lengthy interview format, to try and gain a better understanding of the participants true sentiment.

**Limitations**

Being the first of its kind, and exploratory in nature, this study has some limitations. A larger sample size would allow for more elaborate quantitative analyses. However, since this is a clinical sample, and a youth sample, at least 20 participants in each group is consistent with other research that used an interview approach, although ideally they should have been more fully matched for age and gender. Furthermore, the gender ratio discrepancy between the ASD and the NT samples limits our ability to make conclusions specifically about the difference between males and females, as well as between ASD females and NT females. One may consider that the trends found within this paper are more strongly supported within males, however, I believe that the comparisons have some validity for females as well: this would be an important topic for future research.

**Further Research**

This study is the first of its kind, the first to ask high school students with ASD for their first hand opinions and perspectives on romance, and while many noteworthy trends were found, much more research into this area is needed. Future research would benefit from interview style data collection, which would allow the researchers to probe for more information when interesting, ambiguous or incomplete, answers were offered. While interview methods can be fruitful for any research topic, it may be especially helpful when researching such a nuanced topic.
within a group of people who struggle with social communication. Further, extending this research into actual experience of romance and sexuality would be productive in addition to the topic of romantic debut: many people also make sexual debut in adolescence, and with the issues of romantic consent appearing to correspond with the problematic rates of sexual victimization in the ASD population, teens with ASD could be also be struggling with understanding and practicing proper sexual consent (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Dewinter et al., 2016). As this study was just the starting point, researchers might explore any one of the themes from this study at greater length.

**Conclusion**

As expected, many of the conceptions high school age students with ASD have about dating and romance are somewhat askew, compared to the notions of their NT peers. First and foremost, high school age students with ASD express no less desire to date than do their same age NT peers. However, even though most teens with ASD express interest in dating, less than half as many ASD teens have ever gone on a date, as compared to their NT peers. This could be partially due to misconceptions more commonly held by ASD teens regarding romantic signaling, such as a failure to recognize common flirting strategies and a misrepresentation of innocuous friendly gestures as romantic advances. Furthermore, participants with ASD claimed they would engage in more persistent repetitive romantic pursuits that could become annoying or frustrating to the subjects of their affection. Lastly, more so than they NT peers, some students with ASD reported an incomplete understanding of consent, responding that they feel that they are not allowed to turn
down a date, and that it is not ok to tell other people about what happens on their dates. While conformity to NT romance customs and practices is not a goal in itself, some of these differences are inherently problematic and could lead teens with ASD into dangerous situations. This research can serve to inform future research on romance and sexuality among individuals with ASD. Although the ASD community has made great strides towards societal understanding and acceptance, there is still a great ways to go, especially in regards to understanding and supporting their romance and sexuality. In order to best serve the ASD community, researchers need to continuing to rely on the voices of the community members themselves in research, parliament, and everyday life. By continuing to honour the voices and experiences of the community we can work to increase their romantic knowledge and skills and help them to realize their romantic desires in ways that ultimately improve quality of life for a great number of people.
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