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"*I can't imagine being able to cope on my own...I'll be a disaster*":

An exploration of autistic adolescents' views of adulthood and the adult future self

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Abstract

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical developmental phase. This is often a testing period for many adolescents but for individuals who are autistic, it may be even more challenging. This research aimed to explore how autistic adolescents perceive adulthood and think about their future selves as adults. This study sought to investigate their concerns, aspirations, and expectations for adulthood, providing a comprehensive understanding of their views. A qualitative approach was employed, using the grid elaboration method to scaffold data collection during interviews with six autistic adolescents.

Using reflexive thematic analysis, this research identified and examined five key themes from the participants' responses; *Aspirations for Independence and Agency, Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap, Life Skills for Independent Living, Social Skills and Relationship Building, and Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers.* The findings suggest that autistic adolescents often think about independence, relationships, and careers when contemplating their future selves in adulthood. Analysis further highlighted significant tensions between participants' hopes for the future and the expectations of achieving these goals. While autistic adolescents appear to aspire to be self-reliant and form positive relationships, they also express concerns about skill gaps and uncertainties in achieving their goals.

This research offers insight into the specific needs and challenges faced by autistic adolescents as they think about and plan for adulthood. The study highlights several implications for educational professionals, emphasising the importance of adopting strengths-based, person-centred approaches. These findings suggest a need for developing targeted support programs that enhance self-reliance, social skills, and career planning among autistic adolescents.

Future research could employ longitudinal methods to track changes in autistic adolescent views over time. Additionally, incorporating quantitative measures to explore structural factors that may influence autistic adolescents' views of adulthood could provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

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It is fair to say that starting the doctorate at the tail end of a pandemic, while also having cancer treatment has not been plain sailing but helped enormously by my family and fellow TEPs' encouragement and belief in me. For that, I offer my deepest gratitude.

1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research presented in this thesis, which is an exploration of autistic adolescents' perceptions of adulthood using a reflexive thematic analysis. The chapter starts by considering the terminology and definitions used to describe autism, followed by a consideration of the different ways that autism has been conceptualised. After this, I outline my personal and professional interests in this topic, followed by a discussion of the value and aims of this study.

1.1   Definitions and Conceptualisations of Autism

This study focuses on young people who are autistic. In order to effectively consider their strengths, needs and support they require, there needs to be some shared understanding of what autism is and what it means to be autistic. This section starts by considering the language used to represent and define autism, followed by a brief overview of key conceptualisations of autism. The section ends with a consideration of my own philosophical positioning.

1.1.1 Definitions of Autism.

Since the term *infantile autism* was first used by Kanner (1943) the terminology used to define autism has evolved, reflecting the development of clinical and research understanding, and a shift in societal and lived experience perspectives. *Autism Spectrum 'Condition'* (ASC) or '*Disorder*' (ASD) (Wing & Gould, 1979; Frith, 1991; Roth, 2010) are terms often used by clinicians in the context of diagnosis and clinical practice. *Asperger syndrome*, a further term that has also been used, refers to a form of autism characterised by the absence of learning difficulties or language delay, has now been removed as a distinct diagnosis from the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). The language used to discuss autism has implications for societal perceptions of autism and the stigma experienced by autistic individuals (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

One debate around terminology centres around the use of person-first language (PFL) e.g. individual with autism versus identity-first language (IFL) e.g. autistic individual. PFL is argued to emphasise the person rather than their disability or condition by acknowledging a distinct separation and aims to emphasise that the individual is not defined by their condition (Maio, 2001). However, research suggests that while professionals have been found to lean towards PFL, IFL is often preferred

by the autistic community, who argue that, by emphasising this separation, PFL inadvertently accentuates stigma (Bury et al, 2020; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Keating et al., 2023). Indeed, one recent study (Taboas et al. 2023) reported that 87% of their sample of autistic adults favoured the use of terms such as autistic person as opposed to PFL language. The preference for IFL is increasingly recognised in professional settings as well in current guidelines from influential organisations such as the National Autistic Society (NAS, 2024) and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice, 2024), now advocating for the use of IFL.

In this research, I use the term *autistic adolescents/young people/individuals*. While recognising that individual preferences around terminology will vary (Vivanti, 2000), this choice aligns with the growing body of research which points to a preference for identity-first language in the autistic community.

1.1.2   Conceptualisations of Autism?

While autism is broadly recognised as a neurodevelopmental condition which impacts communication, interaction and information processing (Kamp-Becker, 2024), different ways of understanding autism have developed over time; from the first inclusion in the DSM-III, which identified autism as a disability, to more recent perceptions of autism as a positive identity (Rosen et al., 2021). These differing perspectives have implications for the way that autism is conceptualised, and assessed, and the types of support (if any) that are implemented (Schuck et al., 2022).

The National Health Service (NHS) and the National Autistic Society (NAS) offer social and clinical perspectives of autism in the context of the UK. The NHS describes autism as a "lifelong developmental condition. It affects the way a person communicates, interacts and processes information" (NHS, 2024), whilst acknowledging that "every autistic person is different and has different experiences". Similarly, the NAS (2024) aligns with this view, stating that autism is "a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world". These perspectives emphasise that autism impacts people in different ways, but common challenges relate to social communication and interaction, repetitive

and restrictive behaviours, sensory sensitivity, intense interests, anxiety and meltdowns.

1.1.2.1 The Biomedical Model of Autism.

The historical, and perhaps currently prevailing conceptualisation of autism is represented in a biomedical model. This conceptualisation is predicated on the assumption that reality can be objectively observed and measured in research and diagnosis. This perspective of autism is captured within established diagnostic frameworks, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th Edition (DSM-V) (APA, 2013), and The World Health Organisation's (WHO) International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11; WHO, 2019), which provide a structured approach to understanding and identifying autism. Both the DSM-V and the ICD-11 characterise autism in terms of impairments in communication and cognition, and behaviour patterns that have early onset and that suggest abnormal brain development. These frameworks endorse the view of autism as a disorder with significant genetic and neurobiological components (Greaves-Lord et al., 2022)

The ICD-11 identifies two core domains for diagnosis: deficits in social communication and social interaction that are persistent and seen in a number of different contexts, and, restricted, repetitive behaviours and interests. The ICD-11 also stipulates that symptoms must be associated with significant impairment in important areas of functioning. Likewise, the DSM-V requires that individuals meet similar criteria relating to communication, interaction and sustaining relationships, as well as at least two further criteria relating to restrictive and repetitive behaviours or interests (APA, 2013). Despite the seemingly objective nature of these classifications, it is argued that the assessment and diagnostic process remain inherently subjective, relying on clinicians' interpretations of observed and reported behaviour and qualitative descriptions of symptoms (Kamp-Becker, 2024). While the biomedical ontology of autism assumes an objective reality in research and diagnosis, the practical application is inherently subjective. There is significant reliance on clinical and professional judgment and interpretation in the diagnostic process.

The medical construction of autism has increasingly been viewed as pathologising; focused on deficits rather than strengths and failing to recognise the

heterogeneity and subjectivity of individual experience (Billington, 2013). Such an approach risks the diagnosis eclipsing specific needs, leading to a situation where the individual "disappears under the weight of their diagnostic label" (Billington, 2013, p.17). Furthermore, diagnostic categories espoused by the medical approach lack specificity and often overlap, with substantial proportions of individuals fitting criteria for multiple diagnoses, such as ADHD and autism (Astle et al., 2021).

1.1.2.2 The Range of Need Associated with Autism Diagnosis.

While diagnostic criteria such as those outlined in the DSM-V (APA, 2013) and ICD-11 (ICD-11; WHO, 2019) point to specific differences and difficulties in communication, social interaction, and information processing, the impact on functioning can vary widely among autistic individuals. Historically, autism diagnoses have been categorised by different levels of severity, but due to current views of the context-dependent nature of the impact, there has been a shift away from this approach (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). This change is also reflected in the removal of Asperger's syndrome as a distinct category from both diagnostic manuals, recognising the spectrum of autism as a continuum of presentations (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019).

Autistic individuals may experience varying levels of difficulty across different areas, significantly impacting their functioning and varying by context (National Autistic Society, 2024). A range of communication difficulties and differences might be present in autistic individuals. For example, communication differences may range from an individual being non-verbal in some or all situations, relying on alternative communication methods, to experiencing some difficulty with conversation skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; The National Autistic Society, 2024). Social interaction issues may range from complete avoidance of interaction to struggling with initiating and maintaining friendships (Griffiths et al., 2016; Crompton & Bond, 2022). Moreover, sensory processing differences can cause extreme distress or discomfort due to over- or under-sensitivity to stimuli, in certain environments, but not others (Kranowitz, 2005; Bogdashina, 2016). All of these differences and difficulties may be context-dependent, with varying degrees of support and adaptation required at home, school, or work to help individuals navigate and manage their unique challenges effectively (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

The participants in this study were autistic adolescents from a mainstream educational setting who possessed fluent language skills. The data was taken from autistic adolescents who did not have additional learning or language needs, seeking to understand the challenges faced by autistic adolescents who are often expected to succeed in mainstream environments without specialised support. By focusing on autistic adolescents in mainstream educational settings, the research aims to address the specific needs and experiences of this group, who often face unique challenges and opportunities. It is hoped that understanding their perspectives may help to develop better support strategies within mainstream education. This specific demographic was selected to ensure that participants could fully engage with the research activities, outlined in Section 3.2.3.4, and articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences effectively, contributing to the richness and depth of the data collected.

1.1.2.3 The Shift Towards the Neurodiversity Paradigm.

There has been a shift in perspectives on autism in more recent years, largely due to contributions from autistic activists and allies (Pellicano et al., 2018). These voices advocate for autism to be viewed through a neurodiversity lens. Conceptualising autism as a variation in brain development, or a form of social identity, also takes account of social inequalities that shape the lives of autistic people (Pellicano et al., 2018; Strand, 2017; Kourti, 2020). This approach challenges the idea that diagnostic classifications represent profiles that are ontologically distinct. Instead, promoting a view which acknowledges that needs, difficulties and experiences can vary widely while there may also be overlapping needs and diagnoses (Astle et al., 2021).

Research plays a role in embedding shifts in how autism is conceptualised over time. However, research has historically been dominated by non-autistic observers' analysis of autistic behaviour (Botha, 2021; Kourti, 2021). Pellicano et al., (2014) reported that over two-thirds of autism research published between 2001 and 2012 focused on underlying causes and biology, with limited publications focusing on experiences of diagnosis, intervention, or support. Furthermore, Pellicano et al. (2014) reported significant dissatisfaction from the autistic community with this research approach, instead indicating that they desired research that was relevant to supporting autistic people in their daily lives. There is growing evidence, however,

that autistic voices are increasingly being included in research. For example, qualitative studies that gather the views of autistic people have helped to highlight concepts such as autistic burnout and inertia, demonstrating how autistic individuals actively construct meaning from their experiences (Raymaker et al., 2020; Leadbitter et al., 2021).

Advocacy provided by autistic individuals and their allies has led to a transformative shift in how autism is conceptualised and researched. Moving away from a deficit-focused view, the neurodiversity paradigm reframes autism as a difference rather than a disability, promoting acceptance, understanding, and full participation in society (Silberman, 2017). This evolving perspective emphasises the importance of understanding the lived experiences of autistic people, encouraging studies and policies that respect self-identification over traditional diagnostic frameworks. As such, participants in this current research were required to self-identify as autistic rather than needing a diagnosis.

1.1.2.4 Autism Through a Critical Realist Lens.

It is important for researchers to consider their philosophical approach to autism, as perspectives may influence all aspects of the research process, including planning, interacting with participants, interpreting findings and making recommendations for practice (Botha, 2021). As discussed above, autism research has tended to be rooted within a positivistic biomedical framework, which characterises autism as a biological disorder or disability, overlooking the societal context within which these identities are experienced (Bai et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2014). Interpretivism and social constructionism may offer an alternative view arguing that reality is shaped by our interactions and interpretations (Botha, 2021), indicating that autism can be understood through societal and cultural contexts. However, while these approaches emphasise the subjective experiences and meanings of autism, they may miss the objective, measurable aspects of autism that can be important for diagnosis, treatment, and understanding its biological underpinnings (Mack, 2010; Pham, 2018).

In this current research, I employ critical realism (CR) as a way of understanding autistic adolescents' experiences and views. CR offers an alternative framework for understanding autism, acknowledging both the biological aspects and

individual experiences of autistic individuals within social contexts. (Kourti, 2021). This approach promotes a holistic view that is neglected in traditional approaches that isolate biological or social factors. This philosophy recognises that while autism has biological underpinnings, social, cultural, and personal perspectives also influence how it is experienced by autistic people and is more widely understood (Pham, 2018). Importantly CR advocates for the active inclusion of autistic individuals in research, valuing their insights and fostering a participatory approach that ensures studies are conducted with them, not merely about them (Kourti, 2021). This aligns with my values as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). I view educational psychology as a means to advocate for equity, inclusivity and opportunity (Schulze et al., 2017). I believe that I have a role in promoting social justice by working with children, families, and professionals.

By challenging the traditional divide between objective facts and subjective values, CR encourages a research paradigm that not only seeks to understand autism but also aims to improve the lives of autistic individuals (Botha, 2021). My philosophical approach to research is further explored in section 3.1.

1.2   Positionality and Research Interests

My interest in researching how autistic adolescents imagine their adulthood is rooted in both my professional background and personal experiences. Before becoming a TEP, I was a secondary school teacher in England for over 17 years, teaching young people from 11-18 years of age. I enjoyed working with adolescents and was aware of the struggles they experienced as they passed through this difficult stage. I also have two children, one of whom is neurodiverse, who have transitioned through school and onto university study. It is fair to say this was a challenging period for us all, and very much reinforced the inherent difficulties in making decisions and planning for the future during this time experienced by young people.

Alongside my studies, I also trained as a therapeutic counsellor, with one placement taking place in a college with autistic young people from the age of 16 upwards. This in particular has influenced my perspective of autistic young people and my reflexivity. On this placement, I was working with young people who were undergoing enormous challenges or were dealing with the impact of traumatic

experiences, anxiety and uncertainty while trying to complete their education. Finally, as a TEP I am increasingly aware of autistic children and young people trying to work their way through the education system and my duty to empower and advocate for them and their families. Understanding and supporting autistic adolescents' views on their futures is more than an academic interest; it is a commitment to improving their current experience as well as their transition into adulthood.

Adopting a reflexive approach in my research has been valuable in acknowledging the influence of my personal and professional experiences on the research process. In this thesis, I start from the assumption that as a researcher, I influence the research, and I have tried to make this transparent throughout. I have aimed to be open about my research process and decisions, and have tried to acknowledge the influence of my position throughout my methodology, analysis, and discussion.

1.3   Relevance, Value and Aims of this Research

Adolescence is a time for thinking about moving into adulthood, making significant life choices and decisions (Nurmi et al., 1991; Nurmi, 1995). It is also a time of considerable change and transitions which can be difficult to navigate. For autistic individuals, the difficulties may be compounded by differences and needs associated with autism. These characteristics, such as social communication difficulties, restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests may make transitions particularly challenging for autistic adolescents. For instance, autistic young people often prefer sameness and may find it uncomfortable or even distressing to deviate from their usual routines. Indeed, we know that the transition experiences and outcomes for autistic young people often do not match with those of their peers or even individuals with other disabilities; fewer complete higher education, maintain stable jobs, and they are also less likely to have positive social engagement (Hatfield et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2019; Office for National Statistics, 2021). Despite legislative efforts, such as the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014b) and policies outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015), there remains a gap between espoused support and the actual experiences of autistic adolescents. These policies advocate for inclusive education and transition support that are tailored to individual needs, yet research indicates persistent shortcomings in their execution, leading to suboptimal outcomes in employment, independence, and social

engagement for autistic adults (Newman et al., 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2021).

The majority of research to date has explored outcomes and transition experiences, but there is limited examination of autistic adolescents' views of themselves as adults. Exploring young people's own perspectives of adulthood is important as the extant literature often relies on a narrow definition of adulthood, one rooted in both traditional views of markers of adulthood (Anderson, 2016) and one based on neurotypical expectations and conceptualisations of adulthood (Sosnowy et al., 2018). Furthermore, there remains a paucity of literature that incorporates autistic voices into the research that shapes the policies affecting them (Cribb et al., 2019; Sosnowy et al., 2018). By focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of autistic individuals, this study seeks to bridge this gap, providing empirical data that can inform more effective and empathetic support from the professionals who work with autistic young people. This research aims to develop an understanding of how autistic individuals view their adult future selves, which is important for understanding their hopes, concerns and expectations. By focusing on autistic voices, this study seeks to align with current advocacy for more inclusive and representative research methodologies. This study aims to promote positive experiences during adolescence as well as support understanding of the experience of transitioning into adulthood.

In this study, a qualitative research design was used to explore six autistic young people's views of adulthood. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to analyse the interview data. Extracts from my reflexivity journal are presented in section 3.3.

1.4   Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 examines psychological theories and empirical research regarding conceptualisations of adolescence and adulthood, exploring the transition into adulthood and the needs of autistic young people during this period. This chapter also incorporates a systematic review of the literature on autistic individuals' perceptions of their transition to adulthood, influenced by their distinct needs and differences. Chapter 3 provides details of the qualitative research design and the philosophical assumptions upon which it was grounded. This chapter also includes

an account of how data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke (2021). Chapter 4 provides analytical interpretations of participant data, organised by themes and subthemes relating to autistic young people's perceptions of adulthood. Chapter 5 discusses findings in the context of relevant psychological theory and empirical research, It also explores implications for autistic young people, and the professionals who support them. Thesis conclusions are presented in Chapter 6.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Chapter Overview

This chapter starts with a narrative review of the literature which aims to explore what psychological theory and research say about how adolescence is conceptualised and the developmental changes that occur over this period. This is followed by a review of what the research tells us about adulthood as a life stage. The chapter then goes on to discuss the concept of the future self, the impact this has on motivation for the future, and how policy aims to support young people in their transition to adulthood. The focus then moves on to how autistic people experience adolescence, their preparation for adulthood, and the UK policy and guidance in place to support them. This is followed by an exploration of how autistic individuals' needs and differences impact their imagining of the future, along with a discussion of the importance of including first-person autistic voices in research, policy and professional practice. In the second part of this chapter a systematic review of the literature is presented. This explores the question: *what does the academic research literature tell us about how autistic young people think about their future as an adult?* This chapter concludes with a consideration of the rationale, aims, and research questions for the main study.

2.2   Adolescence and Adulthood

2.2.1   Adolescence, a Difficult Life Stage

Adolescence is considered to be the transition and developmental period between childhood and adulthood (Kim-Spoon, Farley, 2014). The extended period of adolescence is largely an invention of post-industrial revolution western culture, whereby the advent of new technology required more time in school, effectively delaying work, marriage and child bearing, and as such adult status (Lawrence & Valsiner, 1997). Adolescence involves puberty, a biologically defined period, whereby the individual matures physically, and results in the individual becoming capable of sexual reproduction (Ambler et al., 2013). However, it also includes broader changes in thinking, interests, social and emotional development and experiences (Spear, 2000). Furthermore, during this time young people also experience hormonal changes and undergo considerable brain maturation (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Adolescence is widely acknowledged as a complex developmental phase, marked by significant social, emotional, and physical transformations (Kim-Spoon, Farley, 2014). During this period, individuals endeavour to establish their sense of self and strive for autonomy, while encountering many challenges and pressures (Erikson, 1968). The adolescent period is not clearly defined but is most commonly considered to include the period between 12 and 18 years of age. However, neuroscientific research proposes that brain maturation, particularly in areas related to decision-making and impulse control, continues until around the age of 24 to 30, lending credence to the notion of an extended transition into full adulthood (Steinberg, 2005). Furthermore, research suggests that modern societal changes, prolonged education, and delayed life milestones have also delayed individuals in taking on traditional adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000).

2.2.2 Conceptualisations of Adulthood

Adolescence is conceptualised as the period between childhood and adulthood and part of the role of those supporting young people is in facilitating the transition into adulthood (Kim-Spoon & Farley,2014). As such, it is important to consider what is meant by the concept of adulthood and where the boundary lies between adolescence and adulthood. Historically, adulthood has been defined through reaching legal majority and achieving key socio-demographic markers such as a stable career, marriage and parenthood (e.g. Erikson, 1950; Havighurst, 1953). There is no clear-cut definition, and the answer may depend on prevailing cultural, legal and family perspectives (Arnett, 2015).

A number of psychological models have been developed to define and understand different phases of the lifespan and transitions across phases, including, Erikson's (1963, 1968) theory of psychosocial development (see section 2.5) and Arnett's (2000) Emerging Adulthood theory (outlined in section 2.2.3). However, in order to support young people as they transition into adulthood, it may be particularly important to understand their personal constructions of adulthood.

Arnett (2001) carried out a study, asking 519 participants, from the age of 13 to 55, about what it takes to be considered to be an adult. Participants were asked to evaluate the importance of possible criteria for the transition to adulthood. These criteria were derived from psychological, sociological and anthropological research into the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Perry, 1999), and included; role

transitions (e.g. getting married), family capacities (e.g. ability to look after children), norm compliance (e.g. abiding by the law), and individualistic transitions (e.g. determination of one's personal value system). The study also considered biological and legal transitions. Taking responsibility for one's actions was the most commonly cited characteristic, followed by determining one's personal values, attaining financial freedom and the capacity to support family. The more traditional markers, such as legal transitions (e.g. reaching a legally determined age) and role transitions (e.g. employment and marriage) were the least likely to be cited as significant criteria. Arnett found that conceptualisations of adulthood were largely consistent across all age ranges. However, there were some significant age related differences. The oldest participants indicated that adhering to social norms and expectations was an important feature of adulthood, whereas the youngest did not. Furthermore, younger participants placed more importance on biolgical changes, such as puberty, than older individuals. Arnett contends that these age related variations may be explained by the immediacy of experiencing individual transition criteria.

A meta-analysis conducted by Wright et al (2023a) explored publications on markers of adulthood over the previous 30 years, finding a shift in individuals' views. The research found that fewer than 25% of respondents endorsed more traditional indicators of adulthood, such as marriage and parenthood, while almost 60% endorsed a stable career as a key marker, suggesting contemporary views of adulthood prioritise career stability over family context.

Studies have consistently found that character or psychological qualities relating to individualism are more important to young people than traditional socio-demographic markers in understanding adulthood, indicating that, for most, skills and abilities are more significant than specific outcomes (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Wright et al., 2023a). Indeed, a recent study (Wright et al, 2023b) exploring attitudes to adulthood, found that most participants defined adulthood through psychological qualities; financial independence, looking after one's self, accepting responsibility for one's actions and making independent choices were the most frequently endorsed markers. Indeed, 80% of respondents highlighted accepting responsibility for their actions as a key feature, while in contrast, only 22-40% endorsed socio-demographic markers. However, it should be acknowledged that this observation may also reflect the individualistic nature of the cultures of the participants included in these studies (Triandis, 2001).

2.2.3 Emerging Adulthood.

Arnett (2000) argued that the concept of adulthood is a cultural construction and that it varies between different societies and over time. As discussed above in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.1 shifts in modern society, such as prolonged education, and delayed life milestones have also delayed individuals in taking on traditional adult responsibilities. Arnett (2000) argued that lifespan frameworks that have adolescents transitioning directly to adulthood may be inadequate and proposed the theory of emerging adulthood (EA) to address this gap. EA is defined as the period between 18 and 29 years of age and is characterised by increased *self-focus, exploration* and *instability*, alongside feelings of *possibility* and *in-between* (Arnett, 2015; Gilmore, 2019; Javier et al., 2020). The concept of *exploration* indicates that young people engage in focused inquiry related to aspects of their lives such as careers, relationships and personal beliefs (Arnett, 2015). This allows them to problem-solve and make decisions that align with their developing identities and future aspirations (Arnett, 2011, 2015). *Instability* denotes the unpredictable change that occurs in the lives of emerging adults, particularly in their living arrangements. For example, data suggests that approximately 50% of emerging adults will return to the family home after living away from home while attending university (ONS, 2023). *Feeling in-between* characterises how emerging adults often feel unable to identify fully as either adults or adolescents. Indeed, empirical evidence highlights that approximately 60% of emerging adults report that they do not feel like adults or adolescents, suggesting that they find themselves caught between the responsibilities of adulthood and the restrictions of adolescence (Mary, 2014; Obidoa et al., 2018). The final concept, the *age of possibility*, denotes how emerging adults do not yet have commitments or responsibilities associated with later adulthood and still have the opportunity to enact identity-congruent change in various aspects of their lives (Arnett, 2000).

Proponents of emerging adulthood contend that it is a way of understanding how individuals move into adulthood in a changed culture, and see development as process-oriented rather than the result of moving through discrete stages (Arnett et al., 2011, Syed, 2015). Indeed, individuals in the EA age group also endorse the concept of EA, with a recent meta-analysis by Wright et al. (2023a) reporting that individuals in the EA age group were 1.7 times less likely than people over 30 to

report feeling like an adult. However, it should be noted that 49% of EAs reported that they **did** feel like adults, suggesting that there is considerable variation in personal perceptions of adulthood.

The theory of emerging adulthood is not without its limitations, however. The theory may only be relevant to certain cultural contexts where socio-demographic markers like marriage or having children are delayed (Henrich et al., 2010), limiting how universally this theory may be applied. Further limitations relate to the age boundaries of the theory, which indicates that features such as exploration and instability are confined to a person's 30s, whereas research suggests that these experiences may occur into an individual's 30s 40s and beyond (Bleidorn et al., 2022).

2.3   Developmental Perspectives of Adolescence and Adulthood

In the following section, I will explore how development has been conceptualised in the literature, and how it relates to development during adolescence and adulthood, using the lens of cognitive neurodevelopment and psychosocial development.

2.3.1   The Adolescent Brain

Until the more recent movement towards cognitive neuroscience, there has been a prevailing belief that human brain development reached its full maturity during early adolescence. This led to the assumption that the adolescent brain, despite its relative lack of experience, was equivalent to that of an adult (Steinberg, 2005). However, the advancement of brain imaging methods has facilitated the mapping of the developmental changes that occur throughout the life stages. (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), indicating that this may not be the case. Although brain development is slower in adolescence than in childhood, neuroimaging techniques offer empirical evidence for ongoing increases in neuronal myelination and the establishment of neuronal pathways. This maturation process involves the refinement of neural connections, through synaptic pruning, resulting in improved communication between different parts of the brain (Blakemore, 2008; Spear, 2000). The most significant restructuring occurs in the limbic region and the prefrontal cortex; areas believed to play a critical role in many aspects related to executive functioning including; planning, decision-making, emotion regulation, and learning (Sowell et al., 1999; Spear, 2000). Considering the structural changes to the

prefrontal cortex it is, therefore, it is argued that it is reasonable to assume that there will also be changes to the executive functions associated with these regions (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

2.4   Neurodevelopment and Cognitive Development

2.4.1   Brain Development.

Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to investigate the adolescent brain has identified changes in areas that are associated with behaviours and skills which contribute to social behaviours, including perspective-taking and susceptibility to peer influence. Perspective-taking refers to the capacity to adopt another's viewpoint and understand what others might be thinking and feeling. It is considered to be a fundamental component of effective social interactions (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). While the brain is still maturing, as in adolescence, this may lead to difficulties in interpreting other people's emotional states, which may be interpreted as young people lacking empathy or being antisocial. Behavioural research indicates that the development of executive function skills is not linear, and indeed, there may even be a decline in some skills during puberty. Findings from a study by Carey et al. (1980) indicate that between the ages of six and 10, there is a 20% increase in face recognition accuracy, however, this is followed by a 10% decline in accuracy upon the onset of puberty. Cognitive performance has been attributed to the hormonal changes that occur in puberty, however, it is also important to acknowledge that changes in self-awareness may also occur during this stage and cannot be disregarded as a potential contributing factor (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

Research has found that the significant brain development, that occurs during adolescence is particularly sensitive to social environments, influencing behaviours such as enhanced risk-taking in the presence of peers (O'Neal et al., 2019; Chein et al., 2011). Although neuroimaging offers a somewhat objective measure of neurodevelopment throughout adolescence, the evidence as it relates to social behaviour should be interpreted with some caution, (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2018). The available evidence is not only somewhat limited but, there have been some inconsistencies in findings, particularly those related to the significance of gender differences. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that other behaviours may be influential in social behaviours and outcomes, including genetics, hormones and the

environment, with evidence suggesting that previous experiences and family factors such as parenting styles and parent-child attachment styles all have an impact on behaviour and individual identity (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2018).

2.4.2 Cognitive Development.

Adolescence is associated with cognitive development, with an increased ability to reason being seen over this lifestage (Wever, 2023). Adolescent thinking becomes more flexible and individuals are increasingly able to use both deductive and inductive methods for problem-solving, which Piaget (1970) referred to as formal operational thinking. This means that adolescents generally become more able to consider hypothetical, more abstract ideas as they mature and move toward adulthood (Luna et al., 2004). This period also sees an increased capacity for information processing, working memory and the ability to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant information. These changes support the development of abstract thinking and improved performance on a range of tasks (Luna et al., 2004). Piaget (1970) indicated that cognitive development in adulthood is a continuation and refinement of the skills acquired in adolescence.

2.5   Psychosocial Development, Social Development and Transitions

2.5.1   Psychosocial Development and Identity.

Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theory, was the first psychological model to introduce the idea that development continues beyond adolescence. He posited that development is influenced by both the self (psycho) and the environment (social) (Erikson, 1963). The theory contends that development is characterised by a series of unique psychosocial crises and conflicts that span from infancy through to late adulthood. According to the model, how the individual deals with, and resolves these impacts their self-identity. Psychosocial development theory proposes that during childhood there are four conflicts (trust v mistrust, autonomy v shame, initiative v guilt, industry v inferiority). During adolescence, starting from around the age of 12, adolescents begin to explore their independence, in what Erikson (1963, 1968) referred to as the 'identity versus confusion' stage, arguing that this period, where individuals begin to live a life of their own, apart from their families, is critical in the development of an adequate self, although, unlikely to be a smooth process (Combs et al., 1976; Erikson, 1968). Larson and Ham (1993)

emphasise the impact of social transition during the adolescent life stage, arguing that as adolescents' perceptions of relationships change, their view of themselves and others also alters. This perspective on adolescent development offers insight into how internal identity development connects to external experiences. This connection helps to explain variations in adolescent behaviour across different contexts, such as during interactions with peers.

Erikson (1950) claimed that adulthood consisted of three further stages of psychological conflict; intimacy v isolation, generativity v stagnation, and integrity v despair. Key features of the stages of psychological conflict in adulthood are summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

A Summary of the Psychological Conflicts of Adulthood According to the Psychosocial Theory of Development

Psychological conflict	Stage of adulthood	Goals and Features	Result of failure to resolve
Intimacy vs. Isolation	Young Adulthood (20s-40s)	Establishing intimate relationships. Maintaining independence.	Loneliness and social isolation.
Generativity vs. Stagnation	Middle Adulthood (40s-60s)	Providing care and contributing to society. Finding life's purpose.	Lack of purpose and meaningful connection.
Integrity vs. Despair	Old Age (60+)	Developing wisdom Reflect on accomplishments,	Despair over regrets

The exact age ranges of each conflict have not been validated (Hoare, 2013), indeed, Erikson (1994) and other commentators (Gilleard, 2020) argued against individual stages being assigned specific age ranges, contending that crises might never be resolved and need to be readdressed at various points over the lifestage.

Erikson's development theory offers a comprehensive model for understanding psychological change as a continuous process across the whole lifespan (Gilleard, 2020), while also emphasising the influence of society and culture

on identity and development. However, some criticisms have been levelled against the theory. While the model suggests that psychological development occurs as a result of crises, indicating that maturity is reached once crises have been resolved, there is evidence to suggest that this does not have to be the case. For example, Bleidorn et al. (2022) found that crises such as divorce and bereavement were not associated with personality maturity. Furthermore, the model suggests that there is a hierarchy to the developmental tasks, however, this may not be the case. For example, the increase in divorce rates over the last 60 years and remarriage (Livingston, 2014), suggests that intimacy versus isolation is likely to be experienced not only in young adulthood but also across the subsequent lifespan.

2.6   Social Development and Transitions.

As individuals move through adolescence relationships tend to change (Larson et al., 2006). Friendships become more intimate and peers may have a stronger influence on adolescents' values and behaviours. At this time the adolescent may begin to separate from their parents in the process of establishing their own identity and becoming more independent (Larson et al., 2006). However, although peers become more influential during adolescence, parental influence appears to still be important for some topics, including politics, religion, morals and careers (Albert et al., 2013).

The process of transitioning into new environments, both physical and social may bring with it additional challenges, such as establishing new relationships and managing the personal and external expectations that go along with this. Such factors and challenges collectively have the potential to contribute to psychological distress (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Pitt et al., 2018). The extant literature suggests that the challenges associated with transitioning can have a detrimental impact on emotional well-being and academic achievement (Malena et al., 2022). According to Wagner and Compas (1990), the phenomenon of psychological distress during adolescence can be understood in terms of developmental changes and also their specific meaning to the individual within the evolving social context of this life stage. This perspective provides support for the notion that the stressors encountered by adolescents, e.g. relationship difficulties, and academic demands, are mediated by the developmental process.

2.6.1 Future Orientation; Motivation and the Future Self

The extant literature indicates that there is an increase in future orientation as individuals move through childhood and into adolescence (Mello & Worrell, 2015; Steinberg et al., 2009). Future orientation refers to the thoughts feelings and concerns that individuals have about the future and how they subjectively engage with their perceptions of the future (Seginer & Mahajna, 2018). This concept of future orientation can be observed through an individual's approach to planning, goal-setting, and the way in which they avoid unwanted situations (Seginer & Mahajna, 2018). Furthermore, this concept serves as an indicator of how people foresee the future, including how positively or negatively they view the future, their preparations and their expectations (Seginer & Mahajna, 2003). Thinking about the future starts in early childhood and continues throughout life. However, momentum increases in adolescence and early adulthood, which are critical periods for making significant life choices and decisions (Nurmi et al., 1991; Nurmi, 1995). The individual's perceptions of the future are influenced by a combination of internal factors and external influences (Seginer, 2003). Adolescents are believed to construct subjective images of their future interests, expectations, and plans, through their interaction with significant people in their lives. Psychological factors, such as self-esteem and social development are also thought to impact the image of the future held by the adolescent (Nurmi, 1991).

One approach to considering future orientation is through the idea of the *possible self* or *future self*. *Possible selves* were introduced as a concept by Markus and Nurius (1986) to describe how people imagine themselves, their hopes, fears and motives, at a point in the future. King (2001) argues that this hypothetical future self is particularly important for adolescents, as it can serve as motivation or an incentive for present and future actions, offering a mechanism for assessing and evaluating the current self. Throughout adolescence, young people are expected to consider and make decisions about their future education and occupations. It is, therefore, important to understand what motivates adolescents to actively engage in behaviours that facilitate their career development, such as seeking advice or information related to an aspired career. This process of prioritising future benefits over current desires, is unlikely to be easy for anyone, however, for adolescents in the throws of rapid developmental changes, it is even more likely to pose a significant challenge (Markus

& Nurius,1986). Research indicates that future or possible selves may be important, having been associated with various factors including; life satisfaction, academic outcomes, well-being, and goal attainment (King, 2001; Oyserman et al., 2006). Oyserman et al. (2004) contend that imagining the future self enables individuals to try on and explore a range of identities, comparing these with the current self, allowing them to identify barriers and motivating them to proactively make plans and take actions towards goals (Oyserman et al., 2004). Understanding how adolescents think about their futures may help adults who support young people to understand what motivates them and offer individualised and targeted support.

2.6.2 Autism and Transition

The transition to adulthood can be challenging for all young people but for autistic adolescents, the considerable amount of change that occurs in this life stage may be particularly difficult (Hatfield et al., 2017). Characteristics associated with autism, including social and communication difficulties and restricted and repetitive behaviour and interests (APA, 2013), may make changes such as those that occur during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially challenging (Hatfield et al., 2017). Although there is considerable variation among autistic individuals needs and differences (Frederickson et al., 2010), there may be a preference for sameness, and deviations from current routines can lead to uncertainty and anxiety meaning that transition to a new educational or vocational context may be particularly demanding for autistic young people (Crane et al., 2022; Rydzewska, 2012). Indeed, commonly identified difficulties, including, procrastination, poor planning skills, difficulty socialising, sensory sensitivities and related anxiety, all contribute to transitions being challenging (Anderson et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2016a). Added to this, autistic young people also have the pressure of having to deal with the ever-changing 'hidden curriculum', the rules and conventions in life, not formally taught but seemingly picked up instinctively by neurotypical individuals (Myles & Simpson, 2001).

A further barrier for autistic adolescents is the challenge of imagining and planning for their future selves. Research indicates that such difficulties may be related to differences in understanding the perspectives of others, a core aspect of theory of mind (Atance & O'Neill, 2005; Jackson & Atance, 2008). Theory of mind is the extent to which individuals can attribute mental states such as beliefs and

emotions to themselves and others. It suggests that the ability to understand that others have different perspectives and mental experiences impacts communication and interactions. Imagining the future self, requires one to take on the perspective of another, as yet, unknown self (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Indeed some of the repetitive and inflexible behaviours prevalent in autistic people are argued to stem from underlying difficulties in planning for and thinking about the future (Corballis & Suddendorf, 1997; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). The ability to mentally time travel is a complex skill, involving the capacity to remember past experiences and imagine novel contexts, as well as organising this information to be meaningful (Jackson & Atance, 2008). Research supports this, showing that autistic children may be less able to remember personal past events than non-autistic children, they also find it particularly difficult to imagine plausible future scenarios (Marini et al., 2019; Terrett et al., 2013). Similarly, they also had difficulty performing tasks that required them to think about a plausible future scenario. As such, these challenges may impact motivation and action towards the future.

By understanding the challenges and individual perspectives of autistic adolescents, professionals and care givers can better support them in moving towards their futures.

2.6.3 Support for the Future Self Through Education and Policy

Research suggests that education plays an important role in shaping the future aspirations of young people, including those who are autistic. Future careers and academic success are often common features of individual perceptions of their 'future self', influenced by individual motivations and wider social factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity (Oyserman et al., 2011; Shepard & Marshall, 1999; Cochran et al., 2011; Harrison, 2018, 2019). The Department of Education implemented the *Career Strategy* in 2017, outlining a plan to provide comprehensive career education and guidance to all young people, aiming to help them make informed choices about their future education and careers (DfE, 2017). Additional statutory guidance (DfE, 2023) contended that "high quality careers education… is critical to young people's futures" (DfE, 2023, p. 8) and urged education providers to; develop a career programme based on the Gatsby benchmarks (Holman, 2014, Figure 2.1), have a named Career Leader, and provide independent career guidance starting in Year Seven.

Figure 2.1

The Gatsby Benchmarks

Benchmark	Summary
1 A stable careers programme	Every school and college should have an embedded programme of career education and guidance that is known and understood by students, parents, teachers, governors and employers.
2 Learning from career and labour market information	Every student, and their parents, should have access to good quality information about future study options and labour market opportunities. They will need the support of an informed adviser to make the best use of available information.
3 Addressing the needs of each student	Students have different career guidance needs at different stages. Opportunities for advice and support need to be tailored to the needs of each student. A school's careers programme should embed equality and diversity considerations throughout.
4 Linking curriculum learning to careers	All teachers should link curriculum learning with careers. STEM subject teachers should highlight the relevance of STEM subjects for a wide range of future career paths.
5 Encounters with employers and employees	Every student should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about work, employment and the skills that are valued in the workplace. This can be through a range of enrichment activities including visiting speakers, mentoring and enterprise schemes.
6 Experience of workplaces	Every student should have first-hand experiences of the workplace through work visits, work shadowing and/or work experience to help their exploration of career opportunities, and expand their networks.
7 Encounters with further and higher education	All students should understand the full range of learning opportunities that are available to them. This includes both academic and vocational routes and learning in schools, colleges, universities and in the workplace.
8 Personal guidance	Every student should have opportunities for guidance interviews with a careers adviser, who could be internal (a member of school staff) or external, provided they are trained to an appropriate level. These should be available whenever significant study or career choices are being made. They should be expected for all students but should be timed to meet their individual needs.

Note. This image was taken from: Good Career Guidance (Holman, 2014)

Additionally, the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2014a) mandates that state-funded schools in England provide a curriculum that is broad and balanced and "prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life" (DfE, 2014a, Section 2.1), promoting moral, cultural, mental, and physical development. Since 2020, this has included a duty to teach sex and relationships, and religious education in secondary school (DfE, 2019).

Research shows that effective transition support can significantly enhance outcomes for young people, including autistic individuals (Hatfield et al., 2017;

Wehmeyer et al., 2013; White et al., 2021). However, despite robust policies such as the 2014 Children and Families Act, and the SEND Code of Practice (CoP, 2015), there are often gaps in the quality and accessibility of support provided, which is especially important for autistic individuals who may face unique challenges during transitions (DfE, 2014b; DfE and DoH, 2015; Kraemer et al., 2020). These policies emphasise the need for young people to participate actively in the support they receive as they prepare for adulthood, highlighting the importance of their involvement in decision-making processes which align with their personal goals and aspirations (Ofsted, 2023; UN, 1989). The CoP specifically sets out how children and young people with SEND should be given support to; "live as independently and healthily as possible, achieve success in higher education or employment and participate actively in the community, as part of their preparation for adulthood" (DfE/DoH, 2015, p. 19).

Despite the intentions of public guidance and policy, the reality often falls short, with many autistic individuals reporting having limited say in the support plans that affect their futures. Research exploring the transition experiences of autistic individuals in the UK points to significant systemic barriers and a lack of individualised support (Crompton, 2022; Pelicano et al., 2014). Furthermore, aspirations for employment, social engagement, and independence among autistic young people seemingly differ from their actual outcomes, with research indicating that autistic young people often have lower employment rates and social participation than the wider population, including those with other disabilities (Cribb et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2019; Sosnowy et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2021). These discrepancies highlight the challenges in effectively translating policy into practice and ensuring the provision meets the specific needs of autistic individuals.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) sets out that all young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, a principle supported within the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). However, the inclusion of autistic voices in research and practice remains minimal, which may hinder their ability to develop autonomy and self-determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2013; Cribb et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2014). Addressing these barriers requires not only listening to autistic young people but also integrating their

perspectives into the systems that support their transition to adulthood (Beresford et al., 2004; Crane et al., 2022).

2.7 Theoretical Perspective of Autistic Development

Research indicates that autistic adults struggle to achieve the typical outcomes associated with adulthood e.g. employment, independence and social engagement (Newman et al., 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2021; Roux, 2015). Indeed the literature suggests that the transition experiences and outcomes for autistic young people often do not match with those of their peers or even individuals with other disabilities; fewer complete higher education, maintain stable jobs, and they are also less likely to have positive social engagement (Hatfield et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2019; Office for National Statistics, 2021). Poorer outcomes may be related to personal factors such as differences in communication and social interaction, restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, and sensory sensitivities, as well as co-occurring difficulties such as anxiety and depression (Goldfarb, 2021). Studies suggest that factors such as quality of communication and self-care skills, level of parental or carer involvement, accommodations within the work or educational environment, vocational supports, and transition services providing, all play a key role in the quality of outcomes for autistic adults (Black et al., 2020; Hayward et al., 2019). These findings point to the impact of both personal and environmental factors in the development and transition experience of autistic individuals. In this context, self determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory may provide useful frameworks for understanding the challenges experienced by autistic young people. These theories emphasise the need to keep in mind individual and systemic factors when supporting autistic young people as they transition to adulthood, advocating for a multi-level approach to ensure positive outcomes.

2.7.1 Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) offers insight into the different factors that can interact and influence the development of autistic individuals as they move towards adulthood. This theory highlights the importance of

the social context in which transitions to further education and adult life occur, emphasising the mutual influence between individual and environment. This suggests the need to tailor environments to meet the specific needs of autistic young people, considering their individual characteristics and providing necessary support during transitions (Hannah & Topping, 2013). Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that several environmental layers can influence holistic development. The 'microsystem' refers to a young person's immediate environment and the relationships within it, such as family relationships, peer interactions and educational connections. The 'mesosystem' links these settings, for example, considering the interactions between school and family. On a broader level the 'macrosystem' is reflective of the wider political and cultural values that influence societal perceptions of autism and may impact the allocation of resources and funding for autism at both local and central government levels. Manning (2016) noted that autistic adolescents' experiences of education and their future aspirations are shaped by the school system, their experiences within that system, as well as family and social relationships, which she argued could be viewed through the ecological model in terms of recognising the "interaction of... factors on the developing individual" (p. 99) as they planned and prepared for their next educational steps.

2.7.2 Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-determination refers to an individual's ability to be the primary decision-maker and take control of their own life without external influence or interference (Shogren et al, 2015). It is a fundamental human right (United Nations, 2006). Applying self-determination theory can offer insights into the developmental and socio-cultural processes that promote self-determination. SDT focuses on three psychological needs: competence (sense of mastery of skills and performance) autonomy (sense of choice and free will), and relatedness (meaningful connection to others). These are considered essential for supporting motivation and optimal functioning, thus facilitating development. Consequently, frustration with these needs is likely to result in decreased motivation, which is particularly relevant when considering the motivations required for the shift from adolescence to adulthood.

Research suggests that autistic individuals experience lower levels of self-determination compared to their non-autistic peers, including those with other developmental disabilities (Hodgetts et al., 2018). Social-communication difficulties,

depression, and variations in executive processing have been identified as predictors of lower self-determination in autistic youth, even among those without intellectual disabilities (Tomaszewsk et al.,2020; Tomaszewsk et al.,2022). Furthermore, discrepancies often arise in how autistic individuals perceive their capacities compared to how they are perceived by others, such as parents or teachers, which complicates understanding about whether these abilities are overestimated by autistic individuals or underestimated by others (Thompson-Hodgetts, 2023).

Autistic individuals frequently encounter limited opportunities to practice self-determination in various environments like home and school, which restricts their ability to develop necessary self-determination skills (Cheak-Zamora, 2015). Research suggests that it is common for autistic individuals to find themselves in jobs that do not align with their skills, education, and interests, which may result in decreased motivation (Anderson, 2020) and, potentially, subsequently reduced stability of employment (Goldfarb et al., 2021). The need for social-relatedness may be particularly pertinent for autistic individuals, as communication and interaction needs are commonly associated with autism. This highlights the importance of supporting young people in exploring and recognising their individual social interests, and facilitating the achievement of their personal social goals (Clements et al., 2018; Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019). Thompson-Hodgetts et al. (2023) explored the perceptions of self-determination among autistic individuals, finding that their experiences mirror those of non-autistic people but are hindered by factors such as lack of opportunity due to systemic ableism and executive processing challenges impacting decision-making.

A qualitative study by Goldfarb (2021) used the SDT as a framework to explore motivation in autistic adults. Findings pointed to the importance of satisfying psychological needs in the context of work, including a daily routine, a sense of meaning and contribution, and job interest. These findings suggest that adjustments in the work environment can support motivational needs, but importantly further support the notion that motivation is malleable. Using the lens of SDT, self determined motivation is viewed as a dynamic, rather than fixed state which can be enhanced so that autistic individuals have better outcomes in line with their individual needs and preferences. Studies have shown that individuals can enhance their self-determination skills through targeted interventions and support (Morán et al., 2021). In the workplace autistic adults' motivation is influenced by SDT concepts, with

factors such as income, routine, social norms, and psychological needs satisfaction playing an important role. However, research suggests that autistic young people may display lower self-determination skills, which has been associated with other challenges including depression and executive function difficulties. According to Ward (1988) SDT can be seen as a 'way of life' for all people, providing a framework for a better quality of life and offering mechanisms and processes to aid consideration of possibilities, which may be particularly important for autistic individuals. Therefore, promoting self-determination in autistic young people during the transition to adulthood may be particularly important.

2.7.3 Theories of Autism through a Critical Realist Lens

Theories such as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) and monotropism provide insight into autism from a critical realist perspective, emphasising the need to go beyond surface behaviours, explore individual experiences, and challenge traditional deficit theories of autism.

The double empathy problem suggests that difficulties in communication and interaction that may occur between non-autistic and autistic people are mutual, with both groups struggling to effectively communicate. This perspective challenges the traditional understanding of theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), which attributes communication difficulties exclusively to deficits within the autistic individual. Empirical support for the double empathy problem is provided by Crompton et al. (2020), who demonstrated that communication difficulties result from a mismatch in communication styles rather than communication deficits. The research involved three groups of individuals (autistic, non-autistic and mixed groups), finding that autistic and non-autistic groups were equally successful in communicating effectively, and had equally high levels of rapport, when with others of the same neurotype, whereas the mixed group experienced the lowest levels of rapport and more difficulties in communication. These findings indicate that differences in communication style are responsible for hindering the transfer of information rather than communication style differences, *per se.*

Monotropism theory, (Murray et al.,2005) suggests that autistic individuals tend to intensely focus their attention on a limited number of interests at any given time, which influences how they process information. This theory provides an alternative explanation to Frith's (1989) theory of weak central coherence, proposing

that observed differences in integrating information from multiple sources are due to unique attention allocation and information processing styles, rather than deficits. Research from Wood (2021) supports this premise, reporting that when the intense interests of autistic people were recognised and supported, learning, social interactions, communication, independence, and overall well-being were all enhanced.

Adopting a critical realist stance enables a shift in perspective—from viewing behaviours and characteristics as deviant or deficient, necessitating correction, to understanding them as part of individual experiences. This approach also considers how external contexts influence these experiences, promoting a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of autism.

2.8   Summary and Conclusion

This narrative literature review has explored the developmental transitions from adolescence to adulthood with an emphasis on autistic individuals, highlighting the critical role of educational systems and policies in shaping future aspirations. Throughout adolescence, individuals experience significant biological, social, and psychological transformations that are further complicated for autistic adolescents by experiencing differences such as difficulties with social interactions and understanding the 'hidden curriculum'. Despite the support outlined by policies like the SEND Code of Practice, there remains disparity between espoused support structures and their practical implementation, often resulting in poorer outcomes for autistic individuals in areas such as employment, social engagement, and independence.

The literature set out in this review highlights the need for policies and educational practices that are not only inclusive but also responsive to the diverse needs within the autistic community. Existing research and subsequent support may overlook the nuance of these needs, leading to a gap between autistic adolescents' aspirations and their outcomes. Future research should focus on including autistic voices to ensure that their firsthand experiences directly inform the development and adjustment of targeted education and support. By fostering a more inclusive and adaptive approach, the transition to adulthood for autistic adolescents may be enhanced, enabling them to achieve their desired futures and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Systematic Review of the Literature

2.9 Introduction to Systematic Literature Review

This section includes a systematic review of peer-reviewed empirical research in order to explore autistic young people's perceptions of adulthood and their views and aspirations for the future.

A systematic review aims to first locate evidence around a key research question, this is followed by an appraisal of the research quality to ensure that the best available evidence is used to finally produce a synthesis of the material (Boland et al., 2017). Systematic reviews follow a set of clearly defined steps to answer the posed research question. Gough (2007) describes the process to include the following stages:

- formulation of review question
- define criteria for inclusion of studies
- screen studies
- describe studies
- quality appraisal of studies
- synthesis of data/findings.

This review focused on the current research question: *what does the academic research literature tell us about how autistic young people think about their future as adults?*

2.10 Methods

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the individual perceptions and views of autistic adolescents by conducting a qualitative systematic review to identify and examine the most reliable and robust evidence currently accessible (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014). A meta-synthesis is employed as a means to summarise and afford innovative interpretations of the findings of the individual qualitative research studies identified (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010).

The initial step involves the formulation and construction of a protocol to guide the systematic review process. Carrying this out before implementing the review promotes the credibility of methodological choices and research outcomes (Moher et al., 2015). This current research uses a protocol for meta-synthesis developed by

Butler et al. (2015), which includes; developing a specific research question, identification of search terms, planning for search strategies, and developing a process for review and critical appraisal of the literature. The process also involves developing techniques for the extraction and synthesis of data. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Guidelines (Page et al., 2021) are used, where appropriate for qualitative data, to report this review.

2.10.1 Search Strategy and Tools

A range of academic databases (EBSCO, Google Scholar, PsychINFO, ERIC, Web of Science) were used to carry out an initial scope of the literature (June 2023). Initial search terms were developed, and these were then further refined using a population, context and outcomes tool (Table 2.2). The predetermined key search terms were combined with Boolean operators ('OR' and 'AND'). I chose not to include "adult" or "adulthood" as final search terms. During initial scoping, these terms predominantly yielded studies focusing on adulthood as a participant population rather than as an outcome. Instead, terms such as "future self" and "prospection" were used, as they were found to produce more relevant results.

Google Scholar citation lists and the reference lists from the key journals identified were scoped for additional relevant articles. Any duplicates were removed as they were noticed.

Table 2.2

Systematic Literature Review Key Research Terms

Population	Context	Outcome
Adolescen*	Autism	View*
Young person	ASD	Aspiration*
Young people	ASC	Perception
Youth	Autism	Experience
Emerging adult*	spectrum	Hope*
Teen	disorder	Future thinking
Young adult	Asperger*	Future
		Future sel*
		Prospection
		Possible sel*
		Vision
		Imagin*
		Future orientation

2.10.2 Study Selection Process

The titles of the studies that were initially identified and their abstracts were screened for relevance. Articles remaining were read in detail and the full text was screened. The criteria for inclusion of studies and their justification are outlined in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion in Literature Search

Criteria for inclusion/exclusion	Justification
Published in English	Reader accessibility
Published post 2014	Less than 10 years old and after the implementation of the SEN code of conduct. Considerable research into autism and subsequent paradigm shift in understanding autism in recent years.
Published in peer-reviewed journal	Factor towards the quality of literature.
Includes Qualitative data	Exploratory, limited prior research or knowledge in this area. To elicit autistic adolescent views and perspectives.
Studies set in UK, USA or Australia	Sufficiently similar social, cultural and pedagogical contexts to be generalisable to UK.
Include participants between 12-24 who are diagnosed or self-identify as autistic	Adolescent, or emerging adulthood. Research indicates this the time of working towards independence and preparing for adulthood. To fit in with aims of the current research.
First-person perspective reported (not subsumed within or diluted by other voices)	Experience and views need to fully reflect the voice of the individual research including the personal voice and views of autistic individuals (although may also include other views if reported separately).
Explores aspirations or views of future/adulthood	To link with the aims of current research. This may be the only aim or partial aim or result of research.

These criteria were developed as a result of a review of the existing literature as described above. Much of the previous research provides the perspectives of other stakeholders, e.g. using the views of parents and professionals who support autistic young people. Although such research may be both relevant and important in its own right, very little research has explored the first-person experience or has aimed to understand the views, of autistic young people directly. The country of origin was not part of the final criteria for inclusion. As each country varies in its education system and has its own approach and legislation around special educational needs, there was an initial plan to only include literature from the UK, however, scoping identified very limited evidence which included other key criteria such as first-person voice. Indeed, the final group of articles for review includes only

two studies set in the UK. However, all studies were undertaken in countries that use English language as the language of instruction, as it was felt that there were sufficient similarities in social, cultural and pedagogical practices.

2.10.3 Identification of Studies

Initial scoping of the five databases identified 181 citations for screening, exploring references and citations added a further 11 studies. Following the removal of duplicated articles, titles and abstracts were screened against inclusion/exclusion criteria. Studies were excluded if they were not written in English, were outside the specified date range, or did not include separately reported voices of autistic young people in the findings. This resulted in the identification of 38 relevant studies, which were then fully screened against specified inclusion and exclusion criteria by reading the full text. Over these stages, studies were excluded if they employed solely quantitative methodology, or did not include separately reported voices of autistic young people. The process used for initial identification of records, subsequent screening, and selection of the final group of studies included in the review is outlined below in Figure 2.2

Figure 2.2

Flow Diagram for Identification of Studies for Systemic Review
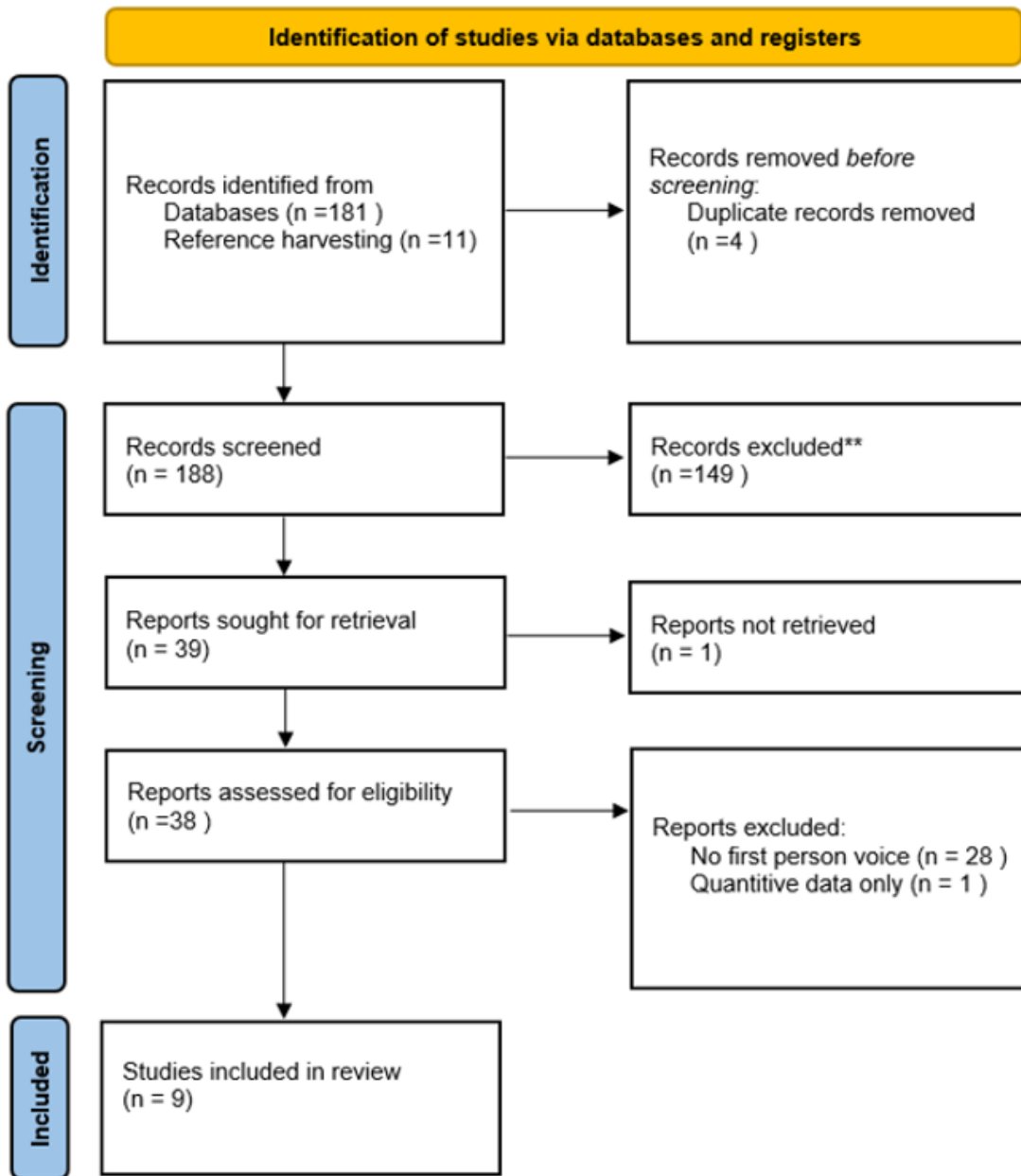
(Page et al., 2021)

2.11 Critical Appraisal of Studies

Nine studies met the full inclusion criteria, these are summarised in Table 2.4 and discussed in the findings below (see Appendix A for a more detailed overview of individual studies). Once the full text had been examined, each paper was quality assured. Gough (2007) indicates that systematic reviews should include a consideration of the quality and relevance of studies in meeting the aims of the review. The process not only promotes quality assurance but also supports the development of a more in-depth and critical understanding of the presented research, including the findings and conclusions (Greenhalgh & Brown, 2014).

For the purpose of this systematic review of the literature, the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) qualitative checklist (CASP, 2018) was used to critically appraise each study for quality and appropriateness for inclusion, using the CASP, 10 item, qualitative checklist (CASP, 2018). The questions on the checklist assess the paper's methodological integrity, the credibility of presented findings, as well as considerations of ethics and the value of the research. The checklist questions give the option to answer "Yes", "Unknown or partial", or "No". Appendix B is an example of a CASP checklist appraisal for the study by Kirby (2019). CASP (2023) contends that where the researcher is unable to answer "Yes" to the first two to three questions this may indicate that the evidence is poor. In this case, it was possible to answer "yes" for questions 1-3 for all studies being reviewed, however, to make transparent the appraisal process, Butler et al.'s (2015) protocol was used to score each of the questions and provide an overall score and judgement for each study. In this protocol "Yes" scored 1, "Unknown or partial" scored 0.5, and "No" scored 0. A summary of the CASP appraisal scores for each paper can be found in Table 2.5. Butler et al., (2015) categorise studies as high quality if they score 9 -10, moderate quality with a score of 7- 8.5 and low quality if they score less than 7. The quality scores of the final nine studies ranged from 7.5 (moderate) to 8.5 (high). Butler et al.'s (2015) protocol indicates that studies should only be included in the final review if they score 6 or above. In this review, all nine studies scored at least 7.5, and as such were categorised high or moderate quality and thereby included in the final analysis.

Table 2.4

Summary of Studies Included in Systematic Review

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Data analysis	Main Findings
Anderson et al (2016) USA	Examined the perceptions of adulthood among high-school students with ASD.	Semi-structured interview. 31 autistic students (Mean age 16).	Fundamental qualitative description	Independence, maturity, and personal responsibility are key characteristics of adulthood. Varying ideals about friendships, and different living arrangement preferences.
Anderson et al. (2021) USA	Exploration of employment expectations and experiences	Unstructured interviews. 12 Young people with ASD (Mean age 22).	Grounded theory approach	Employment Aspirations and Potential; Challenges of Job Finding and Keeping
Cheak-Zamora et al. (2015) USA	Exploration of the perspectives of autistic adolescents when thinking about becoming an adult	Semi-structured focus groups 13 autistic youth (Aged 15-22).	Grounded Theory	Fear and anxiety about transitioning. Unaware of steps needed to accomplish goals
Cribb et al. (2019) Australia	Explore autistic young people's aspirations for the future. approached emerging adulthood.	Semistructured interviews. 28 young people (Aged 16-20).	Thematic analysis	Need to 'take it one step at a time'', increased sense of identity and personal autonomy.

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Data analysis	Main Findings
Curtiss et al. (2021) USA	To understand expectations of autistic youth relating to transition to adulthood	Focus groups. 6 autistic young people aged 18-30	Thematic analysis	Normative hopes, living with uncertainty, mismatch of reality and expectations, impairments shape expectations, and services dictate expectations.
Kirby et al. (2019) USA	To understand different factors autistic youth consider when thinking about and preparing for their futures.	Semi-structured interviews. 27 autistic adolescents (Aged 12–17).	Thematic analysis.	Family connections, their own interests and abilities, characteristics of their future situations, and chronological progressions. The importance of age/accomplishment and responsibility/maturity. Main focus was on employment.
Lambe et al. (2019) England	To investigate the perspectives of autistic students transitioning to university.	Focus groups. 25 autistic students (Aged 16-21).	Thematic analysis.	The Social World, Academic Demands, Practicalities of University Living, Leaving the Scaffolding of Home and Transition to Adulthood.
Tesfaye et al. (2023) Canada	To explore the aspirations and hopes for the future.	Semi-structured interviews. 31 autistic youth (Aged 11-18).	Thematic analysis	Autistic identities, thinking about the future, seeking social connection on their own terms, seeking autonomy, school as both a stressor and social facilitator and experiences of stress and anxiety.

Table 2.5

Critical Appraisal Skills Program Checklist Scores

Article	CASP Scores*										
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Score
Anderson et al. (2016)	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	0.5	1	0.5	1	7.0
Anderson et al. (2021)	1	1	1	0.5	1	0.5	1	1	0.5	1	8.5
Cheak-Zamora et al. (2015)	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	1	1	0.5	1	8
Cribb et al. (2019)	1	1	1	1	1	0	0.5	1	0.5	1	8
Curtiss et al. (2021)	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0.5	1	8.5
Gaona et al. (2019)	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0.5	1	8.5
Kirby et al. (2019)	1	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	0.5	1	0.5	8.5
Lambe et al. (2019)	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	0.5	1	1	0.5	8.5
Tesfaye et al. (2023)	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	0	0.5	1	0.5	7.5

Note. *Questions are outlined in Appendix B. A score of 0= criterion not met, 0.5=unclear or partially met, 1=fully met.

2.11.1 Analytical Approach

The nine studies identified as appropriate for inclusion within this systematic literature review were first read several times to aid familiarisation. The study findings were then entered into NVivo 14 (Lumiero, 2023) software for analysis based on the research questions. Analysis followed the process set out by Thomas and Harden (2008), whereby the initial stage involved coding the data inductively by content and meaning, sentence by sentence. This was followed by organising codes into related themes.

2.12 Findings: Resultant Themes

Nine studies were included in this systematic review and synthesis. All are empirical, qualitative studies, published between 2015 and 2023. The studies provided data from 185 autistic young people. Five articles included young people from the USA, two articles included participants from England, one included participants from Canada, and one final article included participants from Australia. All participants had a diagnosis of autism, although, where it was reported, IQ ranged from 62-130. Participant ages ranged from 11-30 but all samples were referred to as *adolescents*, *youth* or *young people* and included at least some participants who were within the adolescent age range (12-18). The majority of

participants were male (66-93%, where reported) and white (78-93%, where reported).

The studies all included aims, often among others, which were broadly, to explore young people's perspectives of their futures and/or adulthood. All articles gathered and reported the direct views of young people, six through face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews and three using focus groups. Thematic analysis was the most commonly used data analysis technique, with five studies employing this analytical method, two studies using Grounded Theory and one study using fundamental descriptive analysis. Table 2.4 provides a brief summary of the main characteristics of the studies included in the review, more comprehensive information is provided in Appendix A.

2.13 Thematic Analysis and Meta-synthesis

A number of key themes were evident when young people were asked to talk about their views of their future and adulthood. Autistic adolescent views mainly focused on hopes and expectations for the work or career they might have as an adult. However, participants also discussed more personal topics, including living independently, romantic and social relationships, and having families. Young people also discussed having ambivalent and sometimes complex feelings about the future and becoming an adult.

2.13.1 Adolescent Perspectives on Work and Careers

Work and careers were the areas most commonly discussed by autistic adolescents. Within this two subordinate themes were identified, outlining how autistic young view their future work. The first subordinate theme; *Career Preferences and Influential Factors* explores participants' career aspirations and expectations and the factors that shape them. The second subordinate theme*, Work aspirations and family influence* examines family influence, social connections, and the impact of these relationships on shaping young people's career aspirations. Together, these two themes offer an understanding of some of the reflections that underpin autistic adolescents' perceptions of work and careers.

2.13.1.1   Career Preferences and Influential Factors.

Although the individual studies in this review did not explicitly ask about participants' specific career choices, those that did probe this area demonstrated a

range of preferences, mirroring the variation seen in the broader population. Notably, technology emerged as a key area of interest (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015). Participants also highlighted the importance of the job context and location in their aspired to future careers (Kirby et al., 2019). For instance, Anthony expressed an aversion to being "*cramped inside an office or anything, I have to move around*" (Kirby et al., 2019, p.40), while Bruce indicated a desire for "*a job where I can work from home*" (Kirby et al., 2019, p.40). Additionally, Bobby was clear about his aspiration to work "with my hands" (Kirby et al., 2019, p.40).

Participants also articulated a desire relating to who, or, what, they would work with. This included aspirations to work with animals, children, or specialised equipment, as exemplified by Brody's interest in construction due to the allure of getting "*all the big toys there*" (Kirby et al., 2019, p.40). Financial considerations surfaced as another influential factor in career decisions. For instance, Curtiss et al., (2021) noted participant, Chris's inclination toward welding was underpinned by his perception of its potential for substantial earnings. On the other hand, some participants prioritised the pursuit of enjoyable and easy work experiences. Ben's journey to becoming a librarian characterises the importance of personal passion, "*I just love libraries*" and vocational pursuit "*I like working with people*" (Curtiss et al., 2021, p179). Interestingly, there were instances where young people demonstrated motivation to seek experiences distinct from their current realities, for example improving their financial circumstances (Tesfaye et al., 2023). These findings highlight the range of considerations which may influence autistic young people's career preferences.

2.13.1.2 *Work aspirations and family influence*

The impact of family and social connections on the career aspirations of autistic adolescents was a commonly noted theme, highlighting the importance of personal ambitions and social and familial influences. Participants' career aspirations were sometimes directly influenced by family traditions, with some expressing a desire to continue the vocational paths of their family members. For instance, Ben's wish to attend the same university as his parents (Kirby, 2019) and Brian's desire to pursue his father's career in psychology exemplifies this alignment: "*I love psychology because both my parents have degrees in psychology*" (Kirby, 2019,

p.39). When considering where he wanted to live, Blaise stated, "*I've always wanted to live in California ... my dad's Californian*" (Kirby et al., 2019, p.39).

Family members were also often identified as facilitators, creating work opportunities for example, getting a job in a family business in the future. Cody stated, "*My uncle works for the tile industry so he is going to give me a job working for his tile company*" (Kirby et al., 2019, p. 39), demonstrating how these connections can provide a pathway to work. Young people also discussed how the experience of family and friends helped to develop their expectations, especially in relation to understanding what jobs involved, and how they might impact their emotional well-being and work-life balance. This is illustrated by Curtiss et al.'s (2021) participant, Tyler, who said, "*I came into the school wanting to go to game design but then I realized it's horrendously competitive*" (p. 179). However, some young people indicated that the relationship between family influence and personal aspirations could be complex. Some participants seemed to grapple with the tension between their personal aspirations and the expectations of their families. This tension appeared to be particularly evident when individual interests deviate from the viewpoints of their families, for example, Kirby et al., (2019) highlight that their participant Brad was interested in computer programming but felt that his parents thought "*there's too many, programmers*" (p. 39)

Family and peers also appear to impact the transition to adulthood. While relationships and connections can offer invaluable guidance, there also appears to be a desire for individuals to be empowered to act with agency and autonomy in order to make choices that reflect their personal hopes and wishes.

2.13.2 Future Relationships and Social Connections: Balancing Optimism, Concerns, and Complexities

The idea of friendships and relationships is highlighted as a key theme in the lives of autistic young people as they transition to adulthood. This theme explores participants' mixed perspectives about their future friendships, including reflections of both optimism and apprehension. On the one hand, participants were mostly optimistic about having friendships and connections in their futures, while on the other hand, some expressed concerns over the potential loss of existing relationships and the challenges of forming new ones.

Participants often expressed that they expected to keep their current friendships and hoped to cultivate new ones as they transition to new stages of life. Young people were often cited as being hopeful that jobs or higher education would result in new friendships. Some discussed the view that they expected making friends to be easier in adulthood as "*you have a little bit more contact with people and people are more willing when they are older*" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 20). Some young people also expressed views that friendships would, "*probably be better than right now*" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 20). Moreover, some perceived their next steps as being a fresh start in terms of socialising. For example, some of the young people planning on going to university described wanting to participate in societies and clubs, indicating that they wanted to be more ambitious about socialising:

> *Over the coming year I'm going to try and go into social situations more and I think the more that they're positive the more confident I'll get … I'm worried but I'm also sort of interested to see whether my fears will you know grip or if you know they don't have any basis* (Lambe et al., 2019, p. 1535).

School was perceived as facilitating friendships, and participants expressed concern about whether they could maintain these friendships when they moved on to either work or higher education (Cribb et al., 2019). There was a recognition that moving to a different setting could mean seeing fewer of their current friends and participants reflected on the future of these relationships as their journeys took them in different directions. Some young people were worried about losing touch with friends after moving on to university or work (Gaona et al., 2019).

The value that participants ascribed to social relationships becomes evident as they describe their role in supporting personal growth and averting feelings of isolation. For example, one participant described how "*Friends can help us make sure we're reaching our goals*" (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015, p.553). Other participants highlighted the supportive role of friends in striving towards goals and providing companionship, particularly when family support may decrease, one young person stating, "*You need your friends to support you in the later years because you won't have your family anymore*" (Cribb et al., 2019, 1774). Yet, the shift to new settings and interactions with unfamiliar people may present challenges. Young people expressed apprehension about their skills and abilities to make new friendships, fuelled by concerns of potential bullying and past experiences shaping their caution (Gaona et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019). Previous experiences of

bullying had led participants to be cautious about socialising; "*because I know it [bullying] can happen I'm more wary and slightly paranoid about being in those situations*" (Lambe et al., 2019, p.1534). Participants reported less concern about social situations that were more structured e.g. group work, however, situations that did not have a clear framework for interaction were viewed as more uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing, with many describing feeling worried about the social consequences of saying or doing the wrong thing, along with concerns about the challenge of trying to avoid such situations (Lambe et al., 2019).

Findings indicate that young people appear to feel some ambivalence about romantic relationships and having children. Some participants expressed a desire for such relationships, while others were more cautious, indicating that they would avoid romantic relationships to avert associated difficulties, although they often still liked the notion of "*having people that you care for and you brought up*" (Cribb et al., 2019, p. 1774). These findings highlight the complexity of feelings, aspirations and expectations that autistic young people have around friendships, relationships, and their future roles within them.

2.13.3 Pursuit of Independence and Autonomy

Independence was viewed as a key component of the transition to adulthood, encompassing various aspects of daily life (Goana et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019). This theme highlights how participants view the nature of independence, encompassing the desire for self-sufficiency, skill development, and autonomy, along with the challenges posed by change and the decision-making process. Young people discussed their journey towards independence as encompassing a wish to develop associated skills, including dealing with finances, using transport, undertaking self-care and making autonomous decisions (Goana et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019). Young people expressed that this transition to adulthood was anxiety-inducing but acknowledge the role of support, whether from caregivers or professionals, in alleviating this anxiety and aiding the decision-making process (Lambe et al., 2019). The pursuit of higher education, such as attending university, was viewed as a stepping stone towards cultivating independence (Lambe et al., 2019).

Living away from parents seemed to be viewed as a tangible sign of independence. Although many participants currently reside with their parents, the

desire to move out and live independently remained a key aspiration, albeit one tempered by practical considerations (Cribb et al., 2019). Factors that would determine living independently included where they would live and the cost of living, "*If I have enough money I will move out and buy another house. But then who is going to pay for the Wi-Fi*" (Kirby et al., 2019, p.40). Other participants indicated that they wished to stay at home, for these young people, minimal change to their lives seemed to be preferable and provide comfort (Lambe et al., 2019; Tesfaye et al., 2023). While the prospect of change can be challenging for autistic individuals, the desire to move out and reside with friends, alone, or with a partner highlights the diversity of living aspirations (Kirby et al., 2019).

Central to achieving independence is having the requisite life skills. Participants expressed the importance of mastering daily tasks such as cooking, laundry, and learning to use domestic appliances (Gaona et al., 2019). Moreover, the ability to move around outside of the home, without adult assistance was highlighted as an important aspect of autonomy. Decision-making was also seen as inextricably linked to this pursuit, with participants indicating that they often required support from parents, teachers, and professionals to guide them in making choices and decisions that felt comfortable for them (Gaona et al., 2019). This suggests that well-known adults can offer valuable insight and experience. However, differences between young people and other adults, particularly parents occasionally result in autistic young people needing to make autonomous decisions. This is reflected in the views of one participant (YP 15) in Gaona et. al.'s (2019) study, who observes… "*They don't focus on the near future I would like to have. So then it's basically myself*" (p. 347).

This theme highlights that while autistic individuals aim to move towards independence and autonomy in adulthood, there is a recognition of the significance of their wider support network and their personal aspirations during this challenging transition.

2.13.4 Feelings about the future; hope anxiety and ambivalence

Within the studies reviewed, autistic young people reported complex and conflicting emotions when considering the future, their next steps and adulthood. Participants reported ambivalence, hope, anxiety, and a preference for focusing on

the present due to various challenges and uncertainties they expected the future to bring.

Participants reported an inherent ambivalence toward the future, where feelings of anxiety co-exist with hopes and aspirations (Gaona et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019; Tesfaye et al., 2023). Lambe et al. (2019) particularly highlighted anticipation for university life and the social opportunities it entails, exemplifying a mixture of excitement and trepidation, "*I'm looking forward to it (university) if I can make friends and do the social side of it*" (Lambe et al., 2019, p.1535). Other young people had generalised concerns about the future, "*I'm not scared of the job market. I'm just scared – I don't know why, but I just don't like thinking about the future*" (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015, p. 554). Some young people appeared to feel overwhelmed when thinking about the future, preferring to focus on the here and now: "*I don't really [like] thinking about what my future's going to be…I only like thinking about what I can see in front of me, not the entire thing*" (Cheak Zamora et al., 2015, p. 552). Fear and an inclination to avoid contemplating the broader expanse of the future were often related to leaving behind comfort and certainty. O Other sources of challenge related to social difficulties (Goana et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019); academic challenges (Lambe et al., 2019), social difficulties (Goana et al.,2019), as well as reduced amounts of available support (Curtiss et al., 2021; Tesfaye et al., 2023). Alongside these concerns, many felt that they needed more time to prepare for their next steps (Curtiss et al., 2021).

2.14 Summary of Themes

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical developmental phase marked by numerous changes and the requirement to make significant life choices and decisions. This is often a challenging process for many adolescents but for individuals who are autistic, the transition may be even more challenging. This systematic review of the literature identified a number of themes that autistic adolescents, within the included studies, highlight when thinking about their future and adult self including; hopes and expectations for the work or career that they might have as an adult and the influences on those aspirations, living independently, romantic and social relationships, and having families. Young people also discussed

having ambivalent and sometimes complex feelings about the future and becoming an adult.

The pursuit of meaningful employment was a central component of autistic adolescents' aspirations for adulthood. The ideal job imagined by these adolescents appeared to involve using their specific strengths and interests while ameliorating individual challenges which were often related to autism (Anderson, 2019). This aspiration for employment is emphasised by a desire for financial stability, personal fulfilment, and independence (Anderson et al., 2021; Kirby et al., 2019). However, alongside these aspirations, participants also expressed anxiety about entering the workforce and dealing with the complexities of employment (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015; Lambe et al., 2019). The challenges of social interactions, time management, and handling work demands also emerge as concerns that may impede their successful transition to employment (Anderson et al., 2021; Lambe et al., 2019).

Relationships with family and friends appeared to be seen as influential factors that shape autistic adolescents' perceptions of their future lives. Many adolescents mirror family traditions and aspirations, often aligning their career choices and living preferences with those of their family members (Kirby et al., 2019), reflecting a sense of continuity and belonging. Friends and family also act as important sources of guidance, offering insights into potential career paths and the realities of different professions (Curtiss et al., 2021). However, for some tensions may arise when adolescents' aspirations are not aligned with family expectations, highlighting the inherent conflict between autonomy and external influences (Kirby et al., 2019).

Relationships and connections are also highlighted as a significant theme, when autistic adolescents thought about their future selves, within the included studies. While there was some optimism about maintaining and forming new friendships, there were also concerns about losing current friendships and lacking the necessary social skills (Anderson et al., 2016). The transition period is characterised by the anticipation of fresh starts and new social experiences, often associated with attending higher education settings (Lambe et al., 2019). However, the shift in environments may lead to reduced interactions with existing friends and apprehensions about forging new connections (Cribb et al., 2019; Gaona et al., 2019). Participants were reported to be anxious about the complexities of

communication such as not picking up on social cues or misinterpreting what others were trying to communicate (Lambe et al., 2019).

Autistic adolescents appear to have complex emotions around the transition to adulthood. There are often high levels of anxiety, but also a prevailing sense of hope and aspiration (Gaona et al., 2019; Lambe et al., 2019). This reflects a balance between uncertainty about the future and the excitement of what lies ahead. While some autistic young people experience worry regarding the job market, others are apprehensive about the prospects of independent living and how their individual futures will unfold (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015), suggesting an ambivalence of perceptions as they try to make sense of the, as yet, unknown.

2.15 Conclusions

The current literature relating to how autistic adolescents imagine their future selves seems to indicate that young people have a range of aspirations for their adult lives, but are also concerned about the challenges. Young people appear to be at once optimistic but also apprehensive about adulthood. As they think about their path toward meaningful employment and independent living, they also appear to grapple with uncertainty and concern for a lack of some 'adult' skills. While they often aspire to independence there appears to often be an acknowledgement of the need for support. Connections and relationships also appear to be important to autistic young people but there are tensions between personal aspirations and external expectations. Managing social relationships also seems to be viewed as challenging, demanding skills that extend beyond their comfort zones.

Understanding how autistic adolescents view their futures is important for several reasons. Firstly, it may contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment. Recognising an individual's aspirations, concerns, and unique perspectives may help to empower educators, caregivers, and policymakers to tailor interventions and resources that cater to young people's specific needs. By acknowledging their desires for meaningful employment, independent living, and social connections, society can work towards fostering an environment that facilitates young people's successful transition to adulthood. Secondly, insights into autistic adolescents' future perceptions may promote overall well-being. The hopes and anxieties that young people experience shape their mental and emotional states during this transitional phase. By understanding these dynamics, professionals can

develop targeted interventions that address their anxiety and bolster self-esteem. Thirdly, understanding autistic young people's future aspirations can inform educational practices. By aligning curriculum and career guidance with an individual's interests and strengths, educators can foster a sense of purpose and engagement. Tailored educational approaches that emphasise skill development and provide opportunities for social interaction can equip autistic adolescents with the tools needed for them to achieve their aspired futures.

2.15.1 Limitations and Gaps in the Research.

The information provided in this literature review has some limitations in providing a comprehensive understanding of how autistic adolescents imagine their futures. One limitation lies in the focus on a relatively narrow set of themes, such as employment, social relationships, family influences, and independent living. While these themes offer valuable insights, other dimensions of their future perceptions, such as personal aspirations beyond employment and social aspects, appear to remain relatively unexplored. Studies included in this review often used broad exploratory questions to unpick understanding, but perhaps questions directed towards specific adult outcomes might be useful. The SEN code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) identifies; employment/higher education, independent living, health and community, as being important outcomes for adult life. These areas are broadly in line with the areas highlighted in this systematic review, however, interestingly health and perhaps the wider aspects of community were not highlighted within the studies included in the systematic review. Including prompts around these areas in future research could help to explore whether these areas are not important to young people or merely not current priorities.

The way in which the voices and views of autistic adolescents are gathered and reported is a further limitation. Several papers identified in the initial search for literature suggested that the views of autistic individuals were reported when it was actually stakeholder views which were used as a proxy, and as such these papers were rejected from inclusion (see Section 2.10). Each study that was included in this review did report the voice of the young person, however, in several cases (e.g. Cribb et al., 2019), this was a relatively small aspect of the overall aim of the study. Additionally, all of the studies used semi-structured interviews or focus groups. There are many needs and differences associated with autism, particularly those relating to

social communication and interaction, which may mean that this is not the best way of gathering views from participants as it may not take into account personal preferences and skills.

The education system plays an important role in supporting the transition to adulthood, however, these may be significantly different between cultures. For example, the education system is often guided by very specific policy e.g. the National Curriculum and the SEND code of practice in England (DfE, 2015). This review included participants from English-speaking nations, making the assumption of reasonable similarities in the education systems. However, only two studies were undertaken in the UK, with five studies taking place in the USA which may mean that the results are more pertinent to this country and reflect the impact of country-specific policy or culture.

Other limitations relate to the potential lack of diversity of study participants. Autistic adolescents are a heterogeneous group with diverse experiences, abilities, and backgrounds, yet the sample groups primarily comprised of white males, although demographics beyond age and gender were often not reported. Therefore the information provided may not fully capture the perspectives of those with different cultural, socio-economic, or linguistic backgrounds. While it is not the goal of qualitative research to generalise the findings to all autistic adolescents, the representativeness of findings is important for transferability (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). The findings in this review, rather offer insight into the perspectives of autistic adolescents but any interpretations should be treated with caution. Additionally, this review includes only nine studies, which is fewer than the 10-12 suggested as optimal by Bondas and Hall (2007). This smaller number of studies may limit the scope of evidence and in turn the nuance and richness of interpretation, further limiting the transferability of findings.

2.15.2 Future Research Directions.

Further research which addresses the views, aspirations and hopes of autistic adolescents should adopt a more comprehensive and holistic approach. As indicated in the narrative literature, (section 2.7.3) methods for data gathering should be carefully considered to ensure that they offer flexibility and address any specific needs of the individual, particularly those that relate to communication and understanding, ensuring that the young person's voice is heard and amplified. The

literature highlights a gap, suggesting that it would be useful for research to more explicitly explore a broader range of topics that might relate to adulthood and the transition to adulthood; including personal aspirations, leisure activities and health. Inclusive research methodologies that involve collaboration with autistic individuals themselves can ensure that their voices are authentically represented.

2.16 Rationale and Aims of the Current Study

The review of literature suggests that there is a paucity of research which explores adolescent views of their future selves, with much centred around the transition period itself rather than the young people's views, aspirations, fears and expectations. Furthermore, there is a lack of research which reports the individual voices of autistic young people, and despite increasing recognition that understanding individual perspectives is important from a human rights perspective, the need for support that is targeted to individual strengths and needs. This research, therefore, aims to explore perceptions of adulthood and future self among autistic young people with the aim of developing insight and understanding for professionals who work with autistic adolescents

Research Question

The research aims to answer the following research question:

- *How do autistic adolescents perceive adulthood and their future adult selves?*

3   Methodology

This current research aims to explore how autistic adolescents think about adulthood and their adult future selves. This research involved the completion of semi-structured style interviews with participants between 14 and 18 years of age, who all identify as autistic. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is used as a framework for data analysis.

The following chapter begins with an outline of the philosophical stance within which the research has been situated and goes on to discuss the justifications for the approach adopted. This is followed by an outline of the research design and methods, including, recruitment of participants, data analysis, and ethical issues. There is also a consideration of reflexivity and my positionality as a researcher.

3.1   Methodological Orientation

A researcher's philosophical position is determined by the assumptions they hold about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be known (epistemology) in the real world (Burnham, 2013). Unlike in the physical sciences, where it may be clear what is or should be studied, there are likely multiple ways that researchers studying people might interpret social reality. Researchers' assumptions about the "nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated" (Cohen, 2018, p. 5) are key influences on the research process. This positioning is also impacted by an individual's underpinning values and beliefs about the purpose of research (Botha, 2021). Indeed, Gorski (2013) contends that such philosophies offer a guide to research in practice and as such examining and acknowledging one's perspective can improve research.

3.1.1   Research Paradigm

Research paradigms can be described as a "way of working by a group of researchers within a particular discipline or research area" (Robson, 2011, p. 529). The research paradigm that practitioners align themselves with will influence the research questions, data collection methods, and analyses used for inquiry (Bergman, 2010). In this research, I have drawn on a critical realist (CR) paradigm and applied Rowley et al.'s (2023) *Framework for Critical Reflection in EP Practice (*see Section 3.1.2.1*).*

CR, initially developed by Bhaskar (1978), may be understood to combine realism ontology with a relativist epistemology. CR theorises that there is one independent form of reality but many interpretations of that reality (Bhaskar, 2008). CR offers an element of realism since it considers that there is a reality independent of the researcher's views about reality. However, it theorises that this reality is socially located and impacted by both language and the social context (Pilgrim, 2014). CR argues that there are different layers of reality (real, actual, and empirical). However, moving away from positivism, CR suggests that not everything real is visible or measurable (Bhaskar, 1998; Gorski, 2013). Indeed, CR offers elements of ontological relativism, with CR theorists contending that any knowledge about the world can only be partial and provisional, rejecting the notion of objective knowledge of the world (Maxwell, 2012). Furthermore, although similar to positivism in the view of reality as being singular, CR posits that there may be multiple perspectives on this singular truth. CR contends that language and culture have a role in mediating an individual's experience, ultimately impacting their understanding of reality (Maxwell, 2012). However, unlike a more relativist view, CR speculates that understanding reality is "shaped by the possibilities and constraints inherent in the material world" (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007, p. 127). Furthermore, Pilgrim (2014) contends that the researcher is part of the reality they want to explore and that understanding can only be developed through being part of the research process, not from the outside.

3.1.1.1 Language and Meaning within Qualitative Approaches.

Willig (2013) contends that the CR approach enables the exploration of participant experiences, meaning-making, and implications related to the area of research interest. However, such an approach also acknowledges the role of social context and language while recognizing "the impossibility of ever accessing decontextualized or incontrovertible truth" (Terry et al., 2018, p. 276). A researcher's fundamental beliefs about language and its role in conveying meaning serve as the foundation for their overall approach in qualitative research (Hall, 1997). These beliefs shape their understanding of reality and knowledge, influencing their research methodology. Braun & Clarke (2022) argue that when a researcher believes that the language used by participants expresses their realities, thoughts, and emotions, it reflects their deliberate interpretation of language and its representation. However,

the notion that meaning is not inherent in material things or individuals but is instead created and socially shared via language adheres to a more constructionist perspective on language (Hall, 1997). Such a perspective is foundational for research that aims to create and negotiate meaning in collaboration with participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.1.2 Philosophical and Methodological Approach of Current Research.

In terms of this research which gathers autistic adolescents' views of adulthood, a CR approach means that data that has been gathered is not viewed as being a direct representation of reality, rather it is a reflection of reality that has been mediated by the participants' culture and language, including their wider experience and the research experience itself (Willig, 2013).

3.1.2.1 A Reflective and Reflexive Approach.

In line with a CR approach, I position myself as an integral part of the research process. Therefore, it is essential to reflect on various aspects of the research, encompassing planning, action, and meaning-making. Reflection holds a central tenet in Educational Psychology (EP) practice, as emphasised by guidance from the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2017, 2019), and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2015). To structure and support my reflection and reflexivity, I opted to use Rowley et al.'s (2023) Framework for Critical Reflection in EP Practice (FCRiEPP).

While there are several well-known frameworks supporting reflective behaviour, such as Gibbs' and Kolb's reflective cycles, the FCRiEPP proves particularly useful as a tool for EP self-reflection and reflexivity. Research exploring experiences with the FCRiEPP highlights its flexibility in application across various contexts without being overly prescriptive. The framework has demonstrated its ability to promote deeper thinking, offering "space to pause and reflect on actions and thought processes" (p. 28), and to increase reflexivity, fostering self-knowledge and awareness of blind spots, values, and their impact on actions. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the FCRiEPP.

Figure 3.1

Framework for Critically Reflective EP Practice (from Rowley et al. (2023))
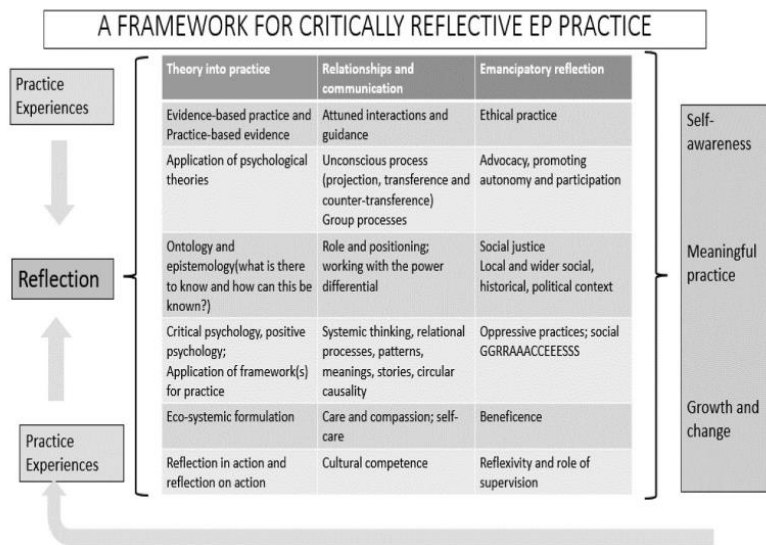
I used the framework to prompt my thinking across each of the stages of the research process. Table 3.1 provides an overview of how each of the main strands were considered.

Table 3.1

Examples of the Main Strands of the FCRiEPP

Strand of framework	Reflection during the current research process	
Theory into practice	Personal knowledge and worldviews	
	Underpinning psychological theories in understanding the current research	
	Overarching theory on reflection in action and on action during	REFLEXIVITY
Relationships and communication	The power differential between self and participant	
	Communication, interaction and attunement with participants	
	Communication with other stakeholders	
Emancipatory reflection	Ethical research process	
	Effecting social justice change	
	Power and privilege	

3.1.2.2 Reflexivity

While reflection is necessary for professional or personal development, on its own, it is not sufficient; there needs to be a further reflexive process. Reflexivity, defined as "the concept used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006, p. 143), occurs when there is an intentional internal dialogue, weighing up a range of factors related to the issue, including those outlined in the FCRiEPP, current world views, and approaches. This process can result in changes in beliefs and potentially in practice (Florian et al., 2017).

Reflexivity in research aligns with the critical realist (CR) notion that the researcher cannot be neutral in their observations, and their perspective can influence both the processes and outcomes of the research. CR suggests that social reality is shaped by structure and agency (of self and participant). Taking a reflexive approach encourages the researcher to recognise how their beliefs, views, and assumptions are influenced by broader social structures and how these perspectives may influence the interpretation and analysis of data (Haigh and Evers, 2015).

3.1.3 RTA and Alternatives

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was selected as the methodological approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA is a method for analysing data and interpreting patterns across qualitative datasets. This systematic process involves coding the data and developing themes. While Thematic Analysis, in broad terms, is understood to be a 'theoretically flexible method' (p. 5), RTA, specifically, emphasises reflexivity as its foundational characteristic. Reflexivity involves critically reflecting on the researcher's role in all aspects of the research process (discussed in Section 1.1.2.2 above). It is a practice where the researcher critically interrogates their actions within the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Being reflexive throughout the design, planning, implementation, and analysis is crucial. Decision points guided by the framework and ethics should be highlighted, and a reflexive diary should be maintained for documenting thoughts and critical reflections on the research process. Discussing these aspects with the RTA team, supervisor, and tutor is also important.

RTA was chosen because its analytical approach aligns with the CR paradigm, emphasising participants' experiences and perspectives. RTA is a flexible method suitable for making meaning from a set of behaviours, thoughts, or experiences within a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Its methodological flexibility allows for the analysis of various types of qualitative data, including semi-structured interviews and creative artefacts. The analysis will follow the six-phase process recommended by the Braun and Clarke RTA framework (2012, 2022), including initial familiarisation with data, systematic coding, searching, reviewing, defining themes, and writing the analysis. The complete RTA analytical method employed can be found in the section on data analysis (Section 3.3).

To analyse the resultant data using RTA requires a level of interpretation by the researcher, influenced by their own cultural and experiential lens. Braun and Clarke (2022) contend that the interpretation should speak "to situated realities and the limits and constraints of the world that participants exist within" (p. 171). Taking a CR approach aims to acknowledge and explore how the material world and systems, such as the educational setting and system and theories/understanding of autism, shape individuals' sense-making (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). The focus on reflexivity in RTA promotes consideration of the researcher's subjectivity and its impact on how the data is understood. From a CR perspective, RTA provides access to contextualised realities mediated and shaped by participants' personal perspectives, viewed through the researcher's own experience, as opposed to "decontextualised truths" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 171). The flexibility of RTA offers the possibility of inductively developed analysis that captures both latent and semantic meaning, and provides both descriptive and interpretive accounts of the data, focusing on patterns of meaning.

Grounded Theory (GT), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) were initially considered as potential research approaches for my study on young people's perspectives of adulthood, as they are often considered to produce broadly similar analyses from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Charmaz, 2014; Spiers & Riley, 2019).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method that aims to explore and understand participants' lived experiences within a specific phenomenon, acknowledging the researcher's interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is recognised for its flexibility, avoiding the imposition of

theoretical assumptions on interpretations and maintaining the centrality of the phenomenon in the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, it enables the identification of the affective, cognitive and also discursive, aspects of the data (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006). IPA involves an idiographic approach, analysing individual cases before identifying themes across cases. It prioritises the exploration of subjective accounts and the meanings participants attribute to their experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Although IPA is acknowledged for its ability to explore participants' perceptions and lived experiences within a phenomenon (Alase, 2017), several factors led to its rejection for use in this research. Firstly, IPA often focuses on small, homogenous samples, whereas my research aimed for a larger sample size of 4-8 participants (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Additionally, IPA tends to prioritise individual narratives over shared patterns across participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This does not align with the current research which aims to explore the views of multiple autistic adolescents.

Grounded Theory (GT) is a qualitative research approach that aims to generate theories grounded in the data, emphasising inductive analysis without imposing preconceived theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2014). One crucial element of GT is its emphasis on approaching the research topic without predetermined theoretical frameworks, contending that this could influence the organic development of an emerging theory (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). The GT method involves constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and the identification of patterns and categories to develop an overarching theory derived directly from the participants' experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While GT offers an inductive approach to theory development from data (Charmaz, 2014), it was deemed inappropriate for my current research. Having engaged with the existing literature, I felt that my current theoretical knowledge would be a barrier to developing new theory (Holton, 2010). Furthermore, this did not align with the nature and goals of my research, which sought to understand experiences rather than generate theories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, GT aims for theoretical saturation, which can be both time-consuming and impractical. Furthermore, this notion is not useful according to Braun & Clarke (2021), who argue that the concept of saturation assumes that there is meaning in the raw data, in contrast, they contend that 'new meanings are always (theoretically) possible' (p. 210) when derived through data analysis.

RTA was ultimately chosen for its alignment with the study's aim to explore shared patterns across a broader dataset while considering the socio-cultural context in which young people's experiences are situated (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

As a trainee practitioner psychologist, I aim to promote social justice and advocate for the rights of autistic young people, and this underpins my current research goals. A CR approach considered to be a transformative paradigm, recognises that social positioning can grant privilege to some constructions of reality over others. It explicitly recognises the consequences of such privilege and seeks to emancipate those affected (Mertens, 2023). As such it allows for the researcher to explicitly imbue their research with their values. In this current research, I aim to explore the views and experiences of adolescent students who identify as autistic. I aim to consider how the data and interpretations could promote social justice and equity by fostering a deeper understanding of young autistic people's experiences. This understanding is vital for informing and empowering those who support them, ultimately working towards a more inclusive and just society (Kourti, 2021).

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

The research design is determined by both the researcher's philosophical positioning, in this case, critical realism, and the nature of the research question. Here, I aimed to explore how autistic adolescents think about adulthood and plan for their future adult lives. Qualitative approaches to research are well-suited for gathering and exploring rich, detailed information about autistic adolescents' experiences. Using participants' own words can provide valuable insight into how they make sense of and derive meaning from their lives (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, there is currently a movement to promote and include the rights and views of children and young people in policy, practice, and research (Botha, 2021). Consequently, a qualitative methodology, specifically RTA was employed, involving participants in the research process.

3.2.1 Ethical Considerations

This research was guided by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021), the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2016) professional guidance and the Data Protection Act (2018), to ensure the protection of participants. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Nottingham School of Psychology Ethics Committee before participant recruitment

or data collection began. Detailed information on the ethics application and approval can be found in Appendix C.

Details of ethical considerations are discussed throughout the following sections. This includes consideration of ethics directly related to the sample population of autistic adolescents and encompasses the role of school staff (SENCOs and head teachers) and parents/carers in gatekeeping participants in the process. Additionally, as participants were between 14 and 18 years of age, the role of parents/carers in obtaining consent is addressed. Further details on this aspect are discussed in Section 3.2.2.

The potential risk of harm to the participants was thoroughly considered to ensure that such risks were minimised. The research focus sought to exclude areas that might be considered potentially distressing or sensitive. However, potential risks included the possibility that participants might feel inconvenienced by their involvement in the research. Despite being informed that participation was voluntary, there was a potential for some participants to feel a degree of obligation, either due to being approached by a member of school staff or parent and feeling obliged to continue once they had started. Additionally, participation might have evoked negative evaluations or concerns about future education, careers, or independence. Participants were, therefore, explicitly advised that they had the right to stop and withdraw from the study if they experienced any distress at any point. The research process aimed to be emotionally supportive, recognising that personal reflection could potentially elicit thoughts and discussions on unexpected topics that might prompt participants to share deeply personal experiences and feelings.

This research acknowledges the potential power differential experienced by participants, particularly when they are adolescents and autistic. I aimed to mitigate potential biases, promote collaboration, and contribute to reproducible, respectful and safe autism research (Hobson et al., 2023). I aimed to develop rapport by using person-centred communication skills, having a warm-up conversation and using accessible activities.

To ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym was chosen at the start of the process to maintain confidentiality. Participants were offered a range of Roman or Greek gods to choose from, or they could provide their own. Any identifying data was not included. Participants were provided with a privacy notice on the participant

information sheet (Appendix D), this also included signposting to the University of Nottingham's privacy notice.

3.2.2 Participants and Recruitment
3.2.2.1 **Participants**.

The sample comprised six participants aged between 14-18 years of age, who self-identified as autistic. Demographic details and characteristics of the participants can be found in Table 3.2. This specific age group was chosen as they should have experienced career guidance in school under the new career strategy. Additionally, participants in this age group would have passed through crucial education, training, or career transition points, requiring them to consider their options for their next educational and/or career steps. Participants were recruited from a single 11-18 mainstream secondary school, with approximately 1200 students on role, in a city in the North of England, following the attainment of initial consent from the headteacher (Appendix E).

Table 3.2

Participant characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Gaia	15	Female
Apollo	18	Male
Athena	17	Female
Aurora	16	Female
Mars	14	Male
Zeus	15	Male

Given the specific population and diverse experiences of the participants, a purposive sampling approach (Ranjbar et al., 2012; Robson, 2011) was employed to identify and recruit potential participants. SENCOs and other school staff were tasked with identifying individuals who met the following criteria:

- Aged between 14-18 years of age.
- Enrolled in a mainstream school and following a mainstream curriculum.

- Understood to be autistic and believed to self-identify as autistic (this was explored further when potential participants had the research explained to them, and again before the research session began).
- Not, and never have been, care experienced, as evidence suggests that this group of people are likely to have significantly different or additional issues during the transition to adulthood (Guishard-Pine et al., 2007).

3.2.2.2 Recruitment and Sampling.

Given the specialised nature of the population under investigation and the in-depth nature of this study, I aimed to recruit between 4-8 participants, which is aligned with the more narrative interview approach described by Joffe and Elsey (2014), in which there is inevitably a tendency towards smaller participant numbers. Existing literature suggests the need for enough participants to achieve saturation of information, although other researchers argue that saturation is not required or useful in a qualitative exploratory study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2006).

The recruitment process began by approaching the school SENCO, providing them with information about the study, the participant eligibility criteria, the implications of the research and what was involved for the school and participants. Once the SENCO had expressed a willingness to be involved, they approached the headteacher and shared the necessary documentation (Appendix F). With the school's agreement, the SENCO was provided with participant information sheets, consent forms, and an information sheet for staff, outlining details regarding recruitment and ethics (Appendix D).

After potential participants were identified by school staff, parents were provided with the participant information sheet (Appendix D). After parental consent had been given, staff held initial discussions with potential participants to explain the requirements and encourage further conversations with key adults, ensuring informed decisions about participation. Even for participants below the age of 16, the emphasis was on ensuring informed consent rather than mere assent. In this process, 12 participants were identified, and consent was obtained from six participants.

3.2.2.3 Gatekeeper and Access to Participants.

Gatekeepers, as defined by Lund et al. (2016, p. 281), are individuals who wield "power and control over access to communities and key respondents in a

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particular location selected for research". In the context of schools, all staff play a role in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young people, mandated to 'consider, at all times, what is in the best interests of the child' (DfE, 2023, p. 4). Therefore, formal consent to engage in recruitment was obtained from the Headteacher or senior staff. While this formal approval is deemed necessary, there are often additional levels of gatekeepers involved in the recruitment process (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016), including staff such as the SENCO and pastoral managers, who make decisions about the suitability of approaching individuals for this research. The assumption here is that these staff members, being most familiar with the students, are best positioned to identify potential participants meeting the criteria for this study and support them in their decision-making process.

While recruiting through school gatekeepers, who have a duty of care toward students, adds an extra layer of protection for young people, it is essential to consider the ethical implications. Gatekeepers have the authority to decide on the inclusion or exclusion of individuals in research, potentially limiting a range of perspectives or voices, especially those from marginalised groups (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016). It could be argued that recruiting in this manner shifts power away from the individual toward the system (school). Therefore, it was crucial to address this balance by ensuring that potential gatekeepers, such as school staff, fully understood the research objectives and were aware of its voluntary nature and participants' right to withdraw.

3.2.2.4 Obtaining Informed Consent, the Right to Withdraw, and Protection from Harm

Once potential participants had been identified, obtaining informed consent and/or assent from both participants and parents or carers was crucial. This involved ensuring that potential participants had a clear understanding of what participation would entail. However, as the participants would be between the ages of 14 and 18, it required consideration of whether parental consent would be necessary. According to BPS guidance (BPS, 2021), for 'low-risk research' (p. 16), where senior school staff have given approval, sole consent is acceptable for young people aged 16 and over. Given that the research relates to topics unlikely to be considered sensitive—areas covered, to some extent, within the school curriculum—sole consent could have been sufficient. However, recognising that some aspects covered or elicited

might be challenging for young people, and considering the BPS statement that individuals under the age of 18 "have a legal right to safeguarding" (p.15), it was considered prudent to inform all parents and encourage potential participants, regardless of age, to discuss participation with them. Additionally, both young people and parents were given the option to have further discussions about the study with me the researcher.

Potential student participants were informed about the study, following the staff guidance sheet (Appendix D). They were provided with the information sheet and consent form to take home. The participant consent/assent process and documentation adhered to Loyd's (2013) guidance for obtaining consent from autistic young people, ensuring that the process enabled meaningful consent/assent. Loyd suggests considering the most effective modes of communication and providing opportunities for potential participants "to say 'no' in different ways, in different contexts, and to different people on different occasions". In practice, I ensured that the participants had the process explained to them and had the opportunity to read the information themselves. They were encouraged to discuss it with parents or carers and then, if they desired more information, to engage in discussions with me. Following the principle highlighted by the BPS (2019), the consent process was treated as an ongoing dialogue during the research, rather than a one-off process completed before the young person gains a more informed understanding through participation.

The staff who initially approached students were asked to go through the participant information sheet (Appendix D) and emphasise that participation was entirely voluntary. Students were informed that they had the freedom to decline participation, and even if they agreed initially, they were free to change their minds or stop at any point during the research activities. At the beginning of the research activities, I reiterated the information from the participant information sheet, emphasising that participation was optional and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants were explicitly told they could ask to stop at any time, and a visual stop sign was placed on the table (Appendix G) to provide additional support if needed. I regularly checked in with participants, asking if they wanted to stop or take a break at various points during the activities. As discussed in the gatekeeping section (section 3.2.2.3), while school approval and parental consent (especially for those under 16) were necessary, ensuring the best interests of the participants and avoiding coercion

due to power differentials in school were priorities. This approach aimed to ensure participants were not agreeing out of a sense of obligation.

3.2.3 Data Collection

3.2.3.1 Interview Approach.

An adapted semi-structured interview format was adopted for this research, including, warm up, main semi-structured tasks, and a cool down (Kvale, 1996). The warm-up offers a way to ease participants into the session and the cool-down offers a decompression, which is particularly important if topics are sensitive and sets the scene "for a friendly departure" (Luker, 2008, p. 171).

3.2.3.2 Participatory Approach.

This research aimed to offer the use of participatory and creative approaches to address power imbalances often present between participants and researchers, especially in the context of children or young people (Punch, 2002; Weller, 2012). Participatory research with autistic participants involves incorporating "the views of autistic people and their allies about what research gets done, how it is done, and how it is implemented" (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019, p. 1). Hobson et al. (2023) emphasise the diversity of participatory practices, acknowledging the potential power imbalances between researchers and autistic participants and the wider autistic community. Traditionally, autism research has faced accusations of tokenism, wherein although there might be a semblance of community input, power is ultimately retained by the researcher (Crane et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2021). A recent shift advocates for a more equitable distribution of power between researchers and research partners, or even allowing partners to maintain control over the research process (e.g. den Houting et al., 2021; Pickard et al., 2021). Fletcher-Watson et al. (2019) argue that participatory and collaborative research is essential for improved outcomes for autistic individuals and those who support them.

Participatory approaches encompass an overarching philosophy guiding the research process, and specific methods can further support this aim. Fletcher-Watson (2019), emphasises the importance of respect, authenticity, avoiding assumptions, and showing empathy in the research process. I sought to transfer power to the young people by offering choices in the way of working, including options for different ways of recording and communicating. Additionally, I promoted

"participative ownership" (Franks, 2011, p.4) in certain aspects of the research process by developing questions from the young people's own initial ideas (see GEM in section 1.2.3.3, below).

At the end of each session, I reviewed any information that had been recorded with participants, clarifying my understanding, and obtaining consent for the use of the information. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experience of involvement. The goal was to listen to young people, amplifying their voices, aiming for them to be "knowing and approving experts" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 78).

3.2.3.3 Grid Elaboration Method (GEM)

I chose a GEM activity (Appendix H) as a method for scaffolding young people's responses and promoting empowered involvement. The GEM is a simple free association technique, which allows structure to develop from participants' initial thoughts around a topic (Joffe and Elsey, 2014). This method avoids the constraints of pre-prepared questions, aiming to illuminate salient associations with a given topic (Perfitt, 2013; Shepherd, 2015).

In the GEM activity, participants work with a blank grid containing four boxes on a sheet of A3 paper. Participants express their immediate 'associations' to a given topic using a word, image, or phrase. Each box is limited to one association. After completing the grid, participants will have identified four 'salient' associations. The researcher then prompts the participant to elaborate on each association, encouraging detailed explanations until the participant indicates there is no more to add. This process continues for all four boxes, minimising researcher interference and ensuring that data originates solely from the participants' "subjective stance" (Joffe & Elsey, 2014, p.178). The grid format allows participants to express themselves without the constraints of a "coherent, linear dialogue" (Joffe & Elsey, 2014, p.181). The GEM serves as a tool for extracting subjectively relevant material from participants, free from preconceived notions about what they should think or the direction their thoughts should take. The free association element of GEM aims to ensure that subsequent questions are grounded in the distinctive experiences of each participant, accurately capturing the "emotional underpinning of participants' remembered experiences" (Hollway, 2015, p.44).

3.2.3.4 Procedure

Participant data collection sessions (interviews) were conducted individually in a pastoral room within the young person's school. Each session began with an introduction of my role, the research aims, and an overview of the activities that might take place. This was followed by a reminder of the information provided on the participant information sheet and informed consent form, with an opportunity for participants to ask any further questions.

Participants were given a choice in how they provided their responses. Initial responses were recorded on A3 paper by the participant, myself, or a combination of both, and detailed field notes were also taken. Participants engaged in the warm-up task, main task, and reflection tasks as outlined below. The sessions concluded with a debrief, reviewing the session's aims, and providing a further opportunity for questions. Sessions lasted between 40 and 70 minutes.

3.2.3.5 Field Notes v Audio Recording

Data were recorded through detailed field notes rather than audio recording interviews. This decision was driven by careful consideration of various factors that impact the qualitative data collection process and consideration of the balance of power in the research process. The use of detailed field notes served multiple purposes in aiding reflection, reflexivity, and immediate and later analysis.

While audio recording is often viewed as the gold standard for data reliability and rigour, it has several disadvantages. Aside from the time-consuming transcription process, it may also inhibit participant responses (Hollway, 2011). A key concern with audio recording was its potential impact on participant openness. The literature suggests that open responses may be hindered when individuals feel uncomfortable or concerned about the confidentiality and storage of recorded voices, which are integral to their identity (Hollway, 2011). Nordstrom (2015) contributes to this perspective by challenging the often-held assumption that recording devices are acultural, apolitical, or devoid of problems. This aligns with the decision to rely on detailed field notes, mitigating concerns and fostering a more comfortable and open environment for participants. Additionally, Rapley, (2004) and Nordstrom (2015) contend that the presence of recording devices can impact the dynamics of the interview and the interaction between participant and interviewer. This potential disruption to the natural flow of the conversation emphasises the importance of a

method that promotes collaboration and active engagement between the researcher and the participant.

The reflective and reflexive aspects of detailed field notes align with the critical realist paradigm, emphasising the development of the participant's reality rather than imposing the researcher's perspective. By opting for detailed field notes and engaging in reflective discussions with participants during interviews, I aim to acknowledge and value the participant's perspectives, fostering a commitment to transparency and active participant involvement in the research process. This approach emphasises the co-creation of knowledge and helps prevent the imposition of the researcher's preconceived notions on the participant's reality. The choice to maintain a detailed reflective/reflexive research diary further enhances the credibility of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2022). By documenting thoughts, feelings, and notes on the research journey, I followed a practice advocated by Robson (2011) and Nordstrom (2015), making transparent the interpretative processes and acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity as an instrument of understanding. Furthermore, Rutakumwa et al. (2020) argue against viewing non-recording as a limitation. This approach, they contend, can be the best option, not a disadvantage. Moreover, the use of expanded field notes as an alternative recording method, as advocated by Hill et al. (2022) and Rutakumwa et al. (2020), has been found effective, especially when research questions are straightforward. Research reports that not only can this method provide relevant and detailed information but it may also decrease the time required for both data collection and analysis and encourage more reflection from interviewers (Hill et al., 2022; Rutakumwa et al.,2020).

3.2.3.6 Method (GEM)

Participants were given a blank grid (Appendix H) and asked, "What does adulthood mean to you? Please use a word, phrase, or image that represents what first comes to mind when thinking about adulthood" (Instructions adapted from Joffe & Elsey, 2014). This aimed to ease the participants into the research experience and begin to help them focus on thoughts of being an adult.

3.2.3.7 Main Activities; Discussion of the Grid

Participants were asked to elaborate on their responses and explain their representations, using phrases such as "Can you tell me more about this?" and "Is there anything else?" This process aimed to allow participants to guide at least some

of the schedule, keeping within their own subjective experience, rather than working to a predetermined schedule (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Joffe & Elsey, 2014). It was hoped that this process would help to elicit the individual's personal perspective.

The GEM provided a visual mechanism for gathering data by offering prompts to structure individual interviews, allowing participants to generate content based on their own individual associations with 'adulthood'. Research suggests that visually mediated methods, a feature of the GEM grid, enhance the communication abilities of young people with autism (Hill, 2014; Perfitt 2013; Shepherd, 2015). This aimed to help elucidate the individual's personal perspective.

3.2.3.8 Main Activities; the Adult Self

Participants were asked to think about the type of person they would like to be when they are an adult, they were given the age range of 25-30 years of age to provide additional context (the schedule is outlined in Appendix I). This began with free responses, and then participants were given cards with prompts based on the Preparing for Adulthood (PfA) framework (NDTi, n.d.); employment, independent living, health, relationships, and community. These were used as they are identified in the SEND code of practice as key areas that young people need to be supported with (from at least Year 9) for good life outcomes (DfE, 2015). Participants were offered the choice of which cards they wanted to discuss, if any, and in what order. Participants were prompted to describe each aspect of their imagined adult self, starting with open, broad questions. For example, for employment, they were asked, "Tell me about what work would be like for you". Further prompts were provided where necessary, such as asking, "What job do you do?", "Do you enjoy work?", and "What would your daily routine look like?"

Participants were asked to think about how close they felt to their ideal adult self in each area, and overall. They were also asked to think about what they have done to move them towards this self (planning, actions, experiences), what they think they could do now/next, and what other people could do to help them move forward. Participants were given the option to write, draw, or speak their responses. Spoken words were scribed by the researcher.

3.2.3.9 Reflection on the Process

After the main activities, participants were encouraged to review any artefacts and notes made together. I discussed what had been written in my field notes,

checking for a shared understanding and ensuring that the recorded information was accurate. Participants were asked how they felt about the activities and if they had anything to add. The participants were finally provided with the debriefing statement (Appendix J), and this was read to them. The statement includes signposting for further support, and participants were reminded that they may still withdraw their data from the study.

3.2.3.10   Pilot and Amendments

A pilot study was conducted with the first participant recruited to assess the usability of the procedure and activities. The activities were found to be understood by the participants and appeared to yield rich data. The reflection activity was well received and appeared to be valuable in adding to and clarifying initial data. As I was not recording, I was keen to ensure that my field notes were clear. Initially, I recorded my session field notes in a very linear way, which meant that my thoughts were entwined with the participant's original data. I decided that it would be useful to split my notes into two columns so that there was a distinct separation between my thoughts and queries, and the original data (e.g. what the participant said, wrote or drew) while keeping them related. I found this to be helpful when undertaking the review activity at the end of the session.

3.3   Data Analysis

As discussed in Section 1.1.3, above, data analysis was guided by the six stages of Braun and Clarke's (2012) reflexive thematic analysis. Informed by a critical realist approach, I aimed to explore autistic young people's views about adulthood and their adult future selves. As analysis was guided by the data, an inductive RTA was used. It should be noted that while here the stages are presented in a linear fashion, to aid understanding, the process in reality is iterative and recursive. Analysis often requires a flexible approach, moving back and forth through the stages to fit with the data and research questions, and allowing for conscious reflection (Terry et al. 2017, Braun and Clark, 2020). I used the FCRiEPP (outlined in Section 3.1.2.1) to facilitate my critical engagement with the data and support my reflections, which I documented in my reflexive journal. Extracts relating to each stage of analysis can be found in the reflexivity boxes in the following sections.

3.3.1 Familiarisation

Familiarisation is developing a "deep and intimate knowledge of your dataset", and also involves "critically engaging with the information "(Braun and Clark, 2022, p. 42). I began this process during the interviews. In an attempt to involve the participants, I read through data that had been recorded by myself and the participants. I checked that what I had recorded was correct and any interpretations that I had made were correct. As outlined in Section 3.2.3.10 participant data and my personal comments were kept separately, this was particularly important where participants wanted me to record their information. This ensured that I avoided any conflation of original data with my own interpretations and analysis. As data were not audio recorded, but recorded in writing, I felt it was important to reflect on the data and produce a more standard 'transcript' (record of the data) as soon as possible after data collection. I ensured that after each interview I had allocated the rest of the day to producing a transcription and writing my reflective notes. This process ensured that I was actively engaging with and immersed in the data set. Once all of the data had been collected, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) suggestion, I went back through my transcriptions and the original data, making further notes, highlighting initial patterns, and aiming to actively make sense of the data. Using the FCRiEPP outlined in Section 1.1.2.1, to facilitate my critical engagement with the data, I noted any broad patterns, similarities and differences in the data. Box 3.1 outlines an extract from my reflexivity journal relating to the interview process and data familiarisation.

Box 3.1 Reflexivity in familiarisation

Extracts from Reflexive Journal

5.2.24

It feels like a big responsibility to check what I have recorded in terms of participants' responses. I know it is important, but I feel that X today and Y last week were perhaps just agreeing with me when I read over my notes. I don't necessarily think that they disagreed with anything but it felt like they were just ready to be done with the session. For Y in particular, I know he was really hungry and it was almost lunchtime. I find myself thinking that despite my best intentions recording this way is very hard! But it definitely makes me reflect- and hopefully, that will help me become familiar with the data more quickly and help with the analysis process. I already feel highly invested in my participants' stories!

28.2.24

I really wanted to use creative approaches-but it really does not seem to be happening! Participants prefer to talk or jot things down, which means I need to try to record everything. I know it needs to be their choice thought, and as long as I give them options at the start that offers them some autonomy - that itself is important.
I do need to acknowledge that I feel disappointed by that though! I would have really liked to have lots of lovely artefacts to use but I know that is about me and not about the YP or the data!!

3.3.2 Coding Data.

Copies of data transcripts were systematically coded with three rounds of coding of the dataset. Codes are the key concepts, ideas or meaning attached to sections of data, which are pertinent to the research questions. Coding was undertaken largely at the semantic level, this is where codes describe the participant's data, remaining with the surface meaning. However, some data were coded at the latent level. Latent coding occurs when the researcher aims to identify hidden or latent meaning within the content (Byrne 2022). However, it should be

noted that Braun and Clarke (2022) contend that coding may sit somewhere along the continuum between latent and semantic. Sections of data were highlighted and given initial names, which were short but descriptive of the content. Subsequent coding rounds also helped to ensure clarity of code definitions, with several codes being expanded or collapsed to support the consistency of their application to data. Appendix K shows extracts of some of the coded data, with participant quotations and code labels. I also recorded my reflections relating to the coding process again using my reflexive journal.

3.3.3 Generating Themes and Reviewing Themes

The coded data were reviewed, exploring how similar codes might be clustered to represent patterns of shared meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2020). This was completed by organising codes within an Excel spreadsheet, which easily allowed codes to be initially categorised and recategorised as my thinking developed over time. This also allowed for themes to be demoted to sub-themes or collapsed. Themes were developed so that they were distinctive and created a coherent picture of the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise the researcher playing an active process in the construction of the themes from the data. My knowledge and previous experience are likely to have impacted my interpretation of the data and the development of themes. In this stage of analysis, I developed my initial candidate themes. Individual themes were reviewed and checked in terms of how well they relate to the data and codes, revising where necessary. I aimed to keep in mind Patton's (1990) criteria for maintaining internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity and starting to think about what might be included and excluded from the themes. I drew out an initial thematic map (Appendix L), but having reviewed the codes within each theme I found that there was overlapping of ideas. I therefore decided to leave the theme development for a few days and come back to it. I reflected on this in my reflexive journal (see Box 3.2 below for an extract) and discussed this with my fellow RTA TEP research group. Appendix M shows how codes were grouped to become the final theme: *Aspirations for Independence and Agency*. At this stage, I was also looking to ensure that my themes told a compelling story that answered the research question, while also remaining true to the data. I now began to think more about which themes might be most important, changed some to subthemes (Byrne, 2022).

Box 3.2 Reflexitity in theme development

Extract from Reflexive Journal

20.3.24

I felt that this analysis process was going really well, I felt I had a good handle on the participant's data and I was beginning to notice that some key ideas- lots of wanting to be independent and discussions about careers, as well as really interesting points about not feeling able to cope with daily life stuff (being reliant on Mum!). However, when I started developing themes I just could not get the codes to fit (yes, I know!!). I was so frustrated. The problem was that several times I had codes that could go in more than one theme. I realised that I was being too fixed in my approach and I had been making themes without the evidence. I now need to step back and go through the process. I think I really want to just get this finished and that means I have rushed. However, by doing this I have now got to go back a stage- but I know that this is an iterative process, TRUST THE PROCESS!!, and I will have learned a lot about the data from this, even if it is not clear at the moment.

3.3.4 Themes Defined and Named.

Defining themes involved developing short descriptions which would explain the essence, scope and boundaries of the themes. Although cited as being a discrete stage, names and definitions were developed alongside the theme development and names and definitions were refined over several iterations. Indeed theme definition was also further developed during the writing process (stage 6). I aimed to ensure that the definitions were succinct but still illustrated the main organising concepts of the theme. In choosing a theme name I aimed to be informative but concise. For example, theme five was named *Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers,* and described thus; this theme explores participants' hopes, fears and expectations of careers in adulthood. It considers job stability and capacity to cope with the demands of the workplace.

3.3.5 Writing the Thematic Analysis Report.

The final stage involved writing up the analysis. Although this is presented as a standalone stage this process involves moving back and forth between writing and the previous defining and naming stage. The final analysis is presented in chapter 4. Here five themes were described, along with pertinent data excerpts and analytic commentary of key observations. This stage of the analysis also involved consideration of how themes might be organised in order to ensure the most coherent narrative and answer the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Themes were explored in relation to the pertinent literature in the discussion chapter (Chapter 5).

3.4 Research Quality

In qualitative research, ensuring trustworthiness is paramount to establishing the rigour and quality of the study. Trustworthiness encompasses several factors, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba, 2007).

Credibility, as proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), relates to the extent to which research findings accurately represent the participants' views. It emphasises the congruence between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility involves making clear the robustness of the research process and the faithfulness of the interpretations of the participants' experiences. In this research, I aimed for participants to be involved in recording their responses. I also reviewed anything recorded by participants or myself during the interview, intending to remain within the participant's frame of reference. Using an RTA framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022) ensured self-awareness of the process, as the process involved clarifying my positionality, writing a reflexive diary, and discussing my thoughts in supervision and in a discussion group with peers who were also undertaking an RTA study (see section 3.1.3).

Dependability, according to Anney (2014), involves participants evaluating the findings to ensure that interpretations and recommendations align with the data received. A systematic and deliberate research approach, documented through an audit trail, contributes to dependability (Nowell et al., 2017). I aimed to provide visible evidence of the research process to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data (Bowen, 2009).

Transferability, as highlighted by Bowen (2009) and Nowell et al. (2017), involves the creation of a rich description that allows readers to judge the transfer of research findings to different contexts, which they may be familiar with. This is facilitated by providing a detailed description of the research process and outlining key characteristics of the participants within the purposive sample, ensuring that the study's findings can be applied beyond the specific study context.

Confirmability involves establishing a clear thread between data, interpretations, outcomes, and conclusions (Ary et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). This is achieved through maintaining transparency in the research process, documenting decisions consistently, and incorporating reflexivity. An audit trail, including reflexive journaling, serves as evidence of decision-making and justifications, contributing to confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Hollway and Jefferson (2012) contend that transparency and acknowledgement of researcher subjectivity play a crucial role in ensuring robust research.

3.5 Summary

This research aims to explore how autistic adolescents view adulthood and think about their adult selves. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with six participants aged 14 to 18 who identified as autistic. Participants were recruited from a mainstream secondary school, with a purposive sampling approach to identify individuals who met the criteria. The recruitment process involved initial discussions with school staff and parents to ensure informed decisions about participation. Gatekeepers, such as school staff, played a crucial role in facilitating access to participants while maintaining ethical standards.

The methodology is grounded in a critical realist stance, acknowledging both the objective realities and subjective experiences of the participants. Data collection aimed to reduce the power imbalance between participant and researcher by using the Grid Elaboration Method (GEM). This activity allowed participants to express their immediate associations with adulthood, which were then elaborated upon during the interviews. This approach aimed to elicit rich, detailed data grounded in the participants' subjective experiences. Detailed field notes were taken to promote participant comfort and encourage openness. RTA was used as the method of data analysis.

RTA highlights the importance of reflexivity, with the researcher maintaining a reflexive diary and engaging in reflective discussions with researcher peers. This practice aligns with the critical realist notion that the researcher is not a neutral observer and that their perspectives influence the research process and outcomes. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and mitigating power differentials.

4 Results

4.1 Chapter Introduction

The previous chapter outlined how a reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse data gathered from autistic adolescents about their views of adulthood and their adult future selves. The research was planned and executed using a critical realist perspective.

This chapter presents an analysis of the dataset in relation to the research questions: *How do autistic adolescents perceive adulthood and their future adult selves?*

In order to provide context for the main analyses, the chapter begins with a brief overview of participants' views of the key markers and features of adulthood, as elicited through the GEM (Grid Elaboration Method) activity (Joffe and Elsey, 2014). The specific personal meanings of these are further explored within the main analysis. The key patterns identified in the dataset, in relation to the research question, are presented in five key themes. Each theme offers an interpretation of how the data relate to the research questions, and quotes are used to provide illustrative examples and offer evidence for key analytic claims. The wider implications of these interpretations, as well as a consideration of how findings might be contextualised within the existing literature, are further outlined in section 5.3.

4.2 Participants' Conceptualisations of Adulthood; salient features identified through the GEM activity

Participants were asked to use 'a word phrase or image that represents what first comes to mind when thinking about adulthood'. Figure 4.1 is an example of Gaia's response; the other participant's responses can be found in Appendix N.

Figure 4.1

Example Adulthood GEM Response from Participant Gaia
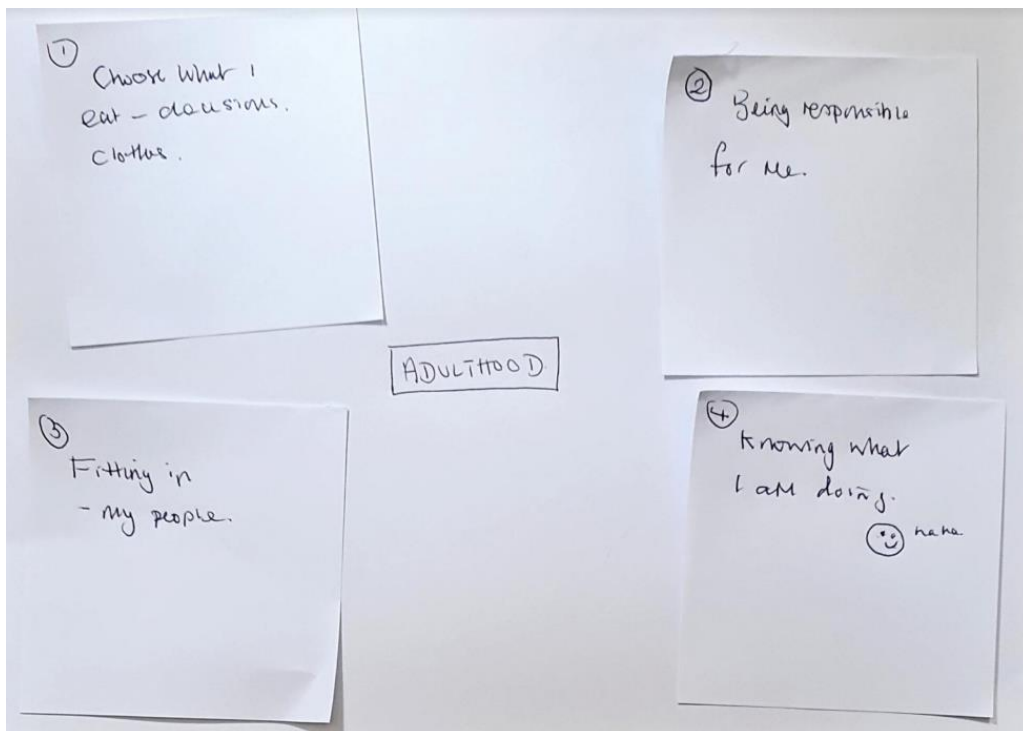
The GEM activity was primarily used as a tool to prompt young people into thinking about the aspects of adulthood that were most salient to them. The intention was to use the areas identified as a springboard for further exploration, rather than using pre-prepared questions. This aimed to keep the discussion within the participant's frame of reference, aiming to avoid imposing my meaning on them.

The key features participants initially brought to mind in the GEM activity when asked to provide "a word, phrase or image that represents adulthood" are outlined below in Table 4.1. Participant responses have been provided for transparency, rather than for further statistical analysis. In presenting GEM responses, I aim to provide a clear depiction of the different aspects of adulthood initially identified by participants and seek to provide context for the responses, which are included in subsequent themes. This approach aligns with a critical realism perspective by presenting observable data (key features of adulthood identified in the context of the GEM activity) that does not attempt to reduce the complexity of the participants' individual subjective perceptions.

Table 4.1

Main Features of Adulthood Identified by Participants in the GEM Activity

Area of adulthood identified	Frequency	Apollo	Zeus	Athena	Mars	Aurora*	Gaia
Job or career	5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Money and Financial stability	4	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Freedom and leisure	3		✓		✓		✓
Housing and living arrangements	2			✓		✓	
Children and family	2		✓			✓	
Having responsibility	2	✓					✓
Driving	2			✓	✓		
Difficulty	2				✓	✓	
Fitting in	1						✓
Knowing what I am doing	1						✓
Marriage/romantic relationship	1	✓					
Age (e.g. being 18+)	1					✓	

Note. *Aurora provided more than one feature in one of the GEM grid boxes

The most commonly elicited feature was having a job or career with 5 of the 6 participants highlighting this feature e.g. Athena identified, "Being a doctor". Money and financial stability were features of 4 responses, for example, Aurora stated, "Money…being broke". Freedom and leisure were salient features in three participant's grids. Housing and living arrangements, children and family, having responsibility, driving, and difficulty, each featured in 2 responses respectively. Fitting in, knowing what I am doing, romantic relationships and age were found in one participant's response respectively.

4.3 Themes Identified in Relation to the Research Question.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify five main themes which seemed to represent how autistic adolescents thought about their adulthood and their adult future selves. Figure 4.2 offers a map of themes and subthemes identified in this research and Table 4.2 provides an overview of their key characteristics.

Figure 4.2

Thematic Map of How Autistic Adolescents View Adulthood and their Future Adult Selves
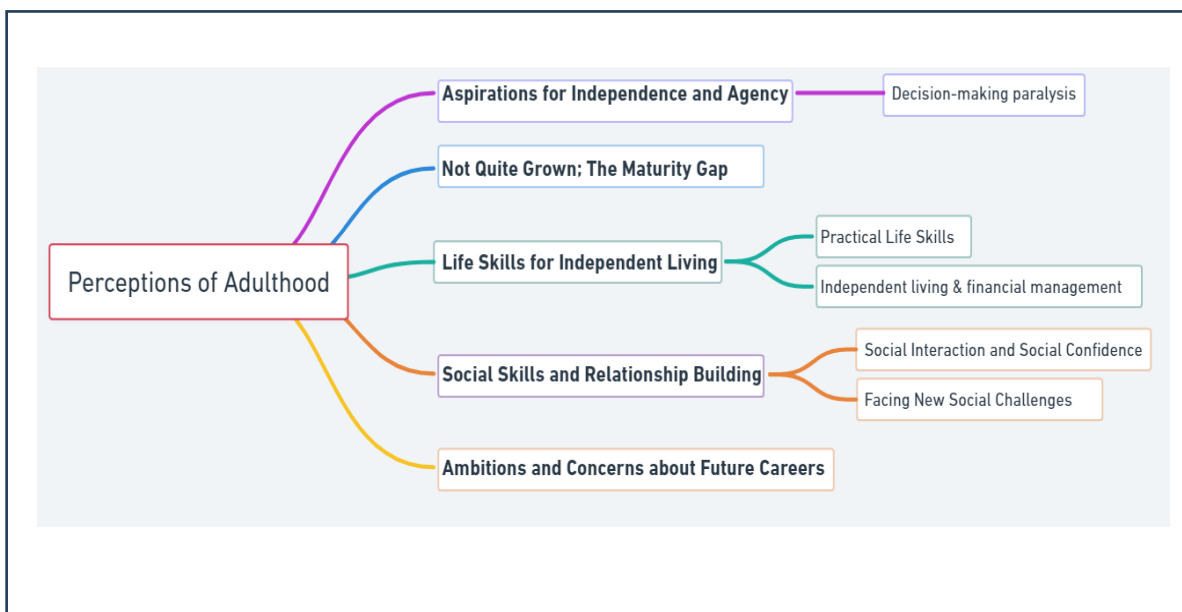
Table 4.2

Characteristics of Themes Relating to How Autistic Adolescents View their Adulthood

Theme	Characteristics of Theme
1. Aspirations for Independence and Agency	Hopes of managing own lives and making independent decisions. Includes financial independence, living alone, and personal lifestyle choices. Reluctance and perceived inability to make significant life choices.
2. Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap	Feeling unprepared, sense of self-doubt about meeting adult societal expectations. Gap between chronological age and subjective sense of maturity. Worry about coping with adult responsibilities.
3. Life Skills for Independent Living	Limited ability to manage daily tasks. Anxiety about future independence. Low confidence in ability to live independently. Challenges related to financial management and securing stable living conditions. Fears about economic stability and responsibilities of managing money and maintaining a home.
4. Social Skills and Relationship Building	Difficulties in social settings and building new relationships. Lack of confidence in social skills, and the impact on their ability to engage in meaningful interactions. Concerns over transitioning from established social networks to new environments. Fear of isolation and difficulties in forming new relationships.
5. Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers	Desire for meaningful employment. Career satisfaction important to happiness. Difficulties in choosing and preparing for a career.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Aspirations for Independence and Agency

The theme of *Aspirations for Independence and Agency* highlights the hopes and challenges that participants face as they think about and plan for adulthood. This theme focuses on participant desires to make independent lifestyle choices, manage their own finances, and take control of daily decisions. Additionally, the subtheme, Decision-Making Paralysis, addresses participants' difficulties with making decisions independently and their reliance on adult guidance.

Many participants expressed their desire for self-determination and personal autonomy, aiming to manage their future adult life and the transition towards it on their own terms. Their aspirations appear to extend beyond simply achieving independence; they cover a wide range of personal lifestyle choices and financial self-sufficiency. Participants frequently discussed their wish to control daily decisions that directly impact their lives, from everyday choices to making major life changes. Participants often highlighted the importance of independent living, such that they hoped to live outside of the family home and no longer be the responsibility of parents or guardians. This included having financial independence and being able to travel independently and of their own volition.

One of the key aspects of their desire for independence was the ability to make decisions about their personal routines and spending. For example, Mars expressed this sentiment, saying, *"I wanted to be able to make my own decisions about what I do each day".* Similarly, Gaia looked forward to the freedom of managing her own schedule, stating, "*I can't wait to just do what I want*". She explained her frustration with current constraints:

> *At the moment my mum is like, get up, get up, you need to blah blah. Well, I know that, and I know that I'll do that later, but at the moment I have to either explain it all to her or just do what she wants.*

Several participants echoed this sentiment of freedom, highlighting their desire to experience the autonomy associated with driving. Athena explained,

> *Being able to drive would be so amazing, I can just think I want to go to Tesco, and just go, literally it's not a big deal. At the moment I have to ask my mum, and she'll be busy or won't want to.*

Similarly, Apollo expressed his desire for more personal freedom by saying, *"I wanted to go to bed when I want, eat what I want"*, suggesting that participants

valued and sought to live on their own terms. This shift from dependence to self-reliance was something these young individuals anticipated and valued. Their statements were not just about everyday choices but also revealed a deeper desire for personal agency, where their daily activities were no longer dictated by others. This independence reflects a desire to live in a situation where decisions such as when to sleep or what to eat are not mediated by parental or societal expectations.

Beyond the personal freedoms associated with daily decisions, financial independence appeared to be a key aspect of their aspirations for autonomy. Gaia illustrated this point by expressing the empowerment that comes with managing one's own finances, remarking:

> *Having my own money means I could do what I wanted without asking for permission. If I want to spend it (money) on Macdonald, yeah, I will and that's ok.*

This desire was not only about everyday choices but also spoke to broader aspirations like financial independence. These reflections suggest a strong link between a sense of financial independence and broader personal autonomy. However, with these aspirations, there also appeared to be some fears and uncertainties about actual capabilities. For example, Apollo voiced concern, remarking:

> *I don't really worry about it but if I think about it it's actually something I don't want to think about I think that like he needs to get job and that's quite worrying because what job am I going to do I don't actually know what I want to do.*

Some participants also discussed independence in terms of having control and choice over who they spent their time with. For instance, Apollo expressed frustration over having to regularly spend time with his cousins, saying, *"we have to go pretty much every week"*, explaining, *"it's just what we do. I really want to stay at home because it's just boring, it's cringy"*, but he felt obliged to comply because *"it's my mum's choice...she'd be upset"*. Aurora also reflected on having control over the friends she spent time with, sharing,

> *They're [parents] picky about who I hang out with. They don't like some of my friends and say I shouldn't see them. It's stressful cos we end up arguing every time.*

These experiences reflect participants' struggle for personal autonomy and illustrate the tension between their aspirations for independence and family expectations.

While many participants voiced a desire for independence, the transitioning to such autonomy appears to present some challenges in terms of making effective decisions.

4.3.1.1 Subtheme 1.1 Decision-Making Paralysis

The subtheme *Decision-Making Paralysis* highlights a pattern of meaning across the dataset that reflects how participants struggle with making independent decisions and feeling a sense of dependency on adult guidance.

Many participants appeared to position themselves in a perpetual state of decision-making paralysis. Across the data set, there was an expressed desire to make autonomous decisions, however, this was often accompanied by some reluctance and a perceived inability to do so. Gaia remarked:

> *It's going to be really good to do my own thing to make decisions for self but at the same time is quite scary.*

This seems to reflect her mixed feelings of anticipation and fear towards independence. The fear of the unknown and the responsibility that comes with making choices appear to overshadow excitement for future independence. These difficulties seem to not just be confined to minor day-to-day decisions but also extend to significant life choices.

Participants appeared to have been shielded from making significant decisions by schools and parents. For instance, Athena shared, *"I didn't really have to make much big decisions at school"*, and elaborated, *"I literally don't know what I'm doing. I just bumble along from day to day…I just follow the timetable".* This implies that she followed routines set out for her by school staff. Similarly, Zeus reflected on his restricted opportunities to make choices, explaining that when choosing his GCSE options, *"I left it to them [parents], they know what I like and what's important"*, indicating a reliance on his parents' judgement. This suggests a dependency on adults for decision-making.

Further emphasising the challenges around decision-making, participants revealed their dependency on adults, including parents and school staff, for guidance

in both transitioning to adulthood and daily responsibilities. Many participants expressed a substantial dependency on family support, which, while providing a safety net, might also hinder their development into independent adults. For example, Apollo described his helplessness when he was unable to unlock the front door of his house, stating,

> *If she (my Gran) hadn't come with some spray I'd have been there all night…If I lived on my own, really what would I do?*

Similarly, Aurora recounted a moment of overwhelming stress when she lost her BTEC coursework,

> *I was crying, it was gone, but a teacher helped by calm[ing] me down… literally, planned out everything.*

These incidents highlight the decision-making paralysis faced by participants, illustrating their sense of ongoing reliance on adult guidance and the challenges they can encounter in achieving autonomy.

Participants also discussed the broader implications of their decision-making challenges, illustrating how they felt this might impact their future independence. For instance, Athena described how she felt "*anxious*" when faced with decisions about going to university, for example, questioning her decision-making capacity, *"How do I know what's going to be the best uni? I can't even decide what to wear in the morning".*

This highlights not only the stress of making decisions but also the overwhelming nature of seemingly straightforward choices that may stall progress toward independence. Similarly, Gaia expressed fears about her ability to manage on her own, reflecting, "*I can't imagine being able to cope on my own...I'll be a disaster*". These fears illustrate the internal tensions participants appear to wrestle with about their capacity to make decisions and the potential negative consequences these decisions could have on their imagined future adult selves.

There appeared to be a tension for participants between the expectations of adulthood and their perceived ability to cope without support. Participants implied that they wanted to be less dependent on adults, however, this aspiration is contradicted by what appeared to be ongoing dependence on adults for decision-

making. This may suggest a lack of readiness for independent judgment and decision-making.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap

This theme captures what seems to be the psychological unpreparedness that participants experienced as they contemplated transitioning to adulthood and its associated responsibilities. The theme reflects not only the self-doubt felt by participants but also concerns about the gap between their chronological age and their subjective sense of maturity. Participants often articulated feelings of being unready for the societal expectations and responsibility of adulthood.

Respondents seemed to experience discomfort and reluctance to embrace the expected societal roles of adulthood. Gaia expressed his apprehension about transitioning to adulthood with notable trepidation, stating, *"It's really scary. I don't know what life will be like, I can't imagine it"*. Zeus shared his confusion about reaching adult maturity, observing:

> *I look at other people and wonder how do you get to that point. I can't imagine acting like that… but… I can't imagine them ever being like me. I think they were born that way.*

These comments reflect a general sense of fear and uncertainty that seemed to cloud young people's perception of the future and the changes that would be required for them to transition from their current selves to their adult selves.

A number of participants expressed concerns over the apparent contrast between their chronological age and the legal age of adulthood. Aurora admitted, "*I don't think I'm gonna be an adult at 18, not really. I'm going to still be in a child mindset*".

Apollo echoed this sentiment, *"I'm meant to be an adult but I don't feel like it. I definitely am not"*, further emphasising the conflict felt by these young people, suggesting a potential disconnect between societal expectations and their own personal readiness. Aurora also discussed the increase in societal expectations that come with adulthood, *"Driving, voting… drinking, having sex"*, describing how, *"these are things people expect you to get right"*, and the pressure associated with that. Apollo also remarked on how he felt about societal expectations and how individuals were treated once they were adults, noting:

> *When you're a child they let you off with stuff. When you're an adult you can't get away with stuff.*

Apollo further elaborated on the constraints that accompany adult responsibilities, noting:

> *There's also a real lack of freedom—you don't have so many choices over what you want to do because you've got responsibilities.*

His comments suggest a shift in perception about the relative freedom of youth to the demanding obligations of adulthood. Mars further highlighted the reality of self-reliance, succinctly capturing the essence of adulthood: *"Being adult means that you have to work, you have to earn money"*. The theme of financial independence is explored further in subtheme *3.2 Independent Living and Financial Management.*

Findings highlight concerns about sudden increases in expectations and the sense of pressure to adopt adult roles, which may be overwhelming for those who feel may not feel adequately prepared.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Life Skills for Independent Living

This theme explores the challenge that participants appeared to face in terms of developing the practical and financial life skills perceived as an important part of adulthood. This is presented in two subthemes, *Practical Life Skills* and *Independent Living and Financial Management.*

4.3.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: Practical Life Skills

This subtheme outlines the gaps in everyday life skills that participants appear to experience as they approach adulthood and also reflects the specific challenges these individuals seemed to encounter in acquiring basic life management skills, which could be considered essential for independent living.

Participants appeared to recognise their limitations in basic life management skills. This awareness was often accompanied by anxiety about their future independence, especially when they contemplated living away from home, such as moving to university. Mars expressed this concern, stating:

> *I can cook myself some pasta but I don't know what I am going to do when I go to uni; I don't think living on takeout is a good idea.*

His statement not only reflects his current perception of his capabilities but also his concerns about managing more complex self-care tasks in the future. Zeus also reflected that he felt he still had a lot to learn in terms of practical living skills, "*Like, how do you know what to do with bills…how do you do the washing without ruining your clothes?*", admitting that currently "*my mum does it all*", suggesting that he did not feel that he had the opportunity to develop or practice these skills.

4.3.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Independent Living and Financial Management

Managing finances and securing stable living conditions seem to pose considerable challenges for participants as they approach adulthood. This theme explores how participants perceive and cope with the responsibilities of financial management and residential stability, which participants appeared to consider essential for their transition to adulthood and independence.

Athena articulated her personal aspirations and concerns about financial independence:

> *I'll get money from my job. I don't need to be really rich but want a nice house and car. Have nice clothes and hair.*

Athena's statement reflects her personal goals, for how she would like to earn and spend her money. Mars also had ideas for how he would enjoy his financial independence, "*I'll have a mint car… and spend a lot on clothes*". However, financial concerns were frequently mentioned, highlighting a shared worry among participants about their economic futures. Aurora expressed,

> *I worry about being broke; it's hard enough now but actually when you've got to pay for things that's really scary*.

This sentiment was mirrored by Zeus, who feared not having enough money to support a family, stating, *"If you can't earn enough money, you can't, you shouldn't have kids, it's not fair".* This theme of financial concern was echoed repeatedly, with Mars articulating his worries about economic management, "I *worry about not being able to earn enough and then not being able to afford things"*.

These reflections emphasise the overwhelming challenge of achieving financial self-sufficiency, illustrating the participants' concerns about their ability to sustain themselves and their dependents financially.

The topic of housing stability was also present in some participant narratives. Aurora shared her desire to "*have my own house*". This sentiment was mirrored by Gaia, who feared the consequences of potential financial challenges, stating, "*I worry I'll be like jobless and homeless*". Additionally, Apollo showed awareness of and concerns around the current housing market,

> *Mortgages are high, no-one young is going to be able to buy a house unless they've got rich parents, I don't think rent is much better*.

These reflections illustrate the participants' concerns about their ability to find and finance independent living accommodation.

These narratives highlight participants' apparent fears of financial inadequacy and residential instability. However, despite their awareness of the challenges ahead of them, participants did not necessarily feel confident enough to deal with them,

4.3.4 Theme 4: Social Skills and Relationship Building

The theme of *Social Skills and Relationship Building*, comprising two subthemes—*Social Interaction and Social Confidence* and *Facing New Social Challenges*—explores how participants consider their social interactions both currently and when thinking about their adult future selves. Participants emphasised the struggles they have in managing the social world and the self-doubt they feel when anticipating new social environments, along with the challenges they face in developing and maintaining social relationships.

4.3.4.1 Subtheme 4.1: Social Interaction and Social Confidence

Many participants highlighted that they experience significant challenges in social settings, often expressing feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence in their social skills, which seem to result in limited social participation and feelings of social isolation.

Several participants alluded to lacking social confidence, that other young people might take for granted, which impacted their ability to engage in routine conversations. For instance, Aurora expressed feeling "*it's like everyone else knows what to say*". Athena shared her struggle with expressing her thoughts when interacting with others:

> *I just keep going over what I want to say in my head, you know, clever, funny stuff, but by the time I'm ready (to speak), the moment has already passed, I'm rubbish.*

This discrepancy between internal thoughts and external expression in social interactions appears to be a cause of considerable frustration for Athena.

Several participants expressed concerns about initiating and sustaining conversations. Zeus noted his discomfort with unfamiliar social situations, stating, "*I'm not good at talking to people I don't know, it makes me anxious*". Athena also mentioned her reticence, adding:

> *I often don't say things out loud because either the conversation has moved on or I am just too shy... I can't find the right moment without feeling like I'm interrupting.*

These reflections suggest that participants appear to feel a lack of confidence in their skills to engage in social interaction, which seems to inhibit their participation. Moreover, Gaia indicated that she was concerned that she would be judged negatively for the way she interacted, which deterred her from engaging, expressing concern that "*people will think I'm weird. It's easier to just say nothing*".

Participants reflected a sense that they wanted to engage in conversations with others but struggled to find the words or know when to talk, which appeared to leave them feeling self-conscious but also isolated. This seemed to be exacerbated by perceptions that they would be judged negatively by others, who participants felt seemingly took those skills for granted.

4.3.4.2 Subtheme 4.2: Facing New Social Challenges

Friendships and social relationships appeared to play important roles in participants' current lives and were also prominent in images of their future adult selves, as one participant noted, "*they [friendship group] are what makes being at school ok*" (Mars). However, transitioning from established social networks into new, unfamiliar social environments, such as leaving home to go to university, seemed to elicit concerns over losing consistent, familiar interactions and relationships. Aurora captured this sentiment when discussing her upcoming move to university, saying "*I just can't imagine not seeing 'X' [friend], or my mum every day.*" This statement reflects not only the potential loss of daily family contact but also extends to the broader anxiety about losing touch with established, long-standing friendships.

Some participants shared their apprehensions and feelings of uncertainty about forming new social connections in settings like universities or cities where they have no existing ties. Athena expresses her fear of leaving home: "*I'm scared of being alone in a new city,*" highlighting a fear of isolation that might come with such

transitions. Zeus elaborates on the challenge of knowing what to do when meeting new people, "*I find it really hard to get to know new people, what do you say*?" He described his feelings of uncertainty around how to go about developing new relationships, "*I don't know how I made friends with Y and Z, it just happened*". Mars echoed this view, stating "*The thought of making new friends is awful, I just want to hide*".

Some participants' responses seemed to reflect an internal struggle, as they considered the prospect of building new relationships in unfamiliar settings. While some participants appeared to prefer solitary activities, they also seemed to recognise the potential social implications of such preferences. One participant, Mars noted, "*When I'm at home I just like to chill on my Xbox, cos school's like a lot*," but also shared his hopes that this would change, "*I don't want to look like a loser-loner, but it'll be easier when I'm a proper grown-up.*" This reflects a hope that adulthood might bring easier social interactions, despite current preferences for solitude.

Throughout the narratives, participants often appear to show a keen awareness of what is required for social interaction, viewing these as important aspects of their future adult lives. However, this also highlights the challenges participants perceive in maintaining existing relationships and developing new ones, with participants often citing a lack of knowledge and understanding of social skills, and how to manage them.

4.3.5 Theme 5: Career and Educational Aspirations

Unsurprisingly, jobs were frequently identified as key components of one's future adult self, and appeared in five out of six of the initial GEM grids, indicating that this was considered an important feature of adulthood. This theme describes how ambitions for future careers and the educational pathways to achieve these

careers, feature in participants' thoughts of their adult future selves. The participants' thoughts on work and career were characterised by aspirations for fulfilling and rewarding employment, worries about achieving financial stability and earning enough to support themselves, and the importance of personal satisfaction in their work.

This theme outlines how participants often express a strong desire for meaningful employment, which they view as a cornerstone of their future adult identity. The significance of achieving financial stability (explored in theme 3.2) and personal satisfaction through work is often seen in their narratives. This aspiration for a rewarding career appears to be tempered by concerns relating to the feasibility of achieving these goals, in light of their feelings of societal expectations and personal uncertainties around their skills and competencies.

The importance of work as a defining aspect of adult life was a recurrent feature in discussions with participants. Jobs were not merely seen as a means to an end but as integral to their identity and well-being. Zeus highlighted this connection, stating,

> *[My] career is the most important thing at the moment… if it's good, I get a good one, I'll have a happy life.*

This quote underlines how some participants felt that career satisfaction could influence their overall happiness, emphasising the potentially high stakes involved in their career choices. The desire for a career that transcends mere financial necessity is a significant theme. Furthermore, Mars' statement, "*I want a job that fulfils me, not just something to pay bills*", points to a broader desire among participants to find work that offers intrinsic rewards beyond monetary compensation. The pursuit of meaningful work appears to be important for young people's emotional and psychological well-being. Mars illustrates the importance of selecting a career that aligns with his personality and future goals:

> *I need a job that keeps me active and busy. I know that because I know how I am at school … [I am] much better when I'm actually kind of doing something so I've thought about this and I want to be a joiner or a bricklayer or something like that but actually I think I'll enjoy that and it will keep kind of my mind and my body active.*

Mars' approach to career planning demonstrates a thoughtful and self-aware strategy. He appears to recognise and understand his own needs and preferences for an active work environment based on his experiences at school. His choice seems to reflect a deliberate alignment of his career choice with his personal strengths and interests, hoping that his future job is not only a source of income but also a source of personal satisfaction and well-being. Athena also highlighted the importance of career to life as a whole:

> *Being a doctor. This will be the work I do. I will have this title people will look up to me. I feel important. Everyone will know I'm clever and useful because it will be part of my name. I will feel good about myself because I am helping people. Doctors are well paid and people think they are important. So I will be important and in be helping people so I'll be useful.*

However, participants' perception of the path to realising these career aspirations appeared fraught with challenges. Many participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to decide on a career path. Apollo represents those who experience considerable anxiety regarding their future careers. Despite early aspirations to join the police force, his perspective shifted significantly after exploring this career path through various career counselling sessions and assessments. The reality of the roles he once aspired to, did not align with his expectations, leading to a re-evaluation of his career goals. Apollo described his struggle with this pressure, saying, "*I'm going round and round and round in circles. I can't think of anything that I don't feel just 'meh' about*," which illustrates his difficulty in identifying a career that genuinely interests him amid external expectations. He further emphasised the social pressure he faced, "*Everyone keeps asking, 'What do you want to do?' Like, I DO NOT KNOW!*" (capitals are used to represent the participant's emphasis on these words).

Aurora reflected a concern that not knowing what she wanted to do later meant that she felt uncertain about her educational choices:

> *I did health and social care because, if I decide to be a nurse and did like English, Art and History (A Levels) I wouldn't be able to…you've got to know now what you're going to want to do years off.*

This reflects the notion that there is an expectation that young people need to have a sense of certainty about their career choices in order to make suitable decisions in

the present. These reflections highlight the intense pressure that some participants felt and the impact of such expectations on their decision-making process.

Other participants also emphasised the importance of choosing the right educational programs that directly contribute to their career success. Mars pointed out the strategic nature of such decisions, "*I know I'm going to need to do an apprenticeship...I've got to do well in my English and Maths particularly.*" Highlighting that his future career aspirations had a direct impact on how he felt he needed to currently engage in his schoolwork. Similarly, Athena, who is committed to pursuing a medical degree, reinforced the view that education as a foundational element for career success: *"I am going to uni to do medicine; I need top A levels to do that and be a doctor"*. This determination illustrates participants' appreciation that educational background plays an important role in entering and succeeding in their chosen careers.

Participants revealed that work and career are key features when thinking about the adult future self. Young people often highlight the importance of career satisfaction to a wider sense of contentment in life. However, this seems to be punctuated by concerns about making the right career choices. This stress appears to be linked to the implications that these decisions have on their future, which seems to embed a sense of both urgency and gravity in their educational and career-related decisions.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the findings from a reflexive thematic analysis of data gathered from autistic adolescents, offering insights into their perceptions of adulthood and their adult future selves. Analysis identified five themes to illustrate how participants imagine their future adult selves; *Aspirations for Independence and agency, Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap, Life Skills for Independent Living, Social Skills and Relationship Building,* and *Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers.* Themes highlight participants' hopes and challenges but also set the scene for a deeper discussion in Chapter 5, where these findings will be considered in the context of the existing literature on autistic adolescence and adulthood.

5   Discussion

5.1   Introduction to Chapter

This chapter begins with a summary of the research findings outlined in Chapter 4. Key findings are then discussed in the context of pertinent psychological theory and extant research. This chapter then goes on to consider boundaries and limitations of the current research, along with consideration of what this might suggest for future research. Researcher reflexivity is then discussed and, the chapter concludes with a consideration of the potential implications for autistic adolescents and the professionals who support them.

5.2   Summary of Research

Adolescence is widely acknowledged as a complex developmental phase marked by considerable change and the need to make important decisions (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). As a result, the transition to adulthood may be challenging for many (Kim-Spoon, 2014,). The differences and needs associated with autism, such as difficulties with social communication, and restrictive behaviours, potentially make it even more difficult for autistic young people. Indeed, research suggests that autistic individuals often have considerably poorer transition outcomes than their non-autistic peers, such as those relating to education, employment and social engagement (Hatfield et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2019; ONS, 2021).

This research aimed to answer the research question: How do autistic adolescents perceive adulthood and their adult future selves? The study sought to explore autistic adolescents' views of adulthood and their expectations, hopes and aspirations for their future adult selves. Furthermore, in this research, I aimed to give voice to the lived experience of autistic young people through individual interviews. The grid elaboration method (Joffe & Elsey, 2014) was used to elicit participants' initial views of adulthood, and their responses were then used to guide further discussion. This approach aimed to give some control to participants aiming to address some of the power imbalances that may occur in research with autistic individuals (Billington, 2013). Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Additionally, it is hoped that this research can contribute to the existing knowledge relating to autistic young people's views and experiences

so that professionals and adults around them can best support them as they plan for adulthood.

Five key themes were identified (outlined in section 4.3); *Aspirations for Independence and Agency, Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap, Life Skills for Independent Living, Social Skills and Relationship Building, and Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers.* Although each participant had their own unique experiences and perceptions, the findings suggest that there are patterns and similarities in the perceptions of autistic young people when they think about their adulthood, based upon the sample used in this research. The following section presents a discussion of three overarching findings, informed by the themes outlined in section 4.3, which are discussed in the context of relevant psychological literature.

5.3   Discussion of Key Findings

The findings suggest that participants think about three main areas when they imagine themselves as adults; *Independence versus Dependence*, *Connections and Relationships*, *and, Career and Educational Pathways*. Table 5.1 outlines the themes which informed each key finding.

Table 5.1

Table Showing the Relationship Between Themes and Key Findings

Key finding	Related theme
Independence vs Dependence	• Theme 1: Aspirations for Independence and Agency
	• Theme 2: Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap
Connections and Relationships	• Theme 4: Social Skills and Relationship Building
	• Theme 2: Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap
Career and Educational Pathways	• Theme 5: Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers
	• Theme 4: Social Skills and Relationship Building

Within each area, participants often reflected conflicting feelings. While participants often demonstrated hopes and aspirations for positive life outcomes, there was also often a sense of anxiety around the barriers they may face, and a consideration of the outcomes they actually expected.

5.3.1 Key Finding 1: Independence versus Dependence

The findings from this study indicated that participants commonly expressed a desire to become self-reliant in various aspects of their lives, including financial management, and social and emotional regulation. Participants also demonstrated an awareness of the responsibilities that they associated with adulthood, which appeared to be influenced by their expectations of adult roles. Furthermore, participants highlighted concerns about their capacity to develop skills necessary for independence, along with reluctance to assume some of these responsibilities.

Aspirations versus reality. The tension between hopes for the future and expectations of its reality was a key idea seen across all participant's reflections about adulthood (Theme 1). This aligns with Curtiss et al. (2021) who report that young autistic adolescents often appeared to have clear aspirations for living an independent life. They often discussed a desire to make their own decisions and manage their own lives. However, there was also a sense of concern around their capacity to achieve these goals, with participants often discussing their skills and emotional readiness to do so. Research by Goana et al. (2019) and Lambe et al. (2019) supports this dichotomy of thinking, highlighting autistic young people's mixed feelings about change and the future. Goana et al. (2019) emphasise the desire for independence among autistic young people, while also highlighting their worries about being able to make autonomous decisions and manage finances. Tesfaye et al. (2019) reported that autistic adolescents felt anxiety about their transition to adulthood, which also aligns with current findings.

Participants appeared to reflect on their current skill set, seeming to contemplate their current life, and communication skills, while also exploring their emotional readiness to do so. Participants demonstrated a desire to manage their finances and perform daily tasks independently, yet they acknowledged a lack of essential skills, which appeared to contribute to their anxiety about coping in adulthood. Financial management was a key focus within responses and an area where participants appeared to feel some vulnerability. While the participants aspired to financial autonomy they appeared to fear that they would not be able to handle their financial responsibilities, indicating that they considered this to be an important aspect of living a fulfilled and stable adult life. These findings also align with those of Goana et al. (2019) and Tesfaye et al. (2023) who highlighted the importance of

managing finances and self-care for autistic young people as they transition to adulthood alongside the value of educational settings in providing the necessary support for mastering daily tasks and aiding in decision-making. Cheak-Zamora et al. (2015) similar to current findings, reported that autistic adolescents expressed fear about transitioning to adulthood, highlighting that they often felt unclear about the steps needed to accomplish their goals for the future.

There appeared to be a tension between participants' hopes of meeting societal expectations of adulthood, and their current skills and emotional maturity. This gap appeared to result in hesitancy created by a feeling of unpreparedness for the future. Participants often discussed their concerns about their skills to live independently of parental care. This is consistent with Cribb et al.'s research (2019) which proposed that young autistic people often have mixed feelings about leaving their parental homes. Findings from the current study suggest that autistic young people often have their own conception of what it means to be an adult which to an extent aligns with prevailing conceptualisations of adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2015). For example, Arnett (2001), identifies key markers of adulthood such as achieving financial independence and taking responsibility for one's self. while this aligns with the aspirations of current participants, they also appear to express concerns about their ability to meet those markers. According to Arnett's conceptualisation, not meeting these standards implies an individual is not an adult and as such remains in the adolescent life stage. In addition, young people's concerns about reaching societal expectations align with research from Wright et al. (2023b) who found that financial independence and making independent choices were key concerns of adulthood. In fact, these were considered to be more important than more traditional markers such as marriage and parenthood (Wright, 2023b).

Some participants expressed concerns about feeling unprepared for adulthood, despite, in some cases, recognising that they were legally an adult. This sense of unreadiness may be explained in terms of Arnott's concept of *emerging adulthood.* This proposed lifestage is characterised by ongoing reliance on parental and social support systems, a theme which is also reflected by the current study's participants. Indeed, this period may well be prolonged for autistic individuals, who often face additional challenges, if they do not receive adequate support to develop skills and confidence to meet the psychological markers of adulthood (Tasfaye,

2022). Current findings also align with Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial development theory, which posits that adolescence is characterised by feelings of role confusion while simultaneously striving for independence. Research suggests that there is considerable subjectivity in how adulthood is perceived, indicating that adulthood may be conceptualised on an individual basis and personal circumstances rather than social norms (Wright et al., 2023a).

Reliance on adult support. The current findings suggest that autistic young people often felt reliant on caregivers, family and other supporting adults to manage their transition to adulthood. This support often extends to managing emotional responses and supporting their communication and social interactions (see also section 5.3.2). While some participants appeared to appreciate the support that they were afforded, there was often a sense of concern about their dependence on others, and a feeling of anxiety about not being able to cope without this scaffolding. This suggests that adult support may be a double-edged sword, on the one hand, it can serve as a supportive safety net but there may be a risk of over-reliance which may hinder the progress towards autonomous adulthood. These findings are supported by research from Lambe et al. (2019) who also emphasise the significant role that caregivers play in making some of the decisions relating to transition to adulthood. However, Kirby et al. (2019) reported that not only was adult support seen as important to their autistic participants, but they also often expressed a desire to maintain that support at the expense of autonomy. This suggests that some participants were keen to remain under adult guidance.

Findings suggest that autistic young people often feel overwhelmed when thinking about themselves as adults. While they may have clear and high aspirations, they may also struggle with knowing how to move from their current self to their hoped-for future self. They may need support to understand this process, evaluate their skills and develop them. This is likely to also be related to career planning which is outlined in section 5.3.3 below. Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which emphasises autonomy and connectedness as key psychological needs and drivers of behaviour, may offer a useful framework for understanding the tension autistic young people experience as they move towards adulthood. SDT posits that relationships and meaningful connections are key components for motivation and as such, foster independence. This perspective

supports the notion, that while autistic individuals often desire independence, they may also have concerns and frustration about not always possessing the necessary skills to achieve it, as seen in the tensions expressed by participants in the current research.

Overall, findings suggest that autistic adolescents seem to experience a tension between their desire to manage the responsibilities of adulthood, including financial independence, social responsibilities, and self-care, and their need for support. However, they often appear to not feel sufficiently skilled or prepared to do so, which may introduce feelings of stress and uncertainty about their future as adults. Consequently, this suggests that there may be a need for tailored interventions that address both the skills gap and their emotional readiness. Programs designed to enhance practical life skills, financial literacy, and emotional literacy may be particularly useful. Additionally, fostering supportive transition environments that gradually build their confidence and capabilities could help bridge the gap between their current abilities and their aspirations for adulthood. Findings also suggest that there may also need to be a consideration of the markers and definitions of adulthood and an exploration of what they may mean for autistic young people in particular.

5.3.2 Key Finding 2: Connections and Relationships

Results from the current study indicate that participants often consider relationships, connection with others, and communication as important aspects of adult life. However, results also provide insight into the concerns that autistic young people may have in managing their interactions with others. Their concerns seem to arise from how they interpret their experiences and their current communication and interaction skills. Indeed, although autism impacts people in different ways, one of the key indicators of autism is experiencing challenges in aspects of social communication and interaction (NHS, 2024).

Anxiety in new social environments. Autistic adolescents often expressed concerns about the difficulty that they anticipate in entering new social settings. These concerns appear to result from the challenges they may experience in understanding and responding to social cues. While they might feel able to cope in their current environment, there was a sense that adapting to different social norms

in new environments, such as university or the workplace, would be challenging. Participants seemed concerned that the understanding of their differences and accommodations, which they currently receive, might disappear once they had reached adult status. This fits with Cribb et al.'s (2019) research, which highlights autistic adolescents' concerns about maintaining current friendships during transitions and worries about isolation and loneliness.

Gaona et al. (2019) further emphasise these concerns, reporting autistic young people's concerns about not having the skills necessary for making new friends, along with anxiety over being bullied. This aligns with the anxiety around transitioning to new social environments expressed by the current participants. Current findings appear to indicate that the anxiety associated with social interactions in new environments could prevent autistic young people from engaging socially with others which may also explain their concerns about feeling isolated. This is an important consideration as research points to the importance of relationships in promoting well-being and personal development (Cheak-Zamora et al.,2015), with Cribb et al. (2019) describing an increasing reliance on friends over time, as family support reduces. SDT posits that individuals will strive for autonomy and relatedness when given the opportunity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). There are, however, some contradictions between current findings and what might be expected based on SDT. Participants in the current study, despite their aspirations for successful relationships, often suggested that they avoided making connections as a way of coping with feelings of lack of competence. This aligns with findings from (Cheak-Zamora, 2015) who found that autistic adolescents often encounter systemic barriers that limit their ability to engage with others and make meaningful connections. However, SDT would suggest that for these individuals there may be something of a vicious cycle in terms of developing the skills required for social connectedness. According to SDT, competence is a further key component of motivation. However, the current participants suggest that they feel a lack of skills and therefore do not feel competent in their social skills. The sense of low competence is likely to further reduce young people's motivation to engage.

Findings from this current study suggest that, despite their perceived challenges, participants wanted to build meaningful social and romantic relationships. This is echoed by the work of Lambe et al. (2019) who described

autistic adolescents as having a sense of optimism about developing future relationships, describing how they wanted to engage more in social situations as they enter university. Some participants in the current study indicated that they hoped to connect with peers who shared similar interests or experiences as they transitioned to work or continued education and that they hoped for relationships that offered understanding and acceptance. This aligns with Anderson et al. (2016) who found that young people had varying ideals and requirements of their friendships and Tesfaye et al. (2023) who report that autistic youth were keen to seek connection with others on their own terms. Others expressed a desire for romantic relationships and families but also raised concerns about how they might build and maintain such relationships. This apparent ambivalence about romantic relationships and having children is echoed by Cribb et al. (2019), who noted significant concerns about the complexities of building and maintaining such relationships. However, despite findings suggesting that relationships were important to participants, they sometimes expressed feeling obliged to interact according to other people's expectations. This suggests that they feel subject to a standard for how society expects adults to interact, which was a perspective that failed to take account of their personal preferences.

The notion of a double empathy problem may be a neurodiversity-affirming way of understanding participants' concerns about their communication and interaction skills (Milton, 2012). The theory posits that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic individuals are mutual and result from differing communication styles rather than deficits in autistic individuals alone (Crompton et al., 2020). Understanding that differences in communication are style-based rather than deficits may help autistic individuals understand their differences. Such a perspective may also help educators and employers develop better support systems for autistic adolescents to explore their preferences and develop self-knowledge. This support might include tailored career counselling sessions that take into account individual communication styles and preferences, thereby making the process of career planning more aligned with their personal capacities and less daunting. Developing a personalised approach by exploring personal communication differences and preferences for relationships, sits with the increasing movement towards viewing autism through a *neurodiversity* perspective (Pellicano et al., 2018),

The findings that autistic adolescents have concerns about adjusting to social norms in new environments may be viewed through Erikson's psychosocial development theory (1950, 1968). The theory points to the importance of managing social roles and relationships both in identity formation during adolescence and in the transition to adulthood. The current participants appeared to be concerned about their communication differences and the challenges these may bring which may impact their ability to be confident about establishing their future identities. Furthermore, Erikson also posits that adulthood involves the challenge of forming intimate relationships while avoiding the possibility of loneliness. The participants in this research appeared to be aware of these challenges and demonstrated concerns about managing the complexities of developing and maintaining relationships, which may result in being isolated. However, it may be necessary to consider that the developmental challenges of relationships may look different for some autistic individuals, due to their individual needs and challenges in this area. Bleindorm (2022) for example, suggests that crises such as managing one's social identity may be an ongoing process which for some may never see resolution. This points to a need for a more flexible, personalised understanding of individual development (Gilleard, 2020).

5.3.3 Key Finding 3: Career and Educational Pathways

Findings suggest that careers and next educational steps were often areas of importance when autistic adolescents were prompted to think about adulthood. Findings offer insight into autistic young people's aspired careers but also their concerns around the challenges associated with working for a living and job stability.

Some participants expressed clear and aspirational career goals but they also seemed to point to a gap between their hopes and their perceived capacity to achieve them. Supporting this finding, research by Kirby et al. (2019) details a diverse range of career fields among autistic adolescents, along with preferences for specific job contexts like working outdoors or from home. However, participants also indicated uncertainty about how they might achieve their goals, given current experiences and skill set. Indeed, this study also found that participants felt uncertainty around career planning and decision-making processes. This is supported by Anderson et al.'s (2021) research which highlighted that while

employment was a key concern of adolescents, they were concerned about being able to choose career paths that would meet their needs. While some participants were aware of their own preferences, and personal challenges, using this awareness to craft possible career paths that aligned with their personal strengths and needs, this did not always appear to be the case. This suggests that some participants may have insufficient information to make informed decisions that align with their personal preferences and values. As such these individuals may benefit from support to explore their preferences and develop self-knowledge which could be valuable when seeking a career path that aligns with their interests and strengths.

The current findings reflect a trend towards the prioritisation of career stability as a marker of adulthood, as opposed to more traditional markers such as marriage and having children (Wright et al., 2023b). Participants' concerns about the gap between their current skills and those required for employment responsibilities in adulthood may be explained by the notion of the emerging adulthood phase (Arnett, 2000), which outlines a period of exploration and instability. This idea aligns with the current findings, which suggest that participants are still in the process of exploring and understanding their career preferences and related skills. This highlights the need for supportive transitions to adulthood for autistic young people. Some participants seemed concerned about not knowing what to do for a future career. Monotropism theory (Murray et al.,2005) suggests that autistic people may have specific and highly focused interests and could be used as a way of supporting young people to find careers that are aligned with their preferences. Jobs that leverage interest are more likely to be fulfilling and sustained over time, indeed, findings from Goldfarb (2023) reported that job interest was a key job motivator for autistic adults.

Research suggests that starting work or further education is often seen as an objective marker of adulthood. However, such transitions are often accompanied by a mixture of worries, anticipation, and excitement (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). The current findings highlight a gap between participants' career aspirations and their perceived capabilities to start working and maintain stable employment. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) highlights the importance of developing competency for motivation and action. This would suggest that supporting autistic individuals to develop a greater understanding of various career pathways, roles, and their own preferences could

increase their self-determination and motivation, potentially narrowing the gap between their career aspirations and their perceived ability to achieve them. Indeed, some of the uncertainty expressed by autistic adolescents regarding career planning may stem from a lack of opportunities to engage in self-determined actions. Providing opportunities for autistic young people to practise making choices and exerting control may improve their ability to plan for the future more effectively. Additionally, SDT suggests the importance of work environments that support a sense of relatedness and connection. As discussed in section 5.3.1, participants expressed concerns about coping with the responsibilities and challenges of effective communication in the work environment. This highlights a need to understand what work relationships might entail and indicates the particular relevance of work experience (or experience of the workplace) for autistic adolescents. Taking account of individual autistic differences and preferences would help to promote supportive work environments that could alleviate some of the challenges these individuals anticipate as they transition into the workplace. Research by Morán et al. (2021) has shown that individuals can improve their self-determination skills through targeted interventions and support, emphasising the importance of tailored environmental adjustments in supporting successful transitions for autistic adolescents.

5.4 Summary

Findings from the current study suggest that autistic adolescents often think about independence, relationships, and career paths when considering their future. They appear to aspire to be self-reliant but worry about their ability to meet expectations and develop necessary skills. Social connections also seem to be important to them, but they appear to feel anxious about new environments and maintaining relationships. Some participants demonstrated clear career goals but often seemed unsure about how to achieve them due to perceived skill gaps and lack of information. Exploring individual needs and preferences may help to provide targeted support in practical skills, financial management, communication, and self-determination, and facilitate a successful transition to adulthood. It is also important that these needs and preferences are taken into account in ensuring that future environments are suitably adapted.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This section presents a reflection of the methods used in the current research, including a consideration of the participant sample. The rigour and trustworthiness of the findings presented in this thesis are also discussed. There then follows a consideration of future research directions. This research aimed to illuminate the voices of young autistic people, but there needs to be a consideration of the research method and its implementation.

5.5.1 Participant Sample and Research Quality.

The views of six participants were explored in this current research, which is considered an appropriate sample size for a reflexive thematic analysis of this scale (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The sample was recruited using a purposive sampling approach, with initial identification being through school staff, as outlined in section 3.2.2. This method of recruitment was successful; however, it is important to consider how the final sample may have been influenced by the views and perspectives of staff who suggested the initial group of potential participants. As such, it is possible that the findings are not reflective of the perceptions or experiences of other autistic adolescents. However, although this research looks for patterns in experiences within the sample group, it does not seek to suggest that there is generalisability of its findings. Instead, the current thesis tentatively offers consideration of the potential transferability of findings. By providing detailed accounts of the participant data and context, this research aims to allow the reader to determine how well these findings might apply to other contexts.

A further potential limitation relates to the method used to record participant responses and the impact that this may have had on subsequent analysis and considerations of data quality. As outlined in section 3.2, I was mindful of the inherent power imbalance at play in the interviews and considered that recording the interviews may add to this and potentially constrain participants' responses (Cohen et al., 2007). Instead, having checked that this was possible during a pilot interview, I made contemporaneous field notes, also reviewing them immediately after the interviews. This is a method that has been successfully used in previous research which had similar concerns (Hannah & Topping, 2013), I was able to record participants' comments and my in-the-moment reflections. However, this was not an

easy process, and despite checking my written recordings with each participant, at the end of the interviews, it is possible that some information was missed. It is not possible to ensure that written recordings were verbatim, as participants may not have remembered exactly what they said or may have felt uncomfortable doing so.

An additional limitation was that one session was given over to collecting data per participant, and the process was very much reliant on developing a rapport between myself and the participants within this study. I felt a sense that my relationship with each participant did progress over the course of each interview and that they were generally more expansive in their responses towards the end of the session. However, overall, the time it took for participants to warm up into the session is likely to have had an impact on the depth of the data collected. Given the time constraints of this project, having a single session was all that was possible. However, future research might benefit from taking a longer-term approach to building a relationship, which may support the participants to feel more comfortable and be more likely to be responsive.

I aimed to remain within the participants' frame of reference by using their own ideas generated from the GEM activity to structure the subsequent discussion. However, although some participants were expansive in their responses, others needed much more scaffolding to elicit their views. This may mean that I have projected my thoughts and perspectives onto participants, consequently, having more influence on some responses than others. Future research may wish to consider carrying out the initial GEM activity or other reflective activities, separately, before the main interviews. This would mean the young people had more time to process and consider the information, and their reflections more thoroughly. Additionally, this would also give the interviewer more time to consider suitable prompts. Having to develop prompts and questions, that were not leading, on the spot, during the interviews, was challenging. One way to further develop rapport and reflection might be to develop a longer-term group project, undertaken for instance, over the course of a school half term. This could include a soft start, with a 'getting to know you' session, and with subsequent sessions going on to explore different aspects of adulthood, allowing autistic young people to discuss their thoughts and views with other participants. A longer term project would allow rapport and trust to be built with the researcher. This would also provide a greater opportunity to develop

a more participatory process (Kourti, 2021), which fits with research informed by critical realism seeking to not only gain knowledge of autism but also to improve the lives of autistic individuals (Botha, 2021).

5.5.2 Future Research Directions.

Implications for future research are considered alongside the discussion of the limitations of the theory in section 5.5.1. This section considers how the research presented in this thesis might be expanded upon.

- ***Exploring the views of adults who support autistic adolescents.*** The current research explored the perceptions of autistic adolescents, in order to ensure that their views and voices were included and illuminated. This is important because previous research has often relied on gathering views of adults as a proxy for understanding young people's experiences. However, the current research shows how autistic young people often feel dependent on adults, including family and school staff, for support with skills building, communication and career planning. It would therefore be useful for future research to explore adults' experiences and perceptions of supporting autistic young people as they transition towards adulthood.

- ***Longitudinal study of autistic adolescents' views of adulthood.*** The current research captures a snapshot in time of autistic adolescents' views of adulthood. A longitudinal approach, gathering information through the lifestages, as young people move through school and into their next steps e.g. entering university or employment, could provide further insight into how perspectives and experiences of adulthood change over time.

- ***Exploration of the impact of structural factors on autistic adolescents' views of adulthood.*** This current study was qualitative, providing insight into autistic adolescents' views on adulthood. However, a critical realist perspective, highlights that research can help uncover information about the underlying mechanisms and structures that influence these views (Kourti, 2021). As such further research could usefully explore autistic young people's current experience through other quantitative measures, such as by gathering data on socio-economic status, gender, or career development activities. This approach might support the development of a deeper understanding of the causal relationships and mechanisms at play, which are often not visible

through qualitative methods alone. This would allow for an understanding of the relationships between different factors and how they contribute to the way that autistic adolescents view adulthood. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods can enhance the explanatory power of the research (Halcomb, 2019). While qualitative data provides rich, detailed insights into individual experiences, quantitative data can reveal broader trends and patterns (Vikal, 2017).

5.6   Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity.

This section reflects on how my background, perspective, and experiences may have influenced the research outcomes. As detailed in section 3.3, this research employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach, through which I acknowledge that my interpretations and analyses were shaped by my prior experiences and views. Braun and Clarke (2022) advocate that subjectivity should not be controlled but rather "treated as a resource" (p. 8). Throughout this process, from recruitment to data collection and analysis, I tried to maintain an awareness of my own positioning and experiences, supported by maintaining a reflexive journal, and regular discussion with a group of other trainee EP researchers who were also undertaking research using a reflexive thematic approach.

My previous roles and experience in academic settings, educational psychology training, and personal experiences as a mother of teenagers, stimulated my initial interest in research involving adolescents and, more specifically, autistic young people. Before embarking on the doctoral educational psychology programme, my initial understanding of the world was very much influenced by a positivist stance, from my background as a Biomedical Scientist and as a Science teacher. However, exposure to various psychological perspectives, including attachment, trauma, and neurodevelopmental approaches, has resulted in quite a significant shift in my views. For instance, instead of viewing challenging behaviours in adolescents as a choice, I started to consider what changes in the pre-frontal cortex, related to adolescent development (Blakemore & Mills, 2014), or their past experience, might tell me about such behaviours. This shift in perspective influenced not only my thinking but also how I respond and communicate with young people. Similarly, my understanding of autism has evolved from a medical perspective to one that now embraces social models of disability and neurodiversity paradigms

(Silberman, 2017), leading me to now view autism as a difference rather than a deficit.

These evolving perspectives have influenced my underlying values, and also my positioning in this research. In adopting a critical realist stance, I assume that while objective realities can be explored, each individual may have a different perception of these realities as a result of their social and cultural contexts. Indeed, I argue that it is this standpoint that allows for patterns of meaning to be elicited from participants' responses (e.g. career pathways and earning wages and taking qualifications), while still emphasising the importance of maintaining individual voices and interpretations. As a critical realist, I believe that beyond biological realities (e.g. neuronal structures in the brain), the needs and differences of autistic adolescents can also be understood through the material barriers they face, such as accessibility issues in new environments or the absence of appropriate resources and understanding (Anderson et al., 2019). This fits with my values as a trainee educational psychologist, which is to promote social justice, support the inclusion of all young people, and advocate for an equitable education system. In my practice, I reflect on the structures and contexts that influence an individual's experiences and sense of agency. Maintaining a reflexive journal throughout this research allowed me to recognise my personal perspectives and experiences and consider their impact on my approach to the research process. This active reflection also enhances the credibility and confirmability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.7   Implications of Findings for Providing Support for Autistic Adolescents

This research contributes to the growing body of qualitative research focused on the views of autistic young people, focusing specifically on how they perceive adulthood, including their expectations, aspirations, and concerns. The importance and impact of research are suggested to be indicative of the quality of qualitative research, as outlined by Yardley (2008). Unlike much of the existing literature that largely focuses on autistic young people's experiences and views of transition, this study offers a broader exploration of perceptions of adulthood. It provides insights that could help improve support systems for these individuals during adolescence and as they move forward into adulthood. This section outlines the implications of

the findings for how adults, and professionals, including educational psychologists (EPs), can effectively support autistic adolescents as they consider adulthood.

The current research highlighted that autistic adolescent participants aspired to achieve self-reliance, form positive relationships, and succeed in their careers. However, they often expressed concerns about their ability to achieve these goals due to perceived gaps in skills and knowledge. These findings, combined with prior research which points to poorer life outcomes for autistic individuals (Roux, 2015), highlight the need for targeted support and adapted environments as they move towards adulthood. Findings advocate for a person-centred, strengths-based approach in planning and supporting individuals as they prepare for and transition into adulthood. This aligns with the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015), which emphasises the requirement for ongoing and early preparation for adulthood; focused on independent living, employment, education, relationships, and health. However, this approach is often limited to those on the SEND register or those with statutory plans outlined in an Education, Health, and Care Plan, suggesting a need for broader application within schools.

Findings suggest that autistic young people may require support in developing skills and decision-making related to communication, interaction, and career planning. EPs may play an important role in supporting schools in integrating ways to facilitate self-determination skills into the school environment, in order to promote the development of autistic young people's self-awareness and decision-making skills. EPs are well placed to be able to use psychology to facilitate the development of policy and organisational change for autistic adolescents, as well as advocate for their individual voices to be heard (Harding et al., 2017). EPs could support education staff to choose and implement interventions that focus on promoting autonomy, and self-regulation, as well as providing opportunities to include them in the broader educational strategy. EPs are well placed to provide psychoeducation and training to school staff on psychological theory, such as self determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2002) which as argued in this thesis might be useful as a framework for understanding autistic young people's needs, and act as a guide for designing policy and implementing self- determination supporting practice. Additionally, EPs could also offer advocacy for understanding autism through a neurodiversity perspective, encouraging neurodiversity-affirming practice and policy,

emphasising the importance of understanding their individual differences, and involving students actively in decision-making processes as they relate to their support and educational pathways.

There has been a growing understanding of the importance of hearing the voices of children and young people (Robinson, 2016). EPs often play a key role in gathering the views and aspirations of autistic young people and ensuring that their voices are heard and considered (Gersch et al., 2017). It is argued that gathering the views of young people is an important aspect of the EP role, including within the statutory assessment process (Gersch et al., 2017). The GEM approach, used in this study, aimed to reduce the power imbalance inherent in traditional assessment methods. This could be a valuable technique for EPs to adapt to use when gathering young people's views about their education and future plans. EPs could also promote the use of such tools in schools. By advocating for resources that are practical and easy to implement, EPs may help ensure that these approaches are sustainable and effective within busy school environments, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience and preparation of young people for the future.

6 Conclusions

This research addresses the challenges faced by autistic young people as they think about and plan for adulthood. Adolescence is a period marked by developmental changes, which may bring along with it social, educational and emotional challenges. This study employed a qualitative approach, using the grid elaboration method to scaffold data collection during interviews with six autistic adolescents. This research adopts a critical realist stance, which acknowledges both the objective realities and subjective experiences of the participants, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of their perspectives of adulthood. My interest in researching how autistic young people imagine their adulthood stems from my professional background as a teacher and as a TEP. Personal experience with my own teenage children has given me further insight into the challenges faced by young people as they plan for and make decisions about their next steps.

This study aimed to explore how autistic adolescents view adulthood, seeking to examine their concerns, aspirations and expectations of their future adult lives. Five themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis; *Aspirations for Independence and Agency, Not Quite Grown: The Maturity Gap, Life Skills for Independent Living, Social Skills and Relationship Building, and Ambitions and Concerns about Future Careers.* Findings suggest that autistic adolescents often think about independence, relationships, and career paths when contemplating their future. The study also revealed a tension between hopes for the future and expectations of its reality, as well as a sense of uncertainty, as they reflected on adulthood. Autistic young people appeared to aspire to be self-reliant but also worried about their ability to meet expectations and develop necessary skills. Social connections also seemed to be important to them, however, they also felt anxious about new environments and maintaining relationships. Some participants demonstrated clear career goals but often seemed unsure about how to achieve them due to perceived skill gaps and lack of information.

This research contributes to the existing literature by providing an understanding of how autistic adolescents view adulthood and anticipate their adult lives. To the best of my knowledge, this research was the first to gather individual perceptions of autistic adolescents about adulthood, using their own voices. Previous research in this area has mainly focused on transition experiences, such as moving

to university or into work. Furthermore, although there is an increasing movement towards including autistic voices in this research, it is still limited, and as such this literature adds to and expands upon the existing knowledge base.

The insights gained from this research may offer guidance to those who support autistic adolescents. This study highlights the importance of educational professionals adopting a person-centred, strengths-based approach to support autistic adolescents in thinking about and planning for adulthood. Implementing tailored interventions and support that enhance self-reliance, social skills and career planning may help address the specific needs and gaps identified by autistic adolescents. Educators may also need to consider how skills that promote self-awareness and decision-making might be integrated into the curriculum, ensuring that support extends beyond those on the SEND register to all autistic students. EPs may also play a role by advocating for strategies that support autonomy and regulation in autistic adolescents. EPs are well placed to support school staff through psychoeducation and training on pertinent psychological theory, facilitating understanding of the unique needs of autistic young people and promoting neurodiversity-affirming practice.

This thesis argues that future research should explore the perspectives of adults who support autistic adolescents, as this may provide valuable insights into improving support systems. Additionally, a longitudinal approach and the incorporation of quantitative measures would enhance understanding of how autistic adolescents' views of adulthood evolve and highlight potential influences on these perceptions.

In conclusion, this study highlights the need for person-centred approaches to gaining an understanding of autistic adolescents' specific strengths, needs and perceived challenges, and the need for support systems that are tailored to these individual needs, to help them overcome challenges and work towards their goals for the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of Studies included in the Systematic Review

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Sample	Data analysis	Main Findings
Anderson et al (2016) USA	Examined the perceptions of adulthood among high-school students with ASD. To report postsecondary expectations of school, work, friendships, and living arrangement. To describe how sample defined adulthood.	Semi-structured interview that questioned students about friendships, activities, and the transition to adulthood. interviews. "What do you think someone has to do to be considered an adult?"	31 students with ASD independent diagnosis of autism. Verbally fluent . Average age 16. 13, 79% male 93% caucasion. IQ 70-128	Fundamental qualitative description. Directed content analysis approach using criteria traditionally endorsed in secondary schools, Codes are determined before and during data analysis; however, these pre-defined codes do not preclude the possibility of new or emerging themes	The majority of students expected to attain traditional markers of adulthood after high school. For some the pathways to achieving these outcomes were narrowly defined and perceived as a linear process. Independence, maturity, and personal responsibility were the most highly endorsed characteristics of adulthood, followed by chronological age and traditional markers. Sample had a wide range of vocational and academic interests, varying ideals about friendships, and different living arrangement preferences. Conclusions: (a) The attainment of nontraditional adult roles should be incorporated in transition plans and services, (b) secondary institutions need to prepare students for the uncertainties of adulthood, and (c) there is a need for community-based services that help all students attain employment, living, and social transition outcomes.
Anderson et al. (2021) USA	Exploration of employment expectations and experiences	Qualitative interviews - unstructured as little existing	12 Young people with ASD Average age 22.9. 79% white.	Constant comparative method, this is associated with a	Three major themes: **Employment Aspirations and Potential;** hope in a future that would involve meaningful daily engagement, including paid employment. The ideal job would make the most of a young persons

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Sample	Data analysis	Main Findings
		knowledge of area of study.	32% intellectual disability	grounded theory approach.	strengths and autism-related diffculties ameliorated/accepted. **Challenges of Job Finding and Keeping;** participants described the barriers faced whether in a job or laying the groundwork for one and the consequences of failure.
Cheak-Zamora et al. (2015) USA	Exploration of the perspectives of autistic adolescents when thinking about becoming an adult, specifically regarding preparation and support for transition to adulthood.	Two semi-structured focus groups, one with ASD youth, one with parents.	13 autistic youth. 15-22 years years of age. 11 Male, 2 female. Good verbal skills	Codebook describing the themes, theme analysis of the data using strategies derived from Grounded Theory	Fear and anxiety about transitioning, unmet needs were also high. Most youth reported lacking individualized services. Although youth have future goals, they were unaware of steps needed to accomplish them and hesitant to talk to caregivers. Educators and service providers must understand the individual needs and strengths of youth with ASD, as well as take into consideration the individuality of each person they serve.
Cribb et al. (2019) Autralia	Explore the process of transition and autistic young people's aspirations for the future. To understand the subjective views and experiences of young autistic people as they	Face-to-face semistructured interviews . Young people were asked about their experiences of school, goals for the future and self-perceptions.	28 young people. 26 boys 2 girls Aged 16-20 IQ 62-130 86% white	Thematic analysis, using an inductive approach to identify patterned meanings.	Young people reported feeling more in control of their own lives, including developing a need to 'take it one step at a time", increased sense of identity and personal autonomy. The pressures of striving towards more normative ways of engaging in the world may be detrimental to well-being. Key processes identified which allow them to feel more in control of their own lives, including their developing sense of identity and personal autonomy, which appeared to be rooted in young autistic people's executive skills and their ability to develop and maintain strong relationships with others. Fostering these underlying skills – while, critically, being attentive to individual varying needs

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Sample	Data analysis	Main Findings
	approached emerging adulthood.				and preferences should serve these young people better in the longer term.
Curtiss et al. (2021) USA	To understand expectations of autistic youth relating to transition to adulthood	Focus groups for participants to share their perceptions and experiences One moderator with one cofacilitator/note taker led groups.	6 autistic young people. Aged between 18-30, average age 21.6 years. 4 male, 2 female, 83% white.	Thematic analysis. Open coding using a technique called episode profile analysis, with each focus group being considered an episode. Quotations identified, memo's written and compared using constant comparative analysis.	5 main themes identified; normative hopes, living with uncertainty, mismatch of reality and expectations, impairments shape expectations, and services dictate expectations. Tension between matching expectations with abilities.
Goana et al. (2019) England	To explore the views of young people with ASD in their transition to post-16 education and employment. To understans the meaning of the lived experiences of transitioning to post-16 education	Semi -structured interviews focusing on what young people wanted to achieve following their exit from secondary school, their transitions to post-16 settings and	12 young people with ASD receiving specialist support under an EHC plans. Aged 15-19. Purposively drawn from four secondary schools and one further education provider. 10 males 2 females mean age 16.4.	Analysed inductively, through thematic analysis	Young people emphasised their mixed feelings about change and the future, their aspirations to become more independent in everyday life, as well as the supportive nature of school, friends and familial networks in decision-making and problem-solving. Addressing these themes during transition planning is of crucial importance, as they can assist young people, their families, practitioners and professionals in in the discussion, design and implementation of interventions and tailored provision that are

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Sample	Data analysis	Main Findings
	for individuals with ASD, in light of the changes introduced by the new SEND legislation.	their aspirations for the future.	verbal communicators		relevant and meaningful to the young person's views, aspirations and goals.
Kirby et al. (2019) USA	To understand different factors autistic youth considered when thinking about and preparing for their futures, as well as, more generally, their conceptualizations of adulthood. e aimed to understand different factors autistic youth considered when thinking about and preparing for their futures, as well as, more generally, their conceptualizations of adulthood. Our	Semi-structured interviews about plans and desires for adult lives.	27 autistic adolescents (12–17 years old). 93% male. White non-Hispanic (78%), black (15%), and Hispanic (7%). Expected to get high school diploma. Verbally able to participate.	Qualitative thematic analysis with an inductive, iterative approach.	Variety of factors explored when adolescents considered their plans and desires for adulthood, including their family connections, their own interests and abilities, characteristics of their future situations, and chronological progressions. When speaking about adulthood in general, participants discussed the importance of factors such as age/accomplishment and responsibility/maturity. Although asked about multiple aspects of adulthood (e.g. employment, living arrangements, and social life), the main focus was on employment. Transition planning practices should include a focus on youth interests and abilities as well as considerations of situational characteristics that are appealing to them and give attention to family support.

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Sample	Data analysis	Main Findings
	exploration can offer insight and guidance to support transitions to adulthood that better meet the needs and desires of youth.				
Lambe et al. (2019) England	To investigate the perspectives of autistic students transitioning to university. What are the challenges faced by autistic students transitioning to university? What are their hopes for attending university?	Three focus groups were conducted with 25 autistic students preparing to start university. Participants were asked about their hopes for starting university, as well as their worries and concerns.	25 autistic A level students, aged 16-21. Participants were attending a university transitional programme at a English university.	A data-driven thematic analysis was conducted. This inductive semantic approach was adopted so that resulting themes were analysed from the explict meanings of the data itself, interpretations did not go beyond the data to suggest underlying meaning.	Five main themes were identified: The Social World, Academic Demands, Practicalities of University Living, Leaving the Scaffolding of Home and Transition to Adulthood. The results provide an important account of the challenges autistic students face when transitioning to university, as well as their aspirations
Tesfaye et al. (2023) Canada	To explore the facilitators and barriers autistic youth perceived and their aspirations and	Semi-structured interviews. Interview included an ordering activity wherein the	31 autistic youth 5 female 26 male. diagnosis. 11-18 years of age. IQ 33-152	Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.	Key themes identified (1) autistic identities, (2) thinking about the future, (3) seeking social connection on their own terms, (4) seeking autonomy, (5) school as both a stressor and social facilitator, and (6) experiences of stress and anxiety. The experiences described by autistic

Citation and country	Aim	Design	Sample	Data analysis	Main Findings
	hopes for the future.	participant was asked to order four topics (family, friends, future, and school) according to what worried them from most to least. Topics were then discussed from the most to least worrisome. A closing reflective activity was used as a wrap-up to the interview (e.g. What three things they would change in their life if they had the power to do so?			youth parallel many of the aspirations and challenges of typically developing adolescents, while being uniquely shaped by their autism. Insights from these participants can be used to understand what matters to autistic youth and to better support autistic youth throughout their adolescent journey and especially during periods of transition

Appendix B: Example of Complete Critical Appraisal Tool

CASP
Critical Appraisal
Skills Programme

Paper for appraisal and reference: Kirby (2019) Who will pay for the wifi?

Section A: Are the results valid?

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?

Yes ✓
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
• what was the goal of the research
• why it was thought important
• its relevance

Comments: The current study explores different factors autistic youth considered when thinking about and preparing for their futures.

2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?

Yes ✓
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
• If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants
• Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal

Comments: Includes personal perspective and understanding of the future. By asking young people to describe their views the authors aim to draw meaning

Is it worth continuing?

3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?

Yes ✓
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider
• if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g. have they discussed how they decided which method to use)

Comments: Yes- semi structured interviews allow for participants to give their own perspectives and not be too constrained.

CASP
Critical Appraisal
Skills Programme

4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?		
Yes	✓	
Can't Tell		
No		

HINT: Consider
- If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected
- If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study
- If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)

Comments: Thorough desctiption was included of the participants in the sample. They were volunteers but there was a predetermined range of features required- eg age diagnosis of autistm, verbal fluency

5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?		
Yes	✓	
Can't Tell		
No		

HINT: Consider
- If the setting for the data collection was justified
- If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)
- If the researcher has justified the methods chosen
- If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)
- If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why
- If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)
- If the researcher has discussed saturation of data

Comments: Appropriate setting used, clear that interviews which were semi-structured. There was no discussion of saturation, however, RTA was employed and as such this is not advocated.

CASP
Critical Appraisal
Skills Programme

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

Yes ☐
Can't Tell ✔
No ☐

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location
- How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design

Comments: No discussion of researcher impact in interviews or in analysis

Section B: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Yes ✔
Can't Tell ☐
No ☐

HINT: Consider

- If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained
- If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)
- If approval has been sought from the ethics committee

Comments: Ethical approval is discussed

CASP
Critical Appraisal
Skills Programme

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Yes		HINT: Consider
	Can't Tell	✓	
	No		

HINT: Consider
- If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process
- If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data
- Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process
- If sufficient data are presented to support the findings
- To what extent contradictory data are taken into account
- Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation

Comments: Some points considered around rigour

9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes	✓	HINT: Consider whether
	Can't Tell		
	No		

HINT: Consider whether
- If the findings are explicit
- If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments
- If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)
- If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question

Comments: Clear statement and discussion of the findings with reasonable consideration of credibility and validation.

Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?

HINT: Consider
- If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g. do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature
- If they identify new areas where research is necessary
- If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used

Comments: 0.5- Findings may be useful to support young people in their transition to adulthood. However there would need to be a level of interpretation for it to be employed effectively by professional who work with autistic young people.

Appendix C: Ethics Approval

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T. +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1528**

Monday 17th July 2023

Dear Suzanna Dundas and Nick Durbin,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult future self'

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research, then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Tuesday 14th November 2023

Ref: **S1559 Chair Approval Minor Amendments**

Dear Suzanna Dundas and Nick Durbin,

Your name and contact details:- Suzanna Dundas
Today's date:- 15/10/23
Title of the new project:- 'An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult future self' (unchanged)
Are you an undergraduate, postgraduate or staff? PGR

Details of the previous study:
Applicant: Suzanna Dundas
Title: 'An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult future self' (unchanged)
Date of approval: 17.7.23
Reference number (if known): S1528

As Chair of the Ethics Committee I have considered your request and I am happy to grant approval for the following changes:

List of significant changes in the proposed study. This list should include any changes which could potentially impact on ethical risks of the work e.g., moving from student participants to vulnerable adults; use of sensitive stimulus materials; changes in remuneration or consent procedures:

1. Widening the participant population from 16-18 year old's to 13-18 year
old's. In the original study it was suggested that participants should speak to
adults who knew them well. Now, for participants below 16 I will gain
consent from parents or carers as well as participants.
The consent form for under 16's will include the following section:
I have read and understood the accompanying letter and information leaflet
and give permission for the child (named above) to be included.
Name _____
Relationship to child _____
Signature _____

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor.
The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British
Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any
concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes
of Practice.

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Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix D: School of Psychology Information Sheet, Privacy Notice and Consent

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Title of Project - **An exploration of autistic adolescent**

views of the adult future self

Ethics Approval Number: 51559

Researchers: Suzanna Dundas suzanna.dundas@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Nick Durbin nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Chair of ethics committee: Stephen Jackson stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Information for participants

Hello,

My name is Suzi Dundas, I am a trainee educational psychologist at the University of Nottingham. I am carrying out a research project investigating the way that autistic young people think about themselves as adults and how they plan for their future. I would like to invite you to take part in this research. Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done, and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully or listen to it being read to you.

What would this mean for you?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in some activities about how you think about yourself as an adult. This will involve describing your views of adulthood, yourself in the future and the plans you have made for your future. You can choose how to share your views, for example, you could write, draw or speak about your views. The whole activity will last about 1 hour, but you can stop at any time or take breaks.

Participation is Voluntary

You do not need to take part in this study if you do not want to, but if you do agree to take part you can stop at any point. I will ask you before we begin the activities and during the activities if you would like to stop but you can also tell me if you would like to stop or take a break at any time. There will also be a picture in the room of a stop sign. Like the one on the next page, which you can point to.

Privacy Notice: what will happen to the things you say, write or draw?

All the things you say, write or draw in the study will be kept confidentially and used for research purposes only. Your name and any information that could identify you will be removed before it is stored. The research is guided by the law in working with your personal information which will be processed and protected in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR, GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA). More information about this can be found here: www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Storing and using your data

All of the data (what you say, write or draw) will be stored in a password-protected file, and will only be seen by the researchers involved in the project, myself and my supervisor, Dr Nick Durbin, at the University of Nottingham. The anonymous information may be used in presentations, research reports, or similar. Your information will not be identifiable, but if you do not want it to be used in this way, please do not take part in the research.

Questions or concerns

This research has been approved by the School of Psychology's Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham. Please feel free to contact me if you want to know more about this research or what it might mean for you. If you have any concerns or complaints about this research you can contact me, my supervisor (Nick Durbin) or Chair of Ethics Committee, (Stephen Jackson). Contact details can be found above.

What's next?

Give yourself time to think about whether you want to take part, and talk to your parents or the people who look after you about it. If you decide not to take part, we would like to thank you for your time and you don't need to do anything further! If you think you would like to take part, please fill in the consent form and ask a parent to sign that they give permission for you to take part. Once you have done that, return the form to the member of school staff who gave it to you and we will be in touch with you soon.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this.

Suzi Dundas researcher and trainee educational psychologist

Stephen Jackson stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk *(Chair of ethics committee)*

School of Psychology Consent Form

Title of Project: **An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult future self.**

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1528

Researcher(s): Suzanna Dundas suzanna.dundas@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor(s): Nick Durbin nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Please answer these questions independently:	Circle or highlight your answer	
Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?	Yes	No
Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes	No
Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and without giving a reason?	Yes	No
We would only store or share your data (information that comes from what you say or do in the study, eg drawing or writing) after removing your name. Do you agree to this?	Yes	No
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes	No

Participant: *This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.*

Name of participant (your name in block capitals): _____

Signature of the participant: _____ Date _____

Parent/carer: *I have read and understood the accompanying letter and information leaflet and give permission for the child (named above) to be included.*

Name _____ Relationship to child _____

Signature_____ Date_____

Appendix E: Gatekeeper letter to Headteacher

Gatekeeper letter to Headteacher

29 October 2023

An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult future self

Dear Headteacher name,

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being carried out and what it would involve for you and the participants. Please take time to read the following information carefully and do contact me to ask questions if anything you read is not clear, or if you would like more information.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

My name is Suzi Dundas, I am a trainee educational psychologist, employed by the City of York Council and studying for the Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology at the University of Nottingham. As part of my studies, I am carrying out a research project investigating the way that autistic young people think about themselves as adults and how they plan for the future.

WHAT I NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE WITH

I am writing to ask for permission to, invite some of your students to take part in my research project and ask staff members (eg SENCO) to help identify possible participants. The intended participants of this study are autistic adolescents aged 16-18 currently in mainstream education. I would hope to identify potential participants with the help of school staff who know their students well, for example, SENCO, head of year or form tutors. I would also hope that staff would be able to support young people identified as potential participants to understand what taking part in the study might mean for them so that they can make an informed decision about whether they want to take part in the research. For further information *about* how this process would work, please see the *School of Psychology Information Sheet and Privacy Notice* and *Information for Staff* documents attached to this email.

WHAT TAKING PART IN THE RESEARCH WILL INVOLVE?

The research would involve a semi-structured, task based interview, with each pupil taking part in activities and discussions relating to how they think about being an adult and what plans they have made towards becoming the adult that they want to be. Discussions will be based on the preparation for adulthood outcomes outlined in the SEN code of practice (employment, independent living, health and community participation). The young people will have a choice of how to respond to questions and prompts, for example, they could write, draw or speak their thoughts.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO DATA FROM THE RESEARCH?

The information gathered would be held confidentially and anonymised. Pseudonyms would be used in writing about the research and no data would be traceable back to participants or your school. All personal data will be processed under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR, GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA). More information about this can be found here. Confidentiality will only be breached if the young person is deemed to be at risk of harm or posing a risk to someone else.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Please contact me, or my supervisor, if you have any further queries about this research, contact details can be found below.

Many thanks for your consideration of facilitating this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Suzi Dundas

Trainee Educational Psychologist suzanna.dundas@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervised by Dr Nick Durbin nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix F: Information for staff

To be read with *participant information sheet and privacy notice*
document

Title of Project - **An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult
future self**

Ethics Approval Number: S1559

Researchers: Suzanna Dundas suzanna.dundas@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Nick Durbin nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Chair of ethics committee: Stephen Jackson stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear staff member,

Thank you for agreeing to help explain my project to the young person that has been
identified as a potential participant. It would be helpful if you could start by telling
them the following:

*We have been asked by Suzi Dundas, who is a trainee educational psychologist at the
University of Nottingham, and on placement with City of York Council, if we have any
students who would like to take part in her research. She is studying how young
autistic people think about their future and themselves as an adult. We thought you
might be interested, can I tell you more about it?*

If they agree, please then go through the *participant information and privacy notice
document* with them so that they understand it and can make an informed decision
about whether to take part.

You know the young person, so please use your professional judgment to decide the best way to do this. For example, you might give them the information sheet and then discuss the various parts of it, or you might read it together.

Please encourage the young person to:

- discuss their thoughts about participating in the study with their parents or carers and anyone else that they feel could help them to make a decision.
- email me with any questions that they have (or ask someone else to do this on their behalf). I can then either reply by email or arrange to speak to them in person.

If parents/carers or any school staff have questions about the research they are also encouraged to contact me by email.

KEY POINTS

It is really important for participants to understand that:

- they do not have to take part in this study if they don't want to.
- they can change their mind about being involved and withdraw from the study at any time.
- Any information that they share will remain confidential and it will be stored anonymously, unless there is a risk of harm to self or others.

If the young person does not want to take part, they do not have to do anything further. If, after going away and thinking about it, the young person would like to be involved, please ask them to complete the attached consent form. This can then be emailed to me or I will arrange to pick it up in person.

Questions or concerns

This research has been approved by the School of Psychology's Ethics Committee at

the University of Nottingham. Please feel free to contact me if you want to know more about this research or what it might mean for you. If you have any concerns or complaints about this research you can contact me, my supervisor (Nick Durbin) or Chair of Ethics Committee, (Stephen Jackson). Contact details can be found below. Many thanks for taking the time to read this and for your involvement.

Suzi Dundas

Researchers: Suzanna Dundas suzanna.dundas@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Nick Durbin nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Chair of ethics committee: Stephen Jackson stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix G: Stop Sign

Please remember that you do not have to take part in today's activities, it is also ok for you to change your mind once you have started.

I will ask you at various times during the activities if you would like to stop/take a break or if you are ok to continue.

You can also let me know at any time if you would like to stop or take a break by telling me or pointing to this stop sign.

You can stop and withdraw from the research/study at anytime. You do not give a reason for this.

Appendix H: Adulthood Grid (GEM)

I am interested in what you associate with 'adulthood' or 'being an adult'. Please use a word, phrase or image that represents what first comes to mind when thinking about adulthood. Sometimes a really simple drawing or word can be a good way of portraying your thoughts and feelings. (Instructions adapted from Joffe & Elsey, 2014).

1	2
3	4

Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Adulthood Research Activity schedule

Introductions

- Who I am and what I am doing
- Recap participant information, informed consent
- Discuss right to stop- Stop sign
- Ask questions, no right or wrong answers
- Option to write, draw, talk- or a mixture.

Activity 1 GEM- See grid GEM sheet/grid

What does adulthood mean to you?

Go through each one- say; *tell me more about this. Why is that important? What if it did not happen?*

CHECK IN with any notes taken so far

Adulthood Prompts

I want you to think about the kind of person you would like to be when you are an adult of 25 -30 years of age.

Would you like to draw a quick sketch of this person in the middle of the page? Leave some space around the outside of the page for more pictures or writing.

(Option to write, draw, talk- or a mixture!)

When we think about Preparing for Adulthood it can help to think about **4 key things/areas** Things that are positive and possible. Jobs or future education, friends and relationships, health and independence

Show cards – which would you like to talk about first?

Education and Employment- *tell me about what work will be like*
-what job will they do- If you could have any career or do any job-what would you do
What would it be like doing that job?
What will you need to do to get that job/career etc
Prompts

-qualifications- need? what are you planning to do next (p16)?
_how do you know about that job, what other jobs have you thought about and decided you don't want?
Any work experience- know someone who does the job? What sparked your interest?
-how much earn
- typical day/routine
-what need/use money for
-enjoy work? How would I know
_what skills would you need- do you have them- how might you get them.
-what help have you had to decide
-what help would you need to decide or get there
-what have you done at school to help you decide- any careers information, people coming in to talk to you? Any staff talked to you about it?
Looked at different p16 options- do you know about apprenticeships?
• How do you feel about moving into Year X /school/college?
• Do you know the next steps and the pathway to the world of work? (college/apprenticeship/university)

Reflect- How feel about your work/education plans now? What have you done so far (think about what you were like/could do in Y7)- (experiences, planning, qualifications, research)
Is there anything you need to do/work on to become more independent?
Who could help you?

?CHECK IN with any notes taken so far

Independent Living- tell me about how you will be able to look after yourself. What does this mean to you?

How independent are you now?

How are you going to be as independent as possible? You might want to think about your home, where you would like to live and who you would like to live with if anybody? How are you going to travel and get to places you want to go?

How are you going to be as independent as possible?
Prompts
You might want to think about your home, where you would like to live and who you would like to live with if anybody?
How are you going to travel and get to places you want to go?

-life at home- who
-keep clean, eat, look after home, travel
-manage money, pay bills
-make decisions

What is something that you have never done but would like to try?
• How are you learning to care for yourself? (Developing life skills)
• Where would you love to visit?
• What do you spend your allowance/pocket money on? (Are you saving up for anything?)

• If you had to choose somewhere else to live where would you choose?
• If you had £100 to spend on yourself, what would you buy or do?
• How to you get to where you need or want to go?

Reflect- How feel about your independence now? What have you done so far (think about what you were like/could do in Y7). (experiences, planning, qualifications, research)
Is there anything you need to do/work on to become more independent?
Who could help you?

> **CHECK IN with any notes taken so far**

Friends, relationships and community
How will you spend your time?
Any clubs activities

- What will you do outside of work- with other people, for other people and at home alone
- Will you spend time with friends
- Will you spend time with family?
- Will you have a romantic relationship? Children of your own?
- What would like to change about the world if you could?
- How will you keep yourself safe?

Reflect- How feel about your friendships/relationships now? What have you done so far (think about what you were like/could do in Y7) (experiences, planning, qualifications, research)
Is there anything you need to do/work on to improve your relationships?
Who could help you?

Health- tell me about how you will be able to keep yourself healthy.
How are you going to be as healthy as you can be? This includes being physically and mentally healthy/feeling happy content with your life. We often call this your wellbeing.
Prompts

- Personal care
- Make doctor appointment?
- Free from pain
- Exercise
- What/where support if ill?
- Relaxed/happy/stressed worried
- What helps you to feel better when you are upset or sad?
- What activities do you do that help you keep healthy? What do you like doing?
- How confident do you feel about managing your own health needs (e.g. inhaler/epi-pen/ insulin/medication etc.)

Reflection
Reflect- How feel about your health and wellbeing now? What have you done so far (think about what you were like/could do in Y7)- (experiences, planning, qualifications, research)
Is there anything you need to do/work on to improve or make sure you stay healthy?
Who could help you?

> **Reflect and CHECK IN with any notes (including field notes) taken so far**
>
> **Can we summarise information- what does the participant think?**

DEBRIEF
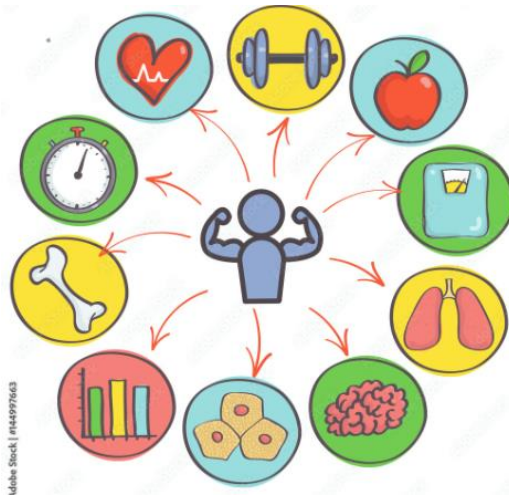
Preparation for adulthood cards

Employment

Independence

Friendships and relationships

Health

Appendix J: Debrief statement

DEBRIEFING INFORMATION

School of Psychology

Name of Researcher:	Email of researcher:
Suzi Dundas	suzanna.dundas@nottingham.ac.uk
Name of Supervisor:	**Email of Supervisor:**
Nick Durbin	nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Check in

I hope that you have found taking part in this research interesting. However, it may be that you feel a bit worried or upset about some of the things that you have talked about. If that is the case I encourage you to speak to an adult who knows you well, eg a parent/carer or member of staff in school. If you would like me to talk to a teacher or parent on your behalf, please let me know. Everything you say will be kept confidential unless I think you are at risk of harm, or you might harm someone else. However, if I felt that was the case I would let you know before talking to anyone else about this.

Other places that you might want to go for support:

- Young Minds is a charity that helps young people to understand more about how they are feeling and find ways to feel better.
- The National Careers Service provides careers information, advice and guidance and can help with making decisions on learning, training and work. However, your school will also have lots of support for you. You can talk to your form tutor to find out more about this.

If you want to find out more information about the study that you have taken part in, there is information below, or please feel free to contact me using the email address above.

Title of Research:

An exploration of autistic adolescent views of the adult future self

Background

Adolescence can be a difficult time for young people, with lots of social, emotional and physical changes going on. During this time adolescents often start to think about their futures and what they want from adulthood. The changes that young people are going through can make it hard to think about and make effective plans for the future. People who are autistic may have additional challenges, for example, they might may find some aspects of planning difficult or find it hard to bring up an image of themselves in the future.

Aims and purpose of the study

This study aims to find out how young autistic people think about themselves adult self and about any plans they have made towards that adult self. We know that every individual is different but understanding your experiences could help us to come up with ideas to support other autistic young people when they are making plans for the future.

Design

Participants carried out tasks, which involved drawing, writing or speaking about how they think about themselves as adults and any plans that they have made towards that adult self.

Intended Analysis:

The information you have shared will be analysed using thematic analysis. This involves examining the information that the participants have given to identify common themes, topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly.

Appendix K: Coding of Participant Responses

Participant	Quote	Code Name
Athena	Being able to drive would be so amazing, I can just think I want to go to Tesco, and just go, literally it's not a big deal. At the moment I have to as	Travel Autonomy
Athena	I want to be able to go on my own without having to ask for permission every time	Travel Autonomy
Athena	I want to be in charge of my own life, deciding when to wake up and when to sleep	Schedule Autonomy
Athena	I didn't really have to make much big decisions at school… I literally don't know what I'm doing. I just bumble along from day to day…I just follo	Lack of Decision-Making Experience
Athena	How do I know what's going to be the best uni? I can't even decide what to wear in the morning	Decision Anxiety
Athena	The thought of making decisions on my own is really intimidating	Decision Anxiety
Athena	I don't even know how to use the washing machine	Laundry Skills
Athena	I need to learn how to cook more than just the basics	Cooking Skills
Athena	I'll get money from my job. I don't need to be really rich but want a nice house and car. Have nice clothes and hair	Financial Goals
Athena	I want to be able to save money for my future, but I'm not sure I know how	Saving Money
Athena	I just keep going over what I want to say in my head, you know, clever, funny stuff, but by the time I'm ready (to speak), the moment has already	Overthinking Conversations
Athena	I'm scared of being judged if I say something wrong	Social Skills Doubt
Athena	I'm scared of being alone in a new city	Fear of Isolation
Athena	It's hard to think about leaving my comfort zone and meeting new people	Leaving Comfort Zone
Athena	Being a doctor. This will be the work I do. I will have this title people will look up to me. I feel important. Everyone will know I'm clever and usefu	Career Respect
Athena	I am going to uni to do medicine; I need top A levels to do that and be a doctor	University Goals
Athena	I need to find a job that I'll be good at and can cope with	Job Match
Aurora	Having my own money means I could do what I wanted without asking for permission. If I want to spend it (money) on Macdonald, yeah, I will a	Financial Independence
Aurora	Choosing who I spend time with and who I don't	Social Freedom
Aurora	I was crying, it was gone, but a teacher helped by calm[ing] me down… literally, planned out everything	Emotional Reliance
Aurora	I'm constantly second-guessing myself and I cant choose	Second-Guessing choices
Aurora	I don't think I'm gonna be an adult at 18, not really. I'm going to still be in a child mindset	Not an adult
Aurora	[Grocery]shopping seems so complicated	Food Shopping concern
Aurora	I worry about being broke; it's hard enough now but actually when you've got to pay for things that's really scary	Financial Anxiety
Aurora	it's like everyone else knows what to say	Social Skills Doubt
Aurora	I get nervous meeting new people because I don't know what to say	Nervous Meeting New People

Participant	Quote	Code Name
Aurora	I worry about being broke; it's hard enough now but actually when you've got to pay for things that's really scary	Financial worries
Aurora	it's like everyone else knows what to say	Social Skills concern
Aurora	I get nervous meeting new people because I don't know what to say	Social Skills concern
Aurora	I just can't imagine not seeing 'X' [friend], or my mum every day	Fear of Separation
Aurora	I worry about being lonely when I leave home	Loneliness Concern
Aurora	I did health and social care because, if I decide to be a nurse and did like English, Art and History (A Levels) I wouldn't be able to…you've got to	Educational Choices
Apollo	I wanted to go to bed when I want, eat what I want	Routine Control
Apollo	Being able to choose my own clothes and style without input from others is something I really want	Clothing Choices
Apollo	If she (my Gran) hadn't come with some spray I'd have been there all night…If I lived on my own, really what would I do	Reliance on Others
Apollo	I often leave decisions to others because I'm scared of making the wrong one	Avoidance of Decisions
Apollo	I feel like I need someone to guide me through every choice I make	Need for Guidance
Apollo	I'm meant to be an adult but I don't feel like it. I definitely am not	Not an adult
Apollo	I'm worried about managing my time for all the chores	Time Management
Apollo	Mortgages are high, no-one young is going to be able to buy a house unless they've got rich parents, I don't think rent is much better	Housing Concerns
Apollo	I need to figure out how to budget so I can afford the things I want and need	Financial worries
Apollo	Making small talk is really hard for me	Small Talk Difficulty
Apollo	Making new friends seems impossible, I don't know where to start	Making Friends Difficulty
Apollo	I'm going round and round and round in circles. I can't think of anything that I don't feel just 'meh' about	Career Confusion
Apollo	It's hard to decide on a career when I don't know what I'm really good at	Identifying Strengths
Gaia	I can't wait to just do what I want	Desire for Autonomy
Gaia	I want to be responsible for my own money, buy what I want	Financial Responsibility
Gaia	I hope to make my own career choices not do what my parents want	Career Choices
Gaia	It's going to be really good to do my own thing to make decisions for self but at the same time is quite scary	Fear of Independence
Gaia	I can't imagine being able to cope on my own…I'll be a disaster	Fear of Failure
Gaia	I always doubt myself	Self-Doubt
Gaia	It's really scary. I don't know what life will be like, I can't imagine it	Future Uncertainty

Appendix L: Initial Mapping Out of Themes
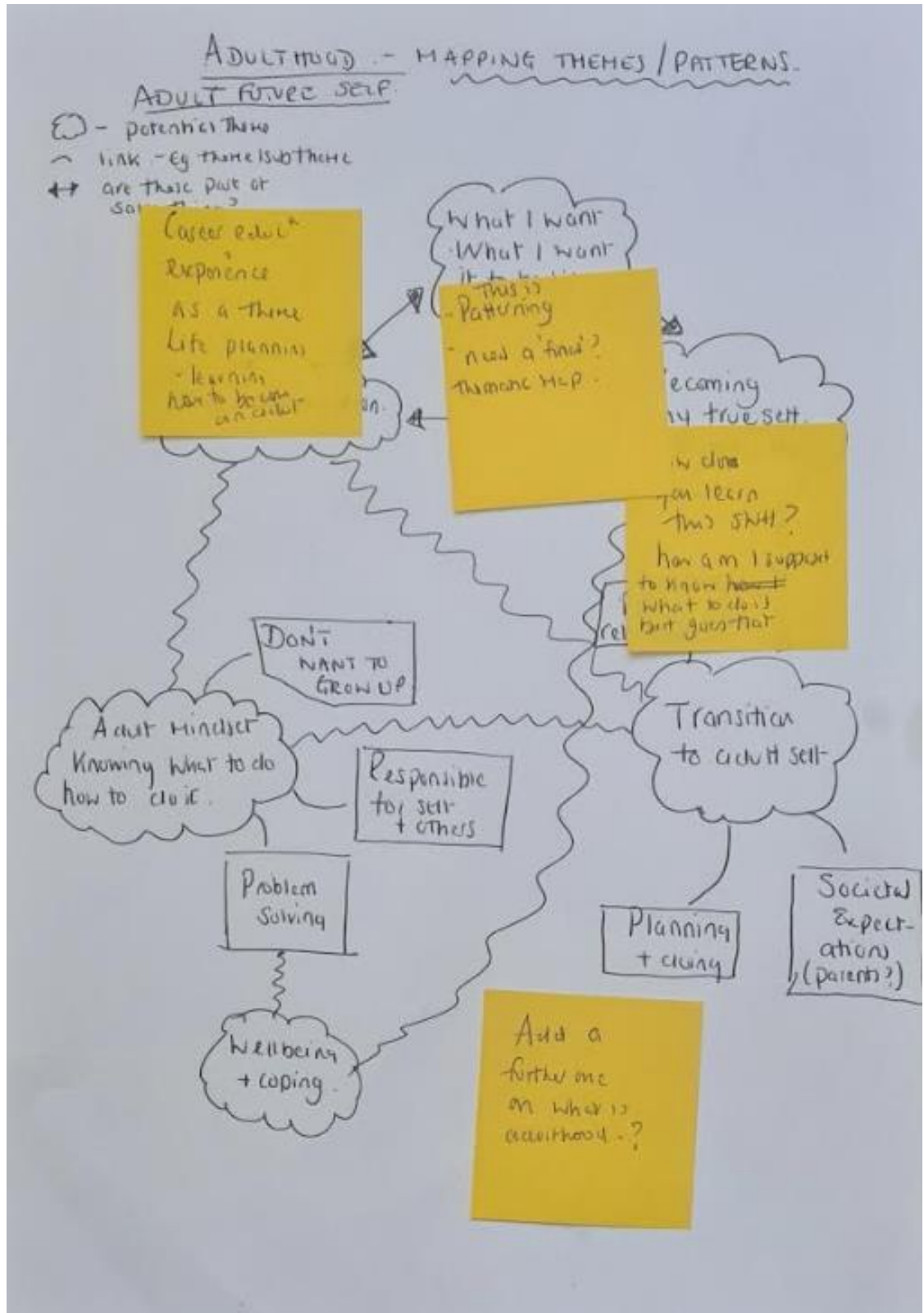
Appendix M: Codes for Theme: Aspirations for Independence and Agency

Theme	Subtheme	Code Name
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Travel Autonomy
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Travel Autonomy
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Schedule Autonomy
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Financial Independence
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Social Freedom
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Routine Control
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Clothing Choices
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Desire for Autonomy
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Financial Responsibility
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Career Choices
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Decision-Making Freedom
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Own Living Space
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Learning Independence
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Eating Independence
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Medical Autonomy
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Avoiding Parental Control
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Career Uncertainty
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Social Autonomy
Aspirations for Independence and Agency		Choosing Friends
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Lack of Decision-Making Experience
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Decision Anxiety
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Decision Anxiety
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Emotional Reliance
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Second-Guessing choices
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Reliance on Others
	Decision-Making Paralysis	Avoidance of Decisions
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Overthinking Conversations
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Social Skills Doubt
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Social Skills concern
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Social Skills concern
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Small Talk Difficulty
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Fear of Judgement
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Bad Impression Worry
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Social Awkwardness
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Lack of Social Confidence
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Social Anxiety
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Maintaining Conversations
Social Interaction and Social Confidence		Shyness in Conversation
Facing New Social Challenges		Fear of Isolation
Facing New Social Challenges		Leaving Comfort Zone
Facing New Social Challenges		Fear of Separation
Facing New Social Challenges		Loneliness Concern
Facing New Social Challenges		Making Friends Difficulty
Facing New Social Challenges		Starting Over Friendships
Facing New Social Challenges		Value of Friendships
Facing New Social Challenges		Fitting In Worry
Facing New Social Challenges		Difficulty Making Friends
Facing New Social Challenges		Anxiety Joining New Groups
Facing New Social Challenges		Home Comfort
Facing New Social Challenges		Future Social Confidence
Facing New Social Challenges		Friendship Uncertainty

Appendix N: Participant GEM Activity Responses

Apollo   **Zeus**

Athena   **Mars**

Appendix E: Adulthood Grid

I am interested in what you associate with 'adulthood' or 'being an adult'. Please use a word, phrase or image that represents what first comes to mind come to mind when thinking about adulthood. Sometimes a really simple drawing or word can be a good way of portraying your thoughts and feelings. (Instructions adapted from Joffe & Elsey, 2014).

1	2
DRIVING A CAR	HAVING MY OWN HOUSE
3	4
HAVING MONEY	BEING A DOCTOR

Work   Hard

——————— ADULT ———————

Fun /Freetime.   Driving.
                  Ford ST
                  Modify.

Aurora

Appendix E: Adulthood Grid

I am interested in what you associate with 'adulthood' or 'being an adult'. Please use a word, phrase or image that represents what first comes to mind come to mind when thinking about adulthood. Sometimes a really simple drawing or word can be a good way of portraying your thoughts and feelings. (Instructions adapted from Joffe & Elsey, 2014).

1	2
Money Not having money being broke.	House
3	4
Over 18 + age	Jobs Children

Gaia

① Choose what I
eat — decisions.
Clothes.

② Being responsible
for me.

ADULTHOOD

③ Fitting in
— my people.

④ Knowing what
I am doing.
:) haha