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‘An Exploratory Study of the Use of Positive Writing Diaries for Autistic Females’

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Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged. Jacqueline Green

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the use of positive writing as a tool for the management of difficulties and behaviours associated with autism and the improvement in life satisfaction of the autistic community within educational settings. This intervention study focuses on adult autistic females as they are often overlooked in research. A small group of women (13) either diagnosed with autism, or who self-identify as autistic participated in the study. The study involved keeping a positive retrospective diary for a period of four weeks, whilst looking for positive experiences to include in the diary, and answering questionnaire questions about it and its effects before and afterwards. Thematic Analysis was carried out on diary entries and questionnaire responses in order to identify themes and sub-themes across participants. All participants were either school or university students, or professionals working in education. The pre-diary questionnaires identified many struggles associated with autism, such a strict routines, social difficulties, and high levels of anxiety. Some of these, such as masking, may have been particularly associated with females. Post-diary questionnaires commonly revealed improvement in sense of life satisfaction and well-being associated with the diary task. It was commonly reported that the positive diary led to an increased focus on happy events and less negative thinking. The post-diary questionnaires also frequently showed a marked decrease in anxiety following the diary procedure. Reasons for this and possible mechanisms are explored. Participants demonstrated enjoyment of the diary task and most said that they would continue to keep using a positive diary after the study had finished. The findings of the study contribute new knowledge to understanding and coping with autistic behaviours and difficulties in educational settings for both workers and students, especially in helping autistic females to manage anxiety and maximise their potential within education. This has implications for practice in terms of the way in which autistic students are assisted and treated by staff, and the way in which autistic academic staff are accommodated. The findings also have implications for practice beyond education in terms of helping autistic adults to manage difficulties and anxiety, foster self-awareness and coping skills, and live more positively. All forms of health practitioners could introduce and recommend positive diary writing techniques as part of broader well-being interventions. Positive diary writing is a practical, low cost self-help strategy that can be personalised and used in multiple settings.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Stance

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the use of retrospective positive writing diaries in the adult female autistic community. Very little research has been carried out in autistic adults (Pellicano et al, 2014), and even less in female autistic adults (Ratto, 2020), this is particularly true for research into methods for managing and bettering daily lives (Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al, 2018; Harrop, 2015). This intervention study takes a feminist theoretical stance in order to examine ideas for helping adult autistic females to improve their life management and satisfaction. The lack of research of this kind, and the demand for it (Scott-Barrett et al, 2019) make this thesis particularly necessary and relevant.

The choice of a feminist theoretical stance is central to the work, not simply because of its focus on females. It is the ethical approach and background to this particular perspective which makes it most fitting. A feminist theoretical stance aims not just to increase knowledge but to improve the lives of those being studied (Denzin, 2014). This factor is intrinsic and central to the present study. Also worthy of mention is the more recent development of areas of feminist theory to include other disadvantaged cohorts such as the disabled (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020). This is relevant because the autistic females in this study fall into both the female category and may also be considered by some to have a disability.

1.2 Gaps in Knowledge

The fact that research within the adult autistic community is severely lacking (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016), with the majority of research focusing on young children of primary school age or less (Richler et al, 2010), has led to several factors which make research in this area important and needed. Firstly, little is known about autism in adulthood, and less about what those with the condition might need and how to assist the adult autistic community with life skills (Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al, 2018). Research has tended to focus on the social and communication issues of autism (Richler et al, 2010). Secondly, it has led to possible underdiagnosis, particularly amongst autistic females (Fowler & O'Connor, 2021; Kaat et al,

2021). This has led to gaps in knowledge as to how best to help autistic adults in their daily lives.

This thesis concerns adult autistic females who are literate (as they were all university students or academic staff), and are considered have low support needs, sometimes previously referred to as people with Asperger's Syndrome. The reduction in levels of diagnosis of autism in females is particularly apparent in those with low support needs (Shattuck et al, 2009), which means that they are even more likely to be missing from research groups. Whilst this group of females fit a diagnosis of autism, they also have unique qualities and requirements above and beyond simple diagnostic criteria (Simone, 2010).

1.3 Meaning of Autism

Autistic people are defined as having social and communication problems which include 'deficits in social-emotional reciprocity', 'deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction', and relationship difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.50). Of more importance and salience to the present study, those with autism are also defined as having 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities', 'insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualised patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour', and 'highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.50). These definitions are used because they appear to be the most widely employed and accepted (Grandin, 2012), with other texts often referring to them. However, as will be discussed in the Literature Review, this thesis views autism as a difference and a form of neurodiversity, rather than a disorder, terms such as 'normal' or 'abnormal' are questioned although participants may choose to use them.

This thesis favours a social model of disability rather than a medical one (Oliver, 2013; Riddle, 2020). Whilst commonly used definitions of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) are referred to in order to establish and understand autistic traits and difficulties, this thesis does not align with the view that autism should be medicalised or seen as some sort of illness that needs to be eradicated. The behaviours described above, such as 'repetitive patterns of behaviour', 'adherence to routines' and 'restricted, fixated interests' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) can be interpreted in different ways. Rather than being seen as purely negative, they could be considered as coping mechanisms in an unpredictable world. Autistic interests, whilst typically undervalued, involve deep focus and

can lead to valuable work and developments, breakthroughs and new ideas (Grandin, 2012). This thesis focuses on difficulties that autistic people identify and choose to address, while acknowledging that these challenges often interact with societal structures and expectations.

The behavioural features of autism are a key factor in this present study. They are under-researched (Harrop, 2015) despite often being one of the most challenging and potentially disabling aspects of autism (Boyd et al, 2012). From the research that does exist, it is already established that self-management techniques can show promising results within the autistic community (Aljadeff-Abergel et al, 2015). This area of study is in its infancy and requires much development. Yet there are many positive signs regarding its potential. The autistic community have shown a desire to participate in research which aims to assist them when they are treated respectfully rather than merely observed (Goodall, 2020; Muller et al, 2008).

1.4 Positive Writing

This thesis looks at the potential for positive retrospective diary writing as a way of increasing life satisfaction and managing autistic behaviours in a form of natural activity substitution. Participants were asked to keep a positive retrospective diary and to strive to find and take part in positive activities in order to complete the diary, thus forming a routine in which positive events (however small) needed to be sought out in order to fulfil it. Positive writing, particularly when used in retrospective diary writing (Suhr et al, 2017), has been shown to be beneficial for mental health and therapeutic for various different groups (Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009). However research to date has not explored positive writing with members of the autistic community in any form. This means that the current study is novel both in its area of research and in its approach. A practical rather than experimental approach is advocated for research which makes a difference to practice (Guldberg, 2017). This is of importance to educational practice which this thesis aims to influence.

It was considered that elements of the very definition of autism suggested that a technique such as positive diary writing may well be especially suited to autistic individuals. This was due to the fact that diary writing is a repetitive behaviour and can be kept as a routine, thus working with an autistic trait. It also accommodates any special interests of any intensity. Furthermore, a method such as diary writing could suit the common autistic preference to work alone, to dislike change, and to complete tasks in their own time and choice of place (Westerberg et al, 2021).

1.5 Autism in Education

Autism research is important to education, both in schools and universities, and in other settings. The findings of autism research feed into policy and practice within education and should allow practitioners to best accommodate their students. The lack of research into certain areas of autism currently means that teachers and lecturers do not have as much information or as many resources available to them as they could when it comes to helping autistic students to develop and advance in their school or university (Sproston et al, 2017). Research in this area could ultimately create more opportunities for the autistic community to succeed in their chosen field of education. Many autistic adults (including those who work in education as teachers or lecturers) may have discovered their autistic status later in life (Attwood et al, 2014). Autism research is important to them too for managing their own difficulties such as anxiety and repetitive behaviours and hence best being able to deliver education to others.

All knowledge about autism can help to improve the educational experience of autistic people, as well as their life satisfaction in general (Hidalgo et al, 2022) and skills such as self-management have been shown to benefit academic progress (Carr et al, 2014; Carr, 2016). Enhancing knowledge about how to help those with autism in their daily lives will feed into how education is delivered for them, and allow for more tailored guidance. It is hoped that the present study will be able to inform practice within education, and the ability of practitioners of all sorts to assist the autistic community in its educational journey and acquisition of life skills. Whilst the present study focuses on university age students and adults, this is merely a start point. Ideally the research would be continued with younger school age teenagers. Those with autism are more likely to be withdrawn from school (Parsons & Lewis, 2010) and hence potentially miss out on educational opportunities.

1.6 Participants

The adults in this study are either university age students, or are teachers (from primary or secondary schools) or academic staff from universities. As previously mentioned, teachers and university staff were included because the needs of these practitioners (and hence their ability to perform as best they can in their work) are also important and are often given less focus than the needs of students. There will be autistic adults working in schools and universities, although they may often choose not to reveal their autism formally to others. Current autism research carried out on children may not be of use to autistic adults.

Techniques and projects which help those who are already past school age are necessary (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016). The present study could benefit both staff and teenagers in schools and universities.

In terms of how to refer to people in the autistic community, there has been some debate about the advantages and disadvantages of the use of various phrases such as 'autistic person' as opposed to 'person with autism' (Vivanti, 2020, p.691). The logical choice would be to use the description preferred by the autistic community itself, however there is no agreement or consensus about this issue, with different people favouring different expressions (Kenny et al, 2016; Vivanti, 2020). The views of the participants in this study were sought and it was found that they all referred to themselves differently, some favouring one expression, others describing themselves in multiple ways, often changing from one sentence to the next. Overall they were much more concerned about their treatment than about linguistics. Whilst the author of this thesis could see the merits of both types of description: a 'person with autism' putting the person before the condition, or an 'autistic person' emphasising the importance of autism and its defining characteristics, generally the condition first term was used where possible as this fits with a more social rather than medical approach to autism (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Oliver, 2013; Retief & Letsosa, 2018).

1.7 Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality needs to be mentioned and considered as part of this study. Identities such as race, class and gender interact and influence how a person is perceived and treated (Cho et al, 2013; Gopaldas, 2013; Hill-Collins, 2015; Hopkins, 2019). There is interaction between autism (viewed by some as a disability) and gender (this study focuses on females) in terms of life experiences. It can, at times, be difficult to separate one element from another in terms of prejudice experienced. All forms of prejudice need to be recognised in order to be challenged (Sauer, 2018) and ignoring this can endanger equality progress (Echeverria, 2024). The present study looks at autism, but also gender, by focusing on autistic females as a frequently overlooked group. The present study aims to acknowledge this intersectionality by allowing autistic women to express their views about any aspect of their autism they wish, including how it relates to their gender, and considering the unique impact gender may have on an autistic individual.

1.8 Rationale for the Current Study

The main research questions addressed in this thesis explore whether a technique of positive retrospective diary writing can improve the perceived well-being of autistic females, and whether it can improve the self-reported management of autistic difficulties such as unwanted repetitive behaviours. This focus shines a light on an unexplored area and aims to be a start point for intervention development for autistic people. This study aims to work with the autistic community, rather than merely observing them, to thoroughly include their views in the research (Muller et al, 2008). This inclusion of views and opinions about the research fits with the ethical stance taken, and helps in giving a voice to autistic women.

In research literature, autistic females are often grouped together with their male counterparts, and this may be unhelpful due to potentially important differences between the two groups (Simone, 2010). The tendency for autistic females to be underdiagnosed as well as under-researched (Cockburn, 2019) has led to a gap in knowledge about the female autistic community and a lack of resources when it comes to assisting them in particular. This is accentuated by the fact that autistic females seem to be more likely to blend in and disguise their autism (Tierney et al, 2016), making it more challenging both to identify them and provide them with help that they may benefit from. Evidence of distinct differences between autistic males and females, even at the level of brain structure (Supekar et al, 2022), highlights the importance of studying the two gender groups separately, and not making assumptions. Some autistic females may also be reluctant to be open about an autism diagnosis due to the possibility of prejudice. Interventions need to consider this carefully and confidentiality is crucial.

This thesis aims to explore ways to help autistic females in their everyday lives, using methods which the females can easily employ and adapt themselves. They are discreet, simple, free, and unintrusive. Positive writing has much unexplored potential (Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009) and does seem to lend itself to use within the autistic community due to their particular traits and characteristics, as does the concept of self-management of difficulties generally (Aljadeff-Abergel et al, 2015; Wilkinson, 2008). Indeed the concept of interventions which can be self-managed and which participants can take ownership of, have been shown to have far-reaching benefits (Carr et al, 2014), and a greater chance of enduring over time. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the prevalence of anxiety within autism

(Ainsworth et al, 2020; Attwood et al, 2014) and the potential for the techniques used to address this potentially debilitating difficulty.

The willingness within the autistic community to participate in research that is geared towards helping them rather than studying them is mostly untapped (Attwood et al, 2014). A modern and inclusive approach to research, which the present study seeks to incorporate, seems like a sensible and ethical way forward. This thesis also endeavours to concentrate on the positive rather than the negative in terms of autism. A previous tendency towards viewing autism as a predominantly negative condition (Baron-Cohen, 1999) has influenced public perception towards it. However there are many positive aspects to autism which should be celebrated and not ignored, and successful studies have included these (Wood, 2021). Positive traits of autism can include having a direct communication style, and having dedication and concentration (Searle, 2010).

The present study does not seek to change autism, and does not view it as a medical problem. Here autism is considered to be a difference rather than a disorder, and is treated accordingly, with focus on strengths rather than weaknesses (Wood, 2021). Instead of trying to change autism, the present study strives to use its advantages and channel traits into useful routines. This is a novel approach, but it is supported by evidence within autism literature, and that of therapeutic writing, as will be demonstrated in the literature review which follows. The findings could potentially have far-reaching implications.

Research Aims and Questions are included here, and will be further explained and justified during the Literature Review:

RA1: To explore positive retrospective diary writing in terms of its potential for using autistic routines and behaviours for positive and functional purposes.

RA2: To use feminist theory as a lens to study practical methods for improving the lives of autistic women.

RQ1: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of autistic females?

RQ2: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve females' self-reported management of difficulties / behaviours commonly associated with autism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This thesis looks at the use of positive retrospective diary writing (Suhr et al, 2017) with literate and able female members of the autistic community. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research and evidence surrounding the issues explored in this thesis. This literature review begins with an examination of current definitions of autism and then existing research into the autistic characteristics which are relevant to this study (repetitive behaviours and rituals, and intense interests). It demonstrates how these characteristics could have made autistic females particularly suited to this study. The chapter also rationalises the choice of and reasons for a feminist perspective as a theoretical framework when conducting research with autistic females. Anxiety as comorbid with autism (Attwood et al, 2014) will be covered due to its pertinence to this study and there will be an overview of some of the literature looking into efforts to help and include the autistic community.

The literature review will then turn to the topic of positive writing. Whilst no studies have been found using positive diary writing in autism research, evidence for the application of positive writing within the neurotypical community and in areas of mental health in general will be reviewed, (the term 'neurotypical' is commonly used to describe the population who do not have autism (for example: Attwood et al, 2014; Searle, 2010)). The chapter concludes by summarising current research findings, identifying the gap in research to which this thesis attends, and listing the research aims and questions related to this study.

2.2 Defining Autism

This section looks at how autism is defined and then how research identifies gaps in how the needs of autistic people are met. Criteria for a diagnosis of autism, defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, are generally split into two categories, the first being social and communication problems which are not the main focus of the present study. They cover apparent 'deficits in social-emotional reciprocity', 'deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction', and relationship difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.50). As previously mentioned, this thesis favours

a social model of disability rather than a medical one (Oliver, 2013; Riddle, 2020), but refers to widely accepted diagnostic definitions in order to clearly describe common autistic traits.

The second category is key to the present study and covers behaviour. The diagnostic criteria for autism describe 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities', 'insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualised patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour', and 'highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.50). This definition of autism does not differentiate between males and females, however the American Psychiatric Association does note the imbalance in numbers of males and females diagnosed with autism and concludes that 'girls without accompanying intellectual impairments or language delays may go unrecognised, perhaps because of subtler manifestation of social and communication difficulties' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.57). This does not necessarily support different diagnostic criteria for males and females, but does imply that tailored interventions could require different approaches (Ratto, 2021).

2.3 Disorder and Difference as Perceptions of Autism

This section will now look at how society views autism, due to the centrality of this in how research and support provision decisions are taken. Although there are some clear issues and distinguishing features, there is still debate and disagreement about whether autism is actually a medical disorder or, as expressed by Grandin who is an autistic lady: 'a truly continuous spectrum. There is no black-and-white dividing line between the geek, the nerd, the socially awkward person, and the mildly autistic individual' (Grandin, 2012, p.6). A more medical approach describes autism as 'the most severe of all the childhood psychiatric conditions' and 'unfortunately a lifelong disorder' (Baron-Cohen, 1999, p.60). This view has been the dominant one for some time, and 'autism for the moment has firmly secured its place within medical systems as a neurodevelopmental disorder under the purview of biomedical authority' (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022, p.1327). This sort of description ignores factors such as variation in support needs and the presence or absence of learning disabilities, and could leave some autistic people feeling misunderstood and misrepresented.

The focus on a more medical attitude, with autism as a 'disease to be eradicated' (Pisciotta, 2024, p.1) has in some respects been a hindrance to autistic people looking for acceptance and help (Wood, 2021). Multiple parents report 'struggling to maintain hope in the face of

dire predictions from doctors, school administrators, and other professionals who were supposed to be on their side' (Silberman, 2015, p.9). Whilst a medical model of autism could be criticised for 'over-focusing on what the person cannot do instead of what they can do' (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022, p.1321), a model which views autism as a form of neurodiversity simply sees them as different from the neurotypical (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). It considers autism to be 'part of the rich tapestry of human neurological development', 'portraying autistic people as crucial contributors to humanity' (Pisciotta, 2024, p.1).

This thesis rejects the idea that autism is a medical problem, or that it should be limiting or viewed in terms of a model of some form of victimhood (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). Instead it sees autism as natural neurodiversity and accepts a more social model that highlights the social environment as a key issue which places restrictions upon autistic people (Reindal, 2008; Retief & Letsosa, 2018). A social model with disability as a 'socially constructed phenomenon' (Retief & Letsosa, 2018, p.3) fits with autism because with environmental adjustments autistic people can function and contribute (Oliver, 2013; Pisciotta, 2024).

The autistic community experiences advantages and disadvantages just like the neurotypical population (Attwood et al, 2014). Research by Wood (2021) is an example of moving away from a medical approach and towards a more practical and 'strengths-based' model of autism (Wood, 2021, p.49). In light of her work, Wood (2021) proposes reconsidering some autistic characteristics such as 'obsessiveness' and 'perseveration' in terms of 'motivation' and 'determination' (Wood, 2021, p.49). The way in which autism is viewed (disorder or difference) influences how those with autism are included in research and society (Retief & Letsosa, 2018), which is salient in future sub-sections too. This thesis views the autistic women who took part in the study as being different rather than disordered. Some of the participants in this study associated 'intelligence' with autism which was interpreted as cognitive ability. This is reported as a finding but should not be used to oversimplify complex realities or reinforce any stereotypes.

2.4 Gender and Autism

Aside from possible prejudice and other difficulties, autistic females appear to be in a minority (Fowler & O'Connor, 2021; Hull et al, 2020). Prevalence reports vary, but a typical figure is that three times as many males are diagnosed with autism as females (Fowler & O'Connor, 2021). Whilst true numbers are hard to ascertain, it is recognised that autistic

females are underdiagnosed and diagnosed later than male counterparts (Cockburn, 2019; Fowler & O'Connor, 2021; Tien et al, 2025). A study in the USA surveying data from 2568 individuals with autism found that females were not only diagnosed less but also significantly later and less formally on average than males (Giarelli et al, 2010). This finding was replicated in a Dutch study of 2275 individuals (Begeer et al, 2013). The large numbers of participants make the results compelling. It has also been shown that these findings are amplified in the case of autistic females with low support needs (Shattuck et al, 2009).

There are many theories as to why autistic females are underdiagnosed. Tierney et al (2016) interviewed ten female autistic teenagers and found that they tended to mask their autistic traits and copy the social skills of others in order to fit in. This makes them appear more socially competent and therefore less likely to be referred for a possible autism diagnosis. These 'sophisticated methods of masquerading' can be 'both helpful and unhelpful' and the researchers advise that a more 'gender-sensitive' approach would be more beneficial for these females (Tierney et al, 2016, p.82). A very large scale study by Kaat et al (2021) describes this phenomenon as 'camouflaging' (Kaat et al , 2021, p.97) and concludes that due to this, females are often absent from studies concerning autism. Indeed the majority of participants in autism research seem to be male which therefore could mean that results are skewed towards them. Some recent thinking proposes that autistic females engage in 'compensating for and masking autistic characteristics' (Hull et al, 2020, p.306) which means that female autism is not accurately described in diagnostic literature.

Ratto (2020) highlights the 'heavy reliance on predominantly male samples in autism research as a sort of self-reinforcing cycle of potentially biased research' (Ratto, 2020, p.107). She stresses the need for research into the full range of people on the autistic spectrum, particularly females. This underlines the necessity for research which shines a light on an underrepresented community. It also supports a feminist theoretical approach, especially as such an approach, whilst striving for gender equality, is multifaceted and diverse in itself (Commeyras et al, 1996; Gedro & Mizzi, 2014).

Inequality in terms of gender is of course not exclusive to the autistic community. For example, inequality is ingrained in many areas of education in schools (Cohen et al, 2002; Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018) and universities where advancements can be superficial and tokenistic rather than genuine (Teelken & Deem, 2013). A thorough study of teenagers found that whilst attitudes of young people have changed over time to be much more in favour of

gender equality, their life choices such as jobs and families are still affected by the gender inequality and stereotyping that they continue to see around them (Tinklin et al, 2005). This will impact autistic females too. One consequence of the diagnosis of a higher proportion of autistic males and hence research on autism being predominantly carried out on male samples, is that support mechanisms surrounding autism are also geared towards males (Fowler & O'Connor, 2021; Navot et al, 2017). Despite some famous and successful autistic females, the image of autism as a male disorder prevails and self-help literature has traditionally been centred on men (Searle, 2010).

There is also a tendency to dwell on potentially negative sides of autism despite recent publications showing the positive sides, for example Grandin (2012) informs that 'some of the most important companies in Silicon Valley are led by people on the autism spectrum. Many school systems today would assign a diagnosis of autism to Albert Einstein' (Grandin, 2012, p.5). Contributions from works by autistic females such as Grandin are included here in order to incorporate the views and opinions of autistic females directly, as they are particularly relevant to the aims of the present study. Many famous people who have made huge contributions to society, such as Mozart, Conan Doyle, Van Gogh and Newton, are thought to have had autism, and autistic people are often recognised for their intelligence and creativity (Searle, 2010). Although it is worth noting that these suspected famous autistic people are all male, which suggests that historically autistic females have not found a place or recognition.

Indeed adult autistic females seem to be disadvantaged in some ways when compared specifically to adult autistic males. They are recognised as underrepresented in research and gender has often been ignored in terms of autistic adult studies (Putnam et al, 2025). Recent initial research into the views of autistic women on research found that women felt excluded, that research centred on males, and were keen to be heard (Putnam et al, 2025). Studies looking at the distinct features of autistic females compared to autistic males are novel and rare (Merken et al, 2025), making it hard for adult autistic women to access research relevant to them. Due to discrimination, autistic women have been found to experience poorer health than male counterparts and higher suicide risk (Gillions et al, 2025; Yau et al, 2023). They have also been found to have reduced well-being due to societal expectations and pressures (Yau et al, 2023). For these reasons, acknowledgement of intersectionality is crucial for the current study.

Some traits within autism which might be considered undesirable, such as social isolation, have been well-publicised (Baron-Cohen, 1999). Indeed Baron-Cohen's (2012) referral to autism as an extreme version of the male brain has not only continued the perception of autism as something negative, but also been exceptionally unhelpful to autistic females. It may cause an autistic female to assume that she cannot be autistic because of her gender and mean that interventions are further geared towards the males in the community (Ratto, 2021).

Literature geared purely towards autistic females is gradually creeping into the public domain however, and it highlights the necessity for research and services specifically for autistic females. One example is the book 'Aspergirls' by Simone (2010), the title of which clearly shows its target audience. Such literature is starting to encourage autistic females to be proud of themselves and who they are (Grandin, 2012; Simone, 2010). Whilst these authors are not researchers, they are included here because, as autistic females, their views provide a valuable insight into the possible mood within the female autistic community. Many honourable qualities of the autistic community are being publicised, in contrast to the negative attributes, for example, 'loyalty', 'honesty', 'staying power', and 'modesty' (Searle, 2010, p.17).

It is possible that some characteristics more typically associated with or considered more prevalent in females, might go some way to ameliorate or balance out some autistic traits. For example the social challenges commonly related to autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) may be countered and made less pronounced by the typically female traits of 'empathy', 'sensitivity' and 'talking about emotions' (Searle, 2010, p.47-48). Autistic females are also more likely than autistic males to apply discipline to their lives and use 'control as a stress management technique' (Simone, 2010, p.231). This may make them even more suited to the present study than their male counterparts, however it also means that their access to diagnosis and help could be more challenging. There is also evidence of the possibility of distinct brain features in autistic females when compared to autistic males (Supekar et al, 2022).

Just as it is unwise to group autistic males and females together and assume they are all the same, it would also be unjust to think that all autistic females will be similar. Whilst they share characteristics their personalities can be as distinct as any two people who are neurotypical, (Attwood et al, 2014). Stereotypes about autistic people exist, which can be especially unhelpful to women. 'The "techie"-type person is only a portion of the population

on the autism spectrum' (Grandin, 2012, p.6). Autistic behaviours vary in type and severity across the population, and stereotypes about females generally may equally not apply to autistic females.

This sub-section highlights the urgent need for research which includes autistic females. It demonstrates how, not only have they been frequently ignored in past research, they have also been grouped with their male counterparts which could be misleading and detrimental to understanding their needs. It uncovers some of the reasons for the choice of a feminist theoretical lens for the present study such as the inequality within autism of males and females in terms of research and access to help (Bradley, 2013; Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018; Ratto, 2020). In this sub-section the intersectionality of autism and gender is also apparent (Gopaldas, 2013; Sauer, 2018), with autistic females experiencing some aspects of autism differently because of their gender. The present study seeks to focus on this neglected and disadvantaged group and use methods tailored specifically to them, to improve their quality of life. It hopes to shine light on them as a unique community with unique characteristics, rather than just a sub-group of another. The next section will now turn towards the behavioural aspects of autism which are the focus of the present study.

2.5 Behavioural Aspects of Autism

Certain aspects of autistic behaviour, as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), are key to the present study. In the following two sub-sections these will be discussed, along with some of the reasons why they seem to make autistic people particularly suitable for particular interventions. This text is used because it provides a widely used definition of autism that is used to guide diagnosis when sought. Whilst it does not chime with the social model of autism favoured in this thesis, it does provide accurate descriptions.

2.5.1 Repetitive Behaviours and Rituals

In this sub-section repetitive behaviours and rituals, and their links to autistic women will be discussed. Previous research in this area will also be examined to establish the current state of knowledge in this area. The restricted and repetitive behaviours are a defining characteristic of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They seem to been taken for granted as a part of the condition by the autistic community, for example one autistic

female journalist states of them ‘I have my patterns, but I feel comfortable with them. They reassure me’ (James, 2017, p.13).

Autistic restricted and repetitive behaviours are often categorised as ‘lower order’ and ‘higher order’ behaviours (Boyd et al, 2012). Lower order repetitive behaviours tend to cover repetitive actions and movements, whereas higher order repetitive behaviours include ‘cognitive behaviours (i.e. compulsions, rituals and routines, insistence on sameness, and circumscribed interests)’ (Boyd et al, 2012, p.1236). It is the higher order behaviours that are the focus for this present study. Despite the aforementioned focus within literature and research on the social deficits within autism (Prelock & McCauley, 2021; Richler et al, 2010), repetitive behaviours are deemed to be one of the most difficult and troubling or entrenched traits (Boyd et al, 2012).

Lower order repetitive behaviours have been observed to decrease as a child matures, but higher order repetitive behaviours can expand and become more severe over time (Richler et al, 2010). Richler et al (2010) studied 192 autistic children over a period of up to seven years, beginning when the children were two years old, making this a highly credible study. The most interesting finding was that higher order repetitive behaviours were observed to increase in a significant amount of children over time. The same phenomenon was not seen regarding lower order repetitive behaviours. The authors recommend the studying and treating of the two subtypes of repetitive behaviours (lower order and higher order) separately and warn against grouping them together. Whilst this research provides excellent insights, and its stated intention was to examine trajectories rather than analyse interventions, one of its limitations is the young age of the participants. However it does provide some support for the need for the present study which concentrates on higher order behaviours.

Boyd et al (2012) reviewed research into interventions for repetitive autistic behaviours (particularly those of higher order). Their most stark finding was the great lack of such research. They found that some strategies for addressing lower order repetitive behaviours had been developed, but conclude that ‘current evidence-based practices mainly are effective at reducing lower order and not higher order forms of repetitive behaviours’ and thus do not address ‘the quintessential “autistic” repetitive behaviours like rituals, insistence on sameness, difficulty with change, intense preoccupations, attachments and interests’ (Boyd et al, 2012, p.1244). There appears to be little evidence that treatments and programs for social and communication aspects of autism assist in improving behavioural traits.

Leekam et al (2011) also conducted a review into a decade of research on repetitive behaviours. They concur with Richler et al (2010) in the view that higher and lower order repetitive behaviours need to be classed and studied as two distinct things. They also agree with Boyd et al's (2012) slightly later finding that there is a paucity of research into these autistic characteristics and that more is sorely needed. There seems to be a reluctance to address certain aspects of autism, perhaps because of a lack of understanding about their function (Leekam et al, 2011) or because other traits seem easier to manipulate with some success. Historically, approaches have often prioritised enabling autistic individuals to participate in society according to prevailing standards and expectations.

Harrop (2015) conducted a subsequent review of research into repetitive behaviour treatment and whilst she notes an increase in the quantity of research in this field in the four years since Leekam et al's (2011) study, she reports that interventions into repetitive behaviours have continued to be somewhat overlooked. The study analyses parent-mediated interventions due to their current popularity. It sadly found that repetitive behaviours and their treatment were commonly ignored in favour of work on social skills and communication. Whilst social skills and communication are of huge importance, it might be more prudent to work on all key aspects of autism at once rather than simply focusing on one. This seems not to be treating the person as a whole. It also again hints at the possibility that societal norms might be playing a role in the choice of which issue to concentrate on.

Lin and Koegel (2018) conducted a small but detailed piece of research, again using a parent-mediated intervention. This intervention study is of special relevance to the present one due to its positive and gentle intervention, aiming to redirect rather than force change. Three children aged under ten years were studied, which limits the applicability and generalisability of the findings, however it does generate some particularly useful insights. The intervention targeted higher order repetitive behaviours and involved children gaining rewards when they demonstrated varying activities and flexibility, but did not require complete removal of behaviours. The intervention seemed to be highly successful, with children making gains in terms of their flexibility in play and interests, and reducing repetitive behaviours. These gains appeared to be maintained in the following weeks after the study had finished, although longer term maintenance was not assessed. It is encouraging that gains could be made with such a simple and inexpensive technique, and without the use of drugs. An element of Lin and Koegel's (2018) research which stands out in certain areas is its unusually positive attitude. For example, the authors believe that some higher order repetitive behaviours 'can

be a source of motivation that can be tapped into to enhance the learning and engagement' of young autistic people (Lin & Koegel, 2018, p.3831). They also promote self-management and participant involvement in autism research and state that 'self-management interventions have a long history as an effective behavioural treatment to promote and maintain positive behaviour change for social, communication, and behavioural impairments in youth with ASD' (Lin & Koegel, 2018, p.3832). These points from this study support the approach of the present one, and they both advocate methods which are unobtrusive, participant-centred, and easy for participants to maintain in a natural way.

This sub-section has discussed how research is limited when it comes to higher order repetitive behaviours, despite their prevalence. The fact that the behavioural traits associated with autism are core features and are identified as diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), suggests that they might be better treated more gently and with redirection rather than trying to remove them completely (Attwood et al, 2014; Lin & Koegel, 2018). The present study attempts to guide and work specifically with these behaviours, not eradicate them by force.

One observation of the autistic community, under the heading of repetitive behaviour, is that they commonly display a 'strong desire to collect objects or information' (Searle, 2010, p.36). This is also relevant to the present study and will be discussed further in later sections.

2.5.2 Intense Interests and Education

The next area under the umbrella of repetitive behaviours is intense interests which are also identified as a defining characteristic of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They potentially play a role in the present study and are inextricably linked to education. Whilst typical autistic behaviours are largely viewed as negative (Baron-Cohen, 1999), intense interests have attracted recent attention for their potentially positive side. Wood (2021) observed and gathered the views of autistic children, autistic adults, parents and school staff. Her findings imply that accepting and working with the intense interests (sometimes called monotropism) of an autistic student can have beneficial outcomes. She concludes that 'the tendency to have intense areas of focus … is revealed as predominantly an advantage in educational settings when supported and encouraged by school staff' (Wood, 2021, p.46). There seems to be potential for interests to make a positive contribution to a person's learning and well-being. Indeed, 'embracing neurodiversity is not only a matter of

ethical consideration and benefit for autistic individuals but also cultivates progress, acceptance, and overall societal growth for all' (Pisciotta, 2024, p.4).

Wood's (2021) study takes into consideration possible reasons for intense interests and repetitive behaviours, a concept which is often absent in many other pieces of research. She posits that these behavioural traits in autistic people might be a way to cope with stress and 'moderate their levels of arousal' (Wood, 2021, p.39). Therefore removing them completely may not be advantageous. She also makes the interesting point that schools often encourage a 'high degree' of repetitive behaviour as a learning strategy (Wood, 2021, p.39), and then consider it unacceptable in an autistic child generally. Schools can often be stressful environments, but they then negatively label the mechanisms for coping with stress of an autistic child.

Whilst the academic environment and routine of school may suit some autistic students, there is evidence that this is not always the case, again demonstrating an area where the present study could inform practice. Schools are often under pressure to exclude disruptive students and focus on the rest (Russell & Thomson, 2011). Sproston et al (2017) interviewed a small cohort of autistic secondary school girls and their parents and identified a need for school environments to be more inclusive, which the incorporation of interests could help with. They also comment that such issues are of even more importance for autistic girls in secondary rather than primary schools as these pupils tend to fit in before adolescence but then become more isolated (Sproston et al, 2017). Building on Sproston et al's (2017) research, Brede et al (2017) also interviewed autistic students and found a lack of needs being met at school, and resultant mental health problems (Brede et al, 2017).

In research examining studies over a 24 year period and covering 91 individual children, Gunn and Delafield-Butt (2016) consistently found that learning is benefitted when the intense interests of autistic pupils are incorporated into lessons. The length and breadth of the study make it all the more credible. They report 'substantial benefits in social engagement, learning, and behaviour' for those with autism when their interests are included in teaching (Delafield-Butt, 2016, p.425). Grove et al (2016) concur with this and urge that 'special interests should be included in intervention and where possible should not be discouraged' (Grove et al, 2016, p.685). They believe that intense interests in autism go beyond stress reduction and are a source of motivation for things such as 'pursuit of knowledge' (Grove et al, 2016, p.685).

With guidance, intense autistic interests can lead to successful employment (Wood, 2021). Temple Grandin, a successful autistic lady, made a career out of her intense design interests (Grandin, 2012). She has published a book of accounts from 14 autistic adult contributors, each from a different background, who have used their interests to gain employment (Grandin, 2012). Other publications offer inspiration in this area. Lars Perner, an autistic teacher in a college, writes 'I am one of those fortunate Aspies who actually gets paid (albeit not quite as much as I would like) for talking about my special interests in great detail. I even get to give exams, one of my favourite activities!' (Attwood et al, 2014, p.262).

Due to the evidence in this section, the present study incorporates the interests of autistic participants and uses them positively. It employs useful repetitive behaviour and possible stress-management techniques. The next sub-section looks at the role played by anxiety in autistic behaviours.

2.6 Anxiety as a By-Product of Autism, and its effect on Education

There is a high co-occurence of autism and anxiety (Moore et al, 2022). Whilst some autistic behaviours and interests may lead to enjoyment, as has been touched upon, they may also have an element of stress or anxiety reduction. Studies exploring the concept of anxiety as comorbid with autism, or as part of autism, will be examined here. Boyd et al's (2012) previously mentioned research identifies anxieties as possible partial causes or 'drivers' behind some autistic behaviours (Boyd et al, 2012, p.1238). In a survey of 322 autistic people, overcoming anxiety was rated as the issue which created the most stress, even more so than low self-esteem, sensory problems and relationships (Attwood et al, 2014). One respondent contributor describes anxiety as 'the permanent emotional state for autistic people' (Attwood et al, 2014, p.25), therefore it clearly requires consideration in a possible intervention, as it could interfere with many areas of life including education.

Anxiety in the autistic community could be related to issues such as social situations, but it is also described as an 'inherent aspect of the syndrome. It is a feeling like an animal in the wild – always on a heightened sense of awareness, looking out for predators' (Attwood et al, 2014). Rodgers et al (2012) conducted an empirical study of autistic children and teenagers, although with some reliance on parent rather than child opinion which means results must be treated with caution. They found that higher order repetitive behaviours were associated with anxiety. They conclude that these repetitive behaviours and 'particularly sameness

behaviours may confer some short term amelioration of anxiety by reducing demand and restricting the environment' (Rodgers et al, 2012, p.2408). This echoes the previously mentioned notion of routines to 'reassure' (James, 2017, p.13).

Whilst these authors do not feel that anxiety and repetitive behaviour are always interlinked, they signal that removing a source of anxiety reduction without an adequate replacement could have damaging consequences. The rate of anxiety amongst those with autism is subject to debate and different studies have come to different conclusions, although it seems to be generally agreed that 'the presence of anxiety in children with ASDs has been noted for many years', (Scahill, 2012, p.348). There have been various speculations, but the exact relationship between autism and anxiety remains uncertain, both for children and adults, despite the fact that approximately half of autistic adults have been estimated to meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder (Ainsworth et al, 2020).

Lau et al (2020) looked at several hundred children and teenagers' anxiety (as reported by parents or carers). They found that, whilst anxiety is not unique to autism, almost half of reported anxieties were related to or specific to autism. Which begins to unwrap why anxiety is unusually common in the autistic community. For example, autistic participants were found to have anxiety about sensory issues, anticipation of events and social events, and uncertainty and change, related to the autistic trait of insistence on sameness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Lau et al (2020) consider that rather than some autistic traits causing anxiety, it may be anxiety about change which in fact leads to insistence on sameness. Or it could be a combination or a cycle of sameness reducing anxiety and therefore being sought continuously.

Although autism and anxiety often go hand in hand, there has been 'very limited research on how to directly assess and treat anxiety' (Moore et al, 2022, p.1279). However there have been some efforts and successes, with general agreement that treatment needs to be tailored for autism (Parr et al, 2020; Reaven et al, 2012; Wood et al, 2009). Work to reduce anxiety in the autistic community is seen as important because it 'significantly limits everyday opportunities and quality of life' (Parr et al, 2020, 1). In terms of younger people and teenagers, anxiety in autism can 'interfere significantly with a child's ability to participate in home, school and community settings' (Reaven et al, 2012, p.410). It can also mean that children and teenagers 'perform below their ability level, affecting overall school performance and participation in after school activities' (Reaven et al, 2012, p.410). With

this in mind, reduction of anxiety amongst those with autism would seem to be absolutely essential in order to maximise educational performance and enjoyment. Anxiety has also been found to be more prevalent amongst females than males generally (Bekker & Mens-Verhulst, 2007).

2.7 Gaps in Interventions

For an autistic person, understanding that they have autism could be a first step towards dealing with it, but providing helpful interventions following that point can be problematic (Pellicano et al, 2014). Research shows many intervention attempts aimed at improving outcomes for autistic people, however there seems to be much more attention devoted to the social and communication side of autism than other aspects and features both in terms of diagnoses (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and in terms of help and therapy available (Prelock & McCauley, 2021). This may be because social and communication difficulties are easiest to identify for an outside observer, yet this does not necessarily mean they are the most salient feature for the autistic person themselves (Pellicano et al, 2014). The behavioural side of autism can be a 'major barrier to learning and social adaptation' (Leekam et al, 2011, p.562). It can also lead to 'problems with organisation and planning' and potential 'poor time management' (Searle, 2010, p.29). This could easily lead to issues at school, university, or in the world of work, and is one of the reasons for the present study. There is also a lack of research into strategies to help the autistic community in general.

The focus in research tending to lean towards social and communication differences in autism (Richler et al, 2010) has meant a relative lack of progress in terms of perceived behavioural difficulties. Whilst plenty of studies observe and discuss behavioural traits, when it comes to interventions, such traits are often the 'forgotten symptom' (Harrop, 2015, p.669). Patterson et al (2010) undertook a review of interventions into behaviours such as repetitiveness and rituals and found only ten suitable case studies to include, which demonstrates a scarcity of robust research of this type. Also it covered fourteen males but just three females, a skew which is present in many studies (Ratto, 2021). Many therapies in the past have been deemed 'ineffective' (Patterson et al, 2010, p.325) which shows that historically intervention progress has not always been successful, and may still be in its infancy.

One of the reasons for a lack of previous progress in terms of autism interventions may be that research into autism has historically predominantly been carried out *on* autistic people

rather than *with* them (Scott-Barrett et al, 2019). This means that they are at least in part defined by people other than themselves, and that the thoughts and opinions of the autistic community are often missing from research. Part of the reason for this could be a skew towards research on younger autistic children rather than teenagers or adults (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016) and the high levels of use of parental reports when assessing autistic children (Grove et al, 2016).

Researchers have noted how little is known about 'how to promote optimal functioning and quality of life for individuals with ASD (autism) throughout the life course' (Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al, 2018, p.703). In extensive interviews with autistic people, parents, practitioners, teachers and researchers Pellicano et al (2014) found a disproportionate focus on children. One respondent went as far as to comment that 'as far as research is concerned, it pretends that kids on the spectrum don't exist after the age of seven' (Pellicano et al, 2014, p.760). Perhaps this is to some extent because children are simply easier to observe.

It has been found that there is understandably an increasing demand for autistic adults to be able to participate fully and equally in research about them (Fletcher-Watson et al, 2018; Scott-Barrett et al, 2019) as they gradually gain rights and recognition. Another dominant finding was that the autistic community would prefer to see research which addresses their needs rather than studies them, and that assists with 'developing skills to manage in day-to-day life' (Pellicano et al, 2014, p.761). Some emerging studies are starting to demonstrate how intervention research with autistic adults could move forward. For example, internet interventions have been shown to have some success, supporting the fact that often those with autism appreciate being able to 'work on their treatment independent of time or location' (Westerberg et al, 2021, p.1). Involving autistic adults in the research process itself has been found to have positive outcomes (MacLeod, 2014; Searle et al, 2019). Also simply enhancing understanding of autism itself has been shown to be helpful for both those with autism and their families in terms of acceptance and life quality (Hidalgo et al, 2022) and open-mindedness is viewed as crucial (Cascio, 2015).

The need for research geared towards helping autistic adults is even more apparent when considering outcomes such as mental and physical health. Higher rates of suicide and suicide contemplation are found amongst the autistic community as opposed to the rest of the population, with this being highest amongst autistic women (Cassidy & Rodgers, 2017). Despite depression being common in the autistic community, it is poorly understood and less

researched than depression amongst other groups (Cassidy et al, 2018). A recent study including thousands of participants found that autistic adults are much more likely than others to have long term health problems and receive lower quality health and medical care which the researchers describe as 'very concerning' (Weir et al, 2022, p.16). As well as healthcare inequality, lower life expectancy is found amongst autistic adults (Bishop-Fitzpatrick & Kind, 2017; Weir et al, 2022), this is even more marked in the case of autistic women (Gillions et al, 2025).

There seem to be gaps between what research tends to concentrate on, and what autistic adults actually want to see researched (Cage et al, 2024). When surveyed, a large group of autistic adults reported that their top priorities for research would include mental health and well-being and problems affecting autistic women (Cage et al, 2024). Health, well-being and life expectancy have also been identified as research priorities by families of autistic people (Frazier et al, 2018). Additionally, employment, opportunities in education and life skills have been found to be priorities that autistic adults would like to see addressed (Gotham et al, 2015).

Evidence in this sub-section points towards a paucity of research conducted into behavioural aspects, which are key defining parts of autism, as well as into how to improve them. It also shows the need for research into the requirements of autistic adults. The definitions of autism (such as the prevalence of rituals and routines) suggest a particular suitability of autistic people for the present study, as will be further examined in later sections.

2.8 Inclusion and Participation

As previously mentioned, there is evidence that members of the autistic community want to be involved in research about them (MacLeod et al, 2014; Scott-Barrett et al, 2019), and want research to concentrate on things that will make a difference to their lives rather than on theoretical concepts (Pellicano et al, 2014). This section will look how including autistic people in research in many forms can achieve good results and beneficial outcomes. It will also consider how the autistic community have previously been successfully involved in studies concerning self-management, which is one of the categories the present study falls into.

One progressive example showing how including the autistic community in research works well is that of Muller et al (2008) who interviewed autistic adults in a study which has merit

because of its direct communication with and reporting of the views of autistic adults. This element makes the research seem more genuine and the findings of the study revealed an overwhelming desire of autistic people to be included and socially connected. Autism research in which autistic people are included in the designing of the research itself have been very successful (MacLeod et al, 2014; Searle et al, 2019).

One finding of special interest for the present study was that the majority of participants emphasised that they needed 'self-initiated supports for coping with day-to-day social stress' such as 'mediating objects' and 'alone time' (Muller et al, 2008, p.184). These salient concepts fit well with the aims and ideas of the diary writing of the present study. The wish to spend time alone (as opposed to more frequent socialising seen as preferable to neurotypical counterparts) was explained as being 'a legitimate coping strategy and not something that needs to be 'fixed'' (Muller et al, 2008, p.186). Again this ties in with the present study in listening to the needs of the autistic community rather than trying to force adherence to neurotypical norms. The results of Muller et al's (2008) research are extremely important for the autistic community, however an acknowledged limitation is that many of the participants were members of some form of support group which may mean they had higher levels of expression and self-awareness. But whilst this may mean findings are not replicated with another group, this might be due to another group's lack of articulation and experience rather than disagreement with the views expressed. A lack of similar more recent studies underlines the need for further research and development in this area.

A completely different but equally thought-provoking study, which also relates to the present one, was conducted by Milton and Sims (2016). The authors performed a thematic analysis of topics in a magazine written by autistic contributors to examine issues around well-being and belonging. Like Muller et al (2008), this study also revealed a desire for inclusion and acceptance within the autistic community. Another relevant key finding was the importance to autistic people of 'structure and routine in minimising stress' (Milton & Sims, 2016, p.525), this links to the section on anxiety and supports the ideas in the present study. However it also underlines how vital it is to include autistic people and their views in research in order to access all possible findings. Interestingly, and in concurrence with Wood (2021), the study 'would support wider criticisms of a medical model of autism' and indicates that tackling autistic traits purely in terms of ''deficits' is highly limited and potentially counterproductive' (Milton & Sims, 2016, p.531). It should be mentioned that like Muller et al (2008), this study also involved a particularly articulate sample. It leaves the question of

whether a less articulate cohort would feel the same or be able to articulate the same yearning for inclusion. Perhaps, as with the neurotypical population, it must always be borne in mind that different strategies suit different people.

Other research carried out including autistic people and their views, rather than simply observing them, also reveals not just a desire for inclusion and a sense of well-being, but a wish for help in achieving this goal that is suited to autistic people (Goodall, 2020). All of the above studies highlight the need for tailored strategies to suitably assist the autistic community, to make sure research studies what they want and need, and to include everyone despite ability. The present study takes this into account, as well as catering for the need for routine and structure commonly found in autistic individuals.

Self-management using mindfulness has been demonstrated to be effective in autistic adolescents (Singh et al, 2011; Singh et al, 2019; Wilkinson, 2008), although convincing results need to be considered alongside the potential weakness of very small sample sizes. These studies are important to the present one in terms of exemplifying how autistic persons can actively participate in research and manage behaviour when given techniques to do so. Emotional regulation as a form of self-management has also been shown to play a role in the management of anxiety in the general population (Bates et al, 2021). Many with autism seem to be able to self-manage and may prefer to do so rather be managed, diary writing is a form of self-management.

Reviews of self-management work in the field of autism suggest that it can be effective, easy to implement and inexpensive, but that research is still in its infancy (Aljadeff-Abergel et al, 2015). However it can work in multiple settings and needs further exploration, particularly as an alternative to medications (Aljadeff-Abergel et al, 2015; Lin & Koegel, 2018; Singh et al, 2011; Singh et al, 2019). Analysis of many smaller studies has found that self-management is efficacious in autistic behaviour management and can lead to consequent improvements in other areas such as academic skills (Carr et al, 2014; Carr, 2016). These results were apparently maintained over time which is promising for the present study.

The next two sub-sections will turn away from the topic of autism and delve into research which has been carried out into the field of positive writing and its benefits. How and why positive writing could be suitably applied in the autistic community will also be scrutinised.

2.9 Positive Writing

Positive writing is simply writing a description of or details about a happy, enjoyable or beneficial event or achievement which has happened (Suhr et al, 2017). Whilst there does not appear to be research into the use of positive writing in any form with autistic participants, there is evidence of the potential of diverse uses of positive writing and encouraging results in different groups. The use of diary writing in the present study takes the form of encouraging participants to engage in positive activities in order to write about them, therefore taking a slightly different approach to the studies described here. However they still serve to exemplify the potentially advantageous outcomes of this type of activity.

2.9.1 Positive Writing for Mental Health

Writing has a history of being therapeutic in a number of ways (Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009) and this section will look at writing for the purpose of improving mental health problems. Writing has been shown to be a useful tool in terms of handling stress and promoting self-knowledge, and the expansion of its use is recommended (Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009). However the application of specifically positive writing is not as well documented as that of writing more generally or as a method for coping with trauma.

Beneficial effects of positive writing have been shown in some groups, for example adults suffering from mood disorders. Baikie et al (2012) found that groups asked to write about positive experiences and those who were asked to write about things they wanted to express both reported fewer negative symptoms and lower stress scores than controls up to four months later. The lasting nature of this benefit is especially noteworthy, although general improvements over time could also be at play. Similarly, a small and simple intervention by Allen et al (2020) found that adults with social inhibition given a short positive writing task were found to have significantly reduced depressive and stress related symptoms four weeks later compared to controls.

Given the common co-occurrence of depression and anxiety with autism (Attwood et al, 2014; Boyd et al, 2012) the above findings suggest that writing tasks are worth exploring as a tool within the autistic community. The authors postulate that the benefits of the writing tasks may have in part been due to them providing ‘some structure that assisted emotional regulation’ (Baikie et al, 2012, p.317). This is also of relevance to work with autistic people due to their previously mentioned need for structure and routine.

Suhr et al (2017) looked at the effects of writing a positive diary on depression and regulation of emotions in participants who had recently received serious psychiatric treatment. As with Baikie et el (2012), the intervention study found improvements in depression and emotional regulation scores several weeks after completion. The same improvements were not found in controls. This supports the potential of positive writing as an aid for helping with mental health management in autistic adults. Another relevant and unexpected finding of the research was that females in particular demonstrated a beneficial reduction in suppression of expressions after the positive writing assignment. The authors consider that 'the experience of inducing or changing a certain mood by writing about positive experiences may have enhanced participants' skill in regulating their emotions' (Suhr et al, 2017, p.1594). Together these studies present a picture of general mental health benefits as a result of positive writing.

Positive writing has also been found to be useful in preventing depression in teenagers. Reiter and Wilz (2016) found that a positive writing group showed improved mood and less negative rumination and concerns compared to controls. The authors attribute this to the writing task being an attention-shifting tool which focuses the mind on the positive. The present study could have similar effects, especially relevant when considering the frequent presence of anxiety in autism discussed previously. A topical comment is made toward the end of the Reiter and Wilz (2016) study's discussion, in which the authors claim that positive writing tasks are advantageous because they 'are not cost prohibitive and they can be assigned by teachers or school psychologists' (Reiter & Wilz, 2016, p.106). This economical argument is increasingly relevant today when resources and funds are limited. A tool which can be administered, for example, in schools by teachers with minimal training could be of great use.

The studies described here create an image of positive writing as a relatively simple and straightforward mechanism for stabilising and maintaining mental health in a variety of situations and conditions. The technique of positive diary writing might well be even more relevant and beneficial in the autistic community where structure is craved and levels of anxiety and depression can be high (Attwood et al, 2014).

2.9.2 Positive Writing for Well-Being

In this sub-section studies which look at some wider uses of positive writing will be appraised. Here writing for general well-being and happiness, rather than solving a specific

problem, are considered. Reflection in general is commonly viewed as a vital component of learning and improving (Day, 2000). Positive writing, or reflecting exclusively on the positive, could combine both learning and mood enhancement. As some of the studies described in the previous sub-section have shown, it has potential for managing mental health problems in a variety of settings, before they become clinical, as well as for treatment. The following studies are examples of the application of positive writing as a tool for well-being and happiness more generally.

In a simple piece of research involving a large sample of university students, Burton and King (2004) found that writing about intensely positive experiences for just 20 minutes per day for three days not only improved mood but also led to less need for visits to the doctor over the next three months compared to controls. This demonstrates a benefit of positive writing in participants without specific problems and also highlights the link between mental and physical health. The authors speculate that a possible reason for their findings lies in the 'enhanced self-regulation' and 'greater understanding of his or her own needs' as a result of the writing process (Burton & King, 2004, p.160). These findings were recently replicated in a comparable study by Marschin and Herbert (2021), although with some potential confounding variables due to the additional incorporation of physical exercise.

Positive writing has been shown to enhance other areas of well-being. A study by Wing et al (2006) looked at the effects of similar positive writing tasks not just on mood, but on other concepts such as life satisfaction. Participants were a very large group of adults and improvements in life satisfaction ratings were found in the positive writing groups after the study and two weeks later. What this study underlines, in agreement with studies from the previous sub-section, is that methods of improving happiness and related concepts can be quite straightforward and inexpensive. However, it must be acknowledged that positive writing as a technique for improving well-being has limitations. In order to benefit from it, a person must be literate and reasonably expressive, which means it may not be used by everyone (Reiter & Wilz, 2016; Wing et al, 2006). It could also risk glossing over difficulties by emphasising the positive and oversimplifying experiences, leaving someone feeling that their hardships and challenges are minimised.

However overall what the above studies have in common is their conclusion that positive writing could have huge potential which is still to be unlocked. The present study aims to use this potential within the female autistic community, where autistic characteristics discussed

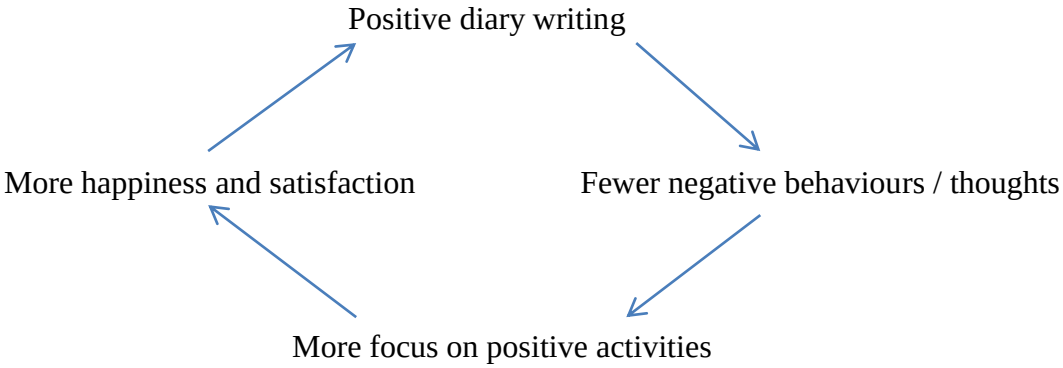
throughout this literature review (need for routine and structure, intense interests, anxiety, preference for self-management and time alone) seem distinctly suited to positive diary writing.

2.10 Conclusions Drawn

This literature review reveals that there is research into aspects of autism, but seemingly less into autistic adults, autistic females, and particularly autistic females with low support needs. There is research relating to social and communication issues but much less relating to behaviours, rituals and life satisfaction. Research into positive writing exists and reveals benefits for mental health, but it seems that none has been carried out specifically in the autistic community. There is a huge gap when it comes to research into how to help the autistic community in their daily lives. Studies are urgently needed but there is so little background in certain areas that researchers do not have much to build on, although this does create an opportunity for particularly original research (Murray, 2017). This literature review gives rise to a possible idea as a start point and research questions which will be explained below. It seems to have novelty and lacks precursors, however in the absence of other research ideas in the area and for the age group in question, it serves as a beginning (Fodor, 1983).

This literature review has commented on multiple research papers and texts which underline why retrospective positive diary writing of this nature would seem to be advantageous to autistic females. The repetitive behaviours which feature so heavily in autism could lend themselves to the repetitive daily routine of diary writing. The desire for rituals, routine and sameness, described in the very definitions of autism, could be somewhat fulfilled by the ritual and routine of daily diary writing. The premise is that traits integral to autism could be exchanged for something more functional, and that as a result autistic characteristics could be employed to a person's advantage. Crucially this study does not require any forced change or any relinquishment of autistic behaviours, merely a possible swap or redirection. The ideas gleaned from and evidenced in this literature review give rise to the following hypothetical cycle:

Figure 2.1: Positive writing cycle.



As mentioned, the fact that repetitive behaviours and routines are core features of autism suggests that trying to simply eliminate them could be counterproductive or even harmful. Working with them would appear more appropriate, and using them for possible life-enhancing purposes. The part played by anxiety and stress in autistic behaviours was discussed in this literature review and leads to the conclusion that if certain behaviours have an anxiety-reducing purpose, removing them could be damaging and it would be preferable to find a useful alternative that fulfils the same role, to work with the traits rather than against them. The common trait of a need for collecting amongst autistic people was also touched upon. Diary writing presents a form of collecting information about experiences and achievements, thus fulfilling a need, but in a functional way.

The intense interests present in autism summarised in this literature review are also taken into account as the writing of a positive diary can cover any interest or activity, could encourage new actions, and remains present and stable when interests change. Finally the research which found that members of the autistic community prefer and require time alone and self-monitored help also fits with the positive diary writing idea. As well as providing a more functional outlet for autistic traits, positive diary writing could also help members of the autistic community to venture into new activities, because in order to achieve this routine, they will need to have positive things to write about. This could be especially relevant in an educational or work setting, encouraging people to use time productively, aim higher, participate more, and seek more enjoyment in school or university life. It is proposed that a positive diary writing routine could help liberate autistic people to do this by providing the structure and safety that they require.

From the research and literature and subsequent ideas discussed in this literature review, the following research aims (RAs) and research questions (RQs) have been identified in order to begin to fill the gap in knowledge in this area:

RA1: To explore positive retrospective diary writing in terms of its potential for using autistic routines and behaviours for positive and functional purposes.

RA2: To use feminist theory as a lens to study practical methods for improving the lives of autistic women.

RQ1: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of autistic females?

RQ2: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve females' self-reported management of difficulties / behaviours commonly associated with autism?

The next chapter will explore the methodology used in this research.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This methodology chapter will describe and justify aspects of the methods and approach used in this study. The following areas will be discussed: ontological and epistemological stance, the research paradigm, the theoretical framework, participants, research design, data analysis techniques, compliance with research ethics, reliability and validity, as well as the strengths and limitations of the study.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

The stance taken for this research was that each person forms their own realities and that there is no positivistic ontological 'single identifiable reality' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.102) and no epistemological 'total objectivity' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 103). Ontology and epistemology were considered in conjunction with decisions about the research paradigm. Ontology is defined as 'the study of being' and 'the nature of existence' (Gray, 2009, p.17) or 'the form and nature of the social world' (Coe et el, 2017, p.16). Epistemology is described as the study of 'how can what is assumed to exist be known' (Coe et al, 2017, p.16) or 'the nature of knowledge' and 'how we know what we know' (Dawson, 2013, p.18). The aim of any research would be to add to knowledge in some way (Denzin, 2014; Coe et al, 2017), and great care must be taken to ensure that the desired information is being accessed and represented as accurately as possible.

An interpretivist approach was taken for this study. Epistemology demands that the researcher questions whether they are eliciting genuine data, and whether that data constitutes what really exists. Research in all areas increasingly requires the consideration of these issues (Christensen & Erno-Kjolhede, 2008), rather than the acceptance of older and simpler stances encompassed by a positivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Positivism and interpretivism (also known as or related to constructivism) can be seen as being at opposite ends of a scale (Coe et al, 2017). Positivism asserts that the world can be reduced to a 'series of facts' (Scott, 2014, p.31) which do not vary from person to person, and that things 'have meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them' (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p.80). This study rejects that notion and adopts both an ontological and epistemological interpretivist stance. This is because such a stance incorporates 'interpretations of the social

life world' (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p.80) with 'meaning' at their centre (Funk, 2019, p.465) and acknowledges that 'realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.102). This is relevant both to responses given by participants (their mental constructions) and the interpretation by the researcher. Positivism has been described as 'fact-oriented' (Otani, 2020, p.91) and interpretivism as 'meaning-oriented' (Otani, 2020, p.91), the latter incorporating the multiple and changing facts and realities that exist between people. The participants' views are opinions rather than facts, but they have meaning to them and represent what reality means to each of them.

In this study, participants were asked their views about autism and the issues surrounding it. It could be questioned whether a small sample, or indeed any sample, would provide data which factually represents reality. However, the opinions given and experiences recounted of the participants in this study are their understanding of reality, and that is a valid reality for them. Their perceptions are their version of reality and the knowledge of that is valuable in that it is how they see the world. Reality is always seen through individual lenses, and as long as this is recognised, the data retains its value. 'Validity means that a work has verisimilitude. It evokes a feeling that the experience described is true, coherent, believable, and connects the reader to the writer's world' (Denzin, 2014, p.70). The findings of this study connect the reader to the worlds and realities of the participants.

3.3 Research Paradigm

This was a qualitative intervention study which had a paradigm that was interpretivist in nature (closely related to constructivist) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The study could be considered to have both interpretivist and constructivist elements in that it attempts to interpret people's opinions and beliefs in order to make sense of them, and constructs knowledge from the experience of reading the participants' views in the data. The views of the participants about the diary task and their diary entries were interpreted and conclusions constructed from this data in order to add to knowledge. A qualitative study was considered most appropriate given the nature of the in-depth and detailed data to be collected ('linguistic data' (Otani, 2020, p.91)). Qualitative research has been criticised for possibly lacking external validity (Gray, 2009). Yet equally it has been argued that neither quantitative nor qualitative research is better, simply each is suited to particular types of study, with qualitative research being particularly appropriate with regard to interpretivist and feminist enquiry (Dawson, 2013). The concern about the applicability and generalisability of

qualitative research to other settings is counterbalanced by the potential richness of the data which can be gathered and by striving for 'trustworthiness and authenticity' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.92). It has also been argued that 'moderate' generalisations (Williams, 2000, p.221) can be made within interpretivism, therefore justifying acceptance of results as long as they are considered in context.

Interpretivism in qualitative research accepts that a researcher will unintentionally maintain some subjectivity despite all efforts to the contrary (Miled, 2019). Indeed it is embraced here as perfect objectivity is unlikely in any circumstance by a human researcher. However findings can still have great value with honesty about positionality, and a researcher's positionality can be used positively to access more in-depth information (Miled, 2019; Scott-Barrett et al, 2019). It is perhaps essential to accept that 'researchers cannot be separated from their research' and that 'researchers who reflect about their stance offer more trustworthy and honest accounts' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.663). Interpretivism has been considered to go as far as saying that 'inquirer and inquired into are fused into a single entity' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.103). Whilst this might be deemed to be more suitable for certain methods than others, it has been argued that, within reason, 'the selection of either particular research *methods* or one or more research *paradigms* does not automatically imply a particular selection for the other' (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019, p.235).

3.3.1 Positionality Within The Paradigm

The positionality of any researcher will affect how the researcher approaches and views the research (Miled, 2019). The choices made about methodology are unavoidably influenced by the researcher's background and 'reveals something about who we are, our values, our fears' (Miled, 2019, p.5). Being clear, open and 'transparent' (Coe et al, 2017, p.72) about positionality is essential. The author of this thesis is a female secondary school teacher who is also a mother. She is British and has spent time living in Britain, but was raised and currently lives in mainland Europe. She is bilingual but completed all her university degrees in the UK in English. The facts that the researcher is female, works in education, and is a mother, meant that she had some things in common with a lot of the participants. She also has previous experience of teaching and working with autistic pupils, and has some family members with autism. This gave her some insight into the autistic community and understanding of the condition and its advantages and disadvantages. It also motivated her to strive to seek out solutions to improve the lives of autistic people, and to highlight their good

points. She was particularly concerned with the plight of autistic women, having witnessed a seeming lack of help available to them, and much apparent prejudice, misunderstanding, negativity and stereotyping. 'Ignorance and prejudice of peers and coworkers' (Grandin, 2012, p.3) towards the autistic community is common and damaging. She was also motivated by the view that being different is a good thing, and should be channelled accordingly. These views tie in with an interpretivist paradigm which is not 'value-free, detached' (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p.80) and additionally aim to be inclusive and promote inclusion for those with autism and the acceptance of diversity within society. Education about and awareness of autism can develop 'understanding and appreciation of diversity and change' (Attwood et al, 2014, p.245).

The researcher's knowledge of and experience with autism were considered to be of benefit in the research, and parallels could be drawn with 'insider research' (Coe et al, 2017, p.72). This is where a researcher is studying within a group or organisation in which they work or of which they have a more intimate knowledge than others might (Gray, 2009). The researcher's experience within autism education and having family members with autism create an element of insider research here. The obvious advantages of this are the 'unique and rich knowledge base and a commitment to improve', yet possible assumptions and reduced objectivity are potential pitfalls (Coe et al, 2017, p.72). One challenge was an emotional investment in the study and its desire to help the autistic community, and care was taken to remain as removed and objective as possible at all times. However it is important to acknowledge that 'all theories, concepts, and findings are grounded in values and perspectives; all knowledge is contextual and partial; and other conceptual schemas and perspectives are always possible' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.581-582). This study's aim was to shine a light on a particular group and concept, and to develop and contribute to knowledge in the field.

3.4 A Feminist Theoretical Framework

The complex issues surrounding inclusion and treatment of the autistic community in research makes a suitable and sensitive choice of theoretical framework or perspective even more important. This section will look at which perspective was chosen in this case and why. The theoretical framework behind a piece of research is often given less attention than it deserves, despite being of fundamental importance (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Whilst theory should never be used to 'strait-jacket' research and findings (Thomas, 2007, p.45) it is a very

useful foundation, which is why it is being addressed here. A feminist theoretical lens (which concentrates on women as a marginalised group) was employed during this research due to its focus on autistic females, and due to the potential application of this theoretical lens to other disadvantaged or misunderstood groups such as the wider autistic community (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018). It was chosen as opposed to a perspective looking at disability, because this research views the autistic females involved as different rather than disabled. A feminist perspective was also chosen because of its ethical stance which has as its aim to use research to improve the lives of those studied (Bradley, 2013; Denzin, 2014; Rizvi, 2019), this sub-section will consider and justify this choice for the present study for one minority group, autistic females, especially within educational settings.

Feminism can be considered as a paradigm in itself (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018). However in the present study, the research paradigm was interpretivist, with a feminist perspective taken. This combination was used due to the suitability of an interpretivist stance in relation to the nature of the study and its data. However, the aim of each piece of research using a feminist paradigm is to find a way forward which 'empowers the oppressed and supports social transformation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.104) and this was considered well-suited. This may be deemed overly ambitious for a small piece of research, however it was viewed as one small contribution to a larger movement in terms of progress for autistic women. This is especially important as it could be considered that women's rights along with academic feminism have not made any major breakthroughs in recent years (Bradley, 2013).

Postfeminism recognises the 'need to think sexism *with* racism, ageism, classism, homophobia and (dis)-ablism' (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020, p.6). This branch of feminism is particularly pertinent to the present study because autistic females may experience more than one type of prejudice, and bullying was reported in almost three quarters of several hundred autistic survey respondents (Attwood et al, 2014). This survey covered multiple topics and therefore was unlikely to simply be attracting those who wished to reported poor treatment. In addition, autistic people often have greater difficulty finding employment than neurotypical counterparts (Grandin, 2012). They have been found to be more likely to be withdrawn from school (Parsons & Lewis, 2010), and case studies report a lack of understanding of autism by some school staff (Kendall & Taylor, 2016), all of which adds support to a postfeminist approach. Overall, the choice of a feminist perspective for the present study seems particularly relevant. It suits both the facts that the participants recruited

were female and that the autistic community is potentially a minority which could suffer prejudice at times. However, the author does not view them as a disabled community and therefore rejected a disability lens in this case, specifically wishing to move away from it.

One possibly overlooked aspect of the feminist perspective which is pertinent to a study of autistic women, is that they in particular may not feel that advances in women's rights have benefitted them particularly, as they are a rather marginalised group of females. Not all females are the same and cannot be categorised as one homogenous group which is affected equally by changes and advancements in rights (MacDonald, 2016). Baker (2010) examines how the assumption that all women's rights have improved in recent decades and 'presumptions of gender equality' (Baker, 2010, p.2) can in fact be damaging and difficult for some females. This presumption of equality can contribute to a 'pervasive, unforgiving and frequently anxiety-ridden obligation to account for the circumstances of their lives in individualised terms' (Baker, 2010, p.2). For an autistic female, these issues are even more complex, with a possible 'contradiction in a feminist-empiricist positioning of female autism as being associated with gender equality, when its construction serves to police the parameters of femininity' (Moore et al, 2024, p.15).

3.5 Participants and Recruitment

All participants consisted of adult females (over age 18) all of whom were on the autistic spectrum, either by official diagnosis or as self-identified. They were all either within the education system (students) or education workers (school teachers or academic university staff). All were either university students, or were educated to at least degree level or equivalent. This meant that they were all able to comprehend and engage fully with the study, and that the study was centred around education, with the aim of helping people within education. All participants were considered to have low support needs, were British, and spoke English as their first language. Some of the participants were mothers, with one or more of their children also diagnosed or identifying as autistic. The following table gives information about the participants using pseudonyms.

Table 3.1: Participant information.

Pseudonym:	Previously known to researcher:	Position:	Parent of known autistic child:
Alina	No	Student teacher	No
Eden	No	University student	No
Hanna	Yes	School student	No
Jane	Yes	Retired teacher	Yes
Karla	No	Staff at university	No
Kelly	Yes	Teacher	Yes
Kitty	No	University student	No
Lucia	No	University student	No
Macu	No	University student	No
Mary	Yes	Teacher	Yes
Mila	No	University student	No
Nell	No	University student	No
Sara	No	University student	No

Some of the participants (four) were known to a greater or lesser extent to the researcher and hence this part was a convenience sample (Goodall, 2020). An advantage to some of the participants being known to the researcher was the fact that a trust and a rapport between them was already established, which allowed for more successful data gathering (Dawson, 2013). Also the researcher's position as a teacher (although not in the same institution as any of the participants which could have caused a conflict of interest) may have meant the ability to ask more insightful and probing questions (Miled, 2019). However no differences in responses were noted between participants that the researcher knew and did not know.

Other participants were recruited by announcing the study via general email at the university through which the project was being carried out. This allowed both students and staff to come forward and participate voluntarily if they wished to. They were not made to feel singled out as the project was announced generally to everyone in a given department. Due to the complexities of finding and engaging potential participants, an invitation to take part in

the study was also announced via the email contact list of a UK based autism education charity. The director of the charity was keen to assist with the study. This again allowed people to come forward voluntarily if they wished to do so. Despite many assurances of privacy and confidentiality from the start, including in the initial recruitment email, some potential participants seemed reluctant to take part due to the fear of somehow being found out and having others around them discover their autistic status. Many were anxious for this not to occur due to prejudice they felt they could receive. 'Protecting prospective participants' privacy is particularly important if the group, behaviours, or condition is stigmatised in any way' (Anderson & Corneli, 2018, p.107), and clearly this may have caused concern amongst some potential participants. Whilst it is hard to ascertain from other studies exactly why people may have chosen not to participate in them, it can be seen that generally response rates are low within the autistic community (Attwood et al, 2014; Parsons & Lewis, 2010).

The wording of the emails advertising the study (appendix B, p.171) was encouraging but allowed recipients to make their own choice about whether to respond or not. They summarised the study aims and what would be involved in order to allow people to make a decision about whether they wanted to take part or not, and whether they had time to do so. They also stated that those interested could receive more information before making a decision about whether to proceed and mentioned that no real names would be published to reassure potential candidates about privacy (following university and British Educational Research Association guidelines) (Anderson & Corneli, 2018; Coe et al, 2017).

3.5.1 Participant Inclusion

A lot of consideration was given to whether to include participants who self-identify as autistic. It was decided to include them due to the much lower diagnosis rate amongst females compared to males. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a typical figure is that three times as many males are diagnosed with autism as females (Fowler & O'Connor, 2021). The real figure is unknown, and due to gender differences, females may be more likely to hide their behaviours and blend in (Tierney et al, 2016) making a diagnosis, at least in childhood, less probable. Hence a possible higher proportion of self-identifying females among the population, also potentially avoiding an official diagnosis to escape perceived prejudice. As an adult, some authors are of the opinion that an official diagnosis is only recommendable if it is necessary for education or work paperwork purposes (Attwood et al,

2014). The self-identifying community was included in the study as their views are of equal importance to work in the field of autism. If they were excluded, not only would it have shrunk the field of potential participants, it would also have meant that vital views and opinions were missed. It was clear from the responses of all participants to the first questionnaire that their claim to having autism was genuine as they exhibited many traits from diagnostic criteria (for example all reported rigidity and routines, and all reported autistic social difficulties). They all appeared to have a good understanding of the problems associated with autism.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of including autistic people in autism research (Milton & Sims, 2016; Scott-Barrett et al, 2019), rather than just observing them or asking others about them. Ratto (2021) describes participatory approaches, which the present study adheres to, as a 'gold standard methodology' and states that it is vital to engage with and listen to the 'deeply knowledgeable voices of the autistic community' in order to move forward (Ratto, 2021, p.108). The present study only included members of the autistic community and listened to their views exclusively, it did not ask others about them.

All participants had a link to education. The study was open to students from schools or universities (as long as they were aged over 18), and to teachers and university lecturers. This was done so as to provide a specific insight into how to benefit the autistic community within the world of education, both for students and practitioners. It was felt that there was potential for those with autism to be better catered for within education, which could help both students and staff. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the areas of autistic adults and autistic females are under-researched but have also been shown to be in need of help and direction due to failings to adequately support those with autism in educational settings (Brede et al, 2017; Sproston et al, 2017).

The study asked for females to participate. In order to be inclusive, it was open to people who identified as female but were not biologically so, however none applied. The study was also open to people who were biologically female but identified as something else. Two such people expressed an interest in the study and were welcomed, and one signed up to participate, however did not continue. The reasons for this are unknown.

3.6 Research Instrument: Positive Diaries

This study was a qualitative intervention study which explored how autistic females responded to the intervention of a positive retrospective diary. Intervention studies have commonly and successfully been used in relevant fields in previous studies both within autism (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Wood et al, 2009) and within positive writing (Reiter & Wilz, 2016; Suhr et al, 2017). The participants were asked to keep a retrospective diary of positive events and experiences which had taken place for a period of four weeks. They were asked to aim to find as many positive experiences as possible so as to be able to write as much as possible. This could be completed in a book or in digital form, such as a Word document, which was the most commonly chosen format. They were given instructions about how to go about this by the researcher as explained below. This was done orally (or by email if preferred) and individually in order to allow participants to ask any questions they might have. Participants were also given a guidance instruction sheet as backup (appendix D, p.178). The participants were informed that they could contact the researcher at any time for clarification. The participants were told that the contents of the diary were to be submitted, but that any entries considered private could be removed first, in order to encourage them to write freely and not feel inhibited. It was considered that the technique of positive retrospective diary writing had the potential to be an inexpensive and easy to administer method for assisting those with autism in educational arenas.

3.6.1 Diary Approach

Participants were asked to write in their diary daily, or as often as possible, (appendix D, p.178). They were instructed (in writing or orally) to only write positive things which had made them happy or gave them a sense of achievement. They were told to aim to create a structured routine around the writing of the diary, knowing the autistic liking and need for routine and structure (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, it was explained to the participants that in order to fulfil this particular routine, they would need something positive to write about, and so would have to create positive experiences or achievements by participating in opportunities available. In addition they were gently asked to, if possible and if desired, aim to substitute some routines or rituals associated with autism which they considered unwanted, for the positive diary writing routine (swapping routines instead of eliminating them). It was suggested that this might happen gradually and naturally over time, but also emphasised that it was not necessary or a required outcome and that no outcome was

correct or incorrect. The following list of examples was given to help participants understand how varied, easy and subjective the positive events could be.

Table 3.2: Diary writing examples.

I got an improved grade at school today.
I made a contribution at a work meeting.
Today I took a good photograph.
Dinner was yummy this evening.
I went for a walk with a friend / a dog.
I saw a beautiful sunset and it made me smile.
This morning I got to work / college early.
Someone told a joke and it made me laugh.
I tried a new sport today.
My boss said I had worked hard on my latest assignment.
I helped someone who had fallen over.
I have finished reading a really interesting book.
Today I won a game of chess.
My football team scored a goal at this evening's match.
My piano playing has improved recently.

3.6.2 Rationale for Positive Diaries

The use of a positive retrospective diary was chosen, as mentioned in the previous chapter, because of its apparent suitability for the autistic community. Studies have highlighted the need for and benefit of routine and structure in the management of autism (Milton & Sims, 2016), both of which are an integral part of regular diary keeping. Research has also found a necessity for 'self-initiated supports for coping with day-to-day social stress' such as 'mediating objects' and 'alone time' amongst autistic people (Muller et al, 2008, p.184). Writing a diary is a solitary activity, it can be completed whenever desired, and whether completed in the form of a book or on a computer or laptop, this could be a mediating object. Plus the therapeutic benefits of positive writing in other areas are very well documented (see previous chapter) (Baikie et al, 2012; Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009; Suhr et al, 2017). It was considered that these therapeutic benefits could similarly apply to the problems that are

common in the autistic community such as stress, anxiety, depression and lack of organisation (Attwood et al, 2014; Searle, 2010). This in turn could not only lead to subtle increases in life satisfaction and contentment, but in turn improved organisation and performance at school, university or work. It was thought, given the evidence presented in the previous chapter, that positive diary writing could be a general tool for the management of autism and provide some simple alleviation of behaviours.

In terms of the methods of previous research, this study was an amalgamation of them and a development from them. Suhr et al (2017) used the technique of a positive diary for the control of depression and emotion regulation. However it was focused upon resources in the form of memories and skills, rather than recent and daily positive experiences. This would not allow for the present study's aim of participants striving for positive experiences in order to write about them, thus creating a form of routine which has the potential to reduce or control autistic traits. Although Suhr et al's (2017) study's results were promising and it is notable that particular effects of the intervention were observed in females.

Reiter and Wilz (2016) also used a positive diary intervention to encourage participants to reflect on their skills, strengths and good qualities, and on more distant memories. This was a focus on all things positive, but again more general rather than recent, and lacking the drive to create positive experiences and achievements day by day. It demonstrated the beneficial effects of positive writing, but without the added aim of seeking out positivity and creating a useful routine within autism. This added to the evidence for beneficial uses of positive diary writing, but suggested that further uses were possible. Similarly, Allen et al (2020) concentrated on positive emotional writing in their method, incorporating the advantageous effects of positive writing, but not employing the potential motivating factor of writing about daily experiences that the participant has created. The present study sought to use these findings but advance them further for specific use within the autistic community and within education.

Both Wing et al (2006) and Burton and King (2004) found benefits of positive writing but in terms of immediate effects of a task (with some results maintained over time) rather than the keeping of a diary. The helpfulness of positive writing in terms of depression, mood and life satisfaction is clearly documented. The present study aimed to build upon this by using a diary for this established purpose, and also to motivate and help those with autism to focus and possibly manage behaviours as well. The idea was an extension of previous work,

applied and adapted for the autistic community, given their particular characteristics and needs (liking of and desire for routines etc). However the chosen methods were decided upon because they are backed up by related research into other groups of participants (see previous chapter) and supported by the defining characteristics of autism itself (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

3.6.3 Research Design: Questionnaires

Participants were asked to complete a detailed open-ended questionnaire before and after the four week period, and after a further four weeks as a follow up, (appendix E, p.180) to assess the effects of the diary keeping. All questionnaires were completed thorough 'Online Survey' (Jisc Online Surveys; www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk). There was also the option of a follow up interview in each case if further information or more exploration of a topic was needed. Carefully designed, open-ended questions were used in order to collect as much rich in-depth data as possible (Dawson, 2013) and to create an opportunity to gather any unexpected response data. Specific issues such as gender were not mentioned so as not to be possibly leading, but to see what issues participants chose to raise when given the chance to write what they wished.

The use of a questionnaire sought to avoid potential interviewer bias (Gray, 2009). It was also chosen to ensure that participant experience and questions asked were uniform across participants, and was specifically chosen for autistic participants to permit them to provide answers without any time pressure. This is considered to be of particular importance to autistic girls who 'need extended time to process and then respond to information' (Cridland et al, 2014, p.1262), and because more generally 'individuals on the autism spectrum often benefit from having additional time to process information' (MacLeod et al, 2014, p.412). Therefore an interview would not seem the ideal option for autistic females in the first instance. Multiple studies support the preference for questionnaires over interviews for the autistic community due to their 'slow and deliberate style of processing or thinking' (Milton & Sims, 2016, p.524) and their difficulty with 'unstructured dialogue requiring improvised responses' (Muller et al, 2008, p.179).

Great care was taken in the writing of the questionnaire questions and their wording in order to elicit answers about the topics desired. They were designed to be unambiguous, non-leading and straightforward. For example, before the diary task, participants were asked if

autism ever interfered negatively with their lives, and if they experienced anxiety, then asked if so, how. So no assumption was made that there would be negative interference or anxiety and participants were not led to say that there was. Examples from the second questionnaire are shown here:

1. How did you find keeping a positive diary for four weeks? Was it easy / difficult / fun / tedious etc? Why?
2. Did you feel that you got into a routine of diary keeping? Did it become a natural part of your day or not?
3. Did you find that you were trying to find more positive experiences in order to complete your diary? If so, please give examples.

Participants were told that they could ask for clarification about them if necessary (although none did). The questions also aimed to be interesting to consider and answer (Dawson, 2013). They were open-ended (with some prompts) so that participants could write extra information or detail if they thought it relevant. Open-ended questions are ideal for potential 'richness of responses, some of which may not have been anticipated by the researchers' (Gray, 2009, p.348). An example of a question from the first questionnaire (appendix E, p.180) was as follows: 'If you could change anything about autism, would you? If so, what would you change and why?' The first part of this question allows participants to decide on a yes or no response, but does not force them into such a choice. For example they could answer 'maybe' or 'sometimes'. The second part then permits for a variety of answers of any length or type. It does not restrict the participant. Asking 'why' which was included in many questions encourages participants not just to give a view, but to justify it and rationalise it. There were also opportunities in each questionnaire for participants to write anything additional that they wished to, thus allowing for possibly overlooked ideas and themes to emerge.

In this study the participants did have a vested interest to some extent in answering the questions, because they were all on the autistic spectrum, and understood that they would be making a contribution to autism research. 'People are more likely to spend longer answering questions about a topic that they feel strongly about, or with which they are very involved' (Dawson, 2013, p.97) which is clearly the case in this study. The instructions accompanying the questionnaires encouraged writing as much detail as possible and assured that all responses were welcome and valid (appendix E, p.180).

3.6.4 Decisions Regarding a Pilot Study

The possibility of a pilot study was given much consideration at the start of the research project. This was especially because the questionnaires to collect data were designed by the researcher specifically for the study and had thus not been tested before. A pilot could have helped to ensure that the required information was being accessed, and 'eliminate or at least reduce questions that are likely to mislead' (Gray, 2009, p.340), and some researchers deem them essential (Dawson, 2013). However for practical reasons the decision was taken not to carry out a pilot study due to the small number of participants available to contact, and the difficulties in recruiting them. A pilot study was also not carried out because it was considered that it may have had limited value due to each participant being very unique, and therefore any individual would not necessarily be at all representative. People are likely to read questionnaires and 'interpret questions in quite distinct ways' (Gray, 2009, p.340) therefore several respondents would be needed to build up a picture and look for patterns. In some ways this study took the form of several case studies (although this is not deemed to be a method because it has been argued that 'case study is not the name of a method' but is open to many method types (Coe et al, 2017, p.114)). It is considered that case studies are not necessarily well suited to pilot studies (Coe et al, 2017).

The writing of a positive retrospective diary could also have been piloted, however again the shortage of participants and challenges in finding and recruiting them to participate voluntarily meant that this was deemed unviable. All participants' data was needed for the main study so as much as possible was available for analysis. Brief thought was given to perhaps asking a male, or non-autistic person to pilot aspects of the study. But this was quickly dismissed as it would not have represented the data that the project was seeking to gather (Supeker et al, 2022). Clear and important differences between autistic males and autistic females are detailed in the previous chapter, as is the possible unique suitability of autistic females to this particular project.

However there were small opportunities for the researcher to learn and adapt accordingly within the study. For example, the first participants were those already known to the researcher, and they were given verbal as well as written instructions about the study. This was offered to other participants (who were not known to the researcher), but most of them stated that they would prefer to receive written instructions only, which they could consider in their own time. Therefore the researcher communicated with them simply by email (but

with the offer of a meeting should they choose at any point). This further supports the use of questionnaires over interviews as an appropriate research tool for autistic adults (Cridland et al, 2014; Milton & Sims, 2016; Muller at al, 2008).

3.6.5 Timings

Different times of year for completing the positive diary suited different participants. Initial announcements about the study were made near the start of the school and university summer holidays, as this was considered to be a time when people within education might have more time to participate and therefore be more willing to do so. This was generally correct for participants who were teachers, and those participants completed the study during the summer. In order to recruit more participants, second announcements were made at the start of the autumn term, and at this point it was found that many more university students came forward expressing an interest. This led the researcher to assume that students might prefer to participate when they were already in the routine of a term. Given the difficulties of recruitment within a study such as this, these timings have implications for how and when to best find particular types of participants (not the same for all participant groups).

3.7 Data Analysis

Questionnaire data, and diary entries, were collected and analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2023). This has at times been a 'rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method within psychology' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.77). It is commonly used within related studies mentioned in the Literature Review (for example: Goodall, 2020; Milton & Sims, 2016). There is 'diversity within Thematic Analysis' and it is a 'theoretically flexible method' (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p.1). Thematic Analysis has overlaps with content analysis (Duriau et al, 2007; Elo & Kyngas, 2008). However the flexibility of the Thematic Analysis method, as well as its possibility for use alongside varied theoretical standpoints, were elements that led to its choice (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). It can be used for identifying patterns and its lack of preconceived structure is ideal for studies such as the present one where responses are unpredictable. The approach taken was one of holistic coding (applying a code to a large piece of data rather than just a couple of words in order to grasp the overall sense) and was hybrid although more 'inductive' rather than 'deductive' in order to allow for all possible outcomes and unexpected findings (Burnard et al, 2008, p.429).

A variety of texts were used as guides for the Thematic Analysis process employed due to there being many ways of approaching it (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2023; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Finlay, 2021; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). All questionnaire responses were read through by the researcher multiple times in order to achieve familiarity. The data was then coded using holistic coding (assigning codes / themes to sections of text such as sentences so as to capture their meaning). Through an iterative process of repeated reading and refinement, themes and subcategories were identified. This involved a 'constant moving back and forth' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86) within the data to gradually amalgamate similar themes and identify new emerging ones. The themes were then considered in relation to the Literature Review and assessed in terms of which were most salient. Through this lengthy procedure, it is hoped that the key meanings of the text were extracted.

The data from each participant were initially looked at individually, ('multiple case study' (Coe et al, 2017, p.115)). Then the data were viewed as a whole in order to make comparisons and search for possible patterns and similarities. Beginning by looking at each individual was chosen as a strategy for this study in part because of its feminist aim to give autistic women a voice, and in part because it allows for the 'generation of multiple perspectives' and 'multiple data collection methods' (Gray, 2009, p.169).

3.7.1 The Coding Process

The Thematic Analysis process was begun with the responses and diary entries of one participant. The data were read and re-read many times and themes and sub-themes found, developed and adjusted. The themes and sub-themes cover all the data as a whole (the questionnaire responses and the positive diary entries) as it was looked at together. The following table shows the themes and sub-themes after the Thematic Analysis process for the first participant. The letters in brackets are those which were used to code and annotate the raw data of the questionnaire responses and diary entries.

Table 3.3: First themes and sub-themes.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Social issues (S)	Lack of acceptance (L) Masking (M)
Routines / rigidity (R)	
Positives of autism (P)	Intelligence (I) Enjoyment (E)
Negatives of autism (N)	Meltdowns (O) Mental distress (A)
Hobbies etc (H)	
Positive effects of diary (D)	Seeking new positives (Q) Reducing negative thinking (U) Happiness (B)

The themes of 'social issues' and 'routines / rigidity' are key diagnostic criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However it was not assumed that they would be present in the data. It did quickly become clear though, that they were prominent themes in all of the participants' responses.

After the Thematic Analysis of the first participants' data, the process was repeated for each further participant, one at a time. New themes and sub-themes were added when they became apparent, or adjusted if necessary. Once all of the participants' data had been analysed, each one was re-read and examined in light of additional themes and sub-themes and changes and additions made when relevant. The data were then re-coded to check for consistency until it was established that the same codes were appearing across the data set. Conversations between the researcher and the supervisors led to refinement and some changes to the coding. The following table shows the final summary of themes and sub-themes:

Table 3.4: Final themes and sub-themes.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Social issues (S)	Lack of acceptance (L) Masking (M) Loneliness (F) Misunderstandings (G) Dislike of crowds (K)
Routines / rigidity (R)	
Positive aspects of autistic identity (P)	Intelligence (I) Enjoyment (E) Love of interests (J)
Negative aspects of autistic identity (N)	Meltdowns (O) Eating disorders (Z) Anxiety (A) Tiredness (T) Depression (X)
Positive effects of diary (D)	Seeking new positives (Q) Reducing negative thinking (U) Happiness (B) Improvements in work (W) Pride in self (V) Calming / reducing anxiety (Ñ)
Sensory issues (Y)	Sounds (C) Touch (Ç)
Hobbies / work etc (H)	

The sub-theme of ‘anxiety’ was added as coding proceeded, however it was then amalgamated with the sub-theme of ‘mental distress’ as it became apparent that these were actually the same. ‘Tiredness’ was initially identified as a theme, but later changed to a sub-theme of ‘negative aspects of autistic identity’ when it became obvious that it was constantly related to autism. The themes ‘positives of autism’ and ‘negatives of autism’ were refined to

'positive aspects of autistic identity' and 'negative aspects of autistic identity' as it became clear that these were better descriptions of the themes. This occurred during re-reading of responses, and when coding and themes were discussed with the researcher's supervisors as they emerged in order to increase reliability. Adjustments were made accordingly following discussion with supervisors and arriving at an agreement about which phrase or word best described a theme. Data were triangulated and agreement was found both between responses for the same participant (such as between diary entries and questionnaire responses) and between participants in terms of responses to the diary task.

It was found that the most useful and revealing data were in the questionnaire responses. Below is an example of coded responses by one participant to the second questionnaire. The letters represent the themes and sub-themes assigned to the data. Further examples of the coding by theme and sub-theme for various excerpts from the data from various participants are given in the appendix (appendix F, p.182).

It was an easy task to do once I got into the swing of keeping the positive diary. The first week was tricky because I often get into the habit of only looking at the negatives.	D N	X
It became a part of my routine relatively quickly. I am still keeping up with looking at the small positives within my day even after the conclusion of the study.	R	
I didn't have to seek positive experiences, I just had to notice the positives which were already in my daily life.	D D	
I enjoyed the routine of keeping the diary. I didn't write things down every day because I tend to get busy, but even just doing diary entries a few times a week was enjoyable.	D	
I realised how much time I was wasting on negative experiences, and it felt calming to look at the positives instead.	D	U
I felt more satisfied with my life. As a new student at university I was struggling with managing each part of daily life, it could become monotonous. This experience has helped me focus on the small but happy experiences.	D D D	Ñ Ñ B
I have already kept up with this activity. I don't write it down, but I make it a part of my day to think about the small pleasures in my day.	D	
It was a low pressure activity and helped me with my mental state, without feeling a pressure to have to come up with sentences to write down.	D	Ñ

3.7.2 Definitions of Codes

Below each theme and sub-theme is defined and explained. Themes are underlined.

Table 3.5: Definitions of themes and sub-themes.

Theme / Sub-theme	Definition
Social issues	Difficulties with social communication and relationships as described in the diagnostic criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
Lack of acceptance	Feelings of rejection by others or not fitting in with peers due to autism.
Masking	The covering or hiding of autistic personality traits in order to appear more pleasing and likeable to others, or to behave in ways you think they might like even though it is unnatural to you.
Loneliness	Feeling consistently alone or left out due to autism.
Misunderstandings	Where autism or autistic behaviour causes a misunderstanding with others, where others misinterpret something done by an autistic person and miss their true intentions.
Dislike of crowds	Feeling uncomfortable in crowded areas or amongst large groups of people due to autism, avoiding such situations.
Routines / rigidity	Following strict routines or rituals and insistence on sameness as described in the diagnostic criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
Positive aspects of autistic identity	Autistic traits which the autistic person considers to be positive and beneficial.
Intelligence	Perceived higher cognitive abilities, considered to be related to being autistic.
Enjoyment	Enjoying events or activities to a greater extent because of autistic traits such as heightened senses.
Love of interests	Love of and passion for special interests related to autism.
Negative aspects of autistic identity	Other autistic traits which the autistic person considers to be negative and detrimental.
Meltdowns	Temporary mental breakdowns caused by autistic anxiety, stress, panic or circumstances considered challenging.
Eating disorders	Problematic eating caused by mental issues leading to ill-health,

	such as anorexia or bulimia.
Anxiety	Anxiety, excessive worry or mental distress associated with autism.
Tiredness	Tiredness, weariness or exhaustion caused by autism or autistic tendencies or behaviours such as heightened senses, anxiety or masking.
Depression	Feeling consistently depressed and of low mood, exceeding typical variations, due to autism or problems associated with it, periods of clinical depression.
Positive effects of diary	Times where the positive diary task was seen to have or described as having some sort of positive or beneficial effect on the participant.
Seeking new positives	Where the participant has deliberately sought out or identified positive events or experiences specifically for the positive diary task which they would not otherwise have done.
Reducing negative thinking	Where the positive diary task has caused a reported reduction in negative thoughts such as self-dislike.
Happiness	Where the positive diary task has led to happiness or increased happiness.
Improvements in work	Where the positive diary task has led to perceived improvements in work or study performance.
Pride in self	Where the positive diary task has led to reported pride in achievements, progress or self, or recognition of such pride.
Calming / reducing anxiety	Reporting of reduction in anxiety, stress or worry where this reduction is attributed to the positive diary task, a calming effect caused by the use of the positive diary.
Sensory issues	Heightened senses (hearing, sight, touch, taste, smell) often associated with autism, and sometimes causing problems.
Sounds	Heightened sense of hearing often associated with autism and causing some sounds to be painful or especially irritating.
Touch	Heightened sense of touch often associated with autism and causing some textures to be painful or especially irritating.
Hobbies / work etc	Reporting in the positive diary of engagement in hobbies or things enjoyed such as cooking, crafts or sport, and descriptions of such activities, or detailing work done.

3.8 Ethics

All the ethical guidelines and protocols of the supervising university and of the British Educational Research Association were adhered to during this research (British Educational Research Association, 2024). An ethics form required by the supervising university was completed, submitted and signed off by the ethics department at the university before any research began (appendix A, p.155). The completion of the university ethics form was a process which took time and a great deal of thought to ensure that the study was carried out ethically in every way (from treatment of participants to data storage). Within education research, Coe et al (2017) propose three main concepts to bear in mind when carrying out ethical studies: 'minimising harm, protecting privacy, and respecting autonomy' (Coe et al, 2017, p.59). All three of these areas were given careful consideration throughout the present study. For example, any possible data which could have led to a person being identified was pseudonimised or removed, not just names. The participants were all over the age of 18 and were considered to be literate and have low support needs, none appeared to have any intellectual impairment which might influence their decision making ability.

The possible harm to participants caused by this study was considered to be small, however it could consist of upset due to feeling that the study had not had the anticipated effects of highlighting positive events. To address this, participants were explicitly told that there was no right or wrong outcome to the study. Research would be considered harmful if it caused a participant to be 'subject to mental distress' or 'produces negative emotional reactions' (Gray, 2009, p.74). The study was considered not to be a risk of provoking such things, particularly due to its focus on positive events, even tiny ones, however participants were treated with honesty and not told that there was any guaranteed outcome to the study. Indeed, the study concurs with the notion that 'researchers need to go beyond avoiding harm to participants and should aim, instead, for positive benefits' (Gray, 2009, p.74). This study was very much aiming for positive benefits both for the participants and for the gathering of knowledge about how to improve the lives of autistic women.

The aims of the research were overt and transparent rather than covert, which in itself is a more ethical form of research (British Educational Research Association, 2024; Dawson, 2013). However no criteria for success or failure were given in any way, so that the participants would not feel that they had done anything wrong, or that there was a correct or incorrect way to respond to the study. No direct or indirect deception (Anderson & Corneli,

2018) of participants was necessary in this study therefore they could not feel misled in any way by the research. The research had a collaborative nature.

All data collected were treated with complete confidentiality and all responses were recorded in a pseudonymous fashion, with no real names being recorded, for ethical reasons as mentioned above. Participants were given new names with their real identities known only to the researcher. Any data which could possibly have been used to identify a person, such as the name of a place of work or a unique hobby, were removed or changed. The stored data allowed no way for it to be linked to an individual, it was 'de-identified' (Anderson & Corneli, 2018, p.35). Any data which could have affected a person's reputation, such as mention of drug use, were also removed. All data were stored on the researcher's private password-protected computer. Due to the nature of the data collected (questionnaire responses and diaries), the data in its entirety were not placed in the appendix. This was to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality (Coe et al, 2017) because some questionnaire responses could have caused harm to a participants' reputation and some of the diaries could have led to the identification of a participant due to the uniqueness of the interests detailed.

All participation was voluntary, there was no coercion and no economic or other reward for participating. Payment for participation is not encouraged in educational research as it could be argued that participation is then less voluntary (British Educational Research Association, 2024). All participants were given information and consent sheets (appendix C, p.172) and it was explained to them that they could leave the study at any time up to the completion of the data collection process without giving a reason and without consequences or repercussions. It is recommended that a researcher stays sensitive to the possibility that a participant may want to withdraw consent even if they do not actually say so (British Educational Research Association, 2024) and this was borne in mind throughout. An important area of concern, especially due to the ethical stance of the feminist standpoint taken during this research, was the issue of the power relationship between the researcher and the participants. A useful suggestion, which was followed during the present study, is given by Ellis (2009) in which she advises 'continually checking with participants to accommodate changing research relationships and respondents' willingness to continue participating' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.136). All participants were treated equally, given the same access to the researcher in case they needed to ask additional questions, given the same information, guidance and time.

As mentioned, some participants were already known to the researcher though work in schools (although none currently working or studying in the same school as the researcher at present). These participants were initially approached informally, and those who expressed a keen interest in participating were then invited formally to join the study and were sent information, guidance and consent sheets to consider (appendix C, p.172, & D, p.178). These were only people who were open and public about their diagnosis of autism or self-identification as autistic. No one who may have been on the autistic spectrum, but who had not made that information public was approached, due to their rights to privacy. 'There are private places and there is private information, and if either are treated as if they were public then, arguably, privacy has been breached' (Coe et al, 2017, p.61). Autistic status is considered to be private information, especially as its revelation could result in prejudice and other problems.

In terms of contacting potential participants (students and staff) at the university, rather than targeting those with autism which seemed unfair and possibly offensive, an information email was sent to all. This meant allowing the relevant people to decide whether they wished to respond. This also allowed for those who self-identify as autistic to respond and to do so without revealing their status to anyone else. Particular care was taken when corresponding with students due to the possible power imbalance in the relationship between participant and researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

It was hoped that all participants would have a genuine desire to participate, and would not be doing so because of any perceived obligation to take part. The lack of obligation to begin and to continue with the study were continually reinforced both by the researcher in her communications, and by the information and consent paperwork provided to participants (appendix C, p.172). However extra care was taken to interpret the communications and responses of participants in order to ensure their contentment to proceed. Issues such as the hiding of genuine emotions in the form of emotional labour were regularly contemplated (Grandey et al, 2017). Although it is worth noting that the typical honesty often identified as an autistic trait (Searle, 2010) is beneficial in research within the autistic community. Method choices were made to suit autistic participants and make them feel more comfortable such as the use of questionnaires rather than interviews (Cridland et al, 2014; Milton & Sims, 2016; Muller at al, 2008).

3.9 Reliability and Validity

This present study provides samples of the raw data in the appendices (appendix F, p.182) so that readers can see a selection of responses and diary entries. This goes some way towards addressing possible unintended researcher bias and subjectivity. Care was taken to present the views of participants as they were given and to not make assumptions, or to ask 'assumptive questions' (Gray, 2009, p.340). As discussed earlier in this chapter, questionnaires were selected as opposed to interviews due to their particular suitability for autistic people (Cridland et al, 2014; Milton & Sims, 2016; Muller at al, 2008), and their greater reliability (Gray, 2009). However this choice also had the added benefit of eliminating interviewer bias. Questionnaire questions were designed to be non-leading (and open-ended) and as the participants completed them alone and in their own time, the researcher had no influence over the answers.

Care was also taken during the entire research process to ensure that participants did not feel any specific response was correct or required, so that their answers would be genuine. In terms of the relationship between researcher and participants, the participants should not have felt any need to give any particular response at any time. None of them were students of the researcher, some were older than the researcher, and they had nothing to gain by completing the study in a certain way. There is a danger that participants could elect to give false or exaggerated information, and present themselves in whatever manner they wished to. However, again, there would be no benefit in the study for doing so, responses all seemed fitting and genuine, and the trait of honesty generally present in those with autism (Searle, 2010) mean that responses are likely to have a high level of reliability. There was consistency between diary entries and questionnaire responses, and between responses for the different questionnaires for each participant.

Discussion of codes with supervisors will have been a step towards reliability. The data (for example the vignettes in Chapter 4) were not checked with participants as this part of the study was not written up until some time after the study had finished. Participants had not been asked if they were happy to be contacted at a much later date, and some had left their places of study or work by that time. Moreover, there is some debate as to the value of member checking when not all participants engage with it (McKim, 2023). Furthermore, a long time after data collection, some participants may have changed their minds about aspects of what they originally said and this could threaten reliability of data (Lloyd et al, 2024).

It is important not to view qualitative research such as this, in the same way as quantitative research in terms of reliability and validity (Dawson, 2013), but to consider it in conjunction with positionality. Of course participants may be influenced simply by taking part in the research process itself (Dawson, 2013) which needs to be acknowledged. Any researcher will also inevitably bring their own experience to the research which must also be acknowledged transparently (Coe et al, 2017) (see previous section on positionality).

This particular study was only able to access the views of literate individuals due to the ways in which the participants were contacted, and the nature of the data collected. This must be considered in terms of the applicability of the findings. More time may have allowed for a wider field of participants to be contacted and for them to participate in a wider variety of ways. For example, diaries were submitted as typed or written. A larger study may have been able to accommodate a different form of diary entry, such as a video diary, thus possibly allowing more individuals to participate and facilitating wider engagement and strengthening the credibility of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: THE WOMEN'S STORIES FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This first Findings chapter will explain the study's findings as a whole, primarily by summarising the data from each participant, in the form of a series of vignettes. It will look at the data from all parts of the study: before, during and after the positive diary task. The presentation of each female participant's 'story' in this chapter has been done for each person so that their individuality and complexity is respected and so that their unique journey during the research can be understood. Each of the following vignettes covers all of the questionnaire data from the individual participant as well as their positive diary entries. One of the research aims was to use feminist theory as a lens to study practical methods for improving the lives of autistic women (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018). When using this lens it seems appropriate to give each individual woman a voice and present their whole story, rather than group responses only, which would detract from the individuality of each woman. It would also fail to show how each woman found improvement or otherwise in well-being, life enjoyment and management of autism which relate to the research questions. The Methodology section mentions the use of elements of case study techniques in this research, and the vignettes below fit well with this (Coe et al, 2017; Gray, 2009). Summarising the results for each woman was also seen as particularly important from a feminist perspective due to the extreme lack of research into adult autistic women. Plus presenting each person's entire results picture makes the findings more credible, trustworthy, and easier to comprehend from a human perspective.

4.1.1 Feminist Approach

From the first questionnaire responses, it seemed apparent that there were some arising issues which were particularly relevant to feminist research, which was another reason for the presentation of the women's stories individually in this chapter. These issues were not coded separately as they covered different themes and sub-themes. However they were present in

the responses of many participants. Some of the participants felt that some of their problems or difficulties related to autism were specific to their gender, or were caused by their gender.

The fact that various eating disorders and possible borderline eating disorders surfaced in the responses is pertinent here. Whilst eating disorders are not restricted to females alone, they are often portrayed as a problem that is far more female than male, and the majority of sufferers are perceived to be female. They are also often viewed to be the consequence of pressure exerted on women by society to attain a certain appearance or level of control.

Other sub-themes from the pre-diary questionnaire responses which were considered, in the cases of some respondents, to have feminist connotations were those of 'masking', 'misunderstandings' and 'lack of acceptance'. There were elements of some responses within these sub-themes which seemed to be gender specific. Some participants appeared to feel that they were misunderstood at times, or not accepted at times, because as autistic women, they did not meet the societal expectation for what a woman should be, and adhere to societal norms for women. The need to mask sometimes arose because of this, and particular gender expectations which can clash with autism. An apparent example of this is Nell saying: '*I mask my 'true self' with a character that I think people will like (a bubbly person who tries to make people laugh and be happy)*'.

Responses revealed that there was the added complication that society's perception of autism is often predominantly associated with males, and the stereotypical image of autism is male, as mentioned in the Literature Review. This was reported as leading some people to consider someone being both female and autistic as a mismatch or an impossibility. Lucia felt that information on autistic females was '*lacking*' and that there was commonly '*misinformation*'. She also wrote that she would like to change the way the world views autism, '*particularly towards women and girls, as it is much harder to diagnose and there is so little research on it*' in her opinion. Lucia goes on to explain that this '*for me it makes it a difficult road to try and convince people I am autistic and questioning whether I am based on old stereotypes*'.

Hanna discussed these concepts in some detail in relation to social issues. She writes that in terms of autism, '*there is such a specific stereotype surrounding the label, that it is very difficult to find good relationships outside of the community*'. The fact that this '*stereotype*' is a male one implies that this problem may not be as relevant to autistic males. Hanna elaborates: '*most people have a specific image regarding an autistic person, most of the time relating it to characters which enact stereotypes on television (i.e: Sheldon from The Big*

Bang Theory, Rain Man, or any low functioning, usually white young boy'. The television characters she mentions here are all male, and this highlights how society's perception of autism as a male problem may have been influenced by the media.

It seems from some responses that society's perceived demands for women to behave in a certain feminine way, added to the stereotype of autism being a male disorder, have created a dilemma for autistic women. Autistic traits often do not seem to match society's image of ideal femininity, and autism is still portrayed as predominantly male, thus further exacerbating the lack of acceptance and misunderstandings expressed by multiple participants. There was a general feeling among the participants of a keenness to participate in this study due to the lack of research into autistic females, and to further knowledge about autistic females because they are misunderstood and misrepresented because of their gender. All of this supports a feminist perspective for the study and the additional presentation of each woman's story, rather than simply summarising all the data as a whole.

Table 4.1 below presents the themes and sub-themes for each participant (in their questionnaire responses and positive diary entries). Thirteen participants took part in the study, each completing the first questionnaire, a positive diary for a period of four weeks, and then a second questionnaire. All but one of these participants also completed the final follow up questionnaire a further four weeks later. Then the vignettes below each draw on all the data for each participant (pre-diary questionnaires, positive diaries, and post-diary questionnaires). In each vignette, data from the first questionnaire is presented first, followed by data from the post-diary questionnaires, then data from the positive diary.

4.2 Table of Themes and Sub-themes Across Participants

Below is a table showing which themes and sub-themes were present for each participant. This is provided so that the reader can see exactly how many of each theme and sub-theme were present and where they occur amongst the participants, and possible patterns within them visually as a whole. It allows for potential links across themes and sub-themes to be made. The themes and sub-themes cover both the questionnaire responses and the positive diary entries. Themes are underlined and their sub-themes are beneath them. How they were identified is described in the two previous chapters. The participant numbers in the table below match those for the vignettes. Following the table there will be some brief comments about it and the interpretation of possible patterns and clusters within it.

Table 4.1: Themes and sub-themes by participant.

Participant> (age in brackets) Code V	1 (18)	2 (47)	3 (69)	4 (18)	5 (33)	6 (20)	7 (21)	8 (18)	9 (35)	10 (18)	11 (19)	12 (20)	13 (20)
Social issues	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Lack of acceptance	v	v		v		v		v		v			
Masking	v	v				v		v	v			v	v
Loneliness			v			v							
Misunderstandings		v	v	v		v	v	v	v	v			v
Dislike of crowds			v				v	v				v	
Routines / rigidity	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Positive aspects of autistic identity	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Intelligence	v				v				v	v	v	v	
Enjoyment	v			v			v		v		v	v	
Love of interests	v			v		v	v	v	v	v	v		
Negative aspects of autistic identity	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Meltdowns	v						v	v			v	v	
Eating disorders		v			v		v				v		
Anxiety	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Tiredness	v				v			v	v			v	
Depression					v			v			v		
Positive effects of diary	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v
Seeking new positives	v	v	v	v	v		v	v	v	v		v	
Reducing negative thinking	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v		v	v	v
Happiness	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v		v		v	v
Improvements in work		v		v	v	v		v				v	
Pride in self					v	v		v	v			v	
Calming / reducing anxiety	v	v	v	v	v		v	v		v	v	v	v
Sensory issues			v	v			v			v	v	v	v
Sounds			v				v			v		v	v
Touch				v			v				v	v	
Hobbies / work etc	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v	v

From this table, it can be seen which themes and sub-themes arise most commonly, and which were mentioned by fewer participants. Certain clusters can also be seen. For example, the table shows that several participants (Hanna, Sara, Eden, Karla, Kitty, Alina, Nell) mentioned two or all three of the sub-themes of positive aspects of autistic identity, whereas some (Mary, Jane, Mila) mentioned none of them at all. Two participants detailed sensory issues with both sound and touch, but others only cited one.

Other patterns which may be significant include: Almost everyone who mentioned masking, also mentioned either lack of acceptance or misunderstandings, which could mean that the former is a consequence in some way of the two latter sub-themes. For example, feeling rejected by a group could lead an autistic person to mask and pretend to be what they think others want, in order to gain some sort of acceptance. Everyone who mentioned improvements in work as a result of the positive diary task also mentioned happiness, everyone who mentioned pride, also mentioned reduced negative thinking. These concepts could be linked.

The table shows visually that social issues, routines and rigidity, and anxiety were the autistic difficulties which were reported by all of the participants without exception in the pre-diary questionnaire. From the table it can also be seen that all participants found some positive effects of the diary task, with happiness, reducing negative thinking, and reducing anxiety being the most common. This last point is especially relevant as all participants reported experiencing anxiety in the pre-diary questionnaire. All but one participant who found the diary to have a calming and anxiety reducing effect also reported that the diary had reduced their level of negative thinking. Again the above table suggests a possible link here but it is not clear which causes which. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

4.3 Participant 1: Hanna

Hanna is an 18 year old student who, at the time of participating, had finished school and was preparing to start university. In the first questionnaire, Hanna described the world around her as sometimes '*confusing and overwhelming*' as an autistic person, but also sometimes '*wonderful in a way only I can see*'. She described some '*strict habits*' and '*meltdowns*' if these were disrupted. Hanna stated that she had difficulty connecting with neurotypical people but would like to do so more. She found the stereotypes associated with autism, and

hence assumptions made about her as an autistic person detrimental. Hanna described the positive diary writing task as '*fun*' and said it was '*natural at first but then slipped away*'. She wrote that the use of the positive diary had the effect of stopping her from '*hyper fixating*' and helped her to '*recall and focus on smaller positive aspects of the day*'. She reported that she might use the positive diary again in future because it created a positive '*pattern of thinking*'. She felt that a positive diary would have beneficial uses in the autistic community because '*autistic joy is a severely underexplored facet of our person*'. In the additional comments section of the last questionnaire, Hanna describes participation with the positive diary as a '*wonderful experience*' which was '*incredibly validating*'. She went on to state that she felt the positive diary helped to '*improve my lifestyle and routine in ways that will greatly benefit due to their relation to my neurodivergence*'. She wrote '*thank you*' at the end of her responses.

Hanna's positive diary described lots of her hobbies, such as art and watching films, and the pleasure she got from them. She clearly demonstrated the she was finding joy in small things such as chatting with someone about films and eating '*exquisite watermelon*'. She reported that she did do things she would not otherwise have done because of the positive diary '*expressly to seek out a positive experience*'. After writing in detail about a film she watched which she was a big fan of and buying film merchandise, she wrote '*the autism fed well today*', in reference to this being one of her special interests which makes her happy. Hanna mentioned strong connections and rewarding friendships with other autistic people in her diary, which clearly made her happy. During the diary recording phase she also received her A-level examination results which she was '*delighted*' with. Her diary entries were long and detailed, expressing emotions such as '*happy*', '*glad*' and '*ecstatic*', as well as describing events she was participating in. She seemed to enjoy the diary in part as an outlet for describing and recording her special interests such as films. Hanna also at one point chose to write about previous attempts to fit in with others but then concluded after a good experience with an autistic friend that '*I was reminded today I will never have to be normal, my people are not, nor will ever be normal. And why try? There is no such thing*'. This seems to show a sense of belonging to the autistic community and an acceptance of difference.

4.4 Participant 2: Mary

Mary is a secondary school teacher in her late forties. She explains what it is like to be autistic as '*being an alien in a world that runs according to different rules and beliefs*'. She

describes difficulties with making friends on more than a superficial level, and social difficulties, particularly in groups. In terms of autistic routines, Mary wrote that she follows a '*clear order of daily tasks*' during days at work, and does not like days when her '*routine is disrupted*'. She elaborated that she plans days '*meticulously*' and prefers them to be '*organised*' and '*predictable*'. She also comments on a liking for '*rules*' and explains that she follows a '*moral code*'. Mary feels that she does not come across to others as she would like, and that her honesty as an autistic woman is often not appreciated because when people ask for honesty '*actually what they wanted was validation*'. She writes that she now feels more comfortable with her autism, but that it had very negative effects on her in her youth, such as causing shyness, eating disorder, and '*very low self-esteem*'. She now worries less about the opinions of others but it caused her distress in the past. Mary reports being less anxious than she used to be, but suffered from anxiety when she was younger due to her autism. However she wrote before taking part in the diary task that she still tends to '*catastrophise*'. She appreciates the fact that she is able, but feels that she has reached her limits in terms of her career, and attributes this to autism and people's reactions to it.

Mary reported that she found it quite easy to get into a routine with the positive diary. She wrote that she liked its reflective nature and that because if it she '*started looking for positives ahead of them happening*' and recognising them more. She reports that because of the diary '*I actually found I was catastrophising less and felt more positive about things generally*'. She reiterates in a later response that '*I have definitely noticed a decrease in catastrophising*'. Mary thinks she will keep up the diary work, but mentally rather than recording things physically. She states that it has become '*incorporated*' into her daily routine and has given her a '*new focus on what is good about each day and how the negative things can be cancelled out or mitigated by the focus on positives*'. In the follow up questionnaire Mary confirms that she has kept up the positive diary mentally as it changes her '*mind set*' in a beneficial way, and states that she does feel it has potential uses within the autistic community.

Mary divided her positive diary into 'achievements' and 'happy / positive events'. She recorded things daily and covered a variety of things from simple events like reading, to getting examination results for classes she had taught. Her diary covered the start of the school term and comments on work going well and taking pride in it. She wrote about being happy when pupils appreciated her work and having satisfaction about getting lesson plans

organised. Example entries are '*Year ten first lesson was really positive*' and '*My introduction assembly went well*'.

4.5 Participant 3: Jane

Jane is a retired primary school teacher in her late sixties. She wrote that her biggest issue as an autistic woman was with social groups. She stated '*I try to avoid large gatherings and always refuse invitations*'. She says she prefers to meet one or two people at a time and finds big social events '*intimidating*'. She thinks that for this reason she stays at home more than others. She reports on routines such as the order of things when she is getting ready for bed. Jane mentions sensory issues with loud noise. She writes that she feels that these sensory issues and her dislike of large groups mean that she misses out and comes across as anti-social when she is not. She states that a lot of socialising happens in bars and pubs which are crowded and noisy and therefore she feels excluded from them.

Jane wrote that she did not find the diary task difficult, and '*it became quite natural*'. She reported that the diary made her do '*things I had been meaning to do for a while but kept putting off, so that I could enjoy them and write about the experience*'. Jane refers to the diary as the '*happy diary*' and writes that it '*became a good focus, so I didn't worry so much about more mundane tasks*'. She also writes that '*after a couple of weeks, the diary became a delight to look back on as a reminder of good stuff that had happened*'. She felt that if she had not recorded some positive events she would probably have forgotten them. Jane '*realised what a great month July was*' which she says she would not have done without the diary. She wrote of her intention to keep up the diary, but for the most significant events rather than daily. In the follow up questionnaire Jane reported that she had kept up the diary and that it was helping her to remember positive things, which make her happy. She feels it would be useful to other autistic people in this way. She commented that as an autistic person '*it is too easy to be angry or negative about things that happen so writing about all the good things helps to balance it out*'.

In her diary Jane wrote daily and in some detail. She recorded sports and crafts she had done, visits to places of interest, meetings with family and tasks such as cleaning that gave her satisfaction. She also recorded generous acts such as giving clothes to charity which made her feel good and pleased. Jane also recorded very simple happy events like '*Marmite*

sandwiches' and '*The lovely smell of new mown grass*', as well as walking dogs and finding a lost phone. She describes scenes and views she has seen and '*beautiful*' sights.

4.6 Participant 4: Sara

Sara is an eighteen year old university student. In terms of autism, Sara describes many strict routines that she adheres to, and habits that she feels she cannot change, for example wearing the same clothes until they are worn out and have holes in. She also mentions sensitivity to touch and a feeling of a lack of social skills. She struggles in conversations as she needs time to plan answers, by which time the conversation has often moved on. Sara writes that she can '*talk for hours about the things I am interested in, makes me feel so excited when doing so, it allows me to collect things which I am interested in*'. However she thinks that people treat her childishly because of her autism, and resents this treatment.

After completing the diary task, Sara reported that she found it difficult to remember to do, especially when busy or tired. It did not become natural for her as it was hard to incorporate a new routine into her existing ones. However '*when I did write in the diary, it was nice to look back on my day*' and later '*look back on my days / weeks as I could read about events I had forgotten*'. Sara felt that she did not go searching for more positive experiences for the purpose of the diary, but she did find herself '*trying to see experiences in a more positive light*'. Whilst Sara did not think that keeping the diary had a huge impact on her sense of life satisfaction, '*it made me realise that even though others may see my day-to-day as boring, I typically enjoy the 'mundane' routine of life which is comfortable to me*'. She says that she will continue to keep up with a diary when notable things happen. She also notes that the diary highlighted the '*consistency*' of her life and that this was a '*really pleasant realisation*' for her. In the follow up questionnaire Sara reported that she had kept up diary writing more generally (not just for positive things) but was unsure about the use of positive writing within the autistic community.

In her positive diary, Sara wrote a lot of detail. She wrote about her university studies, music listened to, games played, and things seen. Having published some of her work online and received feedback, she records '*it was nice hearing how my work had resonated with some people and the fact that they took time out of their day to read and comment made me feel special*'. Sara also recorded satisfaction in university work completed to a good standard. About half way through her diary, Sara wrote the following: '*This diary has actually been*

really nice to write in, I never thought of myself as someone who enjoys writing, but it is nice reflecting on my day. It shows that every day is different, even if only slightly, as often days will just blur into one and I don't have anything to distinguish them by'.

4.7 Participant 5: Kelly

Kelly is a secondary school teacher in her mid-thirties. She described her autism as making '*everything very intense*' and went on to explain various difficulties that it caused her. She wrote that '*I overthink everything, and often focus too much on one thing*'. She uses the word '*overthink*' several times in her responses and stated that because of autism '*I know I waste a lot of time on things that objectively don't matter*'. She also described autism as '*frustrating*' and whilst knowing she is intelligent she reported that '*I find it harder to arrange books on a shelf than teach a lesson about physics*'. Kelly described certain routines as examples as she follows many of them. She felt that autism caused her to waste time and that she cannot '*do things automatically like other people do*'. She described a need to '*organise and check*' things but is aware that this is related to autism rather than other issues. She finds this poor use of time '*upsetting*' but difficult to avoid, to the extent that it sometimes makes her late for things. Kelly wrote that she felt her autism sometimes '*gets me in knots*' and that '*little things bother my brain*'. She describes struggling to prioritise and a tendency to '*ruminate*' and be bothered by '*autism fixations*'. She felt that autism made her '*stressy*' but that she would like to be more '*relaxed*', '*peaceful*' and '*happy*'. She ends her first questionnaire by saying in the additional comments section that autism '*can be a daily struggle and tiring. Instead of a glass ceiling it's like there's a glass wall between me and some of the fun and laughter in life*'.

Kelly's responses to the diary task are extremely positive. She writes '*I loved it!... I did positive things I would not have done otherwise*'. She says that '*the idea kind of clicked with me*' and the diary became a natural daily routine. She explains '*I was looking out for positive things to write. I kind of centred on it*'. She adds '*I liked the routine and wanted to keep it up so I was looking for things to do*'. She then describes some activities that she was motivated to do for that purpose. She described the diary as '*a routine I can feel good about*'. Kelly reports that she felt the diary '*makes me waste less time on silly things*' and feel more '*stable*' and '*fulfilled*'. She finds the diary '*satisfying*' and '*calming*'. Kelly writes that keeping the diary helped her to '*get rid of the nonsense and concentrate on what matters, like a filter*'. At the end of the second questionnaire Kelly said that she intended to keep up the positive diary

in a notebook which she has already purchased. She thinks it is '*nice to collect positive memories*' and that it makes her '*try harder and kind of live more*'. She adds '*it really suits me as an autistic person, I like my routines!*' She volunteers that she liked the idea of the positive diary from the beginning and that in the past she had suffered with depression and an eating disorder but that '*something like this could have helped me avoid that sort of thing more*'.

In the follow up questionnaire Kelly confirms that she has kept up the use of the positive diary and repeats that she finds it a '*good routine*' and '*kind of stabilising*'. She says it reduces her tendency to '*overthink*' and makes her '*less fretful and anxious. Probably because more of my brain is taken up with looking for positive things everywhere!*' Kelly explains that the diary '*makes me do more things without being so nervous because I do like writing it later and feeling proud of myself*'. She says it makes her look for more positives at work and use her time better. She also says that the diary is '*a really useful idea if you are an Aspie*' and that she thinks it could be '*stabilising*' for other autistic people.

Kelly wrote daily in her diary. She begins '*So I'm doing this positive diary. I like the idea, it kind of clicks with me*'. This reiterates what she said in her questionnaire responses. She describes teaching work and what material she has covered saying '*I think I did it well. While I was there I was thinking, hey this is positive, I'll write it down later!*' Kelly's diary covers activities with her children during the holidays, and then the start of the school term. For example she wrote '*Inset day, tried to look for the positive, got a top set this year*'. Other entries include '*Today I was teaching year nine decimals and they were singing funny songs, I nearly wet myself laughing, such a great group*', '*saw a rainbow*' and '*took the kids to the castle*'. She uses quite a few entries to write about what subjects she has taught at school and that she feels it has gone well. She appears to be using the diary as a tool for participating in more positive things as she recorded '*Today I didn't have plans, but I knew I had to write something in this diary, so I started reading a book*'. Her entries were generally short, with each day using one or two lines.

4.8 Participant 6: Macu

Macu is a university student in her early twenties. She feels that because of her autism '*I don't fit in with most people*' and '*I always feel left out or different*'. She finds that autism can be '*isolating*' and '*lonely*'. She has '*niche interests*' that few others share. Macu

describes multiple routines that she attributes to autism, which she is compelled to carry out otherwise her days feels '*disrupted*'. She says that '*I also have to do certain types of activities or tasks at certain times – like I associate reading tasks and writing assignments with the evening or late night*'. Macu finds some of these routines stressful as they can make her late completing tasks because '*I have a need to still do routines and enough self-care before I can start on the task*'. As a result of her routines she can be late for events. She struggles with deadlines but finds '*joy*' in her unique special interests. Macu mentions social anxiety and masking as a result of autism.

Macu felt that the positive diary did become part of her routine and she wrote in it every day in some detail. She liked doing it except when she was tired. She reports '*It was nice to reflect on the day and realise that there was always something to be positive about*'. She felt that the diary task '*helped me feel more positive about my day and helped me find things to be positive about even if I thought I didn't have the best day*'. Macu comments that the diary task '*made me realise more about my own life and how much I have progressed*'. She stated that she would keep up diary writing, and in the follow up questionnaire confirmed that she had. She thinks that positive diary writing would be good for many people, not just the autistic community.

In Macu's diary she wrote many details about her hobby of cooking, such as what she had made and how it turned out. Her other hobbies of crafts and making things were also written about with comments about how much she enjoyed them. She also recorded lots of small achievements such as '*happy because I finally got to tidy*' and '*submitted my essay so I don't have to worry about it anymore*'. There were also many comments about simple pleasures such as '*today is a good day because it rained and I love the smell of the air after it rains*'. Macu demonstrated the use of the positive diary by writing of an event she had attended: '*it was fun to take lots of pictures with the photo booth. It made me happy because I could put the photos in my journal later on to record the memories*'.

4.9 Participant 7: Eden

Eden is a university student in her early twenties. She explains that effects of autism on her include getting '*overstimulated in busy environments*', hating crowds, and being easily '*overwhelmed*' by things such as '*low-level noise*'. She has some very specific special interests regarding certain television programmes and literature with which she claims to be

'*obsessed*'. She could '*happily spend hours*' on these interests, and believes that it is '*good to be passionate about things in life*'. She also likes planning events way in advance. However she admits that '*the negative of this is that I like to stick to plans and times and can get upset when these change, and I am not very good at being spontaneous*'. Surprises can lead to '*meltdown*' and '*panic*'. Eden often takes things literally and struggles to understand certain things like jokes. She was diagnosed with autism a few years ago and now finds it easier to deal with it having that knowledge and now that '*I know what to look out for*'. Eden has strict routines surrounding how she organises her day and cooks her food etc, and can get '*unreasonably upset*' when these do not go according to plan. On a positive note Eden thinks that in some ways her autism has actually given her more confidence because she cannot change it so worries less than others about what people think of her and about fitting in, and it has made her more reflective than others. There are things that Eden reported wanting to change about autism in the first questionnaire, such as wishing to '*worry less*', have less anxiety, and stop '*always overthinking*'. In the first questionnaire Eden felt that her autistic anxiety made her life '*less enjoyable*'.

After the diary task Eden reported enjoying it except when she was tired. She states '*it helps me to be reflective and break my thoughts up to not get overwhelmed*'. She found it to be a '*good routine*' but could lose that routine on stressful days. The diary made her '*notice small things in my day that I wouldn't usually*' and that she '*became more aware and grateful of spending time with loved ones*'. Interestingly Eden reported of the diary: '*I was surprised at how much I enjoyed having an outlet to talk about what excites me e.g: special interests. I could write about how much I am looking forward to something and why, and not worry about annoying / boring someone by telling them*'. In terms of using the diary to seek out new positive things, Eden wrote '*I started to be more conscious in allowing time to relax or treats for myself, so that I knew I had a positive thing to write. This was nice, as even a bad day could still have a positive moment*'. Eden felt her positive diary improved her life-satisfaction and was also '*a nice reminder when I was struggling – even if I didn't have the energy to write a new entry, I could look back at old ones*'.

Eden planned to incorporate positive writing into her existing routines, and confirmed that she had done so in the follow up questionnaire. She feels the diary is particularly useful when she is '*overwhelmed and stressed*'. She describes the diary as a way to '*keep myself grounded and stop myself from getting overwhelmed, as it is a calming practice*'. She thinks that a positive diary could have '*a lot of benefit*' for some in the autistic community. Eden

divided her diary into sections such as 'made me happy' and 'achievements', and wrote short sentences under each. She wrote every few days. She recorded things related to her special interests, university work and how she was feeling, for example: '*I felt very supported and loved*', and '*I feel really happy about what I've achieved today*'.

4.10 Participant 8: Lucia

Lucia is a university student of eighteen years of age. She describes her autism in terms of a gap between '*what society expects and me*', and like '*navigating the world with parts of a map empty or indistinguishable*'. In terms of routines, Lucia says that she has to have a '*set structure*' for everything she does, plans things in advance, and feels '*uncomfortable or distressed*' if things change. She mentions social issues including masking. She loves her special interests which she describes as '*passions*'. Lucia says that autism has made her '*prone to anxiety and depression*', and that she finds it difficult '*to healthily process my emotions as they only come in extremes*'. Lucia would not want to change her autism, however would like to change how society views it. In her view this is '*particularly towards women and girls, as it is much harder to diagnose and there is so little research on it*'. Growing up without an official diagnosis was problematic and it is sometimes hard to convince people that she is autistic because she is female and because of '*old stereotypes*'.

Lucia found the positive diary and its routine '*easy*', she started by setting a timer each day to remind herself to do it, but soon found that she did not need the reminder. She felt that the diary helped her to process each day and focus on positive points, and to '*recognise what I am good at too in my autism, and not just what makes it a challenge sometimes*'.

At the end of the second questionnaire Lucia was planning to continue positive diary writing, and in the final follow up questionnaire confirmed that she was doing so regularly. She particularly likes recording what she is '*proud*' or '*excited*' about. She feels the technique is valuable and would be useful for other members of the autistic community too. In her positive diary, Lucia wrote an entry every day. She wrote about her university studies and plans for her studies in great detail. She also wrote about hobbies, interests, how she enjoys '*collecting things*', and how she was '*proud*' of small achievements, for example '*today was a major step – one I did not think I could or would do so early on in the academic year. I planned to go shopping by myself*'. Lucia writes about simple happy events and on one particularly nice day wrote '*it was such a good day and to be honest, it was so good that I*

had a hard time processing the emotions of it and happiness. So I wrote it down in my journal which helps a lot'.

4.11 Participant 9: Karla

Karla is an academic member of staff at a university and is in her mid-thirties. She describes her autism as both '*a blessing and a curse*'. She says that it has given her many great abilities, logic and talents which help her at work, however she struggles to understand things like sarcasm and what is expected of her. She feels '*unable to see the 'big picture' and only being able to see things in tiny detail that I easily get overwhelmed by things other people see as simple*'. She often tries to mask her difficulties and her true self and finds this '*exhausting*'. She says '*I thrive on routines*'. In the first questionnaire Karla reported '*I live with high levels of stress on a daily basis*', in part due to interactions with other people such as at work. Her autism caused her tiredness and much anxiety. She loves her interests but felt that autism affects her health negatively, to the point of missing work because of stress. However she would '*like to change other people and society, to make it easier to be autistic, rather than changing autism*'. She describes finding out she has autism as '*profound*' and helpful in understanding herself, '*discovering that I am autistic was one of the best things to happen to me*'. It has led to self-understanding and finding the autistic community which Karla describes as '*mostly great*'.

Unfortunately, Karla suffered several very upsetting events during the period of keeping the diary, including bereavements. In the second questionnaire she was keen to emphasise that '*I had a number of particularly challenging life events occur during the four weeks I kept this diary, so it may not have been the same results as if I was completing it in a more normal month*'. However despite this, the diary did become a routine '*to some extent*' for Karla, and she did find herself searching for positive experiences to write about. She says that the diary helped her to find things to be grateful for despite having a bad time.

In the follow up questionnaire Karla had not kept up positive diary writing but was planning to incorporate aspects of it into her life in future, as it helps her focus on the positive and '*put things into perspective*'. She thinks positive diary writing has uses within the autistic community alongside other things too, whilst knowing that is it fine to feel bad sometimes too when appropriate. Karla divided her diary into columns such as 'things I'm grateful for' and 'things that went well'. She wrote bullet points under these headings. She found things

to be positive about despite her difficult circumstances, for example: '*feeling better*' and '*kind neighbours*'. She also recorded some things she enjoyed like food and pride in her work and helping others. Karla wrote about when she had overcome a challenge, for example: '*I stood up for myself and had a difficult conversation but got what I wanted / needed*'.

4.12 Participant 10: Kitty

Kitty is an eighteen year old university student. Kitty reports that autism makes social situations difficult for her, and that she easily gets '*overwhelmed and overstimulated*'. However she has some particular interests which she really enjoys and can get very involved in, sometimes repetitively. Kitty feels that autism affects her mental health at times and causes her anxiety, but she also feels it has benefits like making her more observant. She would not necessarily like to change her autism, but would like to change how it is viewed and how autistic people are treated. She dislikes people using it as a joke, and using the word 'autistic' as an insult. As a result of others' reactions, things can be challenging and some days Kitty does not go out, choosing to stay at home instead.

Kitty described the positive diary task as '*difficult yet enjoyable*' because she is not used to writing so it was a new experience. She did find herself searching out positive activities in order to write about them, such as walks and engaging in social events more. She reports that the diary also made her be '*kinder*' to herself. Kitty felt that the diary did have a short term effect on improving her time management and that it also improved her life-satisfaction, she states that '*after filling the diary out, it made me feel more okay*'. She did not feel that she would keep up diary writing straight away as it had been a rather foreign experience, however she hoped to in future at some stage. In the follow up questionnaire Kitty stated that she had not continued diary writing for the time being but does think back to when she did as it is a positive memory. Kitty thinks that having something such as a '*pretty notebook*' might help motivate her to start positive writing again and this is something she will consider. She says that positive diary writing has uses in the autistic community in her opinion, because it is '*grounding*' and can make someone feel '*comforted*'. She also suggested that diary keeping could be helpful in improving communication skills.

Kitty wrote lengthy but occasional entries in her positive diary, resembling letters to a friend. She wrote detailed descriptions of things that she had seen and liked, such as acts of kindness

between others. Also long descriptions of activities she likes such as music, dancing and cooking (ingredients, method, how it turned out). She showed great appreciation for small things and for people being nice to each other, she wrote '*feel appreciative towards people that show any kind of love – be it platonic or non-platonic*'.

4.13 Participant 11: Alina

Alina is a student teacher who is nearly twenty years old. Alina has many autistic '*rigid*' routines which she hates deviating from, and says she gets '*overstimulated*' easily. She thinks she is '*obsessed*' with her special interests but is also '*passionate about becoming a teacher*'. Alina's autism means she gets anxious about things that others may not, however also has a lack of fear in situations that others might find daunting such as public speaking. Alina wrote '*I like to be in control. I always write lists as this makes me feel in control and makes my life manageable*'. When she was younger, Alina struggled to manage her autism and it caused her periods of quite severe mental illness and anxiety. However she recognises that autism is part of her and would not want to change it, she likes her differences and abilities such as problem solving.

Alina felt that the positive diary task was '*easy*' and '*it became a part of my routine relatively quickly*'. She felt this was good because '*I often get into the habit of only looking at the negatives*'. The diary task made her notice positive things more and she planned to keep it up. Alina said that she '*enjoyed the routine of keeping the diary*' and as a result '*I realised how much time I was wasting on negative experiences, and it felt calming to look at the positives instead*'. The positive diary task meant that she '*felt more satisfied with my life. As a new student at university I was struggling with managing each part of daily life, it could become monotonous. This experience has helped me focus on the small but happy experiences*'. She feels it helps her '*mental state*'.

In the follow up questionnaire Alina writes that she has kept up positive diary writing, and will continue to do so. She reports '*this positive diary activity has enabled me to feel more confident in my own skin and able to look for the small joys in life*', and it has made her '*more aware of small positive actions*'. She repeats that diary writing was '*easy*' and not '*pressured*'. She liked the fact that you did not have to write every day, as this allowed for when she was particularly busy with her studies. She thinks that other autistic people would benefit from it as it makes them feel '*less self-conscious about their own thoughts and*

actions'. Alina wrote entries every couple of days in her diary and wrote bullet points under each date. She commented on simple things such as a '*relaxing shower*' and '*fresh air*', hearing birds singing and eating something tasty. She wrote about positive feelings such as '*felt warm and cosy*' and '*I felt relaxed by the sound of the rain hitting my window. It was a good level of background noise to make me feel calm*'. Alina also wrote about progress she was making in her life in terms of self-management and how she is staying on track with that issue.

4.14 Participant 12: Nell

Nell is a university student in her early twenties. She reports quite a few difficulties caused by autism, such as struggling in some social situations and finding the move from home to university a challenging change. She sometimes has what she describes as '*sensory overload and panic attacks*'. Nell discusses social masking and says that she masks her '*'true self' with a character that I think people will like*' but this is tiring and '*emotionally draining*'. She also discusses rigid routines that she follows and will have difficulty if they change. She can be '*overwhelmed*' by people, especially in crowds, or by tasks, which can lead to panic attacks. Routine change is very hard and she suffers from much anxiety. Nell reports benefits of autism though, such as intelligence and creativity.

In terms of the positive diary task, Nell wrote that she '*really enjoyed keeping the positive diary as I found it really nice to reflect on my day and look for the positive things, as I tend to really focus on the negative*'. However after a few weeks, she missed some journal entries when busy and then '*lost the motivation*'. She explains that for her '*once I had gotten out of a rhythm of writing the diary, it was quite difficult to get back into the pattern of it*'. When Nell was keeping the diary she felt it made her notice positive things more, and '*found that during my day I was looking at things as achievements pre-emptively*'. She gives the example of household chores and writes that the diary meant '*I was more motivated to do them as I knew I would be able to reflect back on it later as something I was proud of*'. Nell also found the diary task helped with work, saying: '*I was more excited to go to work, as reflecting upon the positive things that happened whilst I was there encouraged me to want to go*'. Whilst keeping the diary she reports that she was '*much better at going to bed at a good time, eating three meals, and doing my best at work, because I knew that I could write about it as a positive achievement later on*'. However once she got out of the habit of diary writing after a few weeks, she began to '*slip up again on my time management*'. Nell thinks that she

was '*happier when I was writing the diary, as even though bad things were still happening in my day to day, I was more focused on the positive things which really helped me have a brighter outlook on the day*'. She reported an increase in life-satisfaction and confidence. Nell would like to start positive diary writing again in some form and keep it up because '*I found I was happier when I was keeping the diary, so this is why I would carry it on*'.

Nell chose to handwrite her diary, she wrote daily in detail, under headings such as 'achievements' and 'things that made me happy'. She regularly recorded small details and achievements such as eating healthily, keeping things tidy and her progress with her studies. She records positive things in work and studies such as '*I was congratulated by my managers for my good work*', and '*doing some more work on my essay rather than procrastinating*'. Nell did not complete the final follow up questionnaire.

4.15 Participant 13: Mila

Mila is a twenty year old student at university. Mila wrote that autism made her feel different to other people and like she is '*always doing something wrong*'. She felt that she struggles with '*strict routines*', '*a lot of rituals*', some sensory issues, friendships, and '*high emotional empathy but low cognitive empathy*'. She said that her routines are '*always at the forefront of my mind*' and that she experiences anxiety frequently, which at times has been '*debilitating*'. She feels most comfortable alone because of communication difficulties. Mila reports masking and wishes she did not feel this was necessary. But she is happy with who she is and accepts her autism and differences.

Mila described the positive diary task as '*sometimes annoying but actually made me think about all the positive things that had happened*'. It did not become natural, but she kept it up and '*it helped with my anxiety and low mood*' and made her '*feel more hopeful*'. Mila said that the diary helped her concentrate on positive rather than negative things and that she planned to keep it up. In the follow up questionnaire Mila explained that she was continuing to record positive things in note form. She feels that positive diary writing would benefit other autistic women because '*they have more struggles with self-esteem and anxiety and it is helpful to remember the good things that happened without creating an anxiety around it*'. Mila volunteered that '*I enjoyed the study, I thought it was well thought out*' and '*helpful*'.

Mila wrote bullet points every couple of days in her positive diary. She recorded simple daily events and activities and things related to her university studies. Examples include:

‘*went to a seminar for the first time*’, ‘*painted my nails a nice colour*’, ‘*got my washing done*’, and ‘*saw so many squirrels*’. She also wrote about small achievements potentially related to autism such as: ‘*went to the shop on my own for the first time which had made me anxious before*’.

This thesis will now turn to the Discussion chapter, where the above findings will be looked at in terms of their relationship to literature and other research. In the Discussion chapter the findings will be discussed in terms of how they answer the research questions about whether a technique of positive retrospective diary writing can aid perceived well-being, life enjoyment and management of autistic difficulties.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS FROM THE PRE-DIARY QUESTIONNAIRES

5.1 General Introduction

This chapter will detail the findings of the research in this study, derived from the coded data collected during the study from the pre-diary questionnaire. Findings from the diary entries and from the post-diary tasks will be reported in the following chapter. This is to support clear illustration of differences before and after the diary task. Establishing the challenges faced by autistic women before the diary task helped to inform the post-diary questionnaires, and to examine possible improvements in well-being and management of difficulties after the diary task to answer the research questions. Findings are presented without reference to the literature in order to preserve the focus on the women's responses, which fits with the feminist theoretical approach to the study. Reference to relevant literature follows in the Discussion chapter.

The findings in this chapter are divided into the themes that arose from the pre-diary questionnaire responses (see Table 5.1 below). Examples from questionnaire responses will be given to illustrate points. Details of how these final themes and sub-themes were determined can be found in the Methodology chapter. Questionnaire questions can be found in the appendix (appendix E, p.180).

Table 5.1: Themes and sub-themes arising from first questionnaire.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Social issues	Lack of acceptance Masking Loneliness Misunderstandings Dislike of crowds
Routines / rigidity	
Sensory issues	Sounds Touch
Positive aspects of autistic identity	Intelligence Enjoyment Love of interests
Negative aspects of autistic identity	Meltdowns Eating disorders Anxiety Tiredness Depression

The participants were given the opportunity to discuss any aspect of autism which they wanted to in the questionnaires. Table 4.1 shows exactly where each theme and sub-theme was found for all participants and is given in the first Findings chapter.

5.1.2 Themes and Sub-themes

Before reporting the findings and giving example participant responses for each theme and sub-theme, this section will briefly describe how each theme and sub-theme was identified and demonstrated in the data from the pre-diary questionnaire. Definitions of the themes and sub-themes are given in the Methodology chapter. Themes are underlined, and their sub-themes are immediately below them.

Social issues: These were identified when a participant mentioned autistic problems relating to others, feeling left out, struggling with or avoiding social situations, or not feeling satisfied with them.

Lack of acceptance: This was coded when a participant mentioned that they felt they had been rejected by people in some way or felt left out and not part of their peer group because of their autism.

Masking: This was identified when either a participant mentioned it specifically by name, or when they described feeling the need to hide their true selves from others for fear of rejection or ridicule.

Loneliness: Again this was noted when someone either mentioned it by name or when they described feeling alone and wishing for more friends or company.

Misunderstandings: These were demonstrated when a participant described ways in which they had tried to explain something but not managed to get their point across, or when they had attempted to say or do something, but been misinterpreted, attributed to autism. Also when they felt that others were not seeing who they really were or what point they really wanted to make.

Dislike of crowds: This was clearly identified when participants stated that they did not like crowds, large groups or gatherings, avoided them, or felt very uncomfortable in them.

Routines / rigidity: This was demonstrated in many cases when participants specifically said that they followed strict routines related to autism, but as well when they described routines and rituals which they adhered to daily. Also when they explained that they had a lot of difficulty in deviating from their routines or plans, or struggled with the unexpected.

Sensory issues: These were seen when participants mentioned discomfort caused by certain sounds, sensations, textures, lights or smells, and consequent avoidance of them. The most common ones reported were sounds and touch.

Sounds: This sensory issue was demonstrated when a participant mentioned an intolerance for a particular sound, which caused them pain or discomfort.

Touch: This sensory issue was demonstrated when a participant mentioned hating the feel of a particular texture such as a material or a food. (Some did mention especially loving certain textures too).

Positive aspects of autistic identity: This was seen when participants described ways in which they felt that autism benefitted them, gave them an advantage, or things they liked about being autistic.

Intelligence: When a participant expressed that they felt their autism contributed to higher cognitive abilities relative to peers, and they valued this aspect.

Enjoyment: Demonstrated when a participant reported enjoying something that happened or that they did.

Love of interests: This was shown when participants specifically mentioned their special interests (related to being autistic) and described them and how much joy they got from them. Also when they described their interests, and their joy and love for them was apparent.

Negative aspects of autistic identity: This was apparent when participants complained about troubles which autism caused them, talked about how their autism disadvantaged them in some ways, and led to negative consequences such as upset, stress or anxiety.

Meltdowns: Some participants mentioned meltdowns by name, others described being unable to cope or having a breakdown caused by an aspect of autism.

Eating disorders: Two participants specifically stated that they had had anorexia or bulimia. Others recounted disordered eating such as only eating an extremely limited range of foods.

Anxiety: This was demonstrated when participants mentioned anxiety, stress or worry, attributed to autism, and discussed how it negatively affected their lives.

Tiredness: This was shown when it was mentioned specifically and related to being autistic or caused by autistic traits.

Depression: Again this was mentioned by name and was considered by participants to be related to autism or its consequences.

5.2 Social Issues

All participants reported that they encountered social issues related to their autism, as described above and as defined by the diagnostic criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Social issues are reported upon here, and the participants' responses demonstrate how important this aspect of the lives of autistic people is. **Misunderstandings** with other people were commonly mentioned (by nine out of 13 participants), Mary said: '*certain people don't understand how I mean to come across is not necessarily how I come across. For example if someone wants 'an honest opinion' and I give it, but actually what they wanted was validation*'. Kitty said: '*I feel as if I miss social cues and tones*'. Lucia was concerned about '*never knowing the 'rules' and standards for social situations*'.

Also mentioned were feelings of being left out socially and consequent **loneliness**. **Loneliness** was named specifically by two participants, Jane said: '*For most people normal social life involves going to bars and pubs. I never do this so I can feel left out*'. There were feelings of sadness about being misunderstood and about being rejected or **not accepted** by others, which was mentioned by six participants. For example, Sara said: '*I feel excluded from groups a lot, as though I don't fit in with them, I also can recognise that I don't have adequate social skills in conversations, I get told talking to me is like 'talking to a brick wall' over the phone*'. Macu explained: '*Feel like I don't fit in with most people and this has been persistent as I've grown up – I've never stuck with one friend group growing up and even in those friend groups I always feel left out or different … It can be very isolating at times*'.

A **dislike of large groups and crowds** was another issue that surfaced amongst four participants. For example Eden explained: '*I can get overstimulated in busy environments and can't be in big crowds (immediately break down)*'. However there were several mentions of good and rewarding friendships within the autistic community. Karla said: '*Finding a community (the autistic community is mostly great) and other people who share so many of my experiences is life changing in a good way*'.

A particularly relevant and prevalent issue which was raised by seven participants was that of **masking** (usually named as masking but sometimes described in terms of not being able to be yourself around others). Interestingly, there were no terms used to prompt this in the questionnaire questions, but it was mentioned in responses multiple times. Participants described regularly **masking** in front of others by trying to behave in a way that they felt others would like and accept. Lucia said: '*I am constantly striving to appeal to others to the*

point it hides my real self', and Nell said: '*I mask my 'true self' with a character that I think people will like (a bubbly person who tries to make people laugh and be happy) but it is emotionally draining to do this all the time*'. They also consistently reported disliking the fact that they felt obliged to do this and that it was very tiring. Karla said that she will '*unconsciously mask most of the time which means many people don't see my difficulties … It is also exhausting to mask so much*'.

There was a consensus that society demands a certain set of social behaviours and norms, often incompatible with autism, and perhaps particularly for females. Mila felt '*conflicted with being myself and not managing my autistic traits, but then having more difficulty. Or I could just mask all the time but I hate it*', and Hanna commented that the typical image of an autistic person is a '*low functioning, usually white young boy*' which makes it harder to be oneself with those outside the autistic community. In relation to this element of autism Lucia felt that: '*I would like to change the perception society has on it, particularly towards women and girls*' and that as a female people questions her autism '*based on old stereotypes*'. All of this creates pressure for autistic women to engage in regular masking in social situations, rather than feeling free to be themselves.

5.2.1 Routines / Rigidity

All participants reported routines that they carried out and rigidity in their behaviours, as described above and as defined by the diagnostic criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A great dislike of change and much difficulty with unexpected events or changes to plans was commonly described. Disruption to plans and unexpected changes were cited as common causes of anxiety and meltdowns. Eden admitted: '*I like to stick to plans and times and can get upset when these change, and I am not very good at being spontaneous*'. Alina commented that autism makes her '*rigid in my routine and causes anxiety when I deviate from what I had planned*', and Macu described morning routines then said: '*if I can't do this then my day feels disrupted*'.

Many participants wrote about a need to control events and plans, as well as detailed daily routines and rituals such as the way food is prepared or the order in which things must be done. Kelly said of her daily routines: '*I do it all the same way every day and very precisely*', and Alina said: '*I always write lists as this makes me feel in control and makes my life manageable*'. Mila revealed: '*I like to do my daily tasks in the same order at the same time*

slots. I have a lot of rituals too'. She also wrote that her routines '*are always at the forefront of my mind*'. These data paint a picture of people who need routines to function, and who build their lives around them as a way of managing each day.

5.2.2 Sensory Issues

Some participants (seven out of 13) chose to mention sensory issues, common in autism, such as finding certain sounds unbearable and a sensitivity to touch or light. A lot of references to this were negative, such as finding the noise in a busy place intolerable. Five participants brought up sensory issues with sounds, while four mentioned touch. Eden said she was often '*overwhelmed by all the low-level noise*'. Some participants had found solutions like noise cancelling earphones. Alina noted: '*most vegetables I avoid because the texture disgusts me*'. Sara will only wear clothes that feel '*nice*' on her skin such as '*cotton pyjamas*', and reports wearing them until '*they literally degrade and have gaping holes in them and get told to bin them*'. Nell felt that '*emotions, lights, sounds, and touch hit me in a more forceful and in-ignorable way*' than is the case for non-autistic people. However some references were positive, such as an awareness that they enjoy some sensory experiences more than others, for example the touch of a soft material. Karla wrote that she loves '*when I am able to indulge in nice sensory seeking behaviours*'. The frequency with which participants chose to mention sensory issues, and the details which they gave about them, highlight further the differences between the autistic community and neurotypical peers in many areas of life.

5.2.3 Positive Aspects of Autistic Identity

All participants reported at least one thing that they found positive about being autistic, and many of them reported several positive things. There was a clear and general consensus that the participants did not wish to change much of their autism, however they would like society and attitudes towards them to change to be more tolerant and accommodating. There was common desire for more acceptance of difference and for more understanding of autism, especially in women. Lucia said: '*being autistic is not always the problem, but living in a world that is not designed for autistic people*'. This view shows an acceptance of self but a disappointment at the possible perceived narrow-mindedness of the neurotypical community in general.

Amongst the positive aspects of autism that were reported, the most frequently mentioned ones were **intelligence** (six participants), **love of special interests** (eight participants) and heightened **enjoyment** of interests and other experiences (six participants). For example Kelly wrote that the best parts of autism were '*intelligence, quick thinking, stamina, ability to concentrate for ages when everyone else has given up and gone home*'. Many participants reported excelling academically and appreciating their logical and ordered thinking.

Eden said of her special interests: '*I could happily spend hours researching these topics I find interesting*', and Karla said her special interests bring her '*great joy*'. The sub-themes of '**love of interests**' and '**enjoyment**' were often intertwined. There was also a general acceptance that autism was part of who they are. Alina wrote: '*Having autism is a part of me. I would never want to get rid of it because I can't imagine who I would be without it. I am different to other people, but I enjoy my life*'. More than one participant described autism as a gift as well as a curse.

5.2.4 Negative Aspects of Autistic Identity

All participants reported a number of negative aspects of being autistic. There were mentions of concurrent related problems such as **depression** (cited specifically by three participants at a clinical level) and four reports of or allusions to **eating disorders** (and in some cases possible borderline **eating disorders**). Lucia said: '*Autism for me impacts my mental health, I am prone to anxiety and depression with it, which can be brought on by burn out and overstimulation*'. The word '*depression*' was also mentioned several times in passing, as if taken for granted as a potential part of autism. Eden admitted to being a '*fussy eater*' and Mary shared that she '*developed bulimia for many years and had very low self-esteem*'. **Depression**, **eating disorders** and other negative mental conditions seemed to be seen as an inseparable package in some cases.

Tiredness and exhaustion (often related to the need to mask, but also related to the way the autistic mind works and thinks through things excessively) were discussed by five participants, some several times. For example, Hanna said she was '*easily socially exhausted*' and in relation to **masking** Nell felt that she was '*becoming tired because I was over expressing my emotions and acting*'. **Tiredness** could then lead to and be related to other problems.

Meltdowns and panic attacks from various causes (changes of plan, crowded places, etc) came up in the cases of five participants in the first questionnaire, even though there were no prompts in the questions about them. Eden said: '*I find it difficult when plans are sprung on me, and this can lead to a meltdown which is very inconvenient*'. Also Nell wrote that for her '*a passive aggressive tone can sound like shouting and can lead to sensory overload and panic attacks*'.

The most prominent and prevalent issue to be reported in the first questionnaire was that of **anxiety** (associated with autism). All participants reported experiencing **anxiety** very regularly, some of them to an extreme degree and on a daily basis. For example, Kelly tended to '*ruminate and overthink*' and '*worry and stress about things that I know don't really matter in the grand scheme of things*', and Karla wrote: '*I live with high levels of anxiety most of the time, and have done for all of my teens and adult life. In times of high stress ... it can overwhelm and cripple me*'. Some felt that the **anxiety** they experienced was constant, sometimes unnecessary, and disabling at times. Mila reported: '*I am anxious most of the time*', and Alina felt that she '*can get anxious over things most people wouldn't*'. Kitty complained that **anxiety** '*affects the way I think and operate as a person, and on especially bad days I just stay in my room because that's the only place I can say that I'm comfortable*'. Eden revealed that: '*I had therapy both in secondary school and my first year of university to deal with anxiety. Both of these times I hadn't considered autism, so a lot of it was unhelpful. Anxiety makes me overthink, which is part of why I don't like crowds. I'm always worried about a crowd crush and thinking of the best way to escape*'. All of the above responses show the extent to which **anxiety** affects the participants, to the point of dominating and limiting aspects of their lives at times. They also show how the **anxiety** is interlinked with other problems, and exacerbates them. Eden's comments about unhelpful therapy suggest that traditional remedies for **anxiety** may not be helpful in the autistic community.

All participants reported that their **anxiety** had a negative effect on their lives. Different words were used to describe the **anxiety** experienced by the participants in their first questionnaire answers, with the same word often appearing in the answers of several participants. Words such as '*worrying*', '*overthinking*', '*hyper-fixating*', '*catastrophising*' and '*stressing*' all appeared. **Anxiety** was a common element of autism that many participants said they would like to change.

In summary, the pre-diary responses present a variety of problems associated with autism and many personal struggles related to them. There were positive aspects of autism reported too, however the difficulties that accompany autism did seem to colour the lives and views of the participants, such as social issues and rigidity. **Anxiety** associated with autism was reported as a prevalent and debilitating difficulty. There seemed to be a need for more solutions in many cases.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS FROM DIARIES AND POST-DIARIES

6.1 General Introduction

This chapter will report the findings from the positive retrospective diaries that all 13 participants kept for four weeks then submitted, and then the findings from the data collected in the two questionnaires completed after the positive diary task. All 13 participants completed the first post-diary questionnaire and 12 completed the second follow up one four weeks later. This chapter will detail the findings of the research in this study, derived from the analysis of the positive diary entries and both post-diary questionnaires. This has been done in order to address the research questions about whether a technique of positive retrospective diary writing can indeed aid perceived well-being, life enjoyment and management of autistic difficulties. As with the previous chapter, findings here are presented without reference to the literature in order to preserve the focus on the women's responses. Reference to relevant literature follows in the Discussion chapter. A table showing exactly where each theme and sub-theme was found for all participants for the data as a whole is provided in the third Findings chapter. Table 6.1 below shows the additional themes and sub-themes which were found in the diaries and second two questionnaires.

Table 6.1: Themes and sub-themes arising from diaries and second and third questionnaires.

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Positive effects of diary	Seeking new positives Reducing negative thinking Happiness Improvements in work Pride in self Calming / reducing anxiety
Positive aspects of autistic identity	Enjoyment Love of interests
Hobbies / work etc	

6.1.2 Themes and Sub-themes

Before reporting the findings and giving example participant responses for each theme and sub-theme, this section will briefly describe how each theme and sub-theme was demonstrated and identified in the data. Definitions of the themes and sub-themes are given in the Methodology chapter. Themes are underlined, and their sub-themes are immediately below them. As can be seen from the table above, the theme of 'positive aspects of autistic identity' and two of its sub-themes 'love of interests' and 'enjoyment', are the same as those found in the first questionnaire responses in the previous chapter. However other themes are sub-themes from the first questionnaire responses were not found in the positive diaries or the second two questionnaires, (except in some cases where a participant was referring back to a previous pre-diary experience). The possible reasons for this positive skew are discussed in this chapter and in the Discussion chapter.

Positive effects of diary: This was demonstrated when something positive or beneficial occurred specifically because of the use of the positive diary, such a trying something new or achieving a goal.

Seeking new positives: This was identified when a participant reported that they had done something positive, for example reading a book, specifically because of the diary and wanting to be able to record it, which they otherwise would not have done.

Reducing negative thinking: This was noted when participants reported noticing that the positive diary had caused / was causing them to think less negatively or think negatively for less time.

Happiness: Demonstrated when participants stated that they were happy or clearly were from events that they were describing. They also talked about laughing, having fun, feeling satisfied, etc.

Improvements in work: This was identified when participants described how the positive diary had helped them in some way to improve in their work or study, such as motivating them to get to work on time, or wanting to get a good result so that they could record it in the diary.

Pride in self: Some participants actually mentioned being proud of something they had done to write in their positive diary. Others displayed pride by describing an achievement, something they felt they had done well, or something which had gained recognition.

Calming / reducing anxiety: This was demonstrated when participants stated that they had found the positive diary to have a calming effect and to reduce their anxiety levels. Other words used by participants included less overthinking, less catastrophising, less worrying, less stressing and less ruminating.

Positive aspects of autistic identity: This was seen when participants described ways in which they felt that autism benefitted them, gave them an advantage, or things they liked about being autistic.

Enjoyment: Demonstrated when a participant reported enjoying something that happened or that they did.

Love of interests: This was shown when participants specifically mentioned their special interests (related to being autistic) and described them and how much joy they got from them. Also when they described their interests, and their joy and love for them was apparent.

Hobbies / work etc: When participants mentioned things they had done as pastimes, activities they had engaged in, or their work in the form of a job or studies.

6.2 Findings From the Positive Retrospective Diaries

This section will begin with some general comments about the positive retrospective diaries. These were coded using the same code group as the second two post-diary questionnaires, as shown above, however they often contained large chunks of data which came under the same code, such as 'hobbies / work' or '**love of interests**'. The participants were told that they could keep the diary in whatever format they chose, and each participant did indeed choose a different method. Some chose to handwrite the diary, others chose to type documents, or to create a spreadsheet. Some wrote entries every day, others less regularly. Some participants wrote little and wrote in the form of bullet points. Others wrote lengthy detailed entries of several paragraphs at a time. However the same themes and sub-themes appeared across all these formats.

The content of what was written in the positive diaries was generally concerned with events that had happened and hobbies engaged in. The responses to the diary task and feelings about it were found mostly in the questionnaires following it, which therefore made them the most valuable source of data. Many of the participants wrote in great detail about their hobbies and special interests, using the diary as a form of '*outlet*'. Some mentioned that they enjoyed this outlet, whilst for others it seemed apparent that being able to write about their special interests in this unrestricted way was welcome. For example, Sara really likes music and wrote at great length about what happened in various songs that she had listened to. Macu, who especially likes cooking, wrote detailed descriptions about how she had cooked certain meals and with what ingredients.

One thing that all the positive diaries had in common was that the participants had all managed to find **happiness** in very simple things. For example there were many comments about finding the weather pleasing, enjoying tasty food, and appreciating kindness from others. There were also many entries about things that were small successes for that individual, such as completing a university assignment, managing to go out alone without feeling scared, or getting a good night's sleep.

6.2.1 Love of Special Interests and Hobbies in the Positive Diaries

Seven of the participants (Hanna, Sara, Lucia, Kitty, Jane, Eden and Macu) clearly used the positive retrospective diary to discuss their special interests, rather than simply mentioning them as things that they had done or experienced. Their **love of these interests** (which was one of the sub-theme codes which appeared in both the questionnaire responses and the positive diaries) was very apparent, and went beyond the activity simply being a hobby. Care is taken here not to link information about some of these special interests to other possibly identifying data, and precise details are not given, because some of the special interests are extremely specific and could identify a person to someone who knew them. These decisions to take extra care to hide identities were taken in response to ethical guidelines (see Methodology chapter).

However, the way in which the special interests were described in the positive diaries deserves mention. For example, Hanna has a special interest in a very specific type of film. Here are some parts of her entries, with the names of the films omitted and simply written as (film). The length of these extracts and the detail shows Hanna's **love of her interest** and how she is using the positive diary. '*We started with breakfast at a nice quiet place, then we headed home where I chased in my promise of watching (film), and having everyone watch it with me. It was a really hard choice of which, but I ended up deciding. We had some tea and snacks, and then headed to the leisure centre, where they had a whole new shelf of (film) stuff in the comic book shop. I could hardly keep still I was so excited. My grandma bought me one of the items and I was ecstatic. There is a bag there that I've seen over and over, which is a really cool bag (take a wild guess, it's (film) themed) but it's designer, and therefore costs more than a limb. But then my mum searched eBay and found one (not the exact same but actually better) which could be delivered to the UK! I was over the moon*'.

'*Today I finally got to see (film). I say this with complete bias that it was the most amazing film this year. … My nan came along as well and really enjoyed the movie. I was so excited I could not sit still in the theatre, I think I was shaking the entire row of seats, but fortunately there was barely anyone there to witness my insanity. We listened to the soundtrack all the way home where I got to do some more drawing. I plan on going to see it again as soon as possible*'.

'*Today was my second viewing of (film), I took three of my cousins. … It was just as good the second time around, they had fun as well. I was able to keep a slightly level head this time, it*

took a lot of effort, but I reacted normally to seeing the (film) on the big screen, trust me, it was truly a herculean effort. Later, I went with my nan and mum to go see (film) which was fantastic, I was a big fan of the musical when I was younger, and it was amazing to finally see it on stage'.

This writing shows how much Hanna **loves her special interest** and how much she gets out of it. She describes her **enjoyment** and **happiness** very clearly. It also seems to show that she is enjoying writing it down and recording the experience, as she had no obligation to do so, especially not in such detail. This seems to be an '*outlet*' for her, where she can describe things which others might not be interested in. It concurs with a comment that Eden made in her post-diary questionnaire responses where she says of the positive diary: '*I was surprised at how much I enjoyed having an outlet to talk about what excites me e.g: special interests. I could write about how much I am looking forward to something and why, and not worry about annoying / boring someone by telling them*'.

Another participant, Kitty, has a special interest in types of dance. Again the types of dance will be omitted and written as (dance). Here are some excerpts from her diary. '*After being productive, home wise, I was going to do a little walk around my house area but it was just too chilly so instead, I blasted some (dance) music on and just danced around my room and in the dining room. It was quite therapeutic if I do say so myself, dancing like no one is watching, and doing choreographies to a maximum level to dancing them with little details. ... My favourite one to dance to properly is probably (dance), it's like a fun workout. ... (Dance) choreographies are always fun and nice to learn and watch! I only ever go ahead to learn a choreography to a song if I like the song and I like the choreography too and if it's somewhat simple to replicate. I'm planning to learn one soon though I haven't found quite the right one. I'll let you know when I do!*'

'*I also made my own (dance) server that I was going to share with a few people in the current (dance) society. ... I wanted to create a space, on (dance) where people can talk about (dance) and other common interests because the current (dance) server ... is quite inactive. The Whatsapp group chat is active though and that's enough for me. That's all for today*'.

It seems clear from these entries that an outlet for writing about special interests is a valuable use for the positive diaries, and the fact that participants chose to write in this level of detail suggests that they also got some **enjoyment** from recording their engagement with their special interests. Moreover, they became very focussed on recording things about their

special interests at times. Perhaps the diary became like a person to share interests with, in the absence of a person with the same specific interests. Those who chose to write in detail about their special interests did not do so exclusively, they also wrote about other things that had happened and other positive things such as nice weather or a good grade. But for some, the diary writing about their special interests, and in many cases their **love of these interests**, seemed to be an important element of the positive diary task.

6.2.2 The Positive Diary and Work / Study

Another of the sub-themes which occurred in both the post-diary questionnaire responses and the positive retrospective diaries themselves was that of **improvements in work** (paid work or study). About half of the participants mentioned in their questionnaire responses that they felt they had seen possible **improvements in their work** caused by an aspect of the positive diary. This was for a variety of reasons, for example, taking **pride** in an assignment, or getting better at arriving for work on time. All participants wrote about **hobbies / work** in their diaries in some form. Some participants also recorded elements of **improvements in their work or study** in their positive diaries. Examples from the positive diaries are given below, again they are not linked to other data in order to preserve privacy. Also for this reason, in some places the subject taught is replaced with (subject).

One participant, Lucia, used some entries in her diary to describe her work on her studies and various essays. This seemed to be to help her think through aspects of her work and also express how pleased she was when she felt she was doing something well. These are some of her entries: '*Today is back to term time now after the pre-reading week. I'm quite glad about that to be honest as I get to be back to set schedule and, ironically, less work than the holidays as I have already completed the pre-reading and essay for this week. It's just about sticking to what I need to do and managing my work*'.

'*I did a bit of my report today, well a significant proportion of it, same as yesterday. It took me much longer than I expected but I'm just glad I got it done like I wanted to. I find it almost enjoyable to get references and write it up so it didn't feel too difficult to motivate myself to get it done. I do like that aspect of me: it takes little motivation or incentive to get it done as I like to be organised and would rather do that than stress all day and feel guilty for relaxing*'.

'*Today was a full day on work. I am getting on well with my schedule of the essay and hoping for it to be complete and handed in a week before it is due. A big strength to my autism is my organisation. It is very thorough when it comes to my assignments. This is due to being planned for everything and also avoid the panic and overwhelming feelings if it was not handed in early*'.

'*I know I need to give myself a break … which I have taken into account when making a routine of when to write my essay. I handed in the other one, the report, today too. I'm glad that is sorted as I can get organised for the other ones and be ahead*'. The use of the diary in this way seems to be both about achievements and perhaps a form of release once tasks are completed. There may also be some sort of mental organisational element retrospectively.

Other participants recorded comments in their positive diary about working well in their jobs. There are overlaps here with the sub-theme of '**pride in self**'. Here are some entries from three different participants. Karla: '*I made an amazing spreadsheet at work*'. Kelly: '*Reorganised books and stuff ready for the start of term. Good to get everything ready. This term is going to be extremely positive!*' '*Today I was teaching year nine (subject) and they were singing funny songs, I nearly wet myself laughing, such a great group*'. '*Tutoring: taught (subject), pupil did well and said thanks*'. Mary: '*AS results day and my two pupils got good results*'. '*Managed an hour long assembly without being too boring hopefully*'. '*Year ten first (subject) lesson was really positive*'. These entries demonstrate that **happiness** and positivity can come from work and study, not just leisure. Participants did not have to mention work or study at all in their diaries, but many chose to do so, showing how it can be a rewarding experience in the autistic community.

Another participant, Nell, recorded many small achievements related to both work and study in her diary under headings of 'achievements' and 'things that made me happy'. Here are some of her entries: 'I *worked a nine hour shift and was in a good mood throughout. I was congratulated by my managers for my good work*'. '*I started planning my essay*'. '*I organised the stock room at work and made nice maps*'. '*I kept up with the lecturer in my morning lecture and was fully engaged*'. '*I did a shift on the shop floor*'. '*Going to work and being calm, despite the sudden changes of tasks which were unexpected*'. '*I got a proper start on my essay and completely finished planning*'. '*I went to the library, even though I could have gone home instead*'. '*I made the final edits to my essay so it is ready to submit*'. '*The managers at work complimenting my work ethic*'. Again this shows positivity about

work and study, and the fact that it is being noticed, and possible overlaps with the sub-theme of '**pride in self**'.

The corresponding post-diary responses for these participants show that they felt the positive diary task was a potential motivator for elements of their work and study (this is described in the vignettes in the next chapter and below in the reports on the findings from the post-diary questionnaires). Given that all participants were completely free to write about whatever they chose in their positive diaries, it is noteworthy that a significant cluster of them elected to write about details of their work or study as this was being seen as a positive thing for them at that point.

6.2.3 Pride and Happiness in the Positive Diaries

The sub-themes of '**happiness**' and '**pride in self**' were apparent in the positive retrospective diaries as well as being mentioned in the post-diary questionnaire responses. '**Happiness**' might be unsurprising because the aim of the diaries was for them to be purely positive, however the amount of **happiness** found, particularly in small things, was noteworthy. For example, Nell wrote '*I laughed with my friends*', and Macu wrote '*I'm happy because I finished the crochet cat beanie and I got lots of compliments on it*' and '*I'm happy because I made beef noodles and it was so yummy*'. Sara made lists of 'things that made me happy today'.

Lucia describes being 'proud' of herself for going shopping alone which she was nervous about. She uses the same word again in her diary when talking about some university work she has completed. Karla shows **pride** in herself in her diary when writing about a time when '*I stood up for myself and had a difficult conversation*'. Nell wrote many things she was **proud** of under headings of achievements, such as '*I went to the library, even though I could have gone home instead*' and '*I called 999 when a man passed out at the bus stop*'. The positive diary seems to provide a place to record things to be **proud** of, and the fact that the participants chose to record these events is informative. Perhaps the **pride** of the experience was enhanced by recording it.

6.3 Findings From the Post-Diary Questionnaires

The remaining sections of this chapter will examine the findings from the two post-diary questionnaires, one completed immediately after the diary task, and the other completed four

weeks later. This section will begin with some general comments and following sections will then be divided into the relevant sub-themes that were present in these questionnaire responses, plus other noteworthy points, in order to report on the possible effects of the diary task.

The responses to the diary task were overwhelmingly positive, all participants found the diary to have some positive effects. No one reported a negative effect of the diary, except for Mila who commented that it was '*sometimes annoying but actually made me think about all the positive things that had happened*'. Eden and Macu mentioned that they did not feel like writing in the diary on occasions when they were tired, although this is not a negative effect of the diary.

The lack of negative comments might be in part because the diary task was not a pressured one, the diary did not have to be completed every day or at a set time, and could be tailored to suit the participant (see diary guidance in appendices). So for example, if a participant was tired, they did not have to write in the diary that day, or could catch up the next day if they so wished. Great care was taken in the wording of the instructions given to the participants, to ensure that they did not feel there was any right or wrong way to respond to the task, and thus avoid negative consequences. Participants were also told to focus on the positive and not record the negative in terms of the diary. In the final questionnaire, Karla commented that she felt autistic thinking can sometimes be rather '*black and white*' and that she thought the positive diary was useful as long as it was clear that it was still '*okay to feel negative things but that positive diary writing can help balance this*'.

Nearly all participants (12 out of 13) responded when questioned that they felt the positive diary task had improved their sense of life-satisfaction or well-being in some way in the second questionnaire. The majority of participants (11 out of 13) said that they would continue to keep a positive diary in some form after the study had finished. The majority (11 out of 13) felt the positive diary task would be of use to the autistic community generally. Some participants found that the diary had become a natural routine for them, whilst others found the process more effortful.

6.3.1 Seeking New Positives

As hoped, many participants (ten out of 13) reported that the diary had caused them to actively **seek out new positive experiences** in order to have something to write about, that

they would not have done otherwise. For example Kelly wrote of the diary: '*I liked the routine and wanted to keep it up so I was looking for things to do*', Nell '*found that during my day I was looking at things as achievements pre-emptively*' to write about, and Mary '*started looking for positives ahead of them happening*'. Many also reported that the diary task had made them notice positive things around them more, which were already there but they had not paid attention to before. Eden said she began to '*notice small things in my day that I wouldn't usually*', and Macu said the diary made her '*realise that there was always something to be positive about*'.

Overall the diary task appeared to have the effect of steering participants towards positivity, even though their autism was unchanged and some aspects of it such as social issues had not changed. Some participants described purposefully organising events in order to fill in their positive diaries, whilst others described smaller moments where they had sought an experience to write about, such as a relaxing bath or listening to the rain. For example, Kelly wrote: '*one day I planned to make ice cream with my kids just to be able to write something*', and Kitty wrote that as a result of the diary she '*tried to be more social. I also found myself trying to be kinder to me, treating myself to something whether that be buying something for my own leisure or watching something that made me happy*'. Hanna recorded that '*there was one instance where I went into the dark half of a shop, because I like the atmosphere, expressly to seek out a positive experience*'. These comments show the positive diary as a potential motivator to look for activities and experiences.

6.3.2 Reducing Negative Thinking

The majority of participants (12) felt that the positive diary task had **reduced the amount of negative thinking** that they engaged in. This could be considered to be an expected result. Some suggested that this might be because the diary caused them to spend more time looking for positive things, therefore allowing less time for negativity. Jane said the diary meant that she '*didn't worry so much about more mundane tasks*'. Mary said: '*I actually found I was catastrophising less and felt more positive about things generally, as I had a positive mind set*' and that the diary '*really gave me a new focus on what is good about each day and how the negative things can be cancelled out or mitigated by the focus on positives*'. Kelly said that with the diary '*more of my brain is taken up with looking for positive things everywhere*'. Some mentioned that they had had a tendency towards negative thinking previously, but that the diary task had helped with this. Alina commented that: '*I realised how much time I was*

wasting on negative experiences, and it felt calming to look at the positive instead', and Nell wrote that when keeping the diary '*I found it really nice to reflect on my day and look for the positive things, as I tend to really focus on the negative things that have happened in my day*'. Most participants (12) reported feeling improvements in life-satisfaction and a greater sense of well-being after the positive diary task. Some felt that this was due to the diary task causing a shift in thinking away from negative concepts. Mila said that the diary made her feel more '*hopeful*', Macu said the diary '*made me realise more about my own life and how much I have progressed*', and Mary felt that '*I feel more positive generally and recognise small things that are achievements and that make me happy*'.

A **reduction in negative thinking** could also be attributed to noticing more positive things, even if they were already in existence, due to the intentional focus of the positive diary task. For example, Alina felt that an important role of the positive diary was shifting her focus away from the negative and wrote: '*I just had to notice the positives which were already in my daily life*'. Mila reported that the diary task helped her to '*ignore*' negative aspects of her day.

6.3.3 Improvements in Work

Some participants (six) wrote or showed that the positive retrospective diary task had led to **improvements in their performance at work** or in their studies in some way, because they wanted to be able to write about it as something positive afterwards. One participant said she was teaching to the best of her ability in order to record it in her diary. Another said that the diary motivated her to get to work on time. Nell wrote that when keeping her diary she was '*doing my best at work, because I knew that I could write about it as a positive achievement later on*'. In a different response she also stated that the diary task made her '*more excited to go to work, as reflecting upon the positive things that happened whilst I was there encouraged me to want to go*'. Kelly wrote that the diary '*made me do more things rather than hide from them*' and '*made me more functional*'. She also explained that the diary '*really does make me think more positively and do more, so I don't waste as much time*', and helps with '*looking for positives at work*'. There were other references to improvement in time management, which in turn had led to **improvements in work** or study. There were many comments, particularly in the diaries, but also in the post-diary questionnaires about study assignments completed well, praise earned for work, or studies and work done to a high standard.

6.3.4 Happiness

There were many responses to the questionnaires, and comments in the positive retrospective diaries, about feeling **happy**. Some linked to specific events, other more continuous. Most participants (11) seemed to think that the diary task had made them **happier**, either overall, or at certain moments. Alina said the diary meant '*I felt more satisfied with my life*', and Nell shared: '*I was happier when I was writing the diary, as even though bad things were still happening in my day to day, I was more focused on the positive things which really helped me have a brighter outlook on the day*'. Kelly described the positive diary as a '*filter*' for negative things, thus increasing her **happiness**. Jane recorded that '*looking back through the diary, I realised what a great month July was, so I do feel very good about it*'. Lucia described how the positive diary made her **happier** by helping her '*find the things to be grateful for in my life*' and '*recognise what I am good at too in my autism*'.

Increased **happiness** is likely linked to the improved feelings of life-satisfaction that many participants claimed after the diary task. There were several responses regarding improved mood generally attributed to the diary task. A few participants even wrote a thank you for the study due to its benefits in their additional comments, and expressed how glad they were that they had decided to take part!

6.3.5 Pride in Self

Some participants (five) specifically noted that they had felt **pride** in their achievements during the positive retrospective diary task. This ranged from obtaining good examination results for themselves or their students, to much smaller things like being brave enough to catch a bus alone for the first time. Lucia wrote: '*recording the positives was important to reflect and remember what is good that is going on and what I am proud or excited about*'. Kelly reported that the diary '*makes me do more things without being so nervous because I do like writing it later and feeling proud of myself*'. Though it cannot be known for certain whether such **pride** would have been present without the positive diary task, it appeared that it was possible that the diary task served to highlight it and make the participant more aware of their achievements. Similarly, a couple of participants mentioned increases in self-esteem that might be related to the diary task, as it made them notice good things about themselves more. Alina wrote that '*this positive diary activity has enabled me to feel more confident in my own skin and able to look for the small joys in life*'. In terms of potential use for the autistic community, Mila said that the positive diary would be of benefit because '*autistic*

women, I think, have more struggles with self-esteem and anxiety and it is helpful to remember the good things that happened without creating an anxiety around it'.

6.3.6 Calming / Reducing Anxiety

The most significant and pertinent finding from the post-diary questionnaires was that of **anxiety reduction**. Almost all participants (11 out of 13) reported with certainty that the positive retrospective diary task had significantly reduced their levels of anxiety in some way, which they had previously experienced as an autistic person, and that the diary task had had some sort of **calming** effect, which was unexpected. This was particularly striking given that there were no specific mentions of anxiety or **anxiety reduction** in the two post-diary questionnaire questions, yet nearly all participants elected to mention it. The act of looking for positive things to write about, and thus **less negative thinking**, seemed to have an **anxiety-reducing** effect.

A variety of language was used to describe experiencing **reduced anxiety** during the diary task, as well as many specific references to the diary causing a definite lessening of anxiety using the word '*anxiety*'. Participants reported a marked reduction in '*overthinking*', '*hyper-fixating*', '*catastrophising*' and being less '*overwhelmed*', '*stressed*', '*fretful*' and '*nervous*'. Unprompted, participants used words to describe the positive diary task such as '*calming*', '*grounding*' and '*stabilising*', with more than one participant using the same word in each case. The voluntary choice of language such as '*calming*', '*grounding*' and '*stabilising*' by the female autistic participants was a clear and eloquent way of expressing the effect the diary had on them, which was also somewhat unexpected.

Some examples are: Mary said in response to the diary task that '*I have definitely noticed a decrease in catastrophising, which is something I regularly do*'. Kelly said of the diary: '*I find it kind of stabilising. It definitely makes me overthink things less, and makes me less fretful and anxious*'. Eden wrote of the diary: '*I think I'll continue to use it to keep myself grounded and stop myself from getting overwhelmed, as it is a calming practice*'. Kitty describes the diary task as '*grounding*' and providing '*comfort*'. Alina said it '*helped me with my mental state*', and noted that the diary meant she '*realised how much time I was wasting on negative experiences, and it felt calming to look at the positives instead*'. Mila wrote of the positive diary: '*I think it helped with my anxiety and low mood … It also helped*

me concentrate on different aspects in my life instead of stressful aspects that I was also experiencing'.

As anxiety is common amongst autistic persons, these findings were deemed to be very significant. It is also interesting to compare them to the comments that participants made about anxiety as a negative aspect of autistic identity in the pre-diary questionnaire. It appears that the positive diary task may have had the effect of **reducing anxiety** and worry generally and consistently for the majority of participants. It also had a **calming** effect on people who had previously felt anxious and stressed a lot of the time. This could be linked to the finding that the positive diary contributed to a **reduction in negative thinking**.

6.4 Changes in Tone / Mood

Although the tone of a participant's writing is a rather intangible concept, there seemed to be a noticeable change in tone in some of the participants' responses between the pre-diary questionnaire and the post-diary questionnaires. In the pre-diary questionnaires, some participants came across as rather down and pessimistic. However the general tone of the post-diary questionnaires was more upbeat in many cases.

Here are some noteworthy examples. In the pre-diary questionnaire Mila wrote: '*It feels like I am always doing something wrong, not just in social situations but even with my parents. I have a long list of things I struggle with*'. However in the post-diary questionnaire she wrote that she now feels '*more hopeful that each day brings good things*'. Alina wrote in the pre-diary questionnaire: '*I get overly emotional and often doubt my own ability*'. In the last post-diary questionnaire she reports that: '*I have started to look in the mirror and say nice things about myself, this positive diary activity has enabled me to feel more confident in my own skin and able to look for the small joys in life*'. Before the diary task Kelly wrote: '*Can be a daily struggle and tiring. Instead of a glass ceiling it's like there's a glass wall between me and some of the fun and laughter in life*'. This is a striking image which suggests she can see happiness but not reach it. Post-diary Kelly wrote: '*I felt more like a normal person, ha ha ha!*' and '*I really feel it makes me get out more, try harder and kind of live more*'. This is a much more positive and optimistic tone that before the diary task.

6.5 Generational Differences

During the thematic analysis process, other possible patterns and clusters were looked for. One that became apparent was that of differences in responses depending on age or generation. Whilst the samples of certain ages within the participant group were too small to draw conclusions with certainty, an interesting possible trend was observed which forms the basis for potential future investigation. There seemed to be slightly different initial responses before the diary task from the older autistic women (those over the age of 45). These responses varied from those younger than this age. Whilst all participants reacted well to the diary task and said that they found it positive and useful, it was the responses to the first pre-diary questionnaire in which the difference was initially noted.

There were two participants over the age of 45: Mary and Jane. Mary works as a secondary school teacher and Jane is a retired primary school teacher. In the first pre-diary questionnaire these two ladies, whilst reporting some difficulties and anxieties due to autism, both expressed that they were generally more comfortable with themselves than other younger participants. Mary reported that she no longer finds her autism very difficult to manage, but she did in the past. She wrote that this was the case '*particularly as an adolescent where I did not know why I felt different or socially awkward. I became extremely shy and wary of saying anything as I did not want to say the wrong thing*'. She later confirmed that she has got to a point where her autism is managed, writing: '*I have now reached a stage of life where I am happy with my family and friends and work. I can connect with people I like and don't worry about other people who may find me odd or stand-offish*'.

Jane mainly reported difficulties with large groups and certain social situations in the pre-diary questionnaire. She did not mention any great difficulties with self-management. In her diary she had many happy things to write about and seemed to view the exercise as an addition to her life rather than a necessity. In the post-diary questionnaire, Jane wrote that '*everything in the diary was a joy – some of which I would have forgotten if I hadn't written them down*'. Remembering positive events later is something that she mentions more than once and seems to be a key feature of the positive diary for her.

The younger members of the participant group (under 45) seemed to be less confident and have fewer coping mechanisms for autism in the pre-diary questionnaire. Unexpectedly, this was not only true for those in their teens or twenties, but for those in their thirties too. It would seem from this small sample that working out how to manage autism could take a

person well into their forties to establish. Two autistic females in their thirties took part in the study: Kelly and Karla, a secondary school teacher and an academic member of staff at a university respectively. From the pre-diary questionnaire, these two participants did not appear to have many more coping skills for dealing with autism than other participants in their teens or twenties, which was perhaps unexpected as it might have been supposed that more coping skills would have developed by that time.

In the pre-diary questionnaire, Kelly reported that: '*I waste a lot of time on things that objectively don't matter*', and '*I don't seem to be able to do things automatically like other people do. I overthink everything. It is irritating but I don't know how else to manage*'. She felt that her autism caused her a lot of anxiety and regularly got her '*in knots*'. Karla, in the pre-diary questionnaire, described autism as '*quite hard to bear on a daily basis – I struggle with self-acceptance*'. She also reported high levels of anxiety and revealed that '*I'm often so overwhelmed by the end of the day that I have to just hide in a duvet in the dark when I get home*'. Kelly in particular responded extremely positively to the diary task, reporting that it caused her to be '*looking out for positive things to write. I kind of centred on it and it made me more positive and happy*'.

Other younger participants seemed to have few methods for coping with autism and hence grasped at the positive diary task as a potential source of help with autism with much enthusiasm. For example, Alina wrote of the diary: '*as a new student at university I was struggling with managing each part of daily life … this experience has helped me focus on the small but happy experiences*', and that the diary '*helped me with my mental state*'. In the pre-diary responses, Mila wrote: '*I have a long list of things I struggle with*'. She felt that the diary helped with her '*anxiety and low mood*' and '*concentration in the sense that it helped me ignore any negative experiences in the days*'. Nell reported many struggles in the pre-diary questionnaire such as '*sensory overload*' and panic attacks. She also wrote: '*another difficulty for me at the moment are my coping mechanisms, of lack thereof*'. After the diary task Nell reported that it made her feel happier and more motivated to do tasks and arrive places on time. For example: '*I found that I was more excited to go to work, as reflecting upon the positive things that happened whilst I was there encouraged me to want to go*'.

In general there appeared to be a lack of help and strategies for autism amongst the participants except the two older ones (over 45). Consequently amongst these younger participants there were a great many reported problems and difficulties associated with

autism in the pre-diary responses. Many of the younger participants embraced the diary task with enthusiasm and seemed to benefit from it, to a greater extent that the older participants, as they seemed to have already found at least some ways to manage their autism. This generational difference may be specific to autism or may apply to coping strategies for life in general across other populations too.

6.6 Variety of Backgrounds

Data about age and occupation of participants were collected, and from this it is known that the participants were of a variety of ages, some were students, and some members of staff in academic institutions, one was retired. They were studying / working at various different institutions. They were also from different geographical locations. However they all reported the same issues with autism in the pre-diary questionnaire, such as social problems, rituals and routines, and anxiety. This demonstrates how the common traits of autism seem to be constant across ages and backgrounds. It also makes the similar responses of the participants to the diary task more credible.

In summary, the diaries and post-diary questionnaires generally revealed a tendency for the diary task to have some beneficial effects. It led to some **reduction in negative thinking**, **pride** and **happiness**, and caused some participants to **seek out new positives**. In most cases it also had a clear **calming and anxiety reducing** effect which stood out amongst the findings.

DISCUSSION

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study in terms of their relationship to other research from the Literature Review, the use of feminist theory as an interpretive lens, and in terms of the research questions. The research aims and questions for this study were as follows:

RA1: To explore positive retrospective diary writing in terms of its potential for using autistic routines and behaviours for positive and functional purposes.

RA2: To use feminist theory as a lens to study practical methods for improving the lives of autistic women.

RQ1: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of autistic females?

RQ2: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve females' self-reported management of difficulties / behaviours commonly associated with autism?

In relevant sections throughout this chapter, themes which emerged from the data analysis will be used to examine why the diary task may have worked, and this will lead on to how the findings of the study answer these research questions. Discussion will demonstrate whether perceived well-being and life enjoyment have improved in response to the intervention, and on the effect of the positive diary on self-reported management of difficulties and using autistic routines for functional purposes.

Research Aim Two was to use feminist theory as a lens for studying practical methods for improving the lives of autistic women. Therefore this will frame discussion throughout the chapter. Whilst many subsequent sections arise from the data analysis, a feminist lens is drawn upon throughout the chapter, and is particularly relevant to some arising issues which will be discussed. In keeping with other feminist research, the positive diary journey of each woman as an individual voice, rather than solely as part of a thematic trend across the group will continue to be borne in mind (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018).

The first sections will discuss the situation that the participants found themselves in before the positive diary and in general. Here the need for an intervention to improve well-being and life enjoyment (RQ1) and in managing autistic behaviours (RQ2) is apparent. This will then lead on to the answering of the research questions using the data. Each subsequent section is labelled with the research question which it addresses. Below is a table of themes from the data analysis and which research question or aim they predominantly relate to.

Table 7.1: Themes and research questions and aims.

Themes	**Research Question / Aim**
Social issues	RQ1, RA2
Routines / rigidity	RQ1, RQ2, RA1
Sensory issues	RQ1
Positive aspects of autistic identity	RQ1, RA1
Negative aspects of autistic identity	RQ2, RA1
Positive effects of diary	RQ1, RQ2, RA1, RA2
Hobbies / work etc	RQ2, RA1, RA2

7.2 Participants' Initial Reception of the Intervention

One of the many reasons that this study came about was because of the apparent gaps in interventions for adult autistic females. The study sought to begin to look into possible helpful interventions for this cohort, in the form of positive diary writing. Behavioural aspects of autism have historically been given little research attention (Harrop, 2015) and the focus has been on young children rather than adults (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Pellicano et al, 2014). How to go about helping autistic adults to function well has not received a great deal of scrutiny (Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al, 2018), with studies specifically for this group only just starting to emerge in significant numbers (Westerberg et al, 2021). There has been evidence of the needs of the adult autistic community not being met in many educational settings (Brede et al, 2017: Sproston et al, 2017). This was backed up by the findings of the present study in which the sample seemed to show that autistic women do not establish the effective management of their autism at a young adult age, but rather much later in adulthood, such as their forties, when most education may have been completed and opportunities potentially missed.

This lack of research and interventions was reflected in the responses of the study's participants. There was often a keenness to participate and an ambience of thankfulness that a study involving adult autistic females was taking place, especially amongst those participants who were under the age of 45. It was clear that some participants in their twenties and thirties were still in need of an intervention. This is an important point for education because it means that during the time when most people might be students, they are still having difficulties with autism that could harm and reduce their educational experience. This could lower grades and alter life chances. Before the diary task, Kelly wrote that autism caused her to '*waste a lot of time*' and got her '*in knots*'. Karla wrote that autism was '*quite hard to bear on a daily basis*'. In the pre-diary questionnaire, Alina reported '*struggling*' and Mila said that she had '*a long list of things I struggle with*' with regard to autism. Nell wrote: '*another difficulty for me at the moment are my coping mechanisms, or lack thereof*'.

These responses directly exemplify the need for research into interventional support and guidance for autistic adult females, and show that the two research questions were apt. Some of the responses at this point also suggest difficulties unique to women, as they are struggling to function as autistic women in a world with a narrow definition of being female. When girls reach puberty they are often 'initiated into the rules of femininity' and 'the influence of consumerism targeted at children may be pushing this period forward, in a phenomenon known as the 'pinkification' of girlhood' (Bradley, 2013, p.30). The interests expressed by many of the participants in the study, such as film, history, sport and computing, do not necessarily chime with 'pinkification' and imply that their difficulties with autism could be mingled with issues of how femininity is defined.

Several participants spontaneously wrote thanks for the study in their questionnaires, which again seems to underline both the rarity of access to opportunities for autistic females to take part in research, and the need for more. Kelly wrote a thank you at the end of one of her responses, as did Hanna who described participation in the study as a '*wonderful experience*'. Lucia chose to mention the lack of resources for autistic females, showing an awareness of the wider situation. She wrote that for women and girls, autism is '*much harder to diagnose and there is so little research on it*'. This starkly shows Lucia's realisation that there is little research into the condition for people of her own age and gender, echoing other research into autistic women's views on the subject (Putnam et al, 2025).

7.2.1 Effects of Autism and Gender Stereotypes

Evidence from the pre-diary questionnaire shows how debilitating autism can be for women. For example, Mary wrote that autism is like '*being an alien in a world that runs according to different rules and beliefs*'. Kitty wrote that '*on especially bad days I just stay in my room because that's the only place I can say that I'm comfortable*'. Lucia described autism as '*navigating the world with parts of a map empty or indistinguishable*'. These comments show how difficult autism can feel for these women. Karla's opinion that it would be ideal to '*change other people and society, to make it easier to be autistic, rather than changing autism*' is echoed by other participants.

These comments support findings from previous research that members of the autistic community want and need research that helps them with 'developing skills to manage in day-to-day life' (Pellicano et al, 2014, p.761). Especially given that changing or educating society as a whole could be difficult and slow. The sentiments of the participants also endorse previous findings that self-management techniques can be of benefit within autism (Carr et al, 2014; Carr, 2016). This is pertinent because many of the participants in the study commented that society as a whole does not frequently adapt to suit the autistic community. Therefore techniques that help those with autism feel better able to manage themselves (such as aspects of the present study) seem like the most sensible way forward to make autistic people feel more comfortable, bearing in mind their frequent need for a 'system' as a way of managing life (Attwood et al, 2014, p.144).

When viewed through a feminist lens, it can be considered that autistic women have two disadvantages to deal with, that of being autistic and that of being female, and that recent developments in feminist theory emphasise intersectionality, extending consideration to other disadvantaged cohorts too (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020). It is important to remember that autistic women's lives are impacted by the intersectionality of both their autism and their gender, and in some ways they are inseparable (Gopaldas, 2013). A feminist lens is useful as it can be applied to both (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018), and when viewing the results of this study in this way, it could be gleaned that autism is exacerbated by being female due to the lack of acceptance of female autism that some of the participants mentioned. The feelings of autistic women that they are rarely researched and that autistic males are prioritised (Putnam et al, 2025; Ratto, 2020) adds to this sentiment. The historical feminist idea that 'all women do share a common identity' (Bradley, 2013, p.65) could create an additional problem for

autistic women who do not all fit the traditional female mould, such as some of the participants in the present study who had roles or hobbies that were not traditionally feminine. Again these findings show that the research questions were appropriate for the participants as improvements in well-being and management of behaviours were needed.

The incompatibility of some views of autism with femininity had been noticed by some of the participants. Lucia, for example, felt that society's views of autism made it harder for women to get a diagnosis. This supports views put forward by Ratto (2020) in which she highlights how autistic males have dominated research samples, thus leading to a skewed impression of what autism is. Lucia stated that she would like to change how society views autism '*particularly towards women and girls, as it is much harder to diagnose and there is so little research on it. For me it makes it a difficult road to try and convince people I am autistic and questioning whether I am based on old stereotypes*'. This links with findings that autistic females are underdiagnosed (Cockburn, 2019; Fowler & O'Connor, 2021), particularly autistic females with low support needs (Shattuck et al, 2009) which the participants in the present study would be due to the fact that they are either attending university or are education professionals.

Hanna summed up how she felt society looked at autism saying: '*most people have a specific image regarding an autistic person, most of the time relating it to characters which enact stereotypes on television (i.e: Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory, Rain Man, or any low functioning, usually white young boy*'. This perception is completely incompatible with the sensitivity and compassion of many autistic women (Simone, 2010), and it demonstrates how there are problems specific to being an autistic female. It also shows how misunderstood and misrepresented autistic females can feel, and underlines the negative views of autism which can still dominate (Baron-Cohen, 2012).

Lucia wrote that she would like to change the way the world views autism, and Karla that she would '*like to change other people and society, to make it easier to be autistic, rather than changing autism*'. Some of the participants seemed to feel that autistic women are still struggling to gain acceptance. The aforementioned reliance on males in autism research (Ratto, 2020) means that autism assistance is more tailored to males (Fowler & O'Connor, 2021; Navot et al, 2017; Putnam et al, 2025). Karla's comment chimes with this and shows how an autistic female can feel that help and support is lacking for them. The participants' comments and opinions about lack of attention for autistic females also underline research

which found that they often feel underrepresented and ignored compared to male counterparts (Gillions et al, 2025; Putnam et al, 2025).

7.3 RQ1: Perceived Well-Being and Positive Responses

The responses to the diary task were very positive and there was a notable lack of negative comments. Mila wrote that the task was '*sometimes annoying but actually made me think about all the positive things that had happened*'. Eden and Macu both noted that they did not feel like writing in their diaries when they were tired, although there was no obligation or pressure for them to do so as the diary did not have to be used daily. This lack of criticism of the diary task was partly attributed to the design of the study, which attempted to gear the task towards autistic females. The study could have attracted females who like to write, although some mentioned that it was not a natural activity for them. In a male-dominated world, where much research has been carried out on and by males, and where many incorrect assumptions are made about gender, this approach seemed to be well-received (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018; Ratto, 2020). 'Much of the world has been constructed by men, with men's needs and habits as the unquestioned norm' (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018, p.329). The tailoring of the study towards females in the autistic community, rather than grouping those with autism as a whole, was seen as part of the study's positive outcomes in terms of how it was received, and the lack of negative comments. The participants were given freedom to adapt the diary to themselves as they saw fit (handwriting, typing, short or long entries etc) which also may have contributed to a lack of negative comments.

As described in previous chapters, the positive diary task was designed to suit autistic traits such as a liking for routines, and to work with them rather than against them. This was underlined as a correct decision by comments in the questionnaire responses such as the following by Eden: '*I had therapy both in secondary school and my first year of uni to deal with anxiety. Both of these times I hadn't considered autism, so a lot of it was unhelpful*'. This participant clearly understands how interventions and help need to be tailored to the autistic community in order to be useful.

The tailoring of the study to autistic characteristics was done in order to use autistic tendencies for positive purposes, but it also seemed to have the effect of appealing to the participants and making them feel comfortable with the task. Regarding the diary, Kelly commented: '*it really suits me as an autistic person, I like my routines!*' Unprompted, Mila

wrote: '*I enjoyed the study, I thought it was well thought out*'. Hanna described the diary task as '*incredibly validating*'. These responses suggest that creating a task which fits with autistic traits and designing interventions specifically for autistic people is beneficial for their well-being. This fits with the view taken in the Literature Review that seeing autism as a difference rather than a medical condition is the more helpful approach, and that reconsidering some attributes such as 'obsessiveness' and 'perseveration' as 'motivation' and 'determination' is useful (Wood, 2021, p.49).

The findings of the present study tie in with the results of Lin and Koegel's (2018) research which employed redirection of autistic traits, rather than trying to force change. Although carried out with young children, their intervention was comparable and was very successful, because they did not seek to eliminate autistic characteristics. The present study produced similar findings in that the participants responded well to something which incorporated autistic behaviours like routines, so was natural for them. Both studies aimed to create something which would be easy for the autistic community to adapt to and maintain.

The present study was also tailored towards autistic females in other ways, such as the use of questionnaires rather than interviews due to autistic females needing more time to process and answer questions that neurotypical counterparts (Cridland et al, 2014). The apparent detailed responses and high levels of engagement suggest that this may have encouraged participants to participate fully. The study also took into account findings from previous studies such as autistic people responding best to tasks that can complete alone and tailor to themselves (Muller et al, 2008). In terms of the first research question, the lack of criticism and negative comments from the participants regarding the study suggests that the design of the diary task did cater for their needs and well-being.

7.4 RQ1: Life Enjoyment Through Seeking Positive Experiences and Reducing Negative Thinking

One of the ideas put forward by the researcher before this study was that the positive diary writing task would reduce negativity and cause participants to actively seek out new positive activities and experiences. This appears to have been the case with the majority of participants reporting that they found themselves deliberating searching for positive things during the task, and that the amount of negative thinking they engaged in had reduced. Searching for positives seems to be unexplored in previous research in adult autistic females

(Pellicano et al, 2014). This seeking out of positive experiences is exemplified in the post-diary questionnaires by Mary writing that she '*started looking for positives ahead of them happening*' and Kelly writing: '*I liked the routine and wanted to keep it up so I was looking for things to do*'. A reduction in negative thinking is shown with Jane writing that the diary task meant she '*didn't worry so much about more mundane tasks*' and Alina explaining: '*I realised how much time I was wasting on negative experiences*'. This also links with feminist concepts about female oppression and hence pessimism generally (Bradley, 2013).

Seeking positive experiences was seen as an effect of the diary task that may be specific to the autistic community in some ways, due to their liking for the maintenance of routines, and perhaps also to women. In order to keep up the diary, the participant needed to find positive things to write about. However the reduction in negative thinking could be linked to the therapeutic nature of writing in general (Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009). Positive writing has previously been linked with assisting with depression, stress and emotion regulation in non-autistic populations (Allen et al, 2020; Baikie et al, 2012; Suhr et al, 2017). All of these matters are interrelated, with negative thinking and depression having much in common. Seeking positive experiences and reduced negativity seem likely to play a role in a person's perception of well-being and enjoyment of life, and could also contribute to their enjoyment of and participation in education and work. This has implications for educational institutions and practitioners because if students can be guided to think less negatively and seek more positive experience, it is likely to enhance their engagement with and hence success in education.

7.5 RQ1: Improved Well-Being and Life Enjoyment

Positive retrospective diary writing appears to have impacted the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of autistic females in various ways. This was clearly shown when 12 out of 13 of the participants responded that they felt their well-being or life enjoyment had improved in some way. Alina recorded that the positive diary meant she '*felt more satisfied with my life*', and Nell wrote '*I was happier when I was writing the diary, as even though bad things were still happening in my day to day, I was more focused on the positive things which really helped me have a brighter outlook on the day*'. Such comments support findings from previous research which links positive writing to improved mood and well-being in neurotypcial populations (Burton & King, 2004; Marschin & Herbert, 2021) whilst this study extends the finding to the autistic community. Burton and King (2004) attributed their

findings to improved self-management and comprehension of the person's own needs, caused by the process of retrospective positive writing. This appears to match the findings of the present study, where participants seemed to find that the diary task helped them to focus on the positive in their lives and thus manage their moods and mental states better. Kelly described the diary as creating a '*filter*' for negative things, suggesting that, as with the findings of Burton and King (2004), the diary assisted her in managing her mental state by paying more attention to positive and less attention to negative things. Lucia also commented that the diary task helped her to '*recognise what I am good at too in my autism*'. The diary did not change reality, but changed participants' views of it. Additionally this chimes with Reiter and Wilz's (2016) findings which they attribute to positive writing shifting attention away from the negative. The present study furthers the work of these previous studies by demonstrating how the positive diary task can work to improve sense of well-being for autistic females and be tailored to their specific needs.

Wing et al's (2006) study specifically looked at the link between positive writing tasks and life satisfaction as well as mood. The present study also replicates their findings in that the positive writing did indeed increase senses of life satisfaction and enjoyment. However, as mentioned, the present study additionally adapted the positive writing task to suit autistic females, and created a task which could be continued over time. This furthered previous findings and made them practical and usable for autistic females, who felt more satisfied with areas of their lives as a result. This is particularly demonstrated when participants mentioned feeling '*proud*' of themselves about what they have achieved to record in their diary. The following response by Alina is especially relevant: '*this positive diary activity has enabled me to feel more confident in my own skin and able to look for the small joys in life*'. This again shows a change in attitude or mind set rather than a changing of reality, leading to greater satisfaction. Mary specifically wrote that she felt the diary task altered her mind set towards the positive, and Mila wrote that the diary task made her feel '*more hopeful*'.

An improvement in life enjoyment and satisfaction is particularly important within the female autistic community, where prior to the diary task there did seem to be a somewhat negative outlook on life. Depression can be higher amongst autistic populations (Attwood et al, 2014) and historically healthcare generally has been male-centred (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018). Karla reported naturally being '*cynical and pessimistic*', Mila felt that she was '*always doing something wrong*', Alina would '*often doubt my own ability*', and Kelly said that '*instead of a glass ceiling it's like there's a glass wall between me and some of the fun and laughter in*

life'. These responses show a need for an intervention and the change in tone after the positive diary task matches the findings of the previous studies mentioned, but perhaps to an even greater extent due to the greater need for an increase in positivity within the female autistic community.

After the positive diary task, Kelly thought that the diary caused her to '*get out more, try harder and kind of live more*'. This is in direct contrast to her comment above in the pre-diary questionnaire. The positive diary task had a further effect on Alina in that in the final follow-up questionnaire she tells that because of it, daily she has '*started to look in the mirror and say nice things about myself*'. This sort of result, the fact that most participants chose to continue with the diary task after the study had finished, and the continued positive effects of the diary in the follow-up questionnaire, all support the findings of previous positive writing studies which found that effects were maintained over time (Baikie et al, 2012; Burton & King, 2004; Suhr et al, 2017). However the present study adds to and builds on previous work by designing a task which can be continued indefinitely. The positive diary does not have an end point and can be used over long periods of time. For the period covered in the study it seemed to have the clear effect of improving the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of the autistic female participants. Enhancement of well-being has been found to be seen as a research priority by autistic women (Cage et al 2024), and it could improve many parts of women's lives and work, by helping them to feel happier and more comfortable in their work and leisure.

7.6 RQ2: Negative Thinking in Autistic Women and the Need to Manage it

Some of the findings from this study suggested that one of the effects of positive diary writing in the adult female autistic community was that of reduced negative thoughts. This might perhaps be considered to be a somewhat expected finding given that the aim of the diary was to focus on the positive. However the findings may also reveal something about why autistic females seem to have negative thoughts, perceived as more so than neurotypical counterparts.

Within the social issues that autistic people experience, the sub-themes of 'lack of acceptance', 'masking' and 'misunderstandings' were common. Mila felt '*people never seem to understand me and it feels like I am always doing something wrong, not just in social*

situations but even with my parents'. Macu revealed that she feels '*I don't fit in with most people*' and as a result feels '*left out or different*'. These comment examples begin to show a possible reason why autistic women could begin to think negatively as they feel unaccepted, misunderstood and left out by others due to their differences. There are, of course, behavioural problems associated with autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Boyd et al, 2012) that could lead to negative thought patterns too, yet there were hints amongst participants that they felt it was society that needed to change, rather than them.

The feminist theoretical lens focuses on women as a marginalised group (in this case autistic women) (Bradley, 2013; Disch & Hawkesworth, 2018). Indeed it became apparent from the findings of the study that some of the participants did seem to consider themselves to be marginalised because of being autistic females (as opposed to autistic males), which in turn led to problems and unhappiness for them. Participants' descriptions of masking match those found by other research. The perceived need to behave according to societal expectations for females was apparent in, for example, Nell's comment: '*I mask my 'true self' with a character that I think people will like (a bubbly person who tries to make people laugh and be happy*'. Similarly Karla wrote that she will '*unconsciously mask most of the time which means many people don't see my difficulties … It is also exhausting to mask so much*'. This echoes the 'masquerading' seen in autistic females and described by other researchers (Tierney et al, 2016, p.82), also described as 'camouflaging' by autistic females (Kaat et al, 2021, p.97). 'Masking' is a sub-theme that seems to be specific to feminism, as the need to mask amongst the participants often seemed to relate to feeling the need to present the image of a female that society deems correct, and the literature covering it relates it to the female gender (Ratto, 2020; Tierney et al, 2016).

The perceived requirement to mask by some participants was seen as specific to autistic females rather than males due to the norms for behaviours for females being incompatible with autism. Mila wrote that she is '*conflicted with being myself and not managing my autistic traits, but then having more difficulty. Or I could just mask all the time but I hate it*'. However society's expectations for men seem to conflict less with autism, for example the '*techie*' (Grandin, 2012, p.6) which is a stereotypical image of autism seems to be more acceptable for males. Thus allowing autistic men to be themselves more than their female counterparts.

This also ties in with feminist ideas (discussed in the Methodology section) that feminist advances have in fact put pressure on women by making them expect more than might be available to them in life, and making them feel bad if they do not achieve it (Baker, 2010). The continued power imbalance between males and females (Bradley, 2013) is an additional hurdle for women already grappling with autism that is considered by some to be a disability. These issues seem particularly relevant to autistic women who may not easily access all opportunities now open to women due to their autism. This clash between reality and expectation could contribute to negative thinking, and again shows that when considered from a feminist perspective, being female could add to the difficulties associated with managing autism.

7.7 RQ2: Routines and Collecting as an Aid to Managing Behaviours

Research Aim One was to look at positive retrospective diary writing in terms of its potential for using autistic routines for functional purposes. Autistic routines are relevant to both research questions because they can be used to manage behaviours appropriately, and their incorporation makes the diary task more suitable and appealing to those with autism and thus is an aid to the sense of well-being it may provide. Repetitive behaviours and routines are a key diagnostic component of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and this study aimed to examine a positive use for this. All the participants reported that they had routines and were often rigid in them in their pre-diary questionnaires. For example, Mary said that she plans things '*meticulously*' and likes everything to be '*organised*'. Nell struggled if her routine was disrupted and Hanna described '*strict habits*' with '*meltdowns*' if she was unable to adhere to them. Again there has historically been a paucity of research into interventions in the area of autistic routines (Boyd et al, 2012; Harrop, 2015; Leekam et al, 2011).

The participants were asked to keep a positive retrospective diary, and to incorporate it into their routine (daily or several times per week). All of the participants who completed the study managed to do this, although some reported finding it easy and natural, whereas for others it was more of an effort. Kelly said of the diary: '*I liked the routine and wanted to keep it up*', and it was '*a routine I can feel good about*'. Lucia described the diary writing routine as '*easy*', however for Kitty the routine of diary writing was harder to adapt to and she found it '*difficult yet enjoyable*'. The fact that many participants found that the diary writing naturally became part of their routines, and that others persevered even if it required effort, seems to demonstrate that autistic routines can be used for positive and functional

purposes. It appears that this trait can be adapted for something useful, as was posited before the study, which has implications within education because it could be used for steering an autistic female towards focus on education and achievement. The removal of routines can cause stress for an autistic person (Wood, 2021) therefore may not be advantageous. It has also been suggested that routines are used by autistic people as a stress management technique (Milton & Sims, 2016). Therefore adapting them rather than removing them would seem sensible and beneficial, which was why the present study was designed to incorporate a routine. It was not clear whether the diary writing routine reduced other less functional ones, and that may be hard for a participant to see objectively. However it certainly seemed to become a positive routine and Kelly wrote that it '*became my main routine*'.

Another trait under the heading of routines and repetitive behaviour associated with autism is that of collecting. Autistic people are described as commonly having a 'strong desire to collect objects or information' (Searle, 2010, p.36). Some autistic people might not be aware of this, however it may have increased the success of the diary task, in that participants were collecting information. In her positive diary, Lucia actually wrote that she enjoys '*collecting things*', as did Sara in one of her responses. In a post-diary questionnaire response Kelly wrote of the diary: '*it is so nice to collect positive memories, much better than collecting things like stamps!*' The use of the word '*collect*' here is interesting, especially as it was not mentioned in the guidance and instructions given for the diary. It gives an insight into how the participant might be viewing the diary and supports literature which notes the drive to collect amongst some in the autistic community (Searle, 2010).

This use of an autistic trait for a positive purpose creates part of the answer to the second research question. The management of some autistic behaviours here could be being achieved by diverting them into a positive activity. Such a diversion into activities which assist educational attainment generally could be helpful for autistic students experiencing difficulties. The fact that the participants responded well to the diary task may be because it mirrored common autistic traits but in this case for something positive.

7.8 RQ2: Intense Autistic Interests as an Aid to Managing Behaviours

Intense autistic interests were very apparent in the diaries of some of the participants. About half of the participants chose to write about their special interests in their positive diaries, and often wrote in great detail (see Findings Chapter 5). Their love of their interests was clear

from what they wrote and how they described their experiences. The Literature Review discusses intense interests as one of the behavioural aspects of autism which is relevant to this study (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It has been found that incorporating the interests of the autistic community into things such as school lessons is motivating and encouraging for them (Grove et al, 2016; Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Wood, 2021). The diary task of the present study allowed participants to incorporate their special interests into the task if they wished to do so.

Some of the participants seemed to enjoy having a place to write about their interests in the form of the diary. Eden commented: '*I was surprised at how much I enjoyed having an outlet to talk about what excites me e.g: special interests. I could write about how much I am looking forward to something and why, and not worry about annoying / boring someone by telling them*'. Others also appeared to be using the diary as an '*outlet*' in this way, and the fact that special interests could be incorporated into the task was beneficial for them. Furthermore a couple of the participants also seemed to see the diary as a friend or someone to talk to about special interests. For example, in her diary Kitty wrote about her dance choreography interest: '*I'm planning to learn one soon though I haven't found quite the right one. I'll let you know when I do!*'

As with the previous section, the incorporation of autistic traits, in this case intense interests, into the diary task, seems to help to answer the second research question. The participants' reported improvements in self-management would appear to have been mediated by the fact that the diary task was tailored towards the autistic trait of intense interests and its possible incorporation into the diary task.

7.9 RQ2: Time Management and Work / Education

For some participants, the diary did seem to have an element of use for time management, particularly within education. It had been thought that time management might be an element that influenced the behaviour management of autistic women being considered in the research questions. Poor time management and management generally have been identified as prevalent in autism (Attwood et al, 2014; Searle, 2010) and are considered to be potentially detrimental within the field of education. Improved management was predicted as a possible side effect of the present study (which could be of benefit to school students, university students and academic staff alike).

The findings regarding improvements in time management and work were less blatant than others and perhaps overshadowed by much more significant and dominant findings such as those of anxiety reduction. However they were worth mentioning and may have made a contribution in some cases. It was also clear that some of the participants were already very organised in terms of their work and study, and therefore not in need of help in that particular area. For example, after the diary task, Mary commented that she was already good at time management so had not noticed an improvement in it. However for those who were struggling with the issue, the diary task did seem to have an effect. For example Nell felt that the diary made her '*more motivated*' to do tasks and '*much better at going to bed at a good time, eating three meals, and doing my best at work, because I knew that I could write about it as a positive achievement later on*'. Before the positive diary task, Kelly wrote that she tended to '*waste a lot of time on things that objectively don't matter*'. Yet after it she wrote that she felt the diary '*makes me waste less time on silly things*' and '*concentrate on what matters, like a filter*'.

These findings concur with literature (Attwood et al, 2014) on the need for help with time management for some in the autistic community, but there is a lack of research to date into strategies for such help. The data provide part of the answer to the second research question in that some participants did find the diary task helpful in better managing their time. This in turn led to other benefits, and could have an impact for those with autism in the world of education.

7.10 RQ2: Overall Management of Autistic Difficulties / Behaviours

The second research question of this study asked whether a technique of positive retrospective diary writing could improve females' self-reported management of difficulties or behaviours commonly associated with autism. As mentioned in a previous Discussion section, routines and repetitive behaviours which are a defining feature of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), are also a feature of diary writing, which was one of the reasons why the diary task was considered apt for the autistic community. As also discussed previously, some of the participants found that the diary keeping routine became natural for them, while others had to make an effort to incorporate it. Some seemed to particularly embrace it as a routine, for example Alina reported that the diary '*became a part of my routine relatively quickly*', Eden described it as a '*good routine*', Jane said it '*became quite natural*', and Kelly felt that the diary '*eclipsed other routines*'. This seems to demonstrate

the autistic trait of routine adherence being adapted and used for something positive. However the most notable and striking effect of the positive diary task on management of autistic difficulties was that of anxiety reduction.

7.10.1 RQ2: Anxiety Reduction as Difficulty Management

Anxiety reduction was one of the most frequently and consistently appearing effects of the positive diary task in the post-diary data. This consequence was somewhat unexpected, and the precise mechanism for how it functions is not certain. Anxiety is usually comorbid with autism (Boyd et al, 2012) and is inextricably linked to it (Lau et al, 2020). It is considered to be one of the most stressful aspects of being autistic (Attwood et al, 2014) and is more prevalent in females than males (Bekker & Mens-Verhulst, 2007). Indeed the present study corroborated this because all participants reported experiencing anxiety frequently and often severely in the pre-diary questionnaire. The participants gave clear details about how anxiety negatively affected their lives, echoing previous studies (Ainsworth et al, 2020; Attwood et al, 2014; Parr et al, 2020).

Before the positive diary task, Mary reported a tendency to '*catastrophise*', and Kelly said she tended to '*overthink*' things, be '*stressy*' and noted that '*little things bother my brain*'. Eden described wishing she could '*worry less*' and stop '*always overthinking*', plus certain situations leading to '*meltdown*' and '*panic*'. Eden had also previously had therapy (unsuccessfully) for anxiety. Lucia felt that her autism made her '*prone to anxiety and depression*' and that her emotions '*only come in extremes*'. Karla said autism meant she lived with '*high levels of stress on a daily basis*'. These example comments show how anxiety manifests itself within autism and how debilitating it is, as found in previous research (Attwood et al, 2014; Boyd et al, 2012). Despite agreement that anxiety treatment needs to be tailored to the autistic community (Parr et al, 2020; Reaven et al, 2012) there has been little research in this area (Moore et al, 2022).

Most of the participants reported that the positive diary task had significantly reduced their levels of anxiety, even though the post-diary questionnaires did not contain questions about anxiety specifically, and it was also very apparent from their comments. For example, after the diary task, Mary said '*I have definitely noticed a decrease in catastrophising*', Hanna wrote that the diary stopped her from '*hyper-fixating*', and Mila felt that '*it helped with my anxiety and low mood*'. Kitty said that the diary was '*grounding*' and gave '*comfort*'.

Regarding the diary, Kelly wrote that it was '*stabilising*' and '*definitely makes me overthink things less, and makes me less fretful and anxious*'. Eden reported that the diary kept her '*grounded*', stopped her getting '*overwhelmed*', and was '*calming*'. Alina also described the diary as '*calming*' and helped with her '*mental state*'. Words such as reduced '*overthinking*', '*calming*', and '*grounding*' appeared in the responses of more than one participant, and their choice is interesting.

The responses show how the diary task seems to have created a reduction in anxiety for the autistic female participants. It seems to have provided some sort of much needed stability for them. Perhaps it was something to focus on in a world that to them appears chaotic and unpredictable. It seems to have calmed them to concentrate on positive things in the form of a routine in this way. There are hints from other research that a routine or repetitive behaviour may temporarily reduce anxiety and be used for this purpose (Milton & Sims, 2016; Rodgers et al, 2012). However it seems unlikely that this is the case in the present study because all participants reported in the pre-diary questions that they had many strict routines and rigid behaviours already. Yet they still suffered from much anxiety, therefore suggesting that it was a different element of the diary task, rather than its routine alone, which caused the anxiety reducing effect. The fact that it was a routine simply meant it was suitable to and appealing to the autistic community. It seems more likely that the diversion away from negative thinking and a focus on happy events in some way led to a change in mind set and a reduction in anxiety.

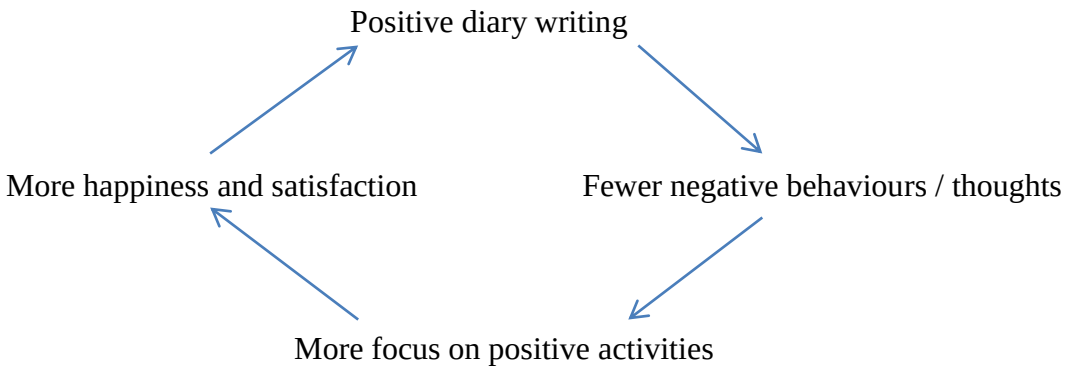
As mentioned in section 7.4, before the positive diary task, some of the participants did seem to tend to think rather negatively, which makes a diversion away from such thinking in the form of the positive diary task even more of a change than it might have been for a neurotypical counterpart. The anxiety reducing effects of the diary seemed to be continued as participants continued to keep up the diary, which most had chosen to do at the point of the follow-up questionnaire four weeks later, and most reported planning to continue to do in future in some form. Mary said she '*felt more positive about things generally*' because of the diary, and in the follow-up questionnaire she felt that it had been helpful in changing her '*mind set*'. In the follow-up questionnaire Kelly repeated that she found the diary '*stabilising*' and suggests that its beneficial effects might be because '*more of my brain is taken up with looking for positive things everywhere*'. Mila used the follow-up questionnaire to confirm that she had continued with the diary task and that she thought it would be useful to other autistic women because they '*have more struggles with self-esteem and anxiety*'.

The apparent anxiety reducing function of the positive diary task seems to be linked to several factors. These include concentrating on positive things, a lessening of negative thinking, and something concrete to focus on. This effect may have been achieved or enhanced by the fact that the act of diary keeping is a routine, which is something that is often both natural and comforting to an autistic person (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; James, 2017; Milton & Sims, 2016). Anxiety reduction would seem to be an important factor both for those in education and those delivering it in terms of creating a better mental state for effective study and teaching. Managing the difficulties that anxiety presents could have far-reaching effects in many parts of an autistic woman's life, both in terms of education and work, and within areas such as mental health, family life and relationships.

7.10.2 RQ2: Anxiety Reduction in the Positive Writing Cycle

In the Literature Review a possible positive writing cycle was proposed, which suggested that positive diary writing could lead to less negative thoughts and behaviours, then more focus on positive activities, which in turn could lead to greater satisfaction, which would increase the amount of positive diary writing, and so on. This suggested cycle is shown below.

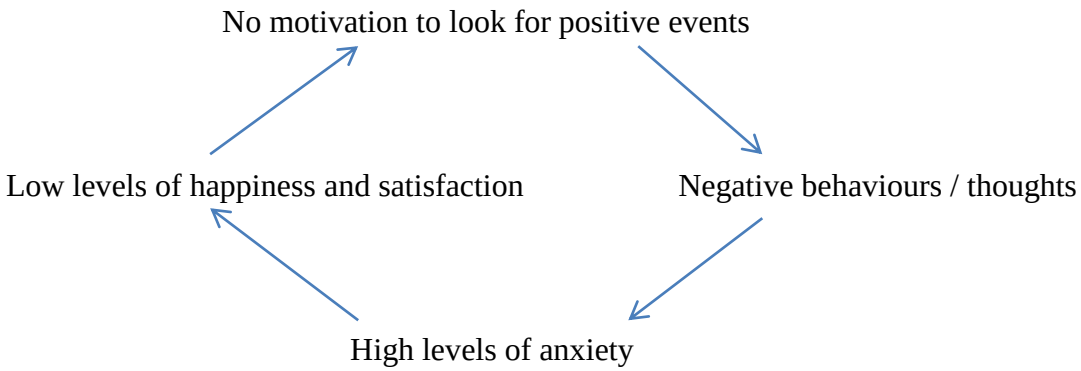
Figure 7.1: Originally proposed positive writing cycle.



The findings from this study seem to show that positive diary writing can indeed reduce negative thinking and increase life satisfaction. Although the effects seem to centre more on negative thinking that negative behaviours than was considered at the start. Further research would be needed to examine the exact workings of the possible positive writing cycle, and whether the effect grows over time. The findings suggest that the cycle may include, or be mediated by the anxiety reducing effect of positive diary writing. This and the high levels of

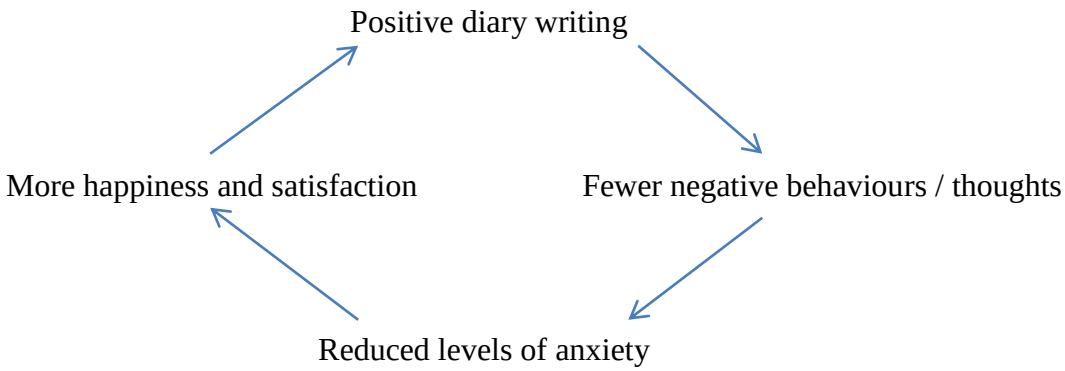
pre-diary anxiety revealed by the study suggest the following possible pre-diary cycle shown below.

Figure 7.2: Potential pre-diary cycle.



This cycle was created from the pre-diary data which highlighted the large amounts of anxiety suffered by most of the female autistic participants, and the negative thinking that a lot of them experienced. Given the significant findings of the study regarding the post-diary reductions in anxiety (a key part of autism for many), the following updated positive writing cycle is now proposed. This incorporates the anxiety reducing effects of the positive diary into a possible cycle showing how the diary might work. This new cycle from the study's results is shown below.

Figure 7.3: Revised post-diary positive writing cycle.



This cycle was created from the data as most participants reported that the diary had led to reduced anxiety, thus helping to manage a key autistic trait, and that they felt greater life satisfaction. It also takes into account the negative thinking which was marked before the study, but reduced after it.

The concepts of fewer negative thoughts / behaviours and reduced levels of anxiety in the above diagram could be reversed as precise cause and effect are unknown. However the two do appear to be related in some way, and connected to positive diary writing for autistic females. This proposed cycle also appears to link to the fact that emotional regulation has been shown to play a role in reducing anxiety generally (Bates et al, 2021) and reducing negative thoughts could be seen as a form of emotion regulation. The answering of the second research question about using positive diary writing to manage autistic difficulties, in this case anxiety, has particular relevance to feminism. Whilst anxiety is common within autism irrespective of gender, it is likely that it applies particularly to females firstly due to the mismatch between autism and society's expectation of females (Bekker & Mens-Verhulst, 2007; Grandin, 2012; Ratto, 2020). Secondly, potential negativity and anxiety are highlighted in females generally due to the mismatch between what advances in feminism, female emancipation, and women's rights promise, and the reality which is less equal (Baker, 2010), 'darker and more complex' (Bradley, 2013, p.184). This is again particularly true of autistic women who do not always fit into traditional female roles, making things even more confusing for them when some of the world has only just emerged from the omnipresent 'men had to work; women had babies' (Bradley, 2013, p.11) assumptions that dominated centuries. All of this makes anxiety a particularly female issue in certain circumstances, and makes the positive diary task and a potential anxiety reducing aid for autistic women even more important. This is especially true given how underrepresented autistic women can feel (Putnam et al, 2025), that they have been found to view mental health as a research priority (Cage et al, 2024) and that they can experience worse mental health and higher suicide rates than autistic men (Cassidy & Rodgers, 2017; Gillions et al, 2025).

CONCLUSION

8.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study has been about the effects of positive retrospective diary writing within the female adult autistic community. It used the concepts and findings of other studies into positive writing (benefits to mental health and well-being of positive writing generally), but added some novel ideas both in terms of the method (using a diary to try to seek out positive experiences to write about and creating a routine with it), and in terms of who it is being applied to (the female autistic community). The findings suggested that a technique of positive retrospective diary writing can have empowering beneficial effects within this community. It was found that positive diary writing had a high rate of improving happiness and sense of life satisfaction, reducing negative thinking, and causing participants to seek out new positive experiences. This confirmed and extended previous research into the effects of positive writing (Allen et al, 2020; Suhr et al, 2017; Wing et al, 2006). It also appears to be the first time that positive writing has been tailored for use within the autistic community. It was noted that autism was particularly problematic for younger participants, who had perhaps not yet established ways in which to successfully manage the condition. For these participants, the diary task was generally welcomed with enthusiasm, perhaps in part due to the paucity of other research in the area. The ability of a positive diary for adult autistic females to successfully increase sense of well-being is a new contribution to knowledge, and has implications in many areas such as mental health, work, relationships and family life.

In the pre-diary questionnaires, the study found that all participants reported both social and communication issues related to autism, and behavioural issues related to routines and repetitiveness. This was expected because these are key diagnostic features of autism. Problems stemming from social issues, such as masking and loneliness were also noted. Less expected was that all participants reported experiencing anxiety as part of their autism. Anxiety is commonly comorbid with autism (Ainsworth et al, 2020; Attwood et al, 2014), but the strength of feeling surrounding it, and the grief that it generated were surprising. Many participants reported wishing for it to be alleviated in some way. Additionally there were expressions of longing for the world to be more tolerant of and welcoming towards those

with autism. The extent of and role of anxiety within autism seems to be relatively unexplored and this study begins to create knowledge around it.

As mentioned, the positive diary task seemed to generally have the effect of reducing negative thinking and increasing life satisfaction, which might appear rather predictable due to the positive nature of the diary. However, the most noteworthy and unexpected finding of the study was that the positive diary task had a marked anxiety reducing effect in most participants. The anxiety-reducing effect of the positive writing appears to be previously unexplored in autistic adults and provides an original contribution to knowledge. All participants reported experiencing anxiety in the pre-task questionnaire as part of their autism, some to a debilitating degree. The majority of participants found that the positive diary task caused a significant reduction in their anxiety levels, which meant that a difficulty associated with autism was in some way being managed.

Most participants planned to continue the diary task after the study had finished, in many cases for this reason. A variety of spontaneous interesting language was used to describe the reduction in anxiety that had taken place due to the positive diary work, underlining the effectiveness of the task. Some described it as calming or grounding, others said that it lessened catastrophising, overthinking or stress, for example. The exact relationship between life satisfaction, lessened negative thinking and reduced anxiety in terms of the diary task is not known, although it can be speculated that the reduction in anxiety allows for or creates the increase in well-being, which appears to be a new finding. Knowledge of how to reduce anxiety and increase well-being in autistic women adds to understanding of how to promote good mental health generally. It may also be of use to other groups and genders.

In summary, the first research question asked if a technique of positive retrospective diary writing could improve the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of autistic females. The answer to this question according to the findings of the study seems to be yes. Nearly all participants reported an increase in sense of well-being and life satisfaction in some way after the diary task, and many were very enthusiastic about the diary's positive effects. The second research question asked if a technique of positive retrospective diary writing could improve females' self-reported management of difficulties or behaviours commonly associated with autism. The answer to this is yes in terms of the particular issue of anxiety which is usually comorbid with autism. Most participants found that the positive diary technique significantly helped them to manage and reduce their anxiety. It is likely that this

in turn in some way led to a greater sense of life satisfaction and more participation in positive things.

8.2 Contribution to Research

The aims of this study were to provide practical solutions for the adult female autistic community. However, in terms of theoretical understanding of autism, the study revealed that anxiety may play a larger role within autism that has perhaps been considered previously. It was reported as an extremely prevalent difficulty before the diary task, and there seemed to be much relief at its reduction afterwards. It also seemed to be linked to negative thinking and to play a large role in limiting the happiness of the participants prior to the study. The findings suggest that interventions in autism should consider anxiety reduction as a key part of any treatment. The implications of the findings of this study are important for understanding of autism and the autistic community.

As put forward in the Literature Review, the use of a positive diary seems to be of particular benefit to the female autistic community, where it suits because routines are necessary and structure is craved (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The autistic community's desire to participate in research that was designed to help them rather that study them on a more theoretical level has been documented (Goodall, 2020; Pellicano et al, 2014; Scott-Barrett et al, 2019). The present study aimed to do this and the participants seemed to respond positively to it, which should add to knowledge about how best to plan future research.

8.2.1 Contribution to Education and Practice

The findings are of even more importance in terms of professional practice. They could and should influence how autistic females are assisted and accommodated in schools, universities and the workplace, where the implementation of a positive diary technique could be used to help regulate mood and anxiety. Especially as anxiety is considered very damaging in terms of educational participation and performance (Reaven et al, 2012). All of the participants in the study were adult autistic females who had a link to education. They were either school students, university students, academic university staff or teachers. This was done because it was thought that retrospective positive diary work could have particular benefits within education. Improvements in life satisfaction and reductions in anxiety could well lead to

increased participation and attainment in schools and universities, which could be considered to be environments that might cause anxiety at times. Therefore the findings were indeed considered to be of use within educational fields, to help autistic females unleash their potential. They provide a practical, simple and inexpensive self-help method for autistic females to manage anxiety and increase well-being, so that they have greater chances of maximising their potential within education. Use of positive diary techniques could help struggling students to settle and encourage them to participate in academic activities more. No special training, expertise, equipment or funding are needed to implement them which is especially relevant in times of austerity (Reiter & Wilz, 2016).

The present study contributes to how employers might need to make adaptations for autistic staff such as teachers. For example, they may need more help with anxiety management in order to best function in their work than other staff. The present study also contributes more generally to how teachers, lecturers, university and school counsellors etc may need to guide and help their students. The challenges and difficulties described by participants in the first questionnaire of the study present many possible hindrances to a good education experience. The findings of the study should begin to help staff working with students to mediate their autistic difficulties and use their abilities positively within their place of education.

Overall, the findings of this study, in terms of retrospective positive diary use, could improve the quality of life and achievements of those within education and beyond. Both staff in their capacity to teach, and students in their academic success. Lower attainment at school or university for an autistic female may not be related to intelligence (Attwood et al, 2014) but to difficulties with autism and the associated anxiety. Reducing the anxiety with a technique such as the positive diary could not only improve the well-being of autistic females, but reduce difficulties and hindrances that hold them back from fully taking part in education and thus improve achievement.

Positive writing is a practical and personalised tool which can be used in many different forms to empower individuals and foster coping skills. It could mean that they could self-manage their own anxiety, mental health and difficulties, and increase their well-being and performance in all areas of life. Professionals such as educators, mental health practitioners and support workers could recommend positive writing techniques as an intervention for autistic people in addition to other tools. Positive diary use could be added to guidance and policy documents to make the technique readily available to professionals to integrate into

their practice and add to the range of help they can offer. It could also be included in literature and guidance given to autistic people, for example, through charities and support groups. Such literature and standard training resources for professionals seeking to implement the techniques should be developed as guidance would need to be clear.

8.3.1 Limitations

Like all studies, this one had both strengths and limitations. The main limitation could be considered to be that of sample size, which limits the applicability of the findings (Coe et al, 2017), however the research was considered to be a small scale exploratory study, which could lead to larger ones in future. It could be argued that only one researcher analysing the data could produce an interpretation that was biased in some form. This could have been overcome by having the data analysed by several people, to check for agreement and consistency (Dawson, 2013). Researchers in a similar field could be asked to check for agreement across coding and interpretation within findings and discussion. However in this case it was promised to the participants that their personal responses and diary entries would only be seen by the one researcher, in order to give assurances as to where their data would go and to encourage utmost honesty from them.

A potential limitation in any study could be that participants are not honest in their answers to questions, or answer in the way they think they ought to or that is pleasing. This could have been reduced by the use of questionnaires rather than interviews, thus creating a distance between the researcher and the participants (Gray, 2009). It could have the effect of making them feel more free to answer questions as they wish, and mean that the researcher could not influence them in any way while they did so. This particular study considered that participants were particularly likely to answer questions in a genuine manner because of the tendency for autistic people to be direct, rather than aim to be pleasing (Searle, 2010).

The study was only able to access literate participants and it could be adapted to incorporate a wider range of participants, participants with different life experience might produce varied results (Wing et al, 2006). A larger study incorporating other methods of diary use, such as recordings or videos, might be able to include more participants. More varied methods for contacting members of the autistic community could also increase participation.

8.3.2 Strengths

A possible strength of the research was the wide variety of participants, and the fact that the data were looked at as a whole and as a series of vignettes. The participants were of different ages (the youngest being 18 and the oldest being nearly 70). They were also from all different locations and backgrounds, some were students and some were teachers / lecturers or academic members of staff, and one was a retired teacher. This reduced the risk of obtaining data only applicable or relevant in a very limited setting. The small number of participants allowed for in-depth data to be collected and analysed.

Consideration was given to whether participants could possibly be masking at any point when responding to questions (behaving in a way that they think is required of them or is pleasing or that society deems correct). However participants said some negative as well as positive things about their reactions to the diary task, showing that they felt free to do so. Some participants signed up for the study but did not continue to complete the diary task, which meant they did not feel obliged to. The third questionnaire which was completed a further four weeks after the finishing of the diary task served not only to gather further data after a period of reflection, but to confirm the sentiments and answers of the questionnaire completed straight after the diary task, demonstrating reliability in responses (Dawson, 2013). There were no contradictions between the answers in these two post-diary questionnaires. Questionnaires generally are considered to lead to better reliability than interviews (Gray, 2009).

The responses of the participants in this study suggest that a feminist theoretical approach was a suitable one, and that there are indeed many current feminist issues associated with being an autistic female. The findings support studies in the Literature Review which found that both research and support for autistic people have predominantly been geared towards males (Ratto, 2020; Simone, 2010). This combined with some of the stereotypes surrounding autism makes being an autistic female even more challenging. Looking at findings specifically through a feminist theoretical lens highlights some of these subtle issues, which may otherwise have been missed. Using a feminist lens rather than a disability lens was considered to be a strength as it made a different contribution to autism research and made the focus about issues more associated with gender rather than medicalising autism.

8.4 Future Study

Further study needs to look at not only the mechanisms by which the positive diary works for autistic females, but to explore it over time. Participants were given a lot of freedom to complete the positive diary in a way which suited them. It would be interesting to examine how and why each style was chosen and if they adjust over time. The longer term effects of the positive diary also need to be explored. This study asked participants to keep a diary for four weeks, and questioned them about its effectiveness at the end of this period, and then again after another four weeks. Research into this technique over six months or a year would be useful, as would the corresponding effects on academic and work performance.

One of the research aims of the study was to explore the use of a positive diary writing technique in terms of its potential for using autistic routines and behaviours for positive and functional purposes. Aspects of diary keeping and its routine did appear to suit the autistic community and fit with their liking for routines and rituals. Part of the success of the diary task was attributed to the fact that it catered to the natural instincts and behaviours of autistic people. Some of the participants reported having to make an effort to incorporate the positive diary into their routine, but others found that it was easy for them and quickly became natural. However they all managed to complete it and most planned to continue it. Further study is required in order to see if over time the positive diary becomes a substitute for other, possibly less functional, routines.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Ethics Form

Ethical Approval Form A (version November 2021)

Please tick one:

Staff: ☐ PhD: ☐ EdD: x☐

Name of applicant(s): Jacqueline Green

Title of project: Autism and Positive Writing

Name of supervisor (s) (for student projects): Prof Naomi Flynn, Dr Anna Tsakalaki

Please complete the form below.

Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that	YES	NO	N.A.
a) explains the purpose(s) of the project	x		
b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants	x		
c) gives a full, fair, and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used	x		
d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary	x		
e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish	x		
f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention, and disposal	x		
g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this	x		
h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them	x		
i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email. If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included, and their name provided	x		
j) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants			x

k) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: "This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct."	x		
l) includes a standard statement regarding insurance: "The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request."	x		
Please answer the following questions:	YES	NO	N.A.
1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this).	x		
2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to 1)?	x		
3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research?		x	
4) Staff Only – Have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/humanresources/PeopleDevelopment/newstaff/humres-MandatoryOnlineCourses.aspx For all student projects, please tick N.A. and complete the Data Protection Declaration form (which is included in this document) and submit it with this application to the ethics committee.			x
5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form (included below with this ethics application)?	x		
6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research?	x		
7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional?			x
8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance?			x
9) If your research involves working with children under the age of 16 (or those whose special educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent?			x

10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data[1], or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents?			x
11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data?			x
12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK?	x		
12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country?	x		
13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English?		x	
13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application.			x
14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5?		x	
14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place.			x
If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below			

- Complete either **Section A** or **Section B** below with details of your research project.
- Complete a **Risk Assessment**.
- Sign the form in **Section C**.
- For all student projects, complete a **Data Protection Declaration form**.
- Append at the end of this form all relevant documents: information sheets, consent forms, and ALL research instruments which may include tests, questionnaires, and interview schedules, and for staff, evidence that you have completed information security training (e.g., screen shot/copy of certificate).
- Email the completed form, as a **SINGLE** document, to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration.

Any missing information will result in the form being returned to you.

[1] Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

Section A: My research goes beyond the "accepted custom and practice of teaching" but I consider that this project has **no** significant ethical implications. (Please tick the box.)	x☐

Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g., teachers, parents, pupils etc.

10 adult females (British, no SEN)

Give a succinct description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments, and procedures) of the project in up to 500 words noting:

1. Title of project
Autism and Positive Writing

2. Purpose of project and its academic rationale
The aim of this project is to investigate the effects of positive retrospective diary writing on adult females with high-functioning autism. There is evidence of mental health benefits of positive writing in other areas (Suhr et al, 2017; Wing et al, 2006) but it has not been investigated within the field of autism. The reason that this study is necessary is due to the paucity of research into adult females with autism (Ratto, 2021) and into ways in which their life satisfaction and study / work performance could be improved (Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al, 2018). Most autism studies are carried out on children, and adults with autism are often under-researched or not researched in the ways they would want (Scott-Barrett et al, 2019). The study aims to answer the following research questions:
RQ1: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve the perceived well-being and life enjoyment of autistic females?
RQ2: Can a technique of positive retrospective diary writing improve females' self-reported management of difficulties / behaviours commonly associated with autism?

3. Brief description of methods and measurements
A brief pilot study will be carried out before the main study. Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire covering aspects of their life with autism, they will then be asked to keep a diary of positive events for a period of four weeks, aiming to engineer as many positive things as possible in order to write about them. They should aim to record daily, or at least four times per week, each entry lasting between about five and fifteen minutes. These events can be subjective and of much or little importance, for example, getting a promotion, passing a test, laughing at a joke, trying a sport, cooking a meal. How to complete the diary will be explained in detail by the researcher and participants will be given a guidance sheet (attached below, page 11). Participants should aim to use the habit of diary writing in order to replace or reduce less functional autistic repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Behaviours within autism often serve a purpose and so replacement seems more logical than attempts at elimination (Lin & Koegel, 2018). At the end of the study participants will be asked to complete a second questionnaire, and a third follow up questionnaire after a further four weeks to see if changes are maintained. The three questionnaires are attached in PDF form entitled 'pre-study questionnaire', 'post-study questionnaire' and 'follow-up questionnaire'. They will be administered through 'Online Survey'. Responses and diary entries will undergo a thematic analysis.

4. Participants: Recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria
The participants (approximately ten in number) will be recruited through universities known to

the researcher, and through contacts from the researcher's previous work in schools. The participants will be university students or school teachers / university lecturers. They will be female and will be over the age of 18. They will be British and speak English as a first language. They will not have special educational needs (other than autism). They will be contacted through the university at which the research is being carried out. This will be done via general email to all staff / students, asking for those who wish to, and who are autistic (either with a diagnosis or self-identifying), to make contact privately and voluntarily. Some potential participants who have expressed an interest are already known to the researcher, and will be invited by email to take part on an entirely voluntary basis.

5. Consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)
Information and consent forms will be used and participation will be entirely voluntary, (forms attached below, pages 7-10).

6. A clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.
Whilst the project does not include underage or particularly vulnerable people, and does not involve obvious dangers, there are ethical considerations. Participants will be regularly advised of their rights to choose whether or not to continue, and will be assured that there are not right or wrong outcomes to the project. They will be informed that they can contact the researcher at any time in case of doubts or queries. The project has been designed to suit participants with autism, for example in that it uses open-ended questionnaires rather than interviews in order to accommodate their preference for time to think before answering and dislike of the unexpected (Cridland et al, 2014). Diary entries considered private can be removed by participants before submission. Data will be stored, only in pseudonymised form, on a password protected computer. Names and identifying details will not be stored and only the researcher will know which responses belong to which participant.

7. Estimated start date and duration of project
The main project would ideally run over four weeks in the summer of 2023, allowing participants time to complete the first questionnaires and diaries in the school / university holidays. The last questionnaire would be completed four weeks later.

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-Wing, J, Schutte, N. & Byrne, B. (2006) The Effect of Positive Writing on Emotional Intelligence and Life Satisfaction. *Journal of Clinical Psychology.* **62**(10),1291-1302.

Section B: I consider that this project **may** have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.	☐

Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g., teachers, parents, pupils etc.

Give a succinct description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments, and procedures) of the project in up to 500 words.

1. Title of project
2. Purpose of project and its academic rationale
3. Brief description of methods and measurements
4. Participants: Recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria
5. Consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)
6. A clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.
7. Estimated start date and duration of project

RISK ASSESSMENT

Brief outline of Work/activity:	Completing questionnaires and keeping a positive retrospective diary.

Where will data be collected?	In participants' homes, using their computers / laptops.

Significant hazards:	None.

Who might be exposed to hazards?	N/A.

Existing control measures:	N/A.

Are risks adequately controlled:	N/A.

If NO, list additional controls and actions required:	Additional controls	Action by:

Section C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT

Note: a signature is required. Typed names are not acceptable.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

Signed: Print Name: Jacqueline Green Date: 16.05.2023

STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: Print Name: Richard Harris Date: 17.05.2023

(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative) *

* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

Information Management and Policy Services

Data Protection Declaration for Ethical Approval (PhD/EdD projects)

This document can be used to provide assurances to your ethics committee where confirmation of data protection training and awareness is required for ethical approval.

By signing this declaration, I confirm that:

- I have read and understood the requirements for data protection within the *Data Protection for Researchers* document located here:

  https://www.reading.ac.uk/imps/-/media/49b402bbe9a74ae59dd8f4f080652123.ashx

- I have asked for advice on any elements that I am *unclear on* prior to submitting my ethics approval request, either from my supervisor, or the data protection team at: imps@reading.ac.uk

- I understand that I am responsible for the secure handling, and protection of, my research data.

- I know who to contact in the event of an information security incident, a data protection complaint or a request made under data subject access rights.

Researcher to complete

Project / Study Title: Autism and Positive Writing

NAME	STUDENT ID NUMBER	DATE
Jacqueline Green	28803580	16.05.2023

Supervisor signature

Note for supervisors: Please verify that your student has completed the above actions

NAME	STAFF ID NUMBER	DATE
Naomi Flynn	Dc910882	17.05.2023

Submit your completed signed copy along with the other documents pertaining to the ethics application.

Copies to be retained by ethics committee.

VERSION	KEEPER	REVIEWED	APPROVED BY	APPROVAL DATE
1.0	IMPS	Annually	IMPS	

INFORMATION SHEET
Research Project: Autism and Positive Writing

Project Team Members: Jacqueline Green

Dear Participant

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study I am undertaking.

What is the study?

The study involves keeping a positive diary over the course of four weeks, and completing a questionnaire about it, and about your experiences of autism, before starting and after finishing. There will be a further final questionnaire to be completed four weeks after the study has ended.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been chosen to take part as an intelligent and literate adult female on the autistic spectrum (either by diagnosis or by self-identification).

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you give your consent to participate. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting Jacqueline Green, tel: 0034 699251299, email: yz803580@student.reading.ac.uk.

What will happen if I take part?

After filling in a questionnaire, you will be asked to keep a diary of positive things that happen over four weeks. How to do this will be explained in detail by the researcher, and you will be given a guidance sheet. You should aim to take part in or create as many happy events and achievements as possible and record them in a retrospective diary every day or few days. Each entry might take between five and 15 minutes. At the end of this period you will be asked to submit your diary, after removing anything private, and fill in one questionnaire at that point, and another follow up one four weeks later. Each of the three questionnaires should take between half an hour and one hour to fill in. You might be asked to answer some more questions in an interview / online if any clarification or more information is needed.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by participants in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team listed at the start of this letter. Neither you nor your school, university or place of work will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the University.
You may find the study enlightening and feel that it is a beneficial experience. However, there are no right or wrong outcomes, and it is also possible that it may not be suited to you.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. Data will be stored on a password protected computer only in anonymised form.

In line with the University's policy on the management of research data, anonymised data gathered in this research may be preserved and made publicly available for others to consult and re-use. All anonymised research data will be retained indefinitely whereas any identifying information such as consent forms will be disposed of securely after the research findings have been written up. The results of the study will be presented at national and international conferences, and in written reports and articles. We can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, we will discard your data.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Prof Naomi Flynn, tel: 0044 1183782770, email: n.flynn@reading.ac.uk.

Where can I get more information?

More information can be obtained at any time from Jacqueline Green, email: yz803580@student.reading.ac.uk.

If you are happy to take part, please complete and return to Jacqueline Green the attached consent form.

Yours faithfully

J Green

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data protection for information sheets

The organisation responsible for protection of your personal information is the University of Reading (the Data Controller). Queries regarding data protection and your rights should be directed to the University Data Protection Officer at imps@reading.ac.uk, or in writing to: Information Management & Policy Services, University of Reading, Whiteknights, P O Box 217, Reading, RG6 6AH.

The University of Reading collects, analyses, uses, shares, and retains personal data for the purposes of research in the public interest. Under data protection law we are required to inform you that this use of the personal data we may hold about you is on the lawful basis of being a public task in the

public interest and where it is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes. If you withdraw from a research study, which processes your personal data, dependant on the stage of withdrawal, we may still rely on this lawful basis to continue using your data if your withdrawal would be of significant detriment to the research study aims. We will always have in place appropriate safeguards to protect your personal data.

If we have included any additional requests for use of your data, for example adding you to a registration list for the purposes of inviting you to take part in future studies, this will be done only with your consent where you have provided it to us and should you wish to be removed from the register at a later date, you should contact Prof Naomi Flynn, tel: 0044 1183782770, email: n.flynn@reading.ac.uk.

You have certain rights under data protection law which are:

- Withdraw your consent, for example if you opted in to be added to a participant register
- Access your personal data or ask for a copy
- Rectify inaccuracies in personal data that we hold about you
- Be forgotten, that is your details to be removed from systems that we use to process your personal data
- Restrict uses of your data
- Object to uses of your data, for example retention after you have withdrawn from a study

Some restrictions apply to the above rights where data is collected and used for research purposes.

You can find out more about your rights on the website of the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) at https://ico.org.uk

You also have a right to complain the ICO if you are unhappy with how your data has been handled. Please contact the University Data Protection Officer in the first instance.

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Autism and Positive Writing

Please complete and return this form to: Jacqueline Green

1. I have read the information sheet about the project and received a copy of it. ☐

2. I understand what the purpose of the study is and what you want me to do. All my questio have been answered. ☐

3. I agree to complete questionnaires before and after the study, and a follow-up questionna ☐

4. I agree to complete a diary of positive events as explained by the researcher for a period o weeks. ☐

5. I understand that I can stop participating in the study at any time without repercussions. ☐

Name:

Signed:

Date:

GUIDANCE FOR PARTICIPANTS

Please keep a diary of positive things that happen over the next four weeks. This can take any form you choose, however you may find it simplest to make it as a Word document and type the date at the start of each entry. You do not have to write every day, however you can do, and should aim to write at least four times per week. At the end of the study your diary entries will be submitted, but you can delete anything private or that you do not wish to reveal first.

You should aim to write as much as possible, explaining what has taken place, why it is positive and why it made you happy etc. You should aim during this four week period to create as many positive events as possible so as to write as much as possible. Consider treating this diary as a daily routine which gives structure to your day.

There is much evidence of positive writing having beneficial effects on mental health, many successful studies have been carried out. There is also evidence that members of the autistic community benefit from having structure and routines. The routine of keeping a diary requires you to find and engage in positive things, in order to have something to write about. The diary entries do not have to be about huge events, but can be simple and subjective. Here are some examples of possible entry and sentence starters.

Possible starts of diary entries:

-I did sport today and enjoyed it.

-My teacher praised my work today.

-I cooked a dinner and myself and my family loved it.

-Someone made me laugh out loud.

-I made a good contribution at a work meeting.

-I cuddled my cat who loves me.

-I won a game of chess.

-There were beautiful flowers on my way to work.

-I went for a walk with a friend.

-I am improving at playing the piano.

-I took a good photograph today.

-My football team scored a goal.

-I got to work on time today.

Examples of starters for possible sentences:

-Today this made me smile …..

-I saw this nice thing today …..

-Today for the first time I went to …..

-Today I was brave enough to …..

-I was proud of myself today because …..

-I received this compliment …..

-I felt happy because …

Possible Template for Starting Diary

(This is an example which you can follow, it is to help you get started, but you do not have to use this format, and you do not have to fill in every day or every section).

Day & Date	Diary
Tuesday 1st August 2023	Things that were achievements for me today: Things that made me happy today: Positive things that happened today:
Wednesday 2nd August 2023	Things that were achievements for me today: Things that made me happy today: Positive things that happened today:
Thursday 3rd August 2023	Things that were achievements for me today: Things that made me happy today: Positive things that happened today:
Friday 4th August 2023	
Saturday 5th August 2023	
Sunday 6th August 2023	
Monday 7th August 2023	

Appendix B: Participant Advert

Calling all ladies with Autism / Aspergers! (Either those with a diagnosis or who self-identify, and who are 18 or over). I am carrying out a small study at the University of Reading into how to improve the lives of autistic women, who often seem to be neglected when it comes to research. The study is not time consuming and simply involves answering some questionnaire questions about your views on autism, keeping a positive diary for a few weeks, then answering some more questions about how you found it. All responses are confidential and no names will be published. If you would like to take part or get some more information I would be delighted to hear from you, my email is: j.p.green@pgr.reading.ac.uk Let's start getting autistic ladies' voices heard!

Appendix C: Information and Consent Form

INFORMATION SHEET
Research Project: Autism and Positive Writing

Project Team Members: Jacqueline Green

Dear Participant

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study I am undertaking.

What is the study?

The study involves keeping a positive diary over the course of four weeks, and completing a questionnaire about it, and about your experiences of autism, before starting and after finishing. There will be a further final questionnaire to be completed four weeks after the study has ended.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been chosen to take part as an intelligent and literate adult female on the autistic spectrum (either by diagnosis or by self-identification).

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you give your consent to participate. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting Jacqueline Green, tel: 0034 699251299, email: yz803580@student.reading.ac.uk.

What will happen if I take part?

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What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by participants in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team listed at the start of this letter. Neither you nor your school, university or place of work will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the University.
You may find the study enlightening and feel that it is a beneficial experience. However, there are no right or wrong outcomes, and it is also possible that it may not be suited to you.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. Data will be stored on a password protected computer only in anonymised form.

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Who has reviewed the study?

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Yours faithfully

J Green

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use of the personal data we may hold about you is on the lawful basis of being a public task in the public interest and where it is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes. If you withdraw from a research study, which processes your personal data, dependant on the stage of withdrawal, we may still rely on this lawful basis to continue using your data if your withdrawal would be of significant detriment to the research study aims. We will always have in place appropriate safeguards to protect your personal data.

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CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Autism and Positive Writing

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5. I understand that I can stop participating in the study at any time without repercussions. ☐

Name:

Signed:

Date:

GUIDANCE FOR PARTICIPANTS

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Possible starts of diary entries:

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-I cooked a dinner and myself and my family loved it.

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-I cuddled my cat who loves me.

-I won a game of chess.

-There were beautiful flowers on my way to work.

-I went for a walk with a friend.

-I am improving at playing the piano.

-I took a good photograph today.

-My football team scored a goal.

-I got to work on time today.

Examples of starters for possible sentences:

-Today this made me smile …..

-I saw this nice thing today …..

-Today for the first time I went to …..

-Today I was brave enough to …..

-I was proud of myself today because …..

-I received this compliment …..

-I felt happy because …

Possible Template for Starting Diary

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Friday 4th August 2023	
Saturday 5th August 2023	
Sunday 6th August 2023	
Monday 7th August 2023	

Appendix D: Summary Guidance Given to Participants

Please keep a diary of positive things that happen over the next four weeks. This can take any form you choose, however you may find it simplest to make it as a Word document and type the date at the start of each entry. You do not have to write every day, however you can do, and should aim to write at least four times per week. At the end of the study your diary entries will be submitted, but you can delete anything private or that you do not wish to reveal first.

You should aim to write as much as possible, explaining what has taken place, why it is positive and why it made you happy etc. You should aim during this four week period to create as many positive events as possible so as to write as much as possible. Consider treating this diary as a daily routine which gives structure to your day.

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-I won a game of chess.

-There were beautiful flowers on my way to work.

-I went for a walk with a friend.

-I am improving at playing the piano.

-I took a good photograph today.

-My football team scored a goal.

-I got to work on time today.

Examples of starters for possible sentences:

-Today this made me smile …..

-I saw this nice thing today …..

-Today for the first time I went to …..

-Today I was brave enough to …..

-I was proud of myself today because …..

-I received this compliment …..

-I felt happy because …

Appendix E: Questionnaire Questions

QUESTIONNAIRE ONE (to be completed at the start of the study)

Please write as much as you can in response to each question. There are no right or wrong answers and all of your thoughts and ideas are important. Please give as many details as possible and feel free to write any additional comments that you would like to share.

1. What is autism like for you? Please write in detail and give examples.
2. Do you have any routines or rituals that you follow that you attribute to autism (for example always doing tasks in the same order)? If so, what are they?
3. a) Do you feel that autism ever interferes negatively with your life? Yes / No
   b) If so, how? Please give examples.
4. a) Does autism have positive effects for you? Yes / No
   b) If so, what are they?
5. a) Do you ever feel that autism is difficult to manage? Yes / No
   b) If so, how? Please give examples.
6. If you could change anything about autism, would you? If so, what would you change and why?
7. a) Autism is often associated with anxiety. Do you experience anxiety?
   b) If so how does it affect you?
8. Please share any other comments you would like to make about autism.

QUESTIONNAIRE TWO (to be completed at the end of the study)

Please write as much as you can in response to each question. There are no right or wrong answers and all of your thoughts and ideas are important. Please give as many details as possible and feel free to write any additional comments that you would like to share.

4. How did you find keeping a positive diary for four weeks? Was it easy / difficult / fun / tedious etc? Why?
5. Did you feel that you got into a routine of diary keeping? Did it become a natural part of your day or not?
6. Did you find that you were trying to find more positive experiences in order to complete your diary? If so, please give examples.
7. Do you feel that this diary keeping exercise had any effect on your autism, for example in terms of other routines? If so, please give examples.
8. Do you feel that this diary keeping exercise had any effect on your management of time or concentration? If so, how?
9. Do you feel that keeping a positive diary had any effects on your life-satisfaction or sense of well-being? If so, what were they?
10. Do you think you will keep up the habit of positive diary writing? Why or why not?
11. Please write any other comments you wish to share about the study and your experiences of it.

QUESTIONNAIRE THREE (to be completed four weeks after the study)

Please write as much as you can in response to each question. There are no right or wrong answers and all of your thoughts and ideas are important. Please give as many details as possible and feel free to write any additional comments that you would like to share.

1. Have you continued to record positive events at all since the study finished? Why or why not?
2. Do you think you will use positive diary writing at all in future and why?
3. Now that you have had time to reflect, do you think that positive diary writing has potential uses in the autistic community?
4. Please share any other comments you would like to make.

Appendix F: Example Responses (Coded) to Questionnaires From Five Different Participants

As someone who self identifies with autism/autistic traits, I have noticed that I always feel different to people (not just my peers). People never seem to understand me and it feels like I am always doing something wrong, not just in social situations but even with my parents. I have a long list of things I struggle with, for example very bad sensory issues (misophonia), strict routines, never being able to make or keep friends, high emotional empathy but low cognitive empathy, and I have also been diagnosed with other mental health disorders like a lot of autistic girls have. Now I feel more comfortable in myself and less like I have to mask, I notice how little I understand of social situations and how when I meet new people they often call me weird/confusing. Yes I like to do my daily tasks in the same order at the same time slots. I have a lot of rituals too which I don't know if it is ocd related but I have to tap surfaces a lot and get anxiety when I don't do it. They are the most prominent routines that are always at the forefront of my mind. I think the hardest thing is communicating with people, I feel like I have different ways of thinking so I can never match someone on the same level. I always feel like I have said the wrong thing or just don't know what to say at all. I am most comfortable when I am just by myself. It has made me more comfortable in being myself and being kind of weird, since I identify that I am not the same as most people. I am conflicted with being myself and not managing my autistic traits, but then having more difficulty. Or I could just mask all the time but I hate it. I would make it easier to mask/easier to not mask, so I could just stick with one and feel comfortable. I experienced severe social anxiety that was debilitating a lot of the time from when I was about 4-18 years old. Coincidentally it got better when I left school and started working. Now I suffer with generalised anxiety which isn't too bad anymore but I am anxious most of the time. I think it is quite subjective and hard to define.	S Y R S S S R R N S S S N N	G C G M G A G M M A A
I loved it! It was really fun and definitely made me do more and look for positive things to do. I did positive things I would not have done otherwise. Yes I got into a natural routine. I did not think I would write every day, but I did. It actually became the focus of my day at times. I was looking out for positive things to write. I kind of centred on it and it made me more positive and happy. Yes absolutely. I liked the routine and I wanted to keep it up so I was looking for things to do. For example, one day I planned to make ice cream with my kids just to be able to write something. The kids loved it so it was a really good thing. Also at work I was teaching to the best of my ability so that I could record it in the diary. On days when work could be tough, I could find the positives. It definitely became my main routine. And it made me do more things rather than hide from them. It eclipsed other routines, and it is a routine I can feel good about. I definitely think it made me more functional, without even trying. I felt more like a normal person, ha ha ha! Yes, it definitely makes me waste less time on silly things. It makes me feel happy, and in a funny way kind of stable. It made me use time better I think. Yes it made me feel very happy and kind of fulfilled. It is a satisfying thing to do, recording positive things. I found it quite calming and it helped me focus. Hard to explain, but the idea kind of clicked with me, it helps me get rid of the nonsense and concentrate on what matters, like a filter. I love it, so cool! Yes I will, for sure. But I am going to do it in a notebook, I have already bought it! It is so nice to collect positive memories, much better than collecting things like stamps! I really feel it makes me get out more, try harder and kind of live more. So enjoyable, and it really suits me as an autistic person, I like my routines! So glad I took part in this, thank you! I liked the idea from the start, but it has been better than I thought. I have had some mental health issues in the past, such as depression and a	D R D D R D D R D D D D D D D R N	Q Q B Q W Q Ñ B Ñ U Q B Z

run in with anorexia, and I think something like this could have helped me avoid that sort of thing more. I will keep using it, thanks again!	N D	X U
I have written some diary entries and have been more aware of small positive actions. Yes I will! I have started to look in the mirror and say nice things about myself, this positive diary activity has enabled me to feel more confident in my own skin and able to look for the small joys in life. Yes I believe that autistic people can benefit from searching for small positive events because then they feel less self-conscious about their own thoughts and actions. The process was very easy to do and I liked that it wasn't pressured to write an entry every day, you only had to remember to do it 4/5 times (this allowed for me to continue with the study even if a few days in the month were hectic)	D D D D	 U Ñ
The diary was fairly easy once I got into a routine - the fact that it was quite structured helped so that I didn't feel I had to spend ages on each entry. I liked that it made me reflect on the day in retrospect and also that then I started looking for positives ahead of them happening. I tended to catch up on a few occasions as I had forgotten to do it daily. I think the routine became more of a mental exercise as the time went on. I don't think I was finding more, just recognising more positive experiences. I actually found I was catastrophising less and felt more positive about things generally, as I had a positive mindset. I am pretty good at time management and concentration, so this was not something I noticed as I was doing it. Yes - I think I feel more positive generally and recognise small things that are achievements and that make me happy. I have definitely noticed a decrease in catastrophising, which is something I regularly do. I will definitely keep it up mentally - it has become incorporated into my day in this way - I am not sure I would continue to write it down though - I am not generally a diary-keeper and the benefits I have found in this exercise are more mental. I am pleased to have taken part and it really gave me a new focus on what is good about each day and how the negative things can be cancelled out or mitigated by the focus on positives.	D R D R D D D D D D D R D	 Q Ñ U U Ñ U U
I have fairly regularly, although haven't as much over the Christmas holidays. I find it more useful when I am starting to feel overwhelmed and stressed, so haven't felt I needed it during the holiday. I think I'll continue to use it to keep myself grounded and stop myself from getting overwhelmed, as it is a calming practice. I do think that it could have a lot of benefit. Not everyone will take to it but for some people it could be really helpful. I think this sort of 'writing a list' behaviour in general can be really helpful for autistic people.	D D D	Ñ Ñ