The ‘Impossible Subjects’? Exploring the social inclusion and belonging of autistic people in religious groups

Krysia Emily Waldock

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DECLARATION

I certify that this work has not been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently being submitted for any degree other than that of Doctor of Philosophy being studied at the University of Kent. I also declare that this work is the result of my own investigations except where otherwise identified by references, and that I have not plagiarised the work of others.

Student	Signature	Name	Date
[redacted]		**Krysia Waldock**	**24.6.24**

Abstract

Religious groups have been argued to be conduits to social inclusion for autistic people, and social inclusion and belonging are increasingly being recognized as important priorities in autism research. However, to date, little social-scientific exploration of autistic people’s social inclusion and belonging in religious groups has occurred. To date, social-scientific investigation has focused mainly on LGBT Christians within churches or other Christian-centric spaces. Therefore, the aim of this thesis was to explore autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and belonging in churches and mosques. Three overarching research questions guided this thesis: 1. How does being autistic impact being socially included and feeling a sense of belonging in churches and mosques? 2. To what extent are autistic and religious identities compatible? 3. What do autistic people do to maximise their social inclusion and belonging. Three empirical studies were undertaken using qualitative methods, notably focus groups (Chapters 4 and 5) and narrative and unstructured interviews (Chapter 6). Findings from focus groups with autistic people (Chapter 4) indicated that being autistic shaped experiences of social inclusion and belonging, with autistic people not always able to meet neuronormative behavioural expectations. Focus groups with Christians and Muslims (Chapter 5) found that despite an ‘all welcoming’ espoused theology, neuronormative behavioural expectations appeared to shape views on who should be included or belong in churches and mosques. Finally in narrative and unstructured interviews with autistic people who currently attend and have previously attended churches and mosques (Chapter 6), all participants struggled to meet the neuronormative behavioural

standards of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). In this light, autistic people ‘disrupt’ neuronormative behavioural expectations that exist within churches and mosques. Autistic people can be argued in many cases to be ‘impossible subjects’ in churches and mosques, through autistic identity disrupting the ability to perform the normative Christian/Muslim role identity, and autistic presentation being perceived as ‘unable to be included’. Therefore, being socially included and experiencing feelings of belonging can appear to be contingent on meeting neuronormative behavioural expectations within churches and mosques.

Terminology note

This thesis will use identity first language (e.g., autistic person) echoing other studies which have found this preference amongst autistic people e.g., Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016). This also follows calls from other autistic scholars and activists who have called for the use of identity first language in the academy (e.g., Botha et al., 2021, Pineo, 2022). Being autistic is part of who I am as an autistic person (and also stated by Sinclair, 2013) and autistic voices are ‘central to discovering what it means to be autistic’ (Williams, 1996). However, in the cases where participants use medicalised or person first language, this will be honoured and therefore will not be changed in order to honour what the participant said.

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‘I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known
Don't know where it goes
But it's home to me, and I walk alone
[...]
My shadow's the only one that walks beside me
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating
Sometimes, I wish someone out there will find me
'Til then, I walk alone’

Boulevard of Broken Dreams, Green Day, 2004

My story (see Waldock, 2023) started much like these lyrics from Green Day. I felt alone, misunderstood and like ‘the only one’. In one sense, feeling like this set the backdrop for both this research and the conviction of wanting a better world for autistic people and wanting to ‘put the church in order’. I have learnt that sometimes to walk alone is necessary to do the right, equitable and just thing.

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“**So God created man in his own image**, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:27, NIV

I dedicate this thesis two people:

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Carol Anne Francesca Waldock
11th February 1959- 19th June 2006

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Robert Oliver Waldock
20th November 1934-

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Chapter 1: Introduction

‘The law is important and can be central to the process of inclusion. However, while law can change structures it simply cannot change hearts. The law can legislate for inclusion, but it cannot help people to *belong*’ (Swinton, 2012, p182)

1 Introduction: an important research priority

Facilitating the inclusion of autistic people, and creating inclusive and accessible spaces, are recognised as important research priorities both within the UK and globally (Cage et al., 2024; Pellicano et al., 2013; Putnam et al., 2023; Roche et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2014). Inclusion and access for autistic people have been argued as important in relation to healthcare (Doherty et al., 2021), education, (Horgan et al., 2023), employment (Nicholas et al., 2019) and community participation (Shea et al., 2021) in particular. Increasing the inclusion and access of autistic people is also mandated within the law, such as the Equality Act (2010) and the *National strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026* (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). Despite this important priority within research and social policy, autistic people are reported to continue experiencing a high level of exclusion in a variety of domains. Findings from Jones and colleagues’ (2022) study exploring the inclusion of autistic people in their communities found that 70% of autistic participants felt socially isolated, 47% had lost friends due being autistic, and 37% had lost a job due

to being autistic. Furthermore, autistic people have been reported as experiencing higher rates of exclusion from education settings; autistic pupils are twice as likely to be excluded from school in comparison to pupils who do not have a disability or registered special educational need (Ambitious about Autism, 2018).

However, one area that receives relatively little attention in relation to participation, inclusion, and access for autistic people is religion and religious groups. Although it has been argued that autistic people are less likely to be religious (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011, Norenzayan et al., 2012), studies have elicited that faith and religion can be important for some autistic people (Liu et al., 2014; Turner et al., 2004). Sango and Forrester-Jones (2019) notably argue that religious groups can be conduits to community participation, social inclusion and feelings of belonging. Other scholars have echoed this argument, in particular arguing that religious groups should be places to nurture social inclusion and belonging for autistic people (Gaventa, 1993; Swinton, 2002; White, 2015). However, it appears that not all experiences that autistic people have within religious groups are conducive to building feelings of social inclusion and belonging (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022; Rafferty, 2022; van Ommen & Endress, 2022). In this light, this thesis sets out to explicitly explore autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and belonging within religious groups.

This introductory chapter of the thesis begins with defining two key terms: social inclusion and belonging. The relevance of these terms is then presented in relation to social groups more broadly, then religious groups, which could be argued to be a

specific type of social group. Next, the rationale for the groups under study is presented (church and mosque groups), as well as the rationale for exploring disability and religion as a social researcher. In particular, the noted gap in relation to autistic people is highlighted and argued as needing specific attention. In addition to this literature-based rationale, I present an encounter I had at a church I used to attend, demonstrating personal and professional rationale for this research. Finally, the research will be situated within the field of Critical Autism Studies, and the impact of how this impacts how autistic people are understood and perceived in relation to this research are reported, as well as its compatibility with religious studies. The chapter finishes with presenting the aim, objective and research questions which will guide this thesis, and outline the structure of following chapters.

1.1 Defining social inclusion and belonging

Two key terms which shape this thesis are social inclusion and belonging, which have been argued to be simple in their premise (i.e., the inverse of exclusion, see Fredericks (2010)) (Jones, 2010) and the result of social interaction and social practices (Allman, 2013). Social inclusion and belonging have much in common, for example positive impact on quality of life (Simplican et al., 2015) and regarding health more widely (Cassel, 1976). However social inclusion and belonging are two terms which are often used interchangeably (Allman, 2013; Allen et al., 2021; Garbutt, 2009; Rawal, 2008), especially in the field of autism (Simplican et al., 2015), when they refer to quite different phenomena.

Social inclusion refers to the presence of social networks, friendships and other meaningful relationships, and presence amongst other people. It may be observable and visible in nature (Wilson & McColl, 2019), and is rooted in the ideas of disabled people having an ‘ordinary life’ and social role valorization (SRV) (Nirje, 1967; Wolfensberger, 1980). Social inclusion is one of Schalock et al.’s (2002) eight domains considered important to having a ‘good’ quality of life for autistic people and people with an intellectual disability, described as ‘natural supports, integrated environments and participation’ (Schalock et al., 2002, p. 463). The origin of the term social inclusion is often credited to René Lenoir, a former Secrétaire d’Etate l’Action Sociale within the French Government. The term originates from France in the 1970s, and was used more broadly by the European Community within social policy beginning in the 1980s to counteract the term ‘social exclusion’ (Rawal, 2008; Wilson, 2006). As part of facilitating ‘social inclusion’, Lenoir identified and spoke of the ‘excluded’, which included individuals who had a physical or mental handicap, delinquents, marginalised people, and other social ‘misfits’ (Rawal, 2008), experiencing a range of social and economic problems. Social inclusion has therefore been argued to be focused on full participation in society (Du Toit, 2004), especially for those who are disadvantaged (United Nations, 2016).

Belonging has been described as a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kohut, 1984 in Lee & Robbins, 1995; Maslow, 1954).
Allen and colleagues (2021) argue that the need to belong is as important as food and shelter in relation to survival. One seminal definition of belonging by Rogers (1951)

suggests that belonging is a subjective experience connected to a longing for connection with other people and being considered positively by others. Hagerty and colleagues (1992) also argue that belonging is a subjective feeling between an individual and the different settings and social groups an individual is part of, which is echoed by Lee and Robbins (1998) who suggest a sense of belonging is a subjective awareness. Belonging is bidirectional and reciprocal (Mahar, Cobigo & Stuart, 2013), and constitutes an intersubjective feeling rather than being observable (Husserl, 1952/1989 in Dant, 2015). Belonging has also been argued to be ongoing and dynamic (Garbutt, 2009; Probyn, 1996), changing according to the environment, setting, and context an individual finds themselves in (Allen et al., 2021; Turner, 2017), and pervasive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Allen (2020, p. 3) states belonging is not only about connection to people, but also to places, objects and experiences. Swinton (2012, p. 172) notably argues for belonging to be a focus of research and practice in religious groups, stating that ‘including people with disabilities does not go far enough in overcoming the alienation, stigmatization, and exclusion’ of disabled people.

For these reasons both terms have been used in this thesis, in order to capture the differing experiences of the two phenomena and how they interact. Furthermore, discussions exist that critique SRV and normalisation (see Campbell, 2009; Chappell, 1992; Moser, 2000; Oliver, 1999) including in relation to autistic people specifically (Chown et al., 2017; Milton & Moon, 2012; Milton, 2014a). In addition, scholars have suggested that a ‘good’ quality of life for autistic people may involve extra nuances, for example Smith and colleagues (2019) suggest autistic people conceptualise their

quality of life differently to non-autistic people, and Robertson (2010) argues that societal stigma and attitudes are not always considered as a barrier to social inclusion.

Social inclusion and belonging link to the wider notions of inclusion discussed above, as inclusion more broadly incorporates access to buildings and communities and attitudinal barriers (as described by Carter, 2007). Social inclusion and belonging can only be gained if access is granted to the community (through physical barriers, for example ramps) and the individual is accepted as a member of the group. Legislation and policy also inform the importance of social inclusion and belonging in communities associated with belief systems. Notably the Equality Act (2010) guides premises and social groups to ensure they are accessible to those with protected characteristics (including sexual orientation, disability, sex, race, age and gender reassignment).

1.2 Religious groups as conduits to social inclusion and belonging

It has been argued that social groups are settings for ‘potential sources of intense feelings of belonging’ (Stroope, 2011, p. 568). Stroope (2011) also argues that these feelings of belonging can support identities becoming salient, and behaviour associated with salient identities (Krause & Wolff, 2005, Stroope, 2011, p. 568). Being a part of a social group, being able to participate, having relationships and feeling a part of a group have all been reported as important to wellbeing (Allen, 2020; Krause & Wolff, 2005; Steger & Kashdan, 2010) and survival (Allen, 2020). Furthermore, social groups can provide social support (e.g., providing buffers against stress) and opportunities to form

social relationships (Cassel, 1976; Forrester-Jones et al., 2006; House et al., 1988). Social groups as providing social support is especially noteworthy of consideration in relation to autistic people, who have been found in previous scholarship to sometimes find it harder to make friends (Mueller, Schuler & Yates, 2008), have smaller social networks (Forrester-Jones & Broadhurst, 2007), and often experience bullying (Sedgewick et al., 2016) or mate crime (Forster & Pearson, 2020) despite their desire for friendship.

When group members share an identity, this can help foster a sense of belonging, as well as what Claridge (2020, p. 1) describes as ‘unity’ and ‘togetherness’. A shared social identity is an identity based on a shared social group. One shared identity that group members might share is a religious identity. Religion has been argued to be ‘a social phenomenon, born and nurtured among groups of people’ (Iannaccone, 1994, p. 1183). Hans Mol (1976) first introduced the term ‘religious identity’ to refer to an individual within a religious tradition. Mol (1976) argues that religion can act as a ‘stabilizer’ of individual and group identity through providing institutions, rituals and existential meaning that is resistant to constant change (Klapp, 1969). Through his identity model of religion (Mol, 1979), Mol (1976, p. 1) also suggests that religion is the ‘sacralization of identity’, whereby sacralization refers to a process of how a religious identity becomes stable and supports rituals, beliefs and myth. Mol (1979, p. 16) argues that sacralization ‘protects identity’. In this manner, religious identity and religion is assumed to be beneficial both for individuals and society, echoing Durkheim’s (1912)

functionalist approach toward religion, whereby religion provides social cohesion and safeguards social order (Seul, 1999).

Like other social groups, it has been argued that religious communities and congregations may be spaces which can foster feelings of social inclusion and belonging (Zhang et al., 2019) and provide social support (Ellison & George, 1994; Hook et al., 2014), including for autistic people (Sango & Forrester-Jones, 2019). Notably Seul (1999) argues how religion and being with others who have a shared religious social identity may help provide a sense of belonging and improve self-esteem. Krause and Wulff (2005) undertook a nationwide survey within the USA, exploring the relationship between physical health and social support within church congregations. They found congregants who experienced more social support had better physical health and experienced higher levels of belonging. Furthermore, in a study (n=229) exploring ideological diversity of group membership, meaning and belonging, Zhang and colleagues (2019) found that participants who were allocated to be in the more ideologically diverse condition reported lower levels of belonging than participants allocated to the ideologically similar condition. Zhang and colleagues’ (2019) findings demonstrate how a shared social identity and similar beliefs can create a stronger in-group dynamic.

1.3 Rationale for selected groups

Religions that gather using a congregational model or gather regularly were the focus of this thesis. A congregational model can be defined as a group of individuals with a

shared religious identity who gather regularly (for example, every Sunday at 10.30am, or every Friday at 1pm) to undertake religious practices and rituals. When originally conceptualising and designing the thesis, the scope was to include four belief systems that gather: three religions (Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) and a non-religious belief system (Humanism). The original rationale for these four particular belief systems was partially based on their significance within the UK population at the most recent census at the time of designing the thesis in 2019. At the 2011 UK Census, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism were the three largest theistic belief systems. In regards to communities at the time of selection, there were 40300 churches (Brierley, 2015 in National Churches Trust, 2019) , 1750 mosques (Naqshbandi, 2017) and 189 Hindu mandirs (Religion Media Centre, 2018). A non-religious belief system was also selected as at the 2011 Census, 25.1% of the population in the UK identified as having ‘no religion’ (ONS, 2012). To date, non-religious belief systems remain under-researched, in particular in relation to disability and neurodivergence (Hwang, 2008). It is understood that ‘no religion’ includes a wide breadth of existential worldviews and that ‘no religion’ is not a homogenous group (Lee, 2012; 2014). It was also recognised that not all individuals who are non-religious will gather with other individuals of the same belief system. In this light, Humanism was selected as an example of a non-religious belief system with a shared identity. At the time of selection, there were 70 humanist groups known to Humanism UK in England and Wales (Prout, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the recruitment process for Chapter 5, with only Christians and Muslims able and willing to take part, and with the data collected being of suitable quality. Therefore, this thesis focuses on churches and mosques specifically.

Social inclusion and belonging are particularly pertinent to churches and mosques due to the presence and importance of various teachings and beliefs regarding inclusion in both the Bible and the Qur’an. Notable examples include the Parable of the good Samaritan (*New International Version [NIV],* 1973, Luke 10: 25-37; Christianity) and the Ummah (*Quran, 1995,* 10:19; Islam). However, disability (including neurodivergence) is not understood in relation to the Bible and the Qur’an uniformly, with disabled people portrayed in a variety of ways (Waldock & Sango, 2023). Conflation of disability and sin has been reported in the academic literature within both Christianity and Islam (see Crabtree, 2007; Haack, 2017; Reynolds, 2008; Rafferty, 2022; van Ommen & Endress, 2022; van Ommen, 2023), as well as tensions around the acceptability of healing (Belser, 2015). This tension of being welcoming, yet having what Claire Williams (2023, p. 149) calls ‘partitions of acceptability’ leaves questions as to the degree of social inclusion and belonging an autistic person may feel within a church or mosque.

2 Rationale for the research

The rationale for the research within this thesis is underpinned by both gaps in the literature, and my own personal experience as an autistic person who has been set on the margins of church. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 describe and justify the need for this research, in particular the lack of focus of research on autistic people in religious groups other than churches outside the US. Section 2.3 describes an encounter with a church

leader and serves as a demonstration of being an autistic person within a church and how this led to this line of enquiry.

2.1 Lack of work in disability and religion within the social sciences

In 2009, Deborah Creamer argued that disability studies as a field has paid little attention to the topic of religion, which she suggested is problematic for a number of reasons (Creamer, 2006; 2009). One notable problem identified by Creamer (2006) is how religion and religious groups can be an important part of disabled people’s lives (Creamer, 2006; Eiesland, 2002; Jacobs, 2022), yet she argues a lack of scholarship within disability studies exists in comparison to other areas, therefore ‘falling short of its own commitments to inclusivity and relevance’ to disabled people. Creamer (2006) particularly notes religion and religious groups may be argued to be ‘unimportant’ or ‘unapproachable’ to scholars of disability studies. More recently Jacobs and Richardson (2022, p. 17) noted the lack of development of the field of disability and religion since Creamer’s (2006; 2009) statements, noting how little social research has been undertaken in the UK in relation to disabled people within religion. The sole exception within the UK Jacobs and Richardson (2022) note is my exploratory study of attitudes toward autism (Waldock and Forrester-Jones, 2020). It is noted that scholarship exists within the US (e.g., Ault et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2016; Carter, 2023; Radstake, 2021) and resources exist to support churches in particular to include disabled people within services and ministry (e.g., Carter, 2007).

Disability theology and practical theology is indeed undertaken in relation to and with disabled people, including within the UK (e.g., Brock & Swinton, 2012; Burnett, 2021; Rapley, 2021; Swinton, 2012), so statements implying for a complete lack of scholarship would be erroneous. However, such scholarship on disability and religion within theological contexts, such as practical theology, has been reported to sit in a silo of theology (Correman-Guittin & van Ommen, 2022). Therefore, scholarship undertaken in these fields may not necessarily be engaged with by scholars outside of theology. One notable scholar was sociologist Nancy Eiesland and her seminal work on the ‘disabled God’ (Eiesland, 1994). Eiesland (1994) argues that through presenting the injuries (which Eiesland (1994) describes as impairments) Jesus gained during the crucifixion, that disability is part of *imago Dei*[1]. Through disability being part of *imago Dei,* it is part of human experience and nature rather than something to be eradicated.

However, others believe that boundaries between the disciplines are much firmer. Roberts (1997, p. 371) argues Wright Mills’ (1959) sociological imagination can ‘undercut theological pretensions’. However, unlike theological fields, the disciplinary boundaries of religious studies are debated (Oliver & Warrier, 2008; Spickard, 2002). Religious studies is considered to be a ‘multiform subject field’ (Capps, 1995, p. 331) with ‘relationships with a large number of academic fields and disciplines’ (Capps, 1995, p. 331) and has ‘no one method of approach’ (Capps, 1995, p331). In this light, this thesis contributes to the ‘multiform’ nature of religious studies. Part of the ‘multiform’ nature of religious studies explores the social within religious settings and contexts

[1] *Imago Dei* is a theological doctrine, stemming from Genesis 1:27 (*NIV*, 1978): ‘So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them’.

(Wiebe, 2005), which is ideal for investigating social inclusion and belonging in this thesis.

In addition, much of the existing scholarship on disability and religion originates from the US, and is therefore culturally embedded within an all-American sense of spirituality, and is Christian-centric. Nadal and colleagues (2015) notably discuss what they call a ‘Christian bias’ that is noted to exist within English speaking scholarship, with other religious and non-religious groups represented less within the academic literature. Although social-scientific research to date on Muslims covers a broad scope of topics (e.g., young people’s lives, education; see Buijs & Rath, 2002), a much smaller number of papers and projects have focused on disability and neurodivergence in comparison to Christianity. Furthermore, the UK context differs from a US context. In the US, 63% (332 million people) of Americans identified themselves as Christian (any denomination) (Pew Research Center, 2021) compared to 46.2% (27.5 million people) in the UK (ONS, 2021). Through undertaking this research within a UK context, further light can be shed on the interface between disability (in this case, being autistic) and religion.

2.2 Autistic people in religious groups

To date, much of the social research scholarship exploring disability within religion and religious groups has explored disability more broadly, instead of subdividing into different types of disability. Therefore, the samples could be considered to be ‘mixed’ with a variety of different impairments and disabilities represented (e.g., Jacobs, 2019; Jacobs & Richardson, 2022). Although not all autistic people may consider themselves

as disabled (see Kenny et al., 2016) and scholars have debated whether autism is in fact a disability (see Baron-Cohen, 2000a; Runswick-Cole, 2016), autistic people can face barriers within the social world due to communicating differently (Milton, 2012a) and experiencing sensory differences (Tomcheck & Dunn, 2007). Autism is considered a disability within the Equality Act (2010) as a ‘lifelong’ disability.

There remains a noticeable gap focusing solely on autistic people’s social inclusion and belonging within religion, with the same silence that Creamer (2006; 2009) notes between disability studies and religion also existing between specifically in relation to religion and autistic people. Autistic people have been conceptualised in some previous research as less likely to be religious (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011, Norenzayan et al., 2012), perhaps further indicating for some a lack of importance of following this line of inquiry. However, findings from other scholarship indicate that religion and/or faith can be important to autistic people (Liu et al., 2014; Turner et al., 2004), and the theoretical frameworks, notably Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), which have informed findings suggesting autistic people are less likely to be religious have been critiqued (Waldock & Sango, 2023). Autistic people’s voices need to be heard within research, notably within this field where little social research has occurred to date. Milton and Bracher (2013) argue that ethical and epistemological issues remain in published research when autistic people’s voices remain unheard in knowledge production. Furthermore, as previously argued in section 1.1, autistic people’s quality of life may have extra nuances to consider in comparison to a non-autistic person. In light of this need, focusing on the experiences of social inclusion that autistic people specifically

have allows for further investigation of experiences specific to autistic people’s lived experiences.

From the currently published literature, it is evident that autistic people can face barriers in religious groups. Experiences within churches are mostly focused upon to date, with some experiences being similar in nature to other disabled people, e.g., attitudes that view disabled people as ‘objects of pity’ (Eiesland, 2002, p. 10; Jacobs, 2019; Jacobs & Richardson, 2022), problems needing fixing (Raffety, 2022), and access requests (such as content warnings, speakers staying near microphones with T loop enabled, ramps, and a paper copy of the sermon to read as it was preached) being denied and/or not taken seriously (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022). In particular, churches have been reported to be socially inhospitable (Eiesland, 2005), as one of the participants from Jacobs (2019) demonstrates. One of Jacobs’ (2019; Jacobs & Richardson, 2022) autistic storytellers, Anthony, found the social demands of after-church chit chat very difficult, especially the pressure to join in and have fun. In some ways, the pressure Anthony felt to be included echoed Swinton’s (2012, p. 172) argument that physically including people alone is not enough. Sensory aspects of church services were also found to be difficult for autistic people in van Ommen and Endress’ (2022) qualitative study of autistic people’s experiences of worship, with four of their participants particularly noting the noise levels were a challenge, and too loud or too complex. Other participants found touching other churchgoers difficult (e.g., during ‘sharing the peace’, where individuals in a church service will go and greet others with a handshake, which

was described as ‘invasive’), and struggled with the expectation of eye contact, which was also reported in Jacobs and Richardson (2022).

However, it is clear from the literature that experiencing barriers may not lead to exclusion outright. Three of the participants in van Ommen and Endress (2022) stated in their interviews that they knew other autistic people who attended or led church communities, hinting at connection or community with others like them, and one participant noted that his church’s culture was ‘filled with love and friendship’ (van Ommen & Endress, 2022, p. 227). In this light, it could be argued that further work could uncover autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and belonging, specifically, since these are generally inferred from experiences rather than explicitly captured.

2.3 An encounter with Simon Peter

In addition to the evident gap in the academic literature to date, this thesis also has personal motivation for exploring autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and belonging within churches and mosques. Below I share an encounter I had with Simon Peter[2] in the first year of my PhD, which shaped the scope and direction of this research, and ultimately the research questions posed.

[2] Fictitious name taken from one of Jesus’ disciples. This name was selected as Simon Peter is a disciple who follows Jesus, yet makes mistakes and sometimes struggles despite his commitment to being a disciple and following Jesus. One good description of Simon Peter is from Walker (2023), who suggests ‘he ran hard after Christ but often fell flat on his face’.

It was summer 2019. I was on my way to meet Simon Peter, who was on the leadership team at the local church I attended. I had been unable to sit in the service for some years due to volume and pitch of the worship group, and was feeling increasingly excluded and set apart from other members of the church. It felt like I was watching church take place through a glass window. I decided to speak to Simon Peter and get the ball rolling on making the services more accessible for me. It was sunny, the weather was warm, echoing the hope I had for a fruitful conversation. After all, church is for everyone, or so I thought.

We met in the prayer room to discuss what we should do. Simon Peter listened to me. He nodded his head as I spoke. He then paused before speaking. In that moment he started speaking, defending the way that church ‘was done’ and how loud the music was, I felt silenced. I was completely dismissed. One line particularly had stuck with me:

‘Krysia. It’s a journey’.

I was expected to wait some more, just as I had been for many years.

I did not belong. I was not able to be socially included within what was my church. The church did not know what to do with me, or they would not do anything, I was not sure which. It felt like they expected me to be patient and contort myself into what was convenient for them:

> Here's what I knew: **I didn’t fit**. I stretched myself around inaccessible worship spaces, hurt myself limping to a Banquet table to which I was not invited – *but my divinely-knit body-mind refused to twist into other people’s shapes.* (Jacobs, 2023, p. 133, emphasis added)

My autistic body and brain did not fit. I did not belong. My needs could not be met.

3 Situating the research

This research takes a critical approach toward autism. Instead of viewing autism as a deficit to be cured and brought in line with the ‘norm’, it takes a different approach, echoing that of Critical Autism Studies.

3.1 Critical Autism Studies

Critical Autism Studies (CAS) as a term was coined in 2010 by Davidson and Orsini (2013) as a field complementary to critical disability studies (O’Dell et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2018), exploring issues specific to autism and autistic people (O’Dell et al., 2016). Freeman Loftis (2023, p. 10) argues that the discourses surrounding autism are particularly complex and nuanced, therefore autistic people need their ‘own critical space’. Where autistic people have been argued to have remained unheard within research, it has been reported this had led to epistemic issues such as epistemological validity (Milton & Bracher, 2013; Woods et al., 2018). CAS as a field, could be seen to

be addressing this gap, as Milton and Ryan (2023, p. 4) argue, through ‘reclaiming of the narratives of autistic people and the centering of these experiences’. This reclaiming also can co-occur alongside a recognition of the multiple identities and intersections autistic people may sit at (Woods & Waldock, 2021). Mitzi Waltz (2014, p. 1337) suggests that CAS is differentiated from the broader field of Autism Studies through the focus on power dynamics that ‘question the deficit-based definitions of autism’. Through questioning deficit-based definitions of autism and therefore what it means to be autistic, O’Dell and colleagues (2016) argue that normalcy and ‘the norm’ are rejected (Davis, 1995).

CAS is an interdisciplinary field (Freeman Loftis, 2023) with no firm set of criteria that all CAS scholars follow, with openness to new lines of enquiry (O’Dell et al., 2016), although most CAS scholars hail from social sciences and humanities (Freeman Loftis, 2023). In some ways, this fluidity echoes the ‘multiform’ nature of religious studies, where no one set disciplinary approach or apparatus is required. In this light, it could be argued that CAS and religious studies as fields could work well together on further exploring autistic people’s experiences within religious groups. As autistic people have been reported to ‘need their own critical space’ (Freeman Loftis, 2023, p. 10) and there is little work to date looking at disability more broadly that explores phenomena specific to autistic people, the need for work in this field remains of high importance.

CAS has been argued to be led by autistic people (Ryan & Milton, 2023), although scholars who do not identify as autistic do also contribute to the field. Ryan and Milton

(2023, pp. 23-24) suggest that concepts such as neurodiversity, the social model of disability, identity and justice are embraced within CAS. Davidson and Orsini, (2013, p. 12) also identify other areas that are part of CAS, notably attention to power relations, advancing ‘enabling’ narratives of autism and developing ‘new inclusive and non-reductive’ approaches to studying what autism is. In particular relevance to this thesis, Freeman Loftus (2023, p. 11) suggests that CAS ‘take a liberatory stance toward autistic rights and social inclusion’. The importance of social inclusion for autistic people within the field of CAS, further demonstrates how the aim of the thesis fits within CAS.

3.2 How CAS views autistic people

As reported in section 3.1, CAS rejects a total deficit approach to viewing and understanding autistic people and the experiences of being an autistic person (Waltz, 2014, p. 1337). A deficit approach to viewing and understanding autistic people has been historically taken within scholarship, with the focus solely being on how autistic people differ from the ‘norm’ (e.g., Theory of Mind: Andreou & Skrimpa, 2020; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Senju, 2012; Tager-Flusberg, 2007; Executive Dysfunction: Demetriou et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 1999; Ozonoff, 1997). This approach may in part be due to diagnostic criteria which have focused on differences in relation to the ‘norm’ (see American Psychological Association (APA), 2013). The focus on biomedical research in particular, which is grounded in deficit and medical approaches to understanding autism, remains high (see Dattaro, 2021). However, within CAS, the abilities of autistic people are valued (O’Dell et al., 2016) rather than seen as deviations

from the ’norm’, rather than something to be cured (i.e., the medical model of disability) or ministered to (i.e., the pastoral model of disability). O’Dell and colleagues (2016, p. 167) also argue that autism should be focused on as an identity, with them acknowledging that ‘identity [...] is materially and discursively produced within specific socio-cultural contexts’. In this manner, the complexity of what it means to be autistic in different settings, including religious groups, contributes to the field of CAS.

One way that autistic people can be viewed as valued within research is through the concept of neurodiversity, and the philosophical foundation of the neurodiversity paradigm. The neurodiversity paradigm is informed by neurodiversity; a concept that Nick Walker (2021, p. 34) calls a ‘biological fact’. Neurodiversity as a concept was developed collectively (Botha et al., 2024). Ryan & Milton (2023, p. 2) report that neurodiversity has become the ‘preferred conceptual paradigm’ for autistic researchers, notably within CAS, in particular due to it being more value neutral (Ryan & Milton, 2023). Neurodiversity refers to ‘the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species’ (Walker, 2021, p. 34). All individuals are part of neurodiversity within the population, and not just autistic people or neurodivergent people more broadly (e.g., people with ADHD, dyslexic people, dyspraxic people, people with Tourettes). The neurodiversity paradigm is a philosophical foundation comprising of three principles and is a particular approach to neurodiversity. Walker (2021, p. 36) outlines these three principles as:

1. Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.

> 2. The idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of brain or mind, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture.
>
> 3. The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power inequalities, and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential.

All three principles echo important aspects of CAS, notably neurodiversity as valuable (principle 1), questioning deficit approaches of autism (principle 2) and power dynamics (principle 3).

It is important at this point to note as part of the philosophical foundation of the neurodiversity paradigm, that being neurodivergent (in this case, being autistic) is seen as both an identity as well as acknowledging the disabling aspects of society and impairments autistic people may have (Kapp, 2020, p. 7). The neurodiversity paradigm’s position on models of disability echoes Anderson-Chavarria’s (2022) assertion that neither the medical model or social model of disability fully encompass what it means to

be autistic. In some ways, being neurodivergent and identifying as such echoes the identity model of disability, whereby being disabled is ‘a marker of membership in a minority identity, much like gender or race’. Brewer et al. (2012, p. 5). Identity in this manner could be seen to be a ’category of practice’ (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 4), where individuals use this category to make sense of themselves and where they sit within the social hierarchy. Furthermore, as part of the identity model of disability, there remains a focus on reclaiming disability as a positive identity (Brewer et al., 2012, p. 5).

3.3 Autistic identity

Identity can be described as how an individual views and understands themselves, and how they are viewed by others (Holland, 2001). The concept of having an identity in relation to being autistic has been named both autistic identity (e.g., Cohen et al., 2022; Maitland et al., 2021) and autism identity (e.g., Cooper et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2023) within the literature. In this thesis, the term ‘autistic identity’ will be used, echoing the identity first language used throughout this thesis. Having an autistic identity may mean different things to different people. For some, it will be related to having a diagnosis of autism, whereas for others it may also include other facets, such as being a part of the autistic community and being a part of autistic culture (Creswell & Cage, 2019). In many ways it would be reductive to suggest an autistic identity is the same for all autistic people and experienced in the same way, given the multiple identities and intersections individuals sit at (Martin, 2012; Milton & Ryan, 2023) and individuals may grow into their

identity in different ways (Martin, 2012). It can include the following to varying degrees, as set out by Brubaker & Cooper (2000, pp. 6-7):

- A core aspect of selfhood (i.e., this is the way I am, I have a diagnosis, I am self-identified as autistic).
- A collective identity based on ‘sameness’ (i.e., being with other autistic people or in the autistic community, as suggested in Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2020).
- An identity based on social or political action, or the product of social or political action (i.e., being a part of the neurodiversity movement).

There have been numerous studies that have argued for the benefits of having a positive autistic identity (e.g., Cooper et al., 2021), notably with benefits for mental health and wellbeing (Botha & Frost, 2020; Cage et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2024). Individuals did this through reclaiming their autistic identity (Cohen et al., 2022; Parsloe, 2015) echoing the identity model of disability in Section 3.1, being part of a larger autistic community (Frost et al., 2019) and peer support groups (Davies et al., 2024).

4 Thesis aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to explore autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and belonging in churches and mosques. The objectives are to learn about the interface between identity, social inclusion and belonging, both for autistic people specifically and

broadly within a religious context. Three overarching research questions will guide this thesis:

1. How does being autistic impact being socially included and feeling a sense of belonging in churches and mosques?
2. To what extent are autistic and religious identities compatible?
3. What do autistic people do to maximise their social inclusion and belonging?

5 Thesis structure

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters, including this introduction chapter. The chapters that follow are given below with their foci outlined:

Chapter 2 ‘The social inclusion and belonging of minority identities in Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Humanist spaces - a systematic review’ firstly outlines the gap in the literature in relation to autistic people’s social inclusion and belonging within Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Humanist spaces, and the rationale for exploring minority identities more broadly. A systematic review of the social inclusion and belonging of individuals with minority identities within Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Humanist spaces is then presented. The importance of identity management and the different manners that individuals with minority identities may navigate these spaces is reflected in the literature. Methodological considerations for the design of this thesis are also reflected upon.

Chapter 3 ‘Methodology and methods’ sets out and justifies the ontological and epistemological positioning of this thesis, and the theoretical framework informing this thesis. My positionality and subsequent reflexivity on my positionality are discussed. The research methods employed for Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are outlined and justified, including data collection methods, sampling frames, how stakeholders were included, and analyses used.

Chapter 4 ‘Conceptualising belonging - the views of autistic people’ is the first chapter focusing an empirical study, with the focus groups with autistic people focused on. Four themes were discovered from the collected data: ‘nebulous’, ‘a bidirectional relationship’, ‘degrees of belonging’ and ‘barriers’. Being autistic did shape how participants understood social inclusion and belonging, with neuronormative expectations, the multiple identities participants had, and the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a) shaping experiences.

Chapter 5 ‘Conceptualising belonging – the views of Christians and Muslims’ is the second findings chapter, which is focused on the focus groups undertaken with Christians and Muslims. Three themes were discovered from the collected data: ‘exploring identity’, ‘questioning responsibility’ and ‘no one set nature’. Although social inclusion and belonging were reported as important to participants, teleological boundaries created limits on who should be included, notably individuals who have stigmatised identities, including autistic people. There also appeared to be a disjoint between the espoused voice of theology (‘what we say we do’) in comparison to the

operationalized voice of theology (‘what we actually do’) (Cameron, 2010; Cameron et al., 2013), which fuels an argument of teleological boundaries as being socially constructed.

Chapter 6 ‘Exploring belonging: the experiences of autistic people who attend and have previously attended churches and mosques’ is the final findings chapter, which focuses on interviews undertaken with autistic people who currently attend and have previously attended churches and mosques. It appears that not all of my autistic participants could meet the normative behavioural standards of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019), which shaped how they navigated church and mosque spaces. The other identities participants had also shaped their experiences within churches and mosques.

Chapter 7 ‘Discussion and Conclusion’ returns to the research questions set out in this chapter, and answers them in relation to the data across Chapters 4, 5 and 6. This chapter also demonstrates how this research fits in with the wider academic literature, including through providing three models of how autistic people may navigate religious groups to maximise their social inclusion and belonging. Limitations of the research will be considered, and recommendations are made in light of these findings for churches, mosques and other stakeholders, such as charities, that support inclusion and good practice within religious groups.

Chapter 2: The social inclusion and belonging of minority identities in Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Humanist spaces - a systematic review

1 Introduction

1.1 Belief system groups

Many people in the United Kingdom (UK) adhere to a belief system (ONS, 2012; 2021). A belief system can be defined as a set of beliefs which guide the way individuals should live their lives, which may include rituals, practices or meeting with others with the same belief system. Belief systems can be theistic or non-theistic, and adherents may meet together in communities as part of their belief system, either formally in a congregational model (e.g., a church) or informally (e.g., a house/discussion group).

As outlined in Chapter 1, the belief systems included in this systematic literature review are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Humanism. The rationale for selecting these four particular belief systems was outlined in Chapter 1, Section 1.3, which includes the number of adherents and the large bias of research focused on Christianity to date within English speaking scholarship (Nadal et al., 2015).

Communities associated with belief systems can be a good way to meet people, explore beliefs, be part of a community and maintain friendships/relationships. Previous research has demonstrated that attendance at a community associated with a belief system can be beneficial, for example for mental health (Forrester-Jones et al., 2018;

Mitchell & Weatherly, 2000) and can provide social support (Nguyen et al., 2013; Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Particularly in the case of social inclusion and belonging, it appears that communities associated with belief system groups may be a provision for this through social support.

1.2 Social inclusion and belonging

As argued in Chapter 1 in relation to the focus for the whole thesis, two key terms for the systematic review within this chapter are social inclusion and belonging. As argued in Chapter 1, Section 1.1, both terms have much in common (e.g., positive impact on quality of life; Simplican, et al., 2015, and regarding health more widely, see the seminal work of Cassel, 1976), yet the terms can be used interchangeably, especially in the field of Autism and intellectual disability (Simplican et al., 2015). However, unlike belonging (Mahar et al., 2013), social inclusion has been argued to be informed by normalisation (see Nirje, 1967; Wolfensberger, 1984) and is a domain of measuring the quality of life of autistic people and people with an intellectual disability (Schalock et al., 2002). Furthermore, teachings and beliefs on inclusion are present in four selected belief systems, for example the Parable of the good Samaritan (*NIV,* 1973, Luke 10: 25-37; Christianity) and the Ummah (*Quran*, 1995, 10:19; Islam).

Research into inclusion in belief system communities has identified that inclusion is often enacted in an idiosyncratic basis (Han, 2011; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020; Webb-Mitchell, 2012). Inclusion more broadly incorporates access to buildings and communities and attitudinal barriers (as described by Carter, 2007). Social inclusion and

belonging can only be gained if access is granted to the community (through physical barriers, for example ramps) and the individual is accepted as a member of the group.

1.3 Minority identities

There may be many positives to being a member of a community of practice associated with a belief system. However, these communities can also facilitate an environment which may not be conducive to inclusion. Seminal work from Allport and Ross (1967) found in the United States a higher rate of prejudice among people who attended church in comparison to people who did not attend church. Dessel and Bolen (2014) and Levy (2014) both argue that the theological, cultural, biblical and historical beliefs of some Christian communities may alienate people who identify as LGBTQIA+. In light of this, social inclusion and belonging in such communities demands further exploration, and notably of other belief systems.

The main focus of this thesis is the social inclusion and belonging of autistic people within belief system groups. However, in regards to completing a systematic review, there is not currently enough academic work in this area, given the freshness and novelty of the topic. Broadening the scope to include all disabilities still does not provide enough studies when exploring social inclusion and belonging and using empirical studies. Therefore, for this systematic review, a wider inclusion criterion was used, such as those who are 'minorities' within their belief system groups. This includes people who identify as LGBTQIA+ (inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual and other queer identities), disabled people, converts and people who

are a minority race or ethnic group. Minority in this systematic review is defined as ‘outnumbered’ (as described by Inzlicht et al., 2009, p. 19) in their belief system group. These identities are also part of a social identity (using Tajfel and Turner’s 1986 social identity theory), in the same manner as being autistic (Biklen n.d., in Thibault, 2014). Individuals with a minority identity experience higher levels of social exclusion outside of a non-belief system context. Violence, assault, bullying, vilification, needing to ‘fit in’ and lack of acceptance have been found (e.g., McLaren, 2003; Obuse, 2019), as have microaggressions (Lomash, Brown & Galupo, 2019). This is in spite of the reported importance and benefits to quality of life and health of being socially included and having a sense of belonging.

Reasons for broadening the criteria in such a way include:

- There are bodies of literature already present for some minorities, for example LGBTQIA+, race, queer studies within a belief system context and religious studies more broadly which combined with disability would give sufficient material to systematically review.
- People with a minority identity may experience a stigmatised identity, as described by Goffman (1963).
- Where there are experiences of exclusion and ostracization, there are similarities, for example having to mask (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008); bullying, violence and hate crime (Forster & Pearson, 2020); lack of acceptance (Cage, Di Monaco & Newell, 2018) as a few examples.

There are currently no recorded demographics or numbers of those with a minority identity who attend a community associated with a belief system (e.g., a church, mosque) in the UK at this current time. Therefore, it is difficult to know the scale of the phenomenon under study.

1.4 The Need for a Systematic Review

There have previously been no systematic reviews on this precise topic to date. The majority of systematic reviews regarding social inclusion do not examine the context of belief systems. The fields of social care (e.g., Bigby, 2012; Merrells et al., 2018) and educational settings (e.g., Rix et al., 2006; Sheehy et al., 2009) are often used as the settings for these reviews, rather than belief system communities. Often the subjects of such a systematic review on social inclusion and/or belonging are autistic people, or people with intellectual disability. This is perhaps due to the importance of deinstitutionalization, disabled people being able to live in the community and SRV. Similarly, systematic reviews examining belief system communities have been completed, with notable examples being found in the field of healthcare (Braam & Koenig, 2019; Chakraborty et al, 2017; Liefbroer, et al., 2017).

Identity as a topic within research focusing on religion/belief systems is covered but not with a distinct focus on social inclusion and/or belonging. Identity is usually limited to only LGBTQIA+ individuals and one belief system (Hossain & Ferreira, 2019; Tamilchelvan & Ab Rashid, 2017). A recent systematic review has looked at the experiences of gay and lesbian people in churches (Wilkinson & Johnson, 2020) without

focusing directly on the social inclusion and/or belonging of those with this minority identity. Wilkinson and Johnson’s (2020) study was only focused on Christianity as a belief system and only people who were gay or lesbian. Further research in this field needs to be guided by systematic reviews, as current knowledge is fragmented and sporadic across belief systems and identities. Furthermore, the quality needs to be appraised as the quality of studies remains unknown.

1.5 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this systematic review is to explore the social inclusion and belonging of people with minority identities in Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Humanist belief systems. Three research questions which guided this study are:

1. To what degree do people with a minority identity report being socially included or feeling as they belong in the four belief systems under examination?
2. If there are barriers to full inclusion, what are they? What form do they take?
3. What is the interface between social inclusion and belonging, and the four belief systems under examination?

2 Methods

A protocol informed by the Prisma-P (Shamseer et al., 2015) was completed in January 2020 prior to the running of searches. This informed the method carried out for the systematic review.

2.1 Search

A systematic literature review was conducted using computerised databases. The databases which were used were: Psycinfo, Psycarticles, CINAHL, Scopus, IBSS and Web of Science. These were chosen after seeking advice from a social sciences subject librarian, and scoping the relevant databases. The search was run on 20th February 2020 across all databases and the search strategy had three main elements: ‘minority identities’, ‘social inclusion and/or belonging’ and ‘belief system group or other group whose community of practice was strongly influenced by a belief system’. These three main elements were identified using PICO (Hastings & Fisher, 2014), a pre-existing framework to assist building appropriate research questions for systematic reviews. The full search strategy used (adapted for one database) can be seen below in table 1.

Table 1: The search string used for one database

(((minorit* AND (ethnic* OR racial* OR religi*)) OR disabil* AND (intellect* OR physical* OR learning) OR autis* OR (gay* OR lesbian* OR lgbt*) OR refugee)) AND (belong* OR (social* AND inclus*) OR social* NEAR/2 inclus* OR exclus*) AND (((religi* OR spiritual* OR humanis*) NEAR/3 (group* OR organi*)) OR congregation OR (religi* OR spiritual* OR humanis*) OR (Christian* OR Islam OR Muslim OR Hindu*))

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In order to be included in this systematic review, studies needed to be: written in English; published after 1960; have social inclusion or belonging of minority identities as part of a research question or an outcome and include their voice or experiences;

examine the belief systems of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Humanism within communities of practice. These communities of practice could be places of gathering/worship spaces (e.g., churches, mosques, mandirs, Humanist groups) but also communities of practice or spaces with a strong belief system presence, for example Christian Universities/Colleges (where there is a code of conduct informed by the belief system and the majority who attend will assent to that belief system). This approach was taken due to the paucity of research only examining places of gathering/worship spaces. Studies were not required be peer reviewed in this instance, considering the freshness of the topic (concerning disability and race in particular) and the popularity of this study area among PhD theses. Other recent scoping reviews in the field of disability have also been inclusive of grey literature (e.g., Hills et al., 2016). Excluding these would have meant the search could miss key findings in this field which were yet to reach wider academic audiences. However, the studies did need to be qualitative, or have qualitative data which could be extracted. This included autoethnographic, auto/biographical and commentary articles, as well as qualitative approaches, mixed methods studies with clearly delineated qualitative data (which was therefore extractable) and ethnography. This broad range of accepted studies echoes the interdisciplinary nature of the origin of the studies. Studies exploring other belief systems (e.g., Judaism, Sikhism), or mixed samples where extraction of the sought belief systems would be impossible, were excluded. 1960 was chosen as furthest time point, as this is in line with the movement of liberalism where inclusion of minorities came to the fore (Brickell, 2001; Evans, 2013, p. 30; Malhotra, 2001; Morris, 1984).

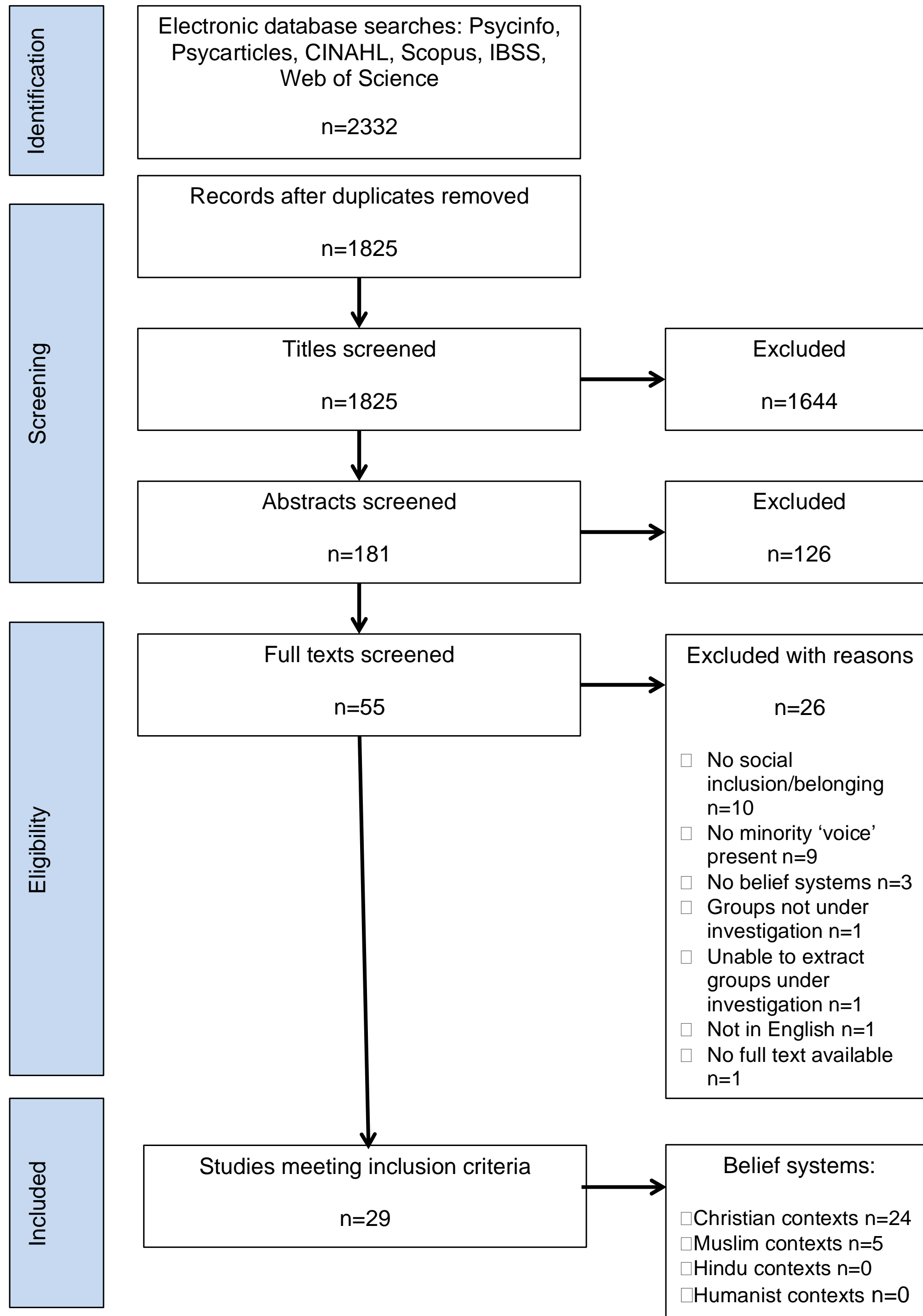
2.3 Extraction

The titles of the studies were extracted from the computerised databases and put into an Excel spreadsheet format. Microsoft Excel (2019 ed.) was used during all stages of the process, to ensure uniformity and allowed completion of the interrater reliability checks with ease. One sheet was used for each level of extraction. Duplicates were removed manually using the A->Z feature. All decisions at each level of extraction for each paper were noted into the relevant spreadsheet.

2.4 Screening

After duplicates were removed, studies were screened for eligibility against the inclusion and exclusion criteria described above. At the first level of study screening, titles were screened for relevance, then abstracts, and finally full texts. A blinded independent rater completed an inter-rater reliability check of a 20% sample of both title screening and full text screening. Both samples selected by the independent rater were random. The blinded independent rater checked eligibility of the titles and full texts at each level of the reliability check. There was 100% agreement on the titles and the studies selected for inclusion by both raters. The screening process is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A Prisma diagram showing the screening process



2.5 Quality Assessment

Studies which were examined at full text review encompassed a variety of qualitative approaches, methods and presentation styles and included PhD theses. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Checklist (2018) was selected as the most appropriate tool to assess the quality of the studies, with the assessment being holistic rather than rated purely on a numerical basis; there is, however, a response of ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘can’t tell’. This was considered important given the broad number of approaches and types of study which merited inclusion. It was not the intention to value one approach over another, rather appraise each study in its own right. After full text screening, each of the 29 studies was subjected to quality assessment by the first author. After the initial quality assessment, an independent rater quality assessed a random sample of 20% of the studies. Discussions occurred with the inter rater after an initial quality assessment, and were ongoing until there was agreement on all items for each included study.

2.6 Analysis

Steps from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as part of a narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2006) were taken as the approach to synthesize the data inductively. Initial coding was completed in NVivo 12. These codes remained close to the source material. The codes were then grouped together and collapsed to find the emergent themes. Both first (quotes) and second order (analysis) data were included in the thematic analysis; the variety of approaches meant quotes were not always presented in text (for example, ethnography and auto/biographical approaches). Second order

data contained other author’s analyses, which were also considered important in the case of this study. Aggregation was the desired outcome of the analysis of this review (Snilstveit, Oliver, & Vojtkova, 2012).

3 Findings

3.1 Study characteristics

29 studies were included in this synthesis. Of these studies, 4 were PhD theses and 25 were peer reviewed papers. 23 of the papers looked at issues pertaining to LGBTQIA+ people, three to issues of disability, and three pertaining to ethnic minority identity. 24 of the papers were in a Christian context and five in a Muslim context. None of the papers which met the inclusion criteria were from Hindu or Humanist contexts. All papers were submitted for viva or published after 2006. No papers were found between the timepoints 1960 and 2006; although liberation theologies began to emerge in the 1960s alongside liberalism, dissemination of liberation theologies has not been widespread. However, ongoing discussions around, and legalisation of, same-sex marriage (legalised in 2014 in England, Wales and Scotland, and in the US between 2004-2015) and civil partnerships (legalised in 2004 in UK) in secular society and belief systems may have contributed to an increase in research interest. Thirteen papers were conducted in the US, six in the UK, three in Canada and one in each of the following locations: Republic of Macedonia, Australia, Hong Kong, South Africa, St Lucia, Philippines & US as joint data collection sites, and Sweden.

Regarding data collection, thirteen used interviews, two used interviews with a supplementary method, five used ethnography, two used surveys, one used interviews and observational data, one was autoethnographic, one was autoethnographic triangulated with interviews, one used observational data accessible through the internet, one used focus groups, and one reported no data collection method.

Regarding data analysis, six used grounded theory, three used phenomenological approaches (including IPA), two used thematic analysis, three were ‘thematically coded’, one used a combination of listening guide and grounded theory, one used content analysis, one used discourse analysis, two used a life histories approach, three analysed ethnographic data, two used a protocol suitable for autoethnography and five gave no data analysis method. The overall number of participants was difficult to ascertain, as some papers did not state the overall number of participants. However, the accounted for number of total participants across all papers was 571.

A summary of the extracted data on the included studies can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Table of extracted data.

No.	Citation and location	Belief system	Participants	Design and data analysis	Findings
1	Barnes (2013); US	Christianity	n=35; Black clergy. 21 men and 14 women. Participants from various denominations.	Qualitative. 3 focus groups (n=15, 12 and 8). Lasting up to 2 hours. Cultural theory as a tool. Analysed using content analysis.	Welcoming church spaces promoted but hesitancy regarding affirming homosexuality **Themes**: 'The Truth Shall Set You Free' Tough Love as Clergy Responsibility; 'A Double-Minded Man' Black Church Double Standards; 'Whosoever will, let him come' Inclusivity (subthemes: Opening the Church Closet; Partial Support; Exclusion from Clergy Roles).
2	Catedral (2018); US	Christianity	n=10 from 2 Christian organisations (n=6 from one, n=4 from the other). Participants from variety of cultural backgrounds	Qualitative. Main data source is recording of an event and other conversations by participant observation July-August 2014. Fieldnotes were made. Analysed using discourse analysis.	**Narratives:** The bureaucratic Christian: "That's not the kind of church we are"; The theologically dogmatic Christian: "We talk about truth being in the tension"; The politically entrenched Christianity: "We follow Jesus".
3	Cole & Harris (2017); US	Christianity	n=18 participants, LGBT and Christian. 5 men and 13 women. Age range mid-twenties to mid-	Qualitative. Phenomenological study. Semi-structured interviews, averaging 60 mins. Analysed into themes using an	**Themes:** Cultural competence (subthemes: Professionals; Client as expert); Personal faith; Challenges (subthemes: Coming out; Marginalization); Help Seeking Motive;

			seventies (as reported). Participants from a variety of denominations.	unnamed method seeking phenomenological themes.	Professional Cultural Competence; Cultural Competence in LGBT issues.
4	Ennis (2015); US	Christianity	n=13 lesbian clergy. Caucasian n=12; Black Caribbean n=1.	Qualitative. Phenomenological approach and informed by social identity theory. Three-part interview series looking for life stories and open-ended questions used during interview. Interviews administered with Grounded theory approach. Data interpretated by listening guide.	**Stages of Lesbian Clergy Development:** Early Religious Identity; Spiritual Identity; Emergence of Sexual Identity; Revised Religious Identity; Clergy Identity; Spiritual Identity; Synthesized Identity.
5	Ho & Hu (2016); Hong Kong	Christianity	n=28. All Christian or ex-Christian. n=27 LGBT, n=1 'pro-gay straight guy' involved in LGBT community. Age range 16-50; gay n=13; lesbian n=8; bisexual n=4, Trans n=2. Protestant n=26; ex-Protestant n=1; Catholic n=1.	Qualitative. Ethnography, including individual interviews (n=18) and a focus group discussion (n=11). One participant had an interview and participated in the focus group. Interviews and focus groups carried out in Cantonese. Analysed using Thematic Analysis.	**Themes:** Forms of intimate discrimination in personal life (subthemes: Misrepresentation and misrecognition; Deprivation of opportunities; Harassment disguised as caring; Intimate exclusion); Dealing with identity conflicts: conformity and resistance (subthemes: Concealment of sexual orientation; Life compartmentalization; Individual confrontation; Finding new spaces).

6	Inloes & Takim (2014); US and Canada	Islam	n=46 participants who identify as Shi'i women returned surveys, n=40 from the US; n=4 from Canada, n=2 did not disclose. Age range: 20-60. White n=28; Black n=8; Latina n=5; Mixed race n=3; Asian-American n=1; Native American n=1; did not disclose n=1.	Qualitative with quantitative aspects. Survey method used distributed via the internet. Two surveys - first of open-ended questions (e.g., demographics and reasons for conversion), then a second to follow up on key issues from the first survey. No analysis method described intext. Narratives are given though.	**Narratives:** Why Convert? (subthemes: Intellectual conversion narratives; Spirituality; Social Justice; Intermarriage); After Conversion: The Challenges (subthemes: The Sunni versus the Shi'i experience; An Ethnic versus a Faith Community; Racism); Responses to the Challenges (subthemes: Cultural Assimilation; Women's Ceremonial Gatherings; A Convert Mosque?; Perceptions of Religious Authority as Female Converts; Online Shi'i communities; Self-perceptions as Women; Identity.
7	Jacobsen; (2017) US	Christianity	n=23 same sex attracted Mormon women. Age range 20-56 years. Mormon n=11; another religion n=2; no religion n=10. Cisgender n=22, Genderqueer (FTM) n=1	Qualitative. Phenomenological study. Semi-structured interviews lasting on average 70 mins. Follow up interviews lasting 35 - 104mins. Coded for themes from a phenomenological perspective.	Safe community spaces are required. **Themes:** Factors influencing community experience (subthemes: Influence of religious congregation; Influence of geographic community); Loss of Mormon community; Rebuilding community.
8	Javaid (2020); UK	Islam	Javaid (author) as sole participant - autoethnographic method. Context - gay, single Muslim.	Qualitative. Autoethnography. Symbolic interactionist approach. Periods of life from past and present as	No set themes due to the methodology used. However, stigma and the notion of the 'outsider'; 'moral panic', confronting normative

				data. No citation of a 'method' followed, however clear method given (i.e. paying attention to 'micro-level social structures and how they come about, while alluding to macro-level social structures that shape how a micro-level social encounter takes place' (p. 8) and ‘reflecting on one's life and posing continual questions regarding interaction’ (p. 8).	regulations and being silenced are all key facets described in the abstract of this article.
9	Jeffries, Dodge & Sandfort (2008); US	Christianity	n=28. Participants from wider study. Black bisexual men. Age range 18-44. African American n=18; Afro-Latino n=3; Puerto Rican n=3; Afro-Native American n=3; Afro-Caribbean n=4.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews lasting 90 mins. Grounded theory approach to data analysis.	Rejection and acceptance found. Sense of belonging found. Alternative spaces/provision may be needed or wanted for bisexual Black men. **Themes**: Involvement in religious communities; Intolerance of bisexuality; Tolerance of bisexuality; Don't ask, don't tell; Church as a sexually diverse community; Spirituality in everyday life; Coping with bisexuality; Coping with religious condemnation; Coping with other adversity; God as protector; Responsibility.

10	Jennings (2018); Australia	Christianity	n=20 LGBTIQ people who are members or used to be members Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian Churches	Qualitative. Semi structured interviews. Analysed using thematic analysis.	Most participants left their churches. Choices posed include: remain closeted, come out but commit to celibacy, undergo conversion therapy. **Themes:** Those who stayed: LGBTIQ in Ministry; The Devil Made You Do It: PCC and SCOE; Those Who Left: Able to Breathe; Pentecostalism and LGBTIQ in Australia; Opening up about PCC and LGBTIQ Members.
11	Karim (2006); US	Islam	n=3. African American n=1; n=1 Pakastani American; n=1 Eritrean American	Qualitative. Ethnography. Main data for this is a conversation between the 3 participants. Unclear if recorded or fieldnotes. Ethnographic technique of 'methods from the margins'.	Experiences of exclusion within the Ummah of the African American participant. Perceived that she self-segregates. **Themes:** race and class discrimination; African American autonomy; cultural difference and multiple oppressions.
12	Lowery (2016); US	Christianity	n=75 families who have autistic children or care for autistic adults	Qualitative. Grounded theory approach. 3 instruments used to collect qualitative data in an online format: an adaptation of O'Hanlon's Spiritual Community Experiences Inventory; an unnamed survey to determine autism-related recommendations; an unnamed survey to	3 major findings: Three major findings were that (1) church leaders who have a negative attitude towards autism/accommodations drive away autistic people, their families, and their caregivers; (2) volunteers who are physically present with the autistic individuals make a positive impact on the communal worship experience

				determine how appropriateness of the intervention guidelines. Themes were thematically coded.	for autistic people, their families, and their caregivers; and (3) accommodations that may provide the greatest impact during a communal worship service for autistic people may be the least invasive. No themes given.
13	Macaulay (2010); UK	Christianity	Macaulay (author) as the only participant. Context: African, gay Christian, Reverend.	Qualitative. Reflective narrative. No analysis method or approach to data collection given.	No themes due to the nature of the article, but key points include: marginalisation of LGBTI Christians of African and Caribbean decent; trauma; effects of religious homophobia; sexual health issues; identity reconciliation.
14	Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy (2015); South Africa	Christianity	n=20. LGBT students. Lesbian n=5; Bisexual females n=3; Trans (FTM) n=3; Trans (MTF) n=2; Bisexual males n=2; Gay n=5.	Qualitative. IPA approach (hermeneutic and questioning). Interview lasting 45-60 mins. Analysed using IPA. Field notes also collected to capture non-verbal cues during the interviews.	Stigma and discrimination found in regards to the University culture, supported by religious beliefs. **Themes:** Stigma and discrimination; processes of 'hetereosexualisation'; the impact of religion-related stigma and discrimination on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.
15	Murr (2013); US	Christianity	n=8 lesbian and bisexual women. Age range early 20s to early 50s. Caucasian n=5;	Qualitative. Critical theory informed study. Semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory approach to data analysis.	All participants shared negative experiences with Christianity. **Themes:** Harmful experience (subthemes: Family conflict; Rejection from faith community;

			Latina n=2; mixed race n=1. Lesbian n=5; bisexual n=2, label rejection n=1.		Shame and internalised messages; Tried to change); Why hold onto spiritual practice? (subthemes: Positive experiences; Celebrations and hard times; Needing community); Developing Affirming Spirituality (subthemes: Never an Issue; Adjusting Theology; Rejected authority of Church; Other LGBTQ Christians); Improved Spiritual Life.
16	Nielson (2016); US	Christianity	Observational data - no participants. Unclear as to exact number of data pieces included.	Qualitative. Exploratory. Social constructionist informed. Observational using data from the internet (internet communities). Accessed via searches on Google and Bing. Analysed with a grounded theory approach.	**Themes:** Sexuality, marriage and family; Policy regarding same-sex marriage and families; eternal nature of marriage and families; Acceptance of divine authority; Rejection of divine authority.
17	Patka & McDonald (2015); US	Christianity	n=12 Catholic priests, vicars and deacons. 12 leaders from 7 parishes. 4 parishes of upper socioeconomic status, 3 of lower. Average age of participants was	Qualitative. Constructivist grounded theory approach. Semi-structured interviews lasting on average 68 mins (range: 39-95 mins). Analysed data using grounded theory.	**Narratives:** 'Close to God'; 'Conformity'; 'Unfortunate innocent children'; 'Deficient'; 'Human Diversity'.

			58.5 years. 5 reported having no disability training. All participants Caucasian.		
18	Penalosa (2018); Phillippines/US	Christianity	Penalosa (author) as main participant - autoethnographic method. Triangulated by n=6 participants, also Filipino, Catholic and gay. Age range 28-43.	Qualitative. Autoethnography. Autobiographical timeline as a key part of the method, along with ongoing fieldnotes collected written and in audio-diary format. Participant moved back to the Philippines during data collection. Protocol by Chang (2008) followed for analysing the autoethnographic data. Interviews conducted for triangulation. Two interviews per participant. Chang's (2008) protocol also followed for interviews	**Themes:** mother as the significant influence on one's self-concept; compartmentalising of faith for survival; sexual intimacy as the means to achieve belongingness, acceptance and visibility; fear of being insignificant.
19	Rahman & Valliani (2016); Canada	Islam	n=6 LGBT Muslims.	Qualitative. Intersectional analytical perspective and queer intersectionality perspective taken. In-depth interviews. Initial analysis presented. Unclear how initial themes ascertained.	**Themes**: Negative reactions from family and the wider community; The strengths in being "Muslim"; Muslim LGBT complications to the "coming out" process and its outcomes; Individual re-interpretations of

					Islamic texts or accommodate homosexuality.
20	Repo (2017); Republic of Macedonia	Islam	n=19 Albanian Muslim women.	Qualitative. Everyday lived Muslim religiosity as a framework guiding the study. Ethnography of religion informing the study. Interviews, 18 face to face or via telephone and one via email. Unclear how the 'spheres' where ascertained.	Qualitative. Everyday lived Muslim religiosity as a framework guiding the study. Ethnography of religion informing the study. Interviews, 18 face to face or via telephone and one via email. Unclear how the 'spheres' where ascertained.
21	Rowe (2014); US	Christianity	n=28 gay men. Age range: 24-72. White n=23; African Americans n=2; Asian Americans n=2; Latino n=1. College educated n=27. Postgraduate educated n=10.	Qualitative. Life histories approach. Interviews including a life history timeline, lasting 1-2hrs. Data analysis by interpretative biography and sociology of accounts. (Themes were found).	**Themes:** Becoming; Belonging.
22	Small (2015); US	Christianity	n=100 participants over 4 years, including n=25 from Unity Fellowship Christ Church; n=50 Seminar/Workshop participants and n=25 other (including members of	Qualitative with quantitative elements, ethnographic. Included face-to-face in-depth interviews and participant observation mainly to ascertain a 'thick description'. Case study approach. Seminars and workshops hosted as further ethnographic data	No clear themes due to analysis approach taken. Two major ideas throughout the study: '(1) Supporting a need for a movement that would deal with immediate crises that exist within both the LGBTQ and TBCC and (2) How people use religion as a means to marginalize others, how it is

			LGBTQ community). Majority were aged 25-65. Mixed ethnic backgrounds to participants, but no numbers collected.	collection sites. In-depth interviews lasted varying durations, with 2 being over 120mins long. Audio recorded.	used to construct identity, and create tensions surrounding gender relations.' Stigma, fear and doubt were also key emotions described in the tentative findings, and in terms of a 'bridge', the Black Church in this study saw more important issues.
23	Taylor & Cuthbert (2019); UK	Christianity	n=13 queer youth. Age range 17-25. Cisgender n=11; Trans man n=1; Trans and genderqueer n=1. White n=13. n=8 participants attended faith schools - those are the narratives of interest to this review.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interview, diary and mapping exercise as ways to data collect. Interviews thematically coded.	**Themes**: Experiences of faith schools; Experiences of community schools; Against (the necessity of) coming out.
24	Taylor & Snowdon (2014); UK	Christianity	n=16 lesbians. White n=16. Age range: 19-34. Range of different denominations. University educated n=14.	Qualitative. Intersectionality as a framework. Semi-structured interviews, diaries and a social mapping exercise as data. There are themes but unsure how these were ascertained, data organised under the	**Themes**: Finding the lesbian women in leadership: "Diversity Role Models" (subthemes: Women Bishops and the "Elders' Wife"; "Nudge, Nudge, Wink, Wink": Leading Lesbians?); "Scary Church Parents": Locating Young Lesbian Lives in Church/through "Family" (subthemes: One of Many: Fitting into God's (Family)

				headings given to the right.	Home; Confessing and "Coming Out" (Or Not); "Doing it in the Eyes of God": Leading into "Family").
25	Toft (2014); UK	Christianity	n=80 completed questionnaires and n=20 participants for in-depth interviews. All participants were Bisexual Christians. Interviews: Male n=11; female n=9. Age range 20-72 years. White British n=20.	Qualitative, phase 1 - questionnaires to collect quantitative data, to inform the interviews. Phase 2 - semi-structured interviews using a life stories approach. Themes given and used as headers, but unclear where they came from or how they were ascertained.	"Respondents reshaped their faith to be more inclusive of bisexuality and re-imagined their sexuality to fit with their religious faith.'' **Themes**: Reimagining Christianity (subtheme: denominational variation); Reconceptualising bisexuality.
26	Vikdahl (2012); Sweden	Christianity	n=3 participants, Eric, Unni & David. A subset of a wider data set. All participants have ID.	n=3 participants, Eric, Unni & David. A subset of a wider data set. All participants have ID.	**Themes presented in the case studies of Eric, Unni and David:** Dependent and exposed; Participating but marginalized; Accessibility - A Presumption for Participation.
27	Westwood (2017); UK	Christianity	n=60 older LGB individuals. Age range 58-92. Women n=36; Men n=24. White n=59.	Qualitative. Study based on Nancy Fraser's (2007) model of equity. Semi-structured interviews. Data from wider subset. Analysed using Thematic Analysis.	Data from one thematic stream presented in this paper concerning sexuality/sexual identity, ageing and religion. **Themes:** In/Exclusions in adolescence and early adulthood; In/Exclusions in later life; Navigating tensions between religion and sexuality

					(subthemes: Integration; Ambivalence; Rejection of organised religion; Seeking out other faith(s) and or groups); Sexuality, religion and older age care.
28	Williams, Forbes, Placide & Nicol (2020); St Lucia	Christianity	n=33 participants. Men n=20; Women n=13. Gay n=11; lesbian n=4; bisexual n=2; did not disclose n=16. Note cultural climate in regards to disclosure.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews. Coded thematically using a coding manual. This included constructs from the Five Faces of Oppression (conceptual model by Iris Young, 1990). Template approach to text analysis taken.	**Themes:** Religion as a Foundation of Life in Saint Lucia; Religion and Power over LGB lives; Religion and Faith Sustaining LGB lives; Religion and Love as Pillars for LGB Human Rights.
29	Zwissler (2019); Canada	Christianity	n=1 congregation, named "Clearwater". Unnamed number of congregants in the church.	Qualitative. Ethnography. Main data for this is from interviews and participant observation of volunteer work, worship services and public protests. Fieldwork over a sustained period of time (2003-2004; 2010; through 2012; 2014) occurring with significant events in the church.	No themes given due to ethnographic data collection method. Ethnographic case study of one congregation’s journey through having a lesbian minister, a gay minister and a Trans woman assistant minister alongside other changes, e.g., change of premises.

Following the inductive analytic process, five themes emerged from the data. These are given in table 3 below:

Table 3: A visual representation of themes and their corresponding subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
The Minority Believer	Minority Presence
	Managing Minority Status
The Perennial Outsider	Toeing the line
	The 'impossible subjects'
Degrees of exclusion	The oppressed
	The excluded
	The partially included
Pockets of empowerment	Affirmation and acceptance
	Joint responsibility
	An inclusive belief system
‘It's complicated'	Brushed under the carpet
	'Sat in the tension'

3.2 Theme 1: The Minority Believer

The first theme, ‘the minority believer’, explores how those with minority identities have past experiences with belief systems and the communities which accompany them. This includes the desire to be part of such a community, and how individuals with a minority status navigate and manage having a minority identity (which may be seen as stigmatising).

3.2.1 Minority Presence

Many people with a minority identity were found in this study have engaged in, or wish to be a part of, a belief system. This was reported in twelve studies (4, 6, 9, 11, 15, 16,

18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 26). This includes the notion of belief systems being important in terms of support during difficult times and milestone events:

> ‘I feel like God is the sustainer of my mind and my heart. And he’s been there. He’s gotten me this far […] Could have done a lot of things. But I just thank God that [I didn’t].’ (9)

For some, their belief system and the community which accompanies it holds great importance in their lives. This was reported in six studies (3, 8, 15, 26, 27):

> ‘I’ve realized that I really do want to belong to a community of believers who share the same beliefs and who, kind of, live affirming lives.’ (15)

3.2.2 Managing Minority Status

For those with a minority identity, there appeared to be varying ways in which they managed their minority status in their faith communities. One way which the minority status was managed was through concealing their status to ‘blend into’ the group. This was reported in nineteen studies (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29). Within these, fourteen specifically report concealing or withholding information on their minority identity (4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27):

> ‘It seems, then, that as long as Phoenix’s transgender status remained a secret from all but their pastor, no negative attention was experienced, presumably because other congregants assumed Phoenix was cisgender.’ (10)

Identities which can be hidden, or ‘masked’, can include sexual orientation and invisible disability (e.g., disabilities without a ‘physical cue’ such as autism), whereas other identities (e.g., race, visible disabilities, i.e. disabilities with a ‘physical cue’ such as a wheelchair or a cane) are more difficult to conceal.

Some individuals with a minority identity challenged the notions of normalcy within their community, and found ‘new’ ways to interact with their belief system, including re-exploring their beliefs. This was reported in eighteen studies (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 27, 29):

> ‘The emergence of my spiritual self and my conscious awareness of choosing God to be the center of my life without the infliction of the traumatizing doctrinal belief systems.’ (18)

However, some individuals with a minority identity did end up leaving. This was often because of a lack of acceptance, painful experience(s) or inability to reconcile their identity with the identity their former community wished. This was reported in ten studies (4, 12, 14, 15, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29):

> ‘I couldn’t bear what they were being taught, […] I just didn’t find the God I knew inside myself there, and I felt wrong in them.’ (25)

3.3 Theme 2: The Perennial Outsider

The second theme describes how the individual with a minority identity may be perceived by the community associated with their belief system.

3.3.1 The ‘impossible subjects’

The ‘impossible subjects’ examines how individuals with a minority identity may be seen as difficult to engage. This was present in 28 of the studies. The title for this subtheme was taken from the term first used by Mae Ngai (2004) in relation to illegal immigrants, and also used by Abraham (2009) in regards to queer Australian Muslims. On this occasion I felt this notion covered multiple minority identities.

Those with a minority identity were often perceived by others in communities allied with belief systems as inferior or ‘needing fixing’. This included being seen as children, needing to go through reparatory programmes (also known as conversion therapy) such as Exodus, and association with demonic possession (e.g., the minority identity is caused by demons to be cast out). This was reported in fifteen studies, including all three studies concerning disability (12, 17, 26) and twelve studies examining LGBTQIA+ people (3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 22, 27, 28):

> ‘My religious upbringing taught me that any sexual ‘deviance’ was to be classified as the work of the Devil and demonic spirits, and that any homosexual feelings would dissipate if I prayed hard enough.’ (13)

Other members of the community of practice did not take responsibility for the part they played in exclusion, and saw the individual as the person responsible for adapting to the culture of the community of practice. This was reported in six studies (1, 12, 13, 17, 26, 27). The following example pertains to attitudes towards a congregant with intellectual disability:

> ‘I didn’t have the time or energy or ability to do much for her … the priest wants certain things done, and helping somebody to the bus and getting in, that’s not part of it.’ (17)

3.3.2 Toeing the line

In 22 studies, the importance of remaining inside group set norms was described, named here as the subtheme ‘toeing the line’ (all studies except studies 3, 5, 6, 21, 26, 27 and 29). ‘Toeing the line’ includes the ideas of in-group pressure, community groupthink and other congregants’ belief system justifying their beliefs and actions.

The idea of in-group pressure, that being pressure to meet heteronormative, able-bodied or other cultural norms of the group, was reported in ten studies (1, 4, 7, 10, 11,

12, 16, 17, 22, 24). The idea of ‘love the sinner, not the sin’ was particularly eminent to those with a LGBTQIA+ identity in Christian contexts:

> ‘And yet if I were to go and get . . . romantically involved with another [person of the same gender], like, they would sit down with me and be like, “Hey, what’s going on?”’ (10)

One way in which this status quo was maintained was the justification of exclusionary behaviour through belief systems of the communities. This was reported in seven studies (1, 2, 15, 22, 24, 25).

> ‘Issues pertaining to sexual orientation are not similar to the issues discussed in Romans 14:15, because the Bible is, in their view, explicit and clear about sexual orientation being sinful.’ (2).

3.4 Theme 3: Degrees of Exclusion

Exclusion within communities associated with belief systems was found in all studies in the dataset. Exclusion was found to take a variety of different appearances in the dataset, as described below.

3.4.1 The oppressed

‘The oppressed’ as a subtheme explored the impact of power imbalances in exclusion, and the impact this had directly or indirectly on those with a minority identity. This was reported in 25 studies (all studies except studies 1, 7, 9 and 17). This included two studies examining race, two examining disability and 21 examining LGBTQIA+ people.

One particularly key aspect of oppression is the power imbalance that can be experienced by the individual with a minority identity. This was reported in seven studies (5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 24, 25). In this dataset, it was found amongst studies examining race (n=2) and studies examining LGBTQIA+ people (n=5).

> ‘I couldn’t talk to the youth about it; I couldn’t share my struggles because I “refused” to change. But, an adulterer, porn addict, an ex-drug addict and ex-prostitute could. They could even get on stage and share about their experiences, but not me. I had to be quiet.’ (10)

Dealing with oppression often left a detrimental impact on individuals with minority identities, as seen in the dataset through mental distress and emotional pain. Mental distress and emotional pain were reported in 21 studies (2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29).

> ‘“Go visit the scary church parents tonight and my whole beautiful gay Christian world could be turned on its head...” […]. In her diary, Sally judged this visit to be a success as she “didn’t come back angry or wanting to cry.”’ (24)

Fifteen studies reported difficulty or the impossible nature of reconciling their minority and belief system identities (3, 4, 5, 10, 13, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28) and six studies reported internal conflict between minority and belief system identities (4, 10, 18, 21, 22, 27). This was particularly noticeable amongst studies concerning LGBTQIA+ identities (n=14).

> ‘I found that many people struggled with reconciling sexuality with spirituality and have often associated being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex as an abomination.’ (13)

3.4.2 The excluded

The subtheme ‘the excluded’ examines ways in which individuals with minority identities were physically excluded from the space, or how exclusion was enacted out. In the current dataset, 28 studies included this subtheme (all studies except study 23).

One way in which exclusion was physically practiced was through rejection and expulsion. This was reported in fifteen studies (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 14, 27, 28, 29). Studies including individuals with a LGBTQIA+ identity (n=10) and a disabled identity (n=1) were included in this.

> ‘When I came out to my pastor, he called me a week later and told me I needed to leave the church and was no longer welcome to lead music.’ (3)

Shunning was another approach to exclusion which was found amongst the dataset. This was reported in five studies (2, 11, 15, 21, 24) and four pertained to LGBTQIA+ individuals, whilst one pertained to ethnic identity:

> ‘It is in the way people very subtly shun me, or cut me off when I’m speaking, or don’t speak, or speak and move away, or don’t make any further attempts to converse. It is little things like that.’ (11)

3.4.3 The partially included

In nine studies (4, 6, 7, 8, 16, 17, 20, 23, 28) there was notions of inclusion amongst the communities associated with belief systems, however this inclusion appeared to lack depth and not actually help those with a minority identity access or be a member of their community of choice. This included inclusion which appeared to be superficial in nature, and segregation as a way to include people.

Superficial inclusion was reported in five studies (4, 16. 17, 23, 28) and notably included both disabled (n=1) and LGBTQIA+ identities (n=4). This was often limited to inclusion based on notions of who is present and how people feel, rather than access requirements or attitudinal barriers:

> ‘What I can say without the least shadow of doubt is that [Church] leaders see the Church as an inclusive community founded on love, and yearn for all to be a part of it, LGBT people no less than any others.’ (16)

Another way in which partial inclusion was enacted was through creating segregated spaces specifically for those with a minority identity, or inversely for those without a minority identity. This was reported in six studies (6, 7, 8, 17, 20, 23). This included disabled (n=1), LGBTQIA+ (n=4) and race or ethnic identities (n=1):

> ‘I don’t think we need to promote inclusion in [sacraments] … […] inclusion doesn’t mean that everyone needs to have access to everything.’ (17)

3.5 Theme 4: Pockets of empowerment

‘Pockets of empowerment’ explores spaces, attitudes and beliefs which accept, affirm and empower individuals with minority identities. This was reported in 26 studies (all studies except studies 8, 14 and 16).

3.5.1 Affirmation and acceptance

In contrast to the theme ‘degrees of exclusion’, instances of acceptance and/or affirmation of minority identities was found in the dataset. This was reported in 23 studies (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29). This acceptance and/or affirmation appeared to be idiosyncratic, and not widespread. However, the pocketed nature of these occurrences does not lower their importance.

One way which acceptance and/or affirmation was found was through communities associated with belief systems who were affirming minority identities, or different spaces within the same community. One such example would be ‘inclusive churches’ or ‘inclusive mosques’, or LGBT groups associated with the belief system (e.g., a Bible study group). This was often actively sought out or initiated, sometimes after years of emotional pain, exclusion and/or oppression. This was reported in eighteen studies (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29).

> ‘MCC to me is security and warmth and a shelter from the storm.’ (23)

Role models were also reported as important in terms of being affirmed; knowing a community was accepting and knowing it is okay to have a minority identity and adhere to a belief system. This was reported in two studies (15, 22) with a further two studies (4, 29) reporting how clergy with minority identities were providing evidence of a community which could be accepting, and advocate for inclusion more broadly:

> ‘Because Sarah was so public in being out in her denomination, the proponents of LGBTQ inclusion in her denomination eventually used her as their “poster child”.’ (4)

3.5.2 Joint responsibility

The subtheme of ‘joint responsibility’ explored the idea that the community has a responsibility to educate themselves on what it means to have a minority identity, and to value those individuals for who they are and as they come and provide any access requirements. This was reported in thirteen studies (2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 12, 17, 21, 22, 23, 27, 29).

One dimension of ‘joint responsibility’ is all members of a belief system community being responsible for change towards becoming more inclusive. This included leaders and fellow group members. This was reported in five studies (2, 10, 17, 22, 29).

> ‘The Rev. Angela believes it is going to take everyone working together to have success in uniting the two communities. “Ain’t None of Us Getting Through Here, Without the Rest!”’ (22)

Another aspect of ‘joint responsibility’ is the idea of being open to change, learning about different lived experiences and in theistic belief systems, differing theological stances. This is especially the case in relation to LGBTQIA+ identity and liberation theology. This is the case for communities, families and wider belief system administration and charities. Four studies (3, 17, 22, 29) report this, including both LGBTQIA+ identities (n=3) and disabled identities (n=1).

> ‘Rather than invite LGBTQ people into their fold as newly domesticated, neoliberal subjects, the congregation looks to them, and other socially

> marginalized members, to disrupt ways that the group may be unconsciously growing complacent with dominant power structures.’ (29)

One final aspect of ‘joint responsibility’ is valuing individuals with a minority identity as they are, and perceiving them as valuable and an asset to their belief system community. This was reported in three studies (4, 12, 17), in relation to both LGBTQIA+ identities (n=1) and disabled identities (n=2).

> ‘I encourage her and tell her what a great job she does singing. This seems to make her feel very proud of herself. Her parents have said this simple act has been wonderful for her self-esteem.’ (12)

3.5.3 An inclusive belief system

‘An inclusive belief system’ examines the ideal scenario of inclusion, and how belief systems may support this. This was reported in fourteen studies (2, 4, 12, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29).

The ideal scenario was often enshrined in the ideas of a God who is all loving and all accepting in the case of theistic belief systems, and God does not necessarily judge in the same way as other belief system community members might in theistic settings. This was reported in ten studies (2, 4, 13, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28).

> ‘That is not what God does. He is not an abuser. What I found is Unity comes from love….God loves you.’ (22)

In some cases, belief systems aligned with notions of social justice, advocacy and empowerment. This was reported in three studies (4, 13, 22).

> ‘Yeah. So you know I just try to work with that as best as I can. And be there and show them different aspect of the scripture that challenge, you know, some of the other aspects of scripture that claim to condemn LGBT people and you know,[…] Yeah. [Pause] it’s just [pause] I think it’s [pause] think It’s an all-out war. I really do.’ (4)

3.6 Theme 5: ‘It’s complicated’

The complexity and idiosyncrasy of discussion surrounding minority identities exposes a variety of responses and actions in regards to discussion. This theme is found in 23 studies (all studies except studies 5, 12, 14, 15, 18 and 26).

3.6.1 Brushed under the carpet

Many of the studies comment on the avoidance some belief system communities may have in regards to discussing the implications and variety of views in regards to minority identities – all studies in the dataset noting this in reference to LGBTQIA+ people. This is reported in thirteen studies (1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28).

> ‘Like when the Anglican Church said gay marriage is wrong and homosexuality is a sin and didn’t consult anybody, any of their members about what they thought?’ (24)

However, some communities have appeared discussion regarding the inclusion and position of minority identities in their communities. The two studies which do mention this (2, 29) have the discussion regarding LGBTQIA+ identities. The following example (29) is in regards to a minister coming out:

> ‘“Well, I just thought, ‘I can’t do that. I can’t go on being in the process and talk about it as if I’m not very involved in this whole thing myself.’” Instead, she approached the Clearwater personnel committee, and they brainstormed the plan to tell each member individually within a two-week interval.’ (29)

3.6.2 ‘Sat in the tension’

‘Sat in the tension’ refers to the mix of views that belief system communities and their members may have, and how there may not be one overall consensus and how experiences may differ per community attended. This was reported in 23 studies (all studies except studies 5, 12, 14, 15, 18 and 26). Tension was found in regard to LGBTQIA+ identities (n=20), disabled identities (n=1) and race and ethnic identities (n=2).

> ‘It depends on the church that you attend. Some churches allow it [sic - LGBTQIA+ identity] to be seen and other churches do not allow it. I don’t see what the problem is.’ (22)

The situation is complicated further by the mixed messages and behaviours in regards to minority identities and associated ‘behaviours’ of people with a minority identity, as well as how the person with a minority identity may perceive themselves in relation to their multiple identities. This increases the tension on an already highly divided discussion. This was reported in eleven studies (1, 2, 4, 10, 16, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29), with all studies pertaining to LGBTQIA+ identity:

> ‘The answer to making life better wasn’t ‘finding myself’ in homosexuality or ‘coming to terms with reality’ on that measure. It was finding God, realizing how completely He loved me, and then surrendering my will to Him…’ (16)

3.7 Quality Assessment

An overview of the quality assessment outcomes is provided below in table 4. Qualitative research was deemed a suitable approach for all included (29) studies in the dataset. However, reflexivity is noted to be a weakness in the dataset when considering the quality appraisal, with researcher reflexivity only occurring in fifteen studies, including personal position and methods undertaken. 22 of the studies explained how their participants were selected and 23 studies explained why these were the most appropriate participants. However, the number of all participants was not always

reported (e.g., Zwissler, 2019 only reported n=1 congregation without the number of congregants). Furthermore, it was not always reported when a participant had a minority identity. Not all participants may have chosen to disclose at the time. Only five studies included discussions around participant recruitment (e.g., why some participants might have not wished to participate at that time). This is particularly key to consider with some minority identities being ‘hidden populations’ (as described in 28) or not self-reporting. The presentation of findings was strong across the dataset, but only 18 studies described their analysis process in depth. A favourable ethical opinion was only stated in eleven of the studies, with thirteen studies giving information on how the research was explained to participants and eighteen studies explaining issues surrounding informed consent or effects of confidentiality. It remains unknown if a favourable ethical opinion was obtained on the remaining eighteen studies.

Table 4: Quality assessment outcomes

	Results					
	Yes		No		Can't tell	
Questions	N	%	N	%	N	%
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	29	100	0	0	0	0
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	29	100	0	0	0	0
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	27	93	0	0	2	7
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	26	90	0	0	3	10
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	25	86	1	3	3	10
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	16	55	9	31	4	14
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	17	59	10	34	2	7
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	19	66	4	14	6	20
Was there a clear statement of findings?	27	93	1	3	1	3
How valuable is the research?	29	100	0	0	0	0

4 Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that the social inclusion and belonging of people with a minority identity in Christian and Muslim spaces is complex and mixed, with many instances of barriers hindering full inclusion and feeling of belonging (Research Question 1).

These barriers include attitudinal barriers, physical barriers, power imbalances and expectations to fit into group norms (Research Question 2). In many instances, these barriers lead to the exclusion of individuals with minority identities from such, in spite of the reported importance of various belief systems to some people with a minority identity (Research Question 3). Experiences appear to differ by individual community, with no overall consensus per belief system found in the dataset, with practice and beliefs appearing idiosyncratic. In regards to this review, It remains unknown what the social inclusion and belonging of people with a minority identity in Hindu and Humanist groups due to the lack of presence in the dataset

The overwhelmingly high number of reported traumatic experiences is not to be overlooked in regards to the findings presented. This demonstrates many of the communities associated with Christianity and Islam were not conducive to social inclusion or belonging for people with minority identities. This is especially of note in conjunction with the finding that belief systems may be of great importance to many people with a minority identity, and the desire they may have to be part of an associated community.

4.1 The role of stigma in social inclusion and belonging

The findings from this study found that experiences of stigma and stigma management appear to be key facets in the experiences of social inclusion and belonging of people with minority identities, notably as a key part of the subthemes ‘managing minority status’ and ‘the impossible subjects’. The experiences of stigma found in this systematic review echo other previous research in regards to gender identity, sexual orientation, race and disability (e.g., Herek, 2007; Howarth, 2006;

Sasson et al., 2017; Susman, 1994). In terms of stigma management, it appears that different groups (therefore with different kinds of stigma – some able to conceal, others unable to conceal) manage their stigma differently. Individuals who can conceal their stigma, for example LGBTQIA+ people, appear to attempt to ‘pass’ as ‘normal’ in some circumstances (as described in Goffman, 1963). Stigma management through ‘passing’ has been previously observed in regards to LGBTQIA+ people (e.g., Corrigan & Matthews, 2003), people from different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Storrs, 1999) and disabled people (e.g., Cage et al., 2018; Hull et al., 2017). The fact that people with a minority identity are having to manage their stigma, be it through the above discussed passing, or leaving community spaces, demonstrates an attitudinal barrier to full access of some communities of practice associated with belief systems. The in-group pressure found (through the subtheme ‘toeing the line’) providing pressure to pass, or leave such a group, may also impact on identity formation. This further impacts on the opportunity to form healthy and supportive relationships (a key part of social inclusion and belonging), for example, being openly LGBQTIA+ in a space allows you to get support from others who also identify as LGBTQIA+ with a similar lived experience.

A further aspect impacting the role of stigma in social inclusion and belonging of minority identities is the limited knowledge regarding minority identities combined with, and how this is ‘played out’ in, the group at large. This lack of information and cultural knowledge has the impact of othering people with a minority identity, and rendering them as undesirable within some communities of practice associated with their belief system. Often in communities of practice associated with belief systems, undesirability may be linked to notions of sin and a lack of purity, which was found in

the subtheme ‘the impossible subjects’ in this review. This echoes findings from Kirby, McKenzie-Green, McAra-Couper and Nayar (2017), who describe people who identify as LGBTQIA+ as ‘sinfully different’, and Tamilchelvan and Ab Rashid (2017) describe in the findings from their systematic review that the gay men in their sample felt they were ‘sinful’. A focus on behaviour, rather than identity, is also found, separating the individual from their identity and assuming this behaviour to be a choice. This has the potential to be harmful, in particular to the health and wellbeing of people with minority identities in some cases (notably mental health and wellbeing through increasing distress), encouraging ‘passing’, and lowers the potential for authentic social inclusion and a feeling of belonging in these groups. Furthermore, the role of in-group pressure (subtheme: ‘toeing the line’) supports seminal findings from Allport and Ross (1967), highlighting the potential prejudicial nature of some communities of practice associated with belief systems. This prejudicial nature has the potential to exclude people through attitudinal barriers (as described by Carter, 2007), advertently or inadvertently, and further decreases the opportunity for social inclusion and a sense of belonging. It is, therefore, not a surprise that people with a minority identity may leave a community of practice associated with a belief system, or that they change their belief system.

4.2 Experiences of exclusion and inclusion

Distinct acts of exclusion and inclusion appear to frame the wider notion of social inclusion and belonging, and are the basis for themes three (‘degrees of exclusion’) and four (‘pockets of empowerment’). Power appears to be a crucial facet to consider in the experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and therefore the social inclusion and belonging of people with a minority identity.

One way that power appears to manifest in the exclusion of people with minority identities is through oppression and microaggressions – subtle acts of discrimination which are targeted towards someone with a minority identity (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions can be experienced by anyone with a ‘marginalised identity’ (Sue, 2010, p. 5) and can take a variety of forms, including behavioural, verbal or environmental. In this systematic review, microaggressions were found within theme three (‘degrees of exclusion’) and notably within the sub theme ‘the oppressed’. Some experiences of LGBTQIA+ clergy were also found in regards to microaggressions in the sub theme ‘the oppressed’, and pre-emptively in the subtheme ‘managing minority status’ through encouragement to ‘pass’. In these instances, the power appears to be held by the community and enshrined ‘norms’. This echoes the findings of Lomash et al. (2019) within a belief system context, and tentatively suggests microaggressions may be experienced in a belief system context by other minority identities explored in this systematic review too, as found by Sue, Capodilupo and Holder (2008) in regards to ethnic minority identities (however not in a belief system context). ‘The oppressed’ also included experiences of marginalisation, as described in Harris, Yancey and Cole’s (2020) recent findings exploring who defines an LGBTI Christian. The more overt experiences of exclusion (McLaren, 2003; Obuse, 2019) was also reflected in the above findings, notably under the subtheme ‘the excluded’. This may be linked to the in-group pressure found in ‘toeing the line’, underlining the role of other group members and group culture in what is deemed as acceptable. Perhaps the oppression and exclusion experienced here are linked to notions of heteronormativity being supported by the norms of religious belief systems (Halkitis et al., 2009) in regards to sexual

orientation and gender identity. Similar notions regarding able-bodied and neurotypical standards may be enforced in some groups when considering the oppression and exclusion of disabled and neurodivergent people (Jacobs, 2019).

Inversely, the theme ‘pockets of empowerment’ includes power that is differently spread, which impacts not only the dynamic of the community of practice, but also how this impacts the social inclusion and belonging of people with a minority identity. Rather in this case, the power is not only held by non-minority group members, as described in the paragraph above, but it is evenly distributed with the individual with a minority identity having agency. This can include, in some situations, clergy who have a minority identity, who can help guide the community towards more inclusive practice; the power being held by the minority can be used in a manner which facilitates change in the community (as seen in the sub theme ‘joint responsibility’. Responsibility is also evenly distributed, with responsibility to learn not only placed onto the individual with a minority identity (notably through the theme ‘joint responsibility’). This links to the self-determination domain of Schalock et al.’s (2002) quality of life domains and the notion of social justice, which was a key facet of the subtheme ‘an inclusive belief system’.

4.3 Idiosyncrasy

The idiosyncrasy and lack of consensus the nature of the experiences of social inclusion and belonging reflects other literature in the field examining the inclusion and valuing of people with a minority identity (e.g., Carter, Bumble, Griffin & Curcio, 2017; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020, Wilkinson & Johnson, 2020). In this systematic review, it is particularly of note with the opposing natures of themes three

(‘degrees of exclusion’) and four (‘pockets of empowerment’), and the presence of theme five (‘‘it’s complicated’’). The findings of this systematic review echo the mixed outcomes reported in Wilkinson and Johnson’s (2020) recent systematic review on gay and lesbian people’s experiences of faith or religious affiliation. The idiosyncrasy is particularly noticeable concerning how people with a minority identity are viewed, as seen in the subtheme ‘‘sat in the tension’’. Findings by Harris et al. (2020) are also mirrored, with their mixed findings in regards to the acceptability of LGBTQI (term used by Harris et al., 2020) in churches; similar findings in relation to disability were found by Carter et al. (2017). This could be due to differing experiences and exposure to people with a minority identity, with some communities of practice associated with belief systems attracting only people who are alike those already group members. Perhaps the lack of directive policy or guidelines in this domain, alongside a range of interpretations of Holy texts, theologies and beliefs more broadly, facilitates a lack of consensus in regards to the inclusion of people with a minority identity more broadly. Any intervention would need to be sensitive to the idiosyncratic nature of these groups, their belief system/theology and the wider cultural context they exist in. In relation to social inclusion and belonging, this idiosyncratic nature among communities of practice associated with belief systems may hinder full inclusion and a sense of belonging. This is especially the case if an individual cannot attend a local group, or wishes to attend a certain group for familial or other reasons; part of full social inclusion and belonging is being able to choose which group one would like to attend or join. It remains unknown if there are such differences in regards to Christianity and Islam.

4.4 Reflexivity

One aspect which is vital to consider in a review of qualitative data is my own experience with a minority identity (autistic) and Christian belief system. Whilst this was the motivation for the topic of review, stringent protocols were put in place to ensure undue bias was kept to a minimum, as the researcher is a tool in qualitative research. This was deemed important given the weaknesses of reflexivity as found within the quality assessment. Steps by Maxwell (1992) of descriptive and interpretative validity were taken through the use of a journal throughout the analysis process.

4.5 Limitations and directions for future research

This systematic review is limited by the data which it includes. This includes the quality of the data, which in many cases was limited by a lack of information given regarding analysis methods and protocols, reflexivity and ethical considerations. Information reported regarding the participants will also impact this given the qualitative nature of and approach to this systematic review. Most noticeably, there are no studies which include Hindus or Humanists in this review, and the majority of studies focus on Christian contexts, linking to the Christian bias in this field (Nadal et al., 2015). This review only included studies written in English, therefore they may be studies in other languages (e.g., Hindi) which may have provided extra data in regards to Hindu contexts. Further studies may wish to include the views and experiences of Hindus, Humanists and people with other belief systems. Furthermore, the majority of the studies found focused primarily on gay or lesbian populations in churches in the US. The inclusion of gay and lesbian people in

churches, and same-gender marriage, has been described as one of the largest and most contentious issues currently facing the Church (Kirby et al., 2017), which may account for the lack of, or non-visibility of, ethnic minority, disabled, autistic, other neurodivergent (e.g., dyslexic, ADHD), and other queer (e.g., Trans) identities in this sample, as well as populations outside the US. Further studies may examine these other identities and the experiences of the people with these identities in different geographical locations. Accurate reporting of who participates, and enabling a safe space for self-reporting of a minority identity (for participants and researchers alike), is vital to improve the quality of the data in the field. With a topic examining beliefs, this could be problematic given all humans have beliefs, morals and ideals, whether they align with a belief system (theistic or non-theistic) or not. Considerations regarding viability of researchers being truly self-reflexive in their studies and disclosing parts of their identity (beliefs, disability, race) which may be stigmatised or misunderstood (e.g., receiving discrimination and unconscious bias, hesitation about disclosure, see for examples: Brown, 2020, p. 61).

4.6 Conclusion

The systematic review in this chapter further demonstrates the identified research gap in relation to disability and belief system groups (both religious and non-religious). The systematic review also found results which support and build on the current literature base, notably in regards to the cross-sectional nature of stigma and stigma management across different identities in a belief system context, and commonalities across in-group dynamics within belief system groups. These findings provide a unique insight into the social inclusion and belonging of people with minority identities and further underlines the need for research that specifically

focuses on autistic people’s experiences. In the next chapter, I will outline the methodology and methods of this thesis which intends to address this gap.

Chapter 3: Methodology and methods

1 Introduction

In this chapter, the methodological approach of the research will be detailed and discussed, as well as discussions pertinent to qualitative research including quality, voices of relevant included parties, and reflexivity. Then, the methods applied in the studies presented in this thesis will be outlined and defended; firstly Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5) together, given the similarity in the methods employed, and then Study 4 (Chapter 6).

The research approach and findings of this thesis will be informed by the theoretical perspectives interpretivism and symbolic interactionism, with reflexive practices paid attention to throughout data collection. The decision to undertake qualitative inquiry as a means to investigate the social inclusion and belonging of autistic people in belief system groups will also be discussed and justified below.

2 Methodology

2.1 Interpretative frameworks and theories

Social research can be undertaken in a manner of different ways, with various theories informing the approach, paradigm, and rationale for the research (Bryman, 2012, pp. 5-6). Whilst some scholarship may utilise an objectivist understanding of knowledge whereby a hypothesis is tested and relies on observable scientific verification (Bryman, 2012, p. 5), other scholarship may consider the heterogenous realities across multiple participants and how knowledge is co-created in a constructivist paradigm (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Additionally, understandings of

realities inform approaches to research, with ontological perspectives of a definitive reality being able to be reached (e.g., naïve realism) and at the other end of the spectrum, multiple intangible realities (e.g., relativism) (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Given social inclusion and belonging have been reported in a variety of different ways, with culture and identity framing how these may be experienced, it is inappropriate to take an objectivist and realist approach to further exploring autistic people’s experiences within belief systems. Using quantitative methods at this time risks reductionism of potential findings, and lack cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, given the lack of academic discourse on this topic, with (Critical) Autism Studies and religious studies (including sociological and psychological perspectives) (see Creamer, 2007), an inductive approach allows for investigation to see if alignment is found with current literature in both fields, and measures used for social inclusion in particular.

Moving down from the macro paradigms of ontology and epistemology lie theoretical perspectives, which are informed by the ontological and epistemological positioning of researchers and research questions. Theoretical frameworks that fall within a constructionist epistemological stance relevant to this thesis include social constructivism, interpretivism and critical theory (Moon & Blackman, 2014), the former two of which seek to understand and discover interpretations, and the latter of which seeks to liberate and emancipate marginalised and oppressed social groups.

2.2 An Interpretivist Framework

Interpretivism is a theoretical framework that adopts a relativist view on reality being culturally derived and historically situated (Moon & Blackman, 2014; Junjie & Yingxi,

2022), with individuals unable to be separated from their knowledge. Interpretivists believe knowledge is constructed – insofar as how objects are viewed influences how they are understood (Weber & Henderson, 2012). Interpretivists also believe that human intentions and beliefs cannot be eliminated (Howe, 1988) and emphasise the importance of subjective meanings of the social world and institutions (Creswell, 2007), thus methods of natural science and positivism are not appropriate for research topics with an interpretivist ontology (Chowdhury, 2014). With the focus on social inclusion and belonging, and the interpersonal and interactional nature that is embedded within social inclusion and belonging, including friendships, communication, interaction and intersubjectivity, and their outcomes, an interpretivist perspective is appropriate for the studies to be undertaken. Given that autistic voices and autistic people’s experiences are relatively unheard and understudied in belief system settings, interpretivism as an epistemological standpoint is suitable.

Studies informed by interpretivism use qualitative research methods to elicit data (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994), for example: interviews, focus group discussions, observations, creative methods, and documents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 18). Qualitative inquiry is a broad church of research methods and approaches intertwined by multiple traditions and used across various disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 2). The history of the landscape of qualitative inquiry has included various paradigm shifts, including its perceived compatibility with quantitative research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 5; Howe, 1988). Often used to elicit information about interactions, beliefs and experiences (Pathak et al., 2013), qualitative inquiry explores the social world through data that is not numerical. This reductionist approach would miss the nuances in the lived experiences of autistic

people, who have been found to conceptualise their quality of life differently (Robertson, 2009), which otherwise may not be adequately captured through quantitative measures.

One of the central critiques of interpretivist approaches is the perceived influence of the researcher and subjective bias they bring to studies (Junjie & Yingxi, 2022). Questions around the objectivity and ‘detached nature’ of the researcher started arising in the 1950s in relation to ethnography (Erikson, 1962). Notably Winkler (1973) argues there is no ‘value-free’ social science, indicating researchers bring values and identities to what we research to some degree from a non-realist standpoint. Challenges to ‘value free’ research have also been posed with the assertion that researchers are intrinsically intertwined with the social world under investigation (Malterud, 2001). Therefore, aiming for positivist objectivity would be erroneous; rather, acknowledging the roles and positionality of the researcher allows for transparency in epistemological standpoint.

Often understandings of markers of quality are framed within a positivist and quantitative research paradigm, with markers for good quality qualitative research lesser known; following Cheek’s (2007) assertion that public understanding of validity originates from quantitative research. One example of this is understandings of generalisation as across populations, rather than within (Riyami, 2015). Indeed, even amongst qualitative researchers, it has been argued that universal criteria would not be of merit within qualitative paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), due to a lack of unity within the qualitative paradigm (Rolfe, 2004).

In spite of some researchers arguing against any consensus of criteria (Rolfe, 2004), some researchers have proposed frameworks and recommendations to guide the production of good quality qualitative research. One such framework by Tracey (2010) has eight broad areas that researchers should attend to, and to promote dialogue between qualitative scholars. Tracy’s (2010) framework is a broad umbrella which outlines what good quality qualitative research under eight domains: ‘a worthy topic’, ‘rich rigour’, ‘sincerity’, ‘credibility’, ‘resonance’, ‘significant contribution’, ‘ethical and meaningful contribution’. Tracy recognises that qualitative scholars have discussed how quality criteria may be shaped by paradigm, theories and communities (2010, p. 839), with different approaches and methodologies needing to focus on differing criteria (as Creswell, 2007 suggests), and postulates their framework as attending to ‘end goals of research’ (p. 839). There is flexibility in how these goals are reached, sensitive to differences in approaches and methodologies, (echoing Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 2) as above). However, even amongst these differences, commonalities across approaches and methodologies exist, such as rigour, transparency and thick descriptions.

Table 5: Tracey's Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

Criterion	Practice and approach – sample questions that can be asked
Worthy topic	Is the study timely, novel, and significant in its contribution, including under-researched topics and areas?
Rich rigour	Are descriptions of settings, samples and theoretical constructs rich? Is there sufficient data to support the reported findings? Is the data collection method appropriate? Is there sufficient information given on how the data analysis was carried out?
Sincerity	Is there sufficient self-awareness of the author's positionality? Has the author reflected on their positionality and impact on various stages of recruitment, data collection and analysis, and presentation? Is the research process reported honest and transparent? Is there a clear audit trail?
Credibility	Is there thick description of the sample, setting and context? Has triangulation or crystallization taken place? Has multivocality (difference between participants, and between participants and the researcher) been attended to? Have member reflections (e.g., member checking, validation) been collected and/or undertaken?
Resonance	To what degree the research can resonate with an audience – including how it is presented (aesthetic merit)? Is sufficient rich description given for transferability?
Significant contribution	Does the study contribute to knowledge and practice, does it seek to liberate or empower individuals?
Ethical	Have procedural ethics been followed? Does it attend to relational ethics? Are exiting ethics (how researchers leave their participants and disseminate their findings) considered?
Meaningful contribution	Is the study coherent in its presentation and logic?

As this is a broad umbrella which is malleable for multiple qualitative approaches and paradigms, the questions guiding each criterion suggest how the researcher may wish to undertake this, rather than acting as a definitive list of instructions to meet each criterion. The criteria 'worthy topic', 'significant contribution' and 'meaningful contribution' examine the novelty of the topic under examination, its relationship to the current academic literature, and how the study is presented. As described in the

criterion ‘rich rigour’, thick descriptions are an imperative aspect of qualitative research (Ponterotto, 2006), including for samples, settings and methods. ‘Sincerity’ refers to the importance of self-reflexivity and the impact of the researcher on the recruitment methods, data collected and data analysis, calling for the lenses these went through to be scrutinised and made apparent. ‘Credibility’ looks at ways and means of confirming findings, either through using different methods (triangulation/crystallization) or member validation methods. ‘Resonance’ as a criterion refers to the transferability of findings (how applicable findings have in different contexts), and steps that increase transferability. The criterion ‘ethical’ evaluates whether the study has been carried out ethically, following procedural and institutional ethics, but also relational ethics and exiting ethics.

As can be seen in the table below, there is significant overlap with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) evaluative criteria of trustworthiness.

Table 6: Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) evaluative criteria of trustworthiness aligned with Tracy’s (2010) “Big-Tent” criteria

Evaluative criterion	Description	Overlap to Tracy’s Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research
Credibility	Having confidence in the ‘truth’ of the reported findings	Rich rigour, credibility
Transferability	The findings being applicable in other contexts and settings	Resonance
Dependability	The findings could be repeated and are consistent	Rich rigour, sincerity, credibility
Confirmability	The extent the findings are shaped by the participants’ voices	Sincerity

This small cross-comparison demonstrates although there exist differences between Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and Tracy's criteria, some overlap is present, echoing the flexibility of Tracy's (2010) framework.

2.3 Symbolic interactionism

The working theoretical background of the studies to be undertaken is informed by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1965), with theories used (identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), and social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963)), heralding from roots and core or assumptions in symbolic interactionism. With roots of symbolic interactionism in James, Dewey, Pierce and Mead's work (Denzin, 2004, p. 81) but coined by Blumer (Joas, 1987, p. 84), symbolic interactionism focusses on processes of interaction (Joas, 1987, p. 84), where each action is symbolic and has a meaning, and a product of the social interaction (Blumer, 1965, p. 5). Plummer (2000) argues the world is 'immensely semiotic' and 'symbolic'. Three main premises underpin symbolic interactionism: the first is the way individuals behave towards things is shaped by the meanings that individuals have; secondly, this meaning is borne from social interaction with others; and finally, the meaning changes through what Blumer calls an 'interpretative process' (Blumer, 1965, p. 2; Plummer, 2000), with objects interpreted to give meaning rather than accepted as they are. Meanings are constructed as people interact, and the social world is dynamic (Blumer, 1965, p. 6; Plummer, 2000). Aspects two and three of this process set symbolic interactionism apart from other theoretical approaches (Blumer, 1965, p. 3).

Symbolic interactionism has been argued to be a theoretical framework suitable for investigating the social world and group behaviour (Blumer, 1965, p. 1). Each social actor has their own agency and self, with both the self and the other the focus

(Plummer, 2000). Notably according to Denzin (1992), the interactive process of joint interaction is how the ‘self’ emerges. Individuals in the social world all have many identities (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Blumer (1965) argues identities are constructed, interpreted and responded to by agents on an ongoing basis. Given this thesis focusses on identity, notably autistic identity and religious identities, how these identities are interpreted and understood are central to the core argument of this thesis. Moreover, social action (e.g., admission to a social group or exclusion from a social group) can be informed by appraisals and the meaning made from interpretation of action. Both social inclusion and belonging can be the outcome of how social action is interpreted, whether they be observable (e.g., in the case of social interaction; being amongst and interacting with other people, taking part in activities) or invisible to the eye (e.g., in the case of belonging; a feeling of belonging and welcome, intersubjective mutual rapport and comfort), or a mixture of both of the aforementioned.

Furthermore, using a framework that goes beyond giving social interactions a ‘ceremonial nod’ (Blumer, 1965, p. 6) allows for a closer inspection of the social actions leading to social inclusion and belonging. As discussed in Chapter 1, social inclusion and belonging have been described as bi-directional, and belonging as intersubjective, in the academic literature (see Mahar et al., 2013; Simplican et al., 2015), emphasising the role of the interpretation of action within them both. In particular in regards to belonging, Carter and Fuller (2015) argue for the importance of intersubjectivity in meaning, and how these can be constantly reinterpreted.

One further rationale for the suitability of symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework to guide this thesis is the importance of shared knowledge. Shared knowledge can be referred to as 'a consensus on how certain behaviours, mannerisms and other symbols are interpreted' (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 13). Consensus in this manner can also include stimuli (e.g., prompts, experiences) due to shared expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 16). In spite of the heterogeneity of autistic people's lives, and the many identities an autistic person can have, autistic people may have common experiences (described here as shared knowledge). These include common experiences of reactions to direct communication, sensory differences (O'Neill & Jones, 1997) and language used to describe parts of being autistic (for example, describing restrictive and repetitive behaviours as stimming). Furthermore, the existence of an autistic culture and community that autistic people may identify with (see Davidson, 2008; Dekker, 1999; Gokh et al., 2018 for further information) may strengthen access to shared knowledge. Autistic culture has been argued to be a minoritised culture in a similar manner to Deaf culture, where individuals have overlapping parallel experiences of exclusion and discrimination (Davidson, 2008). In this light, one can describe being autistic as a personal identity, and also a role identity that one 'leans into' with expectations (such as supporting the neurodiversity movement) (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7).

Furthermore, part of culture and communication are symbols and how they are symbolically understood and interpreted (Plummer, 2000). Religious and humanist groups can be argued to be 'mini-cultures', with their own language, rites of passage and guidance on how to live (e.g., Holy texts in the case of religious groups, beliefs). Geertz (1993, p. 89) strengthens this analysis through arguing religions have their

own culture based on symbols, beliefs and rituals. These symbols, beliefs and rituals inform interpretations of the social world. Geertz (1993) analysis is supported by Durkheim (1912) with his idea of collective consciousness in religions. Durkheim’s (1912) collective consciousness is a shared way of understanding and interpreting the world.

Within this framework, two major theories will shape the thesis, notably by Peter Burke and Jan Stets (identity theory (2009)) and Erving Goffman (social stigma theory (1963)). Both identity theory and social stigma theory are grounded in assumptions within symbolic interactionism (e.g., Barnartt, 2017), particularly in relation to how meaning is symbolically interpreted by agents. These theories have been selected due to the role of expectations that may accompany identity (and therefore the breaking of such expectations) within the theories, and how this shapes symbolic interpretation by agents.

2.3.1 Identity theory

Identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) grew out of Stryker’s (1980) structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory. Stryker (1980, p. 57) emphasises role taking within interaction and relationships, with a role being expectations or symbolic categories that ‘cue behaviour’. Expectations for Stryker (1980) are normative and based on social structures. Stryker (2008) argues that society is composed of role relationships and systems of interaction, with social differentiation as continuous and ongoing (echoing Blumer, 1965).

Identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) specifically demonstrates how meanings are made sense of in relation to identity and roles. Individuals have multiple identities; some may be a master identity (e.g., gender) referring to a set of meanings that apply to an individual across all situations (Stets & Burke, 1996). Interaction of both the agent and individuals in 'counter roles' are of interest in identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000). These interactions are reciprocal and require symbolic interpretation of the counter role's behaviour, mannerisms and communication. Roles define where individuals may sit in social structure (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 26) and in relation to other counter roles different individuals may have (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 26). One example of this is mother and daughter, or shop manager and shop assistant. Expectations are tied to roles, and meaning is interpreted in relation to what each role means and how expectations are held (Stets & Burke, 2000). Although not explicitly stated by Burke & Stets (2009), the normative nature of these expectations remains from Stryker's (1980) conceptualisations. Not all roles are tied to social groups (Stets & Burke, 2000), and identity theory complements other identity theories (e.g., social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1988) (see Stets & Burke, 2000).

2.3.2 Social stigma theory

Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory provides a framework on individuals who do not meet normative expectations may be interacted with and interpreted, as well as how these individuals may navigate this. A stigma is an attribute that disqualifies an individual from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963, p. 9), with stigmatised individuals described as having a 'spoilt identity'. Being stigmatised is a process (echoing a core assumption of symbolic interactionism: interpretation as ongoing),

with the label ‘stigmatised’ attributed when responses or cues are interpreted as deviant. Goffman assumes the existence of a normative order (Kusow, 2004), with individuals with a stigma having a perceived lower social status. Individuals with a stigma can have a discredited identity (a socially devalued identity that is not concealable to others) (Goffman, 1963, p. 14) or a discreditable identity (a socially devalued identity that can be concealed or made invisible to others) (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). Individuals with a discreditable identity may undertake forms of normification (the effort of a stigmatised person to present themselves as a ‘normal) such as masking and/or passing and/or covering (Goffman, 1963, p. 44). Goffman (1963, p. 24) also focuses on what he describes as ‘mixed contacts’; interaction between an individual who is stigmatised and an individual who is not.

Similar to Burke and Stets’ (2009) identity theory, expectations are key facet of Goffman’s social stigma theory. Individuals ‘anticipate’ the other’s social identity and structural status (similar to role identity, including occupation, etc) (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). The individual transfers these into normative expectations (Goffman, 1963, p. 12) which become ‘demands’ to be fulfilled (as a virtual social identity) (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). A new social identity is formed through interaction (Yang et al., 2007), echoing Burke and Stets (2009) emphasis on interactions between the self and counter roles.

2.4 Creative ways of including research partners: techniques to enhance reflexivity

Given the quality weaknesses found in Study 1 (Chapter 2) in regards to reflexivity and researcher positionality, decisions were made in the design of Studies 2-4

(Chapters 4-6) where reflexive practices would be embedded throughout the research process. Reflexivity echoes sincerity in Tracy's (2010) "Big-Tent Criteria" (see Section 3.2.1). Reflexivity encapsulates the impact the researcher has on the research and its process (Rees et al., 2020), with techniques that might be used not just a one-time undertaking, but a continuous practice (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Research undertaken within an interpretivist paradigm is interwoven with the subjective perspective of the researcher (Finlay, 2002; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022), thus capitalising my identities and knowledge (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022), as well as challenging my assumptions and reactions to situations (Appleton, 2011). As a researcher, I am not 'identity void', therefore carry these into the research I do, shaping the research questions I ask (Holman Jones, 2016). Reflexivity emphasises the need for practices that assist me navigating the research process without leading to *mea culpa* statements and an apologetic stance (Lingard, 2015).

Being reflexive helps researchers to understand the power dynamics at play within the research process and social structures more broadly (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). One of the target populations sought in this thesis (autistic people) remain a disempowered social group whose voices often are unheard (Gilliespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Milton et al., 2014; Milton, 2016; Wood, 2024). Even though I am an autistic researcher, and may be disempowered in many spaces (see Waldock, 2023), within a research space and context I am perceived to have power in a variety of ways (e.g., the titles I hold and the associated power they have, e.g., PhD Candidate). Entering a religious space using the role of 'researcher' means I am likely to be perceived differently (Burke & Stets, 2009) to when I enter only perceived as an autistic person. In this light, the reflexive practices undertaken

remain important to both capitalise my knowledge as an autistic person, yet also challenge the privilege I have as a researcher (Dunajeva & Vadja, 2021).

Olmos-Vega and colleagues (2022) argue for concrete practices to be used. Two of the reflexive practices that were used in Study 3 (Chapter 5) and Study 4 (Chapter 6) involved non-researchers, and are described in detail in Sections 3.2.3.1 and 3.2.3.2 below. These practices were collaborative in nature to help me ‘see what I cannot see’ (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022, p. 245), as different identities sit at different places within social hierarchy. The non-researchers were formally acknowledged to recognise the time and expertise that the non-researchers bring (Blake & Gibson, 2021). Other reflexive practices such as field notes (see Section 3.3.3) were undertaken. Furthermore, I wrote my own story as a means of ‘reflexive writing’ through autoethnography (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). I recorded how my experiences as an autistic Christian have shaped how I view church and how it led me to the research questions I am asking (Holman Jones, 2016), and what base assumptions I have about being autistic within a religious space (e.g., it is not accessible to me; people in power make the decisions; those who speak the loudest get heard).

2.4.1 Co-facilitators

Co-facilitators were non-researchers who assisted with the data collection of Study 3. They were asked to have previous experience of qualitative research data collection and/or facilitating groups of people (e.g., discussion groups; to ensure transferable skills were accounted for), be an adherent of one of the belief systems under investigation, and be able to assist with the running of up to two focus groups on the topic of social inclusion and belonging. Previous studies have used co-

facilitators to assist with data collection, including Garcia Iriate and colleagues (2014) and O’Brien and colleagues (2014). These studies used co-facilitators from the population under study (e.g., therapists, people with intellectual disability) to assist gaining richer and more relevant data from the populations under study. Furthermore, having a co-facilitator who identifies as having the same belief system as participants also increases potential trust and rapport, through being among likeness (of salient identity) (Krueger & King, 1998, p. 5).

Co-facilitators were recruited via both an online advert, and sharing this advert through networks known to the main researcher to allow for not only individuals on social media to put themselves forward. Each co-facilitator met the main researcher for a briefing prior to the focus groups lasting roughly an hour, and resources were provided regarding the expectations of the role within the focus group setting, along with prompts that can be used to facilitate discussion. These resources were informed by Krueger and King (1998) and Bates (2017). The co-facilitator was able to ask any questions during this briefing, as well as afterwards over email. The co-facilitator’s role as a valued ‘expert by experience’ was iterated during the briefing, as using an expert by experience on basis of belief system is a novel approach in the literature and in practice. The same co-facilitator was used for both focus groups of each belief system to ensure consistency of approach. A constant dialogue was kept between the main researcher and co-facilitator over a private Zoom instant messaging conversation simultaneous to and within the main focus group discussion; for the main researcher to appropriately encourage and confirm the actions of the co-facilitator if they sought confirmation, and to ensure for a seamless running of the focus group in terms of timings and direction of discussion. Co-

facilitators were made aware of the main researcher being autistic (as this was related to the topic under discussion), and that direct communication over instant messaging rather than hinting with body language would facilitate a stronger working relationship across a potential neurotype gap (as discussed in Crompton et al., 2020) (it was unknown regarding the neurotype of co-facilitators, and not deemed appropriate to enquire at this time), and therefore strengthen the approach to data collection. The main researcher also sought to communicate in a way best for each co-facilitator, given their position of power within the relationship as researcher. A short debrief occurred at the end of each focus group to check in with the co-facilitator in terms of wellbeing, but also in terms of sharing relevant thoughts that needed to be documented in field notes by both parties.

Co-facilitators were paid £50 their time, input and expertise. Co-facilitators were only included in the data collection, due to financial limitations, and the analysis can be seen as a 'skilled task' (Krueger & King, 1998, p. 12) which required further researcher expertise. At this time, acquiring a facilitator with a shared identity with the belief system groups, who was able to use the required technology, was of higher importance.

2.4.2 Critical friends

Critical friends are an element of action research who can give advice during a project. Their overarching role is to listen as the researcher talks through and clarifies ideas, and also to provide honest and impartial feedback (Kember et al., 1997). On a task level, critical friends can undertake a variety of tasks (Kember et al., 1997).

In Study 4, the decision was taken that critical friends would advise, answer questions and assist in making the study culturally appropriate. Through answering questions and advising, the critical friend would be both challenging me on my assumptions, as well as capitalising on autistic knowledge (as the critical friends were purposively sought to be autistic). An advisory group is another means of receiving feedback and challenging researcher assumptions (as recommended by Casico et al., 2020 and Milton 2019). Advisory groups are becoming increasingly used in autism research seeking to include the views of autistic people throughout the research process (e.g., den Houting et al., 2021; Pellicano et al., 2022). It was decided at this time to use critical friends over an advisory group for two main reasons. Firstly, running an advisory group with individuals from different belief system groups could prove very difficult given ideological disagreements which can distract from the role the group was set up to run (e.g., an argument/debate between an evangelical, conservative Christian and an atheist Humanist). Secondly, deep expertise was sought over a group consensus, with one-on-one conversations perceived as richer for reflexive practice. The voices of all critical friends needed to be heard by the main researcher, and a one-on-one consultation would allow for further depth and questions to be asked where necessary. Critical friends operated alongside piloting. The feedback from critical friends informed the pilots, and any questions that arose in the pilot of an access or cultural nature could be posed to the critical friend. Critical friends were recruited from co-facilitators from Study 3 who shared an interest in being involved in the final study (Chapter 6) of the PhD.

The role of the critical friend was written out in an information-sheet style question-and-answer to help both the critical friend and the researcher know their remit (see Appendix 2). This question-and-answer sheet assisted alleviating any lack of clarity in the role, which can sometimes happen with critical friends (Kember et al., 1997). Since it can take time to build a trusting relationship, offering the role of critical friend to past co-facilitators may help this. A ‘protocol’ was on the question-and-answer sheet to help the critical friend effectively critique the researcher’s work (Blake & Gibson, 2021). This clarity of role aimed to deconstruct the ‘researcher as correct and more powerful’, and assist the critical friend to give critique, and the researcher to work on said feedback.

The model of critical friends works through a one-to-one meeting at a time most convenient to them, or through email conversations. Questions were pre-prepared specifically for each critical friend, meaning their expertise was fully utilised. The model was explicitly verbally/over email, and in writing on the question-and-answer sheet. The model that was followed regarding how the meetings worked was based on Feldman, Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (2018), whereby the main researcher gave a background of the PhD so far, and overall plans for Study 4. The design and materials for the study (e.g., interview schedule) were then shared and a discussion was then had around the cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of the design, and the accessibility of the data collection methods. Critical friends were paid £50 in vouchers for their contribution to the design and ongoing questions throughout data collection and analysis.

2.5 Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity is important (Botha, 2021; Olive, 2019), and knowing a researcher's values and position is incredibly useful in terms of understanding the lens through which analyses occurred and research questions were designed (Oswald, 2024). However, some identities are associated with being stigmatised (Goffman, 1963) and/or are labelled as a 'bias' (Botha, 2021). Both of the above are relevant to being autistic, as autistic people have been reported in the academic literature as being unreliable storytellers (Chapman & Carel, 2022) and autistic people's bodies and brains are perceived as 'deviant' (Memmott, 2023).

Researchers should be open and transparent with our values and identities which shape our work, given its importance for good quality qualitative research (Botha, 2021). However, researchers are embedded into a system which seeks to alienate and ostracise the 'othered' (Said, 1978), where the 'other' as the research subject rather than the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p17). Furthermore, Oswald (2024, p. 1) argues that stating one's own positionality and reflecting on it may be required or 'demanded' from marginalised researchers in spaces that 'fail to acknowledge and account for their own structural power'. Would being open in my writing about the identities which have shaped this work discredit me as an academic? Would my autistic identity only be seen as a 'bias' rather than a strength to capitalise on? Am I only bowing to the expectation to disclose being autistic, echoing Creamer's (2009) discussion on how disabled writers are expected to "come out" at the beginning of every article or book?

According to Bryman (2012, p. 7), personal values of the researcher cannot be ignored. I am an autistic and disabled PhD Candidate. I am also a Christian brought up in both Baptist and Methodist traditions, who has experienced multiple occasions of exclusion within Christian settings due to sexism, ableism, physical exclusion, gaslighting, and other power imbalances. I currently no longer attend church regularly in person due to the experiences I have had (see Waldock, 2023), however I do remain connected to disabled and neurodivergent affirming communities, often amongst individuals who have had similar experiences to myself (e.g., Inclusive Church disability conference, which is allied to the Anglican Church).

One key part of this work is the dichotomy of insider-outsider – which has been central to all data collection points throughout this thesis – especially given the topic of identity and social inclusion. One of my ‘insider identities’ – my identity as an autistic person who takes a neutral position on autistic identity (where autism is not a superpower nor a tragedy) clearly shapes not only the data analysis, but the broader research questions which I am asking (Holman Jones, 2016). I am asking questions about people who share an identity with me, and some who would have had the same experiences as me. Being situated so closely to the data, and some of the participants’ contributions to the discussion echoing what I have experienced in my own life, careful attention was given to clearly noting in memos these situations, and all decisions during data analysis have a clear paper trail. My autistic identity also intertwines with my identity as a disabled person; it is another insider identity that allows me understanding of some disabled experiences, and an understanding of the oppression that disabled and neurodivergent people face within society (akin to the social model of disability; Oliver, 1983). I am ‘one of them’ – I have interactional

expertise with autistic people (Milton, 2014b; Grant & Kara, 2021), including those in Studies 2 and 4. Being an othered 'one of them' however has been difficult. Reading research that denies your humanity and personhood (Luterman, 2019) was challenging, as echoed by Jacobs (2023). Researcher care became highly important, with memos capturing my thoughts and feelings, whilst peer support helped validate my discomfort from ideologies and research questions which were harmful in relation to my positionality.

My identity as a Christian is also highly significant in terms of a value to reflect on. In a similar manner to how I am 'one of them' amongst autistic people, I understand the culture and language used within Christianity and Christian practices (e.g., 'being in fellowship', rites of passage such as christenings). This knowledge has helped me navigate the Christian centric spaces, such as the focus groups in Chapter 5. Even though I do not attend church regularly currently, I do still hold beliefs in line with Christianity and what could be described as liberation theology (Gutiérrez, 1988). In short, I believe we should be concerned with justice and liberation of marginalised communities (like LGBTIA+ people, disabled people, neurodivergent people). I also believe *Imago Dei* (*NIV*, 1978, Genesis 1:27) shapes how we should view humanity all as having equal intrinsic worth, including being LGBTQIA+, disabled and/or neurodivergent. This is not aligned with what all Christians think; in particular in regards to sexual orientation, gender identity and disability (see Augustinian Theology regarding 'The Fall' (as outlined in Trapp, 1956)). Being sensitive to ensuring I did not homogenise a 'Christian voice' was paramount, as well as listening to my participants even if my beliefs did not align with them. The implications for reflexivity of both these identities, and adjacent values, shape who I perceive have

inherent value, and therefore shapes how I make sense of my data. It intersects with my Christian identity and my belief system and worldview, and the filter through which data was analysed. Knowing, speaking and understanding the language used within churches helped me interact with those participants, whilst also helping me interpret the data. I also transcribed the focus groups and interviews verbatim and maintained a paper trail of ideas and memos to keep my ideas for codes and themes transparent.

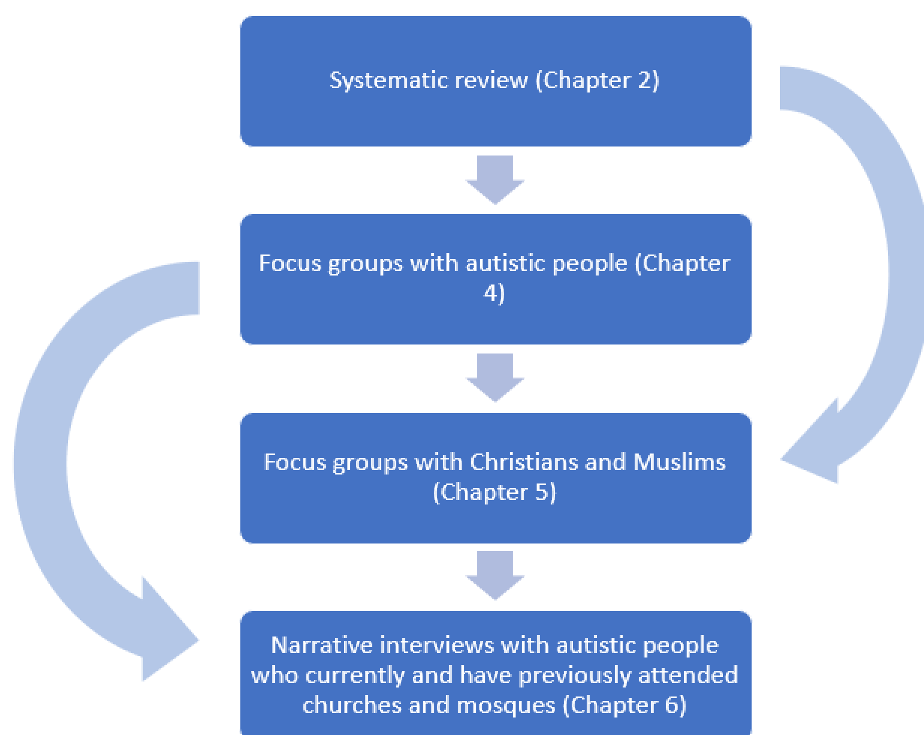
I am not a Muslim – I have an outsider identity in Muslim circles. I do not have cultural knowledge from being a part of mosques or Muslim gatherings in the way I do with Christians. I know the ‘lingo’ used in Christian circles and secular circles, but not in Muslim circles. Much in the same way there is no one homogenous Christian voice, the same can be said about there being no one Muslim voice (Hughes, 2013, p. 9). There are a multitude of Muslim groups and communities, with Hughes (2013, p. 9) arguing that no one Muslim identity should be held as ‘authoritative’. All branches of Islam offer what they see as to be ‘the true interpretation of the Qua’ran’ (Hughes, 2013, p. 10). Differing views exist on topics such as sexuality and gender orientation (see Rahman, 2010), however it is vital to not assume religion, race, and culture are the same, and to consider how these intertwine and interact. I used co-facilitators for all data collected in my third study, including for groups I share a belief system with, to assist with bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012) but also to assist with the richness of data collection, with an ‘expert by experience’ to guide me with their knowledge. This challenged the dichotomy of ‘researcher as expert’ (as reported by Arber, 2006), with me having to listen and learn what biases I have, notably in regards to my position as a white person with the majority of Muslim

participants being of ethnic minority. With the focus groups I ran with Muslims, I was the only white person present – in that case, the double outsider. This is important to draw attention to as a reflexive point for analysis, as I have not had the experiences of racism that some of the participants in those focus groups did. I had to ensure that I was listening to their words, rather than my own preconceptions. I kept a researcher journal throughout the studies as a paper trail, through Post-it notes in a ring binder, to not only collect ideas and assist analysis, but to also keep track of the thoughts and feelings I had. Using Post-it notes allowed me to move and reorganise ideas and concepts, not keeping me trapped to a linear development of ideas. I also posed questions to the Muslim co-facilitator afterwards about words and concepts I did not understand. These actions allowed me to access the cultural knowledge and language within mosques to further enrich the data collection and analysis.

3 Research Design

This section will outline the methods used during the data collection of each of the empirical studies; beginning with the focus groups which inform Studies 2 (Chapter 4) and 3 (Chapter 5), then following onto the narrative research approach used to collect the stories of autistic people who currently attend a church or mosque, and those who used to attend a church or a mosque in Study 4 (Chapter 6). The data was collected in three stages, with each stage informing the next in a sequential exploratory design (each study impacts the design of the next study).

Figure 2: An overview of the thesis study design



3.1 Studies 2 and 3: Focus groups with autistic people and with Christians and Muslims (Chapters 4 and 5)

Studies 2 and 3 were designed as exploratory, qualitative studies using focus groups. Blumer (1965, p. 40) argues that exploratory studies are appropriate for research questions exploring the social world using a symbolic interactionist approach. The rationale for using focus groups as the data collection method for this study were multiple. Firstly, as part of gaining the ‘shared knowledge’ aspect of the groups, a collective understanding was sought (Gibson & Riley, 2019, p. 102). The researcher wanted to ascertain cultural understanding, including how my participants describe things in their language (Kitzinger, 1994; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1998, p. 5). This was vital because this interpersonal communication can indicate group norms

and what is valued within that particular group (Kitzinger, 1995). Blumer (1965, p. 16) argues that group action is the result of collective interpretation, which the focus groups in Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5) investigate. Collective interpretation is visible within group norms in aspects like ‘common ground’, ‘mutual vocabulary’ and potential ‘similar understanding of the research topic’ (Morgan, 2018, p. 29), allowing for ‘collective sensemaking’ (Gibson & Riley, 2019, p. 102). Amongst the autistic participants in Study 2, common ground also came from the increased rapport which has been found between autistic participants in previous studies (e.g., Crompton et al., 2020a; Rifai et al., 2022), and potential intra-neurotype communicational ease (as found in Crompton et al., 2020b). In relation to belief system groups in Study 3, Smart’s (1999) ‘social and institutional dimension’ of religion also highlights the shared beliefs and attitudes within belief system groups (in spite of this being a framework aimed at religious groups, it could be argued it can be used for non-theistic belief system groups too), including practices and rules for membership across groups (and therefore rules for non-membership).

Focus groups are also a useful data collection method when seeking a wider range of voices (in the case of Study 3) (Gibson & Riley, 2019, p. 103). Although there may be shared knowledge and shared values amongst the participants, it is vitally important to acknowledge that there is no one homogenous Christian voice or Muslim voice, as outlined in Section 3.3, and groups may have different rules for membership and thus access to social inclusion and belonging.

3.2 Study 4: Narrative Interviews with autistic people who attend and have previously attended churches and mosques (Chapter 6)

Study 4 was designed as an exploratory qualitative study using narrative interviews to collect data, building on the findings of Studies 1-3. Narrative research (also called narrative analysis or narrative inquiry) is both a method of data collection and an analytical framework (Ntinda, 2019), therefore the focus in this section (Section 3.4.2) remains upon the data collection aspect of this study. Only autistic people who currently attend a church or mosque, and those who have in the past, were included in Study 4, as grounding from Study 3 was required as part of the exploratory sequential design of the project. Studies 1 and 2 found a variety of experiences of social inclusion and belonging which were mediated by ‘stigmatised’ identities. Therefore, a study seeking individuals’ narratives allows for greater depth of individual cases to be studied, as well as how each individual negotiates churches or mosques in relation to their identities.

Interviews are the most common approach to data collection in narrative research (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Interviews can take a variety of forms across a spectrum from structured (where all questions are predetermined and the participant purely answers them) to unstructured interviews (a very loosely structured interview, although not devoid of structure (Britten, 1995; Roulston & Choi, 2018)). Interviews have been described as ‘construction sites for knowledge’ (Kvale, 2012, p. 7) and no ‘standard procedures’ exist for undertaking qualitative interviews (Kvale, 2012, p. 33). Interviews are often used to gather participants’ own perspectives and views (Hannabus, 1996) and seeking to understand experience and meaning (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2018, p. 54), where the participants have expertise on the topic

under investigation (Roulston & Choi, 2018) especially where purposive sampling has been used. New ideas can be uncovered using interviews as a data collection method (Britten, 1995), which helps direct future research (Britten, 1995).

When using interviews as a data collection method, participants are able to ask the researcher questions (Britten, 1995). One aspect which is important to consider with using interviews as a data collection method is that the researcher is the research instrument (Britten, 1995). Despite the positives of using interviews as a means of data collection, interviews can be time consuming and participants may fit their answers to the questions asked (Hannabus, 1996). Participants may be untruthful, or attempt to deceive the researcher (Hannabus, 1996) and within positivist standpoints and when not accounted for, researcher bias and subjectivity can also be seen as a challenge (Hannabus, 1996).

A narrative approach was undertaken in Study 4, to allow individual autistic Christians and Muslims to tell their stories of social inclusion and belonging. A narrative would capture the changes in identity negotiation, including social and role identities, in relation to being autistic in church and mosque contexts across time. Identity negotiation involves both understanding and responding to the self (e.g., becoming aware of being autistic) and others (those in counter roles in the church or mosque). Narrative research also gives participants a voice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), which was deemed to be highly important as autistic people have remained unheard in belief system contexts (see Study 1; see also Creamer, 2008 and Jacobs, 2023 regarding disability in religious studies) and within the research landscape more broadly (Milton & Bracher, 2013).

Narratives are a practice which tells a story (Bleakley, 2000), and in research, narratives use stories as their data (Bleakley, 2005). Narratives may be seen as ‘unscientific’ (Bleakley, 2000), especially from a positivist standpoint. However, narrative research values the subjective (Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2017; Bruce, 2008) and intersubjective connectedness results in co-created knowledge (Green, 2013) of an insider’s view of the phenomenon (Wang & Geale, 2015). Narrative research puts the storyteller at the centre of the research inquiry (Ntinda, 2019), and recognises that the same story can be told different ways (Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2019), leading to potentially different understandings of the same story (Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2019). Within narrative research, meanings are co-constructed between the researcher and participant (Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Ntinda, 2009), with a great importance placed on relational engagement (Clandinin & Caine, 2008).

Reflexive engagement is also central to successful narrative research (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). As a weakness found in Study 1 (Chapter 2), this approach helps attend to the methodological gap in current literature on the topic of social inclusion and belonging in belief system groups. The three dimension narrative space of place, temporality and sociality attended to within narrative research (Clandinin & Caine, 2008).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Sampling approach

Samples need to be representative of the phenomenon under study (Coolican, 2009, p. 34, p. 37; Marshall, 1996) and there are various means and ways of capturing a sample which is representative of the population under study. Random and non-random approaches can be used, dependent on the information sought from participants. Random sampling (including stratified sampling (Coolican, 2009, p. 41) and cluster sampling (Coolican, 2009, p. 41)) was not used in this project, as random sampling may not allow for the participants with the richest data to participate (Marshall, 1996). Given in this project certain characteristics are sought within the samples (e.g., autistic, belief system attendance), purposive sampling allows for individuals with these sought characteristics to participate. Purposive sampling seeks participants with certain characteristics (Crowley, 2019, p. 323), acknowledging that these individuals are more likely to provide insight of the phenomenon under study. Blumer (1965, p. 40) argues that purposive sampling is particularly suitable for exploratory studies taking a symbolic interactionist approach. Convenience sampling uses individuals who are available to participate at the time (Coolican, 2009, p. 42), which is also an approach used within this project. Snowballing was also used to gain further individuals who may be interested in participating; snowball sampling, which can be used in conjunction with a purposive frame, uses participant contacts and knowledge to assist recruitment through introducing the researcher to others who may wish to take part (Crowley, 2019, p. 323). Snowballing is particularly useful where target populations are small, such as autistic Muslims (Study 4; Chapter 6). The samples in all studies were purposefully and conveniently recruited, with opportunity for snowballing, in line with other qualitative approaches. Gatekeepers were also used as a means to contact potential participants in both Studies 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6), with leaders of belief system groups and inter faith groups in

Study 3 (Chapter 5), and contacts of the critical friends as an additional gatekeeper in Study 4 (Chapter 6). Using gatekeepers can be advantageous to accessing participants, as well as increasing what King, Horrocks and Brooks (2018, p. 59) describe as ‘credibility and trustworthiness’. Although risks exist in regards to individuals with certain views being recommended to take part to the researcher (King et al., 2018, p. 59) leading to distortion of the data, some of the populations under study are very small (e.g., autistic Muslims) and remain unrepresented within the academic literature.

3.3.1.1 Study 2 (Chapter 4)

Eighteen (n=18) autistic adults were recruited to participate in this study. They were recruited through responding to an advert which was shared online through social media, and through an autism charity. All participants either were diagnosed as autistic or self-identified as autistic (e.g., those awaiting diagnosis and identify as autistic, those who view themselves as autistic and do not have a formal diagnosis), spoke English and could participate in a focus group held in a UK time zone at a mutually convenient time. Individuals who self-identify as autistic were included in this study, due to biases and barriers in diagnostic materials (e.g., gender bias in current diagnostic tools – see Diemer et al., 2022; Williams, 2022) . Participants did not have to adhere to any particular belief system to take part, as their knowledge comes from their lived experience of being autistic rather than from a diagnosis. However, those with a particular religion or belief system were welcome to participate and share their experiences.

The 18 participants were allocated to one of three focus groups, with them being grouped by their availability. Participants were aged between 20 and 56 years. 7 participants identified as male, 10 as female and 1 as non-binary or other. In regards to ethnicity, 13 participants identified as White (11 White British, two White other), two as Asian, two as White-Asian, one as Black. The table below gives an overview of the participant demographics:

Table 7: Participant demographics for Chapter 4

Demographic	
Age	Range = 20-56 years
Gender	10 females, 7 males, 1 non-binary
Ethnicity	13 White, 2 Asian, 2 Mixed, 1 Black

3.3.1.2 Study 3 (Chapter 5)

Attempts were made to recruit participants for focus groups from each of the belief systems which were included in Chapter 2 (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Humanism), with the justification for their respective inclusion described in Chapter 1. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, changes to the recruitment strategy were implemented to allow for an appropriately safe recruitment process.

Original plans for recruitment prior to COVID-19 had included going to visit groups and gathering spaces, as well as online advertisement and using connections known to the researcher, so the researcher could make themselves known to potential participants, answer questions about the research and meet potential participants in a space that is comfortable for them – this approach had been useful previously

(e.g., Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020). Changes due to COVID-19, including ensuring the safety and health of both researcher and potential participants, forced recruitment to be online and mainly via email communication. An advert was shared on social media, via the Inclusive Church charity, through local interfaith networks, via academic contacts known to the researcher, and churches and mosques not known to the researcher were also approached by email. Furthermore, not all potential participants had access to the internet and Zoom, or were confident users of this technology, so were not able to take part at this time. This change in communication method ultimately had an impact (amongst other factors) on the recruitment process: no Hindus were recruited at this time, and only 1 focus group of Humanists were recruited. The quality of the data in the Humanist focus group was not deemed adequate for inclusion in the study. More broadly, the data collected and included from Christian and Muslims in this study reflects populous-ness of each individual belief system, with Christianity (46%) and Islam (7%) as the 2 most populous religious groups in the UK at the last census (ONS, 2021).

The data for the Christian and Muslim focus groups only will be reported. Twenty-one (n=21) participants (13 Christians and 8 Muslims) agreed to participate. The participants were grouped by both their belief system and their availability, so that only members of the same belief system were in focus groups together. Groups contained between four and eight participants, as with smaller groups, deeper insights can be found (Krueger & Casey, 2014, pp. 67-68). Participants were aged between 24 and 74, with two thirds (n=14, 66%) being aged over 35. Six participants identified as male, and nine as female. In regards to ethnicity, a mix of ethnicities

were reported across the participants (see Table 8). A breakdown of the demographics per belief system can be seen in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8: Participant demographics for Chapter 5

Demographic	
Age	Range = 24-74 years
Gender	15 female, 6 male
Ethnicity	9 White British, 2 White European, 4 Asian, 2 African, 1 White and Asian, 3 not disclosed

Table 9: Participant demographics per belief system in Chapter 5

Demographic	Christian focus groups	Muslim focus groups
Age	Range = 24-74 years	Range = 30-65 years
Gender	9 female, 4 male	6 female, 2 male
Ethnicity	9 White British, 2 White European, 1 Asian, 1 White and Asian	3 Asian, 2 African, 3 not disclosed

3.3.1.3 Study 4 (Chapter 6)

Eight (n=8) autistic adults were recruited to participate in Study 4. Potential participants were recruited through a targeted recruitment procedure comprising of two subsequent arms: 1) emails to Christian and Muslim charities and organisations that interact with autistic people who attend and used to attend churches and mosques (i.e., Inclusive Church, Hidayah LGBTQI+) and 2) through a social media

advertisement shared on Twitter (now X), LinkedIn and Facebook. This targeted approach was taken to ensure a balance of potential participants who currently and have previously attended both churches and mosques, as adverts were shared on social media only for groups that had spaces for potential participants. It was anticipated that sharing a call for participants for autistic people who currently and have previously attended these spaces would result in many potentially interested participants due to my own connections with Inclusive Church and the connections I have. This approach therefore gave parity to both religions. One participant found out about the study through another participant who also took part.

Originally, it was anticipated that participants would either be current and regular attendees of their church or mosque, or that they had previously attended with zero attendance at the time of recruitment. However, when recruiting participants, it became clear that individuals self-reported during the interviews slightly differently to how it was originally conceived within the study design. Some current attendees did not attend every week, and some former attendees occasionally attended for special events only (e.g., Eid, Christmas). Therefore, the attendance at the time of interview was taken as their ‘attendance status’. No potential participants who met all other inclusion criteria were excluded in this light. All participants either had a diagnosis of autism, or they self-identified as autistic (including being on a waiting list for a diagnosis). The participants who took part in the narrative interviews are outlined below in Table 10.

Table 10: Participant demographics for Chapter 6

Pseudonym	Age group	Gender	Religious group	Current attendance
Colin	45-60	Male	Christian	No
Qisma	25-34	Female	Muslim	No
Joan	45-60	Female	Christian	Yes
Aliyya	18-25	Female	Muslim	Yes
Yumus	18-25	Male	Muslim	No
Roger	18-25	Male	Christian	No
Alex	18-25	Non-binary	Christian	Yes
Thomas	25-34	Male	Muslim	Yes

3.3.2 Focus groups and narrative unstructured interviews

3.3.2.1 Focus groups

Both sets of focus groups for Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5) were undertaken by the online conferencing system Zoom. Gaiser (2008, p. 301) and Marhefka and colleagues (2020) argue the choice of online software used for synchronous online focus groups is vital in terms of the accessibility of the group for participants to be able to take part without undue burden. Although MSTeams was tested during the first pilot for Study 2, concerns about data protection when using the instant messaging software (participants’ input could not be destroyed) and questions of ethics regarding participant wellbeing and burden due to the difficulty of using the system were raised. Therefore, Zoom was used as the most widely used video conferencing software during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as Lobe and colleagues (2020) recommending Zoom as appropriate for participants with lower-level digital skills. Zoom is doubly encrypted, therefore the focus group data only remained accessible to the main researcher. All data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, when face to face data collection was not permitted (Cabinet Office, 2020), in line with government guidance. Therefore, alternative means were

explored with the shift away from face-to-face data collection methods (Saberi, 2020).

One available option was undertaking the same method, yet using an online medium (e.g., a video conferencing system). In relation to focus groups, online focus groups (both synchronous and asynchronous) have been undertaken for many years as a means of data collection within the social sciences, notably within health research (e.g., Murray, 1997). Criticisms and challenges of synchronous online focus groups have been widely discussed, including comparing the quality of data to offline, face-to-face focus groups (Brüggen & Willems, 2009); considerations around anonymity and data sharing (Gaiser, 2008, p. 295; Stewart & Williams, 2005), and technological limitations impacting data quality (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Furthermore, not all potential participants may have access to devices or sufficient bandwidth to participate in a synchronous online focus group (Marhefka et al., 2020), or wish to participate in an online-based research study. Despite the aforementioned challenges, various studies have asserted that the findings collected in synchronous, online focus groups through video conferencing software are comparable to face-to-face focus groups (Menary et al., 2021; Richard et al., 2021), and that video conferencing software can ‘nearly replicate’ face-to-face interactions (Marhefka et al., 2020; Stewart & Williams, 2005), with facial expressions, eye contact (for Study 3) and cues being able to be seen over the video recording (Gaiser, 2008, p. 297). Keemick and colleagues (2022) also argue that undertaking focus groups online allows for higher accessibility for some potential participants, and Gaiser (2008) suggested that the pressure to conform online is greatly reduced compared with face-to-face interactions. Geographic restrictions were removed through collecting

data online (Daniels et al., 2019), which allows for a wider pool of potential participants to reached.

3.3.2.2 Narrative and unstructured interviews

The narrative and unstructured interviews in Study 4 (Chapter 6) were undertaken on MSTeams. Interviews can be described as conversations with the purpose of producing knowledge (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21), usually descriptively exploring how participants experience the world (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 22) which is then interpreted for its meaning (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21). Similar to focus groups (see Section 3.3.2.1), interviews can be undertaken synchronously and asynchronously (Hooley at al., 2012). Synchronous interviews were undertaken in this case, so that both the content of the interview and any visual cues (e.g., body language) could be captured. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, video conferencing was being increasingly used for interviews (e.g., Cater, 2011; Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Similar ethical issues exist for to face to face interviews as online interviews, such as recording, informed consent, and withdrawal (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Janghorban et al., 2014). There have been economic benefits reported with using online interviews, in particular travel costs (Cater, 2011). It has also been argued that online interviews are comparable to face-to-face interviews for non-verbal and social cues above the shoulders if participants have their camera on (see Stewart & Williams, 2005).

It has been suggested that in-person interviews can be seen as the ‘gold standard’ of interviewing (Sy et al., 2020) and if an individual has their camera turned off due to poor connection or anonymity reasons, these subtle cues can be lost and impact rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014 O’Connor et al., 2008). There is the additional consideration of participants potentially feeling embarrassed

being filmed in an online interview where video is captured as part of the recording (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Conducting an interview online might also be a barrier to some potential participants and put some participants off taking part (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), and result in a higher dropout rate (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Furthermore, Sedgwick and Spiers (2009) argue that in-person interviews can be difficult for participants from a very wide geographical area, for example, potential participants who attend and have previously attended mosques were considered to be low in number and geographically dispersed in the case of this thesis.

Narrative interviews differ from semi-structured interviews through the format and intended outcome of the interview. Narrative interviews are considered to be a form of unstructured interviewing (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 18; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) guided by a narration schema (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000), where the participant’s narrative shapes and guides the interview rather than the interviewer’s influence (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). One main way which narratives can be elicited is through a main prompt that Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) describe as an initial topic for narration. The interviewer then only listens and gives encouragement to continue narrating (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Actions and experiences are placed into a sequence within narratives (Ricoeur, 1980), with the narrative organised into a beginning, middle and end (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Riessman, 2007). A more structured interviewing approach, such as semi-structured interviews, may ‘curtail’ (as described by Holt, 2010) the emplotment of narratives (Kramp, 2004). Riessman (1993) argues that more detailed accounts of participants’ lives can be sourced through narrative interviews.

Furthermore, narrative interviews have been argued an appropriate means of exploring questions regarding identity and boundaries (Bamberg & Demuth, 2016), including boundaries of who should be included in a social group. As Haydon and van der Riet (2017, p. 86) argue, ‘narratives are central to our identity’ echoing McAdams and McLean’s (2013) assertion that identity is created through narratives. Given that identities are social in nature (Bagnoli, 2004), narratives can be means of exploring how individuals ‘position themselves within society’ (Bagnoli, 2004) and how other members of society and social groups view them. Considering the theoretical framework of this thesis, narratives place ‘the person empirically in interaction and under construction’ (Bamberg, 2011, p. 105) through the interpretation and reinterpretation of behaviour, appearance and other meanings and expectations that comprise an identity (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Each participant was also offered a follow-up unstructured interview which did not begin with eliciting their narrative, so that rapport could continue to be built (as seen in Waterhouse et al., 2023), and both participants and interviewer had the opportunity to add to the narrative and clarify aspects of the narrative. All participants within Study 4 took part in an unstructured interview. An unstructured interview is an interview with little pre-set structure (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 20), where the interviewer takes on the role of a listener structure (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 20). Unstructured interviews were selected, as it was anticipated that each interview would have different conversation and discussion points to add and clarify in each narrative, and for each participant’s narrative to be the framework of the interview. (McCann & Clark, 2005). It has been argued that participants have ‘greater freedom of expression’ (Collins, 1998). However, some structure does exist within unstructured

interviews, notably through being a research interview and the interviewer and interviewee taking on specific roles (Collins, 1998), therefore no interview is completely unstructured (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 18).

3.3.3 Field notes

Field notes are a means of gathering contextual information (Phillipi et al., 2017) to assist the building of thick and rich descriptions (Phillipi et al., 2017), as well as encouraging researcher reflexivity (Christancho et al., 2018). Often regarded as essential, field notes are a means of enhancing data (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018). According to Emerson and colleagues (2011), field notes should include the following: ‘descriptions of the setting, people and activities; direct quotations or paraphrasing of what people said; and the observer’s reflections’. Lüdke and André (1986 in Oliviera, 2016) argue, ‘observation is one of the basic instruments for collecting qualitative data in an investigation’, emphasising the importance of field notes within qualitative research. Some researchers may use field notes rather than a recording of an interview (Tessier, 2012), however in the case of this project, field notes were used to enhance recorded data and assist reflexivity, through capturing initial thoughts and impressions from the focus group/interview (Tessier, 2012).

Field notes were taken in the during each of the focus groups and afterwards for Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5), and during and after each data collection point for Study 4 (Chapter 6). Contextual information was noted at the top of the field notes, including the makeup of participant(s), time of the focus group or interview, and code of the focus group or interview. Initial ideas were noted discretely during the focus group/interview, and at the end of each data collection session, these

notes were collated. A reflection was also written into the field notes after each interview, so that initial impressions after the focus groups/interviews were captured. Field notes are also an important source of data in narrative research, particularly with notes made through observation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this case, this is not just observing what is on camera for participants who have their cameras turned on, but the words participants use, comments on the interactional ease and other important contextual factors.

3.3.4 Vignettes

Vignettes can be used in social research to elucidate perceptions, beliefs, norms and opinions (Barter & Renold, 1999; Hughes & Huby, 2002) and have been increasingly used in social research since the beginning of the new millennium (Sampson & Johannessen, 2020), including within a qualitative paradigm. In Murphy and colleagues’ (2022) recent review, vignettes have been described as a research methodology, method, and tool. Originating from the work of Merton and Kendall’s (1946, as cited in Sampson & Johannessen, 2020) focused interview, where participants responded to a stimulus (i.e., wartime propaganda films), the stimuli used in these focused interviews paved the way for vignettes in social research. Participants are asked to respond to a scenario or a story, including actions and behaviour within a given situation (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1987). Such a scenario of story can depict a hypothetical situation (Hughes & Huby, 2004; Finch, 1987). Vignettes can take a variety of different forms, notably written, visual and audiovisual formats, with different formats argued as having strengths and weaknesses (as discussed in Hughes & Huby, 2002 and Hughes and Huby, 2004). However, it does appear that most vignettes take a written format (Sampson &

Johannessen, 2020). It has been argued that the quality of data from vignette studies will generally be higher when the vignette is relevant to participants, is interesting, and is realistic (Hughes & Huby, 2004). Participants can be asked to respond from their own perspective or from the perspective of others, for example peers, asking what ‘they might do next’ (Jenkins et al., 2010).

Vignettes used within a qualitative paradigm give a stimulus for discussion about real life (Finch, 1978). They have been argued as useful for stimulating group discussions within group interviews and focus groups (Sim et al., 1998), in order to understand group understandings of situations, and can be used on their own, or in conjunction with other data collection methods (Barter & Renold, 2000; Hughes & Huby, 2002), in this case alongside discussions of definitions. Discussing the definitions and then discussing the vignette allows for further in-depth information on social inclusion and belonging to be captured (Hughes & Huby, 2002), especially in regards to how social inclusion and belonging could be enacted within the specific context of a belief system gathering. Although this line of inquiry is not particularly sensitive, vignettes are also useful for research topics which are difficult or sensitive (Hughes & Huby, 2002).

In spite of the positive aspects of using vignettes for social research, some pitfalls remain. Vignettes may be difficult for some individuals to access, for example, people with learning disabilities (Hughes & Huby, 2002), therefore vignette design would need to take into consideration the access needs and other demographics of the participants. Social desirability has been argued by various studies as a risk within vignette research, especially when participants give their own perspectives on

the vignette (Aldersey et al., 2016; Barter & Renold, 2000; Gourlay et al., 2014; Sampson & Johannessen, 2020). Some have argued that vignettes can minimise social desirability, especially when participants are giving a third person perspective of what is occurring within the vignette (Hughes & Huby, 2004). The completeness or how realistic the vignette is also vital to consider, as some participants may report being unable to respond due to a lack of information in the vignette to base an opinion on (Hughes, 1998). Equally, if the vignette is too complex, participants may disengage (Murphy et al., 2022). Therefore, within the vignette design there needs to be sufficient information given without making the vignette too complex. Arguments have also been posed about vignettes being artificial and not representative of real-life scenarios (Barter & Renold, 2000), which further places importance on the careful design required for vignettes.

Vignettes were used in Study 3 as a means to elucidate cultural norms and behavioural expectations (Barter & Renold, 2000) about social inclusion and belonging within belief system groups in reference to autistic people, and also to ‘see the other half of the interlocuters experience’. This was deemed important given the interactional nature of social inclusion and belonging from the views of autistic people (Study 2), but also from the theoretical framing of this thesis (symbolic interactionism).

A vignette of an autistic coded person was inspired and based on the stories from the participants in Study 2, general experiences of exclusion of minorities in Study 1, and findings of Study 2 more broadly. It is vital that vignettes are plausible and realistic (Barter & Renold, 1999), therefore using grounding from previous studies to

build the vignette allowed for not only the main researcher’s experience of religious gatherings to be represented in this vignette, as a white, queer, autistic, and disabled person, but also the vignette to be grounded in empirical data relevant to this setting. A paucity of research has been undertaken in religious settings which elevates the autistic voice and autistic person’s experience (see Study 1). The vignette also checked for feedback prior to the pilot by three autistic researchers independent to this study with expertise in qualitative research methods from different belief system backgrounds, to ensure that the vignette was accurate, realistic and sensitive in its representation of autistic people, and also its accessibility to participants in terms of language across the groups. This approach was taken following the method and recommendations from Gillespie-Lynch and colleagues (2021) in their use of vignettes in autism and stigma research, as well as broader recommendations in the literature (such as Murphy et al., 2022). Adjustments were made to the vignette in light of feedback from the three independent researchers.

Table 11: Vignette used in Study 3 (Chapter 5)

You are attending a gathering for your belief system and you notice someone you’ve not seen before turn up. On the 1st time attending a gathering, a person arrives early and takes a seat closest to the door. The person doesn’t give other group attendees eye contact and keeps themselves to themselves. They often will be playing on their phone, fiddling with their fingers or reading a book before the gathering officially starts. Each subsequent gathering, the person enters at almost exactly the same time, takes the same position in the room, in exactly the same way as the person did the first time. The person never speaks in the gatherings. When there are loud noises, for example music to share or videos, the person will cover their ears and hunch over very quickly. If metaphors are used in talks in the gathering, the person is confused by the use of metaphor. After the gathering, when others meet for coffee or exchange how the week went, this person tries to engage other group members in conversation. However they end up talking over others excitedly about a deep interest of theirs, very loudly. Other group members ignore the person, and turn their back on this person. After this conversation does not go well, they do not approach others anymore and leave as soon as the gathering has finished.

It was made clear to the co-facilitators (Study 3) that they must not give a judgement on the vignette, or indicate in any way that the vignette is autistic coded when discussing it, in order to ensure that only the views and perspectives of the participants were heard.

3.4 Piloting

Prior to implementation, pilots were undertaken to test schedules for Studies 2, 3, and 4 and the online conferencing system (notably interaction, stability and confidentiality). For Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5), the definitions of social inclusion and belonging were selected following a thorough review of the literature (see Chapter 1) to allow for comparison of their responses where appropriate. An online conferencing system was used during to ensure the study followed 'COVID secure' protocols and government guidance during the data collection phase (Cabinet Office, 2020). The conferencing system Zoom was chosen due to its wide usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus minimising the burden of participation. Adaptations were made to the schedule and format of the groups following feedback, including not using MSTeams, which was used one pilot and was inaccessible to the autistic people in the pilot, clarifying prompts and questions posed and increasing the accessibility of the PowerPoint slides through inserting a cream background.

For Study 4 (Chapter 6), a pilot was undertaken on an autistic person who had previously attended church, on MSTeams. During the pilot, the interviewee reported that potential participants may be less used to a narrative interview when qualitative studies in autism research appear to often use semi-structured interviews. Holt (2010) reported a similar experience using narrative interviews with parents regarding their children's experiences in the criminal justice system. Some of Holt's (2010, p. 118) participants expected a 'research interview' to have a semi-structured approach and needed 'a 'kick-start' for their narratives. In this light, potential participants were given information on the structure of the interview in advance over

email, and the initial prompt to elicit participants’ narrations was adjusted to further clarify the purpose and expectations of the interview.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis for Studies 2, 3 and 4 occurred in two different ways: Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5) were both analysed using thematic analysis and Study 4 (Chapter 6) using thematic narrative analysis. The broad options for analysis and the rationale for the selected analytic approach will be discussed.

3.5.1 Studies 2 and 3 (Chapters 4 and 5)

Studies 2 and 3 were designed as studies seeking patterns within data. Broad options of analysis for finding patterns within data include thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Phenomenology focus on the subjective experiences of participants (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011), with IPA seeking to explore how participants make sense of the world around them (Smith et al., 2009). Grounded theory seeks to generate a theory that explains a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Birks & Mills, 2015).

Both IPA and grounded theory are inductive in approach, however incongruencies were found in both analytical approaches with the research questions and methods selected. Questions remain regarding IPA as used within a focus group data collection setting (e.g., Love et al., 2020; Tomkins et al, 2010), notably regarding the

idiographic focus of IPA which is mainly concerned with how the individual makes sense of experiences (Millward, 2012), rather than seeking a group consensus. Although it was understood there may be individual aspects to how social inclusion and belonging were understood, for example personal beliefs or values, the idiographic was not the focus of the study, with group understandings sought. Grounded theory was not used in this instance, as grounded theory seeks to construct a theory from collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Payne, 2007). Though grounded theory, unlike IPA, can be used with focus groups and to gain group understandings of phenomena (Payne, 2007), the aims of a grounded theory study do not align with the research questions of Studies 2 and 3. While good on understudied areas (like Studies 2 and 3), grounded theory is used to explore a process (Birks & Mills, 2015); Studies 2 and 3 sought to discover conceptualisations and understandings rather than dynamic processes underpinned by a theory grounded in the data.

Therefore, thematic analysis was selected as the analytical approach for both Studies 2 and 3, as it can be used to understand how a phenomenon is understood by participants in an inductive manner (Clarke et al., 2015). Thematic analysis is broadly described as a means of identifying patterns across a dataset (Clarke et al., 2015; Freeman & Sullivan, 2017, p161), and can be used on focus groups and interviews (Freeman & Sullivan, 2017, p. 164). Thematic analysis is theoretically flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2014), and therefore can be interpretative in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Freeman & Sullivan, 2017, p. 165), and aligns with the theoretical framework for this project. Thematic analysis also allowed for analysis of both the

discussion of the definitions and the questions relating to both lived experiences (Studies 2 and 3), and the vignette (Study 3).

Analysis for all focus groups, including written and spoken focus group material, was completed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis after transcription had occurred. Material for each focus group was analysed together, with neither transcript (recording or chat box) as being seen as more important in terms of value. Firstly, the transcripts were read and re-read to familiarise the researcher with the data. Attention was paid to any initial thoughts had during this phase, with ideas noted within the reflexivity journal (see Section 3.3), however these were not to create codes at this point, but to capture thoughts. Next, initial codes were created in a systematic manner, starting with the first transcript then reading systematically each transcript one by one, noting initial codes throughout. When the transcripts had been as coded as much as possible, with each possible initial code noted, themes were then looked for through collating the initial codes. The reflexive journal continued to be used throughout this stage and was also referred back to. It is important to note at this point that themes do not emerge from the data, as the researcher is actively involved with their creation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After initial themes had been created, these were reviewed to see if the codes for the whole data set are accounted for. Naming these themes occured next, with each theme name checked to ensure it contained the essence of the theme rather than a description. Finally, the report was written and extracts and quotes were selected to support the themes.

3.5.2 Thematic narrative analysis

Study 4 (Chapter 6) was developed from the findings of Studies 2 and 3. After analysis of both Studies 2 and 3, and using the findings of Study 1, the idiographic nature of the experiences of social inclusion and belonging were found to be particularly prominent, as were changes to social inclusion and belonging across time and space. Two approaches to data collection and analysis were considered in this light: IPA and thematic narrative analysis. It is important to note at this point that narrative research is both a method of data collection and an analytical framework (Ntinda, 2019), whereas IPA is an analytical approach alone.

Arguments for using IPA have already been outlined in Section 3.5.1, notably the idiographic focus on major experiences within individuals’ lives (Millward, 2012; Smith et al., 2009) and how they make sense of them (Smith et al., 2009). With Study 4 seeking further depth on the experiences of the phenomenon under study, IPA could have given further insight on the experiences autistic people have within belief system groups. However, it also became clear through the analysis and findings of both Studies 2 and 3 that the narratives of social inclusion and belonging could also provide useful insight into the experiences of social inclusion and belonging, as it appeared that lived experience informed how participants conceptualised social inclusion and belonging. Therefore, a thematic narrative analysis approach was undertaken. Narrative research is also particularly useful for studies seeking to understand about changes in identity across places, time and contexts (Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Narrative analysis is a family of methods with the commonality of focusing on narratives (Esin, 2011, p. 97), wherein there exist a variety of analytical methods that sit under the umbrella of narrative analysis (Esin, 2011, p. 97). As I wanted to focus on the similarities and differences of the narratives, including the content, I decided to use thematic narrative analysis. Thematic narrative analysis keeps the story ‘intact’ and each narrative is analysed, rather than across narratives (Riessman, 2007, p. 53). Content has been argued to be the exclusive focus of thematic narrative analysis (Esin, 2011, p. 108; Riessman, 2007, p. 53), instead of structure, for example in Labovian structural analysis, where the focus is the structural aspects (e.g., language) of how the narrative is put together (see Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2019, p. 220). Through examining the content in depth, thematic meanings of the narratives can be discovered (Riessman, 2007, p. 62). Where the content is the central focus, the words used are a resource to access content rather than ‘a mode of inquiry’ (Riessman, 2007, p. 59), which echoes thematic analysis more broadly. Undertaking a thematic analysis without taking the form of the narrative into account ignores the impact of sequence and narrative on how meaning is made for each participant (Riessman, 2007, p. 90).

Analysis began with each transcript (both for the narrative and unstructured interviews) being read through multiple times in a process that Smith (2016) describes as ‘indwelling’. Indwelling is a term used within narrative analysis for the reader to orient themselves to the position of narrator, as well as familiarisation of the contents of the interview. The interviews were then transformed from a transcript into a narrative in chronological order, with a beginning, middle, and end. This process is known as emplotment. The words and phrases from each participant were

used in their narrative; inserting new words and phrases that participants did not use in their narration was avoided. Sections of the narrative that were 'turning points' (otherwise known as 'critical incidents') were also identified at this point. Next, coding for content began, which followed Lieblich and colleagues' (1998) categorisation and content approach to coding. Echoing thematic narrative analysis' focus on content, language and structure were means to communicate the content (Esin, 2011, p. 108; Riessman, 2007, p. 53), therefore coding focused on the content of each narrative. Coding for content entailed breaking down each narrative into smaller units of meaningful content. These codes were then aggregated to create themes, illustrating the 'universal features' (Valeras, 2010) across the participants narratives. When the themes had been finalised, each critical incident was mapped against the relevant theme it was coded under, so that patterns within the critical incidents could be identified.

3.5.3 Inter-rater reliability

Inter-rater reliability was not undertaken for any of the studies included in this project, as analysis is a subjective co-construction (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003), with analysis bearing the mark of the researcher who undertook it (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Both participant and researcher biases and worldview are present in social research (Fields & Kafai, 2009). It is understood for some qualitative researchers that inter-rater reliability is likely to assist the trustworthiness of their data, and as such can be seen as a marker of quality in some ways, through assurance that the findings are replicable in some way. However, within a study which is framed from an interactionist perspective, and the main researcher is a key component within both the data analysis and collection, the main researcher is irrevocably a part of the data

– from a relativist position, different researchers may offer different analyses or accounts from the same data (Vidich & Lyman, 1994). Inter-rater reliability is also born from the positivist idea of reliability (Golafshani, 2003): the idea that repeating the analytical process with another researcher can check how ‘far’ or ‘close’ the original analyst was from the truth. Since in this thesis ‘truth’ is not conceptualised in an objective and positivist manner, rather constructed through those present with the meaning making at that time, seeking to use an approach which seeks to agree on a ‘truth’ would be inappropriate. Armstrong and colleagues (1997) explored the efficacy of inter-rater reliability and found that different researchers often found similar phenomena when analysing data, with the main difference being how it is ‘packaged’ (i.e., how the themes are grouped and how they are described). This packaging is likely to be informed by each researcher’s own experiences and conceptualisations, potentially supporting different researchers giving different analyses as per (Vidich & Lyman, 1994). Other markers of quality have been used to assure the trustworthiness and integrity of this study, as inter-rater reliability is not the only marker of quality with qualitative data: reflexivity (Probst and Berenson, 2014), triangulation (as above) and saturation – rich and thick data as per Fusch and Ness (2015).

3.6 Ethical considerations

3.6.1 Ethical favourable opinion

A favourable ethical opinion was granted by the Tizard Centre Ethics Committee on 22nd July 2020 for Studies 2 and 3, and on 22nd November 2022 for Study 4. Clear guidance through information sheets explained the purpose, benefits, and nature of the study, along with potential risks and voluntariness. Consent forms were signed if

the participant wished to take part after reading the information sheet. Participants were made aware they could withdraw from the study up to the point of data collection and that there were no implications for not taking part or withdrawing from the study. Only participants who had capacity to consent were allowed to participate. All participants were given a pseudonym after data collection, and they were informed that they would not be identifiable in any future presentations, thesis, or journal articles. In particular for Study 4, ethical entry was negotiated as vital given the relational nature of the inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

3.6.2 Data storage

The data was stored in recorded mp4 format on a PC in a password protected file, and the transcripts on a computer with a password and not a ‘cloud’ storage system. The recordings were destroyed after transcription. Only the researcher and supervisors had access. The data will be kept for 5 years, in line with Tizard Centre guidelines on safe storage of information. All assigned pseudonyms, transcripts and audio recordings were also kept locked on a secure computer and any paperwork in a locked cupboard (including field notes) – only the main researcher and their supervisors had access to this data. Once the analysis stage was completed, any identifiable data was securely destroyed and only the anonymised data has been used in this thesis.

4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to outline methodology informing the three empirical studies in this thesis, notably including the theoretical framework, justification for the use of creative ways to enhance reflexivity, data collection methods, and data analysis

approaches taken. The reflexive lens through which data was analysed were discussed, with the important implications of reflexivity discussed, including for researchers with ‘discreditable identities’ (Goffman, 1963). Finally, the methods undertaken for each study was outlined and justified. The next three chapters of this thesis will outline the findings from studies, with the first study being focused on autistic people’s views and experiences of social inclusion and belonging.

Chapter 4: Conceptualising belonging - the views of autistic people

1 Introduction

The previous chapter covered the methodology and theoretical framing of the thesis, and the research design for each of the three empirical studies. In this chapter, the focus will be on the first study, which explored autistic people’s views and experiences of social inclusion and belonging. The chapter will begin with situating the study within identity theory and social identity theory, stigma and normalcy. Next, the methods for this study will be briefly recapped before the themes discovered through thematic analysis are presented. Finally, the themes will be discussed in particular in relation to normative standards and expectations, and how this can make autistic people appear to be ‘impossible subjects’.

1.1 Autistic identity

Although the concept of autism has been constructed through observation and interaction (APA, 2013), being autistic as an identity is increasingly being recognised by both autistic and non-autistic people alike (Bagatell, 2007; Cohen et al., 2022). Assertions of having an autistic identity may follow a diagnosis of autism by a clinician or similarly qualified individual, or self-identification with traits and experiences that autistic people may report. Both these paths indicate how an individual’s self is understood by both themselves and those around them. Burke and Stets (2009, p. 3) argue that an identity comprises of meanings defining a role within

society, or membership to a particular group. An identity reflects an individual’s self and awareness of who they are (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 9), as well as how other individuals interpret the meanings of their identity (Blumer, 1969, p5; p. 9). Autistic identity can be understood both with social identity theory (SIT; identity based on group membership and knowledge one belongs to that group (Abrams & Hogg, 1988)) and identity theory (IT; identity based on enactment of social roles (Stets & Burke, 2000)). In this case, SIT would constitute being a member of the autistic community and IT refers to the role of being autistic, and how it is perceived by others. Within SIT, a social comparison process distinguishes in-group members (individuals who are similar) and out-group members (individuals who are different) (Stets & Burke, 2000). Using a SIT approach, autistic people may find other autistic people as more similar to them than non-autistic people, forming an in-group and assisting the development of an ‘autistic’ social identity. However, within IT, behaviour, communication and mannerisms which can be understood to be autistic (e.g., stimming, direct communication, lack of eye contact) place individuals in the role of ‘autistic’. Both approaches use a process of interpretation from meanings (i.e. identities through social position or role) to guide interaction and behaviour with other agents (Blumer, 1965, p. 5).

There are an increasing number of studies that focus on autism from a social identity perspective, notably including foci on wellbeing (Camus et al., 2024; Maitland et al., 2021), masking and stigma (Perry et al., 2021) and disclosure of diagnosis/identity (Togher & Jay, 2023). In particular, Maitland and colleagues (2021) argue that being autistic provides a shared identity with other autistic people, creating opportunity for social connections. Farahar (2021) supports Maitland and colleagues with

suggesting autistic identity protects against stigma, and Botha and colleagues (2021) further this statement with their findings that connectedness to the autistic community is a buffer against minority stress. However, being autistic as a role identity remains so far as found under-researched in contrast to autistic social identity.

It is also vital to consider the multifaceted nature of autistic people’s lives, notably that much like non-autistic people, they will have many identities (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Autistic people occupy multiple roles (e.g., gender, job role, skills, etc) in addition to being autistic (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3).

1.2 Identity, autistic identity and stigma

Linked to notions of identity is how individuals with various identities are perceived, in particular individuals with identities that are othered or deviant. One theoretical framing of individuals with such identities is Goffman’s (1963) social stigma theory. Hailing from symbolic interactionist thought (Barnatt, 2017), Goffman’s (1963) social stigma theory presents a stigma as an attribute which spoils a normal identity and is ‘deeply discrediting’ (p. 13), and disqualifies an individual from social acceptance (p. 19). Stigmas exist as attributes within relationships, with stigmas denoting their own meanings which are seen and interpreted by other members of society (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 4). Goffman focuses on interaction within his theoretical work (Smith, 2006, p. 11), in particular in the case of social stigma theory, on mixed contacts (individuals with and without a stigma) (Goffman, 1963, p. 24).

Individuals who have a stigma are described by Goffman as ‘the stigmatised’, whereas individuals who do not have a stigma have been described as ‘the normals’ (Goffman, 1963, pp. 14-15). The stigmatised can be divided into two groups, of which particular focus is placed on how both groups are perceived by other agents. The first group, the discredited, are individuals who are visibly stigmatised and who are unable to hide their stigma, such as individuals with a visible disability. On the other hand, the discreditable are individuals who can hide their stigma and pass as normal. Autistic people without visible disabilities would be counted among the discreditable. In both cases, the stigma is interpreted by other members of society as ‘undesirable’ and given the meaning of ‘stigmatised’ (Blumer, 1965, p. 2). The meaning given to the stigmatised individual is central in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1965, p. 30), as meaning is central to understanding an individual’s behaviour (Blumer, 1965, p. 3).

Previous literature has denoted how autistic individuals are stigmatised and experience stigma. Botha and colleagues (2022) qualitatively explored how autistic people understood being autistic and stigmatised. They reported that their participants considered autism a value neutral term, yet faced prejudicial views from society, resulting in being stigmatised. Botha and colleagues’ (2022) findings exemplify being autistic as a discreditable stigmatised identity: the participants concealed being autistic to avoid prejudicial behaviour toward them. Goffman’s assertion that stigmatised individuals are ‘not quite human’ (1963, p. 15) is also echoed in Botha and Cage’s (2022) study of autism researchers’ constructions of autistic people. Dehumanisation and objectification were both found in the narratives from their mixed methods survey, with perceptions of how ‘useful’ an autistic person

is central to how autistic people are perceived. Exploring perceptions toward autistic people has also highlighted the prejudice that autistic people face, with Sasson and colleagues (2017) finding autistic participants receiving poorer perceptions than their non-autistic peers. Furthermore, Botha and colleagues’ (2022) participants reported being consistently exposed to stigma around being autistic, notably stereotypes of autistic people being ‘violent’ and having ‘behaviour that challenges’. In this manner, negative stereotypes appear to frame wider understanding of what autistic people are like (Wood & Freeth, 2016) leading to testimonial injustice (where a speaker is seen as not credible; Mackenzie, 2018).

1.3 The double empathy problem

One aspect of being autistic that pervasively shapes the experience of being autistic is the mutual mismatch between autistic and non-autistic agents, named the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a; Milton, Waldock & Keates, 2023). The double empathy problem is ‘a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors’ (Milton, 2012a), where schisms in mutual understanding occur. A breakdown in mutual understanding is particularly important when considering identity and how identities are interpreted by social agents. Within these schisms, it is usually the autistic agent who is ‘othered’ or classed as ‘deviant’ (Milton, 2012a; Said, 1978), perhaps due to an autistic identity (notably behaviours and expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7)) not meeting the standards of a non-autistic identity, and therefore being stigmatised (Goffman, 1963). A recent literature review confirms the growing nature of the double empathy problem’s evidence base and relevance to understanding autistic people in the social world (Milton, Waldock & Keates, 2023).

Communication is one particular area of autistic people’s social lives where the double empathy problem demonstrates the differences in perceived roles. Disjunctures in reciprocity are one product of the double empathy problem. A disjuncture in reciprocity can be described as a breakdown in communication or understanding. One example is Crompton and colleagues’ (2020a) loss of detail in diffusion chains with both autistic and non-autistic people. The double empathy problem is a move away from deficit perspectives of autism, reframing communicative breakdown in a non-pathological manner. Theories such as Theory of Mind (ToM) (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), have framed communicative breakdown as the result of solely autistic people’s difficulties with social communication; reflected in current diagnostic criteria of autism (APA, 2013). Interestingly through its deficit and medical model framing, impairments are perceived as ‘abnormal’ (Shyman, 2016), therefore not meeting neuronormative standards and expectations. However, it appears that findings from studies covered thus far in this chapter highlight a reciprocal breakdown (e.g., Crompton et al., 2020a).

Further supporting a mismatch of expectations, as described above, is the improved quality of communication between autistic-autistic pairings, in comparison to between autistic-non autistic pairings. Crompton and colleagues (2020b) found autistic-autistic interaction pairings to be just as effective in terms of detail retention as non-autistic-non-autistic interaction pairings through a telephone pairing exercise using a ‘diffusion chain technique’. Chains of eight people in three groups were tested: one chain of autistic people only, one chain of non-autistic people only and one chain of ‘mixed neurotype’ (mixed between autistic and non-autistic people).

Other studies have supported these findings by Crompton and colleagues (2020b), including Chen et al. (2021). Additionally, rapport was found to be better between neurotype matched pairs (also found in Rifai et al., 2022), where rapport refers to the quality of social interactions (Crompton et al., 2020c). Limitations of these studies include using a laboratory instead of a naturalistic setting (Crompton et al., 2020b) and a lack of participants with an intellectual disability (Crompton et al., 2020b; Rifai et al., 2022).

1.4 Identity, wellbeing and normalcy

How an individual's identities are perceived and understood by other agents, notably how the meanings within identities inform behaviour toward an individual, will shape experiences of feeling socially included or excluded. If an individual is good at controlling perceptions of them, and keeping the perceptions closer to their identity standard, their self-esteem will be increased (Cast & Burke, 2002), providing a positive feedback loop (Baumeister, 1998). Autistic people being perceived as 'stigmatised' and 'not meeting non-autistic expectations' will therefore pose difficulties in controlling perceptions of them, as well as casting them into an 'out-group' due to their dissimilarity. In light of this, it is no surprise that autistic people have been reported to have smaller social networks (Turnock et al., 2022), experience loneliness at a higher rate (Ee, 2019; Quadt et al., 2023) and struggle making friends (Mueller, Schuler & Yates, 2008).

Social inclusion and belonging, and inversely exclusion, aligns with 'social inclusion' and 'emotional wellbeing' domains within Schalock and colleagues' (2002) Quality of

Life (QoL) framework for autistic people and people with intellectual disabilities. The QoL of autistic people is highly discussed within the academic literature, with an appreciation that QoL has been found to be poorer in autistic samples (e.g., Jennes-Coussens et al. 2006; Kamp-Becker et al. 2010; Kamio et al. 2013). Ideas of what social inclusion is can be seen to have a normative influence from wider society; for example, the concept of having an ‘ordinary life’ (described in Downing, Peckham and Harding, 2007, where 67% of parents and 74% of teachers wished this for their disabled children). This idea of ‘disabled people living an ordinary life’ is exemplified in the ideologies of normalisation (Nirje, 1967) and social role valorization (Wolfensburger, 1984), and could be said to guide some social policy which seeks to improve the QoL of autistic people (e.g., *The national strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026*, 2021).

However, the influence of normalisation on practice and policy has undergone critique from various academics (e.g., Szivos-Bach, 1993; Kunc 1992), notably from an autistic perspective (Milton & Moon, 2012), where the self-determination and agency of the disabled or neurodivergent party is perceived to be compromised within normative demands of inclusion. Furthermore, not all of the tools used to measure the QoL of autistic people have been validated on autistic participants (Ayres et al., 2017), which poses questions as to who is deciding what counts as worthy of measurement. Reynolds (2012a, p. 28) takes this argument further, stating value is placed on ‘how useful, productive or valuable certain bodies are’, holding socially constructed values of how bodies should be as standards for all bodies and brains. Reynolds’ (2012a) argument reflects Davis’ (1995) work on normalcy. Whilst it is important here to recognise that normalcy and normalisation are not the same

and not to be conflated, ideas of an 'ordinary life' and normalisation may holds tenets of normalcy in their support or practice (e.g., reducing stigmatising behaviour, such as stimming, allowing autistic people to perform roles that are perceived as a positive contribution to society).

1.5 Autistic experiences of social inclusion and belonging

Given the critiques levied against normalisation and expectations of normalcy, it is even more imperative to seek autistic people's views and perspectives on what social inclusion and belonging means for them. To date, few studies have explored these phenomena, with one seminal study by Milton and Sims (2016) of particular interest. Milton and Sims (2016) focus specifically on wellbeing and belonging, rather than social inclusion. They conducted a small exploratory study on autistic social belonging, analysing back editions of the magazine *Asperger United* via secondary data. Milton and Sims (2016) analysed 21 back editions of the magazine *Asperger United*, with their sample covering six years of editions (April 2008 - April 2014). Overall, 78 articles, 81 letters to the editor, 37 reviews, 121 pen pal entries and 44 announcements (all written by autistic people) were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by both authors. One notable theme discovered in Milton and Sims' (2016) study is that of 'living with the consequences of an othered identity', where experiences of exclusion, isolation and bullying form a part of 'societal othering' of autistic people. The double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a) was also found to impact the wellbeing and feelings of belonging from within the dataset analysed by Milton and Sims (2016). One apparent limitation of this study is the type of data used within this study, which is not lived experience accounts

elicited first-hand from a focus group or interviews. In addition, belonging has been reported as important to autistic people in a study by Crompton and colleagues (2020a), where 12 semi-structured interviews explored how autistic adults spend social time with autistic and non-autistic peers. Although Crompton and colleagues’ (2020a) study was a small, exploratory study, belonging was one of the three themes found from their data, with three subthemes of ‘understanding’, ‘being your authentic self’ and ‘happiness, wellbeing and resilience’. Furthermore, no construct of what belonging may look like is given in Crompton and colleagues’ (2020a) study. Crompton and colleagues (2020a) also found that autistic people were a minority group (see theme: Minority status), mirroring the theme ‘living with the consequences of an othered identity’ in Milton and Sims (2016). Echoing findings from Crompton and colleagues (2020a), Botha and colleagues (2021) described belonging for autistic people as ‘being among likeness’ in their study of autistic community connectedness, overlapping with Crompton and colleagues’ (2020a) subtheme ‘within neurotype ease’. From these accounts, it may appear that feelings of social inclusion and belonging appear to be mediated by a variety of different experiences in autistic people, however being amongst other autistic people and autistic people as a marginalised minority group do seem to contribute to the experiences of autistic people in data collected thus far.

Given that identity (considering both social and role) is understudied amongst autistic people, yet appears to be an important factor in the wellbeing and QoL of autistic people and impacts social connections (Maitland et al., 2021), exploring autistic people’s views on what it means to belong and be socially included from an autistic perspective is key. Therefore, the aim for this work was to find out how autistic

people conceptualise and understand ‘belonging’, ‘social inclusion’ and ‘inclusive communities’. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the interface between being autistic and experiences of social inclusion and belonging?
2. How does being autistic inform autistic people’s views on definitions of social inclusion and belonging?

2 Methods

As explained in Chapter 3, this study was designed as a qualitative exploratory study, using a symbolic interactionist approach. Blumer (1965, p. 40) argues that exploratory studies are appropriate for studies exploring the social world using symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is often used as a lens in identity research, informing the study design and analysis (Husein et al., 2021), as it allows for investigation into social structures individuals are a part of and how they interact (Stryker, 1980).

2.1 Participants

Participants were purposively recruited, in line with an approach appropriate for a symbolic interactionist informed study (Blumer, 1965, p. 40). An advert was shared via social media on Twitter and Facebook, as well as shared into groups and locations for autistic people. This included groups run by local charities and autistic-

led groups. Participants also found out about the study by word of mouth from other participants, or non-autistic people passing on the advertisement. All autistic people (formally diagnosed and self-identified) were welcome to participate, as long as they were over 18 and had access to a device that connected to the internet.

Eighteen participants agreed to participate. The participants were grouped on their availability. Each focus group contained between five and eight participants. Krueger and Casey (2014, pp. 67-68) argue deeper insights can be found with smaller focus groups. A breakdown of the demographics can be seen in Table 12.

Table 12: Participant demographics

Demographic	
Age	Range = 20-56 years
Gender	10 females, 6 males, 2 non-binary
Ethnicity	13 White, 2 Asian, 2 Mixed, 1 Black

Each participant was allocated a pseudonym which will be reported alongside their quotes.

2.2 Method

The focus groups were run in November 2020 through the online conferencing system Zoom, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and lasted between 75 and 150 minutes. The focus groups were divided into two sections: 1) discussions of definitions of social inclusion and belonging. The definitions were selected to reflect literature; 2) prompts on experiences of exclusion. As previously discussed (see

Chapter 3, Section 2.5), I am an autistic researcher. At the beginning of each focus group during the introductions, I disclosed this information. I felt this was particularly important for a few reasons: 1) given the shared knowledge and common experiences autistic people can have, it would show I am ‘one of them’ and the whole group was autistic, therefore participants may feel more at ease; 2) due to how autistic people have been perceived and treated in research previously, it would help put participants at ease that the research is ‘autistic-led’. Autistic-led research and neurodiversity-affirming research by non-autistic identifying or undisclosed researchers, can be treated with less suspicion.

Within the focus group, member checking was employed to ensure the main researcher and co-facilitator had understood the views of the participants. Member checking is a key facet of a symbolic interactionist approach to data collection (Tuckett, 2005), based on the premise that all social actors may interpret the meaning of objects differently (Blumer, 1965, p. 11). Multiple meanings are possible based on various understandings of participants’ views (Tuckett, 2005), i.e., how they understand the definitions and describe parts of their own lives which reflect or do not reflect the stimulus definitions. How social actors understand and interpret these meanings is of central concern (Husein et al., 2013).

2.3 Analysis

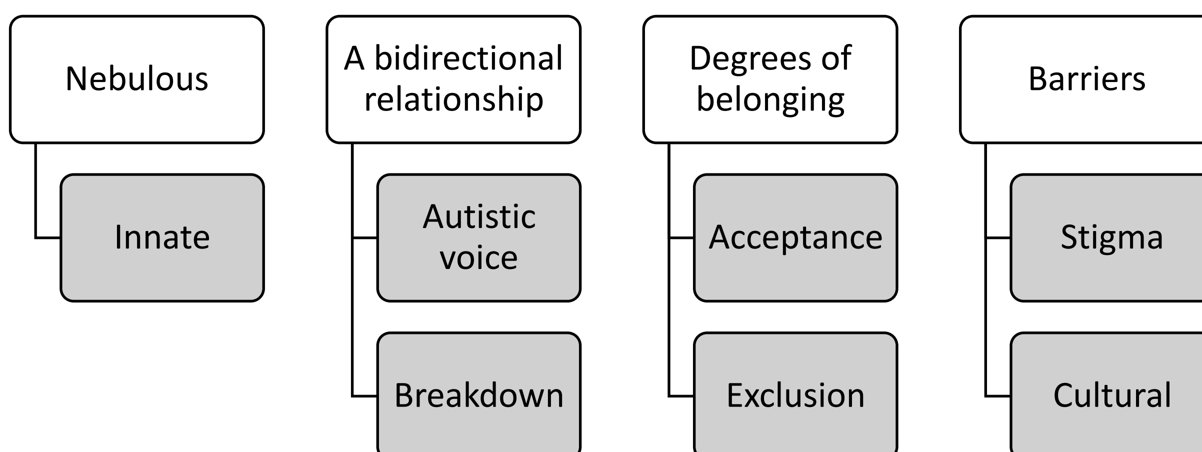
Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from this study. After data collection, the data was transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis was followed, as it is theoretically ‘flexible’, supporting a symbolic

interactionism approach, whilst providing the best fit to the research questions. Firstly, the transcripts were read and re-read. Ideas and notes for codes were noted separately after reading the transcripts through multiple times. Then the process of coding started. Throughout the coding process, constant comparison was undertaken against other codes. The rationale for constant comparison within this study is the same as explained in Section 2.2 above regarding member checking. When coding was complete, themes were searched for within the codes, with constant comparison also occurring at this stage. A first draft of the themes was reviewed, with four themes and two to three subthemes per theme being condensed to four themes with between one and two subthemes.

3 Findings

Following the inductive analytic process, four themes were discovered in the data: ‘nebulous’, ‘a bidirectional relationship’, ‘degrees of belonging’, and ‘barriers’. Figure 3 below shows the themes and their respective subthemes.

Figure 3: Themes and subthemes



3.1 Theme 1: Nebulous

The theme ‘nebulous’ explores the lack of definitive definitions of both social inclusion and belonging elicited in the focus groups. Participants gave a variety of views on what social inclusion and belonging meant for them, with idiosyncrasies found across this theme to demonstrate the diversity of ideas. Views shared appeared to be heterogenous, with no ‘grand narratives’ obvious within participant perspectives, and no one set nature in how social inclusion and belonging were conceptualised and understood by participants. One persistent thread of discussion across all three focus groups was that the definitions posed in the focus groups were 'vague' and 'lacked specificity’, or that the concepts were hard to define. The variety of views is reflective of both James’ (1890) concept of each individual having multiple selves within the relationships in their lives, and Burke’s (2007) individual standard with identity control theory. An individual standard is the meanings unique to that individual, therefore being different across all individuals. A lack of agreement in how participants understood social inclusion and belonging echoes academic literature on defining both terms (see Simplican et al., 2015), where the terms are operationalised

differently across contexts. This section will explore how participants found social inclusion and belonging difficult to define, and the implications of this on how social inclusion and belonging are understood by participants. One subtheme was discovered, ‘innate’, which covers one particular aspect of the nature of social inclusion and belonging to participants. This subtheme will be discussed in Section 3.1.1.

Both concepts were seen as beyond defining, leading to difficulty in how they may be described. Many reasons may underpin this, including the variety of different components and aspects which individuals may report to be part of social inclusion and belonging, due to the different identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 89) and multiple identities (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3) individuals have. For example, when asked in the focus groups, participants gave numerous responses about what social inclusion and belonging was or felt like to them, with none of them seen as comprehensively capturing each aspect for all individuals, and individuals often having more ideas to contribute. One participant called the definitions given in the focus groups as ‘idealised’ (Alice, FG2), demonstrating how the definitions might fit in very specific circumstances (e.g., having a certain identity). Anna summed up discussions on how comprehensive definitions were with her assessment of how belonging in particular for her, is ‘indefinable’:

> ‘I think you know, belonging is quite indefinable in a lot of ways anyway, it probably means different things to different people, I should think.’ (Anna, FG1)

Anna’s statement relates to how individuals interpret the social world around them, and how identity is central to this. Participants who were not directly critical of the definitions still raised how individual each person’s experience of social inclusion and belonging may be, as can be seen with Nicola below:

> ‘In my view, the definition is not necessarily meant to be the truth of the reality. It is defining a concept. And that would be on an individual basis [...] by individual basis I mean the reality and situations.’ (Nicola, FG3)

Nicola infers through the emphasis on ‘individual basis’ how individual both phenomena are, again highlighting the importance of subjectivity in understanding social environments (Blumer, 1965, p. 12), as well as individual identity standards and multiple identities. Furthermore, both social inclusion and belonging can be seen as dynamic entities that are not automatically merited or given in any scenario, and can operate very separately to each other. For example, one could feel socially included but not feel like one belongs to a social group through being physically present in the room, and lack interpersonal ease and connection with other group members. Harry and Lisa outline ways in which this can occur for them:

> ‘I think you can feel socially included without feeling a sense of belonging.’ (Lisa, FG2)

> ‘I also think that, that it’s possible that you feel you should belong in a group, but that you can’t access it because you’ve not been socially included’ (Harry, FG2)

The dynamic nature of social inclusion and belonging lies in tension with the idea that an individual is automatically granted an in-group member (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) based on their shared characteristics alone. It appeared that other factors, such as social acceptance into a group, may change experiences of belonging. For example, being autistic will not mean one automatically feels a sense of belonging with other autistic people based on a shared identity alone:

> ‘I think there's too much assumption generally that people who share a given characteristic or label automatically will have an affinity with each other - that's definitely not always the case’ (Lisa, FG2)

Perhaps no one definition alone can accurately capture social inclusion or belonging for autistic people, with each individual’s reality a prominent factor on how they define each concept, further emphasizing importance of subjective experiences on both phenomena.

3.1.1 Subtheme: Innate

The subtheme ‘innate’ explores the humanness and universal nature that accompanies the ideas of social inclusion and belonging for autistic people. In spite of the nebulous nature of social inclusion and belonging shared by participants, one key aspect which was agreed upon by participants on discussions was how belonging is a human need for everyone, including for autistic people. ‘Innate’ mainly refers to belonging as a concept, and echoes Baumeister and Leary’s (1995)

seminal commentary on belonging as well as other theorists’ conceptualisations of how central belonging is to human experience, for example Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs:

> Phoenix, FG1: I think I would probably say that belonging is not emotional in many ways. it goes beyond that. There is a primal, instinctive need to belong, to a parental figure, and to a familiar group. It’s an essential requirement for humans to thrive, like food, water, shelter, sleep...
>
> Anna, FG1: Yes, rather like Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Further to belonging being perceived as a human need, the innate nature of social inclusion and belonging and the importance of feelings of inclusion and belonging within understanding social inclusion and belonging were discussed. This included notions of both social inclusion and belonging being intangible feelings that are felt internally, rather than only externally performed or exhibited. Participants particularly critiqued the given definitions for social inclusion, with them being considered as ‘too objective’ and ‘too observational in nature’, and the definitions of belonging were seen more favourably due to them including the concept of them both being ‘feelings’. Including aspects that may not be externally visible or expressed by individuals in the definitions allowed for internal and innate aspects to be considered. Emily from Focus Group 1 expressed her views on why both social inclusion and belonging are feelings in a pertinent manner:

> 'Yeah, I think I'd keep the word 'feel' in the definition as I feel like, apart from being physically part of that group, like factually part of the group, how do you feel about that? Belonging is also equally as important.' (Emily, FG1)

Being physically present in a social group and feeling a part of a social group akin to a sense of belonging were seen as different by participants, even though they both were seen as part of social inclusion and belonging. Louise in Focus Group 3 discussed the tension between being and feeling a part of a group, and how they were distinctly different for her. It appears that it is this difference that marked the difference between just being present and meaningfully being involved and feeling a part of a group:

> 'I do like that this definition specifies the ability to take part and feeling part of something as separate … phenomenon 'cause as you mentioned, is easy to, it can be a lot easier to take part in something then it is to feel part of something' (Louise, FG3)

In this case, it appears that both social inclusion and belonging go beyond ideas of presence alone, and problematise presence as a true gauge for how socially included someone is, or is someone feels like they belong. In addition, some participants spoke about how they feel a sense of belonging to certain social groups without necessarily being present, further complicating the importance of being physically present to feel a sense of belonging for some autistic people and emphasising the importance of 'feelings':

> ‘A lot of my belonging is more like a sense of belonging, like I don’t go to meetings … of things to get a sense of belonging. I know even though I haven’t actually run a [name of organisation] group for a few years, I know I’m part of the [name of organisation] community and I know I will go back like, it’s in my blood.’ (Ellie, FG1)

In light of the above, it is vital to consider how central autistic people see internal feelings of belonging and social inclusion to both phenomena, as well as physical presence.

3.2 Theme 2: A Bidirectional Relationship

The theme ‘a bidirectional relationship’ exemplifies the bidirectionality and intersubjectivity within social inclusion and belonging, and how both social inclusion and belonging were perceived by participants to be socially situated to at least some degree. Social interaction was reported as particularly important in maintaining social inclusion and belonging, and any breakdown of both phenomena within all focus groups. The dynamic nature of social inclusion and belonging reflects Blumer’s (1965, p. 18) idea that action and response of social agents exists in constant flux through interpretation and reinterpretation. This section will explore in what ways social inclusion and belonging are seen as bidirectional by participants, as well as the subsequent impact of being autistic (subtheme ‘autistic voice’; Section 3.2.1) and what happens when there is a breakdown in the bidirectional relationship, leading to either a reduction or dissolving of social inclusion and/or belonging (subtheme ‘breakdown’; Section 3.2.2).

Navigation of and participation in the social world were described by participants as a ‘way in’ to be being socially included and feeling a sense of belonging, notably including understand how others may do things. ‘Others’ in this sense include non-autistic individuals and the neuronormative expectations and standards that are held by social groups. Robert exemplifies this with his reflection:

> ‘Being able to understand the social situation you are in and part of as well is also important I’ve found. Like, sometimes I’ve been in places where I’ve just not understood what’s going on, and that contributes a lot to whether you feel included or not.’ (Robert, FG2)

Other instances were noted across the focus groups, with participants noting that it should not be the responsibility of autistic individuals to meet norms and expectations aligned with non-autistic standards. Rather, participants saw both social inclusion and belonging as phenomena whereby autistic people need to be understood as well as other involved parties (e.g., individuals who are part of social groups). Often, other people who participants interacted and engaged with were perceived as lacking understanding of autistic people. Participants effectively described themselves as marginalised in this sense. Jenna and Nicola sum up their perspectives on social inclusion and belonging as autistic people with:

> ‘For inclusion for autistic people requires recognising that it’s not just that the autistic people require understanding on the part of larger society as well’ (Jenna, FG2)

> ‘Despite the majority of people thinking they are inclusive and open-minded, autistics are actively excluded by society as a whole an awful lot, whether they mean to exclude us or not.’ (Nicola, FG3)

Here the bidirectional nature of belonging and social inclusion is exemplified with the role of wider society in how autistic people are understood. These quotations from Jenna, Nicola and Robert are also an indication of the impact of the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a) in action. As aforementioned, the double empathy problem argues in essence autistic people and non-autistic people have different social realities which has implications for how social interaction between autistic and non-autistic individuals may be experienced. Sabrina further exemplifies how she manages interactions with her experience as an autistic person from an ethnic minority group and religious group, and how she ‘code switches’ between different social groups where different identities are at the fore, in order to maximise her inclusion:

> ‘I exist in multiple minoritised groups […] I just compartmentalise my identity […] if I’m around Black people, I – or Black autistic people, I’m not – I play down the impact of being Muslim in these spaces. And if I’m around Muslims, I play down the impact of my race in these spaces. And I’m constantly doing that, and it’s very tiring’ (Sabrina, FG2)

Sabrina’s identity as a Black autistic Muslim woman demonstrates how different identities may be salient or ‘activated’ (as described by Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 41),

and the impact of having multiple identities that are minoritized within social structures (Collins, 2019). Importantly in terms of Burke and Stets’ (2009) behavioural expectations of role identities, as well as stigma (Goffman, 1963) and othering (Said, 1973). Sabrina’s quote demonstrates how different identities may be understood in different contexts, and the oppression and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007) autistic people can face in relation to the variety of identities they may have. Furthermore, linked to ‘code switching’, the idea of ‘playing by the rules’ was also discussed by participants. The ‘rules’ were perceived to be in particular in reference to neuronormative expectations within social situations, which further exemplifies the double empathy problem, and how this disjuncture between social realities can impact being socially included and/or feeling a sense of belonging:

> ‘But in trying to figure out what-what the specifics are, and what the rules were, [...] I had people like, basically kind of yelling at me for like, being thick, like um, ‘only an idiot wouldn’t understand the rules’ and like ‘you’re just trying to um, find loopholes to keep doing-’ NO! I’m not trying to make excuses, I’m trying to you know, figure out how exactly I can play by the rules!’ (Jenna, FG2)

Jenna’s statement emphasises the significance of the double empathy problem within interactions and how when neuronormative expectations are not met, individuals can be othered and ‘stigmatised’ (Goffman, 1963) for not meeting expectations (e.g., Jenna being called an ‘idiot’ for seeking further clarification).

3.2.1 Subtheme: Autistic Voice

The subtheme ‘autistic voice’ explored the specific nuances that being autistic had on belonging and social inclusion, including agency over the way to belong and the role of knowing oneself in this bidirectional relationship. Participants spoke about how being autistic for them differentiated them from their non-autistic peers, with being autistic being part of their personal identity. This particularly came to the fore with how participants felt different to neuronormative society and the resulting standards from neuronormative society, and distanced themselves from these standards:

> ‘I think society in general can be very prescriptive and judgemental. I don’t really want to be a part of that.’ (Anna, FG1)

Anna describes her perception of how normalcy (Davis, 1995) is valued and expected within society, and how she distinguishes herself as an out-group member (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) from a society that demands normalcy. Ian furthered this idea describing how social inclusion and belonging differed for autistic people, with autistic identity being perceived as a core influence:

> ‘The only thing that I feel that might be missing is a sense of identity, but I don’t know… how much I feel that is required. When I think about belonging to something, it’s the things I identify myself as a part of, or with’ (Ian, FG2)

Ian’s statement echoes wider literature which iterates the impact of identity on belonging (e.g., Soldatic & Johnson, 2017; Weeber, 1999; Weedon, 2004), notably

when one is an in-group member. Being autistic as an identity was also spoken about positively, with participants effectively reclaiming the label of 'autism' and using it to define the lived experiences of autistic people (echoing Botha et al., 2022). Participants described having their own agency over their lives (and thus their social inclusion and belonging):

> 'And also this I actually learned from [autistic led social group] is that not the focus too much on your deficits in autism, but also focus on what you're good at, 'cause we're actually… good at a lot of things' (Emily, FG1)

> [Said to Louise] 'I think you're amazing, and I know it was obviously a difficult thing, like experience, but um… I think that's great and that your age. I could even hear before you even said that you've done so much and that's… identity is amazing.' (Felicity, FG3)

Claiming an autistic identity for participants in this particular study included either receiving a diagnosis or self-identifying as autistic, and retrospectively making sense of experiences throughout life, including experiences of social inclusion, belonging and exclusion:

> 'Then I got a diagnosis and started looking up what it meant and I went 'Oh!' 15 years of suffering all make sense now!' (Ian, FG2)

Through being able to apply an 'autistic' lens to understand past experiences, Ian was able to frame the 'othering' and prejudicial treatment he received (Goffman,

1963) and understand why he felt he had not met a neuronormative standard. Ian’s retrospective reflection is also indicative of how identities are composed of meanings (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3), and how one can interact with the self (Blumer, 1965, p. 13) to make sense of the social world.

3.2.2 Subtheme: Breakdown

The subtheme ‘breakdown’ explores what happens when there is a rupture in the bi-directional relationship in relation to social inclusion and/or belonging, and how participants experienced it. Participants expressed in all focus groups that there only needed to be a one-way breakdown or imbalance for a sense of belonging and/or social inclusion to be lost for them. Breakdowns appeared to occur when autistic people did not meet the neuronormative standards expected by other social agents they interacted with. One example of this was given by Alice who described how she tried to fit others’ standards, but the effect was not always reciprocated, causing frustration:

> ‘Yeah, and I found that where I tried so, so hard to fit people’s standards, so that I’m likeable to them, I’ve suddenly realised every now and again ‘why don’t they ever make any effort to fit my standards?’.’ (Alice, FG2)

Alice recognising the imbalance in reciprocity towards her as an autistic person may be indicative of the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a), and demonstrates how for her, this is not conducive to social inclusion and/or belonging. Louise echoed

these sentiments, with describing either being included or excluded, with no middle ground:

> ‘I find that my experiences with social interaction and then whether or not I feel included are really… 50:50, quite black and white. I either feel in or I feel out and there's not really many degrees to that.’ (Louise, FG3)

Louise explaining how she ‘either feels in or out’ is reflective of social identity theory’s in- and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The precarity of when a breakdown occurs was also discussed, including in reference to other individuals knowing about participants’ autistic identity, and how this may impact how others perceived them (or not). It was not easy for participants to predict when a breakdown would occur. One example came from Lisa, who discussed disclosing whether she is autistic or not in settings she enters:

> ‘It feels like there are some situations where disclosing your autism makes inclusion easier, and others where it makes it harder. Sometimes it's difficult to identify which of those situations I'm in.’ (Lisa, FG2)

Lisa’s statement reflects both the stigmatised nature of being autistic within the social world (Goffman, 1963), and why autistic people may wish to withhold this information. Autism as a discreditable identity, paired with the dynamic nature of the social world (Blumer, 1965, p. 18) leads potential difficulty in knowing when there is likely to be a breakdown.

3.3. Theme 3: Degrees of belonging

‘Degrees of belonging’ examines how people constitute they belong or are included, and inversely excluded. Participants used experiences to explain characteristics of social inclusion, belonging and exclusion in action. Many of the experiences of acceptance or exclusion were interpersonal, however other dimensions and factors were also reported. Participants reported instances of either being socially included and/or feeling a sense of belonging, or feeling socially excluded and/or not feeling a sense of belonging. Experiences were either one or the other in a binary nature, and not ‘in a grey area’, echoing Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) in- and out-groups in social identity theory. This section will cover experiences of social inclusion, belonging and exclusion through the two subthemes of acceptance (Section 2.3.1) and exclusion (Section 2.3.2).

3.3.1 Subtheme: Acceptance

The subtheme ‘acceptance’ describes what the participants felt helped them to belong or feel included in relationships, contexts and environments. Participants reported that common interests and values, openness to diversity, lacking judgement, trust and being validated, and being able to be 'authentic' assisted feelings of social inclusion and/or belonging for them. The items listed above were discussed in reference to both social inclusion and belonging. Ellie explains how she feels a sense of belonging at hippie festivals, where she can be authentic and she is not judged:

> ‘I go to like, hippie music festivals and eve-every difference is embraced and encouraged. And when I’m there, I don’t, might you know, any masking that I might do that I didn’t realise I’m doing comes off. And… you’re encouraged to lay on the floor and, and roll around and… instead of talking to someone having conversation, you play cards with them or something’ (Ellie, FG1)

Differences being encouraged at the music festivals Ellie attends perhaps is indicative of a wide variety of identities being welcomed, with teleological limits of less importance than in some groups (e.g., an autistic women’s meet up group). Autistic spaces, including the focus groups in this study, were reported by some participants as 'safe spaces' to be and groups to interact with. Some participants, such as Emily, reported that interaction is easier with other autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people, echoing findings by Crompton and colleagues (2020a; 2020b). Others such as Lisa and Phoenix, expressed how included they felt within the focus groups with fellow autistic people:

> ‘Socialising with autistic people, or people who are neurodivergent, and that’s just, I guess easier, ‘cause we have more common ground, and we can um… bond over the differen- differences, like the ‘quote unquote’ differences that we have’. (Emily, FG1)

> ‘I think honestly this situation might be the most socially included I've felt. I haven't had many opportunities to be around other autistic people and it feels very warm’ (Lisa, FG2)

> ‘I feel like I am included here! You all speak sense.’ (Phoenix, FG1)

Phoenix’s statement of ‘you all speak sense’ is also reflective of both Crompton and colleagues’ work (2020a; 2020b) and the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a). Furthermore, it demonstrates how focus group participants (which can be described as input in identity control theory; Burke, 2007) are closer to Phoenix’s identity standard than other individuals they have interacted with. Sensory and communication needs being met was also a factor for many participants. Online spaces and other metaphysical spaces were also reported as valuable in fostering inclusion on this basis, as they were seen as more accessible:

> ‘Everything being online has certainly been beneficial for me [...] I would actually not mind partaking in church online! would certainly make it more accessible to me’ (Nicola, FG3)

Those who sit in multiple marginalised groups did express a comfort with anonymity and not needing to be understood, but being allowed to ‘just be’ as they are:

> ‘I think when it comes to the idea of being understood, I don’t want that. I think that’s why I aspire for in silent spaces because I want people not to understand me, but be okay with that.’ (Sabrina, FG2)

The above shows acceptance not just as understanding and knowing other members of a social group’s identity (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), but also

being comfortable with not knowing and accepting people to come as they are, and on their terms.

3.3.2 Subtheme: Exclusion

‘Exclusion’ examines how participants understood they were not being socially included and/or feeling a sense of belonging, and the outcome of being excluded. This was described through a variety of experiences, including lack of support or needs not met, judgement and misunderstanding, bullying and rejection. Exclusion in these cases referred to both being autistic as stigmatised (Goffman, 1963), which resulted in some cases in discrimination, but also against other marginalised identities participants had (e.g., gender, race). One example was given by Louise and her experience with bullying in various settings across her life:

> ‘I've- I've been bullied quite a lot in a lot of contexts and many, many places: Sunday School, sometimes even [name of club], you know, primary school, secondary school, on [name of youth programme]’ (Louise, FG3)

Rejection from social groups and by other social actors appeared to occur throughout many of the participants lives, leading to feelings of not being welcome:

> ‘Yeah, I mean, like a lot of the- like after you try and fail so many times, it just feels like it isn’t worth the effort, because you have such a high failure rate’ (Jenna, FG2)

Being judged, ‘not deemed good enough’, and being left out due to being autistic was also discussed by participants, often having detrimental impact on relationships and social inclusion and belonging within social groups and settings. Being judged in this manner is perhaps indicative of autistic people not meeting neuronormative expectations and standards which appear to be ingrained into society. Anna and Alice both shared how this impacted their relationships with friends and family:

> ‘Yeah, I must admit I never felt as if I belonged in my family… at all. … Um…. (pause) for a variety of reasons really, I never felt that I was good enough, I was always being criticised or judged.’ (Anna, FG1)

> ‘So in university, and especially in first year, um, ‘cause I wasn’t very good at being social, um, in a good way, you know, I would hear about things people had gone to, and they were doing these groups I wasn’t invited to, and just not inviting me.’ (Alice, FG2)

One particular point which was raised by participants was that ‘they were unable to find a way in’ to social groups in spite of how hard they tried, and that having ‘no in’ was a barrier to joining in social groups:

> ‘I was going to say, I um, something that Lisa said resonated when you said something like ‘there’s no in’. (Sabrina, FG2)

Having ‘no in’ demonstrates the lack of accessibility to be able to participate and be a part of interactions and groups, and how they perceived the load to be on them to

get an 'in' into social groups. Having 'no in' also reflects how participants in this case are in the out-group, and unable to reach a social status where they can be accepted by the in-group.

3.4 Theme 4: Barriers

'Barriers' explores the various aspects that can hinder a fostering of social inclusion and belonging. Participants described multiple barriers to being socially included or feeling a sense of belonging across the three focus groups. These barriers are often part of what leads to experiences of exclusion, and contribute to the breakdown of social inclusion and belonging. There are two main forms these barriers take: the first being directed at autistic people, with autistic people being perceived as a stigmatised people (subtheme 'stigma', see Section 3.4.1) and group norms and culture which may exclude autistic people either directly or indirectly (subtheme 'cultural', see Section 3.4.2).

3.4.1 Subtheme: Stigma

The subtheme 'stigma' explores the notion of being autistic as a stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963), and how participants socially navigated having a stigmatised identity. As being autistic is a discreditable identity (Goffman, 1963), individuals may mask or pass in an attempt to gain social acceptance. Many participants reported masking or passing to be accepted by individuals within the social contexts they are a part of. Participants appeared to suppress their autistic selves so to be interpreted as either 'non-autistic', or in contexts where being autistic was unknown either by the

participant (e.g., pre-identification) or others, to avoid labels such as ‘weird’, ‘rude’, ‘shy’ or ‘awkward’. Felicity shared her experience from childhood through to adulthood:

> ‘I’m the opposite – I like your comment there John, you said like a chameleon to fit in. And that’s what I’ve been since um, I’ve been very, very young.’ (Felicity, FG3)

‘Like a chameleon’ is particularly pertinent, as it demonstrates how Felicity navigated social contexts to fit in with whichever standards or identities were expected (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7) or whichever qualities were required to be an ‘in-group member’ (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It also indicates she changes how interacts and behaves across contexts extraneous to the usual roles that individuals might have (e.g., jobs, skills, qualities). Pearson and Rose (2021) argue autistic masking is qualitatively different to contextual identity shifts, with autistic masking occurring across multiple contexts, which is present in Felicity’s statement.

The codes which fell into this subtheme included ‘passing’ and ‘masking’, however in this study participants elicited responses which fitted masking more frequently than passing, and when discussing passing and masking often only used the word ‘masking’. This is in line with how autistic people have been described to refer to this phenomenon more broadly (see Sedgewick et al., 2021; Pearson & Rose, 2023). How autistic people are perceived was also seen to be highly stigmatizing and a barrier to diagnosis, support and inclusion more broadly. Ian emphasized this by

describing the stereotypes of autistic people, and the lack of understanding this can lead to:

> ‘We need a better way to have people understand the multifaceted nature of the spectrum. Too much of popular thought of autism is "there are the dysfunctional ones and the savants, and there is nothing else"’ (Ian, FG2)

It appears that some individuals who had interacted with the participants of this study had misconceptions of how autistic people are, at that timepoint. Ian’s comment echoes Botha and Cage’s (2022) findings about how autistic people are perceived, and how their ‘usefulness’ might be an influence. Anna furthered this by describing misunderstandings and inappropriate comments she had faced in church circles she knows, painting disability as a tragedy:

> ‘(laughs) and don’t even think about asking if you can pray away my autism. You’ll get a slap! (laughs)’ (Anna, FG1)

Participants who were open about being autistic did report sometimes not being taken seriously, as if they are not autistic as they do not match the preconceptions others have of an autistic person and furthering the idea of autistic people as a stigmatised people:

> ‘Even if I don’t necessarily feel like my autism is disabling for me, in my daily life, like, I can feel like people don’t take me seriously (Jenna nods) if they know

> I’m autistic. I guess, it’s kind of like a shamed group, like there’s all these associations with it’ (Harry, FG2)

Harry’s statement infers that the label autistic is associated with an individual not being able to tell their own story and report events in a trustworthy manner by some individuals, echoing hermeneutical and testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007). The lack of being taken seriously may have ramifications on whether an individual feels socially included or belongs, and potentially encourages a lack of being authentic and masking or passing.

3.4.2 Subtheme: Cultural

'Cultural' explores the systemic barriers which further perpetuate exclusion and a lack of belonging at a group- or societal level. The culture of social groups and contexts participants attended were reported to have expectations which were not always obvious or clearly operationalized (e.g., they apply to some individuals and not others). Given that the identity of a group is the aggregation of individual activity (Blumer, 1965, p. 17), and that ‘joint action’ is exemplified in group behaviour (Blumer, 1965, p. 16), these assumptions indicate that group behaviour and therefore, culture, may be reflective of what the majority within a group or context think. Participants were critical of the lack of reflection of a group’s behaviour, and how this may exclude out-group members, as shared by John:

> ‘They’re not aware of their own kind of cultural rules…. And um… if they could become more self-aware, then they would find it easier to be more welcoming.’ (John, FG3)

John’s statement presents a social club local to him as the in-group, and others as the out-group, with out-group members perhaps seeing aspects to group dynamics that in-group members do not. John also effectively turns who should put the effort into being included on its head. Rather than the stigmatised individual with a discreditable identity, or other out-group member, seeking to assimilate through masking and passing to gain social acceptance, he suggests his local social club should be aware of how their behaviour impacts out-group members. Emily in Focus Group 1 echoes the idea of reflection and effort being on the part of the in-group on a wider societal scale:

> ‘I think it’ll be a lot easier if people could just overlook these (gestures quotation marks) problematic (stops gesturing) things that people do differently from them, and before they judge anyone. And not be so obsessed about everyone having to present themselves or express themselves the same way.’ (Emily, FG1)

Emily refers to how ideas of normalcy and neuronormative expectations can be pervasive within society, impacting on interactions she has and how she is perceived. The pervasiveness of autistic people’s exclusion throughout society is summed up by both Lisa and Alice, who saw society as broadly exclusive of anyone who doesn’t meet neurotypical and able-bodied norms:

> ‘I think, I think it’s outside of the field of autism, and that’s just generally how society is (laughs)’ (Lisa, FG2)

> ‘So I think, and it really doesn’t help that-that – that’s like a society wide um issue, because it’s in every aspect you know’ (Alice, FG2)

Lisa and Alice indicate exclusion is not just an ‘autism problem’, with standards and expectations being one aspect that might inform the teleological limits of who is included and excluded from groups. Perhaps also it indicates what and who is acceptable within groups and contexts.

4 Discussion

The themes and subthemes from this exploratory study explores autistic people’s views of social inclusion and belonging, and highlight aspects that are important on both an interactional and systemic level. Autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and exclusion (themes: nebulous and degrees of belonging), as well as having an autistic identity (subtheme: autistic voice) appear to impact their understanding and how they define social inclusion and belonging (Research Question 2). Autistic identity as stigmatised identity (subtheme: breakdown; theme: barriers), the double empathy problem (subtheme: breakdown; Milton, 2012a), and notions of normalcy and neuronormative expectations (subtheme: autistic voice; theme: barriers) frame the interface between social inclusion, belonging and autistic identity.

Many of the themes and subthemes in this study overlap significantly with the findings from Milton and Sims’ (2016). The findings from Milton and Sims (2016) triangulate the findings discovered in this study, in particular, Milton and Sims’ (2016) findings echo findings in this chapter such as normalcy (‘a bidirectional relationship’ and ‘barriers’) and how different identities are perceived and navigated, (‘a bidirectional relationship’, ‘degrees of belonging’ and ‘barriers’). Of particular relevance to normalcy, Milton and Sims (2016) also found masking and passing, and normative expectations within their subthemes ‘stigma’ and ‘societal othering’, which are also echoed in this chapter. In addition, Milton and Sims’ (2016) subthemes ‘stress reduction’ and ‘personal fulfilment’ reflect findings within subtheme ‘acceptance’ in this chapter. This may include the provision of an accessible environment for sensory sensitivities (e.g., lighting and noise) and clear expectations regarding social interaction through use of initiation badges (see Belek, 2020).

The lack of consensus both within focus groups and between focus groups demonstrates to some degree that within this sample echoes previous literature (e.g., Simplican et al., 2015). In spite of the lack of consensus, belonging was seen as a ‘human need’ through the subtheme ‘innate’, echoing Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) assertion that belonging is a human need. The subtheme ‘innate’ particularly affirms the humanity of autistic people, who under various guises have been framed subhuman (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 2000b, p. 3, who states to have a theory of mind is to be human). Theoretical framings that position autistic people as being ‘less’ or framed with deficits echo the prejudicial views of autistic people that participants discussed and the stereotypes of autistic people discussed in the academic literature (e.g., Dickter et al., 2020).

The lack of agreement in regards to the definitions of social inclusion and belonging also reflects the multiple identities individuals may have (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). In particular, each identity has its own identity standard (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 89), defining the character of the identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 63). With each individual having many identities due to the various roles (e.g., job, role within a family) and social groups they may be a part of, it is no wonder that definitions may not be agreed on and perceived as ‘broad’. Even though autistic identity appears highly salient across contexts (theme: degrees of belonging), also suggested by Pearson and Rose (2021), it seems that it does not completely outstrip other identities and roles individuals may have when considering social inclusion and belonging. Other marginalised identities that individuals may have in addition to being autistic (e.g., being LGBQTIA+, being from an ethnic minority) also appear to be highly salient. Within this study, Sabrina and Lisa were particularly reflective of their positions as autistic women from an ethnic minority group, and Harry on their position as a queer, non-binary autistic person (their words). Experiences of exclusion and discrimination appear to be exacerbated with multiple identities where labelling, status loss and discrimination occur (see Link & Phelan, 2001), supporting Wagner and Kitzie’s (2023, p. 1045) argument that intersecting, marginalised identities ‘exacerbate engagement’ on their study of queer people’s access to healthcare information. Discussions of inclusion and exclusion may activate identities that are perceived as stigmatised or part of an out-group, not limited to autistic identity alone.

Further to autistic identity appearing highly salient in discussions surrounding social inclusion and belonging, one aspect of being autistic in this study involved challenging ideas of normalcy and neuronormative standards. Participants' views and the subtheme 'autistic voice' echoes arguments by Milton and Moon (2012) regarding the support strategies for autistic people, and psycho-emotional disablement (invalidating responses based on misunderstandings of mental distress). Both participants and Milton and Moon (2012) argue against autism as a deficit to be 'fixed' and brought in line with normalcy, rather a part of neurodiversity (see Walker, 2021), dispositional diversity (Milton, 2014a) and human diversity. Dispositional diversity has been argued by Milton (1990, in Milton 2014a) to be a wide range of experiences of deviance across the spectrum of human condition, with social conventions shaping who is considered 'deviant'. Through arguing against assimilation, individuals with an autistic identity actively push against non-autistic expectations that may be by default placed on individuals, due to the neuronormative standards ingrained in society. Burke's (2007) identity control theory can frame how an autistic person may reject neuronormative standards. The expectations of a society (perceptions) are compared against their autistic identity (identity standard), with the individual seeking to reduce the discrepancy between perceptions and the identity standard. Through rejecting neuronormative standards, perceptions and identity standard are brought closer together. Rejection of these neuronormative standards may also be accompanied by finding spaces with standards and expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7) (e.g., autistic led social groups) more aligned to their identity standard.

The themes ‘barriers’ and ‘a bidirectional relationship’ both exemplify how central positive social interactions are to the understandings of social inclusion and belonging of the autistic people in this sample, perhaps not a surprise given a core facet of being autistic is part of autistic interpretation and communication styles (as described by Keates, 2022 and Keates et al., 2022). Social interaction is qualitatively different in autistic people (Milton, 2012b), therefore being a central part of an autistic identity and therefore the perceptions of that particular individual (see Burke, 2007). Comparing how autistic people may communicate (e.g., more directly, less backchanneling (Rifai et al., 2022)) to what a non-autistic communication partner may expect (and vice versa), may result in two different meanings interpreted of a social interaction. Camus and colleagues’ (2024) study of autistic social interaction through focus groups and interviews supported the ubiquitous and pervasive nature of the double empathy problem throughout autistic people’s social lives found in this study, in particular with non-autistic communication partners.

Further to autistic people being dispositionally different (Milton, 2014a), autistic people can be ‘othered’ or stigmatised for falling outside the parameters of expected and socially accepted behaviour (as described by Milton, 2012a). Theories framed in normalcy and that position autistic people as outliers add to arguments of autistic people being ‘othered’ (Said, 1978) with those who are outliers being perceived as ‘needing fixing’ (Davis, 1995). In light of this, it is no surprise that autistic people have fewer social connections (Turnock et al., 2022), experience loneliness (Ee, 2019) and feel like outsiders to social groups (Becker, 1963), including feeling excluded. The multiple reports of exclusion and oppression from participants mirror Jones and colleagues’ (2022) findings, where 70% of the autistic respondents to a

survey exploring experiences of inclusion and exclusion felt socially isolated and 47% had lost friends due to being autistic. Stigma has been found as a barrier to accessing social groups and environments in previous studies exploring attitudes towards autistic people (e.g., Dickter et al., 2020; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020), which is not a surprise given a stigma according to Goffman (1963) prevents ‘full social acceptance’. Stigma in this way is an ‘attitudinal barrier’ (Carter, 2017), with perceptions of a stigmatised individual shaping how an individual is understood. Autistic people may attempt to circumnavigate being attributed a ‘spoiled identity’ through masking and passing. Through monitoring how others perceive them, notably through inferencing how other social agents make meaning from the autistic person’s behaviour, speech and other mannerisms, masking and passing in this manner seeks to maximise opportunities for social inclusion and belonging. Han and colleagues’ (2022) systematic review emphasises the ‘acute awareness’ autistic people have of being judged and stereotyped. Pearson and Rose (2021) also highlight the multiple identities autistic people may have (e.g., gender, ethnicity; echoing James’ (1890) concept of multiple selves in multiple relationships), and different parts of one’s identity may be minimised or maximised in different contexts. One example of this is code-switching.

One further way navigating stigma can be understood using a symbolic interactionist approach, notably through identity theory (IT). Masking can be understood to be with ‘playing a role’ (as asserted by Pearson and Rose, 2021 in relation to Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*), which in this case needs to be a socially ‘valid’ role, in order to be included or to attain a feeling of belonging. Playing a role of a less stigmatised person assists stigma management as part of

this effort to be considered socially ‘valid’, and therefore meriting of inclusion into social groups, and potentially fostering feelings of belonging.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

This was an exploratory study and although this study triangulates important findings by Milton and Sims (2016), the exploratory nature of this study calls for further research on this topic, sensitive to the marginalised position autistic people can hold in research (Woods & Waldock, 2020). This study did not have any autistic people who reported having an intellectual disability as participants, and this population were not directly sought. Future studies should seek to include the views of autistic people who also have an intellectual disability. Data collection also sought to be inclusive to autistic people who were non-speakers through the provision of instant messaging, however future studies using creative methods may elicit findings from autistic non-speakers through an alternative communicative means. Furthermore, data collection during a global pandemic meant that participants who perhaps would not have taken part previously could (for example, staying in their own homes), but other potential participants who may have participated could not due to the ‘digital divide’. Finally, future studies could pay closer attention to the intersectional identities that autistic people hold (as recommended by Singh & Bunyak, 2019), and how these interact in experiences of social inclusion and belonging, in particular in relation to religious and humanist social identities. A participatory approach to designing this study, in line with recommendations by Chown and colleagues (2017) or Fletcher-Watson and colleagues (2019) could be used in future studies, as well as

autistic people in the form of critical friends (see Kember et al., 1997) or an advisory group to co-design the interview schedule and recruitment approaches.

5 Conclusion

This exploratory study explores the experiences of social inclusion and belonging of autistic people, and how this informs how identity shapes social inclusion and belonging. It gives crucial insight into the impact of being a minority neurotype within society, and the impact of other intersecting identities; and it supports earlier findings reported by Milton and Sims (2016). The next chapter will present the findings from the study undertaken with Christians and Muslims, in order to find out their views and experiences of social inclusion and belonging.

Chapter 5: Conceptualising belonging - the views of Christians and Muslims

1 Introduction

The previous chapter covered autistic identity in relation to social inclusion and belonging, in particular how normalcy and neuronormative expectations create tensions with social inclusion and belonging. In this chapter, the focus will be on the second study, which explored Christians' and Muslims' views and experiences of social inclusion and belonging. The chapter will begin with contrasting the importance of social inclusion and belonging within theological texts with prejudice within religious groups (e.g., Allport & Ross, 1967) and religious groups as having their own culture. Next, the methods for this study will be briefly recapped before the themes discovered through thematic analysis as presented. Finally, the themes will be discussed in particular in relation to normalcy, prejudice and how individuals who transgress normative standards can be 'impossible subjects'.

1.1 Social inclusion and belonging: their importance within belief systems

As covered prior, both social inclusion and belonging appear to be core to some of the doctrines of a variety of belief systems commonly adhered to in the United Kingdom (UK). Notably within Christianity (46% of the population at the 2021 Office for National Statistic census) and Islam (7% similarly) have teachings as part of their belief system which could be said to put a high importance on social inclusion and belonging, and adjacent phenomena (such as being welcoming). Within Christianity, the parable of the Good Samaritan (*NIV*, 1973, Luke 10: 25-37) places importance of

love for one’s neighbour within a community setting, including those who could be considered to be ‘othered’ or ‘deviant’ (using a lens of Goffman, 1963). In Islam, the notion of ‘ummah’ is central; whereby the role of Islam is to reconcile the world back to one single community. Ummah is addressed in Quran 10:19 (*Quran*, 1995), showing a belief in the world formerly being one community and the role of Islam is to reunify the world back to one community. The notion of community is also highly stressed in both belief systems, for example, in Ephesians 2:19, (*NIV*, 1973), where Christians see themselves as children of God and metaphorically, as brothers and sisters; in Islam the verse of the brotherhood (*Quran*, 1995, 49:10) reflects a similar notion. Other notions such as compassion, altruism, and charity, which may result in behaviour that facilitates social inclusion and belonging, are thought to be intrinsically linked to religious belief (Dekker & Halman, 2003; Norenzayan, 2014). In spite of this, little is known about what it means to belong to a religious group, and how the ‘culture’ of the group may define these understandings, using the voices of the people who attend these groups. This is despite attendance to religious groups specifically being often cited as conduits to social inclusion (Sango & Forrester-Jones, 2017).

In a non-religious context, social inclusion, often used interchangeably with the term ‘belonging’ among other terms (Simplican et al., 2015), is also known to have a positive impact on QoL. Positive influences on QoL include: increased social network, the *presence* of reciprocal social relationships, for example, friendships and feeling ‘a valid part of’ a group of people. Belonging has also been reported as a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) which can be met in social groups. In spite of the muddying of terms, some academics use social inclusion to

delineate a more observational and objective understanding of the presence of social networks (Forrester-Jones et al., 2006), or the presence of relationships (Clement & Bigby, 2009). However, it is important to note this more objective standpoint is often used with disabled individuals, notably autistic people and people with a learning disability, and is informed by notions of having an ‘ordinary life’ (Wolfensburger, 1984) like their non-disabled, neurotypical peers. People who experience mental distress and mental illness have also been focused on in the academic literature, due to their status as one of the most socially excluded demographics (Coombs et al., 2013). In reference to the general population, which this study seeks to explore, this has been investigated comparatively less to date, more often a comparison in studies using more ‘vulnerable’ individuals (as described by Lubbers, 2021). This is despite belonging’s importance, which has been exemplified through constructs such as Maslow’s hierarchy (1954) in particular.

In reference to a religious or faith-based context, much of the literature surrounding social inclusion and belonging to date is Christian centric, echoing wider trends in the academic literature regarding the distribution and focus of studies (see Chapters 1 and 2). Much of the current information is in relation to Christian churches and in a US context (two UK context papers: van Ommen & Endress, 2022; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020), therefore may not be wholly transferable across cultural contexts and religious cultures, including to a UK context. Carter (2021) suggested 10 steps to belonging which can be used as a framework within Christian belief system communities: present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, heard, befriended, needed, and loved. This framework is specifically targeted at communities who seek to socially include and facilitate the belonging of autistic

people and people with a learning disability. It remains unknown if there was input from autistic people and/or people with a learning disability into this framework, or if it would be appropriately culturally sensitive to use with other belief system groups (e.g., Islam). Carter (2021) places an emphasis on being present, accepted and known, as well as giving support for meaningful inclusion. This focus on presence is in contrast to arguments by Carrier (1965), who argued that religious belonging was congruent on participation and contribution to those who also worship there. However, this appears to be based on a church setting and a congregational method of gathering (e.g., a weekly gathering on a set day of the week with the shared goal of worship and contribution to the membership body outside of the weekly gathering). Mosques are traditionally not only places of worship, but also have been described as ‘places of refuge’, tackling ‘social exclusion’ and as ‘dispensing valuable social services’, as reported in this instance by Warraich and Feroze (2008, pp. 6-7), demonstrating their importance on a community level. Churches also may provide for their local communities in a similar manner, providing mother and baby groups, foodbanks and social groups (including regarding a shared interest or identity, such as craft groups, friendship groups or women’s groups).

1.2 Identity and social groups

Religious identities have been theorised by a variety of scholars as being a social identity in the academic literature (e.g., Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Smith & Hogg, 2006). Burke and Stets (2009, p. 3) state that identities are ‘a set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role within society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify them

as a unique person’. These meanings are formed through social interaction and a process of interpretation (Blumer, 1965, p. 5). Interpreting meanings in this manner is a part of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1965, p. 9; Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 13). An individual’s identity is related to the concept of the ‘self’ through a person’s consciousness of who they are (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 9), and operate at both conscious and unconscious levels (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 61).

Social identity theory (SIT) suggests that a social identity is an individual’s knowledge of who they are (e.g., concept of self; Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 9) and recognition being part of a social category or group (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Social categories or groups are a group of individuals who hold the same social identity (e.g., autistic, Black, Christian) categorisation or view themselves to be a part of the same social category (Stets & Burke, 2000), characterising them according to the roles they hold within society (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Categories are enmeshed within the culture and language of the social world (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 13). Each identity’s meanings are shared with wider members of society (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Society in the case of this study would refer to belief system groups.

It has also been argued that belonging is intertwined with identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1998); belonging to the same social category brings benefits, notably positive esteem (Esses et al., 2005; Ramiah et al., 2011; Sutton & Douglas, 2019). Notably, Durkheim ([1897], 1979) argued in his seminal work on suicide that the more socially integrated and connected one is, the less likely one is to commit suicide. Social identities are formed through categorisation; a process of comparison whereby individuals who are similar are deemed the in-group and individuals who are different

as the out-group (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Social categorisation is a dynamic process (as interpretation of symbols and understanding of meaning is ongoing (Blumer, 1965, p. 6)), with social context consistently varying (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Individuals generally have more than one social identity at any one time (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), which may complicate which social identity is salient (activated), for example being autistic and a swimmer. Burke and Stets (2009) further this argument by stating individuals can have multiple role identities (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). Role identities are characterised by how they differ from other roles, what behaviours are accomplished within the role and what behaviours are expected and prescribed within the role (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). For example, a teacher is a role identity with associated behaviours of being authoritative, sharing knowledge and being organised. These associated behaviours are the basis of meaning for the role identity of ‘teacher’.

Social categorisation is the driving force behind intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Intergroup relations have been described as when ‘individuals belonging to one group interact, collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identification’ (Sherif, 1936). Group action is a central focus of both symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1965, p. 16) and understanding social (Abrams & Hogg, 1988) and role identities (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within intergroup relations, in-group bias is omnipresent in how in-group and out-group members interact (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The perception of there being two separate and distinct groups is enough to start discrimination favouring the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), with perceived similarities are accentuated, including impact on attitudes, beliefs and behavioural norms (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Tajfel and

colleagues (1971) sought to explore the effects of social categorisation on in-group behaviour with two studies. The studies included 64 participants, all male and aged 14-15. Participants favoured fellow in-group members in two experiments where rewards and penalties were distributed.

Attitudes are reported to lie at the heart of social relations (Asch, 1952, in Smith & Hogg, 2006), and are said to be grounded in group social consensus (Smith & Hogg, 2006). Attitudes can further be associated with how individuals perceive and interpret the world (see Blumer, 1969, p. 6) through expectations held within role identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000; see also Section 1.2 of this chapter). An individual not meeting the expectations prescribed within the role can result in lower wellbeing as argued within previous literature (Stets & Burke, 2000; Thoits, 2012). It has been argued that competitive inter-group relations lead to prejudice (Allport, 1954), with prejudice described as ‘the way one thinks or feels about a particular person or group’ (Allport, 1954). Allport (1954) asserts that inaccurate perceptions are a defining part of prejudice, as well as prejudice occurring toward groups whose values differ to the current in-group.

Individuals who may face prejudice are individuals who have a stigmatised identity (an identity with negative connotations or attributes; Goffman, 1963) (see Chapter 4, Section 1.2). Having a stigmatised identity has been asserted to be harmful to social identity (Major & O’Brien, 2005), as the stigmatised identity may discredit the individual. A stigmatised identity can discredit an individual if the stigmatised identity is unconcealable or accidentally shown (e.g., through not passing in a social group). Stigma has been suggested to be a social construct (Coleman, 1986) that is an

ongoing process of interpretation of 'cues' that are visible (e.g., wheelchair user) or concealable (being autistic). Disabled people in particular have been reported to be a stigmatised social group (Fine & Asch, 1988), with courtesy stigma often experienced by those who support them in the case of some disabilities (e.g., autism and intellectual disability: Mitter et al., 2019).

1.3 Religious groups, prejudice and exclusion

Religious groups may be considered to be mini 'cultures', where a key part of a 'culture', according to Schein (1991, p. 313) is shared knowledge. This shared knowledge may include behaviours or attitudes towards visible and invisible differences, including in conduct and communication, or how to 'perform' in certain situations. Durkheim (1912) argues that some norms, beliefs and values together make a collective consciousness, which is a shared way of understanding the world. Geertz (1993, p. 89) furthers this analysis through arguing that religions have their own culture composed of symbols, beliefs and rituals, wherein these symbols, beliefs and rituals are likely to inform interpretations of the social world within these groups. This is not to confuse religion with the broader concept of culture (Geertz, 1993, p. 113).

Furthermore, in some countries, theist or non-theist beliefs may form an integral part of wider socio-political culture. However as aforementioned, belief system groups can have a very strong in-group dynamic, with prejudicial attitudes prevalent towards those who are considered 'outsiders'. Research from several decades ago (e.g., Allport & Ross, 1967) showed that churchgoers in the US showed a higher level of

prejudice than individuals who did not attend churches. Furthermore, Stouffer (1955) reports that prejudice and intolerance of non-conformity are higher amongst religious people. Stouffer’s (1955) seminal work also explored this relationship of intolerance of non-conformity between religious people, and found the relationship held even when controlling for other variables, such as education, age, region, and type of community. Religious beliefs were not considered in Stouffer’s (1955) study, as the focus was on attendance. In fact, Allport, (1966) argues that it is secularism which is ‘interwoven with tolerance’, and not religion (when considering religious belief system groups specifically). Allport (1966) further argues that belief system groups are comprised of likeminded individuals, notably in reference to their religious or humanist beliefs. In spite of some teachings iterating the importance of belonging, Allport (1966) suggests that other tenets of religion (when referring to religious belief system groups) may be exclusionary, for example beliefs of a sole authority in understanding and interpreting revelation (including any afterlife), and perceiving themselves as ‘God’s chosen people’. These assertions clearly indicate a boundary between those who are part of the aforementioned beliefs, and those who are not.

More recent research, Ben-Nun Bloom and colleagues (2015) showed religious social identity increased prejudice with three different groups: American Catholics (n=154), Turkish Muslims (n=158) and Israeli Jews (n=157). Attitudes towards immigrants were measured using measures adapted from the World Values Surveys and European Social Survey, with analysis carried out with multi-level modelling. These findings suggest that these attitudes of religious groups are resistant to change. Johnson, Rowatt and LaBouff (2010) support Ben-Nun Bloom and colleagues’ (2015) findings, where 73 college students participated in a priming

exercise across two studies. The first study explored racial prejudice, and the second study explored general negative affect toward African Americans. Johnson and colleagues (2010) found that participants who were primed with Christian words displayed more prejudice than those who were primed with neutral words.

However, it is not only individuals from different ethnic groups that may face prejudice. Prejudicial attitudes toward out-group members is echoed by some research which has elicited that disabled and neurodivergent people, and their families can feel excluded from belief system cultures (e.g. Jacobs, 2019 regarding Christianity; Shikarpurya & Singh, 2021 regarding Islam), as well as findings from Study 1 (see Chapter 2) demonstrating that other minority identities may also experience feelings of exclusion and oppression within such groups. Jacobs (2019; also Jacobs and Richardson, 2022) found in their thesis exploring disabled Christians experiences of church in the UK, that many of their participants felt socially excluded from churches through a lack of provision for their support needs (e.g., a blind couple who were not given the words to hymns and songs in an alternative format; an autistic person who struggled to participate in post church coffee due to unstructured small talk). These instances of exclusion appear to be of an opposing nature to the teachings of social inclusion and belonging outlined in the Bible and the Quran, and embody the barriers that some individuals may face in a belief system context, on both a physical (e.g., physical access to buildings) and intersubjective level (e.g., shared understanding, communicative ease[3]). Spies (2021) also discusses their journey to church leadership within a Canadian context,

[3] Communicative ease in this sense refers to the ease of others understanding communication approaches and systems of interpretation. See Keates (2022) for a definition.

and how they were not considered by various churches to be their minister on account of being disabled, further demonstrating the social exclusion that can occur in such groups. Exclusion within mosques is also documented in the academic literature, with Ghafournia (2020) outlining their research on women’s experiences of segregation and exclusion within mosques. Furthermore, Shikarpurya and Singh (2021) found in their qualitative study in the US (n=3 participants) that participants (who were parents of autistic children or children who had a learning disability) felt excluded from the mosque and that they had lost their sense of belonging.

The contrast of the reported importance of teachings and views about social inclusion and belonging, and the impact of having a marginalised identity within a religious setting, gives impetus to investigate the views of belief system adherents. There is a dearth of studies that focus on congregational perspectives and views. Furthermore, the social group focus of this thesis involves exploring the views of both autistic and belief system social identities. Therefore, a study focused on the views of belief system congregants was logical. In this light, two research questions guided this study:

1. How do the belief systems under investigation conceptualise and understand ‘belonging’, ‘social inclusion’ and ‘inclusive communities’?
2. How is this operationalised in regards to autistic people?

2 Methods

As explained in Chapter 3, this study was designed as a qualitative exploratory study. The same study design was taken as with autistic people, with same rationale regarding shared knowledge (see Section 1.3). Furthermore in this case, given the importance of role identity and expectations within religious and humanist identities, it was sought to find out how individuals with a Christian or Muslim identity perceive other minority groups in relation to their identity within a Christian or Muslim context, including the expectations and behaviours (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). Religious identity has been examined in the academic literature (Werbner, 2010), including Christian (Whitehead et al., 2015) and Muslim (Casey, 2018). However, questions of social inclusion and belonging have remained unexplored. In order to understand this perspective, a symbolic interactionist lens has been used to frame the research questions of the study, the tools and approaches used and the analysis undertaken.

2.1 Participants

Participants were purposively recruited, thus following Blumer’s (1965, p. 40) assertion of the appropriateness of this approach for exploratory studies seeking to explore the social world using a symbolic interactionist approach. Potential participants were approached via a variety of means; emails to churches, mosques, mandirs and humanist groups; emails to interfaith networks throughout the UK; emails to charities (e.g., Inclusive Church, Humanism UK); social media advertisement. Participants also found out about the study through word of mouth from other interested participants. As described in Chapter 3 Section 5.1.2, only focus groups including Christians and Muslims were completed and deemed of a suitable quality to include in this thesis.

Twenty-one participants (13 Christians and 8 Muslims) agreed to participate and whose data is included in this chapter. The participants were grouped by both their belief system and their availability, so that only members of the same belief system were in focus groups together. Groups contained between four and eight participants, as with smaller groups, deeper insights can be found (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p67-68). A breakdown of the demographics per belief system can be seen in Tables 13 and 14.

Table 13: Participant demographics

Demographic	
Age	Range = 24-74 years
Gender	15 female, 6 male
Ethnicity	9 White British, 2 White European, 4 Asian, 2 African, 1 White and Asian, 3 not disclosed

Table 14: Participant demographics per belief system

Demographic	**Christian focus groups**	**Muslim focus groups**
Age	Range = 24-74 years	Range = 30-65 years
Gender	9 female, 4 male	6 female, 2 male
Ethnicity	9 White British, 2 White European, 1 Asian, 1 White and Asian	3 Asian, 2 African, 3 not disclosed

Echoing Chapter 4, each participant was allocated a pseudonym which will be reported alongside their quotes.

2.2 Procedure

The focus groups were run between November and December 2021 through the online conferencing system Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and lasted between 75 and 120 minutes. The focus groups were divided into two sections: 1) discussions of definitions of social inclusion and belonging. The definitions were selected to reflect literature; 2) a discussion of a vignette presented to the participants. The vignette (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.4) was introduced to participants as a story to stimulate discussion of how a new attendee to their church or mosque would be perceived and welcomed. The new attendee in the vignette was coded to be autistic in their presentation. Each focus group was co-facilitated by myself and a Christian or Muslim volunteer in the included data units. The rationale for their use in this study is twofold: 1) as Geertz (1993) argues, religions have their own culture. Therefore, categories and classifications that participants may use and understand will be enmeshed within the language and culture of that belief system (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 13). Through the co-facilitators access to the shared knowledge and language, it was hoped that interactional expertise (Collins, 2004) would access insights in the discussion the main researcher alone might not.

Within the focus group, member checking was employed to ensure the main researcher and co-facilitator had understood the views of the participants. Member checking is a key facet of a symbolic interactionist approach to data collection (Tuckett, 2005), based on the premise that all social actors may interpret the

meaning of objects differently (Blumer, 1965, p. 11). Multiple meanings are possible based on various understandings of participants’ views (Tuckett, 2005), such as how they understand the definitions and describe parts of their own lives which reflect or do not reflect the stimulus definitions.

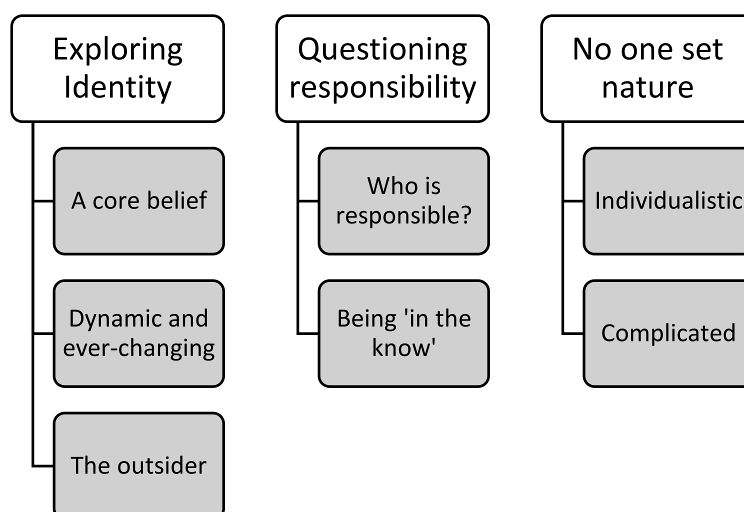
2.3 Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from this study, as the research questions sought to answer a ‘what’ question. After data collection, the data was transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis was followed, as it is theoretically ‘flexible’, supporting a symbolic interactionism approach, whilst providing the best fit to the research questions. Firstly, the transcripts were read and re-read. Ideas and notes for codes were noted separately after reading the transcripts through multiple times. Then the process of coding was started. Throughout the coding process, constant comparison was undertaken against other codes. The rationale for constant comparison within this study is the same as explained in Section 2.2 above regarding member checking. When coding was complete, themes were searched for within the codes, with constant comparison also occurring at this stage. A first draft of the themes was reviewed, with four original themes being condensed into three themes. These three themes were then defined prior to being written up into a full report.

3 Findings

Following the inductive analytic process, three themes were generated from the data: 'exploring identity', 'questioning responsibility' and 'no one set nature'. Figure 4 below shows the themes and their respective subthemes.

Figure 4: Themes and subthemes



3.1 Theme 1: Exploring identity

The theme 'exploring identity' explores the role social identities have in social inclusion and belonging for participants, in particular their Christian/Muslim social identities. Reported beliefs and day-to-day experiences and behaviour appear to be somewhat contrasting, perhaps illuminating the influence of group norms on behaviour. As part of their Christian and Muslim social identities, participants reported that social inclusion and belonging were central parts of their belief systems, with a relationship between doctrine/theology and outlook reported by participants. Both the Bible and the Quran were cited as why aspects such as being welcoming are important and relevant within their belief systems (subtheme: 'a core belief'). Yet in spite of participants citing holy texts often referring to aspects like brotherhood and kinship, there did appear to be boundaries and limits how

participants behaved around other individuals and in different contexts. Identities other than Christian or Muslim alone appeared to inform responses to perceived outsiders (subtheme: ‘dynamic and ever-changing’). Furthermore, participants contrasted this to times they had been or felt excluded by others with the same belief system as them, as well as how others who are in the out-group may be perceived and treated (subtheme: ‘the outsider’).

3.1.1 Subtheme: A core belief

‘A core belief’ explores the reported importance of teachings on inclusion and belonging within both Christianity and Islam. Participants discussed teachings, parables and ideas from their belief system, and how this shaped how adherents believed they should behave towards other people. In this case, participants’ views appeared to highlight the centrality of terms such as ‘welcome’ and ‘love’, as illustrated by Marwen (FG3) and Fred below (FG1), and how this underlines their views of social inclusion and belonging. Particularly pertinent within this is that terms such as ‘welcome’ are equated to being a part of social groups, however no mention was given of what could be termed as inclusive practice equitable to social inclusion and belonging (e.g., teachings which could be seen to support accessibility or equal rights for all). This was echoed across all focus groups, both Christian (FG1 and FG2) and Muslim (FG3 and FG4):

> ‘that is kind of a core aspect in our faith, in terms of welcoming people, and making people feel welcome, and making people feel like, we're one another’ (Marwen, FG3)

> ‘the New Testament is absolutely founded on, you know, Christ teaching about love and-and because we hear so much these days about love being unconditional.’ (Fred, FG1)

To further this, many participants from all focus groups spoke about how these teachings also frame the value they should place on fellow humans. This in particular focused on notions of ‘being children of God’ for Christians, and being ‘brothers and sisters’ in Islam, with God/Allah seen to determine intrinsic value among all humans, rather than via worldly, socially constructed hierarchies. Of particular interest is that participants who described this did not allude to or mention notions of equality, equity, or all being created the same, rather focusing on the relational dynamic between them and their deity. Language used often had a familial reference, with kinship being central:

> ‘And if I think it from my Christian, or from the Christian point of view as being, uhm, being accepted as the created child of God that we are created… in the image of God’ (Naomi, FG1)

> ‘It-it-it-it does preach that we are all brothers and sisters, so that itself causes an automatic kind of bond, where we should-we should… – we should be together, and-and I don't know if that makes sense.’ (Marwen, FG3)

Some participants did go further than notions of kinship and welcome, and expressed how belonging is for everyone in their belief system group. In particular, they focused on not needing to conform, which is at a tension with previous findings asserted within the academic literature (particularly Stouffer’s (1955) seminal work

on non-conformity within religious groups). Also of interest is the reflection that all people all have ‘eccentricates’ and ‘needs’, recognising that all people may not quote fit the mould of the ideal social group member:

> Uhm, because we... we're-we're all there in all our, with all our eccentricities and you know needs and everything else. And-and yeah, um it's I suppose it's coming back to this belonging thing. It's not about conformity. Uhm, um we're just showing up how we are. Um. And so everybody belongs, you know. (Christine, FG2)

3.1.2 Subtheme: Dynamic and ever-changing

The subtheme ‘dynamic and ever-changing’ explores how participants behave to maximise their feelings of social inclusion and belonging, and which social identity is salient (see Abrams & Hogg, 1988) or performed (Goffman, 1959), including how authentically they may behave. Drawn from own experiences. This included the importance of being authentic to feelings of social inclusion and belonging, and tensions where this is complicated by the current company. Participants reported behaving differently across contexts and groups of people, with participants sometimes withholding perhaps what they would say or do in environments they felt more comfortable in. Being able to be honest and comfortable with difficult conversations and emotions was particularly reported in the Christian focus groups, with the perceived difficulty of some Christians finding this also being reported, as Christine describes:

> ‘It may be that it's just about being able to be held in one’s doubt, difficulty, pain. I think that's-that's really important, and sometimes Christians shy away from this.’ (Christine, FG2)

For some participants, this was reported as being able to be themselves and not having to perform a role which is at odds with who they are. Some participants spoke about trying to ‘fit in’ in order to be accepted, with fitting in active rather than passive. Some participants spoke about fitting into social groups where they are a minority themselves through their ethnicity:

> ‘The only time that I've actually ever felt… socially included is when I was myself, when I was authentic to myself […] I always feel like I'm trying to fit in and that's the only time you feel accepted.’ (Alia, FG3)

Alia’s statement reflected Burke’s (2007) identity control theory. When the individual standard (what it means to be who one is) and input (meanings of how one sees oneself in a situation) are congruent, comparison finds little discrepancy against one’s own identity.

The roles individuals can have within Christian and Muslim settings, and the impact on what aspects of their identity they present, also was reported. Participants’ own experiences were reflected on and informed what participants understood social inclusion and belonging. One particular example was from Rachel, who was employed by her church. She spoke about how she controls who sees her authentic self:

> ‘I actually work for my church. I’m employed as the [name of role], so I feel I'm in a really interesting position. I've never known my church congregation outside of my[sic] place of employment yet. They are also my church, so I often find often I'm walking a real fine line between it's my workplace, but they are my church family, and there are people in my church who I am so close to and they will be my people who I go to when everything's gone wrong, because I will let them see me just as I am all through the good and bad stuff. Um wher- whereas other people in my church, I-I would probably maybe tread a bit carefully with.’ (Rachel, FG1)

The way in which Rachel performs different roles in each case with different company is illustrative of dramaturgy as discussed in Goffman’s (1959) *Presentation of the self in everyday life*, in managing in feelings of social inclusion and belonging. There are differences between what could be described as front stage behaviour (her behaviour more broadly in the church) and backstage behaviour (those who she is closer to, who she describes as ‘her people’). Her ‘work’ identity has remained activated within a church context (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 41), thus navigating her church with responses indicative of standards and expectations of the workplace. Other participants also described how they and their families utilise impression management in relation to their belief system identity. Alia (FG3) describes her son’s experience of managing his identity as a Muslim in the workplace:

> But um, you know, just to share, like with my son when he first started working, he-he had the same - he was - he said, “I'm not gonna change who I am. I have to pray. I'm gonna go off to the manager and I will tell him so”. He did exactly

> the same– He didn't hide away, he just said, “this is who I am. If then if they're gonna have a problem with it then I'm gonna go mum. I'm not staying there”. So he went and he said, “look I have to pray at these times. Are you gonna be OK with that?” And the manager, you know, asked like, “what would - what does that mean? How long does it take? When do you have to do it?” And he explained and he said “of course”, you know, he was very welcoming, very loving. He even took him to a room and said’ “listen, if you whenever you need to pray, this is your room” and he said “you know, I respect you bro because um, we've got other Muslims here, but we've never - you're the first person who's actually come and asked to pray”. (Alia, FG3)

Alia’s son’s experience is indicative of how belief system social identity may be managed within different settings, and in particular how he brought perceptions others had of him closer to his own individual standard.

3.1.3 Subtheme: The outsider

In spite of having a social identity which may purport the importance of social inclusion and belonging to varying degrees, there do appear to be limits on who is included, and how out-group members may be treated and perceived. Often this led to some out-group members being excluded by a variety of means, due to not meeting the expectations of the role of a ‘Christian’ or ‘Muslim’ (see role identity theory, Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). There appears to be interactional dynamics which may lead to exclusion. The double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a) was a key component in this subtheme when referring to the autistic person in the vignette, with Christine explaining how this may contribute to exclusion:

> ‘Uhm, they you know they don't know all the rules of the game necessarily and-and er other group members don't really know the rules of this person's game and-and so there's a kind of mutual incomprehension going on, so I've just got to do something.’ (Christine, FG2)

The ‘rules of the game’ that Christine discusses could be said to be neuronormative communicative expectations, which are ‘the prevalent, neurotypical set of assumptions, norms, and practices that construes neurotypicality as the sole acceptable or superior mode of cognition, and that stigmatizes attitudes, behaviors, or actions that reflect neuroatypical modes of cognition as deviant or inferior’ (Catala, Faucher & Poirer, 2021, p. 9016). These differ from autistic social communication patterns. A mutual incomprehension within the double empathy problem is particularly pertinent here, as it is reminiscent of mutual misinterpretation of expectations and behaviour (key facets of role identity theory; Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 7) of how to be in a Christian/Muslim context.

The interactional style of autistic people was also termed difficult by some participants, further straining attempts to instigate positive interactions which may lead to feelings of social inclusion and belonging:

> ‘er it's really, really er- difficult, if the person does have ASD because it's, it is difficult to approach them as well.’ (Aida, FG4)

This quotation from Aida shows how interaction may impact bidirectional nature of social inclusion and belonging in this case, and how perceived interactional difficulties complicate social inclusion and belonging. This also illustrates how participants viewed some marginalised groups, with prejudicial attitudes toward marginalised groups (including autistic people) and negative experiences reported. This is reflective of Goffman’s (1963) social stigma theory, with being autistic discrediting an individual and removing them from ‘full social acceptance’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 19). Participants reported that negative experiences they had led to people from marginalised groups feeling excluded or leaving churches and mosques. In particular, Alia (FG3) described the exclusion her autistic son experienced within their Mosque, which ultimately lead to him leaving:

> ‘…and in the end, I had to withdraw him from attending the mosque, because he just didn't feel like he fitted in. He didn't feel like he belonged there.’ (Alia, FG3)

Here Alia describes a between-person mismatch reminiscent of the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a), disrupting potential feelings of social inclusion and belonging. Attitudes were described as barriers to social inclusion and belonging by participants, as well as tolerance. The behaviour of some autistic people may not meet expectations set for ‘church’ or ‘mosque’, therefore transgressing both the expectations of a Christian or Muslim identity, and expectations of other roles, leading to exclusion:

> But unfortunately, there are still people out there who will still make it… difficult and hard, and almost impossible. And we'll take, you know, bearing in mind where they are, and perhaps what-what they believe their beliefs to be, will not make it an easy ride for someone who comes into this sort of scenario. (Fred, FG1)

These experiences of exclusion were also found in mosques, with Aida (FG4) describing judgement and subsequent breakdown her autistic son experienced in the mosque they attended:

> ‘...but there are obviously people er who are not tolerant. Um I er remember when when-when my son was quite young and because he has autism and he was obviously his behaviour. You couldn't curb his behaviour and someone who was standing next to me got really, really annoyed. That can't you control your son.’ (Aida, FG4)

In Aida’s case, her son’s stigmatised identity is shaped by her mosque’s culture and expectations.

3.2 Theme 2: Questioning responsibility

The theme ‘questioning responsibility’ explores interactional and other dynamics which may mediate social interactions with other group members, including in- and out- group members. Social inclusion and belonging were reported as socially situated to at least some degree, with participants describing belonging as a ‘two-

way thing’, echoing the autistic participants in Chapter 4. The bidirectional nature of social inclusion and belonging was particularly prominent in discussions around the facilitation of social inclusion and belonging, including toward autistic people. This echoes the importance of meanings (response in action; Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 16) in how members of a social group or society facilitate the process of inclusion or exclusion, rather than it being an individual endeavour. Tensions were found in who, in the view of the participants, was perceived to be responsible or accountable for facilitating feelings of social inclusion and belonging within churches and mosques, complicating the reciprocal nature of social inclusion and belonging. Other identities Christians and Muslims have, and how these are responded to, appear to frame some of these tensions. Participants saw individuals who had more knowledge about out-group members, or individuals who they knew less about, as more suited to engaging with out-group members (subtheme: who is responsible?). Further to this, participants reflected on the importance of cultural knowledge, both of autistic people and their support needs, and church/mosque culture in facilitating social inclusion and belonging (subtheme: being ‘in the know’).

3.2.1 Subtheme: Who is responsible?

The subtheme ‘who is responsible?’ includes the views that Christians and Muslims had regarding whose responsibility social inclusion and belonging are, including in reference to the vignette. Tensions were found, with both notions of all being responsible and certain individuals with ‘gifts’, knowledge or roles being responsible. Notions of there being a ‘joint sort of responsibility’, as echoed by Judith below, encapsulated the shared responsibility of social inclusion and belonging of Christians in particular (akin to a communal responsibility):

> ‘It's also… a realisation that when you are in a group of that kind, it's-it’s saying a Christian setting, that we are all responsible for each other to-to feel um… that you feel part of-of that particular place [...] I feel that-that that we've all gotta… Also, we've all got a joint sort of responsibility to making people feel… comfortable and accepted, and respected as well.’ (Judith, FG1)

Perhaps one way of framing Judith‘s statement is her view that a Christian identity should be the activated identity, therefore informing perceptions and responses to the social world. At other points during the focus groups, participants discussed actions they can take to facilitate the social inclusion, without necessarily having specialist knowledge. In this instance, church- and mosque-goers emulate aspects of the ‘joint responsibility’ discussed by Judith (FG1), exploring how attendees can all help individuals who are perhaps outsiders to church or mosque culture (e.g., new attendees) or individuals who may need more support to be included (e.g., autistic people). This included support such as buddy systems, teams of people who welcome church- and mosque-goers (i.e., a welcome team):

> ‘Cofacilitator: Like a buddy system, you mean like somebody?
> Ismail: Yeah, yeah.
> Cofacilitator: Okay.
> Ismail: Kind of help him, you might, if it's, you know, if he's having difficulty with the task or if it's a group activity, then you know his friend can kind of be the one to, you know, liaison or be the middleman.’ (FG3)

> ‘I think you know when people come to our mosque, if um they're new, we, you know, we would always make a point of going up to them. Um. And you know that is so certain within our organization, the structure that we have there um is always one or two people whose role it is to look after anyone who's new who comes to the mosque.’ (Asma, FG4)

The concept of buddy systems or certain individuals as points of contact may represent other roles Christians or Muslims might hold, for example teacher, healer, health care professional, minister or imam, parent or carer, and how these roles can in some instances, appear more salient in decisions of enacting social inclusion and belonging. Salience hierarchy (which identity/ies are the most important at that time (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 41)) informs which identity/ies are activated at any one time.

Participants from both the Christian and Muslim focus groups in this sample described that they felt more specialist input may be needed in for some marginalised groups they know less about. None of the participants reported knowing if there was an autistic person in their current church or mosque. This lack of knowledge perhaps led to them perceiving themselves as lacking the skills or knowledge in this instance, as Fred, Asma and Tara all outline:

> ‘I-I almost think that it needs special handling to-to some extent.’ (Fred, FG1)

> ‘you know um, what they need is someone to who can understand them.’ (Asma, FG4)

> ‘Do you find that people have got different giftings and there are some people? Who-who naturally empathetic and a good in that direction or have experience of it? Uhm, and I would possibly try and steer them towards that person.’ (Tara, FG2)

Again Fred, Asma and Tara indicate here that individuals with identities that are perceived that make them more knowledgeable are viewed as more appropriate in situations of assisting social inclusion and belonging. In particular, Tara’s use of the word 'giftings' reflects Christian language referring to skills, knowledge or roles.

Language often used when talking about the vignette character in this instance (see above) could be perceived as othering, excluding autistic people from full social inclusion and belonging from both churches and mosques. This was further exemplified through the idea of disabled and neurodivergent people being seen as vehicles of teaching:

> ‘I think it's such an important lesson for faith communities um, and everyone else just to be aware of how they're engaging when they speak to people, and um, almost like learning how to care and listen.’ (Daisy, FG1)

Disabled and neurodivergent people as ‘lessons’ to ‘teach’ the broader religious institution denies us agency, rather making us objects of able-bodied and/or neurotypical salutation, erring into a pastoral model of disability (Jacobs, 2019). The pastoral model of disability exemplifies imbalanced relationships between disabled and non-disabled people, and defines disabled people as individuals to be cared for

and supported by non-disabled people (Hogben, n.d.). Through the asymmetrical relationships and power dynamic at play, disabled people may not be valued as a part of the social group in the same way as their non-disabled peer. They are therefore placed into a role identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7) as ‘vehicle for teaching’ through their identity of being ‘disabled’ and/or ‘neurodivergent’, and removing disabled/neurodivergent agency from their identity state.

3.2.2 Subtheme: Being ‘in the know’

‘Being ‘in the know’’, encapsulates the importance of knowledge in facilitating social inclusion and belonging from the perspective of the participants. Being ‘in the know’ refers to cultural knowledge both of the cultural norms of churches and mosques as social groups, but also knowledge and awareness of people who are outsiders or out-group members, in this case autistic people. Across all focus groups, 12 participants (seven Christian and five Muslim) openly commented that they thought the individual in the vignette was autistic. However, there was some hesitancy, with some participants feeling unsure about if they were correct, or if the language they were using was correct:

> ‘I would say autistic, but that might not be the right term at all.’ (Doug, FG1)

Not all participants openly reported that the individual was autistic, although traits and experiences of autistic people were sometimes described in lieu of the label ‘autistic’. A mixture of language was used throughout, both from more standpoints which could be seen as othering (e.g., ‘deal with autism’, ‘this kind of thing’, ‘special

in some way'), and accepting of autistic difference (e.g., 'neurodiversity', 'neurodiverse'), showing the variety of knowledge bases that participants had. Some participants were very honest in their perceptions and journey through their thought processes, as shown below by Hayet:

> 'I'll be honest with you, my honest thought was, and-and I can imagine myself in a mosque if someone was to cover their ear, sorry I don't want to laugh [laughs a little uncomfortably], sorry! If they were to cover their ears or something, I'd think, "God, what's wrong with this person", you know.' (Hayet, FG3)

This indicates that even within a group of self-selected individuals who could be perceived to be comfortable talking about social inclusion, belonging, disability and neurodivergence that some initial judgements remain. The importance of education was particularly made by Muslim participants, as a vehicle to understanding and way to increase the social inclusion and belonging of autistic people within their setting:

> 'so that I think 'cause education is key in this. So our attitudes, er you know, are all about what we know, what we understand.' (Leila, FG4)

However, education was not only described as being something to engage with in regards to disability and neurodivergence. The culture of churches and mosques were also discussed, and how 'knowing your way around' helps members of the congregation/gathering know what to do when, and helps them feel more at ease, as Doug explains:

> ‘When I got married to my wife, her parents weren't in the habit of going to church. They hadn’t been for years and years. But to humour me, they knew I went, they came along with me. And I just wanted a very ordinary, nothing to think about, happy inclusive service. They didn't know when to stand up. They didn't know it sit down, they didn't know…. you know, who to talk to. And I was giving them very clear directions. They really felt-felt out of place’ (Doug, FG1)

Doug’s experience with his wife’s parents supports Geertz’s (1993) argument of religions as having their own cultures, therefore demonstrating the role of knowledge for both in-group members and out-group members. Fred (FG1) also reflected on a similar idea, recognising that when he preaches or leads services that he may well have someone who is new, visiting or an outsider to the culture of how things are done in church.

3.3 Theme 3: No one set nature

The theme ‘no one set nature’ explores the complexity and individual nature of social inclusion and belonging, but also the idiosyncratic nature of churches and mosques as social groups in how they contribute to feelings of social inclusion and belonging. There was little consensual agreement as to what social inclusion and belonging meant to participants, echoing the autistic participants in Chapter 4, with experiences framing their views and understanding. Participants also reported their churches and mosques appeared to work in an idiosyncratic manner. Participants also emphasised that although social inclusion and belonging were socially mediated and situated,

that other factors also influence feelings of social inclusion and belonging. This links to the individual standard within Burke’s (2007) identity control theory, which is a set of meanings unique to that individual, as well as James’ (1890) concept of an individual having multiple selves within the multiple relationships in their lives. There appears to be a variety of practices that churches and mosques enact, and how these may influence potential for feelings of social inclusion and belonging.

3.3.1 Subtheme: Individualistic

The subtheme ‘individualistic’ examines the differences between individual churches and mosques. These differences include group dynamics within these gatherings, as well as the size of churches and mosques. Participants reported a variety of ways that their churches and mosques worked and managed group gatherings such as worship, prayers and other social groups parts of church and mosque life such as craft groups. The role of fellow group members, and group leaders who are in positions of power (e.g., ministers, imams, church leadership teams, mosque management) on the dynamic of each social group. This is exemplified by Olivia with her views on social dynamics within their church and mosque, and how it might be difficult to join in if one does not quite fit preconceived ideas of the ideal participant:

> ‘it can be - it by getting into churches it can be… Quite clique- I don’t know if the word’s cliquey? Yeah in … in church.’ (Olivia, FG1)

With some churches and churchgoers being described as ‘cliquey’, a strong in-group dynamic is apparent in some churches. This strong in-group dynamic may be a

barrier for out-group members, especially if they are perceived as outsiders, echoing Allport and Ross’s (1967) findings on prejudice in churches in the US. Another dimension to the individualistic nature of churches and mosques is their leadership – often in the shape of ministers or priests in churches, and imams in mosques. Both social groups may also have a leadership team that support ministers/priests and imams, and the culture in the belief system groups was perceived as different per church/mosque. Alia described the important role of leadership in the culture of her mosque:

> ‘I-I don't believe it's gonna change if it doesn't come from... you know the-the… the management.’ (Alia, FG3)

Alia’s statement emphasises the perceived importance of leadership in changes within her mosque, with the perceived power to steer the direction of the group standard (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Further reporting of the varying nature of churches and mosques was reported, with the beliefs each group adhered to also seen as central. Tara (FG2) discussed this in relation to Christian denominations in particular, and expressed that although they may all identify as Christian, there are in fact noticeable differences in the practices and theology of different denominations:

> ‘Some Christian denominations do that better than others, um and I think it's really important’ (Tara, FG2)

Tara’s statement indicates how different denominations and churches may have differing contexts they operate within (e.g., their theology and ideas of what makes a Christian or Muslim). Theology can operate as an expectation within role identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7) through providing behavioural and structural guidance (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). This shapes the characteristics and implications, and how these are interpreted by other group members.

The existence of groups within groups was also noted within both Christian and Muslim focus groups, and how this is also part and parcel of the experiences of social inclusion and belonging. It was acknowledged that individuals may group together per aspects of their shared identity, or pre-formed social groups, which may or may not have their own social rules:

> ‘I find, for the first time in my life, being part of a larger church. What I'm seeing on a Sunday morning is that small communities form within the big community.’ (Natalie, FG1)

> ‘sometimes within when you go into mosque, you could be that - there could be a group of Somalis or group of Asians and [inaudible]. Everyone's in their own community, even within the mosque sometimes as well.’ (Hayet, FG3)

Home groups (where individuals with the same belief system meet together informally in each other’s homes to discuss their beliefs) were also mentioned by participants in both Christian focus groups as a potential conduit to social inclusion and belonging within this set up. There was also acknowledgement between group

members that there were ideals in how they should treat and interact with other group members, including those who appear or act different (akin to expectations within role identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). Whether this was translated into practice at all times by all people was debatable:

> ‘But we are we are talking about human beings and we're talking about cultural differences. We're talking about a huge lot of things, and unfortunately, that that is. That is not what is going to happen.’ (Asma, FG4)

3.3.2 Subtheme: Complicated

The subtheme ‘complicated’ explores the complex nature of belonging and social inclusion, wherein both concepts are individual to each person. The complicated nature of social inclusion and belonging was echoed by participants across all focus groups, with mentions of the definitions posed to the participants often seen as too simple or missing aspects:

> ‘You know. it's a multi complex thing of belonging, you know’ (Naomi, FG1)

Part of the complexity of social inclusion and belonging for participants notably included non-social and non-interactional aspects of social inclusion and belonging that were described. Concepts such as like-mindedness, love, respect and trust were all reported as important to focus group members across all groups. Asma gave a particularly pertinent example when describing the role of trust in social inclusion and belonging:

> ‘I guess you know, so I mean like when I used to go to the mosque with my children when they were young. I could leave them there and not worry about them because I knew that everyone else had their back as well.’ (Asma, FG4)

The complexity was also apparent through the non-static nature of both social inclusion and belonging of the participants. The dynamic nature of social inclusion and belonging reflect the view of interacting with the social world as a process (Blumer, 1965, p. 17) and as individuals, we are constantly interpreting and responding to meanings and the world around us (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 17). The dynamic nature of social inclusion and belonging were both reported on an individual level, where participants reflected on past behaviour, knowledge and attitudes; and also changes that have occurred on a societal level in regards to inclusion. In regards to personal change, Fred reflected on the changes in his and Judith’s attitudes, perhaps reflecting wider societal change:

> ‘I think with years of experience um, and years of ignorance as well, when between us, Judith and I've got to a better state um, where I-I like to think we're… pretty much um, social animals in terms of trying to make… people feel comfortable.’ (Fred, FG1)

These dynamics add to the complex nature of social inclusion and belonging. Further to the idiosyncrasy and complexity, the subtheme ‘beyond interaction’ explores the dimensions and tensions of social inclusion and belonging which were not interactional based. Of particular note is a discussion, shared in 3 of 4 focus groups

(75%), surrounding the usage of the word ‘ability’ in the definition of social inclusion (see Appendix 4). Oliver outlined why this may be an issue for people who face barriers to active participation, including disabled and neurodivergent people:

> ‘I guess one issue I could potentially, potentially have with the definition, is it's talking about the ability to take part um in all the activities of society, but it may be a case with some people for whatever reason will not be able to take part, in the same way as other people’ (Oliver, FG2)

Naomi (FG1) furthered this discussion with her argument that ability to take part is a socially constructed phenomenon, as well as her describing disability itself as a socially constructed term:

> ‘I'd just like, Daisy said, that completely agree with her on the word ability, because that word – that concept can be difficult to define, and also if we talk about social inclusion and socially – the con – socially concept behind the word ability, because the opposite is disability, and that's also socially made concept.’ (Naomi, FG1)

Through seeing disability as socially constructed, Naomi is alluding to how humankind has shaped language, and therefore the lack of objective idea of what ‘disability’ is. This echoes Blumer’s (1965, p. 10) idea that ‘objects are the product of symbolic interactionism’ and that ‘objects have different meanings for different individuals’ (Blumer, 1965, p. 11).

Participants also discussed tensions between presence and participation in regards to belonging in particular. Some participants saw presence amongst their belief system group as sufficient, whereas for others they felt they belonged and felt more socially included when they participated in activities with their belief system group, or look part in worship or prayers. This particular tension echoes the tension echoed in the contrasting of Carrier’s (1965) definition of belonging in religious contexts, and Carter’s (2021) guidance on belonging for autistic people and people with intellectual disabilities. Judith (FG1) spoke to this tension specifically, and cautioned against the impact of only viewing participation as an indication of belonging:

> ‘I think we've a guard against feeling that everybody needs to feel that they belong because they're doing things, and there are so many people that I know who would be horrified to feel that they were being encouraged to take part because we feel that they would feel better doing that. Some people just want to be there, and just be - just soak up the atmosphere and know that that is their special place’ (Judith, FG1)

Judith’s assertion, along with the wider tension reflected in the focus groups, indicates that presence versus performance is also a question relevant to able-bodied and neurotypical individuals.

Finally, the complex nature of social inclusion and belonging and how they may be difficult to facilitate or provide environments that enshrine them was discussed. In particular, participants reflected on how difficult it may be to provide and/or facilitate social inclusion and belonging for everyone, and that perhaps some churches and

mosques may think they are more ‘inclusive’ than they are in reality. These reflections indicate further complexity in the views of social inclusion and belonging of Christian and Muslim social groups:

> ‘And that's a that's difficult – that's a difficult concept– a concept for-for all of us to-to actually put that into practice, because we are all human.’ (Fred, FG1)

> ‘I do sometimes think it's easy to think we're more than we think we more inclusive that we actually are.’ (Judith, FG1)

Recognising the difficulty of enacting social inclusion and belonging reflects the lack of ‘one way’ to achieve it.

4 Discussion

The findings from this exploratory study with Christians and Muslims found a variety of views in regards to social inclusion and belonging, with some tensions and opposing viewpoints in the data (Research Question 1). Similarly, there were a variety of responses were elicited about autistic people in particular, displaying a range of knowledge, understanding, and approaches to the social inclusion and belonging of autistic people within a belief system context, with findings suggesting an individual’s multiple identities and salience hierarchy are important to consider in relation to how out-group members are responded (Research Question 2). There does appear to be overall agreement on the importance of social inclusion and belonging within Christian and Muslim belief system context, and this informs some

dimensions of how it is perceived (Research Question 1), but there also appears to a disconnect between what happens on the ground between group members being more idiosyncratic and variable. The variety of views and idiosyncrasy of practice has been found in previous research in regards to religious belief system contexts, specifically Christianity (Patka & McDonald, 2015; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020), and this dataset gives emerging data for potential similar phenomenon in a Muslim context. It is important to note at this point, as previously mentioned in Chapter 2, that there is a bias within the academic literature toward Christian settings (Nadal et al., 2015). The implication of this upon this discussion is that much of the existing literature is Christian-centric, and from an anglophone context, as reported in Chapter 2.

Two clear tensions found were 1) the reported welcoming nature of Christians and Muslims, often through notions of kinship and brotherhood, with limits discussed on who is a part of such groups (theme: exploring identity) and 2) the question of who is responsible for welcoming out-group members (theme: questioning responsibility). In this manner, the social identity of being Christian or Muslim as always fully welcoming is problematised in light of these findings. Other identities appear to inform and shape participants responses in this study, with other identities and roles (e.g., parent, healer, minister) shaping the responses individuals may make. As Burke and Stets (2009, p. 3) argue, individuals have multiple identities.

How an individual with a Christian or Muslim identity may perceive an individual with a stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963) is further complicated by the lack of directive or clear interpretation of disability and neurodivergence in holy texts (Waldock &

Sango, 2023). Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that other identities or roles may be activated (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 41) to navigate social situations and environments regarding how perceived out-group members are understood.

These findings also indicate how both Carter (2021) and Carrier (1965) (see Introduction) both allude to different aspects and perspectives of social inclusion and belonging. The tensions perhaps could link to Cameron and colleagues (2010) model 'voices of theology', which although come from a Christian context, can be seen as applicable to Muslim contexts too in this study. Although originally conceptualised to illustrate the various dialogues and voices in reference to theology and theological action research (TAR; action research with theologians and lay participants working together; Cameron, 2013), this model serves in the case of this data to demonstrate the disconnect between what participants may report as important on a theoretical level, and what they may describe in regard to experiences (Cameron et al., 2010). Descriptions of being welcoming can be said to be espoused theology; espoused theology refers to beliefs that are reported and articulated by group members (Cameron et al., 2010). Limits and boundaries to who can be included can be said to be operant theology (how beliefs are put into practice and operationalised within a group setting). Operant theology is another manner that the pastiche of identities, roles, and responses to those in churches and mosques is reflected. This is particularly pertinent given a group's theology can be argued to be a part of its culture (Geertz, 1993). Furthermore, the mismatch between espoused and operant theology problematises notions of all churches and mosques as welcoming, especially when considering Blumer's (1965, p. 17) argument that a group's identity is the 'aggregation of individual activity'. When aggregating all social

activities, it would include acts of exclusion which are not congruent with what some may term a ‘welcoming’ identity. When conceptualising churches and mosques as social groups, Becker (1963, p. 15) argues that social rules are created by social groups, and that not all groups may share the same social rules. If this is the case, it is no surprise that a variety of experiences were reported by participants, and no one set nature of social inclusion and belonging were reported (theme: no one set nature).

Furthermore, the operant voice is argued to exhibit ‘a strong normativity’ (Dunlop, 2021), with normativity in this case referring to traditions as well as neuronormative expectations that may be held by some churches and mosques (Buijs & Rath, 2002). These neuronormative expectations may not only be theologically informed, but may be informed by other influences such as culture. The distinct difference between espoused and operant theology also limits potential accessibility through giving devalued roles to individuals who perhaps are viewed as out-group members who have stigmatised identities (as previously argued by Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020). An example of a devalued role may be being autistic (as argued in Chapter 4), whereby the behaviours and expectations of an autistic person may not be in line with normative standards and expectations.

As well as differences between the theoretical understanding of participants (espoused theology) and participants’ own experiences (operant theology), there appeared to be limits on who ought to be welcomed and included. Day (2011) argues that boundaries of who is and is not included within a social group are negotiated through interaction, which in this case is how individuals are perceived

and responded to. It appeared that participants used impression management to navigate multiple activated roles, in particular in the subtheme ‘dynamic and ever-changing’. Dramaturgical presentations of self and identity (Goffman, 1959) may explain why participants present themselves differently according to contexts and settings, echoing previous notions of identity as performative (Butler, 1990). Belonging in particular has previously been described as relational and performative in nature in relation to religious identities (Day, 2011), therefore emphasising the role individuals have in their behaviour and to confirm the various identities they have (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 14).

In relation to how the autistic person in the vignette specifically was perceived, some of the views reported by participants support Allport and Ross (1967). Allport and Ross (1967) reported higher rate of prejudice among churchgoers in the US, as well as Stouffer’s (1955) study on prejudice and non-conformity within religious groups. Individuals who appeared to transgress social norms within churches and mosques, or who were perceived as having a stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963) (temporary or longstanding) appeared to be treated less favourably than those who did not. Becker (1963, p. 16) argues that deviance is created by responses of individuals to certain kinds of behaviour (e.g., being unable to stand for hymns in church, covering one’s ears during prayers at the mosque, in particular when not meeting the expectations for the role identity ‘Christian’ or ‘Muslim’ (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7)). Other scholars have echoed these findings of deviance in relation to people with ID (Patka & McDonald, 2015), and more broadly in relation to disabled people (e.g., Reynolds, 2012a). Reynolds (2012a) further argues that those who are excluded by religious groups defines the identity of the in-group, echoing Allport’s (1966)

assertion that religious identities are exclusionary in their nature through the beliefs they may hold (e.g., revelation, God’s chosen people).

As in Chapter 3, the theoretical framework (symbolic interactionism; Blumer, 1965) informing this thesis informed the findings, and their subsequent interpretation. Within symbolic interactionism, individuals attribute meaning to objects (including actions and concepts), and the meaning of these objects is acquired through interaction between the individual, object and society (Blumer, 1965, p. 11). Studies exploring similar phenomena in religious groups (e.g., Patka & McDonald, 2015; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020) have previously used a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this case, a theory to explain underlying processes is sought. In the case of this study, it could have found a process of how social inclusion and belonging are enacted, rather than exploring conceptualisation and understanding of the terms.

4.1 Limitations

This exploratory study, gives an insight into the view of Christians and Muslims on social inclusion and belonging, but it is not generalisable across denominations or other religions/belief systems, including the two belief systems which were sought to be included and could not be at this time (Hinduism and Humanism). Only collecting and analysing on two belief systems could perhaps be seen as a limitation, however it has allowed for more detailed contrasting and comparing between the data units. The sample is mostly female (15 females to 6 males), and not all participants chose to disclose their ethnicity at this time, which limits the contextual information on this sample. After much time and effort, the sample gained was gratefully accepted due to difficulties with recruitment, due to a hesitancy to use Zoom or lack of access to

the internet, relevant technology, and basic technological expertise from some potential participants; and a fear of ‘not knowing enough’ or ‘not being the right person to take part’ (as reported by one participant in Focus Group 1 in an email outside their focus group *after* data collection had ended). The latter was also reported in a similar study looking at attitudes towards autism in churches in the UK (Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020). A future study may be useful in capturing the voices and experiences of those who could not participate at this time due to the ‘digital divide’, as well seeking the views of adherents of other belief system groups not included at this time.

5 Conclusion

This exploratory study explores the views and experiences of Christians and Muslims who attend churches and mosques in the UK in reference to social inclusion and belonging. The beliefs of participants appear to inform some of their views on social inclusion and belonging, but other identities and roles appear to complicate actions regarding social inclusion and belonging. The next chapter will present the findings from the study undertaken to explore the experiences of social inclusion and belonging of autistic people who currently attend, and have previously attended a church or a mosque.

Chapter 6: Exploring belonging: the experiences of autistic people who attend and have previously attended churches and mosques

1 Introduction

The previous chapter covered Christian and Muslim identity in relation to social inclusion and belonging, in particular how espoused and operant theology differ in relation to social inclusion and belonging, and how normative operant theology can be. In this chapter, the focus will be on the third study, which explored the experiences of autistic people who attend and have previously attended churches and mosques. The chapter will begin with exploring how an autistic identity is not only stigmatised, but counternormative, and how individuals navigate multiple (and sometimes conflicting) identities, including within religious groups. Next, the methods for this study will be briefly recapped before the themes and critical incidents discovered through thematic narrative analysis described. Finally, the themes and critical incidents will be discussed in particular in relation to the idea of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019), a set of idealised and highly normative expectations linked to Christian and Muslim identity. Furthermore, it will be discussed how autistic people may struggle to be the ‘ideal worshipper’, showing another way they can be ‘impossible subjects’ within Christian and Muslim groups.

1.1 Being autistic: A stigmatised master identity

As outlined in Chapters 4 and 5, individuals have multiple identities according to the roles they have (Burke & Stets, 2009) and the social groups of which they are a part (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In addition, individuals have what can be described as a person identity, which has been described by Stets and Burke (2014a, p. 70) as being ‘based on the person as a unique biosocial individual’. The meanings of a person identity are related to how an individual defines themselves (Stets & Burke, 2014a, p. 70) and are relevant across all situations, including the roles they have and the groups of which they are a part (Stets & Burke, 2014a, p. 70). Person identities are furthermore a ‘core part of who one is as a person’ (Stets and Burke, 2014a, p. 71). Stets and Burke (2014a, p. 70) argue that person identities have higher salience due to their impact across multiple identities, and can act as a master identity. An identity becomes a master identity when takes on ‘master status’ (Stets & Burke, 2014b) as it is ‘so frequently activated in situations’ (Stets & Burke, 2014b). Burke (2007) also argues that higher level identities (i.e., a master identity) shape other identities, notably how other identities are played out and how others interpret how it is played out. In this manner, being autistic can be seen not only as a role and social identity (see Chapter 4), but also as a person and master identity. Stets and Burke (2014b) argue that social identities such as class, race, gender or age will also be master identities. In addition, Carter & Mireles (2022, p. 516) argue similarly in regards to a D/deaf identity as a person, role and social identity, and D/deaf identity shaping how other identities may be interacted with.

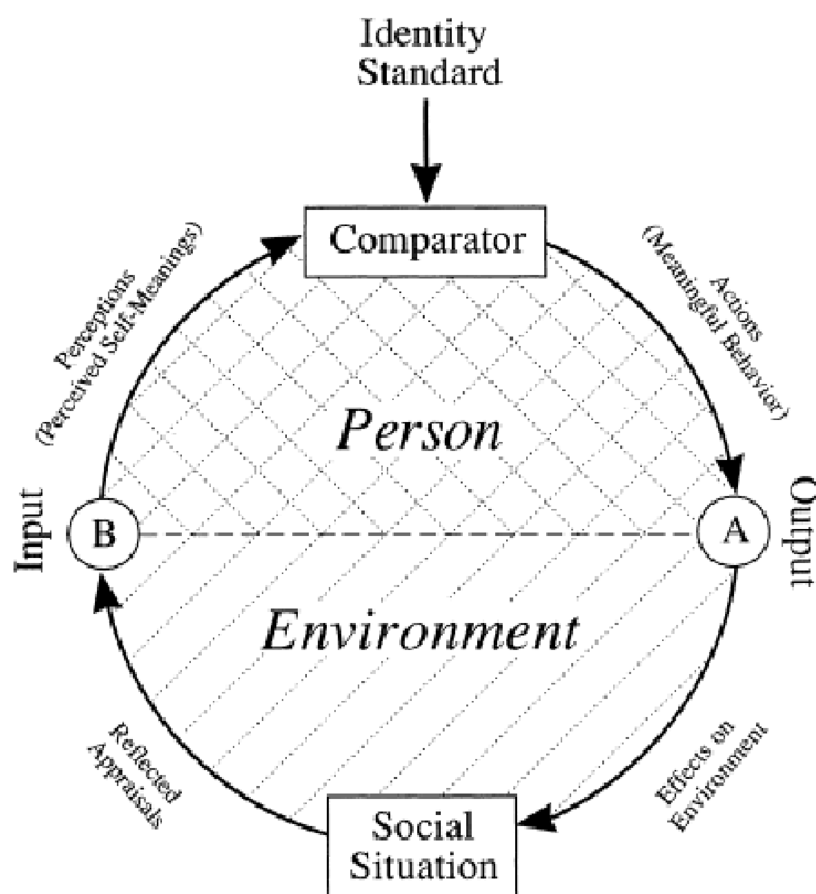
However, unlike many 'master identities', being autistic may not be considered a normative identity, given how it has been argued that an autistic identity is stigmatised (Farahar, 2022; Farrugia, 2009; Turnock et al., 2022). In particular, Pearson and Rose (2021; 2022) use Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory to illustrate how being autistic is stigmatised. Furthermore, stigmatised perceptions can be difficult to shift or change (Link, 2013, as cited in Long, 2022). In this light, an autistic identity can be considered as what Long (2022, p. 540) describes as a counternormative identity, as well as a 'discreditable' identity (Goffman, 1963). A counternormative identity is an identity where expectations and meanings may be negative rather than positive, inappropriate and 'not positively valued within society' (Long, 2022, pp. 543, 547). To date, much of the academic literature focused on identity theory (IT) explores normative identities, such as being a parent or having a particular occupation (Burke & Stets, 2009; Marcussen & Ascencio, 2022, p. 473), or how identities can be verified and how this can improve self-esteem (Stets & Burke, 2014b). Comparatively less attention is seemingly given within the IT literature to identities that are considered 'stigmatised', or by individuals who hide or suppress identities or characteristics through masking, passing or covering.

1.2 Identity control theory

Growing out of IT and symbolic interactionist thought (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Burke, 2004b; Burke, 2007), identity control theory (ICT) has been described as a 'cybernetic control system' by Burke (1991). This system is akin to a feedback loop demonstrating the identity verification process. Identity verification occurs when the meanings within an identity standard match with how they perceive themselves, or others perceive them (Stets & Cast, 2007, p. 524), or bringing meanings into

alignment with their identity standard (Stets & Burke, 2005). Furthermore, identity verification is a means through which social structure can be maintained, notably through the interconnection of roles and group members to each other, and define our position within society and social groups (Burke, 2004b). ICT's control system occurs for each identity held by an individual, including each of the three 'types' of identity introduced in Section 1.1: role, social and person (Burke, 2007; Stets & Cast, 2007). The identity control process is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: A model of identity control theory, and the identity verification process (Burke, 1991)

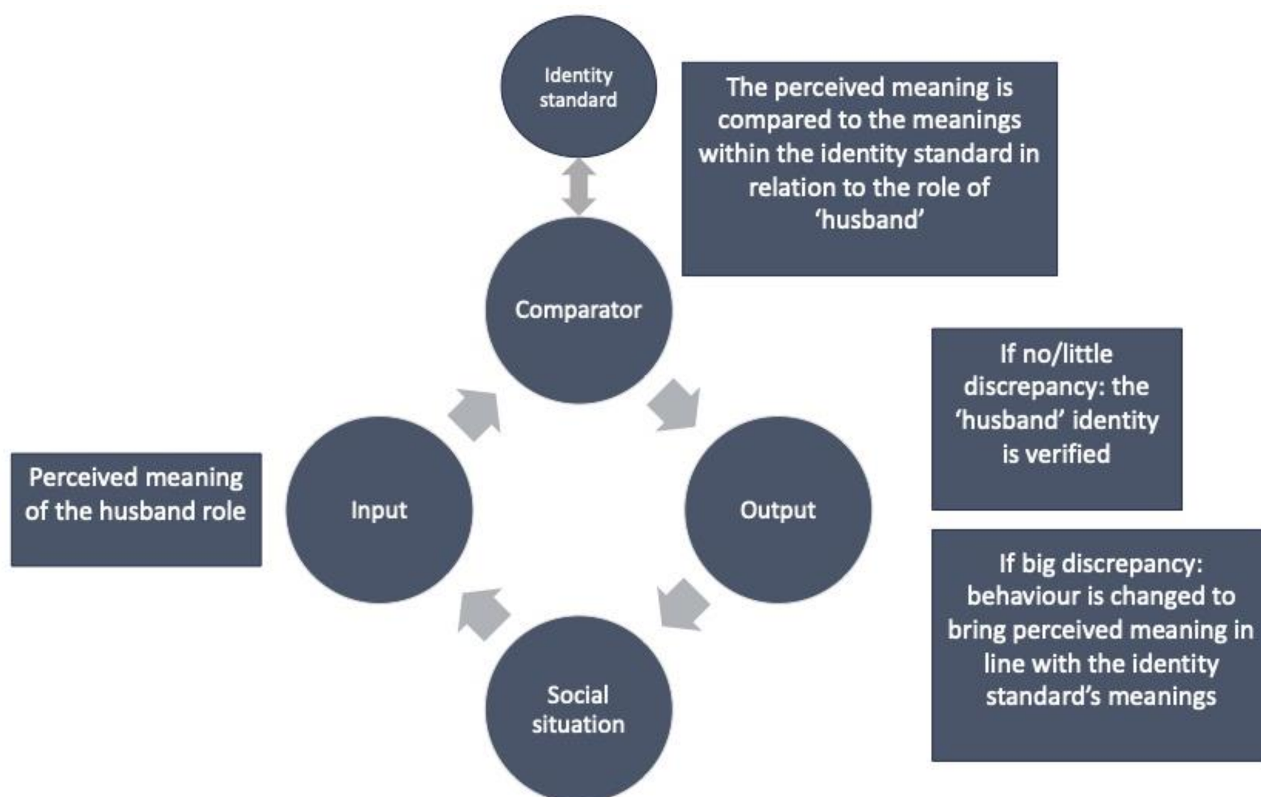


The system is comprised of four parts: an identity standard, a comparator, an input and an output (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 62). The input refers to perceived meaning in

a situation (Stets & Burke, 2005), the identity standard defining the individual's identity (Burke, 2006). The standard contains symbolic meanings of what it means to be that particular identity (Burke, 2006; Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 63), meaning the identity standard acts as a point of reference (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 63). Identity standards are acquired through socialisation into the expectations of positions in social structure (Burke, 2004a; 2004b). The comparator measures the correspondence between the identity standard and the input (Stets & Burke, 2005). The output refers to how an individual behaves after the comparison between the input and the identity standard (Stets & Burke, 2005). When discrepancies occur, for example differences between situational meaning and identity standard, thus creating a discrepancy (Stets & Burke, 2005), meanings are altered to match the identity standard. One example of a discrepancy would be actions not in line with the identity standard meanings (Stets & Burke, 2005).

An example of ICT is given in Figure 6 in relation to a husband identity. As can be seen in Figure 6 below, the input refers to the perceived meaning of the husband identity. The comparator compares these perceived meanings against the identity standard for the husband identity. The output depends on the level of discrepancy between the perceived meanings and identity standard. When there is no or little discrepancy, the identity is verified. When there is a big discrepancy, the individual changes their behaviour in order to bring perceived meaning more in line with the identity standard for the husband identity.

Figure 6: A model of identity control theory, and the identity verification process for the identity of ‘husband’ based on Burke (1991).



As part of identity verification, it has been argued that there are ‘positive emotional consequences’ when identity verification occurs (Stets & Burke, 2005) and that being unable to verify one’s identity can lead to poorer self-evaluation (Stets & Burke, 2005). In addition, Burke and Stets (1999) suggest that decreasing identity verification will make individuals less satisfied with their role and less inclined to remain in the interaction. These statements would also suggest that identity verification would also support feelings of belonging and being socially included when referring to social identities in particular. Group expectations and standards being close to one own’s identity standard could provide identity verification.

Burke and Cast (1997) provide a seminal example of identity verification with their study on role identity (via gender performance) and how this changes over time. Marriage records from 1991-1992 in Washington State, US were used to gain the 338 respondents who were in newly-married couples over a three-year period. The Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) was used to capture ‘meanings of masculinity and femininity’ (Burke & Cast, 1997), as well five items on role and perspective taking, at three time points. Burke and Cast (1997) found that just after the birth of their first child, husbands became more masculine and wives more feminine. Parenthood appeared to accentuate the gender roles each parent had, through positive identity verification.

However, the motivation to confirm identities is an assumption grounded within normative identities, the focus of much IT work to date (Marcussen & Ascencio, 2022, p. 481). Carter & Mireles (2022) focus on a counternormative identity exploring the relationship between being D/deaf, social integration into the Deaf community and depressive symptoms. 223 participants with demographics similar to the Deaf population were recruited from DeafConnect,.com, an English language directory of emails for 10,000 deaf people. The PHQ-9 Patient Depression questionnaire (Martin, Rief, Klaiberg and Braehler, 2006) was used alongside a battery of other non-verified measures, including a question on how important is it to you to think of yourself as a Deaf person and responses to a vignette to investigate identity verification. The more depressive symptoms participants experienced, the more difficulty participants experienced being themselves in social situations and verifying meanings they emit (Carter & Mireles, 2022). In essence, being a Deaf person and attending events for the Deaf community, and being in a space closer to your identity standard results in

identity verification in a positive feedback loop previously only considered with normative identities.

1.3 Multiple and conflicting identities

As argued in Chapters 4 and 5, we all have multiple identities, each correlating to a ‘self’ (James, 1890). Some of these identities (including counternormative identities) will be more salient than others, that is that the identity will be activated more frequently, including across situations (Stets & Burke, 2014a). Although some identities are activated more frequently than others, indicating a successive hierarchy, it has been acknowledged that identities do not sit in ‘rank order’ (Stets & Burke, 2014a). Instead, each identity has their own control system (see Section 1.2 above), and identities can sit at the same level, or different levels (e.g., one higher, one lower). (Stets & Burke, 2014a). Furthermore, several identities can also be active at once, including person, social and role, for example an autistic parent to an autistic child within an autistic-led social group setting will have both their ‘parent’ (role) and autistic (social and person) identities activated (Stets & Burke, 2014a). Many meanings, therefore identities, can be elicited from one stimulus (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Each identity an individual holds is strengthened through identity verification (Stets & Burke, 2005; Burke & Stets, 2015, p. 145). Burke and Stets (2015, p. 145) describe identity verification as occurring when individuals ‘perceive self-relevant meanings in the situation that match who they are in that situation (i.e., their identity)’. Identity verification has been argued to ‘feel good’ (Burke & Stets, 2015, p. 145). When role

identities are verified, individuals experience an increase in self-efficacy (Stets and Burke, 2014a), with self-efficacy referring to ones’ belief and/or capacity to complete a task (Bandura, 1977). When social identities are verified, an increase in self-worth is experienced and when person identities are verified, self-authenticity increases (Stets and Burke, 2014a).

However, identities may hold meanings which are antithetical to each other (Burke, 2004b). Conflict can arise, especially with identities that are activated simultaneously (Burke, 2004b), as verification of conflicting identities with conflicting identity standards is difficult (Burke & Stets, 2015, p. 162). Burke (2004b, p. 10) gives one example of conflicting identities in the form of a male minister/priest: ‘if being masculine involves higher levels of dominance and if being a minister involves lower levels of dominance, then a male minister may experience conflict when one identity is dominant and the other is trying to be less so’. It is clear in this example that both identities cannot be verified with their usual identity standards. In order to remove the conflict, as Burke (2004b) argues, the identity standards for each identity will move to a compromise position. In this case, both identities can be verified at the same time.

1.4 Intersectional identities within religious spaces

Religious identity has been argued to be a normative identity (Long, 2022, p. 539). Given how modern understandings and conceptualization of religion and religious spaces have historically been intertwined with ways of living (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 211), this is unsurprising. In addition, as argued in Chapter 5, religious groups can

be considered to be ‘cults of normalcy’ (Reynolds, 2012b), with strong normativity in regards to expectations and standards (Dunlop, 2021).

This strong normativity and pull towards meeting expectations and standards influenced by normalcy shapes how intersectional identities (both normative and counternormative) are perceived and understood within religious spaces. Notably, this includes prejudice against individuals who do not meet expectations or standards of a religion’s standards or expectations (Duck & Hunsberger, 1999). In this light, prejudice may be permitted as standards and expectations are perceived as violated. Counternormative identities can therefore often be seen as in conflict with a religious identity (Christianity: Harris et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000; Islam: Golriz, 2020; Siraj, 2012).

One particular example of an identity that is perceived as not meeting expectations of standards in many religions, including Christianity and Islam, is being LGBTQIA+ (Fone, 2000). In this case, heteronormative performances of sexuality and gender are enshrined as normative identities, with other identities (i.e., LGBTQIA+) being perceived as counternormative. Whiteley (2009) undertook a meta-analysis exploring religiosity and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men within a US and Canadian context. More negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians were associated with higher levels of religiosity such as fundamentalism, self-rated religiosity and regular attendance at a religious service. Similar findings were reported by Lefevor and colleagues (2021), who used a stratified random sample of 338 participants across 200 congregations in the US. In regards to Muslim contexts, similar prejudicial attitudes can be found, with Ali’s (2022) quantitative study of American Muslims’

attitudes toward homosexuality. Ali (2022) used logistic regression with data from the Pew Survey of US Muslims (n=712). Echoing findings from the studies previously mentioned regarding Christianity, more religious individuals tended to express prejudice towards homosexuality.

However, in spite of potentially conflicting identities and prejudicial attitudes, some LGBTQIA+ Christians and Muslims have been reported to attend spaces which are LGBTQIA+ affirming. One notable example was Rodriguez and Oulette’s (2000) study exploring identity integration of being LGBT and Christian in the Metropolitan Community Church of New York (MCC/NY). The MCC/NY is a LGBTQIA+ affirming church, originally known as ‘the Gay Church’, now known as ‘the Queer Church’ (Metropolitan Community Churches, n.d.). 72% (n=29) of their participants reported being fully integrated into the MCC/NY, with those participants holding both positive gay/lesbian and Christian identities. Furthermore, Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) argued that integrated identities can occur, as outlined by Deaux (1991). Deaux (1991) argues that an integrated identity occurs when identities change over time leading to a new identity, circumventing identity conflict. Similar findings on LGBTQIA+ people forming integrated identities in a Christian context occurs in Walton (2006) and McQueeney (2009), and in Golomski (2020) and Kugle (2014) in a Muslim context.

LGBTQIA+ Muslims have been reported to be ‘largely invisible’ (El-Tayeb, 2012) and are rarely heard (Kugle, 2014). Despite this invisibility, the studies that do exist suggest similar findings. Khoir (2020) undertook semi-structured interviews with seven gay and bisexual men aged 20-27, who were Muslim or ex-Muslim which were

analysed using thematic analysis. Themes discovered included rejection, concerns and feelings of isolation and loneliness – all demonstrating the impact of holding a counternormative identity. However, strategies were also used to circumnavigate these issues, notably positive reinterpretation (of scripture and beliefs), seeking social support and concealing their stigmatised identity.

The experiences of LGBTQIA+ Christians and Muslims and identity negotiation highlight the importance of identity negotiation and control in how churches and mosques are experienced. The corresponding lack of inquiry into autistic people, another stigmatised and counternormative identity, within religious spaces, merits further exploration. Currently autistic people’s experiences in religious spaces remain highly understudied, especially using a social scientific approach (Waldock & Sango, 2023). Furthermore, Chapter 5 indicated that autistic people may be perceived as not meeting the norms and expectations of religious groups in Christianity and Islam. Therefore, in this light, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of autistic Christians and Muslims, and those who have attended churches and mosques in the past regarding social inclusion and belonging?
2. What differences exist between the experiences of those who attend and currently do not, if any?
3. How do belief system identities and being autistic interact in regards to social inclusion and belonging?

2 Methods

As explained in Chapter 3, this study was designed as a qualitative exploratory study. This chapter builds on findings from Chapters 4 and 5, where social and role identities, and meeting expectations were central to participants’ feelings of social inclusion and belonging. This study used a narrative approach to data collection and analysis rather than a purely thematic approach. The rationale for this was the intertwined role of identity and narratives, and how this is relevant to a symbolic interactionist approach. In relation to the intertwining of identity and narrative, Valeras (2010) argues ‘narrative is appropriate for understanding identity, since the very act of creating, telling, revising, and retelling our story enables us to discover, know and reveal ourselves.’

In this manner, narrative research allows for how identities (including social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and role identities (Burke & Stets, 2009)) are navigated, negotiated and reinterpreted through a narrative through time to be explored. Polkinghorne (1991) further argues how our identities and narratives are entangled, with personal and narrative identity (‘a person's internalized and evolving life story’; McAdams and McLean, 2013) as distinct yet intertwined. Furthermore, narratives are not privately created, rather they are created through social interaction (Smith & Sparkes, 2008 in Esin, 2011, p. 94) and interpreted (Blumer, 1965; Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980). These assertions echo narratives as being ‘not factual reports of events’ (Riessman, 2007, p. 187) and how individuals remember events (Bochner, 2017) relies on interpretation and reinterpretation (Blumer, 1965). Collecting

narratives also allow for the dynamic nature of identities to be reflected (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 8), which echoes findings from Chapters 4 and 5.

2.1 Participants

Participants were purposively recruited, as per Blumer’s (1965, p. 40) identification of the appropriateness of this sampling frame within a symbolic interactionist study (echoing the rationale in Chapters 4 and 5). Potential participants were approached through two main routes: firstly, emails to Christian and Muslim charities and organisations that interact with autistic people who attend and used to attend churches and mosques (i.e., Inclusive Church, Hidayah LGBTQI+); secondly through a social media advertisement shared on Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, and Facebook. One participant found out about the study through another participant. Eight participants (4 with current and previous experience attending churches, 4 with current and previous experience attending mosques), agreed to participate and whose data is included in this chapter.

Although a spread of non-attending and attending were requested through recruitment attempts, upon interviewing participants, it appeared that the lines between attendee and non-attendee are more blurred than originally conceptualised during the study design. Some participants described themselves as attending and non-attending at the same time (e.g., I do not attend anymore, but I join for Christmas or Eid celebrations). Therefore, the attendance at the time of interview was taken as their ‘attendance status’. No potential participants who met all other inclusion criteria were excluded in this light. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym which will be reported alongside their quotes.

A breakdown of the demographics of each participant is below in Table 15.

Table 15: Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age group	Gender	Religious group	Current attendance
Colin	45-60	Male	Christian	No
Qisma	25-34	Female	Muslim	No
Joan	45-60	Female	Christian	Yes
Aliyya	18-25	Female	Muslim	Yes
Yumus	18-25	Male	Muslim	No
Roger	18-25	Male	Christian	No
Alex	18-25	Non-binary	Christian	Yes
Thomas	25-34	Male	Muslim	Yes

2.2 Procedure

All interviews were run between December 2022 and March 2023 through the online conferencing system MSTeams due to both the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and also to broaden participation outside the South East of England, given the small target population. Each participant took part in 2 interviews: the first interview was designed as a narrative interview with one simple prompt of ‘Please tell me your experiences in (belief system) as an autistic (name of identifier – e.g., ‘Christian’) for participants to tell their story from. The second interview was designed as an unstructured interview where both the researcher and the participant could meet once more to clarify parts of the narrative. All interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. In-between both interviews, participants were invited to share with the main researcher a response to ‘what does being autistic mean to you?’. This was

designed so the stories and language used within the story could reflect the views of what being autistic meant to them. Given not all participants will have the same background or identities (see Stets & Burke, 2009 regarding multiple identities and Crenshaw, 1989 regarding intersectional identities), the categories and classifications that participants may use and understand may not be the same (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 13). It was also important as a means of not assuming all participants had the same worldview and understanding in regards to being autistic.

Member checking occurred during the interviews and afterwards through sending the transcripts back to participants. A key part of a symbolic interactionist approach to data collection (Tuckett, 2005), member checking is important as social actors may interpret objects differently (Blumer, 1965, p. 11; Tuckett, 2005). Member checking is particularly important in the case of this study, as the variety of identities and positionalities participants have may lead to different understandings and interpretations of what Blumer (1965) calls ‘objects’, or things within the social world (e.g., others’ behaviour, language used).

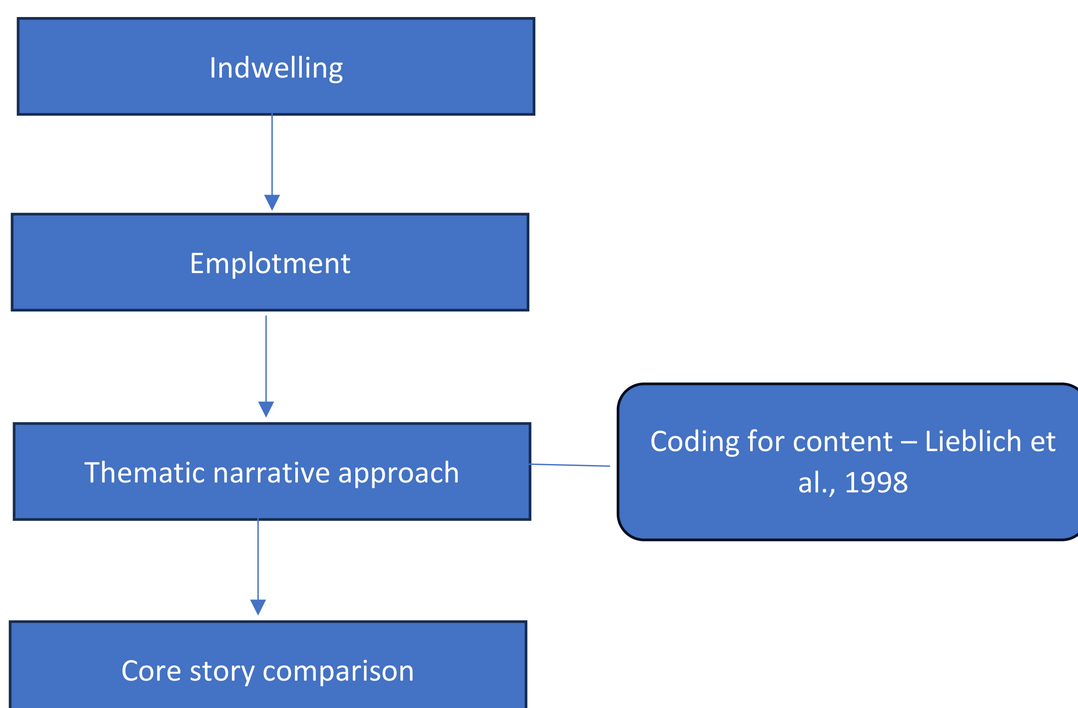
2.3 Analysis

Thematic narrative analysis was used to analyse the data from this study. Thematic narrative analysis has been described as the most common approach to narrative analysis (Esin, 2011), where narrative research has been described as a cluster of methods commonly focusing texts with a story (Esin, 2011, p. 97). Within thematic narrative analysis the form of the story is less of interest (Riessman, 2007), with the content of the story being the focus (Esin, 2011) and the story as a unit of analysis

(Esin, 2011, p. 92). A thematic narrative analytic approach echoes Polkinghorne’s (1995) analysis of narratives.

After data collection, the data was transcribed verbatim. Figure a gives an overview of the analysis process post transcription.

Figure 7: A flowchart of the process used in the analysis.



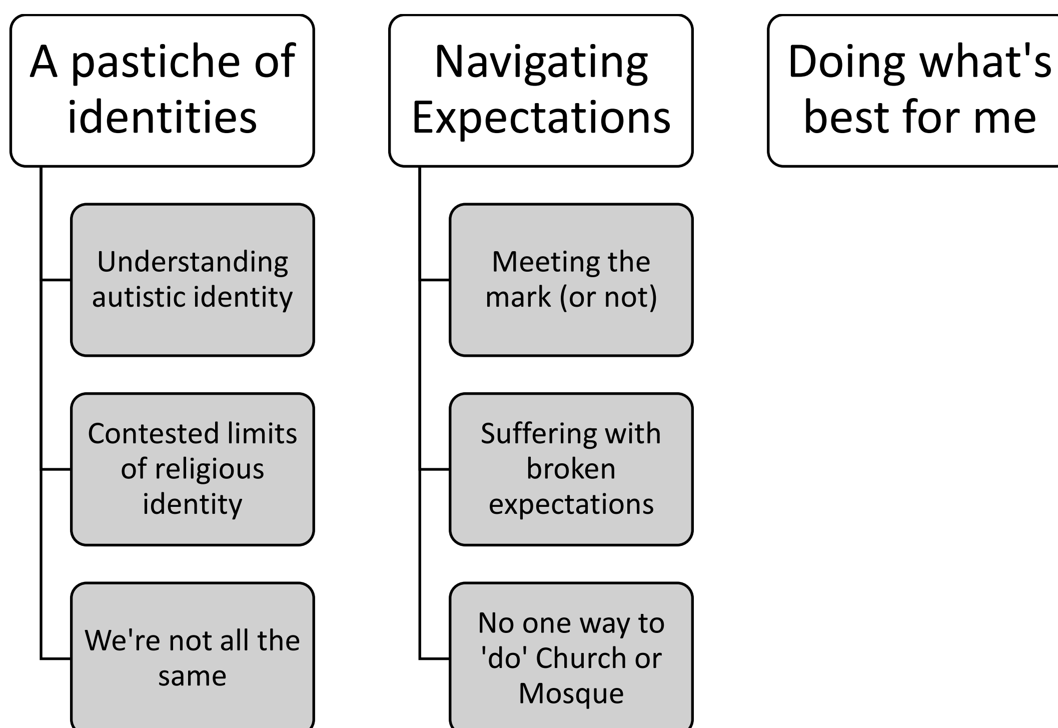
Each transcript was read multiple times to enable familiarisation, in a process that Smith (2016) describes as ‘indwelling’. Indwelling allows not only familiarisation with the interview, but also to be able to orient myself to the position of the storyteller. Next, the interview is turned into a narrative through a process called emplotment: using words from the participant, the plot of the narrative is identified and as part of this process, the narrative is ordered into chronological order. Turning points in the narrative (otherwise known as ‘critical incidents’) are identified. Coding for content

then begins, following Lieblich et al.’s (1998) categorisation and content approach to coding, where the ‘what’ of what is being said is coded inductively within the narrative. Coding for content allows for similarities and differences between the narratives (see Research Question 2), which can be done when the coding of all narratives has been undertaken. Themes were then created from the codes, which allowed for what Valeras (2010) described as ‘universal features’ of the participants’ narratives to be shown across the narratives. These ‘universal features’ echo Polkinghorne’s (1995) paradigmatic categories. The final stage was mapping how each narrative and critical incident linked to each theme, again looking for similarities and differences across the narratives. The themes discovered from the narratives are presented along with the critical incidents. This is in line with other studies that have used TNA (e.g., Ray et al., 2023; Ronkainen et al., 2016; Valeras, 2010).

3 Findings

Following the inductive analytic process, three themes were generated from the data: ‘a pastiche of identities, ‘navigating expectations and ‘doing what’s best for me’. Figure 8 below shows the themes and their respective subthemes.

Figure 8: Themes and subthemes



3.1 Theme 1: A pastiche of identities

The theme 'a pastiche of identities' explores the varied and multiple identities participants had, and how these were different for each participant. The variety of identities, and meanings the identities held, are reflective of James' (1890) theory of multiple selves. The two identities that were most frequently elicited during the narratives were participants' autistic identity and participants' identity in relation to religion. Autistic identity was described in a cohesive manner across participants, using an approach in line with the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2021) (subtheme: understanding autistic identity). However, in contrast, identity in relation to religion included a more diverse group of identities with limits and boundaries appearing less unified, echoing notions of religious identities being dynamic and

having disputed boundaries (Werbner, 2010, pp. 234, 236). Other identities participants had (e.g., gender, ethnic background, other disabilities and neurodivergences) were also discussed as a means of exploring the complexity of finding someone exactly like themselves, due to the variety of identities and corresponding identity standards (subtheme: we’re not all the same) (Stets & Burke, 2005).

3.1.1 Subtheme: Understanding autistic identity

The subtheme ‘understanding autistic identity’ examines how participants made sense of being autistic. Participants described being autistic in comparison to non-autistic people, and using language that could be associated with describing a person identity (e.g., ‘I pay a lot of attention to detail’ (Aliyya); ‘I am very sensitive to sound’ (Roger)). These descriptions support being autistic as a person identity, in a similar manner that Carter and Mireles (2022) argue that being D/deaf is a person identity. Furthermore, participants viewed being autistic as difference, rather than a disorder or problem to be solved, echoing the neurodiversity paradigm. The neurodiversity paradigm exemplifies autistic people and other neurodivergent people, such as people with ADHD, as having intrinsic value and being a valuable part of human diversity (Walker, 2021, p. 36), with no one correct style of neurocognitive functioning (Walker, 2021, p. 36). This was echoed by Aliyya, Qisma and Yumus:

> ‘I see the world differently’ (Qisma)

> ‘we just have different ways of communicating and our brains work differently’ (Yumus)

> ‘my learning was different to everyone else’ (Aliyya)

In addition, participants spoke about how being autistic marked them out as different or ‘other’ (Said, 1978), and how others in the churches and mosques they either currently attend or previously attended noticed their ‘otherness’ or stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963). Otherness was noticed by participants through reporting that they did not have many friends within their churches or mosques, or ‘not having a crew’ as Thomas described. Furthermore, being different led participants to feel like they did not get others and equally others did not get them, echoing the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a). Roger exemplified how his ‘difference’ was known with other members of his church, and how this impacted how he was treated:

> ‘I basically knew that I was different, like all the way through church. Like I knew I was a – I knew it wasn't the same as everyone else. And I knew I wasn't the best at talking to people, and I think everyone knew that’. (Roger)

Roger’s experience demonstrates not only that he knew he was different, but others around him in his church did too, even if no words had been shared between him and other congregants about his ‘difference’. Sometimes when discussing how they were different or ‘other’, participants spoke about people they perceived not to be autistic (often described as ‘neurotypicals’). Neurotypicals were seen as the epitome

of neuronormative standards and expectations, without a difference that ‘others’ them. Roger shared particularly pertinent information on how neurotypicals may perceive autistic people, and how he feels that is incorrect:

> ‘Neurotypical people seem to think that autistic people, uh, are inherently worse at communicating are worse at talking to people. But I think it's not. I think it's not that we're not. We're worse at talking to people. It's that, uh, neurotypicals communicate in a way that doesn't work with us. Like we communicate in a different way to neurotypicals. So it's harder for us to talk to them, but, when it comes to autistic people, I think we understand each other better’ (Roger)

Roger offers a rebuttal to the idea that being autistic is inherently something bad, describing strengths and challenges of being autistic in a neuronormative environment.

3.1.2 Subtheme: Contested limits of religious identity

The subtheme ‘contested limits of religious identity’ explores the diverse religious and former religious identities that participants had. The identities that participants shared included: having a religious identity in relation to the group they gather with (e.g., I am Christian, I am Muslim); having a religious identity that centres their own personal beliefs (e.g., I am more spiritual than religious, I am an atheist, I am a sort of Christian); and having a former identity centred on a past affiliation (e.g., I used to attend Arabic school, I used to attend a Pentecostal church). Some participants organised their lives around their religion, therefore showing a higher salience on

their religious identity. Thomas was one such example, who when offered the chance to relocate for work, made his decision according the mosque he would like to attend:

> ‘I mean the masjid that I go to this in [name of road]. This is precisely why I moved to [town], because I was working in [city]. I went for a job with [company] and I was offered a choice of two locations, either [town] or [another town]. Well, what is there in [another town]? So [town] all the way and I deliberately chose to live very close to this masjid.’ (Thomas)

Thomas also was very precise in the language he used throughout his interview, particularly using the Arabic ‘masjid’ to refer to mosque, further emphasising how central his Muslim identity was to him. However, not all participants reported having a strong religious identity. Colin attended his local cathedral with his wife, however only went when she sat in the service with him:

> ‘I'd go down on occasion and if they had any big events or their Christmas party or their summer fair or the fireworks, then I'd be actively involved in providing manpower to help out on that. But as far as regularly attending on my own was concerned, that did start to fall by the wayside.’ (Colin)

Colin did not report being non-religious, however it is clear that the religious identity he has was not activated as often as Thomas’, who perhaps considered being Muslim as part of his master identity. Differences in religious identity was discussed

by Alex in their interview, after having spoken about how baptism was a means of identifying as Christian:

> ‘once you have your diagnosis as autistic, it's also kind of like, scientifically provable, right? Whereas when you're umm… Even once you've been baptized, people still judge your like Christianity […] some places are like, incredibly affirming and trying to create a very supportive environment. And then you go to a [denomination] a county over and suddenly it's like very conservative. And so you can't really uh … trust what [denomination] Church is going to be like there isn’t a standard.’ (Alex)

It appears that even though within Christianity there is no one set of expectations or standards associated with being Christian, individuals may judge others against their own identity standard (Stets & Burke, 2005). The diversity of expectations and standards within Christianity are emblematic of religious identities as dynamic with no universally agreed boundaries (Werbner, 2010, p. 236).

Some participants spoke about their beliefs and/or their church or mosque being helpful in easing some of the challenges associated with being autistic in a non-autistic world, as exemplified by Aliyya who spoke about what she had learnt in her Arabic classes recently:

> ‘there's a lot like a lot of stuff about like having patience and just knowing that that God doesn't give you something you can't bear. So I don't know if that – it could

> be part of the answer, but I think that also really helped me to just... like I kind of like help me to accept who I was so. And they made me feel like….(long pause) But God gave me this condition, maybe for a reason and it, you know, there's goods and bads and if God gave everyone different sort of hardships and eases and that sort of helps me feel them content with who I am and I'm all for the difficult parts.’ (Aliyya)

Aliyya’s framing of the challenges she faces reflects identity control theory (Burke, 2007), where she seeks to bring the environment that she is in (the input) into line with her identity standard.

3.1.3 Subtheme: We’re not all the same

The subtheme ‘we’re not all the same’ explores the other identities, outside of being autistic and being religious or non-religious, that impacted participants’ lives and therefore their sense of social inclusion and belonging. Participants reported having other identities outside of being autistic and associated with religion or non-religion, reflecting the many identities that people have (James, 1890). Heterogeneity amongst the autistic participants and the individuals mentioned in their narratives was noted. Being autistic alone was not considered enough of a match in terms of identity standards. Thomas explained one particular example where he had an arranged meeting with another autistic woman through a marriage service he has been interacting with:

> ‘Actually I did meet someone who has a historical diagnosis of Aspergers. And I felt really bad when I met her. I mean, we met for marriage. You know,

> when we were interacting, I felt really bad because I thought, yeah, there ain't no doubt. She was definitely interested. And she had a really weird way of eating. She's really noisy. What she ate. And I could tell that. She was to a certain extent, in her own little world. And. I just, I mean, I couldn't marry her because I just didn't find her attractive.’ (Thomas)

However, some participants did speak about the need to know and meet others like them, therefore whose identity standard is likely to be closer to theirs. Individuals who were autistic and from a similar religious and ethnic background were perceived as having more in common, with intersectional and compounding experiences better understood (Crenshaw, 1989). Yumus explained how a friend of his just ‘got’ him who had a similar background was also a Muslim:

> ‘About a year ago I reached out to someone on [social media]. [….] she’s also Muslim and she writes about she does articles about disability and this and stuff and. Yeah. Because, you know, we talk a lot about that aspect. You know, should you know, she'll highlight that and you know, just probably just sort of things. But, you know, the religion is always kind of heavier.’ (Yumus)

It appears that through meeting someone with both similar experiences and background, and therefore some identity standards closer to his, Yumus felt a sense of belonging with his friend he had not had at his mosque. Other identities that face marginalisation within a church or mosque context also had parallels drawn between

them. Alex spoke about how they see more parallels with their experience as an autistic, non-binary, gay person with women in church than men:

> ‘I don't think that my experience is as someone who was kind of raised male, like necessarily aligns with those of most men, especially in Christian settings, umm, whereas for women in Christian settings, I find there is a lot more similar. Um, because even in the best churches like women get excluded and they get reduced to a kind of social role where umm, maybe those same roles don't exist for queer or autistic people in church as at this point, but we they understand what it's like to go through some of that’. (Alex)

Through comparing their experience and the experience of women in churches, Alex places both identities into similar social role of not the ‘ideal group member’.

3.2 Theme 2: Navigating expectations

The theme ‘navigating expectations’ explores how participants navigate the expectations and standards of the churches and mosques they currently attend or used to attend, and how they did or did not meet the expectations and standards of those spaces. All participants discussed that their churches or mosques had expectations and standards. However, it appeared much of the time that participants did not meet the expectations and standards of the churches or mosques they attended (subtheme: meeting the mark (or not)), echoing the autistic participants in Chapter 4 and perspectives toward the vignette in Chapter 5. Not meeting the expectations and standards of the churches and mosques they attended, as well as

others not meeting their expectations and standards, resulted in feelings of exclusion, microaggressions and trauma (subtheme: suffering with broken expectations). Churches and mosques being idiosyncratic in their standards and expectations, as echoed in Chapter 5, means that some churches or mosques are more welcoming than others. However, the standards and expectations of the churches and mosques participants attended were often embroiled in notions of normalcy and neuronormativity (subtheme: no one way to ‘do’ church or mosque).

3.2.1 Subtheme: Meeting the mark (or not)

The subtheme ‘meeting the mark (or not)’ encapsulates the difficulties the participants had in being able to meet the standards and expectations of their church or mosque, or their religion more broadly. Despite there being no one Christian or Muslim identity standard (see Section 3.1.2), practices within the church or mosque were often felt to be exclusionary, with participants unable to fulfil requirements or manage being in spaces not set up for autistic people. Aliyya spoke about the difficulties she experienced at Arabic classes in her childhood mosque:

> ‘it was like a lot of people in one class and for me and we have to store all. And it's kind of in the small room, there was lots of tables and chairs, so that was a bit hard for me and a lot of the time, I couldn’t listen or concentrate, and the teacher would get really disappointed. They'd keep asking my mum to be strong with me. And I never used to do my homework ‘cause I'd forget stuff’ (Aliyya)

In this case, Aliyya was unable to meet the behavioural expectations required for her Muslim identity. Rather, her autistic identity was salient and the difficulties she experienced due to the busy environment were salient. Using identity control theory, the teacher being disappointed emphasises the impact of the mismatch between an input and identity standard (Burke, 2007). Not feeling ‘good enough’ occurred frequently throughout the narratives, with the long-term impact of not feeling good enough illustrated by Joan describing when she attended a previous church:

> ‘And I never all that that period of time. I never felt good enough as a Christian because I could never be who they wanted me to be’ (Joan)

Joan further exemplifies how she could never be who ‘they wanted me to be’, demonstrating however hard she tried, she could not be the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). The idea of an ideal worshipper further highlights how a religious identity can operate as a role identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7), with behavioural expectations to meet (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7), as explained in Chapter 5. Not meeting those behavioural expectations in relation to a Christian or Muslim identity may lead to that identity not being verified (Stets & Burke, 2014a), and other perceived competing identities (e.g., being autistic) as noticed. What ‘ideal worshippers’ should be, and therefore the identity standard for an ideal worshipper, does appear in some way to be informed by normalcy and neuronormative standards, echoing Chapter 5. Yumus described this as a ‘neurotypical standard’ when describing constantly being compared to his non-autistic brother as a child at the mosque:

> ‘It did feel like I was always being compared to him, and I was always expected to be like, and there was always. Let's see. I think maybe, maybe, perhaps unconsciously or consciously, or was always comparing myself to. There was a neurotypical standard.’ (Yumus)

Yumus describes not only other attendees at the mosque comparing him to his brother, but also Yumus himself comparing himself to his brother. Through considering his brother to be the ‘neurotypical standard’, he is reflecting on the gap between his own identity standards as an autistic person and a Muslim, and comparing them to those of the ‘ideal worshipper’. The discrepancy between the two identity standards, and feeling as ‘othered’ (Said, 1978) by not meeting the non-stigmatised identity standard, can result in performing the desired identity at cost to the self (Goffman, 1959). Roger shared how he ‘performed’ as a Christian in his church, despite being an atheist who struggled with the social environment of the church:

> ‘I can't actually, remember, genuinely believing in any of it, uh, I feel like my entire religious identity was a mask.’ (Roger)

Roger performed the social roles of both a Pentecostal Christian and the ‘ideal worshipper’ through his religious identity ‘mask’. The performance projected socially valued roles, therefore avoiding detection of stigma, notably his autistic identity.

3.2.2 Subtheme: Suffering with broken expectations

The subtheme ‘suffering with broken expectations’ explores the impact on participants of both them not matching the ideal standards and expectations, including the idea of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) set by their church or mosque, but also when other attendees do not meet their expectations. The impact of these ‘broken expectations’ is varied, from disgruntlement and offense from being excluded, through to microaggressions and lasting trauma. There was a variety of responses across the participants. One example comes from Thomas, who explained one event which led him to ‘broken expectations’ when he was making up prayers he had missed after his Arabic class:

> ‘I was praying and I was catching up with my prayer. This was on one Saturday night, so I attended for the last units of prayer and then I had to make up three that I've missed. So I was doing that. [...] He was less than four feet away from me and he was telling some other guys and said, yeah, they're [name] said that we might go to such and such. Like, maybe get tea and I said. I can't remember if in the same light or soon after, and I spoke to him and I said look, well, I accept that everybody makes their own independent social arrangements. I'm cool with that, but don't do it right under my nose and certainly don't do it when I'm in the middle of making up my prayer. And you are. And I'm within earshot’ (Thomas)

Thomas clearly describes with transgressed behavioural expectations of the Muslim identity role (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7) through his experience of his prayers being

interrupted. It is also possible that Thomas and the other men who interrupted him had different understandings what interrupting prayer looks like.

For those who appeared to ‘transgress’ the behavioural expectations of being in the role of ‘good Christian’ or ‘good Muslim’, other in-group members of their church or mosque may reinforce their ‘othered’ status. The strong in-group dynamic suggested in Chapter 5, echoing Allport and Ross’s (1967) findings on prejudice in churches in the US, appears to also be present in the narratives of some participants. Yumus described the bullying he experienced at the Arabic school he went to at his childhood mosque, and how it escalated over time:

> ‘Especially towards the end it was. It was like every little thing I'd say or do would constantly brought up back again or picked up’ (Yumus)

The constant reminder for Yumus that he had transgressed behavioural expectations and was not the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) indicates individuals from the group trying to bring him in line with the group standard (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Sometimes ‘broken expectations’ lead to long term difficulties with churches or mosques, and the standards and expectations that might be held. Notably within some churches and church cultures, language can be used distinctly to highlight kinship (e.g., *NIV*, 1973, Matthew 18:15; 1 John 3:1; Galatians 5:13). When compared to the idea of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019), and

not meeting these behavioural expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7), this language can cause pain for some, as Joan describes:

> Joan: I do find a lot of Christians quite difficult. If I’m honest. But then there are some absolute gems, absolute gems out there.
>
> Krysia: In what way do you find a lot of Christians difficult?
>
> Joan: Um. I can't bear spiritual language. It does my head in. I find it really. Of – I know this is a trauma, I know this is a trauma response from experience I had with members of the – my family, but I just find the whole... I will be praying for in all the rest of it, but I cannot bear this kind of. Oh well, you know, sister or. Yeah, that whole. Yeah, exactly. I can't even put into words, but that whole evangelical patronising speak. It's kind of like, ‘ohh, where we're really blessed’. It's like straight out of fucking Gilead, right. And I hate it with a passion.

Joan’s difficulty with ‘most Christians’ illustrates the impact of social inclusion and belonging on autistic Christians and Muslims who do not quite meet the standards or expectations of the groups they have attended.

3.2.3 Subtheme: No one way to ‘do’ church or mosque

The subtheme ‘no one way to ‘do’ church or mosque’ explores how the idiosyncratic nature of churches and mosques shaped the experiences of participants. As discussed in Chapter 5, participants reported a variety of practices, beliefs and

expectations amongst both churches and mosques, echoing Hinnells’ (2005) assertion that there is no one definition of religion. In this light, it is logical that each church or mosque has their own group standard (Burke & Stets, 2009) and culture (Geertz, 1993). Therefore, churches and mosques may have slightly different behavioural expectations of the ‘Christian’ or ‘Muslim’ role identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7) and what behaviour is acceptable within the broad theology at play and rituals carried out within the church or mosque. This plurality would also indicate there is no one set identity standard (Stets & Burke, 2005) within any religion. Qisma illustrates this with her views on how each mosque is different:

> ‘I think… It's really weird because every mosque has its own culture, if that makes sense’ (Qisma)

Some of the participants shared that their church or mosque was a particularly good fit for them, including Joan who said ‘she would not be without her current church’. It appears in this case, that the group standard (Burke & Stets, 2009) of Joan’s current church is close to her own identity standard for her to feel some sense of belonging in that community. Other churches or mosques participants attended were more explicit with sharing their standards and expectations, in particular in regards to who is welcome in their church. Alex shared a flyer their church added to the weekly programme and notices during their first interview which outlines the intended group standard for their current church:

> ‘I have actually I have one of the-the, uh, piece of paper here. So the first line is you are welcome here. You can belong here without exceptional conditions, your whole self-matters to God and to us. The [name of Church] is a community of many races, languages, cultures, faith traditions, nationalities, ages, genders, abilities, financial circumstances, and sexual identities. It's like very, it's not like a registered, inclusive church thing. It's just a thing that they print on the back of every single like, programme every Sunday [shows through the camera]. And it's very affirming’ (Alex)

Although it remains how unclear all individuals within that particular church are affirming of all the circumstances and identities listed on the programme (following the difference in espoused and operant theology (Cameron et al., 2013) found in Chapter 5), Alex found the intention to be affirming of both their autistic and queer identities helpful. On the other hand, some participants had attended churches or mosques that with very different group standards to their individual identity standards, making it difficult for them to meet the expectations of being a Christian or Muslim. Qisma spoke about other mosques she had attended in the past that she had found difficult:

> ‘there is[sic] some masjids that are completely horrible. You'll be pushed, you'll be shoved. It's almost like you have to pick - so I know which mosque will be this way, so I avoid those mosques.’ (Qisma)

Here Qisma recognises the differences between her own identity standard, and the ground standard (Burke & Stets, 2009) of the mosques she describes as 'completely horrible'.

Participants also shared how the expectations and standards both the churches or mosques they attended, and groups of Christians and Muslims, may hold normative expectations and standards. Normative expectations and standards could be said to be expectations and standards that hold tenets of normalcy (Davis, 1995). As discussed in Chapter 4, the participants in this study sometimes struggled with or actively pushed against normative expectations and standards, again described as 'neurotypical' by participants. The power of normative expectations amongst groups of Muslims was shared by Thomas:

> 'I think that's – It's remarkable how what I would call neurotypical culture is so dominant and so self-reinforcing. […] Even more evidence, and perhaps even more reinforced amongst some Muslims, because I think – um certain people. They will just, no matter what you, and it, it absolutely enrages me. But certain people, no matter what you send, no matter what you say, no matter what you write, they will not reply.' (Thomas)

In this case, Thomas' rage at behaviour he identifies as part of 'neurotypical culture' is illustrative of the difference between his identity standard and both the individual identity standards and the group standard of the Muslims he is referring to here.

3.3 Theme 3: Doing what’s best for me

The theme ‘doing what’s right for me’ explores what participants did next after recognising a match or mismatch between their environment (input) and their identity standard. When there was a mismatch, participants sought to bring their environment (e.g., church, mosque) closer to their own identity standard echoing identity control theory (Burke & Stets, 2005). Following identity control theory (Burke, 2007), individuals seek to bring their environment (input) closer to their individual identity standard. One way participants sought to decrease the discrepancy between their environment and their identity standard was finding a church or a mosque that is sufficiently close to their own identity standard. Alex shared they used to attend a church registered with the charity Inclusive Church. Inclusive Church is a network of churches that affirm all individuals, and seek to challenge discrimination against marginalised individuals such as sexuality, gender and/or disability (Inclusive Church, 2024a):

> ‘it just happened that my nearest church from where I was living when I was growing up was [denomination], that was also an ‘Inclusive Church’ for a few years before I went. Umm. And the movement and the certification made me feel a lot more comfortable going, if that makes sense’ (Alex)

Some participants who did attend church or mosque reported staying at their current church or mosque and discovering an acceptance that they are not the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). Joan illustrates this with her sharing how she is comfortable ‘on the periphery’:

> ‘I actually quite like being on the periphery – I really do. It's kind of like that's where I fit now. And. So... Yeah, it's a strange one. It's a strange one. That feeling of feeling like you belong, but also feeling like you don't.’ (Joan)

Joan being comfortable with being ‘on the periphery’ illustrates how her identity standard and the environment perhaps experience less discrepancy on the fringes of a group. In exchange of reducing the discrepancy between her identity standard and the environment comes at the cost of not being more involved with her church, therefore feeling a smaller sense of belonging.

Another way some participants changed their environment to be closer to their identity standard was to attend a group in an alternative environment, sometimes with other individuals who also share an identity standard closer to theirs. Both Aliyya and Qisma spoke about how their families started attending ‘Eid in the Park’, which was more bearable for them both in relation to the volume, crowds and expectations placed on them. Aliyya also was invited by a teacher at her former mosque to attend an Arabic class in her home with a small number of other ladies, which she found more accessible and welcoming than weekly prayers at the mosque:

> ‘Her class is just a small group and I said yes and now we go every other Sunday and it's a really nice experience. This is smaller group of people and it's like an open space’ (Aliyya)

Aliyya mentioned specifically how the teacher had made the group invite-only, which helped foster an environment that remained compatible with Aliyya’s identity standard, relieving her of the pressure to be the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). In a similar manner, Joan attended two well-known disabled-lead online Christian groups when she could not make it into church for health reasons:

> ‘you know, I sometimes go to online groups like YouBelong and um, Uh Disability and Jesus that kind of stuff. I mean [...] I absolutely dip in and out of those as well.’ (Joan)

A final way some participants described making the environment closer to their identity standard was through removing themselves from their church or mosque and stopping attending. This was the case for all participants who reported that they were no longer attending church or mosque. Some participants reported that they had completely stopped attending church or mosque, as Qisma and Roger demonstrate:

> ‘now was old enough. I just kind of stopped going. I didn't have to or nobody could make me’ (Qisma)

> ‘I used to be a Christian, but not anymore. So, I've moved on a lot from that.’ (Roger)

However not all participants reported such a closure with attending their church or mosque. Colin discussed in his first interview how he enjoyed being the cathedral,

but he stopped attending services due to his son being at hockey practice and his wife being in Sunday Club (Sunday School), and he needed her to attend with him:

> ‘So hockey finishes at the end of April and starts up again beginning of September. So you've got a good what's that 5-6 months when there is no hockey on. So there was no expectation of me not of me taking him there. So could I have gone a little bit more frequently? Yes, I could. But again, because [wife] was in the Sunday club and that's where [son] would have gone. It's putting me to go on my own again.’ (Colin)

The support of Colin’s wife is clearly needed to manage the demands of the Sunday service and be the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). Therefore, as she is unable to attend with him, he avoids attending services in his local cathedral, thus avoiding expectations and standards he may or may not be able to meet.

3.4 Critical incidents

Each narrative had between two and four critical incidents. One commonality across all critical incidents is that all critical incidents were centred on the participants’ autistic identity and/or their religious identity. One of the critical incidents in Joan’s narrative was her changing how she viewed herself in light of finding out she is autistic:

> ‘Whereas now, now I know who I am as an autistic person. Now I know who I am as a disabled person, autistic person. I almost stand outside of that whole

> framework because I don't need it. I was diagnosed 11 years ago with autism, and last year with ADHD. That for me is very much a that was the start of my journey. I hate that word. I can't find any words to, you know, other than journey. That was the start of me working out who I was. And that was bound to have an impact on how I viewed my faith, where I fitted in with that faith, where I fitted in with church communities. And whether I wanted to fit with church communities. So for me, I think that was a massive turning point.’ (Joan)

Whereas a similar turning point happened for Alex when they started attending their local church, providing support during a time of difficulty:

> ‘I was previously an atheist. When I started attending church at age 17, I was basically in like my lowest point in my mental health of my life this far. And I was not really going to secondary school properly. I was distressed about a lot of stuff. And I basically felt that going to church, finding a way of kind of, um, experiencing or-or believing in something beyond myself was-was gonna be the thing that could help me.’ (Alex)

The themes which critical incidents most commonly occurred in across participants are theme 3: ‘doing what’s right for me’ (6 incidents, 4 participants) and theme 2.2: ‘suffering broken expectations’ (4 incidents, 3 participants).

The critical incidents in relation to theme 3: ‘doing what’s right for me’ often centred around leaving their church or mosque, as Qisma shared:

> ‘I have like a hip problem, so I can't necessarily stand for long and when people saw this person, they said, why are you behaving like that? Why is she being different? What's wrong with her? And instead of seeing you, as in, you know, maybe she’s autistic or ADHD though. We’ll see her as mentally deranged, so therefore don't go near her. So I think for me I just struggled because I-I just felt um, out of place, I don’t belong here and I don't belong with anybody. When was old enough. I just kind of stopped going when, I didn't have to. Nobody could make me.’ (Qisma)

In relation to theme 2.2 ‘suffering broken expectations’, Thomas realised how his behaviour may not meet the standards of the ideal Muslim in a moment of stress with his mother:

> ‘My mother was who was staying with me here in [town] and historically my mother had the incredible knack of either saying something or asking something that would make me explode with anger. We were walking down the street by [town] station, and she asked me something or said something, and then I just... I exploded with anger and I was wearing a messenger bag at the time. My career bag, messenger bag, and I wrenched it off my shoulder and just slammed it against the nearest wall, which is, I mean, it's reprehensible behaviour for a Muslim towards a parent. So I stormed off down the slope. I was there for a good few minutes, and then I went back to my mother. And she was so shocked. She said I'm going to arrange for you to see someone.’ (Thomas)

In these cases, these critical incidents may be linked to notions of the not meeting the standards of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019), and changing their environment. Changing their environment notably includes reducing the gap between expectations of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) enshrined in the group standard of their church (Burke & Stets, 2009) and their identity standard (Burke, 2005). Therefore, identity negotiation in relation to identity standards and their similarity or difference is clearly central to pivotal parts of participants’ narratives.

However, there was also a spread across the whole sample in regards to the themes the critical incidents occurred in. One example was in Roger’s narrative, when he spoke about feeling out of place at his church’s youth group as a teenager:

> ‘We'd talk about stuff related to the Bible. I think as I got older, I started like when I.... I think I started to – like my mind, I felt like as it was working differently to everyone else's there. I also felt like the way I was thinking about Christianity and the Bible was different to everyone else because I just didn't like the fact that everyone else seemed to be able to make sense of something that you can't prove.’ (Roger)

The variety of themes critical incidents were spread across indicates the plurality of experiences of social inclusion and belonging, and therefore exclusion, and how different people interpret the same experiences differently (Blumer, 1965, p. 11).

4 Discussion

The findings of this narrative inquiry found a variety experiences within churches and mosques. There appears to be no one way autistic people navigate churches and mosques, with some continuing to attend, others finding alternative spaces and others no longer attending any church or mosque related space (Research Question 1). It seemed that there were more similarities than differences across the participants narratives, despite some participants attending a church or mosque frequently and others not at all (Research Question 2). Furthermore, it appears that all participants dealt with not meeting the expected standards for the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). The ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) exemplifies the perfect execution of behavioural standards and expectations in relation to a Christian or Muslim role identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). It is important to note that the ‘ideal worshipper’ is an ideal informing behaviour, which may differ per church or mosque according to their beliefs, rituals and practices. It appears if the ‘ideal worshipper’ is close to the group standard, that someone with an autistic identity standard will need to close the discrepancy between their identity standard and the group standard (Burke, 2005; Burke & Stets, 2009) (Research Question 3).

Identity standards appear to shape both participants’ experiences and how they respond to their environment, in this case their church or mosque. The idea of the ‘ideal worshipper’ appears to be informed and wrapped up in standards and expectations informed by normalcy, therefore informing the group standard (Burke & Stets, 2009). Normalcy, when enacted by ‘normal’ people (e.g., people who can

meet able bodied and neurotypical expectations, or pass as such) ‘rewards’ those who meet this standard, and ‘handicap’ those who do not (Davis, 1995, p. 10). Each church or mosque will have their own ‘cultural understandings of normalcy’ (van Ommen and Endress, 2022), reflective of what is considered normal and meeting the demands of the Christian or Muslim role within the group. Notions of the ‘ideal worshipper’, used by Jacobs (2019) and Spurrier (2019), echo these findings in studies by van Ommen and Endress (2022) and Raffety (2022). Van Ommen and Endress’ (2022) explored autistic people’s experience of worship in churches in the UK, and Rafferty (2022) used ethnographic study with disabled people in churches in the US. In both van Ommen and Endress (2022) and Raffety (2022), the autistic and disabled participants were ‘handicapped’ by being unable to meet the standard of the ‘ideal worshipper’. In this manner, Christian and Muslim identities can be perceived as being ‘achieved identities’, as previously argued by Ammerman (2003) and Peek (2005). An ‘achieved identity’ (Ammerman, 2003) further exemplifies the expectations and roles that one might be required to meet in order to achieve that identity. Through notions of religious identity being a role identity (see Chapter 5), (see also Moulin, 2013), it demonstrates that the standards and expectations associated with a religious identity appear more important than the privatised aspects of a religious identity (e.g., personal beliefs) (Dillon, 2005, p. 221) in relation to social inclusion and belonging.

These findings also reflect how operant theology (as defined in Chapter 5) is strongly normative (Dunlop, 2021), shaping how normative group standards and counternormative identity standards may mismatch. When also considering the prejudice against individuals who do not meet expectations or standards of a

religion’s standards or expectations may face (Allport & Ross, 1967; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999), it is no surprise that individuals will seek to remedy the mismatch.

Being autistic, and therefore having an autistic identity, appeared to be one identity that particularly complicated experiences of social inclusion and belonging. As a counternormative identity (Long, 2022, p. 539) which is considered to be stigmatised (Goffman, 1963), it also provides tension against the normalcy-bound expectations that can occur within a Christian or Muslim role identity. According to Stryker (1980), identities (normative and counternormative) which are frequently salient gain more commitment. As the autistic identity was frequently salient and had a high level of commitment for many participants in this study, it is possible in this case that the autistic identity also disrupted other identities. One parallel finding occurs in relation to identity salience in Muslim young adults post 9/11, Peek (2005) argues that a Muslim identity becomes a master identity when it overpowers other identities. In a similar manner, an autistic identity may ‘overpower’ other identities and disrupt the ability to meet the expectations and standards of a Christian or Muslim role identity informed by normalcy. In this case, an individual may change the environment to meet their identity standard informed by the master identity (e.g., being autistic). Furthermore, participants whose Christian or Muslim identity was highly salient appeared to ‘overpower’ their autistic identity (i.e., Thomas), disrupting the push back against norms that can be associated with an autistic identity.

Notions of the ‘ideal worshipper’ are also further complicated by other identities that an individual may have in addition to being autistic. Some of these ‘multiple selves’

(James, 1890) may change or add to the roles the individual may have, and therefore the behavioural expectations required (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 7). The roles, and subsequent linked behavioural expectations may ‘disrupt’ feelings of belonging, through behavioural expectations not matching an individual’s identity standard (Burke, 2007). In this light, it could be argued that there is no one ‘autistic and Christian or Muslim’ identity (echoing Dillon, 2005 regarding gay and lesbian Catholics). One notable example from this study was the experiences of women within mosques compared to men, echoing Ghafournia’s (2020) findings relating to the exclusion women can experience in mosques. Experiences of the roles different genders may occupy within religious spaces, is documented in other studies including Dillon’s (2005) interviews and surveys within an LGBTQIA+-affirming Catholic church in the US, and Read’s (2003) survey data on gender role attitudes of Arab American Christians and Muslims. It is important at this point to highlight the role of other factors than religion alone, such as cultural expectations within the church or mosque (echoing Geertz, 1993), religiosity and ethnicity (Read, 2003) and culture more generally. As both churches and mosques can be seen as patriarchal institutions (Dillon, 2005; Zine, 2006) as well as having ‘cults of normalcy’ (Reynolds, 2012b), identities which do not match the identities and roles privileged within churches or mosques may experience multiple levels of not being the ‘ideal worshipper’. This is also demonstrative of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), where cumulative and layers of nuance to lived experience against a backdrop where normalcy is strong.

The theoretical framework of this thesis (symbolic interactionism; Blumer, 1965) clearly influenced the interpretation of the findings in this study, in particular to how

identity and its subsequent meanings are understood by the participants (Blumer, 1965, p. 11; Burke & Stets, 2009). Other studies exploring marginalised identities within religious groups have used a different theoretical framework, for example feminism (Zine, 2006) or post-structuralism (Jacobs, 2019). In these instances, other aspects may be drawn out in analysis, for example power dynamics.

4.1 Limitations

This exploratory study explores autistic people’s experiences within churches and mosques. Being focused on only two religious gatherings means it is not generalisable across other religions or belief systems. As Hindus and Humanists were not recruited in Chapter 5, the decision was made to keep to the same groups as recruited in Chapter 5. This decision was made in order to build on the findings of Chapter 5. However, in the same vein as Chapter 5, focusing on churches and mosques allowed for more detailed contrasting and comparing between the participants’ experiences. After much time and effort, the sample gained was gratefully accepted due to difficulties with recruitment, in particular with autistic people who currently attend or who have previously attended mosques. It was felt important to keep a balance of church and mosque attendees, in order to give both types of experiences equal importance. Furthermore, all interviews took place on MSTeams toward the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this was useful in terms of recruiting a small population (autistic people who currently attend or who have previously attended mosques) over a broader geographical area, it might have excluded individuals who did not feel comfortable using MSTeams, did not have internet or did not have basic technological expertise. A future study may be useful in

capturing the voices and experiences of those who could not participate at this time due to the ‘digital divide’, as well seek the views autistic people who attend or have previously attended other belief system groups not included at this time.

5 Conclusion

This exploratory study explores the experiences of autistic people who attend or have previously attended a church or a mosque. It appears that being autistic disrupts feelings of social inclusion and belonging, especially for individuals whose autistic identity is a master identity. In this manner, participants were not the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019), an idealistic set of expectations and standards enshrined in normalcy. In the final chapter, I will discuss all of the findings of the of the thesis.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed how autistic people may find it difficult to be ‘ideal worshippers’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) in churches and mosques. This final chapter will begin by summarising the thesis thus far. The findings of the thesis will then be discussed, including how the answer the research questions set in Chapter 1. Through this discussion, I will argue how being autistic is perceived as deviant, and how this is particularly strengthened in a highly normative environment, creating ‘impossible subjects’. This chapter will then address how my findings question some theological standpoints toward disabled and neurodivergent people. Next, I will discuss how these findings echo other literature in relation to group assimilation and social identity, and argue how these findings illustrate that this is ‘not just an autism problem’. In particular I will reference how counternormative identities are perceived and the boundaries they face, and the multiple identities that autistic people can have. The limitations and future directions from this thesis will be outlined and recommendations for policy and practice shared. I finally return to my encounter with Simon Peter shared in Chapter 1.

The aim of this thesis was to explore autistic people’s experiences of social inclusion and belonging in churches and mosques. The objectives were to learn about the interface between identity, social inclusion and belonging, both for autistic people specifically and broadly within a religious context. I posed three research questions

in order to explore autistic people’s social inclusion and belonging in churches and mosques:

1. How does being autistic impact being socially included and feeling a sense of belonging in churches and mosques?
2. To what extent are autistic and religious identities compatible?
3. What do autistic people do to maximise their social inclusion and belonging?

In order to answer the research questions for this thesis, a systematic review and three empirical studies were carried out.

In Chapter 1, I outlined how social inclusion is marked out as a priority for autism research, and how both social inclusion and belonging are important to investigate in the lives of autistic people. I also argued that religion remains an under-researched area within both disability studies and autism studies, despite the fields of religious studies and CAS offering the opportunity to explore autistic people’s lives within religious groups. Furthermore, I described the personal motivation for this thesis, and outlined how autistic people will be presented (in line with CAS).

In Chapter 2 (systematic review), I undertook a systematic review on the social inclusion and belonging of individuals who have a minority identity within four belief systems: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Humanism. 29 studies met the inclusion criteria, with 24 of the papers in a Christian context and 5 in a Muslim context. Five themes were discovered through inductive synthesis: ‘the minority believer’, ‘the perennial outsider’, ‘degrees of exclusion’, ‘pockets of empowerment’ and ‘it’s complicated’. A variety of experiences were found within the data, including being

included and being excluded. A quality assessment of the 29 included studies was also undertaken, with a particular gap around researcher reflexivity.

In Chapter 3 (methodology and methods), I outlined the methodological approach to this thesis, including my theoretical orientation and approaches, and how reflexive practices will be paid attention to and incorporated into the studies. I then described the methods that will be used within the three empirical chapters, including data collection and analytical approaches.

In Chapter 4 (focus groups with autistic people), I undertook an exploratory qualitative study using focus groups with autistic participants in order to explore autistic people’s views on social inclusion and belonging. Three focus groups were carried out with 18 participants (between 4 and 7 participants per focus group). Four themes were discovered in the data: ‘nebulous’, ‘a bidirectional relationship’, ‘degrees of belonging’ and ‘barriers’. Having an autistic identity appeared to impact participants’ views and how they define social inclusion and belonging despite the lack of consensus found on how social inclusion and belonging should be defined. Furthermore, participants reported experiencing stigma and prejudice due to being autistic, with neuronormative standards (informed by normalcy) shaping exclusion.

In Chapter 5 (focus groups with Christians and Muslims), I undertook an exploratory qualitative study using focus groups with Christian and Muslim participants, in order to explore Christians’ and Muslims’ views on social inclusion and belonging. Four focus groups were carried out with 21 participants (13 Christian and 8 Muslim, between 4 and 8 per focus group). Three themes were discovered in the data:

‘exploring identity’, ‘questioning responsibility’ and ‘no one set nature’. Behavioural expectations within churches and mosques appeared to be highly normative and informed by normalcy, echoing the operant voice of theology being highly normative (Dunlop, 2021). In addition, tensions between the idea of ‘welcome as important’ and questions surrounding who is responsible for enacting this welcome appear to problematise churches and mosques as being ‘all welcoming’.

In Chapter 6 (narrative interviews with autistic people), I undertook a thematic narrative inquiry with autistic people who either currently attend a church or mosque, or who have previously attended a church or mosque. This study was carried out to explore autistic people’s experiences within churches and mosques, given the strong normativity of behavioural expectations in churches and mosques. 8 participants took part in a narrative interview and an unstructured interview, with 4 being considered as current attendees and 4 as previously regular attendees. Three themes were discovered through thematic narrative analysis: ‘a pastiche of identities’, ‘navigating expectations’ and ‘doing what’s right for me’. Critical incidents from each participant’s narrative were also mapped against the discovered themes, with most critical incidents occurring in ‘doing what’s right for me’ or theme 2’s (navigating expectations) subtheme ‘suffering broken expectations’. Participants struggled to be an ’ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) in many cases, and found spaces that were closer to their own identity standards (including leaving all together) when being autistic meant they could not meet the expected standards of their church or mosque.

2 Discussion

2.1 Stigma and normalcy making autistic people ‘impossible subjects’

Across all empirical chapters autistic people experienced exclusion to varying degrees, with varying experiences of stigma and normalcy as barriers to feelings of social inclusion and belonging both inside and outside of churches and mosques (Research Question 1). In many ways, the marking out of someone as different and undesirable coexists alongside the desirability of normative and ‘ideal’ existence and normative behavioural expectations (Edgerton, 1976). Therefore, the normative expectations of churches and mosques may inform the positioning of certain behaviours and presentations as ‘stigmatised’ (Goffman, 1963), ‘other’ (Said, 1974), and ‘undesirable’. This desirability for normative and ‘ideal’ existence drives the need for boundaries and social control, especially boundaries informing who should be included and who should not. Therefore, being able to be socially included and experience feelings of belonging appear to be wrapped up in normative expectations, and contingent on meeting these norms (Research Questions 1 and 2). In particular, experiences of autistic people being stigmatised and not meeting norms informed by normalcy were found in the subthemes ‘stigma’ (Chapter 4, Study 2); ‘the outsider’ (Chapter 5, Study 3); ‘meeting the mark (or not)’ and ‘suffering with broken expectations’ (Chapter 6, Study 4).

These findings add to other literature that also suggests that stigma and normalcy are barriers to social inclusion and belonging for autistic people in churches and mosques. One particular example is Jacobs (2019) thesis and subsequent book with

Richardson (2022), who explored disabled people’s (including autistic people) experiences in churches in the UK. The thesis included interviews with 30 disabled Christians, which was expanded by 20 interviews in Jacobs and Richardson (2022). They found that disabled people often ‘misfitted’ (Garland-Thompson, 2011) in their churches, notably buildings, rituals (such as worship services) and the social milieu of the church, due to not meeting the norms of their churches. Jacobs (2019) also argued how their participants were relegated to ‘objects’ to be ministered to rather than individuals who are a valued member of their church. It could be argued that misfitting echoes the mismatch of identity standards that many of my participants in Chapter 6 faced, rendering them ‘impossible subjects’ in this context due to the discrepancy between their autistic and religious identities. Furthermore, it could be argued that autistic people ‘misfit’ more generally within society due to discrepancy between neuronormative expectations and the identity standards autistic people have, as argued in Chapter 4. In addition to Jacobs (2019) and Jacobs and Richardson (2022), other scholars have also reported autistic people facing the same barriers of stigma and normalcy within churches and mosques, leading to exclusion from full participation in their church or mosque community (Crabtree, 2007; Haack, 2017; Reynolds, 2008; Rafferty, 2022; van Ommen & Endress, 2022; van Ommen, 2023). The existence of barriers, one of which disqualifies autistic people ‘from full social acceptance’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 19), in many ways demonstrates the exclusion that autistic people face in churches and mosques.

However, it is not only the autistic people’s experiences of stigma and prejudice that are echoed in this thesis. Other church and mosque attendees’ views toward autistic people, and to what extent they should be included within their church or mosque,

were also reflected from within wider scholarship. Patka and McDonald’s (2015) exploratory grounded theory study investigating Catholic priests’ (n=12) views toward people with intellectual disabilities. The narrative ‘deficiency’ found within Patka and McDonald’s (2015) study, where priests considered intellectual disabilities as something to be cured, echoes individuals who are othered being stigmatised. In particular within the narrative of ‘deficiency’, the participants raised questions regarding to what degree people with intellectual disabilities should be included in church services with other non-disabled church-goers. These findings echo the subtheme ‘the outsider’ in Chapter 5, where questions were raised in relation to how an autistic person could be integrated into their church or mosque. These findings are further echoed by Waldock and Forrester-Jones (2020, p. 357), who in their exploratory study of attitudes toward autism in the UK found the way autistic people were spoken about in the interviews as not necessarily conducive to full inclusion. In particular, one participant about how ‘it’s their church’ and ‘we should open the doors to them’.

2.1.1 Autistic identity as a value violating disrupter

Churches and mosques are unique settings with both influence from religious institutions and from external non-religious contexts (Webb-Mitchell, 1994). In particular, it has been noted in the literature how an individual’s theology and/or existential worldview, and religious identity, can inform and/or be used as rationale for their own existential worldview (Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020; Cooreman-Guittin & van Ommen, 2022). Therefore, views and perspectives (including prejudicial views) toward autistic people, meaning how much autistic people are likely to be considered as a part of their church or mosque, will be impacted by both

institutional and external contexts. Furthermore, the higher reported rates of prejudice in some religious groups (Allport & Ross, 1967; Johnson, Rowatt & LaBouff, 2012) due to strong in-group favouritism (Brewer, 2001) may create an environment that facilitates and enables prejudicial views towards individuals who transgress expectations of a 'Christian' or a 'Muslim' role identity. In this thesis, some prejudicial views experienced by autistic people were reported (Chapters 4 and 6) and elicited by non-autistic identifying individuals (Chapter 5), indicating these findings support notions of autistic people being considered as out-group members by some churches and mosques (Research Question 1).

One particular consideration that is specific to churches and mosques is how some ways of being and medical conditions that are stigmatised, have been conflated with sin in both Christianity and Islam (Eiesland, 1994; Islam & Campbell, 2014), including being autistic (Waldock & Sango, 2023). Where sin is considered a transgression against God and not meeting the required expectations for a 'Christian' or a 'Muslim', echoing public religious identities as 'performative' (Day, 2011), stigma could also be perceived as such a transgression. In this light, it could be argued that the stigma from religious narratives and understandings of fuel exclusion on this level (Amadhila et al., 2024). Conflating sin and stigmatised identities could be argued to echo the medical model understanding of autism, whereby being autistic is an impairment to be fixed, rather than being autistic as part of human diversity (as found in Chapter 6). Steimke (1994) argues that close adherence to the medical model of disability, where impairment is a problem to be solved, creates a barrier for disabled people (including autistic people) and reduces accessibility, especially those who view being autistic as integral to their identity, which many of my participants did in both Chapters 4 and 6.

This adherence creates what Carter (2007) has described within church contexts as an ‘attitudinal barrier’, where full social inclusion and belonging is inhibited by autistic people as less and needing fixing.

Furthermore, such a conflation in a context which is highly normative (Dunlop, 2021), high importance played on public and visible role identity (Dillon, 2005, p. 221) and has a strong in-group dynamic (Brewer, 2001) highlights how stigma can be perceived as ‘value violating’ out-group members (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 163). Through being perceived as ‘value violating’, individuals who transgress the expectations of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019) may be labelled. Identifying individuals who are ‘value violators’ (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 163) and labelling them in this manner has been argued to produce deviance (Becker, 2008), producing deviance is akin to labelling theory (Scheff, 1974). Producing deviance could be argued to be incongruent to being socially included and feeling a sense of belonging. Labelling, often in negative terms, carries a negative judgement rather than being an objective identifier (Fitch, 2002). Such judgements are likely to include a judgement on the perceived value of an individual (Bourdieu, 1984), which are socially constructed by both individual group members and the group as a whole (Lemert, 1967). In this case, this refers to autistic identity being considered a counternormative within a church or mosque context, and stigmatised identity that transgresses behavioural expectations (Research Question 2).

Williams (2023, p. 149) argues how churches in particular produce deviance, in particular in regard to autistic people when they do not meet what Williams (2023, p. 149) describes ‘partitions of acceptability’:

> ‘the reasons why individuals might prefer specialist groups for autism in churches amount to the condemnation of the church itself, the worldwide church, which has made itself inaccessible to those who seek it and has made it necessary for people to seek alternative provision’ (Williams, 2023, p. 149)

Where Williams (2023, p. 149) mentions ‘alternative provision’, this echoes of some of my participants in Chapter 6 moving into church and mosque spaces that are closer to their own identity standard (Burke, 2007). In this manner, moving to a space that is closer to one’s own identity standard due to a lack of accessible and/or appropriate provision may be perceived as a failing to meet theological standpoints of the Ummah (*Quran*, 1995, 10:19) and all being God’s children (*NIV*, 1973, 1 John 3:1). However, in this instance, it appears that perceived norms of moral conduct (Nehring, 2013, p. 254) are more important than the commonly espoused value of ‘being welcoming’. Furthermore, Williams’ (2023, p. 149) assertion supports notions of churches and mosques being social groups with social rules that are enforced (Becker, 2008, p. 1).

Where social stigma spoils an identity (Goffman, 1963) to the point of ‘value violation’ (Johnson et al., 2012), it could be argued to interrupt congruity with ‘normal’ expectations and normalcy. Scholars such as Reynolds (2012b) and Said (1978) have argued that disability disrupts normalcy, creating what Williams (2023, p. 149) describes as ‘partitions of acceptability’, therefore dividing autistic people into the ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’. These constructed categories echo findings from Chapters 4 and 5, notably that autistic people may consciously and unconsciously

attempt to make themselves more ‘acceptable’ and gain inclusion by masking (Chapter 4, also see Pearson & Rose, 2023), and those who are perceived undesirable should not be included (Chapter 5). It could be argued that those who are ‘acceptable’ do better to mask their autistic identity (see Chapter 4), and fit the expectations of what Shyman (2016, p. 368) names the ‘non-disabled community’. Furthermore, fitting in with the expectations of a majority, able-bodied community and the corresponding group standard, again emulates the medical model of disability.

2.1.2 Churches and Mosques as ‘cults of normalcy’

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, views toward social inclusion and belonging churches and mosques appear to be informed by a highly normative operant theology. Other scholars have also discussed how boundaries on who should and should not be included churches in particular are highly normative. This is in relation to both autistic people specifically (van Ommen, 2023, p. 72) and disability more broadly (Reynolds, 2012b; Clapton, 2009). The findings from this thesis indicate this not only through the experiences of autistic people as discussed in Chapter 6, but also from the views and experiences of other church- and mosque-goers, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Research Question 1). Reynolds (2012) in particular reports how disabled people, notably in this case autistic people, challenge what he calls the ‘cult of normalcy’. A cult of normalcy can be described where the utility, productivity and value of an individual’s body is defined as having value and of social value, or being deviant or abnormal. Within this ‘cult of normalcy’, the ‘ideal worshipper’, as discussed in Chapter 6, is the embodiment of normative behavioural expectations. In particular, neuronormative expectations are echoed in both these findings, for

example how to participate in worship services (see Chapter 6, and communicating in a ‘non-autistic manner’ (Chapter 4 and 5)). Reynolds (2012, p. 29) argues that particularly churches participate in this cult of normalcy through treating disabled people as ‘problems to be included’, which particularly was noticed within Chapters 4 and 6 in both religious and non-religious settings. Through my participants being perceived both as ‘disruptors’ and ‘problems to be included’, they could not be seen as an integrated part of the social groups (including churches and mosques) they attended and therefore feelings of social inclusion and belonging are likely to have been disrupted (Research Questions 1 and 2).

Normalcy can be argued to be part and parcel of the culture of the church or mosque in relation to how individuals’ behaviours and appearances are judged and made sense of. It could be argued that because normalcy is a social construct (Davis, 1995) embedded into the culture of churches (van Ommen. 2023, p. 81), and mosques, as this thesis tentatively suggests, it becomes part of how church or mosque is ‘done’. ‘Doing church’ and ‘doing mosque’ in this sense refers to the practices, rituals and expectations that being a part of such a gathering entails, with both Jacobs (2019) and Waldock (2021) using the term ‘doing church’. The boundary between the ‘included’ (the in-group) and ‘the out-group’ is co-constructed by group members (Cohen, 1985, p. 40), including within religious groups (Day, 2011; Mitchell, 2006, p. 60). Part of the boundary formation includes the embracing of practices, rituals and roles, and the avoidance of other practices, rituals and roles (Priest & Edwards, 2019). It could be argued that the existence of a ‘cult of normalcy’ supports Stouffer’s (1955) seminal findings where attendees to religious groups, in Stouffer’s

case, churchgoers, are less tolerant of non-conformity, where a ‘cult of normalcy’ encourages a normative conformity.

It also appears that where normalcy is particularly ingrained into both a church or mosque’s operant theology, and how church and mosque is ‘done’, the cult of normalcy is hegemonic. Normalcy has previously been argued to be hegemonic by Davis (1995) in relation to wider society, and by van Ommen (2023, p. 84) in regards to churches. As discussed in Chapter 4, my autistic participants saw the normative expectations within society to be powerful. It is possible that normalcy’s hegemony within churches and mosques is strengthened both by strong in-group favouritism (see Johnson et al., 2012 and Section 2.1.1 of this chapter) and increased prejudice toward out-group members (e.g., Allport & Ross, 1967). In addition, cults of normalcy could be argued to be informed by Taylor’s (1989) ‘inescapable frameworks’, in particular reference to how the roles and usefulness of others in society is perceived (third axis), notably demonstrating how normalcy as a meta concept (Hacking, 1996) within current ideology shapes current identity. When considering if my participants met the standards of the ‘ideal worshipper’, it was usually reported through meeting behavioural expectations. Through individuals meeting behavioural expectations, they may be seen as ‘useful’ to their church or mosque (e.g., fulfilling roles within their church or mosque such as welcoming people or helping with events, or meeting the standards of the ‘ideal worshipper’ by not disrupting them with their ‘otherness’). In some ways, this echoes the ’normalisation agenda’ in relation to autistic people (Milton & Moon, 2012) as argued in Chapter 4, where stereotypically autistic behaviours (e.g., stimming, not giving eye contact) are seen as ‘not appropriate’ and in need of fixing. The normalisation agenda, along with normalcy, have been argued

to ‘marginalise and silence’ people who are not perceived as ‘normal’ (Clapton, 2009, p. 116) and lead to psycho-emotional disablement (Reeve, 2002). The normalisation agenda also reflects Williams’ (2023, p. 149) partitions of acceptability, where autistic people that present in an ‘acceptable manner’ are deemed less abnormal.

One reason why normalcy could be particularly hegemonic within churches and mosques, and therefore have a particularly strong normative operant theology (Dunlop, 2021), is the resistance to change some churches and mosques may have (Coutta, 2008; Rainer, 2016). Resistance to change notably includes improving disability access for some churches and mosques, perhaps due to normative bodies being prioritised (Jacobs, 2019, p. 250) and disabled and neurodivergent people being perceived as ‘disruptive’ (Pearson et al., 2023). In some ways, the resistance to change may emulate Mol’s (1976) assertion regarding the stability religious identity has. Although some churches and mosques have been reported to change to adapt to group members (Ammerman, 1997; Roso, 2023), this could be due to wider social and cultural norms guiding change (Roso, 2023) rather than a willingness to break away from the ‘cult of normalcy’. The hegemony of the cult of normalcy also remains ‘invisible’ according to Reynolds (2012b, p. 170), with the practiced barriers and teleological boundaries only felt by those who sit outside the boundary. Its invisibility is also possibly linked to normalcy as a pervasive metaconcept impacting many ways of thinking (Hacking, 1996). With its remaining undetected, it becomes even more difficult to dismantle the socially constructed framework of normalcy. In some ways, this echoes the recruitment patterns that occurred during the data collection, where autistic people were faster to be recruited and appeared keener to take part than Christians or Muslims were. Naturally there may be a multitude of

reasons for this difference, however it is notable that autistic people’s autistic identity seems to be highly salient when discussing exclusion, an experience apparently very common to autistic people, as stated in Chapter 4. However, some potential participants in Chapter 5 felt they did not know enough to take part, perhaps due to a perceived lack of expertise.

2.1.3 Tensions of how to facilitate social inclusion and belonging

The cult of normalcy could be argued to widen the gap which was found in chapter 5 between espoused theology and operant theology, with operant theology demonstrating a ‘cult of normalcy’. This gap between the espoused and operant voices of theology (Cameron et al., 2010; Cameron, 2013) found in Chapter 5 could be argued to further silence and marginalise those who are ‘abnormal’ or who do not meet the behavioural expectations of the ‘ideal worshipper’. This tension also contradicts the notion that shared cultural beliefs should enhance belonging for all group members (Stroope, 2011). However, not all church and mosque communities appear to facilitate feelings of exclusion for autistic people, notably Joan discussing her attendance at her current church and YouBelong, and Alliyya’s small house group she attends outlined in Chapter 6.

Yet scholars have differing views and perspectives in relation to segregated settings or smaller ‘offshoot’ groups, such as the groups that Joan and Alliyya attend in Chapter 6, constitute as real inclusion. In some ways, this discussion echoes the subtheme ‘who is responsible’ in Chapter 5, where there was no consensus as to who should be responsible for making their church or mosque welcoming to both

newcomers and perceived outsiders, including autistic people. One particular critique of segregated groups for disabled and neurodivergent people in churches is autistic theologian Claire Williams (2023, p. 146), who argues against separate groups for out-group members within churches. She notes how individuals of segregated groups may enjoy being a part of a group which is perceived to be segregated from the main community, however being within their segregated groups means they may not be seen a part of the main community. She calls this ‘mitigation’ instead of community (Williams, 2023, p. 144). Volf (2019) echoes Williams’ concerns, suggesting that segregated groups maintain disabled and neurodivergent people being victims of oppression through not being fully included in main communities. These concerns echo Swinton’s (2012) ‘thin inclusion’, whereby the segregation of disabled people into specialist groups for disabled people within the church occurs instead of including disabled people within the main worshipping community.

It is important at this point to note how Swinton (2012), Williams (2023), and Volf (2019) are discussing what could be seen as an ‘ideal situation’ for disabled and neurodivergent people to be a part of main worshipping and gathering communities. Their arguments focus on others doing the segregating rather than self-segregation, which appeared to occur for my participants. Rather ignored within their argumentation are reasons for self-segregation, including that individuals may find it more comfortable to attend a segregated group, including smaller discrepancy that might occur between group and individual identity standards, as discussed in Chapter 6. Schaeffer and Tamminga (2022, p. 6) note that humans will always form some sort of communities or social groups, notably around the interests of the group. These interests may be contradictory to social inclusion and belonging for individuals

the group considers deviant, and such practices and culture within a group may contribute to enhancing feelings of belonging (Ammerman, 2009; Day, 2011; Ryle & Robinson, 2006). In this light, requesting a group which is ‘all-welcoming’ could be detrimental to the ethos of the group, and harmful to out-group members who have previous negative and/or traumatic experiences (Waldock & Sango, 2023; see also Chapters 4 and 6). Whilst disabled individuals should not be purposely segregated and denied to be a part of the groups that they wish to be a part of (see Equality Act, 2010), it does pose questions on how ‘community’ is defined within Christianity and Islam, and Christianity in particular. Congregations in Christianity have been formally defined as places where individuals are in a social institution at regularly scheduled events (Chaves, 2004), often in a formal church building. This includes how smaller groups where individuals self-select to attend, such as the groups that Alliyya and Joan attend, should be seen as part of the wider worshipping community. Such ideas echo the concepts of the Ummah (*Quran*, 1995, 10:13) within Islam, and gathering with other likeminded believers as ‘fellowship’ in Christianity (*NIV*, 1973, Matthew 18:20).

Furthermore, the organisational culture of churches and mosques may add to the ideological and theological tensions on how to facilitate social inclusion and belonging. Notably Schaeffer and Tamminga (2023) argue that church- and mosque-goers may need to be encouraged to take on responsibilities within their religious group, in particular in relation to making their church or mosque more accessible (Jacobs, 2019, p. 250). This may further add to questions of who is ‘responsible’.

2.2 Navigating Churches and Mosques as autistic ‘impossible subjects’

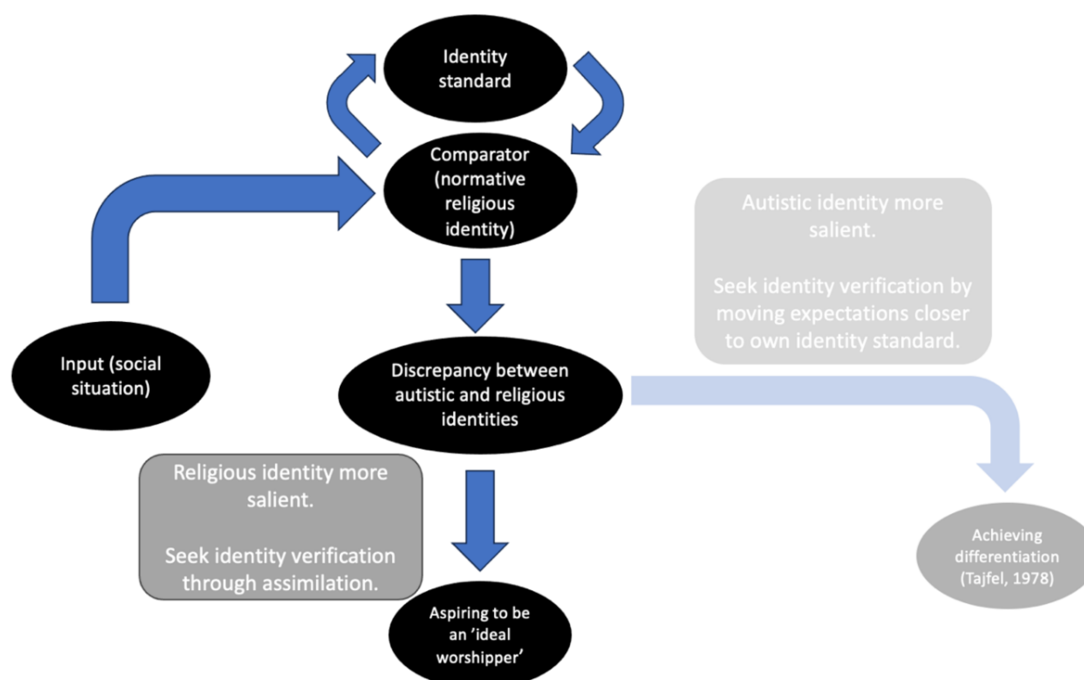
The arguments above have clear implications for how autistic people may navigate churches and mosques, with their created status of ‘impossible subjects’ that disrupt the cults of normalcy that exist within churches and mosques (Research Question 2). Using the findings from Chapters 4, 5 and 6, Burke’s (1991; 2007) identity control theory, identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and Goffman’s social stigma theory (1963), I will now propose and discuss some different pathways autistic people may follow whilst navigating churches and mosques in order to gain feelings of social inclusion and belonging (Research Question 3). Both pathways (Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2) demonstrate the perceived incompatibility of autistic and religious identities within churches and mosques, with normative expectations. Both example pathways have identified that the ‘cult of normalcy’ and autistic identity when considered as a ‘counternormative identity’ create impossibility in the current state, and therefore identity control takes place to counteract the ‘impossibility’.

2.2.1 The ‘ideal worshipper’ and ‘thin inclusion’

One pathway autistic people may take to gain social inclusion and belonging is where discrepancy between being autistic and the behavioural expectations of a religious identity is reduced through seeking to meet the behavioural expectations and requirements of the religious identity, as shown below in Figure 9. In this situation, the religious identity appears to be more salient than autistic identity, with individuals seeking to reduce discrepancy through bringing their presentation closer to the group identity standard, and that of the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019).

As Clapton (2009, p. 224) argues in her scholarship on the belonging of individuals with intellectual disabilities in Judeo-Christian settings, ‘if conditions are met, notions of ‘belonging’ are granted’. In this sense, Clapton’s ‘conditions’ are similar to the expected behavioural requirements within the church or mosque context. Given much focus appears to be on the public identities and roles individuals may have within religions rather than private identities, the religious identity being more salient may facilitate social inclusion and belonging on a public level. This pathway of assimilation echoes Tajfel’s (1978) first developmental step toward achieving differentiation.

Figure 9: A model of identity navigation with autistic and religious identities where autistic identity is ‘counternormative’ and religious identity is more salient based on Burke (1991)



One key aspect of meeting the behavioural expectations associated with a Christian or Muslim identity is how neuronormative the expectations are, as discussed in Section 2.1.2 of this chapter and within Chapters 5 and 6. Where being autistic may

not meet these neuronormative expectations, identity management (for example, masking, as found and discussed in Chapter 4) may be used both consciously and unconsciously to suppress and/or hide appearing autistic. Presenting a mask as a means to gain social inclusion and belonging has been described as only gaining ‘notions of ‘belonging’ (Clapton, 2009, p. 224), indicating using identity management to gain feelings of social inclusion and belonging may have limits. It is understood that autistic people mask and manage their identity for a variety of reasons, and that this aspect of being autistic has often been heavily conditioned into everyday life as a means of protection (Pearson & Rose, 2023), therefore asking people not to mask would be not appropriate. Ridgway and colleagues (2024) also note how masking is often undertaken in order to establish friendships, yet masking interferes with building authentic relationships. However, Clapton (2009, p. 116) argues that authenticity is silenced when normative standards are met, meaning that through individuals seeking to meet the neuronormative standards of a Christian or Muslim role identity, it is not necessarily aligned with their autistic way of being. As in Chapter 4 and 6, being autistic does differ to neurotypical expectations of what it means to be human (Yergeau, 2018, pp. 18-19), therefore further demonstrating how autistic ways are silenced through their perceived deviance. This silencing also echoes Goffman’s (1963, p. 19) assertion that individuals with a spoilt identity cannot have ‘full social acceptance’.

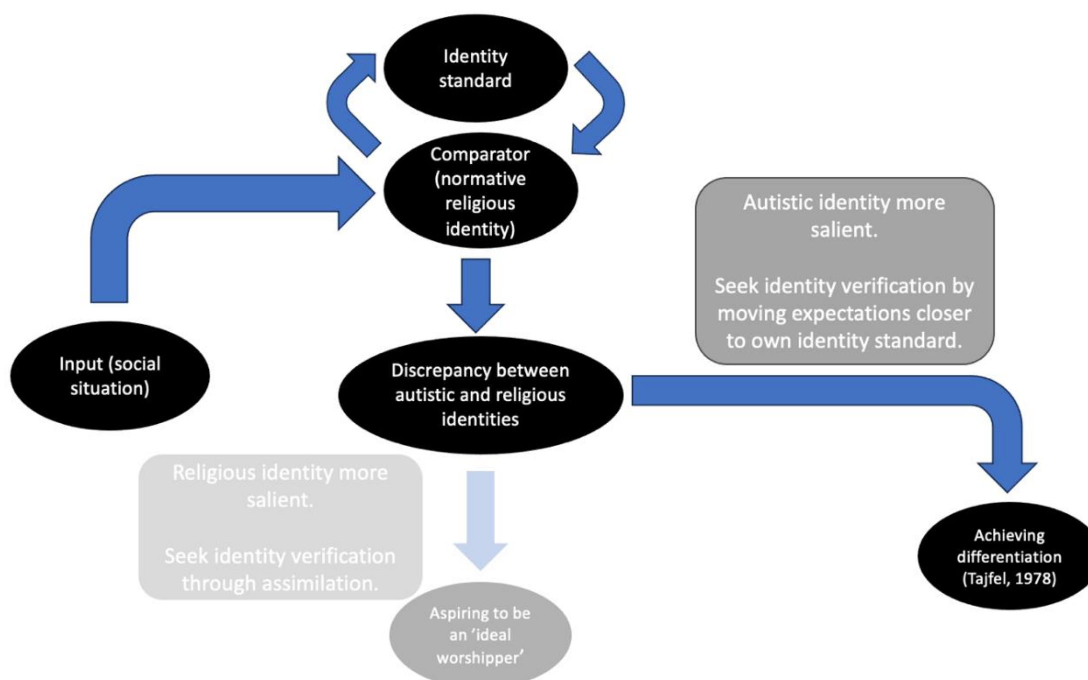
Autistic people being required to meet behavioural expectations that make being autistic ‘impossible’ due to neuronormative expectations, leading to them managing their identity, could be argued to be another form of Swinton’s (2012) ‘thin inclusion’; a form of partial inclusion (see Section 2.1.3). Social inclusion and belonging, when

required to meet neuronormative behavioural expectations, is contingent and conditional on these norms being met, in a similar way to masking a discreditable identity (Goffman, 1963). Where social inclusion and belonging is conditional, and perceived on what Swinton (2000; 2012) calls the principle of likeness, it could be perceived to lack the space for authenticity, which Clapton (2009) reports as necessary for full social inclusion and belonging.

2.2.2 Achieving differentiation

A second pathway autistic people may take to gain social inclusion and belonging is where discrepancy between being autistic and the behavioural expectations of a religious identity is reduced through finding a group with a group identity standard closer to the personal identity standard, as shown below in Figure 10. In this situation, the autistic identity appears to be more salient than the neuronormatively informed Christian or Muslim identity, with individuals seeking to reduce ‘impossibility’ through finding others and spaces with values more aligned to theirs. This can take place through self-segregation to groups with other disabled and neurodivergent, or just autistic, people; a church or mosque with a group standard closer to the individual’s identity standard; or leaving churches and mosques completely. This pathway echoes Tajfel’s (1978) third developmental step toward achieving differentiation.

Figure 10: A model of identity navigation with autistic and religious identities where autistic identity is ‘counternormative’ and differentiation is achieved based on Burke (1991)



Differentiation occurs where individuals define their identity ‘on their own terms’ (Carr, 2003, p. 112). In this context, this could be argued to be stripping away the normative expectations that are part of a religious identity, and aligning both religious and autistic identity so discrepancy is reduced. In addition to finding a space closer to one’s identity standards, as some participants did in this thesis, the wider literature suggests other means of achieving differentiation, such as reinterpreting holy scriptures (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022), and adapting practices and rituals (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022).

Furthermore, autistic people ‘achieving differentiation’ through specifically rejecting normative expectations and normalcy, including the ‘cult of normalcy’, has been theorised as part of the practice of neuroqueering (Walker, 2021). Two aspects of neuroqueering have been argued to be:

> 'Engaging in practices intended to **undo and subvert one's own cultural conditioning and one's ingrained habits of neuronormative** and heteronormative **performance,** with the aim of reclaiming one's capacity to give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations' (Walker, 2021, p.162, emphasis added regarding relevance)

> 'Working to **transform social and cultural environments in order to create spaces and communities** [...] **in which engagement in any or all of the above practices is permitted, accepted, supported, and encouraged'** (Walker, 2021, p. 163, emphasis added regarding relevance)

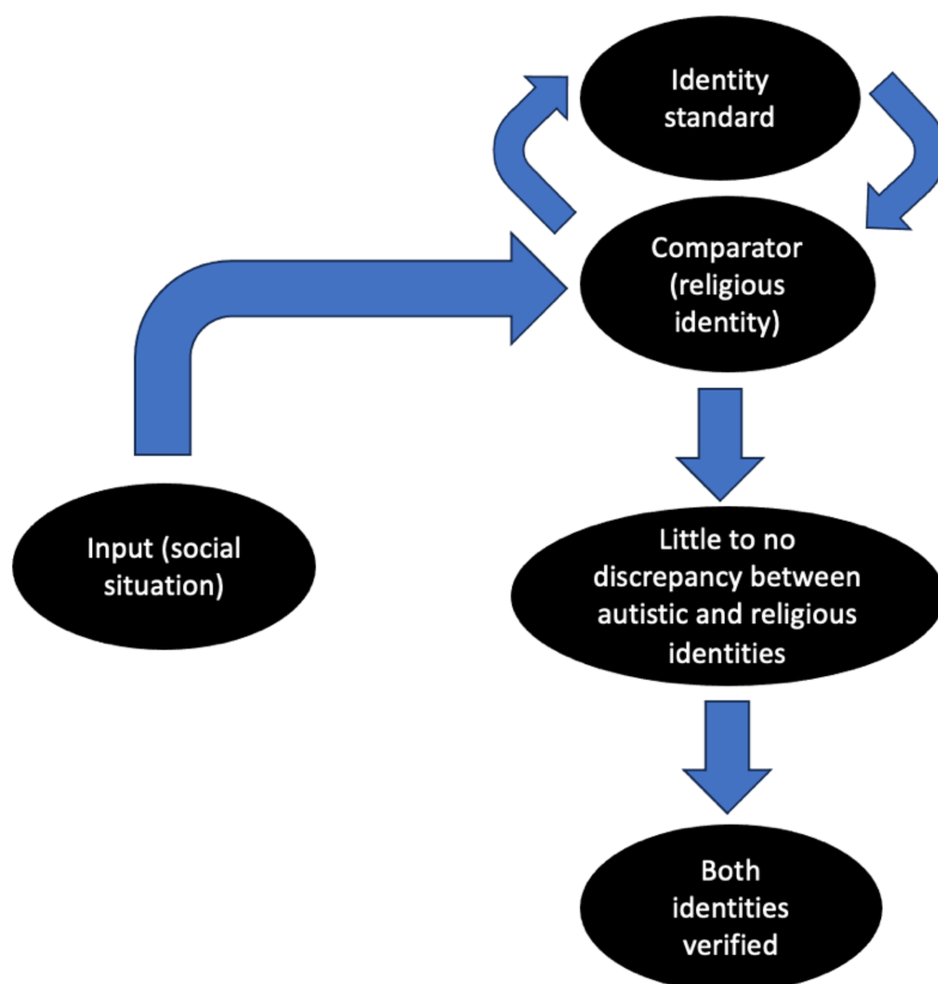
Both of these practices, which have been described as 'neuroqueering', clearly reflect both breaking away from the 'cult of normalcy' on an individual level, perhaps aligning oneself with spaces that allow for rituals and behaviours that do not meet neuronormative standards practiced, and the creation of church and mosque spaces that do not ascribe, or ascribe less, to normative standards and expectations, and therefore the 'cult of normalcy' in their practice. Both of these outcomes are observable in the focus groups in Chapter 4, particularly the subtheme 'autistic voice', and the narrative and unstructured interviews in Chapter 6. Furthermore, where I have previously argued that being autistic does differ to neurotypical expectations of what it means to be human (Yergeau, 2018, pp. 18-19), creating spaces and practices away from the 'cult of normalcy' allows for autistic people to 'grow sideways' (Stockton, 2009, p. 4). The concept of 'growing sideways' occurs when individuals who 'grow sideways' meet normative milestones at a different

timepoint (echoing autistic children sometimes having delays in development compared to non-autistic children (LeBeau et al., 2023; Reindal et al., 2021)) or different milestones. ‘Growing sideways’ was originally conceptualised in relation to LGBTQIA+ people, however other scholars such as Dolmage (2014; 2020) has theorised similar in regards to disabled and neurodivergent people. This concept of ‘growing sideways’ highlights both the normative expectations, including those within ‘cults of normalcy’, and how those with counternormative identities may meet them differently. In some ways, it could be seen as a reconceptualization of social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), whereby norms do not spoil an identity, rather the (neuro)normative expectations placed onto an individual are problematic.

2.2.3 Alignment of identity and behavioural expectations as affirming

When both an individual’s identity standard and the group identity standard either match or experience a very small discrepancy, both autistic and religious identities may both be verified, as shown in Figure 11. This situation could be said to reflect a church or mosque space that is affirming of being autistic, with behavioural expectations closer to those that an autistic person may be able to meet. This situation may also take place after differentiation has been achieved (see Section 2.2.2 in this chapter). In these cases, autistic people would not be impossible subjects (Research Question 3). It is important to reiterate the argument posed in Chapters 4 and 6 that the multiple identities autistic people can have (James, 1890), and the variety of support needs autistic people can have (Keates et al., 2024). Therefore, different spaces may be perceived as affirming for different autistic people, with no one ‘solution’ for all autistic people.

Figure 11: A model of identity navigation with autistic and religious identities where little to no discrepancy is experienced based on Burke (1991).



It could be argued that churches and mosques that facilitate social inclusion and belonging through verifying both an individual’s religious and autistic identities are adhering to the affirmation model of disability (Swain & French, 2000; Cameron, 2012). Rather than seeing autistic behaviours as a problem to solve, echoing the medical model of disability, and autistic behaviours as barriers to ‘full social acceptance’ (Goffman, 1963) as reported in Chapter 5, an affirmation model of disability takes a ‘non-tragic view of impairment and disability’ and includes having a ‘positive social identity’ (Swain & French, 2000, p. 569). In many ways this echoes

the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2021; Botha et al., 2024), which values different neurocognitive functioning that occurs across the human population.

2.3 'It's not just an autism problem'

The findings from all studies echo wider patterns within the academic literature for individuals who have a counternormative identity, particularly literature on LGBTQIA+ people within Christianity, notably the literature covered in Chapter 2. In particular, they reflect the mixed experiences of social inclusion and belonging, autistic people experiencing stigma and being perceived as 'other' in churches and mosques, and the cult of normalcy as a particularly strong teleological boundary. In this light, it would be reductive and misleading to only argue that autistic people could be 'impossible subjects' within churches and mosques. In fact, Abraham (2009) and Jennings (2018) previously used this exact phrase in relation to how gay Muslims (Abraham) and LGBT Christians (Jennings) can be perceived and may be seen as a 'problem to include' (Reynolds, 2012). Yergeau (2018, p. 5) in particular argues how the boundaries and prejudice that fuel autistic and disabled people's exclusion 'are intertwined with the logics of racism, classism, and heterosexism'. Yergeau's (2018, p. 5) argument, as well as the third principle of the neurodiversity paradigm ('the social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity, e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture'; Walker, 2021, p. 36) support the idea of exclusion within churches and mosques being 'not just an autism problem', with other marginalised identities also facing structural and interpersonal barriers to social inclusion and belonging.

2.3.1 Other identities

As described above, the findings from this thesis appear to reflect the findings of individuals who have other minority and marginalised identities, especially those whose identities are also counternormative, including those covered in Chapter 2. In particular, the mixture of experiences that individuals had reflect the findings from the empirical chapters within this thesis, how individuals used stigma management to attempt to gain social inclusion and feelings of belonging and finding spaces with group identity standards closer to their own personal identity standards.

Of particular interest is the apparent similarities that can be observed between autistic people’s experiences within this thesis, and literature exploring LGBTQIA+ people’s experiences within churches and mosques, as explored in Chapter 2. This notably includes how some LGBTQIA+ people may attempt to assimilate to feel socially included or belong, and how other LGBTQIA+ people may achieve differentiation through reinterpreting holy scriptures (e.g., Khoir, 2020; Maulana et al., 2021; Nixon et al., 2023) and finding groups with a group identity standard closer to their own that affirms their LGBTQIA+ identity (e.g., Jacobsen, 2017; Taylor & Snowdon, 2014; Taylor & Cuthbert, 2019). In this manner, it could be argued that once again it is the normative standards and the ‘cult of normalcy’ that contributes to the exclusion and stigmatisation of LGBTQIA+ people within some religious groups. It also echoes normative gender and sexuality being key teleological and symbolic boundaries to mark out who should be included within some religious communities (Tranby & Zulkowski, 2012), in particular socially conservative groups within Christianity and Islam (Guhin, 2020). In this light it is no surprise that practices such as neuroqueering and queering, and associated language, would be perceived as

outside some groups’ ‘partitions of acceptability’, using Williams’ (2023, p. 149) words.

In addition, social dynamics related to having a minority of marginalised identity also appear to not always be well understood, echoing the difference between espoused theologies and operant theologies of social inclusion and belonging elicited in Chapter 5. One particular example lies in the work of Mehta and colleagues (2022), who explored racism in churches in the US through interviews with 85 White Christians. Mehta and colleagues (2022) found that espoused theologies of inclusion echoes similar findings to Chapter 5, with ‘we are all welcome’ and ‘we are all God’s children’ particularly prevalent. The espoused theologies in Mehta and colleagues (2022) appeared to ignore broader structural issues, notably racism. Although it remained unclear how the espoused theologies impacted operant theologies of inclusion in Mehta and colleagues’ (2022) research, the mismatch which is echoed in Chapter 5 clearly demonstrates how the incongruence can act as a barrier to social inclusion and belonging.

2.3.2 Intersectionality and multiple identities

As described in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, participants (autistic and non-autistic) had multiple identities (James, 1890) that shaped the social inclusion and belonging they experienced both in churches and mosques, and in other social groups. This was particularly pertinent within the theme ‘a pastiche of identities’ in Chapter 6 in relation to my autistic participants. Some participants also reported other identities other than being autistic that could be perceived to be counternormative within some church or

mosque spaces (e.g., being LGBQTIA+, including gay and non-binary participants), or shaping which spaces they can attend (e.g., gender, notably being female within mosque spaces). Therefore, it is imperative that when considering the experiences of social inclusion and belonging of autistic people, other identities and the social dynamics associated with them (see Yergeau, 2018 and Walker, 2021) are attended to. In some ways, this echoes the attention that Pearson and Rose (2023) paid to the multiple identities that autistic people can have impact autistic masking. With each identity having its own identity standard (Burke, 2007), this highlights how there cannot be one singular autistic experience, and one set of behavioural expectations that all autistic people may have, echoing the heterogeneity of autistic existence.

Without consideration of the other identities and what Grace (2013) calls social locations, structural disadvantage will likely remain in efforts of facilitating feelings of social inclusion and belonging. This is especially important when considering how some religious groups and institutions position certain identities, in particular LGBTQIA+ identities. LGBTQIA+ people may be seen as 'sinfully different' (Kirby et al., 2017) or deviant (Bratton et al., 2020), and in some spaces, whether they should be socially included and belong remains contested. Given the increasing literature that stipulates the high proportion of autistic people who are LGBTQIA+ (Dewinter et al., 2017; Hellemans et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2020; Peachey & Crane, 2024), the ongoing contestation with the compatibility of being LGBTQIA+ with being Christian or Muslim, or holding roles of importance within churches or mosques has clear implications for autistic LGBTQIA+ people who attend churches or mosques. Future efforts for facilitating autistic people's social inclusion and belonging within churches and mosques should not ignore tensions and discussions around LGBTQIA+

people’s social inclusion and belonging, as similar social dynamics occur in relation to neurodivergences (including autism) as gender and sexual orientation (Walker & Raymaker, 2021). If ‘systematic oppression’, as described by Walker and Raymaker (2021), is removed for one minority identity (e.g., being autistic), but not for another (e.g., being LGBTQIA+), then it could be argued that the oppression remains for those individuals.

In addition, knowledge of what ‘autism’ is and what it means to be autistic can be perceived as very Anglophone centric, with a paucity of research being noted for some ethnic groups (Lovelace et al., 2022) and cultural beliefs towards difference and (perceived) illness (Singh & Bunyak, 2019; Pearson et al., 2023) further fuelling this disparity. In particular, my participants who came from an ethnic minority background had specific experiences the White participants did not undertake, for example code-switching (Chapter 4). In light of this, the social dynamics associated with being an ethnic minority also needs to be considered in terms of efforts to facilitate social inclusion and belonging, notably what Crenshaw (1989, p. 139) calls ‘multidimensionality’ in relation to Black women’s lives. This is particularly important within certain contexts, for example where a religious community plays what Pearson and colleagues (2023) call a ‘pervasive’ part of the community.

3 Limitations and Future Directions

The following limitations of the whole project and corresponding future directions for future research (where applicable) that have emerged from the findings of this thesis:

1. Further exploration is required as to how other religious and belief system groups understand and operationalise social inclusion and belonging. Given both Christianity and Islam are both Abrahamic religions, they are likely to have similarities in their theologies and conceptualisations. Other religions, faiths and existential worldviews should be investigated in this light, as well as differences between denominations and sects. Within Chapters 5 and 6, particular denominations were not sought or differentiated apart, which should be in future research.

2. All of the data collection occurred online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Although some participants were able to take part due to the data collection taking place online, in particular participants that outside the South East of England, some potential participants shared that they would not be able to take part due to difficulties using Zoom. A lack of confidence in using technology, unstable or unreliable internet connection, or not having a device that connects to the internet may have also been barriers for potential participants. Future research should also incorporate a face-to-face element for participants who cannot take part online. Furthermore, potential participants should be able to familiarise themselves with the researcher prior to participation. Familiarisation can be achieved through the researcher visiting congregations or other gathering groups.

3. Non-religious identities and worldviews should also be investigated in relation to social inclusion and belonging. As non-religion is not merely the binary opposite of religion (Lee, 2012; 2017), further research should explore the

variety of non-religious existential worldviews with their own merit and validity, rather than being a comparative marker. This is particularly important given the increasing number of people who identify as non-religious (including identifiers such as atheist, agnostic) and the recognition these individuals may have a variety of different existential worldviews (Lee, 2014).

4. It was clear in Chapter 6 that my participants often felt themselves not meeting the standards for the ‘ideal worshipper’ (Jacobs, 2019; Spurrier, 2019). However, it appeared that participants did not always have a reference point of what it meant to be an autistic Christian or autistic Muslim as two examples, without a reference point to ‘not meeting the norms’. In this light, further investigation into what it means to be an autistic Christian, Muslim, or other belief system adherent would be beneficial.

5. Although attempts were made within the study design for Chapters 4 and 6 to be inclusive of non-speakers, the study design would have excluded autistic people who could not use the chat box on Zoom and Teams as a way to take part. Autistic people with intellectual disabilities were also excluded due to the abstract nature of some of the discussions on social inclusion and belonging. Perhaps in light of the abstract nature of some of the discussions and normative expectations, a different approach to research needs to be taken to be able to learn from autistic people with intellectual disabilities in future research. ‘Being with’ autistic people with intellectual disabilities allows for the development of relationships to help researchers learn about what it means to be an autistic person with intellectual disabilities (Grace et al., 2024). Rapport

building and respecting what Grace and colleagues (2024) call 'multiple ways of being and knowing' could assist with deconstructing normative expectations within research encounters.

6. The views and experiences of church and mosque leaders such as ministers, priests and imams were not actively sought or differentiated from the views of other church- or mosque-goers. Church- and mosque-goers, and autistic people under the age of 18 were also not included at this time and their perspectives and experiences in this context would benefit further exploration.

7. It would be beneficial to replicate this study after the COVID-19 pandemic has completely subsided, as views and perspectives on social inclusion and belonging may have been shaped by the ongoing pandemic throughout the data collection of this thesis. I do not believe the context of COVID-19 to be a limitation, however the findings are the most contextualised within this context. Further research after the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided would further develop individuals' understandings of social inclusion and belonging outside of a global pandemic.

4 Recommendations for Practice

Through the findings of this thesis, the following five recommendations for practice for churches and mosques:

1. <u>Training</u>

Training should be available to churches and mosques, which should ideally be led by or done in partnership with autistic people. The content of such training could include: what it means to be autistic, the various intersectional identities autistic people may have, and access needs that should be considered, as well as theological discussion on inclusion and belonging. Where religious leaders have been argued to be able to influence the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs within their religious group (Harmon et al., 2014), it is recommended that leaders of religious groups promote and prioritise this training to help its dissemination among other group members. As attitude change is usually achieved by changing beliefs rather than imparting knowledge (Marsh & Wallace, 2014, p. 369), training should support a paradigm shift in how autistic people are viewed (van Ommen, 2023, p. 92), with a shift toward the neurodiversity paradigm (Raymaker & Walker, 2021). This is in line with how participants in Chapters 4 and 6 perceived autism being integral to who they are (Botha et al., 2022; Cooper et al., 2021) and being value neutral (Botha et al, 2022), wherein the neurodiversity paradigm is ‘value neutral’ (Botha et al., 2022; Kapp et al., 2013). In fact, Pearson and colleagues (2023) recommend that an understanding of the neurodiversity paradigm within churches in particular may help break the hegemony of normalcy. Autistic people being at the helm of the training supports ideas of allowing for an ‘epistemic break’ (van Ommen, 2023). An epistemic break occurs when non-normative knowledge is understood as valid knowledge, and is the opposite of epistemic conformity[4]. Perceiving knowledge from sources

[4] Galbraith (2024, p. 158) describes epistemic conformity as the ‘preservation of what is normative and therefore true’.

not understood to be normative is an important part of giving autistic people a voice where they have not previously (Fricker, 2007). This allows churches and mosques to learn from the edge (Tamminga et al., 2020), where in this case some autistic people are placed on the edge of churches and mosques due to being excluded from such spaces physically and socially.

2. Clearer identification of values and practices

   Spaces that are affirming of autistic people and the other identities they have (e.g., LGBTQIA+, ethnic minority) should be more clearly demarcated and identifiable, so that autistic people wishing to join a church or mosque know can identify these spaces more easily. Some certification schemes do exist (e.g., Inclusive Church, 2024b), however schemes do not exist for all religious groups and it is not always clear to what extent such a certification identifies churches or mosques as ‘autism friendly’ or ‘autism affirming’. One solution could be a more holistic report including the church’s or mosque’s values, an example prayer meeting or service that is accessible online. This would allow for individuals to find a church or mosque closer to their own identity standards and values. It has been argued how making spaces and settings more accessible to autistic people and other disabled people, such as this recommendation, meaning that non-autistic and non-disabled individuals will benefit from these changes (Oliver, 1999). It is also important to note at this point that not all churches and mosques have the intention of including individuals they might consider as ‘counternormative’, including autistic people, despite calling themselves ‘welcoming’.

It was also clear in Chapters 4 and 6 that sometimes online spaces or spaces with other autistic people can be more conducive to feelings of social inclusion and belonging. Caution should however be taken not to steer all autistic people into an ‘autistic only’ space, as findings in Chapter 4 and 6 indicate the heterogeneity of identities and values that autistic people can have. Furthermore, creating and steering individuals into a segregated space in this manner would echo Swinton’s (2012) ‘thin inclusion’ and other theological arguments against complete segregation by identity or support needs (e.g., Volf, 2019; Williams, 2023).

3. Supporting ‘fringe’ groups

   Other religious spaces (such as small groups and online groups) should be supported by the larger religious institutions both as spaces meaningful to religious participation, and as a source of education, echoing Tamminga and colleagues’ (2020) assertion about learning from the edge. This knowledge exchange can support training as well as providing a space that might be closer to some autistic people’s identity standards (e.g., Joan in Chapter 6 as one example of a participant who benefitted from such groups). Two examples of similar space are the Living Edge Conference (Inclusive Church, 2024c) and groups run by Church for All (n.d.), however this is Christian centric and similar spaces should be encouraged in other religions.

4. Resource bank

   It was clear in Chapter 5 that participants knew a little about autism, but felt they could have known more. This particular finding echoes findings from

Waldock & Forrester-Jones (2020), where the national autism guidelines by Memmott (2021) were not well known. Training should include signposting to these guidelines, and church and mosque leaders and volunteers should receive access to a resource bank, which should include Memmott’s (2021) guidelines and other resources written by autistic writers, academics and practitioners.

5. A research network

   There is currently little dialogue on autism and religion within the social sciences and Critical Autism Studies, with much scholarship to-date coming from practical and pastoral theology. Considering little has changed since Creamer’s (2009) statement on the apparent disjoint between disability studies (including Critical Autism Studies) and religious studies, further work needs to be encouraged in this field. Although pastoral and practical theology give important and useful scholarship on this topic, further growth through using sociological and social psychological theories and approaches would inform new future research questions for both theologians and social scientists, and further facilitate knowledge production. A network should be set up to foster future research encouraging work within the social sciences and religious studies on disability, religion and neurodivergence.

5 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore the social inclusion and belonging of autistic people within churches and mosques. It sought to explore the interface between identity and

social inclusion and belonging, notably the barriers that autistic people face, where the limits to social inclusion and belonging exist and if autistic and religious identities are indeed compatible. Through the findings of the three empirical chapters, I found that stigma and normalcy within churches and mosque create ‘autistic deviants’. Furthermore, I found that churches and mosques can be ‘cults of normalcy’ whereby individuals who are deviant and/or not useful are ‘problems to be solved’ (Reynolds, 2012b). In addition, this thesis found how espoused theologies of social inclusion and belonging may not be congruent with operant theologies of social inclusion and belonging. Operant theologies of social inclusion and belonging were found to be highly normative (echoing Dunlop, 2021), allowing for a ‘cult of normalcy’ to be created and practiced. Where autistic people may transgress the ‘cult of normalcy’ and are 'autistic deviants’ within their church or mosque, they are made ‘impossible subjects’ (Abraham, 2009; Jennings, 2018; Ngai, 2004) and their autistic and religious identities made incompatible through this ‘impossibility’.

This thesis also found how autistic people may counteract being made ‘impossible subjects’, through using identity control (Burke, 1991; 2007) to facilitate their social inclusion and belonging. In addition, the findings of this thesis demonstrate some level of similarity with the experiences of other individuals who have counternormative identities, notably with LGBTQIA+ individuals.

5.1 Original contribution

Only one study focusing on autism was found to meet the inclusion criteria for the systematic review in Chapter 2 (Lowery, 2016), which notably centred only on experiences within Christianity. More broadly, it appears that the views of parents

(Howell & Pierson, 2010; Lowery, 2016; Moerschbacher, 2019; O’Hanlon, 2013; Terry, 2015) or other congregants (Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020) has often been sought. Literature that has been published since the systematic review also includes aspects on autistic people’s experiences in church services (van Ommen & Endress, 2022; van Ommen, 2023), and factors that influence inclusion (e.g., Ault et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2016; Rice, 2019) however these also remain focused within a Christian context.

This abundance of papers on Christianity in comparison to other religions and belief systems reflects what could be called a ‘Christian bias’ (Nadal et al., 2015), with other religious and belief system groups remaining understudied in comparison to Christianity. Through also including Muslims in this thesis, not only have I been able to investigate another religion’s views and perspectives toward social inclusion and belonging and autistic people’s experiences within Islam, I have been able to find similarities and draw comparisons between Christianity and Islam. In this manner, this thesis contributes to the field of comparative religion (Paden, 2005, p. 208), and comparativism, which explores religion as ‘patterned phenomenon of human culture and behavior’ (Paden, 2005, p. 213).

Further echoing the ‘Christian bias’ within the English-speaking literature, only churches have been previously theorised to be ‘cults of normalcy’ (Reynolds, 2012b). These findings demonstrate how normative theologies do not only occur within Christianity, and that mosques too can be ‘cults of normalcy’.

Furthermore, where studies have included autistic people as part of their target population (see Carter et al., 2023; Jacobs, 2019), it is not always clear if there are specific experiences to autistic people. Chapter 4 in particular highlights the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012a) as part of experiences where participants did not feel socially included or a sense of belonging, with Chapters 5 and 6 also supporting how autistic people communicating differently adds to experiences of exclusion and being othered.

In relation to the empirical data within Chapter 4 specifically, so far as known, no other study has directly focused on autistic adults’ views and experiences of social inclusion and belonging using primary data, in particular how they are defined. As argued in Chapter 4, this data triangulates the findings of Milton and Sims (2016), where secondary data was used. These findings can inform inclusive and accessible practices outside of religious and belief system contexts, which given how frequently autistic people are excluded from relationships and social groups (Jones et al., 2022), has a vital practical implication and impact.

In addition, throughout the thesis, tangible reflexive practices were embedded as part of the study design into each phase of data collection. Practices such as co-facilitators and critical friends were seldom used in work exploring social inclusion and belonging (e.g., Ault et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2016; Johnson & van Hecke, 2015).

5.2 Returning to the encounter with Simon Peter

In Chapter 1, I introduced an encounter I had with Simon Peter in 2019, a minister at a church I attended, where I had gone to ask him to turn down the volume on the music deck to make church services bearable and accessible to me. I did not have the knowledge I did now, which lead me to being silenced, excluded and left 'at the Gates' (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022) from what was my church since the age of 18. I was rendered an 'impossible subject', a problem to deal with due to not meeting the norms of the 'ideal worshipper', upsetting the current status quo of the church. As an autistic person who has had a similar experience to some of the participants who so graciously shared their stories with me in Chapter 6, it seems fitting to reflect on how what I have learnt through this thesis and how it now makes sense that I was 'impossible'.

I now recognise why my request to Simon Peter was met the way it was. There was a large discrepancy between the group identity standard of the church, and my own identity standard as an autistic person. Worship for them was loud and complex, and that volume, pitch and complexity caused me extreme pain. Sitting outside in the foyer with headphones on physically separated me from the rest of my community. This situation led to me seeking to reduce the discrepancy with my identity standard, by asking for minor changes to the volume. However, with the group standard for the church being enshrined in normalcy, and the challenge my autistic body and brain posed, disrupted the 'cult of normalcy'.

I had been confused, disappointed, and let down by the response I had received from Simon Peter, and in particular how this did not align with church teachings on social inclusion and belonging he had used in his sermons. However, the difference in espoused and operant theologies account for this discrepancy, and remains invisible to those who are not on the outside of normatively set boundaries. I also understand how Simon Peter is a part of what could be called a ‘normative system’, acting in the best interests of the group.

Since 2020, I have found a new home in a disabled and neurodivergent-led ecumenical community, ‘sitting on the edge’ of organised church groups (St Martins-in-the-Fields and Inclusive Church, 2020). Echoing some of my participants in Chapter 6, I found a space closer to my own identity standard (Burke, 1991; 2007). I now know why spaces not aligned to my own identity standard were difficult for me to feel included in, as I did not meet the standards of the ‘ideal worshipper’ and my Christian identity remained unverified. I now know I was ‘made impossible’ by the neuronormative expectations placed upon me as an autistic person, driven by a highly normative operant theology.

I still do not fit within what is traditionally described as ‘church’. ‘My divinely-knit body-mind’ (Jacobs, 2023) still refuses to twist into other people’s shapes. I can still get hurt ‘myself limping to a Banquet table to which I was not invited’ (Jacobs, 2023). In many ways, I still do not belong. However, through redrawing the boundaries of what ‘church’ is for me, I have found a space on the edge which is more comfortable and affirming of my autistic ‘divinely-knit body-mind’ (Jacobs, 2023). Echoing the words of Fiona MacMillan, chair of the Living Edge disability conference planning

team, as quoted by Rev. Dr Suzanne Vernon-Yorke (2020): ‘like in a forest, things [that] struggle to grow in the middle [...] *thrive on the edge".*

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment flyers

Appendix H - Poster - conceptualising belonging;
AUT Version 2, 17/7/20

Call for Participants

Title of study: Exploring ‘belonging’: the views of Autistic people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Humanists.

We are interested in exploring how different cultural groups understand and experience belonging. We are looking for Autistic people to be a part of an online focus group who are:

- Over the age of 18 years old
- Diagnosed or self-identify as **Autistic**
- Able to attend an **online focus group** at a mutually convenient time via computer, smartphone or tablet
- **No particular belief system needed,** but Autistic people with belief systems welcomed to attend

As part of the focus group, you will answer questions around belonging and social inclusion. Participation in this study is voluntary.

If you would like to take part, or find out more information, please email:

Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
kew48@kent.ac.uk

Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk and J.Bradshaw@kent.ac.uk

Appendix G - Poster - conceptualising belonging;
BSC Version 2 17/7/20

Call for Participants

Title of study: Exploring 'belonging': the views of Autistic people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Humanists.

We are interested in exploring how different cultural groups understand and experience belonging. We are looking for people to be a part of an online focus group who are:

- Over the age of 18 years old
- Have followed, or partaken in activities (e.g. meetings, festivals, etc) relevant to your belief system for at least one year
- Able to attend an online focus group at a mutually convenient time via computer, smartphone or tablet
- No knowledge or experience of autism required.

As part of the focus group, you will answer questions around belonging and social inclusion. Participation in this study is voluntary. Only people who share your belief system will be in your group.

If you would like to take part, or find out more information, please email:

Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
kew48@kent.ac.uk

Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk and J.Bradshaw@kent.ac.uk

Can you help with some autistic led research?

TIZARD
University of Kent

Study title: Exploring the stories of social inclusion and belonging of autistic Christians and Muslims and those who used to attend Churches and Mosques

- Are you autistic? (diagnosed or self-identified)
- Have you attended a Mosque in the past?
- Are you over 18 and happy to talk about your experiences?

If so, I would love to hear from you! My name is Krysia, and I am an autistic PhD Candidate.

Taking part would include 2 interviews and a written exercise. This can be done a variety of ways (e.g., video conferencing, email, instant messaging).

If you are interested in finding out more or taking part, please email Krysia:

kew48@kent.ac.uk

Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy & Dr Jill Bradshaw

Appendix 2: Sample Information Sheet, Consent Form, Group Agreement for Confidentiality, Comments Form, Information Sheet for Critical Friends

Tizard Centre, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East, Giles Lane, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF
Researcher: Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
Contact - E: kew48@kent.ac.uk
Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
Contact - E: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk T: 01227 827997

Information Sheet

Title of study: Exploring ‘belonging’: the views of Autistic people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Humanists.

I am Krysia Waldock. I am a PhD Candidate in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the University of Kent.

I am researching the experiences and understanding of belonging and social inclusion of different belief systems (e.g. Christian, Muslim, Humanist, Hindu) and Autistic people in the UK. I am conducting a research study on the above topic and would appreciate your participation in my study.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not wish to. Before you decide if you would like to take part, it is important that you know what it will involve:

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how different cultures understand and experience belonging. This group you have been invited to is exploring how Autistic people understand, experience and conceptualise belonging and social inclusion.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

You have been invited to take part as an Autistic person (self-identified or formally diagnosed) over the age of 18 who has access to a computer. You do not have to have a particular belief system or faith to take part, and you will not have to disclose or discuss your belief system in the focus group, but you are welcome to discuss these topics if you wish to.

What will be required from me as a participant?

To participate in this study, you will take part in a focus group, facilitated by Krysia via online conferencing software. The focus group will have up to 6 other people, who will all be Autistic too. It will last up to 2 hrs. Krysia will email a schedule and the list of topics she will cover before the focus group, so you have some time to think about what you might like to say. There will be an instant messaging facility available in the focus group. We will also have breaks during the focus group. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the topics or questions asked. You do not have to answer all the questions. The focus group will be recorded with a Dictaphone and by online conferencing software.

If you need help accessing or downloading the online conferencing, please email Krysia up to 48hrs before the arranged focus group time. She can then assist you.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary; you do not have to take part if you do not wish to. You are free to withdraw your interest in the focus group without any reason.

Will what I say be kept confidential? Will I be able to be identified?

All that you say and/or that is mentioned during the focus group will be kept confidential by the main researcher, unless you disclose that you are at risk of danger or harm. No participants will be identifiable in the research, including in subsequent papers and presentations. You will remain anonymous and you may use a pseudonym while using the online conferencing software if you wish. If you do, please let Krysia know via email. All data collected by the researcher will be kept on a password protected computer in a password protected file. Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the password protected computer, files and Dictaphone. When this study is written up you will be given a pseudonym and during any future presentations or publication you will only be referred to by your pseudonym.

What will happen with my information?

Your information will not be used for anything other than this study, all data will be made anonymous and only I and my supervisors will have access to identifying information

Details of the University's GDPR policy can be found here:
https://research.kent.ac.uk/researchservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/12/GDPR-Privacy-Notice-Research-updated.pdf

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of this study will be reported back to you in an accessible format ensuring that no participants are identified. The findings may also be published in a journal.

What happens if I wish to make a make a complaint?

You will be given a form at the end of your involvement, so that you can give feedback or make a complaint. In addition, at any time, you can contact my supervisor Professor Michelle McCarthy by email: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk .

Alternatively you can contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee, Room CE221, Cornwallis East, Tizard Centre (SSPSSR), Canterbury, CT2 7NF, Telephone: +44(0)1227 827772 email: e.lukehurst@kent.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Krysia Waldock

Tizard Centre, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East, Giles Lane, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF
Researcher: Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
Contact - E: kew48@kent.ac.uk
Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
Contact - E: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk T: 01227 827997

Group Agreement for Maintaining Confidentiality

Title of study: Exploring ‘belonging’: the views of Autistic people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Humanists.

This form is intended to further ensure confidentiality of data obtained during the above titled study. All participants give consent to the following:

☐ I agree to not communicate or disclose publicly information (e.g. taking a recording or pictures, sharing a recording, talking what others have said) discussed during the course of this focus group interview.

☐ I agree not to talk about information shared by other participants (including confidential information) with anyone outside my fellow group members and the research team.

Name: ____
Signature: ____

Now please return this to the researcher at kew48@kent.ac.uk

(From N. King and C. Horrocks (2010) *Interviews in Qualitative Research,* (p.70), London: Sage.)

Appendix D - Consent form – conceptualising belonging;
Version 2, 17/7/20

Tizard Centre, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East, Giles Lane, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF
Researcher: Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
Contact - E: kew48@ kent.ac.uk
Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
Contact - E: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk T: 01227 827997

Consent form

Title of study: Exploring 'belonging': the views of Autistic people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Humanists.

Thank you for considering to take part in this research. If you have any questions, please ask the researcher before you decide to take part.

Please tick each statement, then sign and date the form to give consent.

I have read and understood the information provided on the information sheet ☐

My questions have been answered to my satisfaction ☐

I understand I can withdraw from the project any time up until the focus group commences ☐

I understand my participation is voluntary ☐

I understand quotes may be used from this focus group in presenting the research but I will not be identifiable ☐

I understand if I reveal that I am or someone I know, is at risk of harm, the researcher will need to pass this on ☐

I agree to take part in the study and participate in a focus group ☐

I agree to have my contribution recorded ☐

Name	Signature	Date

When the consent form has been signed, please return it to the researcher at kew48@kent.ac.uk

Tizard Centre, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East, Giles Lane, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF
Researcher: Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
Contact - E: kew48@kent.ac.uk
Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
Contact - E: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk T: 01227 827997

Comments Form

Title of study: Exploring ‘belonging’: the views of Autistic people, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Humanists.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in a focus group facilitated by Krysia Waldock to help with their research.

We hope that everything was alright when you talked to Krysia. We would be interested in any comments you would like to make, positive or negative.

When things go well, we like to encourage researchers by giving them good feedback.
But if things don’t go well, it will help us to know this.

Please send any comments you have to:

Liz Lukehurst

Secretary of the Ethics Committee

Room CE221

Cornwallis East

Tizard Centre (SSPSSR)

Canterbury

CT2 7NF

Telephone: +44(0)1227 827772

Email: e.lukehurst@kent.ac.uk

Thank you once again for helping the Tizard Centre with our research.

Tizard Centre Research Ethics Committee

Tizard Centre, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East, Giles Lane, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF
Researcher: Krysia Waldock (PhD Candidate)
Contact - E: kew48@kent.ac.uk
Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
Contact - E: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk T: 01227 827997

Q & A for Critical Friends

Title of study: Exploring 'belonging': the stories of current and former autistic Christians and Muslims.

I am Krysia Waldock. I am a PhD Candidate in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the University of Kent. I am researching the stories of belonging and social inclusion of autistic people with different belief systems (Christian, Muslim, Humanist, Hindu) in the UK. I am conducting a research study on the above topic and have approached you as an 'expert by experience' in one of the belief system groups I am researching.

This information sheet is to give you further information on what being a critical friend would entail. You would not be a participant in the study, but would be advising me on certain aspects.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore social inclusion and belonging through stories of current and former autistic Christians and Muslims. This will be through 2 interviews and a written response.

What is the role of a critical friend?

A critical friend is an advisor who is usually part of a project which involves action research or participatory research. You would be involved as an expert by experience to assist with the cultural sensitivity of questions I may ask, and to ensure (if you are autistic), that the questions and other materials I use are accessible for autistic people. Although I am autistic, I am in academia and therefore may not spot things which may not work for potential participants.

In the academic literature, critical friends are often poorly defined and this information sheet aims to make the role and its remit clearer. However please do not hesitate to ask any further questions if you have any ☺ I want to know if anything is unclear and happy to clarify these.

What kind of tasks may I advise on?

The tasks will include:

- Checking the draft schedule I will use with participants for cultural sensitivity and accessibility
- Answering questions on the meanings of topics or phenomena discussed within interviews or written responses
- Checking the advertisement materials I have
- Confirming and verifying my understanding of language used by participants during analysis
- Giving cultural knowledge of your belief system where required.

You would not have access to the data for this study – I will hold the data on a secure system but provide context for any questions I have. Any information shared would be anonymised from the original data source.

How will I input?

In a medium you feel most comfortable with. I am happy to send emails with questions, or ask for a short meeting on Zoom or Teams, or use the instant messaging feature on these platforms. I cannot take phone calls due to my own severe social anxiety, however I am happy to do a 'phone call' style meeting on Teams or Zoom.

How often will my input be needed?

The input will be flexible.

Will I be reimbursed for my time?

Yes. I consider it a privilege to work with individuals who are experts by experience, and you should rightly be reimbursed for the skills and knowledge you are bringing to this project. I will confirm the exact reimbursement with you if you are interested (I need to do some extra maths as I have extra funding left over this year from my 3rd study). I anticipate this to be between £20-£30, however may be more.

Will I be acknowledged in any papers and the thesis?

You will be, if you are comfortable with this. If you are not comfortable, please do let me know. I will confirm this with you prior to any submissions. You can change your mind at any time.

Do I have to undertake this role?

Absolutely not – if you do not have capacity currently or you have changed your mind, please just email me (email is the best way to contact me about work).

Will what I say be kept confidential?

Everything you say will be kept confidential by me, and I will not be sharing the contents of our correspondence with my supervisors. Conversations will occur on password protected platforms, or meetings with passwords. I will also use headphones if in meetings where we use speech to communicate.

What will happen with any information you hold on me?

Your information will not be used for anything other than this study; all data collected from you will be made anonymous and only I will have access to identifying information. All emails and other correspondence will be deleted at the end of my PhD.

Details of the University's GDPR policy can be found here:
https://research.kent.ac.uk/researchservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/12/GDPR-Privacy-Notice-Research-updated.pdf

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of this study will be reported back to you in an accessible format ensuring that no participants are identified. The findings may also be published in a journal.

What happens if something goes wrong?
Firstly please do reach out to me over email if there are any problems, and I will happily try and solve them. If you are not comfortable with this, at any time you can contact my supervisor Professor Michelle McCarthy by email: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk . Michelle works on Wednesdays and Fridays so will reply to your email on her next working day.

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide about the critical friends role.

Krysia Waldock

Appendix 3: Focus Group and Interview Schedules

Focus group schedule – Autistic focus groups

Main questions numbered.

Introduction

Questions

1 Introductions: what we should call you in the focus group, pronouns we are to use?

Section 1 – 30-40 mins
Show definition:
2 Social inclusion can be defined as ‘the ability to take part in the activities of a society and to feel a part of that society’

Possible prompts
What do you think social inclusion means?
What do you think social inclusion means for autistic people?
Is there anything missing from this definition?
Is there anything in this definition that you do not think is part of social inclusion?
Can you think of some examples of social inclusion?
Can you tell me about a time in your life where you felt socially included?

3 Using what we have just discussed, can you describe your experiences of being socially included?

SUMMARY – as per bottom – of part 1

BREAK IF NEEDED

Section 2 – 30-40 mins
Show definition:
4 Belonging can be defined as ‘to feel happy or comfortable in a situation’ and ‘A secure relationship; affinity (especially in the phrase a sense of belonging)’

Possible prompts
What do you think belonging means?
What do you think belonging means for autistic people?
Is there anything missing from this definition?
Is there anything in this definition that you do not think is part of belonging?
Can you think of some examples of belonging?
Can you tell me about a time in your life where you felt like you belonged?

5 Using what we have just discussed, can you describe your experiences when you have felt a sense of belonging?

SUMMARY – as per bottom – of part 2

BREAK IF NEEDED

Section 3 – 40-50 mins

6 Tell me about your experiences when you have been or felt excluded?

7 What could help you be more socially included?

8 What could help you feel like you belong ?

9 COVID: How has what we discussed so far changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?

10 Which of these changes should continue after the pandemic?

11 How have you stayed on contact with people during the pandemic?

Summary of part 3

12 Is that a representative summary of our discussion today? Is there anything anyone would like to add?

END

Focus group schedule – Belief system groups

Main questions numbered.

Introduction

Questions

1 Introductions: what we should call you in the focus group, pronouns we are to use?

Show definition:
2 Social inclusion can be defined as ‘the ability to take part in the activities of a society and to feel a part of that society’

Possible prompts
What do you think social inclusion means?
What do you think social inclusion means for [INSERT BELIEF SYSTEM]?
Is there anything missing from this definition?
Is there anything in this definition that you do not think is part of social inclusion?
Can you think of some examples of social inclusion?
Can you tell me about a time in your life where you felt socially included?

3 Using what we have just discussed, can you describe your experiences of being socially included?

SUMMARY – as per bottom – of part 1

BREAK IF NEEDED

Show definition:
4 Belonging can be defined as ‘to feel happy or comfortable in a situation’ and ‘A secure relationship; affinity (especially in the phrase a sense of belonging)’

Possible prompts
What do you think belonging means?
What do you think belonging means for [INSERT BELIEF SYSTEM]?
Is there anything missing from this definition?
Is there anything in this definition that you do not think is part of belonging?
Can you think of some examples of belonging?
Can you tell me about a time in your life where you felt like you belonged?

5 Using what we have just discussed, can you describe your experiences when you have felt a sense of belonging?

6 Do you think social inclusion and belonging are important to [INSERT NAME OF BELIEF SYSTEM] Why?

SUMMARY – as per bottom – of part 2

2 *I’d now like to show and tell you a story about a person and a visit to an in-person gathering/meeting for your belief system. After I have shared this, I have some questions for you.*

“You are attending a gathering for your belief system and you notice someone you’ve not seen before turn up.

On the 1st time attending a gathering, a person arrives early and takes a seat closest to the door. The person doesn’t give other group attendees eye contact and keeps themselves to themselves. They often will be playing on their phone, fiddling with their fingers or reading a book before the gathering officially starts. Each subsequent gathering, the person enters at almost exactly the same time, takes the same position in the room, in exactly the same way as the person did the first time. The person never speaks in the gatherings. When there are loud noises, for example music to share or videos, the person will cover their ears and hunch over very quickly. If metaphors are used in talks in the gathering, the person is confused by the use of metaphor. After the gathering, when others meet for coffee or exchange how the week went, this person tries to engage other group members in conversation. However they end up talking over others excitedly about a deep interest of theirs, very loudly. Other group members ignore the person, and turn their back on this person. After this conversation does not go well, they do not approach others anymore and leave as soon as the gathering has finished. “

What are your initial thoughts about this person?
How do you feel towards this person? Why?
How do you think others with the same belief system as you would feel towards this person?
How would you welcome this person into your belief system/gathering? How would you make them feel included? (If a positive answer)
How do you think your group/people with the same beliefs as you would include this person in the gathering?

How would welcoming this person differ in an online context?
How would you behave towards this person?
How do you think others would behave towards this person?
Do you think this person enjoyed the gathering? Can you tell me what parts?
Would you consider this person a part of your gathering? Why/Why not?

Please note, this vignette is autistic coded, however we as facilitators will not be saying this. We want to see what the participants make of this in their own words. Please do not steer them towards or away from them identifying the vignette.
Some participants may be autistic, and others will not be. They are likely to use their own lived experience to make sense of the vignette.

END

Study 4 interview guide

Interview 1

Introduction, clarify point and structure of interview, consent form, any questions, okay to be recorded?

Main story question: Please tell me your experiences in (insert belief system here) as an autistic (name of identifier – e.g., Christian). You can tell me things about:

- Your story as an autistic (identifier), including
    - Events which are important
    - Spaces you have attended
    - Interactions you had
    - People who shaped your story positively or negatively
    - When you realised or found out you were autistic
- Your story can be long and detailed as you wish, and there is no right or wrong story I am looking for.

Listen – active listening to allow the storyteller to narrate. Cues of active listening to encourage the narrator to keep going will be executed, as online execution of this study with autistic people will need more active encouragement to keep people talking.

Narrative follow up after the story has finished: - can be combined with the writing response question – give choice

- Use the story tellers own words! Here are some examples….

Asking about certain events
Asking about certain spaces
Asking about adjustments or lack of
Example follow up questions:

- Can you tell me more about your time with xxx? What have they done ‘right’?
- What adjustments did xxxxx provide?
- What adjustments were missing from your time in the xxxx?
- Can you tell me more about how has/have your theology/beliefs changed - what events specifically lead to changes in your beliefs?
- Could you reconfirm when you were identified/diagnosed as autistic?
- Were there other factors other than those you mentioned, that lead to you feeling excluded from xxx you attended?
- Were there other factors other than those you mentioned, that lead to you feeling included in xxx you attended?
- Can you clarify if you stopped attending xxx? If so, when?
- Were there times when attending xxx felt like a performance??What does this mean for you?
- Can you tell me more about times you felt included/like you belonged at xxx?

Written response:
What does being autistic mean to you?

You should write no more than 500 words, but you can write as much or as little as you would like.

You can write a response in a word document, or you can send me a voice note. You can complete this at a time convenient to you after your first interview. Krysia will use the response to build some questions for the second interview, which they will send in advance.

There is no right or wrong answer. The sort of things you could reflect on include:
- How you experience the world
- What positives or barriers you experience
- How you feel about being autistic
- How being autistic is influenced by other parts of your life or other parts of you

Interview 2
Unstructured interview to clarify and get more information from the written prompt. Questions to be pre-prepared and sent in advance and tailored to each interview if requested to keep the unstructured nature but to give processing time.

Do questions after seeing responses for each participant – stories.

Example questions – please note these are only examples and provide a flavour of what **could** be asked :
- Have you always felt this about being autistic? Can you tell me more about this?
- Are there other factors which have influenced what being autistic means to you, e.g., intersectionalities? Can you tell me about these?
- How has this changed since you left (xyz)?

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Contact - E: kew48@kent.ac.uk
Supervisors: Professor Michelle McCarthy and Dr Jill Bradshaw
Contact - E: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk T: 01227 827997

Q & A for Critical Friends

Title of study: Exploring ‘belonging’: the stories of current and former autistic Christians and Muslims.

I am Krysia Waldock. I am a PhD Candidate in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the University of Kent. I am researching the stories of belonging and social inclusion of autistic people with different belief systems (Christian, Muslim, Humanist, Hindu) in the UK. I am conducting a research study on the above topic and have approached you as an ‘expert by experience’ in one of the belief system groups I am researching.

This information sheet is to give you further information on what being a critical friend would entail. You would not be a participant in the study, but would be advising me on certain aspects.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore social inclusion and belonging through stories of current and former autistic Christians and Muslims. This will be through 2 interviews and a written response.

What is the role of a critical friend?

A critical friend is an advisor who is usually part of a project which involves action research or participatory research. You would be involved as an expert by experience to assist with the cultural sensitivity of questions I may ask, and to ensure (if you are autistic), that the questions and other materials I use are accessible for autistic people. Although I am autistic, I am in academia and therefore may not spot things which may not work for potential participants.

In the academic literature, critical friends are often poorly defined and this information sheet aims to make the role and its remit clearer. However please do not hesitate to ask any further questions if you have any ☺ I want to know if anything is unclear and happy to clarify these.

What kind of tasks may I advise on?

The tasks will include:

- Checking the draft schedule I will use with participants for cultural sensitivity and accessibility
- Answering questions on the meanings of topics or phenomena discussed within interviews or written responses
- Checking the advertisement materials I have
- Confirming and verifying my understanding of language used by participants during analysis
- Giving cultural knowledge of your belief system where required.

You would not have access to the data for this study – I will hold the data on a secure system but provide context for any questions I have. Any information shared would be anonymised from the original data source.

How will I input?

In a medium you feel most comfortable with. I am happy to send emails with questions, or ask for a short meeting on Zoom or Teams, or use the instant messaging feature on these platforms. I cannot take phone calls due to my own severe social anxiety, however I am happy to do a 'phone call' style meeting on Teams or Zoom.

How often will my input be needed?

The input will be flexible.

Will I be reimbursed for my time?

Yes. I consider it a privilege to work with individuals who are experts by experience, and you should rightly be reimbursed for the skills and knowledge you are bringing to this project. I will confirm the exact reimbursement with you if you are interested (I need to do some extra maths as I have extra funding left over this year from my 3rd study). I anticipate this to be between £20-£30, however may be more.

Will I be acknowledged in any papers and the thesis?

You will be, if you are comfortable with this. If you are not comfortable, please do let me know. I will confirm this with you prior to any submissions. You can change your mind at any time.

Do I have to undertake this role?

Absolutely not – if you do not have capacity currently or you have changed your mind, please just email me (email is the best way to contact me about work).

Will what I say be kept confidential?

Everything you say will be kept confidential by me, and I will not be sharing the contents of our correspondence with my supervisors. Conversations will occur on password protected platforms, or meetings with passwords. I will also use headphones if in meetings where we use speech to communicate.

What will happen with any information you hold on me?

Your information will not be used for anything other than this study; all data collected from you will be made anonymous and only I will have access to identifying information. All emails and other correspondence will be deleted at the end of my PhD.

Details of the University’s GDPR policy can be found here: https://research.kent.ac.uk/researchservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/12/GDPR-Privacy-Notice-Research-updated.pdf

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of this study will be reported back to you in an accessible format ensuring that no participants are identified. The findings may also be published in a journal.

What happens if something goes wrong?
Firstly please do reach out to me over email if there are any problems, and I will happily try and solve them. If you are not comfortable with this, at any time you can contact my supervisor Professor Michelle McCarthy by email: M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk . Michelle works on Wednesdays and Fridays so will reply to your email on her next working day.

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide about the critical friends role.

Krysia Waldock

Appendix 4: Sample of Thematic Analysis (Chapter 4/5)

Sample coding

general. And then, that’s kind of medicalised by the superman – not the superman as in like the superhero, but the ‘more man than a man’ version of autism. Whereas for me like, not really… I didn’t really feel I belonged within my gender either, not necessarily identifying as another, and like, I was always more interested in books and learning things than other people. And so um, not really identifying with the social groups of gender um, just that I didn’t really feel I belonged in a male-dominated autistic community. Because um, like at my [type of] school, they had people who were diagnosed as autistic, but they did present this stereotypical version of it. And they couldn’t- they weren’t very nice to other people. They struggled with all these things and I thought ‘oh I’m not like them, I’m not like them’. Like, there’s no way that I’m autistic. But then when you look at the diagnosis process as it is, now with the ASD diagnosis system, it just seems so much easier for people who don’t um, present within the binary.

Lisa: Yeah, I do find it quite ironic that um, this idea of female autism has become, it’s such a- it’s – as far as I know it’s quite recent and being seen as this huge step in progress, where we have now this entirely new understanding, and it can be so much more different for women, this is now going to liberate us to diagnose women and make things easier for women and it’s like; well, actually, that view is-is just holding us back in a different way. ‘Cause … it’s just like- a different presentation of autism and (Ian, Jenna and Harry nod) and labelling it ‘female’ it almost just as unhelpful as not recognising it at all, in some ways.

Jenna: Yeah, um. I am a um, trustee of a charity that works with um aut-, yeah that’s sort of um, autism in women and girls, it’s view. I have struggled with the fact that they call it (gestures quotation marks) female autism (stops gesturing) because it’s – that’s’- I mean it’s kind of a simplification that is more digestible for people who are not really um… just-just the fact you know, the tendency to present a certain way. Just like women in general are more likely to present in this way or uh uh, more likely to present in this other way. But like, I yeah, Just-just this whole … (sighs) I’m not really sure how to… it-it kind of bothers me, um, but I don’t really know the best way to, like, counteract it. I mean I do say – I’ve given presentations and I say like, you know, ‘there’s not really a female… there’s not any such thing as female autism because, you know, men and boys can present in this sort of way. (Harry nods). But, yeah, gendered autism yikes exactly!

Ian: Do you think that its’ more indicative of the way that children are socialised or, than it is to do with the way that autism varies between us? (Harry, Lisa and Jenna nod)

Jenna: Yeah, I’m sure that has something to do with it, because like, I mean, I don’t know, but it’s -it seems like girls are punished, or like um, reprimanded for things that are more tolerated when they come from boys. (Ian nods). Like, just sort of, it seems like boys are more allowed to sort of not be … very … you know, like-like social um, I don’t know what to call it, (sighs) lack of social fluency is-seems more tolerated in boys. But like, if you’re – it seems like, obviously I wasn’t brought up as a boy, I didn’t really grow up– I didn’t have any brothers, so I can’t really say for sure, but I-I do get the impression that um… like, you know, if you’re a girl, and you fail socially, then you are more likely to be told ‘no, that’s wrong, don’t do that’ and that that seems to – I imagine, um… it seems very … understandable that that will lead to more like anxiety um, presentation. Like because, like because anxiety in autistic girls and women is such a… that’s not to say it’s a- it doesn’t occur in autistic men

Coding Density
Struggle with lockdown
Understanding as inclusion
Lack of knowledge
Double empathy problem
Different presentations
Gaslighting
Impact of outdated information
Meaningful socialisation
Up-to-date understanding of autism
Incomplete guidance
Deteriorating health
Impact of perceived gender roles
No felt judgement
Be authentic
Secure relationship
Vague definition - social inclusion
Non-normative group expectations
Lost in translation
Being valued
Often excluded
Onus on individual
Non conformers as other
Forced empathy
Navigating new rules
Boys getting more slack
Role of confidence
Internalised ableism
Assumption over choice

Sample Themes and Codes from NVivo

Name	Files	References	Created on
A bidirectional relationship	0	0	5 Jul 2021 at 16:13:50
Autistic voice	0	0	5 Jul 2021 at 15:40:17
Adjustments with agency	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 14:45:11
Agency in action taken	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 15:55:56
Assumption over choice	1	2	19 Apr 2021 at 15:01:04
Being more selective	1	2	23 Feb 2021 at 14:19:13
Being yourself as powerful	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:29:06
Challenging power	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:01:03
Choice in the 'society' you wish to be part of	2	2	16 Feb 2021 at 16:10:34
Comfortable in own space	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 14:07:23
De-stigmatising stimming	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 13:38:50
Diagnosis providing explanation	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:02:28
Giving self agency	1	2	29 Apr 2021 at 15:28:03
Growth	2	2	17 Feb 2021 at 13:20:14
Identity belonging	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:26:48
Inclusion without stakeholders	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:03:13
Incomplete explanation	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:06:03
Interrupting felt stigma	1	2	23 Feb 2021 at 13:33:46
Knowing identity impact	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:24:39
Lack of opportunity	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:31:34
Meaningful inclusion	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:39:06
Meaningful socialisation	4	14	23 Feb 2021 at 14:47:06
Moving pressure on individual to opportunity and choice	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 15:23:28
Opportunity	2	4	16 Feb 2021 at 16:02:00
Opportunity to be within society	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 16:04:55
Perception	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 15:37:43
Personal growth	2	5	23 Feb 2021 at 14:08:13
Rejecting obligations	1	2	16 Feb 2021 at 15:39:43
Repriotisation of relationships	2	2	23 Feb 2021 at 14:15:49
Role of confidence	1	2	24 Mar 2021 at 15:34:30
Secure in self	1	6	19 Feb 2021 at 11:05:03

Self discovery	1	3	29 Apr 2021 at 15:48:06
Self knowledge important	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:25:49
Self-expression	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 16:07:55
Self-segregation	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 15:53:51
Sense of belonging to self	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:48:30
Stakeholder say	1	4	16 Feb 2021 at 16:26:12
Time to figure out self	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:26:44
Togetherness	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 14:49:13
Understanding self	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:39:19
Breakdown	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 13:58:28
Autistic lead groups not uniform	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:42:52
Differing understandings	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:11:35
Diversity as missed	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:06:12
Exclusion as omnipresent	1	3	29 Apr 2021 at 15:07:42
Exclusion can be felt one way	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:23:13
Idiosyncratic outcome	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:26:49
Inclusion limited by understanding	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:12:43
Inequitable access	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 13:41:19
Justifying self	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 15:38:09
Monodirectional fitting standards	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:08:35
No grey area re inclusion	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 10:52:47
Outsiders as not always inclusive	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:43:52
Unpredictable inclusion	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 14:52:00
Interactional	0	0	5 Jul 2021 at 16:44:57
'Chicken egg situation'	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 15:36:40
'Welcome to our world'	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:28:47
Ability vs accessibility	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 15:22:19
Ableism	3	7	16 Feb 2021 at 15:29:11
Barrier to communication	1	2	19 Feb 2021 at 13:26:29
Barriers to access	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:27:34
Belonging as interpersonal	1	2	18 Apr 2021 at 13:33:28
Bidirectional nature of belonging	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 13:42:09
Bidirectional nature of social inclusion	2	4	23 Mar 2021 at 18:56:24
Bidirectionality	2	2	17 Feb 2021 at 14:11:30

Breaking social rules	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:23:18
Breaking unknown rules	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:57:46
Broke NT code	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:18:43
Code-switching	1	2	24 Mar 2021 at 13:26:25
Collective society power	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 15:17:47
Common sense vs Autistic common sense	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:39:48
Communication breakdown	3	6	19 Feb 2021 at 14:08:02
Comparing to others	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:06:26
Concealing ableism	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 13:33:04
Different lived experience	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 12:02:01
Double empathy problem	2	7	24 Feb 2021 at 15:25:17
Emotional labour	3	4	19 Feb 2021 at 12:58:19
Enablement	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 14:33:16
Enlightened ableism	1	2	13 Apr 2021 at 15:36:49
Ensure all included	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:00:45
Exclusion as unfair	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:09:48
Exclusionary definition	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 15:00:28
Fear	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:37:37
Feeling friendship vs perceiving friendship by others	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:24:00
Following own rules	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:53:52
Forced empathy	2	4	23 Feb 2021 at 15:20:36
Friendship as part of SI	1	4	28 Apr 2021 at 19:50:27
Guessing tacit NT knowledge	1	2	29 Apr 2021 at 15:12:46
Imbalance in power	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:16:41
Impossible	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:34:23
Incomplete guidance	1	3	28 Apr 2021 at 19:28:14
Interaction as part of SI	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:45:55
Interactional nature of SI	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:53:11
Internal struggle	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:02:12
Internalised ableism	1	3	23 Apr 2021 at 13:47:57
Internalised ableism as a barrier to understanding	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:16:30
Internalised social desirability	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:22:01
Intersubjective feeling	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 14:02:29
Irony	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:02:42
Lack of equity	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:19:28
Less perceived effort of NTs	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:04:47

My role in belonging	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:40:04
Need for self-education	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:36:17
Normalisation	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 15:51:14
Not bidirectional	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:10:27
NT reporting ND self-excluding	1	2	19 Apr 2021 at 15:11:40
Obligational inclusion	1	2	16 Feb 2021 at 15:39:08
Obligational socialisation	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 14:33:18
Onus on individual	4	9	16 Feb 2021 at 14:53:59
Others can be more imaginative to include us	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:49:09
Others unsure how to interact	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:41:31
Overcompensating	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:44:23
People as key in SI	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:47:42
Permission to take part	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 20:21:45
Power imbalance	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 16:10:29
Pressure to belong	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:43:17
Role of power	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:24:44
Shot in the dark	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:16:53
Social interaction as hard	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:13:23
Social model of disability	1	1	23 Mar 2021 at 19:30:56
Social norms as barriers	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:11:12
Supporting to be included	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 14:55:53
Telling autistic how to suck eggs	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 13:55:27
Turned on its head	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:08:07
Uncomfortable	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:47:18
Unsure why not invited	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:07:56
Wish to interact	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:34:23
Barriers	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 15:14:23
Cultural	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 15:14:54
'How society is' - systemic	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 15:05:53
Apathy	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:11:30
Arbitary lines	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:10:40
Authority role in rejection	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:31:53
Autistic groups very white	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:03:47
Awareness of own culture in inclusion	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:50:38
Boys getting more slack	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 15:05:10
Bringing autistic culture in	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:46:20

Change in norms wished	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 16:20:24
Developmentalism	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 10:52:27
Exclusion caused by lack of own cultural awareness	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:51:37
Expectation to conform	2	3	17 Feb 2021 at 13:48:49
Impact of perceived gender roles	1	3	23 Apr 2021 at 15:02:39
Inclusion keeping groups alive	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:49:39
Inclusion not complete	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:08:48
Increasing recognition	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:14:08
Kind group members	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:15:49
Less control = easier access	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:32:21
Minority within a minority	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 14:59:57
Normative environment	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 13:51:51
Normative expectations	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:57:08
NTs 'norming together'	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:10:49
NTs more passively including	0	0	29 Apr 2021 at 15:03:58
Only bother for majority	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:07:47
Only done when majority needed	1	3	29 Apr 2021 at 14:50:23
Outside the gender binary	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:48:07
Outsiders see more	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:13:41
Passively excluding environments	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:18:28
Slow progress to inclusion	1	2	23 Feb 2021 at 13:42:36
Slow to act (inclusion)	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:13:11
Some churches lack awareness	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:52:56
Static homogenous culture	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:41:33
Systemic issue	1	3	23 Apr 2021 at 13:34:52
Systemic issues	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:14:15
The unheard	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:09:26
Uncomfortable with normative expectations	1	2	19 Apr 2021 at 13:51:18
Stigma	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 15:24:43
'Feel I should be someone I'm not'	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 13:48:31
'People think I'm wrong'	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:05:55
Accurate knowledge needed	3	5	19 Feb 2021 at 14:49:02
Accusing parent	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:14:25
Acting	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:38:32
Almost a part but not quite	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:05:00
Assimilating	2	2	19 Feb 2021 at 13:10:18
Assimilation over wellbeing	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:33:53

Autism overshadowing	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:20:48
Autistics as shamed	1	1	23 Mar 2021 at 20:18:05
Cautiousness	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 15:33:09
Comfortable as anonymous	1	2	23 Feb 2021 at 15:34:14
Covering	2	5	17 Feb 2021 at 11:23:13
Covering difficulty	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:42:20
Cure over acceptance	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 13:34:23
Different cultural knowledge of ND	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:56:55
Different presentations	1	7	23 Apr 2021 at 13:48:18
Disability as tragedy	1	3	16 Feb 2021 at 14:50:16
Disbelief	1	2	24 Mar 2021 at 10:40:30
Distress overshadowing	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 14:20:03
Excluded yet included	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 15:37:29
Exclusion belonging barrier	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 15:36:21
Hiding past self	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 13:56:46
Impact of being someone else	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:30:52
Impact of masking on meeting dx crit	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 14:04:07
Importance of autism literacy	1	3	23 Apr 2021 at 10:35:33
Importance of language	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:55:12
Inclusion through assimilation	1	2	16 Feb 2021 at 16:21:03
Increasing community knowledge	1	2	17 Feb 2021 at 13:40:16
Infantilisation	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:22:34
Instrinsic masking	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 13:32:31
Intersectional research needed	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:03:01
Lack of knowledge	3	9	19 Feb 2021 at 14:09:29
Language as stigmatising	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:56:08
Less able to mask	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:37:18
Look part but not feel part	1	2	28 Apr 2021 at 19:52:33
Masking	3	4	17 Feb 2021 at 11:36:27
Masking interrupting perceptions	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 10:46:12
Missing discourse	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:18:28
More awareness needed	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:24:52
More knowledge needed	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:48:34
Not feeling a part and not knowing why	2	3	19 Feb 2021 at 13:23:53
Not taken seriously	1	3	23 Mar 2021 at 19:45:31

Outside stereotyped presentations	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:45:43
Pathologising	2	3	24 Feb 2021 at 14:36:11
Pejorative stereotypes	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 13:38:00
Pejoratively called arrogant	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:41:12
Performing a role vs reality	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 11:33:00
Playing the game of masking	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:24:04
Punishment for perceived deviance	1	1	21 Apr 2021 at 15:40:50
Reinforced deviance	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:00:55
Seen inferior	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:30:07
Self-exclusion	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 13:23:22
Shamed with prejudices	1	1	23 Mar 2021 at 20:19:02
Society informing autism understanding	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 15:06:10
Stereotyping	3	4	23 Feb 2021 at 13:38:39
Stigmatised	2	2	17 Feb 2021 at 11:27:26
Stigmatised autistic behaviour	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 13:39:25
Stigmatised identity	1	1	23 Mar 2021 at 19:46:40
Struggle to participate	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:34:54
Trying to fit in	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 15:27:34
Unable to perform set role	1	1	15 Apr 2021 at 10:31:36
Up-to-date understanding of autism	1	6	23 Apr 2021 at 10:24:20
Vicious circle of stigmatisation	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:34:13
Want to be younger	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:11:15
We don't fit	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:36:28
Degrees of belonging	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 14:04:16
Acceptance	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 14:04:49
Acceptance dispite misunderstanding	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 13:45:09
Acceptance of difference	3	4	16 Feb 2021 at 16:22:03
Acceptance of different lived experiences	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 13:48:24
Accepted to be included	2	5	16 Feb 2021 at 14:38:06
Accepted to belong	3	5	17 Feb 2021 at 13:21:05
Alternatives now acceptable	3	6	23 Feb 2021 at 14:23:36
Among expressives (rejecting social norms)	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 10:56:00
Among likeness	1	1	23 Mar 2021 at 20:02:41
Among outsiders	2	5	18 Feb 2021 at 10:44:37

Appearing authentic (celebrity)	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:43:49
Autistic space	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:44:52
Be authentic	3	9	16 Feb 2021 at 16:26:50
Be authentic and not judged	2	2	18 Feb 2021 at 11:01:32
Being authentic as valuable	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:32:14
Being believed	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 13:14:51
Being valued	3	6	18 Feb 2021 at 10:29:12
Being valued as important in SI	1	1	23 Mar 2021 at 19:04:41
Being valued as part of belonging	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:59:10
Belonging 'not concealing'	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 15:32:37
Belonging as ought to be there	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 15:16:37
Belonging leading to happiness	2	3	13 Apr 2021 at 15:34:46
Chance to be more inclusive	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 14:29:52
Changes more accessible to me	1	3	30 Apr 2021 at 14:13:38
Common ground	3	12	17 Feb 2021 at 13:18:42
Common ground as leverage	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 10:55:43
Common shared experience	3	5	18 Feb 2021 at 10:49:38
Connecting with outsiders	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 13:12:21
COVID as opportunity for change	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:12:00
Difference as valued	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 13:47:14
Difference not questioned	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:53:14
Differences don't matter	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 10:50:07
Empowerment	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:02:48
Equal access	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 15:27:25
Experience with difference	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 13:54:40
F2f as less accessible (travel)	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:17:53
Finding your people	2	2	23 Feb 2021 at 14:11:51
Flourishing social life in pandemic	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:45:43
Focus group as safe space	3	4	17 Feb 2021 at 11:29:14
Friends like me	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:23:46
Growing closer	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 14:56:58
Happiness in belonging	2	2	17 Feb 2021 at 14:00:55
Having a place there	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 10:13:41
Holding space (celebrity)	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:47:16

Identified as different	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:44:56
Improvement in dx system	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:49:39
Joint activity	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:25:47
Knowledgable contact	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 14:23:35
Like being among outsiders	1	2	18 Feb 2021 at 13:29:57
Lived accounts as valuable knowledge	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 13:43:20
Meta-physical socialisation	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:06:31
Metaphysical also better for businesses	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:32:31
Metaphysical as accessible	2	3	13 Apr 2021 at 16:11:02
Metaphysical as having fewer limits	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 14:16:40
Metaphysical as less burden	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:18:32
Metaphysical belonging	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 10:26:37
Metaphysical connection	1	3	30 Apr 2021 at 14:42:55
More accessible	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:08:11
More online connections	1	2	23 Feb 2021 at 16:11:46
More options for accessibility	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:36:37
Needs based inclusion	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:48:43
Needs met passively	1	2	24 Mar 2021 at 14:13:57
Neurokin	2	2	19 Feb 2021 at 14:00:16
No emotional labour	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 13:52:57
No felt judgement	2	4	24 Mar 2021 at 14:53:39
Non-normative friendships	2	5	13 Apr 2021 at 16:06:38
Non-normative group expectations	2	2	24 Mar 2021 at 11:50:01
Non-obligational inclusion	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 11:55:26
Not forced to meet norms	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 16:25:09
Online as cheaper and quicker	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:15:45
Online providing connection	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:37:11
Online socialisation	2	5	23 Feb 2021 at 14:58:37
Open to diversity	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 13:55:57
Opportunity for change at work	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:47:04
Opportunity to meet online	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 15:12:53
Outsider	2	2	24 Mar 2021 at 14:47:14
Outsiders as less judgemental	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 13:31:50
Overlap in lived experiences	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 10:36:55

Patience	1	2	19 Feb 2021 at 14:19:23
People like me	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 10:45:34
Permission	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:15:09
Personal space	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 16:24:49
Previous discomfort in situation	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 14:41:58
Reasonable adjustments at work	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:28:44
Relief from masking	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:02:29
Result of belonging	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:36:12
Secure relationship	5	6	17 Feb 2021 at 13:53:36
Similar intersectional experiences - race	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 12:07:50
Similar lived experience	3	5	18 Feb 2021 at 10:20:16
Similar values	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 10:58:55
Social and societal shift	4	8	23 Feb 2021 at 13:49:49
Socially acceptable way to socialise	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 15:13:29
True belonging as novel	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 11:56:22
Trust	2	2	23 Apr 2021 at 10:25:35
Trust as important in belonging	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:03:25
Trust as secure	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 11:14:48
Understanding as inclusion	1	6	23 Mar 2021 at 19:03:50
Validation	1	5	17 Feb 2021 at 11:37:48
Wider dissemination of information	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:49:09
Working from home as better	1	2	13 Apr 2021 at 16:20:29
Exclusion	0	0	6 Jul 2021 at 14:50:15
'More aware of loneliness'	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 16:07:30
Academic exclusion	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:21:32
Accessible space	1	1	21 Apr 2021 at 15:41:49
Age related exclusion	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 14:07:59
Alien environment	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:26:03
Associating gender and autistic communities	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:49:13
Autistic adults as missing	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:37:45
Autistic sibling	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:05:07
Autistic specific struggle	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:53:48
Belong nowhere	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:23:03
Belonging breakdown	1	6	29 Apr 2021 at 14:03:58
Bigtory	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:41:08
Bullying	4	6	19 Feb 2021 at 10:54:21

Change in expectations	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:24:31
Culture shock	1	2	19 Feb 2021 at 13:43:54
Deteriorating health	1	2	28 Apr 2021 at 19:42:49
Different dynamics	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 14:57:27
direct vs indirect exclusion	1	2	29 Apr 2021 at 14:18:48
Discrimination	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 13:36:28
Don't belong	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:45:08
Don't belong here	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 13:57:11
Emotional pain	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 11:08:35
Environment not like me	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 13:59:37
Escapism due to lack of 'in'	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:32:51
Exclusionary environment	1	2	13 Apr 2021 at 16:00:08
Experiences of judgement	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:01:30
Fear of rejection	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:30:03
Feeling isolated	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:21:12
Feeling like an outsider	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 12:59:13
Feeling like not belong	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 15:33:08
Feeling out of place	2	2	19 Feb 2021 at 13:11:11
Feeling stuck in lockdown	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 14:00:19
Fewer opportunities	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 16:10:56
Friendship group geographically distanced	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 15:14:16
Gaslighting	2	5	19 Feb 2021 at 14:26:00
Hard to keep in contact	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 16:07:11
Harder to physically belong over distance	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 16:09:51
High likelihood of exclusion	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:26:44
Impact of lack of knowledge	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:17:55
Impact of outdated information	2	6	24 Mar 2021 at 10:34:38
Impact on healthcare	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:48:22
Inaccessible communications	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 16:17:03
Intersectionality	4	4	19 Feb 2021 at 14:05:08
Invalidation	2	5	19 Feb 2021 at 11:03:11
Judgement	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:12:27
Jumping space to space	1	1	21 Apr 2021 at 15:38:59
Lack of 'home'	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:57:43
Lack of comfort - ease	1	2	19 Apr 2021 at 15:27:43
Leaving spaces	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 14:20:39

Left out	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:07:26
Lost in translation	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:46:19
Managing out of date information	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 15:00:14
Medical gaslighting	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:34:45
Missing Aut group	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 14:44:44
Missing social interaction	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 15:53:59
Missing tactile input	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:58:04
Misunderstood	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 11:10:56
Misunderstood NDs	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 13:51:48
Navigating new rules	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:25:50
Needs based exclusion	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 10:18:27
Needs unconsidered	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 13:46:18
Neurodivergents as outsiders	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:26:08
No friends	1	1	21 Apr 2021 at 15:39:48
No way in	1	4	19 Apr 2021 at 15:15:52
Non conformers as other	1	2	28 Apr 2021 at 19:10:21
Non conforming people seen pejoratively	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:38:25
Non-attendance	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 15:50:13
Non-conventionality as outside norms	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:25:35
Not accepted by outsiders	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 15:22:47
Not belonging	1	1	21 Apr 2021 at 15:35:55
Not belonging anywhere	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 13:54:31
Not invited	1	2	19 Apr 2021 at 14:59:27
Not like us	2	3	19 Feb 2021 at 13:08:09
Not welcome	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:58:55
Often excluded	3	13	17 Feb 2021 at 11:32:39
Only one	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 10:56:39
Other autistics as excluded	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:08:07
Other minorities excluded	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 11:08:34
Others needs over mine	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 13:50:20
Passive exclusion	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:18:19
Passive not belonging	1	2	29 Apr 2021 at 14:59:55
Pre-empting felt stigma	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:33:26
Pressure to participate	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 16:05:21
Projecting judgement	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:02:00
Racism	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 13:38:49
Realisation of exclusion	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:22:46
Rejection	2	2	19 Feb 2021 at 13:24:39
Restricted	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 11:25:39

Rooted	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:49:59
Routine change	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:39:36
Rumination	1	2	23 Feb 2021 at 15:57:45
Sensory needs not met	1	1	21 Apr 2021 at 15:39:30
Shock	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:12:39
Sidelining	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 14:24:37
Social isolation	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 11:02:49
Stopping inclusion	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 14:23:02
Struggle with lockdown	2	11	28 Apr 2021 at 19:18:34
Stuck at home	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:56:15
Support needs not understood	1	2	28 Apr 2021 at 19:33:40
Trouble after transition	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:19:39
Unable to take part	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 14:37:42
Uncontinuous contacts	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 15:48:39
Undetected autistic	1	2	23 Apr 2021 at 14:16:36
Unwelcome eyes	1	2	19 Apr 2021 at 14:11:50
Video conferencing as difficult	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:22:01
We don't exist	1	1	23 Apr 2021 at 10:36:55
We matter	2	3	23 Feb 2021 at 15:19:00
We're all winging it	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 19:37:57
Wrong authenticity punished	1	1	19 Apr 2021 at 14:01:42
Nebulousness	0	0	5 Jul 2021 at 16:26:06
'Idealised' definition	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 15:18:49
Affinity not automatic	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:30:34
Belonging 'inclusion amplified'	1	2	18 Apr 2021 at 15:22:44
Belonging and social inclusion as different	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:32:23
Belonging as bigger than one definition	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 14:45:27
Belonging as dynamic and a journey	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:40:46
Belonging as nebulous	2	3	13 Apr 2021 at 15:17:03
Belonging bigger than people	1	1	24 Mar 2021 at 14:33:52
Belonging to a place	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 15:00:37
Chosen social group	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 14:11:39
Context as important in being included	1	1	28 Apr 2021 at 20:35:18
Definition sufficient	2	4	13 Apr 2021 at 14:25:08
Definition supposed to be conceptual -SI	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 15:48:21

Definitions of society	1	1	16 Feb 2021 at 16:08:22
Happiness as vague	2	2	18 Feb 2021 at 10:11:55
Inclusion leading to belonging	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:44:57
Personalised experience	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 13:56:24
Secure relationship more technical	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 11:10:39
Should vs can	1	2	24 Mar 2021 at 14:37:06
Social inclusion as a locus	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 10:44:37
Social inclusion as nebulous	1	1	29 Apr 2021 at 10:50:54
Social inclusion as physical access	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:33:54
Socially included not belonging	1	1	18 Apr 2021 at 13:38:00
Spiritual connection	2	6	18 Feb 2021 at 11:02:19
Surface level okay	2	3	23 Mar 2021 at 18:45:05
Temporary belonging	2	2	18 Feb 2021 at 13:42:09
Vague definition - belonging	4	12	17 Feb 2021 at 13:50:29
Vague definition - social inclusion	3	8	16 Feb 2021 at 14:50:36
Innate	0	0	5 Jul 2021 at 16:14:48
'It's in my blood'	1	1	23 Feb 2021 at 14:04:29
All welcome	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 15:07:53
Belonging as a need	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 14:06:54
Belonging feeling like 'at home'	1	1	13 Apr 2021 at 14:47:39
Belonging in God	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 14:23:09
Familial bind	1	1	18 Feb 2021 at 13:53:45
Feeling and status as different	2	2	16 Feb 2021 at 15:58:23
Feeling as important in B and SI	1	3	16 Feb 2021 at 15:44:21
Feeling as important in social inclusion	1	1	24 Feb 2021 at 15:52:02
Inclusion as welcoming all	1	2	30 Apr 2021 at 11:39:25
Innate need	1	1	19 Feb 2021 at 11:06:08
Need not emotion	1	1	17 Feb 2021 at 14:10:49
Others like you	1	1	30 Apr 2021 at 13:41:43
Participating and feeling a part different	1	2	28 Apr 2021 at 20:22:11
Psychological belonging	1	3	23 Feb 2021 at 14:05:42

Appendix 5: Example core story and worked analysis for Chapter 6

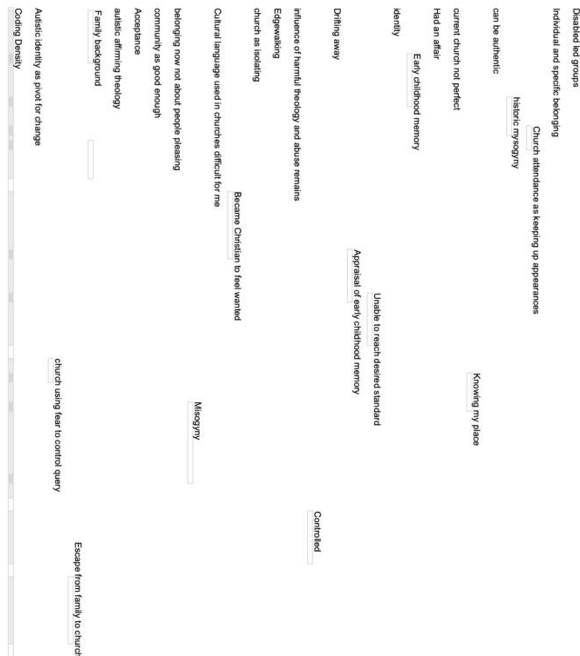
So I grew up, born in ▇ So I grew up in ▇. It was a very. Unhappy family. It was just dysfunctional and the ostensibly. Everybody was masking like prose because we were really. Umm, my father was very aspirational and considers us to be up in middle class, which I find fucking hilarious even to this day because it's just such a joke. Um. We were white, therefore we were superior. Umm. The family has a history of uh, ▇, so we went to ▇ Church. Common masses about it. I remember. I remember going. Umm. As a child, I remember being made to wear these fucking dreadful frocks to church that my mom's handcrafted, which feels a bit. Unappreciative, saying so.It's very hard to um, picture ▇ lives for women in the misogynistic and patriarchal households in the 21st century setting. So we went to church, but I would never have said that. Uh. Christian values were necessarily anything other than a - a social nicety or the kind of cultural norm of day. And then my family were racist. I know that very much because they were brought up in ▇ and they experienced all the immigration of the ▇. Umm. And they chose to be racist as a result of that.

So when a somebody I knew at school took me along to - my God, a ▇ meeting. And they were preaching about coming to Jesus, it massively struck home to me. So I did. I joined ▇ because that's what it was. I would say I became a Christian, as in something of my own. I would say something of my own choice, but I would frame that word choice around well within a framework of seeing very lost, bewildered, not belonging, not feeling loved. And I know that it was kind of an escape. And a wanting. To be acceptable leave very quickly found that. Well, no, I didn't very quickly find out. It took many, many years for me to realise this, really. But I was only acceptable to them if I did. If I did certain things or didn't do certain things as well. I never felt good enough as a Christian because I could never be who they wanted me to be? And I think. It made me feel even more alienated in the school environment because. Not only was I weird, I was now weird and religious. And not just religious, but very, very uncool, religious.

The first time I went into the ▇ I was said Ohh have problems with this one because she's good looking. But at the time, I wouldn't have thought that, but I do now. At the time, I have been quite meek about it because that's that's how it was. That's you know that's you know, had to wear head coverings by the way, it's another thing. Um, women didn't speak in church. I remember one - one meeting where these two women stood up to pray and they were basically slight. They were literally told to sit down and shut up. I also remember there was one Church member from a different bretherin church in the area who I think his wife had died and but his girlfriend was divorced or something and she was he was gonna marry her and they went round. They went round on mass to basically tell him that he was doing what he was doing was wrong. I got called the Jezebel - literally called a Jezebel for wearing earrings once.

I remember the most is kind of like being very strongly discouraged to go to Christian events other than things that are arranged by ▇ They didn't want my friend and I to associate with people who weren't the kinds of Christians they want us to associate with. I don't know how to explain it to this day really, but I I felt very obliged to obey.

When I left home ▇, I went to the people at the church. Because they're the only ones who I thought had my back at the time because there was kindness there. There was kindness, but it was kind of kindness whisperings. Even though they maybe not, they wanted to seem it like that. It would be more like, you know, they're being hospitable and I did live with them. I lived with them for a few weeks. And I remember there was lot there was quite a lot of grief between them and my father.



Because I didn't like him because he wasn't a very good father, that he didn't like them because they were religious. It was very cultic I would say. And very isolating and they didn't like my family. I mean, I didn't really like my family either, to be fair. But they, you know, they I remember some of the same particularly that they thought my father was a very bad father. And to be fair, they weren't wrong. But at the same time, it's that sense of, you know, isolating you from your, your family and come with us because we have the truth.

They weren't interested, and then things may have changed now, but at the time they weren't interested in any kind of like social measures or, you know, making life better for other people, all they, all they cared about was the - a terrifying people into believing in Jesus because if they didn't, they would be going to hell and the and all the preaching was geared towards. It's pretty terrifying. It's terrifying preaching. And very, very strict sort of like expectations, but within an incredibly misogynistic then framework.

I basically went to university, but then I did get married in ▇ asked my first year, but after that I just drifted away from it. But I was in the ▇ Church and. Uh... ▇. Uh, but I didn't ever go back to ▇ And it was more of a sort of drifting away rather than a running away really. But I was still very heavily heavily influenced, I think. Even now I catch myself thinking, oh God, the rapture. And I think it's absolute bullshit. I really do. I think it's absolute bullshit that that whole the indoctrination of that satanic panic and all that kind of rapture mania during the 80s. Oh my God, still catch myself with it sometimes. The roots are long and deep of this kind of abuse.

▇ ▇. And. I don't. When ▇ went to talk to ▇ after at the time, just so we got married and we talked about all the 1st and I was very honest about it. And he need to - oh god... But the bravery from that vicar, actually, I mean brilliant. Brilliant, however. Nobody should be in a situation where they feel that they have to have that given to them.

Even to this day I get very emotional, his graciousness when he said "I see no problem with you getting married in church". Back in ▇ where this stuff really mattered then. It's huge. It was really accepting. So it was a very it was very, it was very different to what I'd experienced before. Like the combination not feeling not being good enough, not feeling good enough being told it wasn't good enough in any way. And then being accepted after, you know, messing up quite badly basically. Umm. Now that's good and I would say that is my over overriding feeling was ▇ is actually I - I you know I can be myself. I do have a lot of gripes. I have gripes about accessibility. I have gripes about attitudes. And they're only getting worse. Actually, because I do think we're - we're getting there is a bit of an evangelical turn at the moment. I don't like evangelical influence. I don't like it at all. I think it's really dangerous . But that is you know that is part of the theology of the church I go to at the moment and it's not for a lot of us because a lot of us are very, you know, left wing and liberal. And uh, very pro Lgbtqia+ rights, women's rights. But there is a bit of a different feel now. And I want. I do think that part of that is because of my own growth, change and awareness since I've found out I was autistic. And I'm very happy with bright and embracing my differences. I actually quite like being on the periphery - I really do I. It's kind of like that's where I fit now. And. So... Yeah, it's a strange one. It's a strange one. That feeling of feeling like you belong, but also feeling like you don't.

Actually, I will say no. No, that's not OK. That's not acceptable. Um. So. It's a strange one, isn't it? I think it's... There's a growth in my maturity. Knowing that I'm massively moving away from people pleasing. And not actually caring if it makes me unpopular. I don't need that popularity. I don't know if it does make unpopular, I don't know. But I. But the point is, I don't really care. And and I think. My sense of belonging now is very different to my sense of belonging before. Although the genuine thankfulness, but I was still very much a people pleaser and are putting everybody's else's needs before my own.

Whereas now, now I know who I am as an autistic person. Now I know who I am as a disabled person, autistic person. I almost stand outside of that whole framework because I don't need it. I was diagnosed 11 years ago with autism, and last year with adhd. That for me is very much a that was the start of my Journey. I hate that word. I can't find any words to, you know, other than journey. That was the start of me working out Who I was. And that was bound to have an impact on how I viewed my faith, where I fitted in with that faith, where I fitted in with church communities. And whether I wanted to fit with church communities. So for me, I think that was a massive turning point.

I have changed so much. I'm in the mid, should I say [redacted] and only just starting.... There's been so much to unpack and so many awful things to sort of like work out and everything, but better late than never. When I was diagnosed as being autistic and that subsequent journey then of unpacking trauma. And learning about who I am and the two are inextricably connected. And inevitably it... My faith will have been impacted by that.

I also sometimes join online groups like you belong and disability and Jesus - that kind of stuff. I dip in and out of those. I just don't have time in my head to engage much in groups that I think are going to take a lot of energy. I do find a lot of Christians quite difficult. I can't bear spiritual language. It does my head in. I find it really. I know this is a trauma. I know this is a trauma response from experience I had with members of the my family, but I-I just find the whole - I don't mind it yourself. I will be praying for in all the rest of it, but I cannot bear this kind of. Oh well, you know, sister or. Yeah, that whole. Yeah, exactly. I can't even put into words, but that whole evangelical patronising speak.

I'm still a Christian sort of, but that's because of Jesus. Not because of any church structure. And not because of the church people. This is Jesus, I think. Hmm. And I I really identify with Jesus as an autistic person because he didn't give a shit and he didn't care who he upset. And yes, he was killed for it. OK, I am. But he was not afraid to speak truth to power. And that that, that is the crux of why I am now still a Christian. I don't give a fuck about hierarchy and I really give a fuck about people who are struggling. And for me, that's the essence of my Christianity now. I go to church because there are some people there who are just absolutely, astonishingly brilliant. No question of it. They are just the best people trying their best in a very, very difficult world.

But I think that's community, isn't it? You know. It's never going to be perfect and we shouldn't ever expect it. We can't expect it to be because none of us are. I think it's more real now though. I think I have a much more realistic grasp on what Community actually is, rather than this kind of like rosy glow that I may have had a couple of decades ago. I think it for me now. I am very, very careful to protect myself. And um... And if there are people there who I find really quite triggering, I just don't interact. You know, it's not up to me to judge them and it's not up. You know, they've probably got stuff going on their own lives

Church attendance as keeping up appearances
historic mysogyny
can be authentic
Knowing my place
current church not perfect
Had an affair
Early childhood memory
identity
Unable to reach desired standard
Appraisal of early childhood memory
Drifting away
Controlled
influence of harmful theology and abuse remains
Edgewalking
church as isolating
Became Christian to feel wanted
Misogyny
belonging now not about people pleasing
Acceptance
Family background
Escape from family to church
church using fear to control query
Autistic identity as pivot for change
Coding Density
Disabled led groups
Cultural language used in churches difficult for me
autistic affirming theology
community as good enough
Individual and specific belonging

I'm a practical theologian. I think I'm an anti – Evangelical. I'm definitely ex-evangelical, no question of it. So... I think I may be a humanist! Oh- actually I don't know what I am, but I don't care because... yeah. Wouldn't think it really matters at the end of the day.

Disabled led groups
Individual and specific belonging
Church attendance as keeping up appearances
historic mysogyny
can be authentic
Knowing my place
current church not perfect
Had an affair
Early childhood memory
identity
Unable to reach desired standard
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community as good enough
Acceptance
autistic affirming theology
Family background
Escape from family to church
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Coding Density