

“The Vulcans have it right”: Comparative Perceptions of Gender and Sexuality by
Individuals With and Without Neuropsychological Disorders

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract	v
Chapter I.....	1
Rationale	1
Previous Literature.....	3
Non-verbal communication of Gender and Sex.....	7
Chapter II	12
Methodology	12
Participants	15
Chapter III.....	18
Results.....	18
Gender Identity	18
Determining Gender.....	18
Communication	21
Difficulty Communicating.....	21
Coping with Anxiety.....	29
Sexuality/Sexual Behavior	37
Courting and Dating.....	37
Difficulty in Romantic Relationships.....	38
Coping with Anxiety in Romantic Relationships.....	46
The Curious Case of Flirting.....	51
Analytically Focused	61
Emotionally Focused.....	67
Communications Styles & Gendered Differences.....	68
Chapter IV	74
Discussion.....	74
Chapter V.....	77
Conclusion	77
Works Cited	84
Appendix A	86
Interview Schedule.....	86

Appendix B	89
Video Script.....	89
Appendix C	91
Participant Demographics	91
Appendix D	92
Video 1	92
Video 2	93
Video 3	94
Video 4.....	95
Video 5.....	97

ABSTRACT

Previous research has determined that gender identity and sexual orientation, experiences of courtship, and sexual behavior are constructed and communicated both verbally and non-verbally. Accordingly, it is possible that individuals with disabilities that affect their ability to communicate non-verbally could have unique understandings and experiences in regards to gender and sex than those without similar disorders. Due to the difficulties these individuals experience with non-verbal communication they may have different perceptions of gender and sexuality. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach along with grounded theory in order to compare the experiences of gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual experience of individuals with neuropsychological disorders to those without diagnosed disorders. A semi-structured interview protocol was used and was designed to understand the experiences of the participants and their perceptions of gender and sexuality. Respondents were also presented with five short videos designed to test their understanding of what sexually charged interpersonal communication might look like in the real world. The videos were designed to show interpersonal communication between a male and female, each with differing levels of flirtation. Specifically, the variables that were changed are the physical distance between the two people, level and amount of eye contact, and physical touch. The data collected from interviews of 20 respondents indicates there was little difference in how they presented their own gender identity as well as how they determined others'. Atypical participants experienced more difficulty with communication and social interaction than the neuro-typical participants. Leading them to experience social anxiety resulting in fear of communication, social interaction, and romantic relationships. There was a perceptible difference in sexual behavior and sexual experience. The participants, who identified as being diagnosed with a learning disability, had less romantic and sexual experience than those without disabilities. They also articulated difficulty with romantic relationships and social anxiety resulting from the difficulties they have with communication and interpreting interactions.

CHAPTER I

RATIONALE

Individuals rely on their ability to impart and interpret ideas and emotions in order to communicate within society. Much of this social experience is focused on constructions of gender and sexuality. It is imperative that people are able to interpret and impart information about gender and sexuality as to function within societies that place a great importance on these constructions. At times individuals assume that experiences of gender and sexuality are similar and comparative across individuals within a society, often believing in a shared experience and understanding of gender and sexuality. It is possible that the understanding of and experiences with these constructions differ for some individuals. This can then in turn make it difficult to communicate and thus function in a society that values the constructions of gender and sexuality.

Previous research has concluded that gender identity and sexual orientation, their associated perceptions and, therefore, experiences of courtship and sexual behavior are constructed and communicated both verbally **and** non-verbally. Therefore, it is possible that individuals with disorders or disabilities that affect their ability to communicate non-verbally may have different understandings and experiences associated with gender and sex than those without similar disorders (this second group of individuals is commonly known as neuro-typicals). Individuals with neuropsychological disorders, such as Autism, Asperger's, and Non-verbal Learning disabilities, may show symptoms of a lack of social skills, including social intrusiveness, social isolation, lack of empathy, unwillingness to make eye contact, and the inability to relate to peers (U.S. National

Library of Medicine, 2013). Due to the difficulties these individuals experience with non-verbal communication and social proficiencies, they may have different perceptions of gender and sex.

Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do both neuro-typical and atypical individuals determine another's gender identity?
- Does this differ by type of neuropsychological disorder?
- Do neuro-typical and atypical individuals differ in their own understanding of and display of gender identity? If so, how?
- If those who are atypical use different markers to determine another's gender identity, does this affect their sexuality? How?
- Do experiences associated with courting and dating differ for neuro-typical and atypical individuals? How?

Since gaining access to an overall, generalizable sample of a- and neuro-typical respondents is not practical for a master's thesis, and because any investigation of how individuals construct their identity should be necessarily qualitative, I have confined my investigation and research findings to current college students. While this limitation is practical, it will also have implications for my findings: this is a necessarily self-selected pool all in the same young-adult age range, and those atypical individuals who are present in this setting will be high-functioning. Also, it seems possible that those with, for example, Asperger's Syndrome may have a different construction of gender than those with a Non-verbal Learning Disability, so I may find a great deal of variation

within my atypical group. However, due to the relatively low numbers of individuals on campus with a germane diagnosis, I fear that limiting my sample to just those with Asperger's would not have allowed me enough research subjects. Unfortunately, as in most social research, I am having to make a trade-off between what is practical and the ideal.

Understanding the experiences of atypical individuals is imperative for a more all-encompassing and emotionally focused society. By examining individuals who experience the world differently, we can gain a better understanding of "normal" social constructs. This study will help us better comprehend the relationship between gender, sexuality, and non-verbal communication. By gaining this understanding we will be able to take a more in-depth look at our social constructions of gender, sexuality, and disability, and hopefully find a way to better appreciate the diversity these three constructions bring to our world. As Bumiller aptly argued,

As long as their contribution to civic life is judged in terms of their ability to fit the role of active citizenship and to participate in the same activities as typical citizens, their viability as citizens will remain invisible (Bumiller, 2008 page 983).

Previous Literature

There is little research on individuals with neuropsychological disorders and their understandings and experiences of gender identity, and even less so on their understandings of sexual orientation and sexual experiences. Most research associated with these topics is focused on either neuropsychological disorders and non-verbal communication or gender and non-verbal communication; few articles examine the

effects of non-verbal communication of atypical persons on their perceptions of gender and sex.

Neuropsychological Disorders and Non-verbal Communication

There are many neuropsychological disorders that affect an individual's non-verbal communication. Three of the most widely researched and understood disorders are Autism, Asperger syndrome, and Non-verbal Learning disabilities/disorders. Both Autism and Asperger syndrome are pervasive developmental Autistic spectrum disorders (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013), while Non-verbal Learning disorders are a sub-category of learning disabilities that affect an individual's ability to understand and communicate non-verbal cues (Dimitrovsky, Spector & Levy-Shiff, 2000). The terms Non-verbal learning disability and Non-verbal learning disorder are often used interchangeably, and both terms are found in research. The exact causes of all three of these disorders are unknown (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013). All three disorders affect the way individuals communicate and interact non-verbally (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013).

Individuals with Autism may have problems communicating verbally as well as non-verbally. Some of their verbal communication deficiencies could include: difficulty in starting or maintaining conversation, developing language slowly, and repeating words or memorized passages and using them in inappropriate contexts (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013). Deficiencies in non-verbal communication and social interactions can include a lack of eye contact, the inability to make friends and play interactive games, the inability to respond to eye contact and facial expressions, a lack of empathy,

and problems with motor skills (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013). Diagnoses of Autism are based on observable behavior and by ruling out other medical conditions (Bumiller, 2008). Due to the difficulties these individuals face with interpersonal communication and the lack of medical definitions they may develop confusing or ambiguous constructions of identity (Bumiller, 2008).

Individuals with Asperger syndrome experience many similarities to individuals with Autism concerning communication deficiencies. Asperger syndrome can, however, be differentiated from autism by normal language development (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013). It is often considered a high functioning form of autism. This is however, changed in the DSM-5. Asperger syndrome is no longer a disorder on the Autistic spectrum and is labeled in its own category (DSM-5, 2013). This may present challenges of identity to individuals diagnosed with Asperger's who have identified as being on the autistic spectrum. Individuals may not withdraw from the world as is commonly associated with individuals with Autism, but they will still have difficulties communicating. They may speak in a monotone voice, show unusual body language, not understand voice inflections such as sarcasm or humor, have problems understanding and expressing eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions, and are often not able to respond emotionally to normal social interactions (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013). Like Autism there is no physical test to detect and diagnose Asperger syndrome. Health care providers will use observable behaviors to label an individual as having Asperger syndrome (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013).

Non-verbal learning disorders affect individuals in very different ways than Autistic spectrum disorders yet social and interpersonal interactions are still greatly affected. Non-verbal learning disabilities differ from verbal learning disabilities in a variety of ways. Verbal learning disabilities affect the reaction to, articulation of, and understanding of verbal and written language, whereas non-verbal learning disabilities affect visual-spatial processing and the reaction to, articulation of, and understanding of affective communications (Palombo, 1996, page 312). Often children with non-verbal learning disabilities will be misdiagnosed as having narcissistic or borderline personality disorders. This could be due to the fact that they respond inappropriately in social interactions because they have the inability to decode non-verbal communication (Palombo, 1996). Their understandings of social contexts are incomplete, thus they construct unusual personal meaning from their experiences, there for creating a different reality and understanding of the world (Palombo, 1996). They often have emotional difficulties and experience social isolation (Little, 1993). Unlike individuals with autism, persons with Non-verbal learning disability may excel at verbal communication. However, like Autism and Asperger syndrome, they may have difficulty understanding and interpreting voice inflection, again, such as sarcasm and humor (Palombo, 1996). They may have difficulty with keeping attention, decoding and expressing vocal intonations, reading and communicating facial expressions or decoding and managing emotional messages and body gestures (Palombo, 1996). Like individuals on the Autistic spectrum, persons with non-verbal learning disabilities may speak in a monotone or sing-song like voice and may show a lack of empathy (Palombo, 1996). In contrast with

individuals with Asperger syndrome and Autism, they may appear to crave social contact and may rely heavily on communicating with others, but because of their difficulties in communication they are often misread by others (Palombo, 1996).

Prior research states that individuals with these types of disorders are less accurate at interpreting emotion than those without disorders (Little, 1993). Individuals who suffer from neuropsychological disorders will learn to cope by imitating behavior and creating and making sense of the world and interpersonal communication within their own perceptual worlds (Bumiller, 2008). Specifically, those individuals may have difficulty communicating non-verbally, difficulty communicating and understanding socio-emotional interactions, and have very different experiences of the world. Therefore, they then may have different understandings of gender and sex.

Non-verbal communication of Gender and Sex

The way one does gender is determined by socially constructed expressions that are deemed masculine and/or feminine (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Doing gender is then socially directed perceptual interactions based on these constructed expressions (West & Zimmerman 1987). Doing gender is thus doing actions within interactions that are prescribed to be masculine or feminine based on societal constructions of those expressions. Masculine and feminine expressions are often based on and created by sex categories (West & Zimmerman 1987). Sex categories constructed and regulated by institutions, are then a way of regulating gender and creating social control (West & Zimmerman 1987). Doing gender denotes developing differences between men and women that are not essential (West & Zimmerman 1987). Institutions then maintain

distinctions between men and women through aligning sex categories with gender and thus aligning sex categories with constructed differences of men and women (West & Zimmerman 1987), therefore creating the illusion that these nonessential gender differences are in fact innate and biological. West and Zimmerman explain doing gender in terms of appropriate or not appropriate or what is socially accepted and what is not: “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain reproduce and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals, not institutional arrangements, may be called to account” (p.146). The repercussions of not doing in socially appropriate or acceptable way according to West and Zimmerman directed toward the individuals, not the institutions that have created and maintained gender distinctions. These expressions within interactions are communicated both verbally and non-verbally.

Individuals use non-verbal communication to understand a multitude of different social factors such as judge the gender of others, to assess relationships, and to evaluate others’ and express their own interest and sexual intent. Individuals read others’ non-verbal cues to determine their gender (Cary & Rudick-Davis, 1979). When viewing an interpersonal interaction between two people, individuals tend to interpret the non-verbal cues of both parties and the way that they interact non-verbally to determine their genders (Cary & Rudick-Davis, 1979). Males and females have a tendency to have different decoding styles. Females are often better at decoding gender, based on non-verbal cues (Cary & Rudick-Davis, 1979). Traditional gender roles put an importance on female’s ability to decode non-verbal communication and to be particularly expressive (Hall &

Halberstadt, 1981). However, women with more liberal non-traditional thoughts on gender, and men tend to not be as good at decoding emotion through non-verbal communication as women with more traditional gender values (Hall & Halberstadt, 1981). Research has found that people are more able to correctly identify emotion through facial expressions of females than of males (Dimitrovsky, Spector, & Levy-Shiff, 2000). The social learning hypothesis explains why females tend to be better at decoding and expressing non-verbal communication. It states that males and females learn socially acceptable behavior differentiated by gender through reinforcement at early stages of development (Hall & Halberstadt, 1981). Traditional gender roles may put an importance on females' ability to communicate non-verbally and males' ability to communicate verbally, therefore females may have developed better decoding abilities. This information provided by previous research shows that non-verbal communication and gender are closely linked (Hall & Halberstadt, 1981). The ability to decode non-verbal communication accurately may be affected by one's gender identity, and the ability to judge the gender of other individuals may be affected by ability to decode non-verbal communication.

Research has found that sexual intent and relationship status are communicated through non-verbal behaviors such as touch and distance in interpersonal relationships (Abbey & Melby, 1986). Individuals are more likely to judge a relationship as a friendship or intimate if there is little physical distance between two people (Abbey & Melby, 1986). If two people touch, they are more likely to be labeled as in an intimate or romantic relationship, and if one person is initiating the touch more they will be viewed

as being more attracted to the other person (Abbey & Melby, 1986). Touch cues often communicate interest (Fichten, Tagalkis, Judd, Wright & Amsel, 2001). Non-verbal behaviors such as facial expressions, gestures, movement, voice inflection and body position express level of interest in interpersonal relationships (Fichten, Tagalkis, Judd, Wright & Amsel, 2001). During a conversation when one person is speaking, the other will express non-verbal cues of level of interest, which the speaker will be tuned into and their reactions and communication will then be based on the other's non-verbal cues (Fichten et al. 2001). When in a conversation, if a person expresses behaviors that are ambiguous, it will often denote lack of interest in both intimate and non-intimate relationship contexts (Fichten, et al, 2001). There are non-verbal behaviors unique to dating and courting (Fichten, et al, 2001) and it is expected that these non-verbal behaviors are understood and expressed appropriately in interpersonal relationships. When individuals' gendered non-verbal behaviors do not match what is typically socially associated with their sex they may be viewed as non-desirable (Lafrance & Carmen, 1980). Research has found that individuals with cross-sex-type non-verbal behavior are stigmatized for the use of those behaviors and females with traditionally male non-verbal behavior will be especially stigmatized being labeled as insensitive, intolerant, and unagreeable (Rachkowski & O'Grady, 1988).

This research suggests that it is imperative to social interaction to understand and communicate non-verbally, and particularly so in personal and intimate relationship contexts. There are severe social repercussions for behaving in ways not normally associated with one's gender. Gender identity disorder, a disorder defined by an

individual's cross-gender identification, has been commonly associated with persons with Autism (Bumiller, 2008). This association could be due to the tendencies persons with Autism have to lack the ability to conform to sex roles, and understand social cues. Due to this, individuals with neuropsychological disorders that affect their ability to communicate non-verbally may have different perceptions of sex and gender.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach in combination with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to compare the understandings and experiences surrounding gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual experience of individuals with neuropsychological disorders to those without any diagnosed disorders. A semi-structured interview protocol was used and was designed to understand the experiences of the participants in relation to their perceptions of gender and sexuality. Though I used a semi-structured interview created after doing literature research I allowed the interview to travel from the schedule and change over time in accordance with grounded theory. Using grounded theory, the interviews were then coded, concepts created, resulting in categories and ultimately theory as outlined in the results section.

Gathering the sample of atypical students was difficult, given their overall scarcity in the general and university population. To combat this selection issue, in my first stage of data collection, I advertised for individuals who have disabilities that affect their non-verbal communication in Tech Announce. Additionally, I contacted Student Disability Services and asked them to pass my information along to individuals who fit this category or who have similar disabilities (such as Asperger's Syndrome or those on the autism spectrum). For this, I created a flyer that was placed in the office of disabilities. I also visited and made announcements in multiple *Introduction to Sociology* classes and Public Speaking classes. Once I had gained access to a portion of the population, I also was able snowball sample to gain more participants (some of my respondents had social contact with others with similar diagnoses). In a second stage of

data collection, I matched neuro-typical respondents to the previously collected atypical respondents on germane demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and, if possible, sexual orientation (since this is a study about sexual behavior, it seems likely that this may differ by sexual orientation). I collected these individuals from the department's *Introduction to Sociology* classes, since those offer the greatest variety of students. I also placed an announcement in Tech Announce. As an incentive to participate, I also advertised and conducted a drawing of two \$20 gift cards to Amazon.com.

Participants signed an informed consent agreement before their interviews to ensure that their participation was voluntary. Each informed consent form was immediately placed in an envelope and then sealed to ensure confidentiality. Each interview was recorded and detailed field notes were taken. It was predicted that each interview would take about an hour. The interviews conducted with individuals with non-verbal learning disabilities ranged approximately 45 minutes to an hour, while the interviews with neuro-typical individuals took a little less time. This difference in time was due to not needing to ask neuro-typical individuals about their diagnoses. Using a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix A) I interviewed 20 Texas Tech University students, 50% with a neuropsychological disorder and 50% without, as to conduct a comparative study. Using college students ensured that participants had the comprehension ability to understand and participate in the interview process. However, using only college students as participants decreased the diversity of the sample and does not accurately represented the population of individuals with neuropsychological

disorders as a whole. It, however, allows for more focused research and a more direct comparison of neuro-typical to atypical persons. By using college students, demographic variables that could factor into their social interactions (age, occupation, marital status, number of children etc.) can be more accurately controlled for, which has resulted in a better comparison.

Towards the end of the interview, I also presented the respondents with five short videos designed to test their understanding of what sexually charged interpersonal communication might look like in the real world. I have designed the videos to show interpersonal communication between a male and female, but with differing levels of flirtation. Specifically, the variables that will be changed will be the physical distance between the two people, level and amount of eye contact, and physical touch. This was to determine whether there is a difference in perceptions between a- and neuro-typical respondents. Since I cannot actually observe them all in quotidian settings, these videos were an approximation. See Appendix B for the scripts.

I analyzed the data in a qualitative data software program, *Ethnograph V6*, to generate verifiable themes for later writing. An analysis was done by transcribing the recorded interviews and coding each interview in search of thematic commonalities in information pertaining to the research questions. The interviews were codified and then categorized, after which a codebook was created and common themes were be determined in accordance with grounded theory. I used coding to generate concepts and then categories of concepts, and then finally to develop a theory based on the original codes.

Participants

The participants in this study ranged in education from college freshmen to recent Masters of Arts graduates. Atypical and neuro-typical participants were matched by general demographics as closely as possible. In the first stage of data collection, I was able to collect 6 men and 4 women (self identified). These participants were later matched in the second stage with 6 neuro-typical men and 4 neuro-typical women. Due to the small percentage of the population identifying as having a non-verbal learning disability, I was unable to collect participants with a variety for racial and ethnic identities. Participants in this study identified as Caucasian/white or Hispanic. Participants ranged in from late teens (none younger than 19) to early 60's. Due to the difficulty with finding applicable participants, some of the demographics could not be matched perfectly. For example, I had to match a white, heterosexual, male, recent Masters of Arts graduate in his mid twenties with a Hispanic, heterosexual, male, Masters of Arts student in his mid twenties (see chart in Appendix C).

I ran into a few unforeseen issues with collecting participants. These difficulties were due to the small portion of eligible participants. Due to the difficulty obtaining eligible participants, I had to open the study to individuals with non-verbal learning disabilities to any person attending/instructing at the university, over the age of 18 with a learning disability that affects any type of non-verbal communication. As stated above, Asperger's Syndrome, autism, and non-verbal learning disability can affect non-verbal communication such as interpreting and imparting body language, written words, symbols, voice inflection as well as verbal communication. In order to find enough

participants for this study, participants with disabilities that affected any one of the non-verbal communication methods became eligible. Participants that identified as dyslexic, which affected participants' ability to understand written communication, symbols, voice inflection, and verbal communication or as having Central Auditory Processing Disorder, which affected an individual's ability to understand voice inflection and other communication subtleties, became eligible. In the case of the individuals with dyslexia and the one with Central Auditory Processing Disorder, I found that they were often so concerned with listening to and paying attention to word order in conversation they had difficulty interpreting and imparting non-verbal communication.

Another difficulty was that I could not isolate disabilities and disorders of participants. Many of the individuals in this study were diagnosed with multiple disabilities and disorders. It is common for individuals to be diagnosed with multiple disorders once diagnosed with one. This due to the prevalence of this comorbidity, I could not find 10 participants with only non-verbal learning disabilities.

The last unforeseen difficulty was in matching atypical participants with neuro-typical participants. Due to the nature of collection methods, I could not ask all individuals about their disabilities or lack thereof prior to the interviews. All individuals in the first stage of collection were given the prerequisites that they must be diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability in order to participate. But in two of the neuro-typical interviews in stage two it was disclosed to me that the participants may be considered as having Attention Deficit Disorder. Although this does not generally affect non-verbal communication, these participants may not be considered neuro-typical. I

explain that these participants “may” have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) because the nature of their diagnosis process is possibly flawed. Both these cases of ADD may be situational. One participant was told by her therapist that she may have ADD, but was never officially diagnosed. She was also experiencing an immense amount of trauma at this time and was seeking help from this therapist because of the recent death of her son. The other participant who identified as having ADD was diagnosed as a child but since entering adulthood has been taken off medication.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The data collected from interviews of 20 respondents indicate that, although half of the participants identified as having a nonverbal learning disability and half of the participants identified as neuro-typical, we see below that there was little difference in how they presented their own gender identity as well as how they determined others'. Atypical participants experienced much more difficulty with communication and social interaction than the neuro-typical participants. This led them to experience social anxiety resulting in fear of communication, social interaction, and ultimately romantic relationships. There was a noticeable difference in sexual behavior and experience. The individuals who identified as being diagnosed with a learning disability over all had less romantic and sexual experience than those without disabilities. They expressed difficulty with romantic relationships and extreme anxiety resulting from the difficulties they have with communication and interpreting social interaction.

Gender Identity

Determining Gender

“I look for boobs usually.”

Previous research would have led us to believe that it was probable that neuro-typical individuals and those diagnosed with non-verbal learning disabilities may use different clues and codes to determine others' gender identity and that they may differ in their representations of their own gender identity. However, the data in this study present

little difference in the way neuro-typical and atypical individuals determine gender and present their own.

All participants (both neuro-typical and those with non-verbal learning disabilities) presented relatively traditional gender representations. They all wore clothing typically associated with their gender. The male participants, both those who identified as neuro-typical and those who identified as having been diagnosed with a learning disability, typically wore jeans or loose fitting slacks and t-shirts, button down dress shirts and in one case a loose fitting sweater. The female participants wore tighter fitting clothing often t-shirts or blouses and all wore jeans or slacks in feminine styles (skinny jeans or pants with closer fitting waistbands that hung on the hips). Their hair and make-up styles did not deviate from what is traditionally associated with their gender identity. One female participant had short hair that was styled in a feminine way (highlights and curls around the ears and bangs) and one male participant wore his hair long to his shoulders. No participants identified as any gender other than cisgendered male or cisgendered female. Statistically, this is expected.

In order to determine others' gender identities, the individuals in this study used very similar visual and auditory clues. All participants were asked, "When you see somebody on the street how do you determine if they are male or female?" Most participants explained that they first look at hair length, facial features, body type, and/or clothing style: "I usually first see their hair length and then facial features. Girls usually have smaller features. So I look at basically the whole head area first." Many participants explained that there are gendered differences in these four physical categories. Most

participants explained that only analyzing one of these categories is not always sufficient to determine gender; that at times it requires looking at multiple factors. For example, men can have long hair and women could have short hair, or men can have traditionally feminine facial features and women can have traditionally masculine features. In this quotation below a female participant from the neuro-typical sample explains that she looks at what individuals are wearing, because hair styles are not sufficient. She also examines their voice and facial features.

JE: “When you see somebody how do you determine their gender?”

Participant: “Usually by what they are wearing. You can’t tell by their hair anymore.”

JE: “Yeah we both have pretty short hair.”

Participant: “I have always had short hair. And there some people at school that have their hair longer then I do.”

JE: “When you are having a conversation with somebody.”

Participant: “Probably their voice, and their eyes and their mouth. Mouth is a real big. Usually you can a really determine”.

Many participants explained that they often look for breasts or lack of breasts. A participant who identifies as having a non-verbal learning disability explains that there are feminine and masculine features that she often assigns to women and men and that she determine others’ gender by their physical appearance. She explains that she looks at their hair and face first: “And then their chest.” The neuro-typical participant matched with the participant above also explained that she often determines others’ gender by their physical appearance as she looks for breasts. “I look for boobs usually.”

When participants were asked to describe how they determine the gender of individuals with out looking at their hair, clothing, or body type they often explained that they listened to their voice, or looked at the way they walked. Many participants

explained that women have higher voices than men and that men take longer strides. This did not differ by neuro-typical and atypical as well. It also did not differ by gender. One female participant explained that she looks at “how they walk” while another male participant said, “Perhaps the way they walk. I would have to say. I am trying to think of how. Perhaps men take more strong strides, longer steps. Women might take shorter.” Not only were responses about determining gender similar between neuro-typical respondents and those who identified as having a learning disability there responses did not differ by gender identity. Both male and female respondents expressed similar processes in determining gender.

Participants did not differ greatly in how they determined others’ gender identity or presented their own. Typically, they assigned gender categories by the way individuals looked and their physical traits. They often determined others’ gender identity by analyzing these traits and matching them with traditional gender cues, such as long hair for women and short hair for men. It was interesting that almost every participant (all but two) explained gender differences, outside the physical, as being socially constructed or due to socialization. This was unexpected due to the conservative and traditional nature of the area. It is possible that the respondents expressed gender categories as being socialized due to their involvement in sociology classes and the University; most of the participants in this study were recruited via *Introduction to Sociology* classes.

Communication

Difficulty Communicating

“My biggest fear is not that no one will like me because fuck them. My fear is that people are pretending to like me because of social graces”

Many of the individuals in this study who were diagnosed with a learning disability expressed that they had difficulty communicating with other people. They explained that they had difficulty picking up and deciphering non-verbal cues during conversation. In this conversation below, an instructor with Asperger Syndrome explains his difficulty with “reading between the lines” of conversation in order to pick up on non-verbal cues.

JE: Do you have difficulty communicating with other people?

Participant: “Less so then I used to but I still do. I like people to be direct. My thesis chair Dr. _____ will tell me to just get out of her office if she is busy and I never take offense to that.... So I like that more than when people give me non-verbal hints because I don’t get them until often after the conversation is over. So I don’t always get non-verbal as well or read between the lines well. And there is a lot of that and a lot of that I don’t get.”

This participant explains that he prefers for people to be direct with him verbally. Many of the participants in this study, who identified as having been diagnosed with a learning disability, explained that they had difficulty with verbal communication as well as non-verbal communication. This often led to them focusing more intensely on one or the other during conversation. In the quotation above, the participant explains that, due to his difficulty with non-verbal communication, he focuses more on verbal communication. Some participants explained that communication is so difficult for them that they at times disregard body language and non-verbal communication altogether in order to focus on

verbal conversation. In the conversation below, a college freshman expresses his difficulty with conversation and his preoccupation with verbal communication.

JE: Do you consider yourself good at reading other body language?

Participant 5: “I never really thought of that before. I would say no because I tend to focus more on what people say and try to think of a response to that.”

JE: So you are very preoccupied with their speaking?

Participant: “Yes, I spend most of my time focusing on what they are saying because I am a bad listener. I guess I don’t really think about their body language.”

Many of the participants in this study expressed an inability to interpret and act within social norms of communication. Some participants explained that they didn’t understand or know how to respond and react verbally in conversation. They felt that they had to spend a great deal of time trying to think of appropriate verbal responses to everyday communications. This difficulty can result in a great deal of anxiety. In the conversation below, the participant explains how difficult social interactions can be due to his inability to understand the social norms of conversation.

Participant: “Social is a little more difficult for me (stuttering) when (stutter) I am trying to think of how to explain it....

JE: “What aspects of it are difficult for you?”

Participant: “Um I think first there is forming a good response in my head. I don’t take the time to do that. Also um just finding a good response, there have been times when people have said things to me in a

conversation, and the first thing I think is how do I respond to that? I don't understand the protocol for what I am supposed to say”

This difficulty understanding social norms of communication can also be seen in participants' non-verbal actions. In this next quotation from an honors freshman diagnosed with Asperger, he tells a story of his difficulty playing with others when he was a child. “Once I was fighting over a red ant hill as a child and I bit a girl's arm because she was in my way. I was an aggressive child.” This participant later explains that his ability to communicate and respond appropriately has gotten better, though at times it is still a challenge. Many participants in this study explained that their ability to understand social norms have not necessarily improved but they have memorized what is socially appropriate and what is not (this will be addressed further in the next paragraph).

Another participant expresses similar difficulties as a child and explains that he has improved in behavior yet he still struggles with knowing what is appropriate when: “I had this weird habit if they were talking to me and I didn't want to I would just stand up in the middle (of the conversation) and walk away.” He recognizes that his behavior was strange and has learned that it is not socially appropriate, but, as he explains later, his understandings of social communication are more like memorized equations and are not necessarily something he truly understands. He explained throughout the interview that he has learned what is appropriate and what is not by the reactions of his peers, examining others, and often people in his life (family members and friends) would explain to him appropriate social behavior. As mentioned below, non-verbal

communication becomes intellectual knowledge, as opposed to knowledge based on intuition of social situations.

Participant: “That I am capable of picking up, I have become more capable of picking up and trying to understand visuals based mostly on verbal comments though I have picked up non-verbal before. I have noticed when people are touching. How much they lean into each other when they talk. So I began to pick that up. But only because I have been explained in an academic (way). I should probably take a non-verbal class. It’s intellectual knowledge.”

JE: “So its very conscious for you?”

Participant: “Yeah, I pay attention consciously aware of it. It’s not like someone give me a non-verbal signal and I automatically recognize it I say oh I notice this person is doing this, I have been told this means this, so that probably also means this. And a lot of them make sense. Touching is clearly, as far as I know, in every society I have ever studied has been at times sign of affection. So I mean it makes sense once I understand it but it’s not intuitive to me. The more I practice doing it the less and less I have to think about it like driving. Driving isn’t intuitive but the more you do it the less you have to think about it”

Many of the participants in this study have learned to adapt their social behavior by translating non-verbal cues into verbal cues, whereas the neuro-typicals did not indicate that they engaged in this type of process. They often explained their social interactions by using terminology associated with emotions and feelings opposed to literal translations of non-verbal behavior in to verbal behavior (see *Flirting* section). Neurotypical individuals often reacted to a situation or conversation by explaining how the situation felt, where atypical individuals explained their reaction as a process of interpreting movements into verbal language and then reacting appropriately based on what they were told in the past that language meant. While understandings of social

interactions may be a learned skill for most people, the individuals in this study expressed these understandings as much more conscious, memorized, and intellectual. Below another participant explains that his ability to communicate non-verbally is a learned trait. He explains that he has become much more proficient at communicating by studying vocal patterns and body language. This very conscious learning of non-verbal behavior was not expressed by any of the neuro-typical participants.

JE: “Do you consider yourself good at reading other peoples’ body language?”

Participant: “At times. I have gotten better over time just because I have learned it just because I have paid attention to it everything from vocal patterns to body language. Just to help realize it. I don’t know, I have been told by my parents growing up that I had difficulty. But I seemingly don’t experience it daily anymore.”

JE: “OK, is it something you would say is not natural but its more learned?”

Participant: “I would say it’s more learned.”

Here, this respondent explains that he “seemingly doesn’t experience” difficulty anymore, but during other points of the interview he expresses extreme frustration over or difficulty with communicating with individuals particularly those who he is romantically interested in. It is unclear whether this is the typical frustration that comes with dating as a young adult or a symptom of his disorder. However, none of the neuro-typical respondents expressed such extreme frustrations, while many of the participants who identified as having learning disabilities did express such frustrations (See analysis in *Difficulty with Romantic Relationships*).

Participants with non-verbal learning disabilities had difficulty communicating verbally as well as non-verbally. This difficulty often leads to them having trouble

socializing or making friends. A college student explains that the hardest part of her disability is the aspects centered on socializing “I didn’t make friends very well. It was hard for me to socialize with people. I guess that’s the hardest part for me.” She goes on to explain that her difficulty with communication and socializing causes her to have social anxiety resulting in more difficulty. When asked if she had difficulty communicating, she said:

“Yes. Sometimes I do have trouble communicating. It depends what I am communicating especially with speeches. Then when I really get my words messed up. But even conversations like this get my nervous levels up and it brings back my speech impediment. Sometimes I have trouble doing eye contact.”

She explains that she gets nervous when communicating with others which results in her having difficulty speaking, igniting her speech impediment and causing her to confuse word order and speech as well as affecting her non-verbal communication such as eye contact. She explains her difficulties with making eye contact as “trouble doing eye contact,” her use of the word ‘doing’ opposed to ‘making’ may indicate that body language (in this case eye contact) are conscious actions. Often for the neuro-typical respondents body language was understood as an aspect of a two-sided nonverbal conversation. Whereas this participant explains eye contact as something she does not make with someone else. Her use of the word ‘doing’ indicates a very one-sided expression.

Another participant explains that her difficulty in communicating results in her inability to maintain a friendship. In this next quotation, a graduate student explains that

before being diagnosed with Asperger's in her early 50's, she thought that she was bipolar and sought professional help due to her lack of relationships.

“My interest in it (getting diagnosed) is honestly because I can't maintain a friendship I always end up saying something totally off the fucking wall. When I don't mean to say it. I have no idea where it comes from. And I lost people in my life that I really wanted to keep in my life so I wanted to know what was wrong with me.”

Most of the atypical participants in this study articulated similar frustrations when it came to socializing. Every one of the participants diagnosed with a learning disability expressed some level of social anxiety stemming from the difficulties they experience when communicating.

Many of the atypical participants explained that they felt uncomfortable in social situations with which they were not familiar. They often had difficulty adapting to new social experiences as evident by the quotation below. The participant (who self identified as having a learning disability) is explaining that he feels discomfort when he is in new social situations: “Just whenever I don't know things. When I struggle. But when I know a situation I am in I am extremely comfortable. I don't like surprises. I don't like sudden things.”

This social anxiety can be so debilitating that it makes it difficult for participants to function in everyday life. In this next quotation a participant explains how she can't enter into public spaces occupied by many other people: “Oh it's horrible! I never go to the mall for that reason. I would end up in the car with my face feeling numb not even knowing where I was. I was so disoriented... I can just get so overwhelmed.”

Similarly, another participant describes that she faces an extreme amount of social anxiety during conversation and whenever she must present in front of class, making it difficult for her to function and perform as adequately as her peers.

“I stutter a lot sometimes. I don’t know how to put words together. If I am presenting like I was in business and professional communication class and it was kind of hard for me to do speeches because I would get in front of people and I would kind of start shaking and mixing up my words and stuff.”

This respondent, along with the others above, expressed severe amounts of anxiety when they must communicate or interact socially. The neuro-typical participants did not express such anxiety when confronted by social interactions. The anxiety felt by the respondents with nonverbal learning disabilities can be frustrating and debilitating.

Coping with Anxiety

The individuals in this study, who identified as having learning disabilities, responded to this anxiety in two different ways. One way participants dealt with their social anxiety was in attempting to overcome it, as is the case with the participant above. In this next quotation, she explains that she tries to “push through” or overcome her social anxiety but this can be very challenging.

“Trying to remember what my family members, sometimes my family members say things like ‘why do you care about what these people think? They are not the person deciding your grade. They are not the person deciding your fate.’ If you really want to do what you want to do then do it. I guess that has been helping me with the speech problems and sometimes I get nervous going up to people and talking or going to an interview for a job. Then I will have to remember this is what I want to do. I have to push through it, I have the ability to push through it since I have done all these other things. So I have to remember I can do it so I should be able to do it again”

She attempts to deal with her anxiety by recalling times that she was able to overcome it.

While some participants attempt to adapt and overcome their social anxiety, others remove them selves from situations where they experience anxiety. They often avoid any type of situation or context that has caused anxiety in the past or could possibly cause anxiety. As seen in this quotation by an honors student: “I don’t go to parties. I am anti-social. I have Asperger’s we don’t do parties.”

Many of the participants in this study would avoid situations that required even minimal communication. One participant explains that he interacts with people as much as he has to academically but no more. This particular participant exhibited many traits associated with autism: most obviously, he was diagnosed as high functioning autistic, including lack of eye contact and difficulties holding and engaging in conversation. It was particularly difficult to get him to expound during our interview. Whereas most of the atypical participants only needed prompted once or twice for each question this participant would often only answer questions with single word answers (most participants’ willingness to answer questions may be due to this sample being self-selected).

JE: “And how does that affect you? (pause) What did they say was different?”

Participant: “They told me I was high functioning autistic. Pretty much that.”

JE: “Ok what aspects of your life does that affect?”

Participant: “Only the social ones I guess.”

JE: “Did it affect you in high school?”

Participant: “Well it a... I never spoke to anyone. But I guess it kind of did confirm you know. That I was (pause) eh.”

JE: “Ok how about now?”

Participant: “Well now I just don’t really care. But I still don’t really talk.”

JE: “Ok. Did it affect you differently in an academic setting versus a social setting?”

Participant: “um. I don’t really (think it) affects (me) all that much. I mean, hmm, yeah not really.”

JE: “Do you see any differences now? Outside of the disability do you see any differences in your social life versus your academic life?”

Participant: “hmm. Um. Like difference?”

JE: “Maybe the way you interact with people?”

Participant: “Well I say what I have to for academics but I mean. I don’t know I just (pause).”

JE: “Ok. Would you say you have difficulty communicating with other people?”

Participant: “Yeah. A bit”

This social anxiety is a result of not only their difficulty with communication but is a product of the informal sanctions placed on them by their peers when they have broken social norms. When participants would deviate from social norms due to their inability to understand them and their difficulty communicating, their peers would react, often negatively, to that as evident in this quotation by a participant in his first semester of college. In this quotation he discusses how he feels, judged by his dorm mates and feels that due to the way he behaves, he can’t fit in:

“Sometimes I like to be alone and actually think of stuff. And most people think I am crazy and they see me doing weird stuff, like I told you, putting the trashcan on my head and weird stuff. Maybe talking to myself and laughing and they are like ‘What’s wrong with you?’ and I am like I am just being my wired self.”

Similarly a graduate student, expressed frustrations over feeling that she was constantly being judged negatively by others, and how this results in her discomfort with social interactions: “I am very uncomfortable talking to people. You seriously are one of the few people I don’t mind talking too... I just don’t feel like you judge.” Prior to the start of this study this participant and I had only a minimal academic relationship. In

order for her to meet with me for the interview, I had to establish quite a lot of rapport, with her via our email correspondence. We scheduled our interview four different times, and each time she would cancel. It took this participant three months before she felt comfortable sitting down with me for a face-to-face interview in the form of a conversation. With this particular participant, I had to match her amount of disclosure in order to obtain report. She would tell me a story about her life and I would then tell her a similar story from my own. This allowed me to gain a very in-depth comprehension of her feelings and understandings associated with communication and her disability.

She, along with many other participants, expressed that, due to their inability to read social situations, they would often react inappropriately. Frequently, participants explained that they were told that they “over shared.” The participant above explained that she found it impossible to stop from sharing information at socially determined inappropriate times:

Participant: “Are you able to sop yourself once you’re going?”

JE: “It’s very hard”

Participant: “I experience that sometimes. Dr. ____ must have told me TMI and over share like 20 times last class. And I could not fucking stop. I could not.”

Every participant in this study who was diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability expressed some level of frustration over the fear of being misinterpreted by others and/or misinterpreting a situation. This fear appeared to be constantly nagging at them and would force participants to frequently question their behavior and second-guess their interpretation of a situation. This fear stemmed from past interactions where they have misinterpreted or have been misinterpreted and the negative reactions they received

from their peers due to this misinterpretation. This fear would manifest in embarrassment, worry, and anxiety, thus further complicating their difficulty with communication. In this next quotation by a student diagnosed with dyslexia he explains that, due to his occasional misreading of body language, he would often analyze social interactions after the fact.

“(sometimes) I completely miss read someone. Or I move or something like that and it could lead to a miss communication...I mean when I am actually in the setting I could think I am doing good or whatever. And then I will look back and be like, well that person kind of wanted to stop talking to me and I just didn’t pick it up at the time.”

Participants often explained this second guessing and insecurity in themselves as “over thinking” a situation. They explained that this lead to a lot of worry; some necessary and some unnecessary. It could also lead to further complicating social situations and interactions making it even more difficult for them to interpret. In this next quotation, a participant diagnosed with central processing disorder explains how she “over thinks” and over analyzes social situations that can result in unnecessary stress in her relationships, romantic or otherwise.

Participant “I over think a lot and not just in relationships but in everything... Well in the social aspect one of my friends, I was hanging out with her and whatever. And I was leaving and then I was like ‘I have to go, I have to go back.’ And she didn’t really say goodbye or anything. Turns out, I thought she was mad at me ‘what did do?’ And then the wheels started turning. I texted her to say ‘ Did I do anything?’ and she was like ‘No, I was getting a phone call from my mom’ I’m like ‘oh ok’ so that is just on example I just start over thinking and like ‘what did I do type deal?’”

JE: “So you were reading her body language as maybe being that she was mad at you?”

Participant: “Yeah.”

Often this worry over misinterpretation leads participants to believe that they have potentially ruined relationships. After interviews I was often left with the impression that the participants felt isolated. It is almost like they are in a foreign country for the first time. The visitor is attempting to adapt to the norms of that culture and is in fear of offending everyone he or she meets. I understood that is what these participants felt like on a daily basis. Except, the individuals they were worried about offending were not strangers but their friends, family, coworkers, employers, and peers. They also felt like they could never truly adapt to many social situations. In this next quotation a graduate student explains that she constantly worries that she has ruined relationships with individuals about whom she cares. In this quotation she is expounding on story of interacting in class with her cohort members and professors. She explained that sometimes she gets into debates during her graduate seminars and afterwards she experiences quite a high amount of anxiety. “I think some of it because I really thought about it afterwards. I was like ‘Oh shit! Now she hates me.’ I am always doing that, thinking about somebody ‘Oh shit! Now they hate me.’”

This participant later explains that she realizes that sometimes her behavior makes people uncomfortable and she is constantly worried of the negative feedback she may receive. In order to combat misinterpretation, she has created rules for herself in social interactions, such as sitting on her hands in order to stop herself from touching other people. In this quotation, we are discussing our shared desire to write a thank you note to a professor. A thank you note from a student may not entirely be the norm but in the

context she explained, would not be inappropriate. However, due to the experiences she has had in the past, she worries that this action would be inappropriate.

Participant: “ I wanted to do the same thing but because I am an Aspy¹, I am always wanting to hug someone touch someone. I have to physically, literally, make something, do something with my hands. I usually go like this (sits on hands)

... I am too (about being a hugger) but a lot of people it’s just it’s just, I know a lot of people say they don’t like to be touched that there is boundaries I cross all the time. And I have no intention. And I have always gotten negative feed back from it so I just don’t do it and I felt like if I tell her what’s in my heart of hearts she would think I was the weirdest person in the world.”

The immense amount of fear that accompanies this type of social anxiety can cause debilitating depression. Some of the participants spoke about the pain that was caused by feeling like a stranger amongst their friends or family or losing their friends and family altogether as a result of finding it impossible to communicate and adapt to social norms. A handful of participants showed great emotional pain when discussing aspects of their relationships with friends they no longer have relationship with due to the difficulties they experience stemming from their disabilities. Below, a participant recalls her best friend’s swearing in ceremony after finishing law school and the traumatizing emotional consequences of her inability to interpret the social situation. She would not tell me what exactly was said but described her comments to her friend as “ungodly” and explained that she had said the things she said because she was feeling an immense amount of anxiety by being in a new social situation.

¹ Slang for a person with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Participant: “and it happened at my girlfriend’s swearing in ceremony. And I felt ok. I was like, so happy for her (crying). And I just said the most ungodly thing right in front of everybody and that was it she just walked away from me and I have never spoken to her since”

JE: “That’s hard”

Participant: “ I was going to kill myself over it. Enough is enough. I didn’t know what was wrong with me and I didn’t make a friend since then I never will. Because I know I will do something that is going to hurt them (crying) and it’s going to hurt me. I never want to feel that again”

Often, this fear and anxiety can result in paranoia. Many of the participants expressed the fear that people that they feel close to don’t share their feelings of friendship, love, or intimacy. This fear of misinterpreting communication is summed up perfectly in this quotation by an instructor with Asperger’s: “My biggest fear is not that no one will like me because fuck them. My fear is that people are pretending to like me because of social graces.” Due to his inability to interpret social situations he expressed a lack of interest in performing social norms for the sake of being polite or graceful. He wishes that other people would do the same, however fears that people without similar disabilities will “pretend to like” him because of the norm of propriety.

At times, the fear associated with developing and maintaining friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships has been in result of the ongoing stigma they experience as members of a marginalized group. Many of the participants expressed anxiety over carrying the label of disabled. Some participants would go out of their way to hide their disability from their peers even when it was detrimental to their education to do so. This is evident in the quotation below. The participant explains that having the “tag” or label of being disabled was so bad she refused to develop a personalized

education program with her school, but was later forced by failing grades, to do so in high school.

I grew up with being afraid of the tag, you know oh she's they used to call them a Special Ed kid. Once you had that you were labeled that for basically your entire public school life. And people in elementary and middle school they would have person follow you around and I was deathly afraid of people knowing that. So I refused for my parents not to let me get that. And then in high school I wanted to get it because things were getting harder and I needed accommodations.

This stigma affects some of their abilities to make friends as children and adults.

Many of the participants expressed difficulties disclosing their disability to potential romantic partners and friends (see section "Difficulty with Romantic Relationships"). For some of the participants, the anxiety over carrying this stigma was a great source of pain. In this next quotation a freshman student explains, how as a child, many people misunderstood his disability. He spent a great deal of time in the interview describing the pain associated with carrying this stigma: "(crying) I lost a lot of friends because their mothers thought I had a disease and they thought I would put in on their children."

Sexuality/Sexual Behavior

Courting and Dating

The participants in this study expressed very different experiences associated with courting and dating. Individuals diagnosed with a learning disability had generally less dating experience than neuro-typicals. It is possible that this lack of experience is due to a multitude of different factors. Many of the individuals in this study who have been diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability expressed a difficulty in communicating with others, which often led to social anxiety resulting in fear of and difficulty starting

and maintaining romantic relationships. This fear also frequently displayed itself in a desire to be Analytically focused or emotionally focused. Some of the atypical individuals in this study placed value in the ability to be either hyper-logical or hyper-emotional often disfavoring the other and belittling those who did not meet their standards of logic or emotion

Difficulty in Romantic Relationships

“Girls would help me or talk with me. I have no idea what the fuck they wanted:

Interested or internal pity.”

The anxiety stemming from difficulties communicating and understanding social norms transcends to courting and dating. Individuals with non-verbal learning disabilities have difficulty communicating in romantic relationships, expressing desire, understanding romantic contexts, and interpreting and imparting romantic cues such as flirting. This difficulty in communication and understanding social norms is then further complicated by the reactions from others they have received in the past. They fear that they will receive negative reactions or feedback from potential romantic partners similar to those they have received from peers, family, and past persons of romantic interest. Participants expressed that they often worry that they will misinterpret or be misinterpreted by (potential) romantic partners similarly to that of their nonromantic relationships. This fear of misinterpretation and negative reactions combined with the difficulty they experience in communication and understanding social norms results in extreme social anxiety. This anxiety often prohibits them from engaging in romantic relationships and activities, thus lessening their romantic experience in comparison with

their peers. This anxiety is then greatly exacerbated by their lack of romantic experience comparatively, subsequently producing a cycle of social anxiety.

Similar to nonromantic relationships, participants in this study that identified as having a non-verbal learning disability expressed difficulty communicating in romantic relationships. This difficulty is evident in this quotation by a freshman student.

“Sometimes it’s like you know when something you said was wrong to a girl. And you are like ‘oh shit.’ You’re like ‘ok how can I fix it how can I fix it?’” He is expressing how difficult he finds it to talk to women in whom he is romantically interested. During the interview he often referred to himself as a coward every time he attempts to engage in a conversation with women.

Another participant articulated similar frustrations when communicating with potential romantic partners. In this next quotation he explains how he didn’t know what to do when confronted with the notion that a woman he was romantically interested in was also interested in him as well. Through her behavior of comparing him to the traits she looks for in potential romantic partners and when a friend of hers told him of her interest, he became aware that she was interested in him romantically. “And I just didn’t know what to do with that knowledge. I just didn’t know what to do with that knowledge. I mean it was really freaking obvious.” He never pursued her romantically because he didn’t know how to go about it.

Many of the participants explained that they had difficulty communicating with (potential) romantic partners, however women in this study expressed particular difficulty communicating emotions and feelings with their male partners. In the quotation below

one participant describes the trouble she experiences when trying to communicate with her husband:

“Men punish by not communicating. Refusing to communicate and women want to talk ... They are taught to be that way. And I don't know if they really feel. I have been married forty years and he fakes it he doesn't feel anymore than that doorframe does. You can teach them to act it. But not to feel it. That's what I think anyway, maybe I am wrong”

This respondent explains that women and men are socialized to communicate and not communicate. She has such difficulty communicating with the men in her life that she has come to the conclusion that they might not really “feel” or experience emotion. Often this participant expressed her self as being extremely emotionally focused, and when others were not as able to communicate on an emotional she understood them as lacking feelings.

Some participants did not just struggle to communicate with others of romantic interest but had an immense amount of difficulty recognizing romantic contexts. In the conversation below, a nineteen-year old participant has difficulty recognizing that the conversation we are having is about romantic relationships as well has trouble recognizing the difference between romantic and platonic behaviors. We spent a great deal of time discussing his thoughts on and experiences with dating, courting, and flirting. In the conversation below (when prompted about his experiences with being kissed) he explains that he has been kissed by family and friends. He spent a great deal of time explaining that the majority of his interactions with women are with his female cousins or with friends but based on the interactions with family members.

JE: "Are you currently dating someone?"

Participant: "No"

JE: "So what is your dating history? How old were you when you had your first girl friend or have you had a girl friend?"

Participant: "I have never had a girl friend. And I am not blind. Girls have actually told me, after that and I was like 'oh'."

JE: "Have you have been kissed before?"

Participant: "No."

JE: "Ok."

Participant: "Well it depends on how you state the question."

JE: "Ok. Explain that."

Participant: "Like how kissed? Like kissed by family or kissed by."

JE: "Kissed by a significant other or somebody..."

Participant: "No. Only like a friendly kiss on the cheek. Like 'ohhh thank you (participants name)' because I did something like that. Yeah that was it."

The difficulty participants (who identified as having a non-verbal learning disability) experienced with communication combined with the difficulty they experience in understanding social norms of dating and recognizing romantic contexts resulted in more anxiety comparative to the anxiety levels they felt non-romantic situations. Participants expressed frustrations and adversity when attempting to interpret communications with (potential) romantic partners. In this next quotation a 26 year old instructor with Asperger's explains that when he received attention from women he couldn't decipher their intentions: "Girls would help me or talk with me. I have no idea what the fuck they wanted. Interested or internal pity?"

The atypical participants in this study often voiced fear, anxiety, negative stress, and frustrations concerned with romantic relationships. Something as simple as developing crushes in high school produced immense amount of stress. In the short

conversation below a participant explains that high school became a time of turmoil as a result of him developing romantic feelings for peers.

Participant: “high school was the first time I started having crushes on people.”

JE: “Ok.”

Participant: “That sucked!”

Many participants with non-verbal learning disabilities often believed that their diagnosis affected their interactions with people in whom they are romantically interested. They feared that their disabilities affected their ability to engage in romantic relationships and, at times, would avoid romantic contexts in order to bypass this fear. In this next quotation from a participant with Asperger’s Syndrome, the respondent explains that, out of all the different aspects of his life that his disability affects it has the biggest impact on his romantic life. He volunteered this information without being prompted or questioned about his romantic life. “My biggest thing the way it affects my life now is probably particularly in a romantic situation. Which I don’t put myself in many of.”

When asked if he thought his disability affected his interactions with people in whom he is romantically interested he explained that it is the one aspect of his life that he finds the most terrifying: “Yes. It’s probably the one place where my ultimate phobias existent: probably to its fullest extent.”

Many participants would not engage in romantic relationships with neuro-typicals out of worry that their partners wouldn’t understand, wouldn’t be able to relate, or out of fear that they would misinterpret romantic cues. One participant articulated that he was able to date in high school because he had attended a private school for students with

learning disabilities. Though he never had a girlfriend he found it much easier to engage in courting activities like going on dates. However, in college he finds this more difficult.

JE: “Do you think your diagnosis affects your relationships with those who you are romantically interested in?”

Participant: “I would say yes.”

JE: “How so?”

Participant: “Well in high school I didn’t notice it that much because everyone was like me. Here in college I haven’t been that romantically involved. I have been on one date.”

Similarly, another participant found it difficult to date. As one of the only neuro-typical participants to currently have a significant other, whenever she would become romantically interested with someone her anxiety levels increased making her disability more evident and, in turn, making her more anxious. She stressed that in the long term her disability doesn’t affect her relationship too much but she still worries that her (potential) partner will think she is “crazy.” Her fear of not acting appropriately in social situations combined with her anxiety of being noticeably disabled creates a great amount trepidation when engaging in romantic contexts or relationships.

J: do you think that your diagnosis affects your interactions with people who you are romantically interested in?

P: Yes. It does. I guess I don’t want them to think I am a crazy person. They are like ‘oh you have Asperger’s that’s a little weird.’ But my boyfriend right now, it took me a while to warm up with him. I would text him a lot before I would even meet with him in person. Because I wanted him to understand I am not crazy. I know how to speak. And when I first met him I like had the speech problem. Really, really, nervous on that first date so like my speech went a little weird. He noticed it a little bit but he didn’t want to say anything. He told me later on. But he noticed it at first. And I guess later on I got better at speaking. I guess it just takes me a long time to warm up to people. But it ultimately I don’t think the speech problem and my Asperger’s is a big deal. But in my head I don’t want

people thinking I am a crazy person. I can be a normal person some people don't even notice I have it. It just takes me a while to warm up to the idea that I can be a normal person.

Similarly to the participant above, many of the individuals who participated in this study who identified as having a non-verbal learning disability expressed anxiety about having to disclose their disability. Some worried their disability would be obvious while others attempted to hide that they had one. This fear of disclosure was often a result of past informal sanctions by peers or partners. In the quotation below a freshman student explains that, due to the way her past romantic partners had reacted to her disability, she was apprehensive to disclose this about herself. In the long run, she felt informing her friends, teachers, and partners about her disability helped them understand why she found certain aspects of socializing, such as engaging in conversation, difficult. She, however, would often attempt to hide her disability out of fear.

“It got to one point where he was getting so annoyed with the fact that I am always doing school work and blowing him off. And I finally explained it to him. And then there were times before that like before he knew about my learning disability we, I would have him repeat things multiple times. And he would be like ‘aren’t you listening?’ And I’m like ‘I am.’ In social aspects and in other romantic settings with other boyfriends it has been that exact same way. It wasn’t just him. It was all the other ones. They had no idea about it. So I finally had to tell them. Because I don’t like advertising it but if I feel like if somebody needs to know then I will tell them. I have gotten better at that. Because I used to not tell anyone I used to not tell teachers or anything like that. But now I am like ‘I am being stupid. I am being stubborn.’ People need to know if they need to know. So I have before, I have explained it to them, I don’t throw it right off the bat. Like ‘Hey you need to repeat these to me because I cant catch it.’ You know the whole deal. But yeah sometimes they got annoyed because I have had them repeat a few things before many times actually in a row. The music thing, studying much longer, not being able to spend as much time because I am studying, because of that whole deal. So yes it does affect my romantic life until I explain it to them

and then they kind of understand it but not really. And sometimes it still plays a factor after that. But it has had an affect.”

For many of the participants this, anxiety about dating neuro-typical individuals stems from the stigma associated with being learning disabled. Comparative to nonromantic communication, the participants in this study often expressed fear over carrying the label of disabled and exposing that label to those who were romantically interested in. This is evident by the quotation above. At times, participants would believe that they were not worthy of healthy romantic relationship because of their disabilities. In the hierarchy of potential romantic partners they often believed that, due to their disability, they were seated at a lower position than many of their peers or “out of their league.” In the conversation below a participant explains that even though her partners see her as an equal she often feels like she is below them.

JE: “Do you think that your diagnosis affects your interactions with people who you are romantically interested?”

Participant: “Sometimes I feel that way but I try not to think it like that.”

JE: “How would you think it would affect?”

Participant: “Sometimes I think that I will classify myself as a lower level than them and I feel like not high enough to their standards. Even though they don’t see it that way.”

One participant explained that she had a series of “rough” relationships; many of her past partners criticized her for her disability. The abuse she suffered in these relationships was not necessarily because of her disability, but she understood her disability as a factor in her difficulties in communicating in these relationships. She spent a great deal of time during the interview explaining she was often fearful of the way people would react to her disability and that she frequently attempted to hide it. This possibly indicates that she feels similar to the participant above who often classifies

herself at a lower position to her partners. In the quotation below she explains that due to the abuse she has experienced in past relationships she has given up dating for long periods of time and always uses caution when entering into a new relationship.

“One was a physical abuse relationship and one it’s just we fought a lot and emotionally, I guess it was emotional abuse. Um I had that problem too. And then I ended up having a pregnancy scare with one of them. That was, I didn’t want to do that any more. I didn’t want to experience that any more. So I was done with that by that time.”

Coping with Anxiety in Romantic Relationships

“But I do think the South Park episode of alcohol being a cure for autism has some truth to it.”

Similar to nonromantic relationships, individuals in this study responded to this anxiety in two different ways. Some participants attempted to engage in romantic relationships. While some participants dealt with the social anxiety they experienced in romantic contexts by hiding or disclosing their disability to (potential) romantic partners, others removed themselves from situations where they experienced this type of anxiety; frequently avoiding any romantic situation or context that has caused anxiety in the past or could possibly cause anxiety in the future. Overall, participants who identified as having a non-verbal learning disability had less romantic experience than participants who did not identify as such. All but one participant in the neuro-typical group explained that they were either currently in a romantic relationship or had been previously and have been kissed and/or have engaged in sexual activity, while multiple participants from the atypical groups explained that they have never been in a romantic relationship and/or have never been kissed and many expressed feeling that they had a lack of sexual and/or

romantic experience compared to their peers. A few participants when questioned about their romantic history did not desire to discuss such topics, as was the case with one participant who throughout the rest of the interview had been quite talkative. He spoke in depth about his childhood, his college experience, his favorite things to study, and his disability, however when asked about his first kiss he immediately changed the style of his answers. He quickly switched from long articulate explanations to short sentences and sounds representative of words. He was loquacious in his descriptions of his childhood experiences but when asked about his first kiss he said he couldn't remember.

JE: "Have you ever been kissed?"

Participant: "mm-hmm"

JE "Can you tell me about your first kiss?"

Participant "I don't remember"

JE: "Can you tell me about the first time you remember?"

Participant: "It was just a kiss."

JE: Can you tell me where you were? Where you on the play ground?
Your parents house?"

Participant: "Later. Much later. I don't...at college"

According to what he said above his first kiss was also years later than his neuro-typical counterparts. It is also possible that he was not entirely truthful in his explanation of his first kiss. His body language suggested that he was uncomfortable with this portion of the interview (looked down, moved in his seat, brought his hands into his lap). He may have made up this story to cover up an even greater lack of experience, such as never actually engaging in kissing. Almost every neuro-typical participant experienced their first kiss while they were children or in their early adolescence (9). Only one neuro-typical participant explained that she had never been kissed. However, multiple participants with learning disabilities explained that they had never been kissed (4) or had

never had a romantic relationship (5). While, one of the participants that did have romantic relationships explained that they did not last long, where only with other individuals that had been diagnosed with a learning disability and he was unable to date in college. In the conversation below, I question an autistic participant about his romantic history. He was the one participant I couldn't get to expound very much on any topic let alone dating and courting. He also did not express that he found any differences between men and women, though by the conversation I could not tell whether this was a result of his beliefs or his discomfort with the topic. I quickly changed the subject, as it was clear by his short answers and body language (he crossed his arms and looked down), that he was not comfortable with this topic.

JE: "Are you currently dating someone?"

Participant: "Nope."

JE "What is your dating history?"

Participant: "Nothing."

JE: "Have you ever been kissed before?"

Participant: "Nope."

JE: "What does it mean to flirt with somebody?"

Participant: "I have no idea."

JE: "Can you describe what it might be like for someone to flirt with someone else?"

(participant takes a long pause; shakes head 'no')

JE: "That's fine, have you ever flirted with somebody?"

Participant: "No."

JE: "Ok, not to much? Do you know if anyone has ever flirted with you?"

Participant: "No."

JE: "No ok. Do you think that there are differences between men and women are?"

Participant: "A penis."

Participants feared interaction with potential romantic partners. One participant who had never had a significant other and had never been on a date explained that the only romantic experience he had was with developing crushes. He explained that these

crushes were based on aesthetics but he would never engage in conversation. This is most likely due to the extreme amount of social anxiety he felt during interactions, especially those of a romantic context.

JE: “Can you tell me how you interacted with those people?”

Participant: “Probably not. I didn’t have much interaction with many people. Its more in the past few yeas my behaviors have gotten a lot more social so generally it was never spoken just no interaction really. Unless they initiated it.”

This anxiety and fear that develops as a product of the difficulty participants have with communication, reading romantic contexts, and understanding social norms sometimes consequently produces a fear of romantic relationships. When participants avoid romantic situations as a result of that fear they subsequently incur less romantic experience than their neuro-typical counterparts. This lack of experience further adds to the anxiety concerned with romantic relationships that they experience resulting in a reciprocal pattern of apprehension. A 26-year old participant with Asperger’s describes this relationship in the quotation below.

“ I have never had sex, I have never kissed anybody, blah, blah, blah. So that obviously gives you the typical fear that one would expect. Plus the irrational knowledge that what is typical we are supposed to learn. I was supposed to learn things when I was 14 years old that I haven’t learned yet or 15 or 16 or whenever people learn. Obviously people are supposed to learn [things] at different ages. But whatever, people learn this stuff before my age. So I know that probably most people aren’t good at sex the first time. And I know, which would be fine with somebody who it’s their first time [too] but I am not going to meet somebody my age, who isn’t like hard core Christian, which I have a ton of other issues with, who is probably not having sex for the first time. Because that is how life goes. And so I mean that is apprehension I have and it builds upon itself. So my fear when I was little (of interacting) builds upon me as I am older.”

Participants explained that they were able to cope with the anxiety centered around dating and romantic relationships by utilizing strategies such as online dating, finding ways to gain control in the relationship, and using alcohol or drugs to lower their inhibitions. Multiple participants explained that they find it much easier to communicate online or through text messaging. Some participants explained it was much easier for them to date and flirt through text. When this topic came up in one interview with a female participant who identified as having Asperger's, she described that she is much more social online.

JE: "Do you have an easier time interacting online?"

Participant: "Way easier than interacting in person. Like even my boyfriend he notices how sociable I am on Twitter. Well I just got a Twitter, but I have a tumblr and a Facebook and that stuff. I am so interactive consistently talking to be on there. But when it comes to like even being in class and talking to the person next to me, it's like the hardest thing in the world form."

Other participants explained that they feel more comfortable in social interactions when they can be in control. One participant who had never been in a relationship explains that he would prefer to be dominant in a relationship because it allows him to communicate in ways that he feels more comfortable. He, however, struggles with this notion because he identifies as a feminist. "Why do I find being dominant gives me a sense of safety and protection? It builds relationships and emotions in ways that function better for me. It's weird because the thing that is weird with me is because I am also a feminist."

A few participants explained that they gain the confidence to engage in conversation and romantic behaviors by lowering their inhibitions with the use of alcohol. Many of the participants were under the age of 21 so it is possible that due to my authority as an interviewer fewer participants disclosed drinking as a form of coping. It is possible that more of the participants used alcohol or drugs as away of combating their fears of romantic relationships. Below is a quotation from a participant who was in his mid-twenties who explained that he did drink to help him engage in conversations with potential romantic partners. In the quotation below he describes an occasion where he flirted with a girl at a bar as the only time he has ever flirted with someone in person (not online).

“That is the only time I really flirted before. And again there was a degree of self-disclosure and interest in me and being intoxicated enough to not be incredibly nervous at the idea of just randomly talking to a stranger about their brother... But I don’t actually drink as much as my stories make me sound. But I do think south park episode of alcohol being a cure for autism has some truth to it. Hyperbolically”

The Curious Case of Flirting

“I am guessing I don’t really pick up on the flirting.”

The participants in this study articulated slightly different explanations of flirting and the behaviors associated with flirting. Participants that identified as having a non-verbal learning disabilities tended to explain flirting by the actions they thought people generally perform while flirting, while neuro-typical participants frequently describe flirting by the feelings they associate with flirting. Participants who identified as having a learning disability often discussed the non-verbal or verbal behaviors they believed to be

associated with flirting. Frequently participants would describe the physical distance (or lack of distance) between individuals when flirting. This is evident by the short conversation with a female atypical participant below.

JE: “What does it mean to you to flirt?”

Participant: “Um I’d say getting really close and kind of like just touching their arms...the only thing I can really think of is just real close and start they will get real close.”

Often participants would describe flirting as smiling and laughing. Both neuro-typical and atypical participants discussed smiling and laughing. However when atypical participants would explain flirting as laughing and smiling they did not describe the feelings they associated with this, where as the neuro-typicals did. In the conversation above a participant diagnosed with a learning disability explains what it means to flirt below the conversation continues

JE: “What do people do when they flirt?”

Participant: “I guess smile a lot, laugh, tell jokes, guess hug I don’t see why not.”

When asked what it means to flirt the participant describes what people do, when asked what people do when they are flirting she speaks more in-depth about their behaviors. Most neuro-typical participants (8) tended to describe the emotional connotations or meaning behind what flirting is when asked “what it means to flirt” and then describe behaviors after being asked what people do. Below a conversation with a neuro-typical participant is evidence of this pattern.

JE: “What does it mean to you to flirt with somebody?”

Participant “Um, I think that I take it kind of seriously so if I am with someone I won’t flirt with someone. I think that flirting with someone means that you are available and that you are not necessarily looking for someone but you are ok with being with someone so when I was in a relationship I wouldn’t flirt with someone. If I thought someone was flirting with me I kind of just like put it down a little bit. I guess. I think that flirting means that you are available and that you are ok with being with someone right now, so it’s like a good time for you to be with someone or when your not wanting a relationship, because it leads someone on and that’s not cool.”

JE: “Can you give me an example of maybe the last time or a particular time that you flirted with somebody?”

Participant: “um I guess would be with my last boyfriend. I would like laugh at whatever he said or said he looked cute, and we would hold hands or touch each other’s back or stuff like that.”

Below, another neuro-typical participant describes his first date with his now wife. He explains that she would flirt with him by making him feel like the center of attention. He addressed how he felt opposed to things she did. He also expresses his flirting as the way he wanted to make her feel opposed to what he did.

JE: “Why don’t you take me back to when you first started seeing your wife. Was there flirting going on? What did you do when you were flirting?”

Participant: “When I first met her it was kind of a crazy night. There was a lot of flirting and stuff and the idea floated that we should all get in to the hot tub. And so we left and got bathing suits and we were all in the hot tub. And flirting and stuff like that.”

JE: “What kind of things did you do to get her attention?”

Participant: “Um I would focus on her, I would joke and look at her a lot and try to make her smile and laugh, and stuff. Yeah humor is my go to.”

JE: “When she was flirting with you did you notice doing anything specific?”

Participant: “Yeah she would just give me more attention. Like I would feel like the center of attention even though there were multiple people there.”

Participants who identified as having a learning disability often spoke very in-depth about the behaviors people performed when flirting. One participant spent a great deal of time discussing the different behaviors he has learned to associate with flirting. He explains he had a high school teacher who was a behaviorist who taught him to recognize signs of body language. However, he expressed many opinions about behaviors that are performed that no other participant (atypical or otherwise) expressed. This particular participant was very confident in his ability to read non-verbal cues. So confident, in fact, that he spoke often of his ability to read body language so well that he could manipulate people. This confidence is possibly a defense mechanism resulting from the difficulty he experiences with communication. He would, however, also contradict many of these statements by explaining how he gets extremely nervous when he must socialize with people especially with individuals of romantic interest. He also had extreme difficulty making eye contact and staying focused on conversation during our interview. In the quotation below he explains in-depth behaviors he believes to be associated with flirting.

“Sometimes when people flirt their eyes, their pupils will get dilated and you can actually see it sometimes because like ...most guys stand up (he stands up) puffs their chest or put their hand and go ‘mm-hmm (puts hand on chin)...yeah most of the times they do. Like I told you with the hair (twirls hair). I actually notice some of this. Our high school teacher used to be, what’s it called, a behaviorist. He studied to be a behaviorist. And he would actually take us to a field trip to Starbucks or to the park or something and he would say ‘you see those two people? Like unknowingly the girl is flirting with the guy but the guy is not seeing it because it is their body language.’ Because we like notice once a guy and a girl really get connected, like they are flirting, their bodies will actually connect to each other. It’s like if I am looking this way, she will look this way, she will move her body the same way I am pointing. She will point

that way if I am pointing that way, she will point that way. But her body is going to be parallel with each other. Sometimes they don't lock their eyes they'll just be like little spasms and try and look away. He will smile, one, if he knows if he got her. Two, if he doesn't know he got her and he is kind of scared. He will do one of two things he will one, scratch his nose, two, kind of clean his mouth, or three, try to stop scratching his head because he is so nervous. And the girl she gonna look away most of the times, she will just look away, sometimes smile uncontrollably. It's kind of like a laughing but not actually laughing (mimics humming noise). And the guy will actually get stiff because he knows something is happening."

Many of the atypical participants described themselves as being bad at flirting, while none of the neuro-typical participants shared these sentiments. They often would express difficulty in attempting to explain what flirting was exactly. Many participants answered with "I don't know" and I would have to prompt them. Below an atypical participant explains that she is "bad at flirting." She then describes what some people do when they flirt, but she cannot explain exactly how she is bad at flirting. Later when asked to describe some behaviors of flirting she explains what her "roommate does" because her roommate is "good at flirting."

JE: "So what mean to you to flirt with somebody?"

Participant: "I am so bad at flirting. My friends tell me I am bad at flirting too. Flirting for me I guess, joking around, in person I will do the whole giggling thing. And joking around with someone. Saying nice things like oh you look cute today in your hat. Or something like that. But I guess mostly that and then the physical. Like you push their arm or something or try to get closer to them. I guess that's all the flirting I notice with my self. My friends tell me I am a bad flirter. I don't exactly know how."

Participants with non-verbal learning disabilities explained that they often have trouble 'pick up' on flirting. This is probably due to flirting often being associated with non-verbal communication. It would make sense that individuals who have difficulty interpreting and imparting non-verbal communication would have difficulty deciphering

non-verbal flirting. Many participants explained that they didn't know when they were flirting or being flirted with. In the quotation below a participant explains how she has difficulty interpreting flirting behavior.

“I am guessing I don't really pick up on the flirting. My friend will tell me too they are flirting with me. And I am like oh they where?! I didn't notice it. But I guess if I am like did pick up on flirting, I notice sometimes that people get closer to me, and then I figure they like me. So I guess that getting intimate closer to you touching you stuff like that.”

Like other forms of non-verbal communication participants explained that interpreting and imparting flirting was intellectual knowledge that was very conscious and they had to learn in an academic way. In the quotation below one participant explains how he learned what behaviors are typically associated with flirting by being given a lecture on what to do and say when attempting to flirt.

“When you are flirting with somebody you don't know as well, typically the non-verbal, or at least I have been told because somebody actually gave me a lecture on this, involved leaning forward, probably don't want to touch the person if you just met them obviously. Lean forward and communicate, tone of voice. Keep the conversation light, which is a problem because I always want to talk about politics and economics and philosophy. Which are apparently not good flirt subjects. Then as you get more serious, various types of touching become ok, shoulder. Then you can increase self disclose. We can also talk about types of interpersonal communication. So you increase the degree of self-disclosure and you begin to share more an more.”

Differences between neuro-typical and atypical individuals in interpreting and imparting flirting presented itself in the data. Neuro-typical individuals tended to explain flirting and flirting behaviors by the way flirting felt while atypical participants explained flirting by behavior. Atypical participants also explained that they had difficulty in imparting and interpreting flirting similar to other modes of communication. Often they

would explain flirting as conscious intellectual knowledge or they would describe themselves as not being able to “pick up” on flirting cues or impart them.

The data collected from the video vignettes indicated that the atypical respondents had difficulty interpreting romantic situations in response to some of the videos. When shown the first video (actors had no eye or physical contact) all neuro-typical respondents explained the relationship between the two actors as a working or colleague relationship or barely platonic. One participant explained that it was strange because the actor’s body language did not “match” her verbal language. This is evident in the quotation below.

JE: “What did you see there?”

Participant: “(pause) obviously, yeah that’s more flirting then saying no we are meeting at the library, and obviously that is, but um, it was strange because she, what she was saying didn’t match how she was acting. They didn’t match at all. They never made eye contact. And I don’t know if maybe that was the point or the next video will show that. But in this it was kind of funny that she was saying didn’t match what she was doing.”

JE: “What kind of relationship did they have?”

Participant: “They have met each other before, in class obviously, maybe they spoken or sat next to each other before, but they don’t know each other.”

Most of the atypical participants (8) did not describe the verbal and nonverbal language as not matching. The atypical participants, however, had a variety of different responses. Two atypical participants suggested that they may be a couple. One participant even describing the relationship between the actors as romantic because they are not making eye contact: “They might be boyfriend/girlfriend. They are comfortable enough with each other that they don’t need to make eye contact. She knew he was sitting down with out even looking. So she knew who she was talking to just by his voice.” None of the neuro-typical participants described this video as romantic.

The atypical respondents spoke more in-depth about the body language the actors were showing than the neuro-typicals. This is possibly due to the more conscious effort they place on interpreting body language because for them it is more learned than innate. Below one atypical participant speaks in depth about what he is interpreting in the video. He even goes as far as to make up their inner dialogue.

JE: “So what did you see there?”

Participant: “Oh! I saw two people talking not looking at each other. Actually making a perfectly good conversation. They just don’t care about actually being there and taking the time and class. Because one, she wants to study and she looks stressed, cuz she is holding her hand right here around her, what its called, her temple. So she’s soothing her self like no you can do this you know it. She’s giving herself a pep talk. And this guy came in and he’s like (grunt). ‘Well I do want to study, but I really don’t care.’ And he does give a good suggestion ‘oh we can go to the library.’ And she’s like ‘I really don’t want to go to the library’ because she is think about more of a time issue. ‘Oh I need to get more time to do this I need to do more of, of, of, Paigets, or something I don’t understand the concept.’ And he doesn’t care, ‘I am not that good at this but I think I can pass,’ because you can see his review papers are light (they are the same amount of paper the girl is holding). So he feels confident enough to say yeah I know this. But as you saw when her papers where flying around (she ruffled through them once on her desk) she was kinda struggling to get her notes around she was studying a little bit when the guy came in she was frustrated. She really needs to study. This guy he could take the test and maybe pass. This girl is going to stress out so much that she is actually gonna fail. Because she is thinking oh I am not going to do it oh this is not going to happen oh shoot what is going to happen. She is actually inviting him with out herself knowing that why did I invite him to my house I don’t even know this guy. Until she notices, we are going to study, and then it might be kind of socially awkward. Because you are just invited somebody that you actually don’t know anything about. If she had a little conversation with him while they were sitting right there ant here is no professor and nobody there and give themselves pointers and stuff like that. That would be a better conversation and then start of in the library even though you don’t want to. The library is good and then her house.”

J: “Ok. What kind of relationship do you think they have?”

Participant: “They have?”

J: “Do you think they know each other?”

Participant: “No they don’t know each other they just look like average Joes, average people with college problems. She’s stressed out, he’s really ‘I don’t want to be here but I have to be here an stuff.’”

J: “Do you think one of them might have a romantic interest in the other?”

Participant: “Like right now? well what their body language was saying was that they didn’t care about each other. The main worry was more about the chick. Because dang the chick gave more stuff then the guy. Just ok I really don’t want to be here I just want to study, study, study. She was screaming study and the guy was screaming what the heck just whatever.”

His interpretation of the scene is an example of the type of conscious analysis that the individuals in this study that identified as having a nonverbal learning disability experience when they are attempting to interpret a social situation. Many of the participants (as shown earlier) explain that they felt that they over think or over analyze situations. This participants response to a 20 second video could be an example of this over analysis. Many of the atypical participants responded to the videos with lengthy descriptions of what they felt the nonverbal behavior meant.

Another participant who identified as having a nonverbal learning disability expressed difficulty in interpreting any of the videos. He responded to the fourth video and the fifth video in the conversation below.

Video 4 (male actor touches female actor twice but she never returns physical contact)

JE: “And what did you see there?”

Participant: “Um I guess the girl seemed a bit more interested.”

JE: “And what gave you that idea?”

Participant: “um I guess. Like expressions...”

Video 5 (female actor touches male actor twice but he does not return physical contact)

JE: “And what did you see there?”

Participant: “Um yeah I guess they were both kind of involved.”

J: “What kind of relationship do you think they have?”

Participant: “Yeah know kind of like a relationship I guess”

J: “And do you think they are evenly interested in each other?”

Participant: "I guess so"

J: "And what gave you that idea?"

Participant; "um. Um. They both seemed kind of like I don't know...comfortable."

No other participants neuro-typical or atypical explained these videos in this way. He describes the first video, where the female initiates no physical contact as her being romantically interested and he explains the fifth video as them being equally interested even though the female actor is the only one to make physical contact.

Overall the neuro-typical and atypical participants often described the male actor as being interested in the female actor even if there was little or no physical contact on his part. In video two (mutual eye contact and no physical touch) eleven of the participants expressed that the man is romantically interested in the woman. Some participants (2 neuro-typical and 3 atypical) expressed that their understanding of the male actor as being interested in the female actor could have something to do with stereotypes of men being sexual aggressors. Two participants even addressed the way the female actor looks, one stating that "Look at her of course he's interested." Many (11) individuals (both neuro-typical and atypical) explained the relationship between the actors in the fifth video as romantic. In this video the female actor makes physical contact with the male actor twice but the male actor does not initiate any physical touch, while most participants did not explain the fourth video (male initiates physical contact) as romantic. This could be due to, as participants explained above, social expectations that men should be or are romantic aggressors.

The inconsistency of the atypical participants responses to the videos could indicate that they have difficulty interpreting social interactions. Their expressions and

the statements they made about having such difficulty (as explained in the section on *Difficulties with Romantic Relationships* and *Difficulty Communicating*) further adds to this evidence.

Analytically Focused

It is possible that this social anxiety, at times, displays its self in the desire to be analytically focused or emotionally focused. Some of the atypical individuals in this study placed a high amount of value in the ability to be either hyper-logical or hyper-emotional. They frequently found the opposite trait undesirable, disparaging those who did not meet their standards of logic or emotion. It is possible that their reactions or and the value the placed in being analytically focused or emotionally focused is a coping mechanism in response to the difficulties they experience in communication.

Many of the participants expressed that they were or they had a desire to be hyper-logical and/or analytically focused. This was displayed in the way they spoke about relationships with family members, friends, peers, and (potential) romantic partners. They often attach logic and apathy as two associated desirable traits. In the conversation below the importance placed on analytical and logical thinking is evident.

Participant: "It's the type of thinking, that analytical thinking that is just really easy for me. "

JE: "Do you like the philosophy type classes?"

Participant: "Not generally."

JE: "But particularly logic?"

Participant: "hmm-mm, me and my friends label them (Philosophy classes) as wishy washy."

This participant explains that he prefers analytical thinking and then devalues subject matter that he believes is not based in logical or analytical thinking.

The sentiments of logic being preferred above other traits were consistent in most of the atypical participants. It was also common for participants to attach the desire to be logical to the desire to be analytically focused. Many participants discussed these traits in relation to each other. Those that expressed desire and respect for these traits explained this desire as being a result of their difficulty with interpreting and imparting communication and social norms. Every atypical participant expressed some difficulty with communication. However, when asked if they had difficulty communicating with others, participants frequently would say that they didn't have a desire to communicate, thus avoiding the immediately saying yes. This is evident in the conversations below with a student with Asperger's. The first conversation is a continuation of the one above. He has just finished explaining that the majority of his social interaction comes from class and out of class extra credit opportunities and that logical thinking is extremely easy for him. He doesn't attend extra credit events for the credit but because he feels that type of thinking is fun and for social interaction. In the second quotation he explains that he has no desire to talk in class. This is somewhat contradictory to his earlier statement of explaining class as his mode of social interaction. In the last quotation of conversation, after being asked of his difficulty with communication he explains he has no desire for social interaction. This statement is contradictory to his desire to participate in extra credit events as a way of socializing.

JE: "Do you participate in extracurricular activities?"

Participant: "Of course!"

JE: "And what do you like to do?"

Participant: “Extra credit opportunities. Which may not sound like much but the Spanish extra credit opportunities take up an obscene amount of time this semester. On Tuesday we have to go watch a two-hour movie in Spanish and then two hour speaking spread out over two days. Which four hours during the school day combined with my 15 hours and I am taking some online classes too.”

JE: “So that is a lot. How does that affect you socially?”

Participant: “It increases my social activity actually. Just because I see the people in the classes in those extracurricular settings. And I sit and watch a movie with someone or something. It’s a more non-education setting, while still being a little bit.”

JE: “Do you like them? Doing the extra credit.”

Participant: “mmm-hmmm!”

...

JE: “Do you do a lot of studying?”

Participant: “No. I have never honestly studied.”

JE: “Do you find school very easy?”

Participant: “Extremely so”

JE: “Ok with the participation. Do you find yourself having difficulty speaking in class or is it more you don’t have a desire to talk?”

Participant: “I honestly don’t have one. The classes now are much different then high school. In high school I had a resentment towards my classes. They are fun. They are a different learning experience.”

...

Participant: “I interact less socially. I don’t care for social interaction. There is no desire. Its not lacking it its just it doesn’t interest me.”

JE: “And it did affect you in high school?”

Participant: “Not particularly. I had friends like everyone else. I mean no significant other, I have never had a relationship of that sort. That I have never cared to.”

JE: “You still feel fulfilled socially?”

Participant: “Exactly.”

The participant above explains that he finds school easy and has no need for extra credit, yet attends extra credit opportunities even though he is extremely busy. He explains that these extra credit opportunities benefit him socially and then explains he has no desire for social interaction in class or out of class. These contradictory statements

could be a result of the desire to communicate but finding it difficult. He has difficulty understanding and expressing social norms of communication and emotion. In order to combat that difficulty, he desires to be analytically focused and hyper logical as for many of the participants they found these traits in opposition to empathy and emotional (traits they had difficulty communicating). Below, another participant shares similar respect and desire for apathy and logic. The participant (also diagnosed with Asperger's) is in his mid twenties and explains that just a few years ago he wished to be devoid of emotion and act solely on logic. He echoes the sentiments of the younger participant above but explains that, with maturity, he began to struggle with this desire to be hyper-logical and emotionless. In this next quotation is in response to his difficulty in romantic and intimate relationships.

“It took me a long time to even admit I had or was capable of such emotions. I wanted to, I didn't watch Star Trek until later, but I functionally wanted to be a Vulcan for a long time. I wanted to pretend I was incapable of emotion. Part of me intellectually still thinks that the Vulcans have it right. But obviously I don't know their magical training methods. Though if I did I don't know if it works on humans but either way I don't have that capacity (to learn Vulcan methods). So I began to do that, I have found other things that make me more comfortable.”

In this quotation, the participant is admiring the character traits of a Vulcan from the Star Trek TV and movie series to explain that he desired to be hyper-logical and void of emotion. He explains that he now struggles with this notion sometimes believing that if he could live like a Vulcan he would. However, he has particularly moved from that as he explains throughout the interview that if he ever wanted to have a relationship he understood he must learn social graces and has found ways to be comfortable in communicating without acting on his desire to be hyper-logical and analytically focused.

Participants also belittle those who are not up to their standards of logic or apathy. It was common for participants to refer to people who they thought were not logical or rational as idiots and those who attempted to shield others from emotional harm as dishonest. They would often depreciate those they thought of as dishonest or stupid as evident in the quotation below. In the next quotation a participant explains that she was scolded by a professor after using insensitive language to explain a situation about a pregnant woman who was put on life support. The participant understands that she made the other students uncomfortable but explains that she was just being honest and the professor should have been honest with the students instead of attempting to spare their emotions.

“But my point is that I can’t always stop what I am doing, I got to get there. Knowing people are shocked by what I have said. They are like oh my god I have made them uncomfortable. I didn’t make this true I didn’t have anything to do with this reality. Why don’t you people know this. But the thing is I knew how uncomfortable she was and I didn’t give a shit. I truly did not give a shit. I had no empathy what so ever for her... You don’t feel threaten by that. I didn’t care what she thought I didn’t even care that she was uncomfortable or unhappy, or anything else. Because she should have been telling them about it. But I know its wrong behavior... maybe that comes across as arrogant.”

Participants would often present themselves in opposition to idiotic or dishonest. “In this cohort there are even some non-debaters who I get along with, which is not common for me. That’s where I meet people where people respect me. They are like ‘I respect that you are honest no bullshit’.” He is explaining his ability to be straightforward and honest are desirable qualities amongst the people with whom he prefers to spend time. He understands honesty as not being “fake” or hiding his feelings in order to be

socially graceful. His experience with honesty is related to the type of communication he is comfortable with. Earlier in the interview he explained that he is more comfortable with people who are able to speak bluntly with him so that he doesn't need to rely on body language to understand social interaction. He understands individuals who are blunt as honest.

Participants explained that they desired to spend time with people who embodied the qualities of honest and smart. They respect individuals who respect logic and are not overly emotional. In the quotation below the participant from above explains that he met people in high school debate team that valued what he valued (honesty and intelligence).

“I met people who I thought huh? These people aren't complete fucking idiots. So they are people I began to respect and therefor wanted to learn how to learn how to fallow basic social graces. Because like I got that they are required I met people outside of my family that did care that much tat would expect me to behave like a civilized human being and who I wanted to talk to and hold conversations with... but you know that helped. Also the debate team valued intelligence and honesty.”

This participant explains that he desires to spend time with people who value these traits because it's what makes him comfortable. Many understand that their Analytically focused and logical nature expressed in their ability to be honest or blunt makes many people uncomfortable. So they prefer to socialize with people who value these traits in the same way they do.

“Important that they are honest or blunt because it makes them more comfortable I respect people who respect me because I am smart. If they don't respect me its because they don't think I am smart enough. Which I can't take I am not smart enough to do something. I may not be smart enough to perform heart surgery. If someone here performs heart surgery I would be like what the fuck are you talking about. I am ok with people not thinking I am smart enough. I feel like people are a little less fake. I mean there are people who are a little bit. None of them are quite as blunt as me

but they are all blunt enough that I never not know what is going on. So that has helped a lot as I got there I built more self-confidence. So I could handle situations other than that. So I could handle situations other than that. So as people use complete bluntness and normal subtly it was kind of like riding with training wheels. I got a little bit of practice so I feel more comfortable outside of that.”

Due to participants’ difficulty in understanding social norms and interpreting and imparting communication they are more comfortable if the individuals they socialize with will communicate in what they perceive as blunt, honest, and intelligent ways. These participants equate being truly blunt, honest, and intelligent to the ability to be Analytically focused and logical.

Emotionally Focused

Some participants who were diagnosed with non-verbal learning disabilities valued qualities of emotions, feelings, and empathy opposed to those of bluntness and analytically focused. Even though there was a difference in traits of value both participants who respected apathy and logic and those who respected emotionally focused traits and emotion explained themselves and the qualities they aligned with as honest. In this next quotation a participant explains that she raised her son with qualities that she valued and how he was then belittled for being empathic. “And if you mother a boy like I did the world laughs at him and calls him a cry baby because he feels things and he is empathic.” All atypical participants aligned with being analytically focused or emotionally focused. However, it is unclear exactly what made them identify with one opposed to the other.

Many of the participants that valued empathy explained this trait as being traditionally aligned with women and femininity. One male participant explained that “men do have feelings” and that they “do cry.” He explained that this should be valued and he often found himself being able to socialize better with women. In the quotation below one participant explains that she values empathy and feelings and that often this is not a trait she finds in men therefore she has a harder time communicating with men. This quotation shows how she values emotions and empathy and disvalues traits of apathy. She explains creation as an empathic trait.

“Men don’t have relationships with anyone except themselves because they think they are all narcissists. I mean they are so shallow...women we nurture, we birth babies, if we were in charge of the world we would make something. We would talk about our children and how to make the world better and we would because that’s what women do”

Communications Styles & Gendered Differences

It is possible that this difference in value is based on the communication styles that participants found easier. The atypical participants in this study had difficulties communicating but some found it easier to communicate in blunt, honest, hyper-logical and analytically focused ways. They were often criticized for making people uncomfortable by being too blunt or analytically focused, while the other atypical participants found it easier to communicate with emotions and physical touch. Often these participants were criticized for “over thinking,” and making people uncomfortable with their lack of personal space and invasive emotional and personal questions and comments. Participants realized that the way they feel comfortable communicating goes against social norms so they often reject those norms and seek relationships with people

that communicate the way they do. They then place value in the personality traits of individuals with such communication styles. This is the case with one participant who sought out debaters² because he found them logical and honest and the case with another participant who sought out women's studies majors because she found they communicated with emotions and feelings and were not so offended by her partiality to touch.

The tendency for the atypical individuals in this study to be emotionally or analytically focused could be based on communication styles but it is important to note that just as individuals vary in the way they communicate they can also vary in their tendency to be analytically or emotionally focused. Being completely emotionally or analytically focused are two poles on the extremes of a communication continuum. The atypical participants in this study often aligned with one extreme or the other but at times were less focused on an extreme. For example one female participant who expressed extreme focus on emotions at times also focused on being analytical. For most of the interview she expressed her self through emotive words and articulated the importance of communicating emotionally and "feeling." However, there were instances when she expressed frustrations with individuals who were not communicating as analytically as she. In this quote below she expresses frustration with students taking graduate classes in feminism that do not have an advanced understanding of feminism. She is frustrated that they are not able to communicate feminist ideology analytically.

"These kids coming in. I think its bullshit how they run the program because you can go to any department and take a couple of classes. You

² Term for members of the debate team.

don't have any god damn idea what you are doing. I mean people coming in to masters level Soc classes in feminism and women's studies who have never even heard of feminism. I mean are you kidding me? What the hell are they doing there? And we have to be nice to the kids, or to the men. Fuck em, fuck all of them I am not there to please them. I paid my money I am here to talk about feminism and women's oppression"

One can be mostly emotionally focused but at times place value in analytical forms of communication or vice versa. In different situations one may be more focused in communicating or placing value in one extreme or the other. The atypical participants in this study often expressed themselves in terms of these extreme, however not always, while the neuro-typical participants did not often align with the extremes of emotionally or analytically focus.

There is some evidence to suggest that partiality and distaste for certain communication styles is aligned with traditional views of gender. Most of the participants who identified with hyper-logical and analytically focused traits were male and most of the participants that identified with emotional and emotionally focused traits were female. This however, does not hold true for all atypical participants. One of the participants who expressed a desire to be emotional and emotionally focused is male while one of the seven participants that stressed the importance of being analytically focused, honest, and logical was female. In this next quotation a participant explains that men are "absent" emotionally. She disvalues men because she values empathy and she aligns men with apathy. "You can be married to them. But they are absent, whether they are absent or not." When asked about differing communication styles by gender she said: "men suck women are everything." In this next quotation, she implies that men are socialized to be apathetic and that there is something fundamentally wrong with apathy.

“I don’t even know why we want men to act that way because then we hate them when they are adults and acting that way. We teach them not to cry and then we are adults trying to have a relationship with a man and we say ‘what the hell is wrong with you? You don’t have any emotion.’”

They neuro-typical participants were not so focused on the extremes of being emotional or analytical. Though neuro-typical participants did express these traits as gendered (being analytical as masculine while emotional as feminine) and often expressed an affinity with one or the other based on their gender identity, they did not place such an extreme importance on being either. Overall, most of the male neuro-typical participants explained that they preferred to communicate more logically while the female participants explained that they communicate more emotionally. These differences were not as great nor did they assign one communication style as superior to the other.

For many participants, including the one above, traits of being analytically focused and emotionally focused and logic and emotion were in exact opposition to each other. Individuals could not be both logical and emotional, or analytically focused and empathic. These traits were often assigned a positive or negative value and were gendered. In the quotation below another female participant explains that women are more caring for each other and more concerned with others feelings.

“Women are more emotional, when they are communicating and guys will say whatever. At least the guys that I know will say what is ever on their mind, they won’t hold anything back they will tell you the truth. Like one of my best friends who is a guy he will tell me how it is he’s not trying to be mean, but he will tell you this is what is happening and he won’t sugar coat it and I know girls will sugar coat things.”

In the next quotation yet another female participant diagnosed with a learning disability assigns value to communication styles she understands as being differentiated by gender.

“Girls are more well me personally I like to say how I feel and lot of guys keep it in. Something bothering me I say it and guys usually don’t and not just in relationships but in general in social aspects a lot of guys do the same thing they keeps what’s wrong or what they think they keep their opinions to their selves more then girls. And in result of that guys are usually easier to be in a social scene because they don’t express those opinions so much and girls express their opinions more or they are more apt to because that’s what I mean how girls are more emotional and all things like that. Maybe not necessarily speak their minds but the more emotional part definitely.

A male participant who identifies has having a non-verbal learning disability explains that men have the ability to be logical while women do not. He then assigns value to the trait of logic and disvalues emotion. In this next quotation he is discussing the differences between he and his mother: “I will be partying a little too much at school but I will still be getting good grades. She will freak out but at the end of the day I am still making still doing good. So logically I am (still making good grades). She just the emotional side of it, she can’t.”

Value of certain traits is not always differentiated by gender; below a participant with Asperger’s explains that he believes he communicates in a very logical and therefore masculine way. However, often he finds men illogical in their actions. He also assigns logic and masculine communication styles to individuals with non-verbal learning disabilities.

“Not that it’s always true but I think I communicate in a fairly masculine way. Partly because socialization and autism tends to make one more logical which has always been I consider more masculine. Though I don’t

get how a bunch of people slamming into each other and getting concussions over a ball counts as rational. And apparently this what men in Texas do to prove their masculinity so I have no idea how this is fucking supposed to work.”

It is possible that the atypical men commonly identified with analytically focused traits while the atypical women frequently identified with emotionally focused traits due to traditional views gender roles. Both atypical and neuro-typical participants often explained women as being emotional and men as being logical or analytical. These understandings of gendered differences could be due to traditional gender roles of men as logical and women as emotional, and men as leaders and women as nurturers.

It is probable that the individuals in this study valued traditional gender roles and thus wanted to emulate the traits associated with their gender identity. In other words the (atypical) men in this study may have valued traditional gender roles of men, and often traditional roles included being logical and analytical, so they would then attempt to be and value the traits of logic and analytics.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

According to West and Zimmerman, individuals have multiple social identities that may be utilized and become more or less prominent situationally. Individuals' identities' change with the circumstances of interpersonal communication, but no matter what the situation individuals are (most) always men or women (West & Zimmerman 1987). Individuals are always gendered. One can be a mother, professional, student, wife, depending on the situation, but one is always woman. This makes gender an unavoidable identity (West & Zimmerman 1987). The social consequences of doing gender are so prevalent that one's sex category can be relevant or called into question and one can be judged on their gender performance in any situation (West & Zimmerman 1987). This understanding presents gender as one of the most master of statuses and all other identities as less prominent or concrete. This could explain why the participants lacked variation in understandings of and experiences with gender but did differ in their views of sexuality and sexual experience. Sexual identity is not as concrete as gender, as we are not always sexual however we are always gendered. Sexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual orientation are constructed in relation to gender and thus are still very strong identities. However, since one can be evaluated on ones gender performance in practically any situation (West & Zimmerman 1987) the informal sanctions for deviant gender expression (any gender other than cisgendered male or female) are more

frequently occurring and more prevalent than sexual identity. Therefore these participants' views and experiences of sexuality are understandably more varied.

If this sample varied more in age it is possible we would have seen different effects of gender. A younger population who has not been as socialized into gender and sex categories may have been more varied in gender identity and understandings and expressions of gender. However it is possible that gender identity is solidified when children are just a few years of age (Cahill, 1989) and therefore variety in gender expression may not be seen.

There were other limitations to this study including a self selective population. Most of the participants in this study were recruited via Introduction to Sociology classes. This could have affected their awareness of social constructions due to their education in sociology. It could have also affected their responses to questions as the majority of them were between the ages of 19-22. They were a very homogenous group in age. Since the majority of individuals in this study were in their late teens to early twenties (two were in their 60's and two in their mid-twenties) it is possible that this time in their life is very concentrated on sexual relationships. This thus creates a more tumultuous understanding and heightened awareness of sexuality and sexual behavior.

Other limitations include the order of which I showed participants the videos. I always started with video 1 and showed them chronologically. Since the level of touching and eye contact increases within the first three videos it is possible that participants caught on to the function of the videos. It is also possible that the gendered appearances of the individuals in the videos allowed participants to draw conclusions about the nature

of the relationships between the actors that they otherwise wouldn't have. The video vignettes should be attempted again in future research with androgynous looking actors to control for the gender power relations. It would also be interesting to collect data on reactions to both types of vignettes, videos with gendered actors and videos with androgynous actors.

Other limitations of this study are in the way in which I analyzed the data. This study is phenomenological in nature and also analyzed from an emic perspective, and the biases that accompany that perspective. As one who identifies with having a nonverbal learning disability I can relate to the atypical participants in this study in a way a neuro-typical researcher could not. I was able to build rapport with them by disclosing this about myself and at times our relationship was able to move from researcher/participant to individuals with shared experiences. Most likely participants were willing to share more openly with me when they functioned with the understanding that we shared similar experiences (I also "outed" myself as a lesbian when my participants disclosed themselves as gay (two participants) and bisexual (one participant) to me. Though my emic perspective allowed me to build rapport quickly it may have also biased me in analyses. I may have projected some of my own understandings and experiences on to my participants, though I took care not to do this.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Though previous research indicated that it was probable that individuals who have been diagnosed with a nonverbal learning disability may have different understandings of gender than neuro-typical individuals, there was little difference in how the respondents in this study presented their own gender identity as well as how they determined others'. Previous research indicated that neuro-typical individuals and those diagnosed with non-verbal learning disabilities may use different clues to determine others' gender identity as well as differ in the presentation of their own gender identity. However, the respondents in this study expressed little difference in the way neuro-typical and atypical individuals determine gender as well as present their own. All participants (both neuro-typical and those with non-verbal learning disabilities) presented relatively traditional gender representations.

Most participants (both neuro-typical and those with non-verbal learning disabilities) explained that in determining others' gender they first look at hair length, facial features, body type, and clothing style. Many participants also explained that they often look for breasts or lack of breasts. Participants did not differ by neuro-typical and atypical in how they determined others' gender identity. Typically, they assigned gender categories by the way individuals looked and their physical traits. They often determined others' gender identity by examining traits frequently associated with traditional gender roles, such as long hair for women and short hair for men. Almost every participant explained gender differences (besides physical) as being socially constructed or due to

socialization. Further research should inquire more about how respondents come to that conclusion. It may be possible that there is a self-selection bias at play due to the fact that respondents were recruited from Introduction to Sociology classes.

Atypical participants expressed more difficulty with communication, social interaction and interpreting social norms than the neuro-typical participants. This resulted in social anxiety stemming from the fear they experience with communication, social interaction, and ultimately romantic relationships. Many of the respondents who were diagnosed with a learning disability explained that they had difficulty communicating with other people. They had difficulty picking up and deciphering non-verbal cues during conversation and expressed inability to interpret and act within social norms of communication. Many respondents articulated frustrations with understanding or knowing how to respond and react verbally in conversation. They often felt that they had to spend a lot of time trying to come up with appropriate verbal responses to simple, everyday communications. This difficulty often led participants to experience a great deal of anxiety.

It is interesting that individuals explained that they were able to cope and communicate in social interactions by memorizing the meanings behind nonverbal communication. Participants expressed that they have not necessarily improved but they have memorized what is socially appropriate and what is not. For these participants non-verbal communication is not knowledge based on intuition of social situations but become intellectual knowledge. Many of the participants in this study have learned to

adapt their social behavior by translating non-verbal cues into verbal cues. However, the neuro-typicals did not indicate that they engaged in this process.

Respondents in this study with non-verbal learning disabilities had difficulty communicating verbally as well as non-verbally. This difficulty often led them to have trouble socializing or making friends. Every one of the participants diagnosed with a learning disability expressed some level of social anxiety stemming from the difficulties they experience when communicating. This social anxiety can be so debilitating that it makes it difficult for participants to function in everyday life

The individuals in this study who identified as having learning disabilities responded to this anxiety in two different ways. Some respondents coped with their social anxiety by attempting to overcome it, while others removed themselves from situations where they experience anxiety. Those who removed themselves from social situations often avoided any type of situation or context that has caused anxiety in the past or could possibly cause anxiety.

All respondents who were diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability expressed frustration over the fear of being misinterpreted by others and misinterpreting social situations. This fear would force participants to frequently question their behavior and second-guess their interpretation of a situation. This fear most likely resulted from past interactions where they have misinterpreted or have been misinterpreted and received negative reactions from their peers due to this misinterpretation. Participants often explained this second-guessing and insecurity in themselves as “over thinking” a situation. They explained that this led to a lot of worry. It also led to further

complicating social situations and interactions making it even more difficult for them to interpret.

There was a noticeable difference in sexual behavior and experience. The individuals who identified as being diagnosed with a learning disability over all had less romantic and sexual experience than those without disabilities. The anxiety stemming from difficulties communicating and understanding social norms transcends romantic relationships. Individuals with non-verbal learning disabilities expressed experiencing difficulty communicating in romantic relationships such as expressing desire, understanding romantic contexts, and interpreting romantic cues. This difficulty with communication and understanding social norms is then further complicated by the reactions from others they have received in the past. Often respondents with nonverbal learning disabilities feared that they would receive negative reactions from (potential) romantic partners in the same way they have received from peers, family, and possibly persons of past romantic interest. Participants expressed that they often worry that they will misinterpret or be misinterpreted by (potential) romantic partners.

The fear of misinterpretation and negative reactions combined with the difficulty they experience in communication and understanding social norms results in extreme social anxiety. This anxiety often makes it difficult for them to engage in romantic relationships and activities, therefore lessening their romantic experience, as compared to their neuro-typical peers.

This anxiety is then exacerbated by their lack of romantic experience, consequently resulting in a cycle of social anxiety. Many of the atypical participants in

this study would not engage in romantic relationships with neuro-typicals out of worry that their partners wouldn't be able to relate, or out of fear that they would misinterpret romantic cues. Participants often expressed anxiety about having to disclose their disability to neuro-typical persons of romantic interest. For many of the participants this anxiety centered on dating neuro-typical individuals is a result of the stigma associated with being disabled.

Comparative to non-romantic relationships, individuals in this study responded to this anxiety in two different ways. Some participants attempted to engage in romantic relationships. Some of these participants coped with the social anxiety they experienced in romantic contexts by hiding their disability from (potential) romantic partners. However, alternatively others removed themselves from situations where they experienced this type of anxiety. Often, these participants avoided any romantic situation or context that has caused anxiety in the past or could possibly cause anxiety in the future.

This anxiety and fear that develops as a product of the difficulty participants have with communication, reading romantic contexts, and understanding social norms often resulted in a fear of romantic relationships. When participants avoided romantic situations as a result of that fear they consequently experienced fewer romantic encounters than their neuro-typical counterparts. This lack of experience adds to the anxiety centered on romantic relationships that they experience resulting in a pattern of apprehension.

Participants responded to this social anxiety centered around romantic relationships by developing coping mechanisms of focusing on either emotional communication or analytical communication. Some of the atypical individuals in this study placed value in the ability to be either hyper-logical or hyper-emotional. They often set these two traits at opposition to one another. Atypical participants found the opposite trait undesirable, frequently criticizing those who did not meet their standards of logic or emotion.

This desire to be, and respect for, analytically focused/hyper-logical traits or emotionally focused/hyper-emotional traits is most likely because it is the communication type with which they felt most comfortable. It is possible that this difference in value is based on the communication styles that participants are more comfortable with. The learning disabled individuals struggled with communicating but found it more uncomplicated to communicate in blunt, honest, hyper-logical and analytically focused ways or in more emotional and emotionally-focused ways. These individuals were then often criticized for making people uncomfortable by being too blunt or analytically focused or for “over thinking”, and making people uncomfortable with their lack of personal space and intrusive emotional comments. Participants often understand that the way they feel comfortable communicating is in opposition to social norms, therefore, they frequently reject those norms seeking relationships with people who communicate in a way they feel comfortable with and value the traits they value. Generally, participants in this study understood flirting slightly differently. Neuro-typical participants explained flirting as describing meaning and feelings while atypical participants described flirting

behaviors. These individuals often felt like they had difficulty imparting and interpreting flirting behaviors similarly to other forms of communication.

There were multiple limitations to this study. Due to the fact that all of the participants were college educated and in an academic setting, it is possible that they have been able to cope better than atypical persons who have not experienced a higher education. It is possible that there would be more gender variance in younger atypical individuals or in those individuals who have not experienced a college education. Furthermore my emic position as a non-verbal learning disabled individual does provide me with some biases making it difficult to analyze this situation as a stranger. My disability does, however, provide me with the ability to relate and sympathize with participants in a way that a researcher without a similar disability could not.

Further research should inquire about the processes individuals with non-verbal learning disabilities undergo in order to understand non-verbal communication as memorized intellectual knowledge. A follow-up study should be conducted to more directly address the coping mechanisms of atypical participants' focus on analytical or emotional communication styles.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Thank you for coming. This is an interview about how college students' perceptions of gender and sexuality. This interview should take about an hour. If there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable with, you don't have to answer them. And, if you wish to stop the interview, we will end it immediately. While your informed consent form that I'll give you in a minute has your name on it, this is not linked with your responses. After you sign it, the consent form will be placed in a sealed envelope kept in a locked location separately from the data. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I would like to record this interview. I am deliberately not going to use your name in addressing you after I turn the recorder on, but I will ask you for your consent on tape. Is it OK to turn the recorder on?

This is interview # __. Do you consent to being recorded for the purposes of this interview? You can ask me to turn it off at any time.

General

(Designed just to get them talking) How long have you been at Tech? What's your major?

Romantic History

1. Are you currently dating someone?
2. What's your dating history?
 - a. (if probing questions are necessary) Tell me about your first kiss – how old were you?
 - b. Was it with your first significant other?
3. What does it mean to flirt with someone? What are some things that people do when they are flirting?
4. Have you ever flirted with someone? What did that look like?
5. Has someone else ever flirted with you? What did that look like?

Gender Roles

6. Do you think there are differences between men and women? What are those differences?
7. Why do you think they are different? What effect does this have on individuals?
8. Do you think men and women communicate differently? Do you think they flirt differently?
9. When you see someone on the street, how do you know if they're male or female?
10. Beyond things like clothes or hair style, when you meet someone for the first time, how do you determine their gender?
 - a. How did you learn that?
 - b. *Researcher writes own observations of respondent's gender display here*

11. When you were a child, what were your favorite playtime activities? Did you play with boys or girls more?
 - a. Compared to other children your age, do you think you spent more or less time playing alone?

Diagnosis Effect

12. (For AT) What is your diagnosis? At what age were you diagnosed?
13. (For AT) How, if at all, does it affect you? Did it affect you in high school? Now?
 - a. Did it affect you differently in academic versus social settings?
14. (For AT) Do you have difficulty communicating with other people? In your ideal world, what would change to make that difficulty go away?
15. (For NT) Do you consider yourself good at reading others' body language?
16. (For AT) Do you think that your diagnosis affects your interactions with people who you're romantically interested in? How so?
17. (For both) Do you participate in any extracurricular activities, or have any hobbies? How do these affect you socially?

Hypothetical Scenarios

18. Watch videos here. In these videos, you will watch an interaction between two people. Afterwards, I'll ask you to describe the interaction.
 - a. What did you see there?
 - b. What sort of relationship do Amy and Brad have?
 - c. Did you notice if either person has a romantic interest in the other? Both or just one? What cues led you to that conclusion?

Demographics

19. What gender do you identify as?
20. What sexual orientation do you identify as?
21. What race do you identify as?
22. What do your parents do? Are they still married? (*Who did you grow up with?*)

Show Videos

Scenario 1.

1. What did you see there?
2. What sort of relationship do Amy and Brad have?
3. Did you notice if either person has a romantic interest in the other? Both or just one? What cues led you to that conclusion?

Scenario 2.

1. What did you see there?
2. What sort of relationship do Amy and Brad have?
3. Did you notice if either person has a romantic interest in the other? Both or just one? What cues led you to that conclusion?

Scenario 3.

1. What did you see there?
2. What sort of relationship do Amy and Brad have?
3. Did you notice if either person has a romantic interest in the other? Both or just one? What cues led you to that conclusion?

Scenario 4.

1. What did you see there?
2. What sort of relationship do Amy and Brad have?
3. Did you notice if either person has a romantic interest in the other? Both or just one? What cues led you to that conclusion?

Scenario 5.

1. What did you see there?
2. What sort of relationship do Amy and Brad have?
3. Did you notice if either person has a romantic interest in the other? Both or just one? What cues led you to that conclusion?

APPENDIX B

Video Script

Scenario 1.

(scene: Two chairs are set up in a classroom like setting. A woman is sitting in one of the chairs reading notes. A man walks in and sits in the other chair. In this scene little voice inflection, little eye contact, and no smiles.)

Man: Hello (does not turn to her) How are you today? (look at phone)

Woman: Hi (does not turn to him) I am fine. How about you? (look at notes)

Man: I am alright. Are you ready for the exam next week?

Woman: Not completely I want to do more studying. Do you want to study together tomorrow?

Man: Yeah. What time do you want to meet up?

Woman: How's six? Where should we study at?

Man: We can meet at the library.

Woman: I don't want to come all the way to campus. Do you want to come over to my apartment instead?

Man: Sure, that would be great.

Scenario 2.

(scene: Two chairs are set up in a classroom like setting. A woman is sitting in one of the chairs reading notes. A man walks in and sits in the other chair. In this scene more excitement in voice inflection, Smiles and more eye contact)

Man: Hello! (he turns to her as he asks) How are you today?

Woman: Hi! (she turns to him) I am fine. How about you?

Man: I am alright. Are you ready for the exam next week? (making eye contact)

Woman: Not completely I want to do more studying. Do you want to study together tomorrow? (making eye contact)

Man: Yeah! What time do you want to meet up?

Woman: How's six? Where should we study at?

Man: We can meet at the library.

Woman: I don't want to come all the way to campus. Do you want to come over to my apartment instead?

Man: Sure, that would be great.

Scenario 3.

(scene: Two chairs are set up in a classroom like setting. A woman is sitting in one of the chairs reading notes. A man walks in and sits in the other chair. In this scene excited voice inflection, lots eye contact, smiles, and physical contact.)

Man: Hello! (turns to her) How are you today? (Make eye contact, smile and touch her shoulder)

Woman: Hi! (turns to him) I am fine. How about you?

Man: I am alright. Are you ready for the exam next week?

Woman: Not completely I want to do more studying. Do you want to study together tomorrow? (Touch his arm and smile)

Man: Yeah! What time do you want to meet up? (look at her)

Woman: How's six? Where should we study at? (look at him)

Man: We can meet at the library.

Woman: I don't want to come all the way to campus. Do you want to come over to my apartment instead?

Man: Sure, that would be great.

Scenario 4.

(scene: Two chairs are set up in a classroom like setting. A woman is sitting in one of the chairs reading notes. A man walks in and sits in the other chair. In this scene excited voice inflection, lots eye contact, smiles, and physical contact by man.)

Man: Hello! (turn to her) How are you today? (Make eye contact, smile and touch her shoulder)

Woman: Hi! (turn to him) I am fine. How about you?

Man: I am alright. Are you ready for the exam next week?

Woman: Not completely I want to do more studying. Do you want to study together tomorrow? (smile)

Man: Yeah! What time do you want to meet up? (look at her)

Woman: How's six? Where should we study at? (look at him)

Man: We can meet at the library.

Woman: I don't want to come all the way to campus. Do you want to come over to my apartment instead?

Man: Sure, that would be great. (touch her hand)

Scenario 5.

(scene: Two chairs are set up in a classroom like setting. A woman is sitting in one of the chairs reading notes. A man walks in and sits in the other chair. In this scene excited voice inflection, lots eye contact, smiles, and physical contact by woman.)

Man: Hello! (turn to her) How are you today? (Make eye contact, and smile.)

Woman: Hi! (turn to him) I am fine. How about you? (Make eye contact, smile and touch his shoulder.)

Man: I am alright. Are you ready for the exam next week?

Woman: Not completely I want to do more studying. Do you want to study together tomorrow? (smile)

Man: Yeah! What time do you want to meet up? (look at her)

Woman: How's six? Where should we study at? (look at him)

Man: We can meet at the library.

Woman: I don't want to come all the way to campus. Do you want to come over to my apartment instead? (touch his hand)

Man: Sure, that would be great.

APPENDIX CParticipant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Year In School	Disability
Participant 1	Male	Straight	White	Freshman	Dyslexia/ADD
Participant 1 Match	Male	Straight	White	Freshman	N/A
Participant 2	Male	Straight	Hispanic	Freshman	Dyslexia/Possibly others
Participant 2 Match	Male	Straight	Hispanic	Freshman	N/A
Participant 3	Female	Straight	White	Freshman	Central Processing Disorder
Participant 3 Match	Female	Bisexual	White	Freshman	N/A
Participant 4	Male	Straight	White	Freshman	High Functioning Autistic
Participant 4 Match	Male	Straight	White	Junior	N/A
Participant 5	Male	Straight	White	Freshman	Language Processing Disorder
Participant 5 Match	Male	Straight	Hispanic	Junior	N/A
Participant 6	Male	Straight	White	Recently Graduated with MA	Asperger syndrome
Participant 6 Match	Male	Straight	Hispanic	Graduate	Diagnosed with ADD as a child no longer medicated
Participant 7	Female	Straight	Hispanic	Freshman	Dyslexia
Participant 7 Match	Female	Straight	Hispanic	Freshman	N/A
Participant 8	Female	Straight	Hispanic	Freshman	Asperger syndrome
Participant 8 Match	Female	Straight	White	Freshman	N/A
Participant 9	Male	Gay	White	Junior	Asperger syndrome
Participant 9 Match	Male	Gay	White	Junior	N/A
Participant 10	Female	Straight	White	Graduate	Asperger syndrome
Participant 10 Match	Female	Straight	White	Graduate	Possibly diagnosed with ADD as a response to death in the family

APPENDIX D

The charts below depict the responses of participants to each video. Relationship column lists the participant's responses to the question "What kind of relationship do you think the two people in the video have?" The Level of Interest column lists the participant's responses to the question "Do you think one person is more interested in the other?"

Video1

Participant	Relationship	Level of Interest
1	Boyfriend/ Girlfriend	Man is more romantically interested
1 Match	Class mates	To hard to tell
2	Don't know each other	No romantic interest
2 Match	Friends/class mates	Man is more romantically interested
3	Classmates	No romantic interest
3 Match	Classmates	No romantic interest
4	Casual/classmates	Didn't Notice
4 Match	Friends/class mates	No romantic interest
5	Couple	Mutual
5 Match	peers	No romantic interest
6	Friends/classmates	No romantic interest
6 Match	peer/classmates	No romantic interest
7	Friends	Didn't Notice
7 Match	Peers	Maybe woman is more romantically interested
8	Classmates	Didn't Notice
8 Match	Friends	No romantic interest
9	Classmates	Maybe Man is more

		romantically interested
9 Match	Classmates	To hard to tell
10	Classmates	No romantic interest
10 Match	Classmates	No romantic interest

Video 2

Participant	Relationship	Level of Interest
1	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
1 Match	To hard to tell	To hard to tell
2	Maybe romantic	Didn't answer
2 Match	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
3	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
3 Match	Didn't answer	Woman is more romantically interested
4	Casual/classmates	Man is more romantically interested
4 Match	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
5	Single	Man is more romantically interested
5 Match	Friends/classmates	To hard to tell
6	Friends	To hard to tell
6 Match	Friends	Maybe Man is more romantically interested
7	Friends	Maybe Man is more

		romantically interested
7 Match	Peers	Man is more romantically interested
8	Didn't answer	Maybe Man is more romantically interested
8 Match	Friends	Woman is more romantically interested
9	Maybe romantic	Didn't answer
9 Match	Maybe romantic	Mutual
10	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
10 Match	Maybe romantic	Mutual

Video 3

Participant	Relationship	Level of Interest
1	Close to boyfriend/ girlfriend	Mutual
1 Match	To hard to tell	To hard to tell
2	Friends	Mutual
2 Match	Maybe romantic	Man is more romantically interested
3	Interested but not boyfriend/ girlfriend	Mutual
3 Match	About to start dating	To hard to tell
4	Involved	Mutual
4 Match	Friends	Mutual

5	Couple	Mutual
5 Match	Romantically interested friends	Mutual
6	Sexual relationship	Woman is more romantically interested
6 Match	About to start dating	Mutual
7	More then Friends	Mutual
7 Match	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
8	Flirting Relationship	Man is more romantically interested
8 Match	Sexual relationship	Woman is more romantically interested
9	Romantic	Woman is more romantically interested
9 Match	Devloping Romantic	Mutual
10	Devloping Romantic	Mutual
10 Match	dating	Mutual

Video 4

Participant	Relationship	Level of Interest
1	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
1 Match	Didn't answer	Man is more romantically interested
2	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
2 Match	More than friends	Man is more romantically interested

3	More than friends	Mutual
3 Match	friends	Man is more romantically interested
4	Didn't answer	Woman is more romantically interested
4 Match	friends	Man is more romantically interested
5	Single	Man is more romantically interested
5 Match	Didn't answer	Man is more romantically interested
6	classmates/ friends	Man is more romantically interested
6 Match	classmates	Man is more romantically interested
7	Didn't answer	Man is more romantically interested
7 Match	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
8	Didn't answer	Man is more romantically interested
8 Match	Not Romantic	Man is more romantically interested
9	Romantic/ sexual/ friends/ I Don't know	Man is more romantically interested
9 Match	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
10	Didn't answer	Man is more romantically interested

10 Match	Friends	Man is more romantically interested
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Video 5

Participant	Relationship	Level of Interest
1	Boyfriend/ Girlfriend	Woman is more romantically interested
1 Match	Both are interested in relationship	Woman is more romantically interested
2	In a romantic Relationship	Mutual
2 Match	Good friends might be sexual	Woman is more romantically interested
3	Together	Woman is more romantically interested
3 Match	Friends	Woman is more romantically interested
4	Relationship	Mutual
4 Match	Friends	Woman is more romantically interested
5	Maybe a couple	Woman is more romantically interested
5 Match	peers/friends	Woman is more romantically interested
6	Friends	Woman is more romantically interested
6 Match	Didn't answer	Woman is more romantically interested
7	Maybe romantic	Woman is more romantically interested
7 Match	Friends	Woman is more romantically

		interested
8	Friends	Woman is more romantically interested
8 Match	Sexual relationship	Woman is more romantically interested
9	Romantically interested friends	Woman is more romantically interested
9 Match	Friends	Woman is more romantically interested
10	Didn't answer	Mutual
10 Match		Woman is more romantically interested