Using Oranges for Apple Juice: Exploring the Experiences of Filipina Female College Students with ASD

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Abstract

Literature on experiences of males with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) continue to thrive within the scientific community, leaving little to none for females. Females are often left undiagnosed as they are better at masking social deficits compared to male counterparts. To counter this male bias among clinical assessments, this study explores the lived experiences of 4 female college students and 1 female college graduate. All 5 participants are Filipina, and were found through purposive snowball sampling in a span of 4 months. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide, and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Analyses show that the accounts of Filipina college students with ASD may be better understood through four main themes: (1) a surge of emotions after finding out their condition, (2) managing the impact of their condition, (3) adapting to the various features of a college setting, and (4) having a secure female identity. Due to the gender roles for females that vary according to a specific country's background and context, proper awareness on female identity during the teenage years - a time of physiological and social transition - proves to be useful. There is also a need for more resources to educate the individual of her condition, as all five interviewees were surprised upon discovering the presence of ASD. Clinicians must advise parents on techniques that would help their daughters become aware of their symptomatologies, and proper parenting and family dynamics must be present as it is crucial for a daughter's drive to continue pursuing college and the workforce. Because there is currently little progress on inclusivity within the campus (all participants had expressed feelings of isolation regarding the management of their condition), findings from this study may help foster informed programs for colleges and institutions who welcome individuals with ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, college, female, IPA, lived experiences, higher education, inclusive education

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by deficits in social communication and interaction and by repetitive patterns displayed in behavior; it is a spectrum disorder that includes Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD has been identified in both genders, and is about 4.5 times more common in boys, with about 1 in 42 compared to 1 in 189 girls (Christensen et al., 2012). The experiences of individuals diagnosed with ASD in postsecondary academic setting or college setting is an understudied field (Matthews, Ly, & Goldberg, 2015). Among disability groups, ASD has the worst transition outcomes and are least likely to attend

college (Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg, 2005; Shattuck et al., 2012). The staff in higher education do not receive training regarding students with disabilities. This makes full inclusion into college life hard for most college students with disabilities (Higbee, Katz, & Schultz, 2011). Even less are studies on females with ASD in college (Sayman, 2015).

Objectives

This study aims to dig into the unique lived experiences and meaning-making of female college students with ASD. Through the individuals' in-depth accounts, it may foster change and improvement with regards to the assessments and services for females with ASD - given that most programs, diagnoses, and tests on ASD rely heavily on the male population. Lived experiences are aimed to be understood to bring better insight to the unique lives and consequently promote inclusivity and acceptance within society (McLeod, Lewis, & Robertson, 2013). This transformative perspective gives a voice to the individuals and unites their voices for reform to advance the agenda of providing the needs of marginalized groups and individuals (Creswell, 2014). By exploring the perceptions and experiences of the participants, the proliferation of more updated and encompassing assessment tools, effective interventions and inclusive measures in the home and college are encouraged.

Research Question

This study aims to uncover the experiences of individuals who have a unique context, which is described by three main facets - (a) being diagnosed with ASD, (b) being a female, and (c) being a college student. This study aimed to answer this question- what does it mean to be a female college student diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Theory

Since this study aims to explore the experiences of females with ASD, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the framework of this study. IPA is the appropriate framework for this study as its three principles - phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography - allow for a richer analysis of the participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology lets the participants describe and share their perceptions regarding their unique experiences (Creswell, 2014, p.42; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Double hermeneutics allows for both the participant's interpretation of her own personal world, and a subsequent meaning-making of the researchers on what the participants shared, which may bring about a richer translation of such unique experiences (Pietkiewicz et al., 2012). Finally, idiography can help the researchers truly value every word uttered by the participants and bring about a more accurate interpretation (Pietkiewicz et al., 2012). There have been studies that explored how those diagnosed with ASD view their condition, how they think others view them, and how they cope with their condition in different circumstances (Huws & Jones, 2008; Jones, Huws, & Beck, 2013; Meyers & Bagnall, 2015). Similarly, this current study seeks to explore the experiences of individuals with ASD while focusing on the facets of the individual as a female and as a college student.

Methodology

Qualitative, face-to-face interviews that were semi-structured in nature were utilized to allow for an exploration of the perceptions of the participants concerning particular issues (Hees, Moyson & Roeyers, 2014). In the semi-structured interview,

focus was given to three areas to cover their research topic: a) the process and experience of being diagnosed, b) being a female with ASD, and c) being a female with ASD in a postsecondary education setting. Using these areas for exploration and discussion served as the proponents' way to facilitate the discussion and slowly engage in clarifying and probing questions (Cridland, Jones, Caputi & Magee, 2013).

Participants

Four female college students and one female college graduate diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) engaged in the semi-structured interview.

Data Collection Instruments

The main instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. The proponents have taken into account the recommendation of Booth and Booth (1996) on interviewing individuals with learning disabilities, which is the usage of a direct approach to questioning and the avoidance of abstract concepts.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants were invited through the help of Autism Society Philippines. By cooperating with an organization, willing participants were better identified (Clarke et al., 2005). The proponents also coordinated with the organization to respect the participants' privacy. Since part of the diagnosis of ASD is having problems with social interaction and communication, data collection is prone to challenges, such as inarticulateness, which is influenced by lack of self-esteem and social isolation, and unresponsiveness (Booth et al., 1996). Both were addressed by sending the interview questions beforehand to the participants; by having an idea of the flow of the questions and the topics that the interview will revolve around on, the participants could better express and articulate their feelings and experiences during the actual session. A pilot interview was conducted for revision of necessary questions. During the actual interview, the rationale of the study was explained once more before proceeding to gain written informed consent (Hees et al., 2015).

Ethics Protocol

As adapted by Hees et al. (2015), participants were encouraged to hold the interview in their preferred location such as their homes, so they may feel more at ease in sharing their stories. Participants were also informed that they could take breaks. To respect the privacy of information, interviewees were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms in their transcriptions, thematic analysis, and discussion. Transcriptions and audio recordings were stored in a password-protected computer.

Literature Review
Female Autism Phenotype

In a study by Loomes, Hull, and Mandy (2017), it was found that females with autism are more likely than their male counterparts to have their condition lately diagnosed, misdiagnosed, or even overlooked completely, as there seems to be a diagnostic gender bias for males. Thus, when females with ASD present such tendencies, there is a danger for them to be regarded as no different from their neurotypical peers, when they are in fact still struggling intrinsically (Kirkovski, Enticott & Fitzgerald, 2013). Aside from the danger of non- diagnosis, most may fail to see the emergence of a unique female autism phenotype. In another study, it was found that females with ASD have a superior ability to hide, or compensate for, aspects

of their symptomatology and tendencies compared to their male counterparts (Baldwin & Costley, 2015). One display of this ability was seen in Baldwin and Costley's (2015) study, as female adults with ASD exhibited learning and studying appropriate behaviors to combat social exclusion from peers. In a mix of the participants' statements, they often mentioned how they learned to say typical responses for others and how they studied acting, or how they desired to learn more social skills to adhere to the socially normal way (Baldwin & Costley, 2015). One of the various ways for females to compensate for their ASD symptomatologies would be through the display and practice of learning various aspects of communication in their social experiences. In one study that compared the behaviors of males and females diagnosed with ASD, it was seen that adult females have better socio-communication abilities compared to males (Lai et al., 2011). Based on their research, Lai et al. (2011) posit that females with ASD may have more motivation into enhancing their compensatory skills, so as to appear socially typical when with peers. Despite the ability to relate and the acceptance that comes out of adopting social roles, females with ASD still express the difficulty of sustaining such masking techniques (Lai et al., 2011). Aside from the anxiety that arise from females' attempts of hiding their symptomatologies, it is also precisely this ability to camouflage their tendencies that make clinical assessment, diagnosis, and intervention much more complicated for females. Lai et al. (2011) acknowledged the views of clinicians and how they find diagnosis for females more difficult; given their ability to hide their autism can lead to a misdiagnosis or un-diagnosis, which could then affect the necessary interventions. There is an inherent male bias with regard to the clinical assessments, tools, and interventions in ASD. Without acknowledging unique tendencies and symptomatologies that make up the female profile of ASD, females with ASD will have to struggle with various issues that are specific to their female gender.

Gender Specific Issues

Some studies have also noted the gender-specific issues of females with ASD, which range from their discomfort with their physical bodies, their social deficits, and even their formation of their identity. In a study by Kanfiszer et al (2017), females with ASD expressed their discomfort with their female physiology, and characteristics linked to femininity - such as breasts and menstruation - brought discomfort to them. Aside from this, one participant also admitted that she often failed to feel maternal or mothering instincts in her, as she expressed their lack of affection for children and annoyance over the expectations of being a mother (Kanfiszer et al., 2017).

Aside from the discomfort in female characteristics, females with ASD have also expressed their difficulties in understanding and portraying what the expected social skills of a woman should be (Bargiela, Steward & Mandy, 2016). In this study, the female participants who were diagnosed late expressed their difficulties in navigating the tendencies of neurotypical women, such as gossiping and a sense of competition against other women (Bargiela et al., 2016).

College Challenges

While a variety of literature was readily available regarding the experiences of individuals with ASD, only a handful have been found on their experiences within a college or postsecondary setting. Of the handful, a majority of them are based on a hypothetical and analytical standpoint only. Concerning the academic activities in a postsecondary setting, it was found that individuals with ASD continue to have difficulties with comprehension; as a result, it is a challenge for them to follow multi-

step directions and keep up with long discussions (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Generally, individuals diagnosed with ASD have the worst transition outcomes compared to those of other disability groups (Billstedt et al., 2005). Most of them do not go through postsecondary education (Shattuck et al., 2012). Transitioning is difficult for them as faculty and staff of most schools do not have training on how to interact with students with disabilities (Higbee, Katz, & Schultz, 2011). Aside from this, other predicted challenges include tending to their personal hygiene, waking up to an alarm, and getting to class on time by themselves; these independent living skills may be challenging for them as they require assistance and supervision over daily living skills (Adreon et al., 2007). Aside from this, their deficit in social skills and sensitivity to sensory demands may make dorm-room sharing and noisy communal spaces difficult to handle, and their prescription to routines can make it more challenging for them to manage surprise fire drills during various times of the day (Adreon et al., 2007). No literature was found on females with ASD within a college setting. This is crucial because the gender-specific needs of women with ASD, whether physically or emotionally, must be acknowledged and addressed as much as any other college student. Based on a thorough literature review, females diagnosed with ASD who are in a college setting constitute a unique set of experiences and several specific issues.

Due to the inherent male bias in ASD, women with ASD are often prone to non-diagnosis or misdiagnosis, which may have negative effects on the necessary interventions. Moreover, several studies have shown the development of a female autism phenotype, such as the unique ability of women to camouflage their ASD symptomatologies, which are often ignored. Female individuals with ASD were also found to have gender-specific issues, such as feelings of discomfort in their physiology. Finally, few literature was found on the issues of individuals with ASD in the college setting, and the absence of research on females with ASD in college only emphasizes the relevance of pursuing this study. The lack of literature on the experiences and accounts of females with ASD in college is found to be the main gap.

Findings

Answering the Research Question

In answering what it means to be a female college student diagnosed with ASD, the researchers have uncovered four main themes after rigorous analysis of the participants' interview transcripts. Based on the experiences shared, it was found that participants (1) faced a surge of emotions on being diagnosed, (2) manage the impact of their condition, (3) adapt to the various features of a college setting, and (4) describe having a secure female identity.

Facing a Surge of Emotions on Being Diagnosed

Feelings of Surprise Upon the Full Awareness of One's Condition. Upon realizing that they were diagnosed with ASD, the participants expressed their shock; they recognized that actions that felt normal at first later became a sensation of difference. As for Sarah, she recalled a specific period when she started recognizing that she had ASD: *"When I was 10 years old and starting to be more aware of my condition, I was having like sensations and feelings of difference… and then I really was like surprised." (Sarah, lines 22-23)*. Meanwhile, though Blossom could not recall when exactly she started being aware of her diagnosis, she still recognized the sensation of being different as time went on: *"I used to think that my uhm... habits and-and the way I, and the way I think and speak were normal before. And, but, but years later I*

think it was really different for me. I wasn't like, any other people." (Blossom, lines 54-59).

Acknowledging how Being Diagnosed Entails Being Different. After recognizing that their actions and mannerisms were different from other people, the participants started to see what it meant to be diagnosed with ASD. This difference was simply a fact for Sarah: "*It means, uh, being diagnosed, it means I am different from the typical person. Different but doesn't make me less of a person.*" (Sarah, line 43-44). Mikey had a similar sentiment with this, as she recognized the difference in attitude between a neurotypical person and a person with ASD: "*I am different from the others… the attitude of the normal is different from the special.*" (Mikey, lines 37 and 45).

Aside from this, participants also expressed the effects of acknowledging the difference being entailed in their diagnosis. As for VB, this resulted in her researching about her condition, as she was interested in knowing the specific facts of being different: "*They're very good in relationships. They're very good in imagination. They're very good in critical thinking..*" (VB, lines 173-175). Meanwhile, Kid felt a sense of clarification as a result of her awareness, as she saw an explanation as to why she acts differently from others: "*In my mind, I'm not similar to them, so I can't relate to them at all. It's like the world gave me oranges to make apple juice...and, it lessens my confusion in feeling alone because there are others who experience this too.. And, it made me understand myself and the others more.*" (Kid, lines 33-34, 42-43; 45-46). This quote is also very salient as it served as the inspiration for the study's title; indeed, it encapsulates the mismatch and how individuals with ASD feel when going through their daily undertakings.

Appreciating the Love and Care From One's Environment. The participants did not feel totally isolated or unusual despite their recognizing condition because of the efforts of others. The efforts of family, teachers, and friends in helping them adjust and be comfortable in life did not go unnoticed by the participants. In Sarah's case, the support received from her family gave her a positive self-image: "*I was loved unconditionally by family and given a good self-image because of their constant love and support.*" (Sarah, lines 202-203). In addition to her family's love and care, Blossom also listed down all the support she received throughout her life from non-family members, such as her closest friend in school, and her teachers in pre-school, elementary, and high school (Blossom, lines 215-219).

Managing the Impact of One's ASD symptoms in Daily Life

Recognizing One's Social Deficits in The Presence of Peers. ASD's symptoms are magnified when interacting with others, especially in the presence of peers; this was also evident as the participants' peers would call them out when they were acting in an inappropriate manner. Sarah narrated a specific experience when she most saw her differences: "*...When this particular guy, my blockmate, told me that I was-that my behaviours were turning them off. That's when I began to realize it.*" (Sarah, lines 233-236). Meanwhile, VB stated that she felt as though her peers presented a false pretense due to her social deficits: "*And the fourth one- the third one is they're very pretentious. They- this person with autism will not know it but deep down inside, this person will sense it.*" (VB, lines 287-289)

Being Discriminated Due to People's Lack of Understanding of ASD. In relation to being around others, the participants also shared instances of bullying and discrimination because they did not understand their context as an individual with ASD. VB was very vocal about such instances and was aware that the lack of autism

education had a big role in such experiences: *"Yeah I was backstabbed and, I was not given that much of a chance to make friends, especially with people that I like 'cause we're being autistic. Because the people in high school - they don't understand autism at all. There was no autism education, no sensitivity training." (VB, lines 149-153).* Meanwhile, Mikey also expressed instances of name-calling in school, and she also felt that it came from people's lack of understanding of her condition: *"Starting elementary school until college, they call me weird, crazy... because normal people, they don't understand my condition." (Mikey, lines 88-89; 103).*

Apparent Need for Acceptance Within Society. As the participants recognized their social deficits, they also saw how it affected their relationships with others. At worst, they would feel isolated from others. In these moments of isolation, they especially felt their need to be accepted by others. For Sarah, being accepted meant that people had positive feelings towards her:*"I've always had this acceptance need and, the need to be liked as a person with Asperger. And, of course, I want - I've always wanted to be likeable, easy to like, and someone whom people think goodly of..." (Sarah, lines 141-143).* Meanwhile, as VB described her return to school after a gap year, she expressed her joy in being welcomed and accepted by her peers: *"I felt unexpectedly the acceptance, accommodation. Just normal." (VB, lines 452-456).*

Undertaking Behavioral Adjustments to Be Liked. Because of wanting to be accepted by others, the participants undertook efforts to change their socially inappropriate behaviours. After Sarah's incident with her blockmate, she took to heart what made others uncomfortable with her and adjusted her behaviour accordingly: *"So, that was late in the first sem of first year, so I decided, 'Ok. So I'm going to behave appropriately, and then I will just reserve the uh, jokes for outside class times, and I'll just be more serious in class. More focused in listening." (Sarah, lines 162-164).* Mikey had a similar mindset of wanting to change her behavior to avoid being antagonized by her peers: *"I need to be changed so that I won't be insulted." (Mikey, line 543).*

Adapting to the Various Features of a College Setting

Valuing One's Education. Upon exploring the reasons for applying into college, the participants expressed how significant and rooted their education was in their personal contexts. As for Blossom, she saw college as an opportunity to learn even more about her interests: *"And sometimes I wanted more from college, like learning new stuff and enhancing your abilities as an artist." (Blossom, lines 143-144).* Meanwhile, Mikey saw the relevance of college as a path to becoming more independent: *"I pursued to finish my studies... it's not all the time that my parents will be there, so I have to take care of my future." (Mikey, lines 175-177).* In a similar vein, Kid thought that college was an important means in order to achieve her goals in life: *"Because I have a goal, and why not? Because there are a lot of things I want in life. So, to achieve these, I have to go to college." (Kid, lines 127-128).*

Expressed Difficulty Adapting Socially Appropriate Behaviors in College. One of the main concerns in college that participants shared was the struggle to consistently perform social norms of neurotypical students. For both Sarah and Blossom, they seemed to acknowledge the gravity of just how different their behaviors and activities are from other students. As for Sarah, she explicitly stated her difficulty with adapting to what behaviors are considered socially appropriate, and how it can sometimes affect her companionship with others: *"And then coming across as different, being seen differently. And then sometimes I feel, I felt like I could not blend in with my block..." (Sarah, lines 257-259).* As for Blossom, she gave a more specific example of how she struggles with socially appropriate behavior in college: *"Uh talking in a*

normal manner, trying not to be this expressive. Especially with the-I think they have this different topics. And I was interested in things that they are not interested in.." (Blossom, lines 261-265).

  Focusing on Interests and Present Tasks to Combat Negativity. As college has allowed for an even wider arena for social interaction, some participants experienced more instances of discrimination and bullying. As a result, they have shared how they cope with such negativity by directing their attention to certain tasks. For instance, during the times where she experienced lots of negative experiences, VB sought to focus on her love for music: *"...before, there were lots of bullies, misinterpretation, mismanagement, that's why - that moment, I will - I didn't have suicidal thoughts, but motivation instead to take music deep down inside. I realize that this motivational move for me to take up music." (VB, lines 337-342).* Similarly, Mikey expressed her way of coping with negativity by focusing on something else, such as her task at hand: *"It's hard, I need to ignore also instances of bully, I just ignore the other people tha tease me so I just really need to focus, focus only in studying..." (Mikey, lines 227-229).*

  Apparent Stress Due to Schedule Changes in College. Participants also shared their struggle with schedule changes in college, whether by semester, or by instances where classes were called off. This was emphasized as they thrive in having order in their lives.For instance, Sarah shared her frustration with her class schedules and even pegged it as part of her negative experiences (Sarah, lines 293-295). Blossom also had a similar sentiment, as she felt confused due to her changing schedules and had difficulties getting used to it (Blossom, lines 192-194; 196-199).

  Noticeable Improvement of Social Skills in College. Despite the great emphasis on their struggles in college as females with ASD, the participants have also acknowledged that their social skills have improved when they entered college. Though adapting to socially appropriate behaviors still challenge them when they're in school, proudly shared that they have improved significantly. As for Sarah, she was confident in expressing how much she has changed regarding her social skills: *"I'm not anymore overeager when it comes to socialization. So I just interact in a typical way." (Sarah, lines 239-240)*

  As for Blossom, she shared how the college setting helped her gain back her confidence in conversing with other people: *"But in college I got back to being more sociable, person. 'Cos I used to talk to lots of people when I was a kid, and then in high school, I just never talked to anyone. Until college, it brought me back to talking to people." (Blossom, lines 107-109).* VB expressed that her gap year aided in improving her social skills as she had the time to converse with music students during that free period: *"Uhm, when I came back it's as if though hard work was fruitful - because I worked hard to have the time to talk to people, with music students." (VB, lines 416-419)*

Having a Secure Female Identity
  Feelings of Ease in One's Female Identity. Delving more into their perceptions of their identity as a female individual with ASD, the participants exuded a sense of contentment and comfort in their own female identity. Both Blossom and Mikey shared how having a female identity was something that did not bother them and was simply in them. As for Blossom, she did not explicitly say why she was comfortable with her female identity, but she was fervent in her insight regarding her female identity: *"I'm feeling comfortable with the female... yeah... I felt really happy being a*

girl." (Blossom, lines 321-322) Moreover, Mikey also expressed her contentment in her identity, and how she also saw the mother as part of the core of what it was to be a female: *"I am very happy and proud to be female… very proud… of course feminine, actions are more refined than males, and then mother because the essence of a woman is to become a mother." (Mikey, lines 369-370)*

   Having Female Role Models. In learning more about their comfort in their femininity, participants mentioned the role of female role models and how it has guided them in developing their female identity. As for Sarah, she expounded on how female role models have helped her in achieving this security in her female identity, and how her mother was one of those role models: *"...she's (her mother) very kind-hearted and easygoing. She is also-she's also the type of person who...She's calm, resilient, easygoing, she's positive and she is...hardworking." (Sarah, lines 317-319; 28-29).* Meanwhile, Mikey acknowledged her female role model as a female protagonist in a fictional work and expressed her wish to identify with the character's attributes of being both simple and a mother: *"Of course Anastasia Grey because she's a mother now, also just a simple girl and what she did, it wasn't that wrong… just a simple girl…" (Mikey, lines 382-384; 386-387).* Finally, Kid mentioned that she looked up to her mother as her mother was knowledgeable.

   Feelings of Indifference Regarding Typical Female Habits. Part of feeling at ease regarding their female identity was because they did not have any strong feelings towards typical female habits. At best, there was indifference-at worst, mild annoyance. The source of Blossom's mild annoyance was she saw instances of couples being sweet. She herself had never experienced such need or feeling: *"I just uhh, I just uhh… actually, I was kind of oblivious to this whole crush thing. And I don't really care much about getting a boyfriend, or love - in general." (Blossom, lines 329-335).* Similarly, Kid did not understand why many were concerned about typical female problems:*"Uhm, I noticed with girls… they're very conscious." (Kid, lines 259-261).*

Discussion
Facing a Surge of Emotions on Being Diagnosed

   Females who usually satisfy the criteria of ASD are at risk of not being diagnosed, as professionals still ascribe to the diagnostic bias for males and the stereotypes of ASD as a male disorder (Loomes et al., 2017). Given this bias, it is possible that the lack of proper assessment techniques for females might have contributed to the participants' feelings of surprise as they became fully aware of their condition. Such feelings could have been prevented if there had been more efficient diagnoses and interventions, such that the participants' parents learned to properly explain the condition to their daughters. The lack of attention for this vital process may be apparent in the experience of the participants - there was no particular moment when participants realized they had ASD. While inefficient assessments and interventions might have caused the participants' initial unawareness of their full condition, it did not seem to lessen the love they received and continue to receive today from their immediate environment. More importantly, despite their delayed understanding of the entirety of their condition, some participants still claimed that they feel normal and that they have a good self-image because of the constant support of their family. A study by Smith, Greenberg, and Mailick (2014) may explain this, which focused on the influences of family environment on the behavioral outcomes of individuals with autism. Based on their study, they found that the family environment may have a significant effect on the functioning of individuals with autism, and that the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child with autism is a vital factor in

determining the behavioral functioning of the child (Smith et al., 2014). This may explain why the participants, despite their poor introduction into their condition, still developed their sense of self well and continue to improve their quality of life.

Managing the Impact of One's ASD Symptoms

Females with ASD are seen to have a superior ability in masking their social deficits (Kirkovski et al., 2013; Baldwin & Costley, 2015). This is consistent with what the participants said, as they have shown that they are aware of their symptomatologies and continue to compensate for them. Most of the participants' attempts to change their inappropriate behaviors out of fear of rejection mirror Baldwin et al.'s (2015) findings, which revealed that females with ASD desire to conform to the socially normal way to prevent being socially excluded. This is consistent with what Lai et al. (2011) posited on females having more drive to appear socially typical among their peers. However, Kirkovski et al.'s (2013) claim that the females' experiences of hiding their symptoms make them at risk of being regarded as no different from their neurotypical peers, does not seem to align with that of the participants'. It was apparent in majority of the participants' stories that they felt different from others; in fact, the recognition that they had social deficits was made manifest by their peers, who would call out their inappropriate behavior in school. Aside from internalizing what their neurotypical peers criticize about them, it is possible that the participants' acknowledgment of being different from others is also caused by their inappropriate school environment. Sproston, Segdewick, and Crane (2017) revealed that one of the reasons for experiences of school exclusion of female students was due to a very impersonal environment, such as the big class size and noisy classmates. In relation to this study's participants, one of them felt isolated and discriminated because of her poor school environment. Sporston et al. (2017) mentioned how the social difficulties of the female students and its association with their autism continue to put them at risk for social isolation. This may further explain why despite the participants' efforts to be accepted by society, their social deficits continue to challenge them in their daily lives.

Adapting to Various Features of a College Setting

Some characteristics inherent in a college setting such as rampant social interaction and intermittent change of schedules are difficult for individuals with ASD to adjust to, precisely because their symptomatologies directly clash with them (Adreon et al., 2007). Some of these symptoms include social deficits and prescription to repetitive behaviors - both of which were apparent in the participants' struggles to adapt socially appropriate behaviors with their peers and to adjust to abrupt class schedule changes. However, one of Adreon et al's (2007) predictions - on practicing independent living skills as a college-specific challenge - was not seen in the participants' experiences, for none of them stated difficulties in accomplishing everyday tasks in college, like waking up by alarm or attending to their personal hygiene. This lack of struggle in accomplishing independent skills may be rooted in the unique context of Filipino college students, where a majority continue to live in and come home to their permanent houses and are still cared for by their parents. This is true for all participants, as all of them currently live in their homes with their parents and not in a dorm. As for individuals who cannot live in their homes while in college, it was revealed in a study that assessed how Asian Pacific Americans decide on their preferred colleges that Filipinos usually prefer schools within a close proximity to their homes, and still formulate their college aspirations based on family influence (Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004). Moreover, in a study that explored the needs of college

students with ASD, several parents saw location as the most deciding factor in choosing the right school for the children (White et al., 2016). Given the tightly knit culture of Filipino families and the desire of parents to have their children's colleges near their homes, it may help explain why the participants did not express any struggles in practicing independent living skills.

Having a Secure Female Identity

According to Kanfiszer et al.'s (2017) study, females with ASD feel uncomfortable with their physiology, as they see characteristics related to being female as burdensome. Moreover, Bargiela et al. (2016) found that females with ASD have difficulties understanding what social skills females are supposed to have. However, all participants in this study expressed that they were generally at ease with their female identity, amidst its uncomfortable attributes. This apparent comfort and strong grasp in one's female identity may be rooted in their well-built perceptions on what it means to be female. The participants' identification of their mothers or particular fictional female protagonists as some of their role models may show that female role models serve a big role in the development of their perceptions on their female identity. It was found that many saw their close relatives or parents as their role models, with mothers and other female relatives as the top two choices of female children (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). As for fictional characters, a study conducted by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) revealed that respondents showed greater levels of wishful identification with characters they saw had similar attitudes with them, and respondents also identified with female characters they saw as successful, intelligent, and admired. This was apparent with one of this study's participants, who considered a prominent female character as her role model, as she saw the character to be a simple, beautiful, and a good mother. Though it is worth noting that this insight is not in line with Kanfiszer et al.'s (2017) findings on females' supposed discomfort with maternal instincts and expectations, it shows that females with ASD are capable of understanding and internalizing characteristics of femininity with the help of established female role models. One point that may explain why the participant was embracing maternal characteristics is her subscription to Filipino conceptions of femininity. In the Philippine context, Jimenez (as cited in Liwag, De la Cruz & Macapagal, 1998) studied the concepts of femininity and masculinity for Filipinos, and identified mother and homemaker roles as closely linked with femininity. The participant has possibly grown up considering the image of a mother as an embodiment of femininity, resulted being comfortable of her female identity.

Implications

In using IPA as a framework, the findings of this study emphasize the significance of the double hermeneutic principle in exhausting the lived experiences of the female college students with ASD. Despite the participants' difficulties in verbalizing and expressing their emotions, the opportunity given to the researchers to interpret the perceptions presented helped clarify the participants' words. While it is assumed that individuals with ASD have similar perceptions about their difficulties, the participants' unique backgrounds allow them to have interpretations that are specific to their own lives; thus, the principle of idiography helped shine light on the distinctive experiences of the participants, which can better improve diagnostic assessments, family dynamics, and school programs.

More than helping deepen the understanding of the experiences of individuals with autism, the findings of this study may help assessments, homes, and schools, in

better catering to females with ASD. Within the realm of clinical psychology and diagnosis, the theme of surprise on one's diagnosis implies the need for more resources to educate the individual of her condition; given that several participants were much older before they were fully aware of their diagnosis, there is a need for clinicians to assist females with ASD in coming to terms with their diagnosis early on. Clinicians need to advise parents on techniques that may help their daughters become more aware of their condition. As seen in the effect of love from one's family on the self-image of a female with ASD, clinicians must also remind parents to create and maintain a welcoming and happy atmosphere at home. In relation to the aura at home, the findings imply proper family dynamics and parenting in the homes of female college students with ASD. In the participants' desire to go to college to a secure their own future, parents must continue to encourage their daughters in becoming more independent and in building their future amidst their symptomatologies. Knowing how some of the participants cope with negativity can remind parents to help explore their daughters' interests or certain tasks that can divert them from bouts of negativity and instead keep on going. Parents must also be careful in exposing their daughters to role models, whether they may be family members or characters in various media, and must encourage them to find female role models with ASD as well. Participants' feelings of stress regarding drastic schedule changes may also encourage colleges to coordinate with their students with ASD in compromising and making schedule changes that are less abrupt for them. Moreover, given the participants' experiences of discrimination due to people's' lack of understanding of ASD, this may prompt colleges to make more programs or avenues that target the awareness of ASD within the student body. Finally, as seen in the positive of effect of college in the social skills of individuals with ASD, it may push colleges to create organizations or programs that may engage students with ASD to the rest of the student body.

Limitations and Recommendations

The presence of comorbidities of some participants is a limitation of this study, as it is difficult to attribute all experiences in relation to being diagnosed with ASD. Moreover, only participants with mid to high socioeconomic status participated in this study. Also, as interviews were reliant on memory, data may not be a full recounting as there is possible mis reconstruction of the participants' memories. One participant's reconstruction of memory might have been aggravated as she was accompanied by her parent. To better generalize findings of future studies, other methods of inviting participants must be done, as some families of females with ASD may not have access to consulting in special clinics or centers or to social media, which are common places for advertisements. Participants must also be encouraged to do the interview alone so that what they share is as sincere and as accurate as possible.

Conclusion

In exploring the lived experiences of female college students with ASD, it is found that the individuals in this unique context face a surge of emotions on being diagnosed, manage the impact of their symptoms, adapt to the various features of a college setting, and have a secure female identity. The findings of this study may be beneficial to clinicians, through the push for resources that may help them and the parents of their clients in educating individuals with ASD regarding their condition. The findings may also help parents expose their daughters to correct role models and motivate them to make their own career path and future. Aside from this, it may also help colleges by addressing the need for compromises in schedule changes and

opportunities for social interaction. Indeed, in appreciating the unique lives of female college students with ASD, it may boost efforts to offer the timely and accurate diagnoses, appropriate interventions, and well-informed college programs that these individuals have deserved from the very beginning.

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