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Intersectionality Within Critical Autism Studies: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

The aim of this narrative review was to examine intersectionality within critical autism studies. A growing body of evidence has demonstrated the importance of intersectional frameworks in highlighting the diverse experiences of marginalized communities. Many disability studies researchers investigated intersectionality to elucidate the impact of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other constructs on disability identification. Within critical autism studies, a field that emerged to challenge the deficit-laden, pathologizing autism discourses favored by the medical community, intersectionality has started to become an integral component of the literature. This review highlights intersectional frameworks utilized to explore autism in both academic and nonacademic contexts, to provide a foundation for future study. Upon analysis, we found overarching themes regarding the explicit, implicit, and descriptive approaches to intersectionality, racial and gender biases within critical autism studies, and the multidisciplinary nature of intersectionality and critical autism studies. We finish the review with recommendations for how to more fully address the experiences of all autistic people—particularly of racial, gender, and sexual minority individuals—in future study. Our recommendations include utilizing intersectionality as an analytical lens for describing previously overlooked phenomena and questioning central tenets of methodology and processes, including developing research questions, analyzing data, and writing results.

Keywords: autism, intersectionality, identity, disability, diversity, ableism

Community Briefs

Why is this topic important?

Intersectionality means that many different social influences make up a person's experiences. Examples of these social influences are gender and sexism, ethnicity and racism, and disability and ableism. This topic is important because different autistic people may have different experiences depending on these other social factors. Studying intersectionality helps us to understand these differences and better serve those autistic communities that may be ignored.

What is the purpose of this article?

We looked at how authors of published studies and community projects have thought about intersectionality in autistic communities.

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What personal or professional perspectives do the researchers bring to this topic?

Both authors have invisible disabilities. We have both done research on disability and social influences, and we have worked with people in disability communities, including autistic communities. We have also noticed how our gender, race, and sexual orientation have affected how we experience our disabilities.

What results did the researchers find?

We found three main ways that authors talked about intersectionality. (1) Sometimes authors directly talk about intersectionality. This means that some authors use the idea of intersectionality to help them think of a research question or to help them understand their data. In these cases, authors use the word “intersectionality” in their articles. (2) Sometimes authors talk about intersectionality, but not directly. This means that some authors do not use the word “intersectionality” to talk about their research, but they still use similar ideas. For example, sometimes authors looked at what it is like to be an autistic woman. This topic is intersectional because it talks about two different social influences (autism and gender). However, the authors did not directly write that it was intersectional. (3) Finally, sometimes authors do not talk about intersectionality, but their study can be used as a starting point for talking about intersectionality later. For example, sometimes authors look at differences in whether people are diagnosed with autism, based on their race. Research such as this can be helpful because other researchers can use it to make studies to learn about why differences between autistic groups happen.

What do the researchers recommend?

We recommend that researchers in many fields and people working with autistic communities think about how intersectionality and social influences affect autistic people. They can do this when thinking of research questions, understanding their data, and writing about their results. We also recommend that researchers think more about racial, gender, and sexual minority group experiences within the autistic community. This is important because sometimes researchers or stakeholders have forgotten about certain groups of autistic people.

How will these recommendations help autistic adults now or in the future?

Thinking about intersectionality can help people understand autistic people’s different experiences, especially in terms of how these experiences are affected by social influences. We hope that our article leads to research that makes life better for all autistic people and fits better for autistic people who have been ignored or forgotten about in some research or advocacy projects.

THE FIELD OF CRITICAL autism studies, a subdiscipline of critical disability studies, emerged out of the pressing need to examine and critique social concerns through the lens of neurodiversity.¹ According to Davidson and Orsini,² three components constitute the field of critical autism studies: exploring the power relationships that construct autism; supporting narratives that challenge preexisting medically focused discourse surrounding autism; and forming theoretical and practical approaches that highlight the individual nature of autism. More recently, Runswick-Cole et al.³ suggest a more constricted critical autism studies definition with two major parts: examining the scientific validity of a diagnosis and determining whether it is meaningful to those classified as such. Although the definition of critical autism studies may vary, a common trend among all definitions includes the investigation of the individual nature of autism and of the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce disability. Despite this emphasis on overlapping and interdependent spheres of influence, most works within the critical autism studies field, until recently, utilized a single-axis framework (i.e., analyzing experiences solely through the lens of disability and ableism without accounting for other identities of axes of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism); several academic and nonacademic works that highlight intersectionality have begun to emerge.

Intersectional frameworks provide valuable lenses for understanding social oppression and its consequences through the integration of multiple contextual factors. In comparison with other social positionalities, disability has received surprisingly minimal attention within the intersectionality literature.⁴ Desires to investigate the individual nature of autism—a core tenet of critical autism studies—would benefit from the integration of an intersectional framework that considers race, gender, class, sexuality, and other constructs. For example, for many autistic people of color or those who have minimal access to quality medical care, health inequities often arise from the relationship between the social determinants of health, such as class, language, or geographical barriers, with disability identification. Therefore, incorporating intersectionality can strengthen critical autism studies by allowing scholars and activists to examine how contextual factors of oppression may influence individual autistic experiences, neurodiversity, and ableism in society.

In this narrative review, we explore the utilization of intersectionality within critical autism studies and related fields and highlight the crucial need for future research to advance these fields. We bring relevant positionalities to this study—one of us has a childhood-onset fluency disorder (i.e., a stutter), sharing similar neurodivergent experiences with many autistic individuals such as difficulties with social

interaction and communication and repetitive behaviors, and the other author identifies as neurodivergent. Our interest in intersectionality is drawn from how our experiences with invisible disabilities relate to our identification with minority groups across the racial or gender spectrum. In particular, one author is a heterosexual first-generation Asian American man who was raised in a middle class family in the United States. The other author is a queer White woman who was raised in an upper middle class family in the United States. With this review, we intend to help researchers to gain an understanding of the importance of contextual factors of oppression and to inspire future studies that extend the fields of critical autism studies, social sciences, medicine, and creative and nonacademic projects. We begin with a theoretical overview of intersectionality with respect to disability studies and critical autism studies and then review examples of how intersectionality has been integrated within academic and nonacademic works in critical autism studies and related fields. We close with providing analysis of cross-cutting themes across these examples and potential methods of further incorporating intersectionality within these fields.

Intersectionality and Disability Studies

Intersectional frameworks conceptualize how overlapping systems and structures of oppressions and privileges impact the experiences of individuals and groups.^{5–7} In other words, this framework proposes that sexism, for example, cannot be understood fully without the consideration of related factors such as racism or heterosexism. Based on ideas originating from earlier Black feminist movements,⁸ the intersectionality framework first portrayed the marginalization of Black women within the legal system and social movements—both of which headline White women or men of color. Thus, attending to intersectionality allowed researchers and activists to better understand the perspectives of individuals who experience multiple forms of marginalization and how single identity-based movements can fall short. For the past two decades, the intersectionality framework expanded to include other marginalized groups (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual [LGBTQIA+] communities) and disciplines of study (e.g., psychology and political science).^{9–11} Within the disability community, researchers and activists recently began to apply intersectionality theory to disability and critical autism studies to better understand and resist varying forms of ableism.^{4,12}

Much disability studies research amplifies the voices of persons with disabilities who are otherwise given limited, if any, decision-making power. However, many disability studies research works have been critiqued for assuming that individuals with disabilities share similar views, experiences, and priorities, irrespective of gender, age, cultural background, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religion.^{4,13–15} This assumption may be implicitly expressed through participant samples that are limited to predominantly White or American participants.^{14,15} In response, a growing number of disability studies researchers leveraged intersectional scholarship to explore the diverse perspectives within this community. For example, feminist analyses of disability drew attention to the manners in which women with disabilities are subjected to simultaneous discrimination.^{16,17} Goodley and Runswick-Cole¹⁸ utilize sociological frame-

works on disability to elucidate the compounded nature of social exclusion, whereby ableism constitutes just one part of a complex web of marginalization and disadvantage. Historically, intersectional disability studies research largely omitted persons of color, despite the fact that interlocking forms of oppressions can create unique barriers for multiply marginalized individuals, such as women of color with disabilities.¹⁹ Recently, a new field of disability critical race theory has emerged, exploring the patterns of oppression that target students at the margins of Whiteness and ability.²⁰

Invisible disabilities constitute a particularly underappreciated sector of the intersectional disability studies literature. Many academic works in disability studies emphasize visible disabilities (i.e., those that are immediately apparent to outside observers).²¹ However, for some individuals, their disabilities might “limit one or more major life activities” but are not readily discernible to others.²¹ Individuals who experience post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, speech impairments, or seizure disorders may all appear “normal” to others, but they may still have a disability.²¹ The invisibility of their conditions engender a new set of challenges. For example, many individuals in this population are driven by a need to either disguise their impairments or actively convince others of their disability status to receive proper accommodation, which is uncomfortable at best and creates life-threatening psychological and moral costs at the worst.²¹

Although the concept of autism as an invisible disability is still being examined, it is notable that many autistic individuals identify with having invisible disabilities.^{22,23} However, the perceptions of the visibility or severity of the condition vary according to moderating factors, such as gender, age, and social contact.²⁴ Therefore, the literature suggests that intersectionality can be a key driver of the labeling of autism as a visible or invisible disability, which is consistent with the diversity of autism spectrum disorder symptoms, as the name suggests.²⁴

Intersectionality within Critical Autism Studies

A variety of interconnected yet distinct activist and scholarly movements, such as the evolution of autism self-advocacy movement and the neurodiversity framework, have coalesced into the critical autism studies discipline.¹ Members of the autistic self-advocacy movement from the 1990s, including Meyerding,²⁵ Sinclair,²⁶ and Singer,²⁷ developed terminology related to neurodiversity, which refers to a framework that seeks to present neurological differences such as autism as a form of natural human diversity that should be respected instead of pathologized.^{28–31} Notably, many of the pioneers of the neurodiversity movement and critical autism studies fell outside of the stereotype that portrays autism as a childhood condition seen primarily in boys.^{32,33} For example, Meyerding²⁵ discussed her experiences of understanding her autistic identity as an adult within the context of her gender and sexual orientation, likening her discovery of her autistic identity to her exploration of feminist theory and contrasting her experiences as a neurodivergent lesbian to those of neurotypical lesbians. Similarly, Singer²⁷ wrote about autistic traits among herself and female family members throughout their lifespans and described how the neurodiversity framework was influenced by social movements around other disabilities. In fact, Singer’s

foundational study in neurodiversity draws on many of the political and conceptual tenets of intersectionality. Despite their strengths, though, these seminal works in neurodiversity and critical autism studies lack in-depth discussion or analysis on issues such as racism, immigration, or autism outside of Western societies. Although much critical autism research and activism continues from a single-axis perspective of oppression (i.e., focusing on autism in isolation from other contextual factors, privileges, or oppressions), there has been an increase in scholarship and activism that integrates intersectionality.¹²

Both scholarly and nonacademic works can integrate intersectional perspectives into critical autism studies and movements. To assess how authors have integrated these perspectives in academic works, we conducted a literature search utilizing search terms such as “autism” or “neurodiversity” AND “intersectionality,” “race,” “gender,” “sexism,” “LGBTQ,” “LGB,” “LGBT,” “trans*,” “minority,” and “women” on the American Psychological Association (APA) PsycInfo database, excluding items other than peer-reviewed research. Although this database focuses on psychology and the social sciences, it also covers academic journals in medicine and biological sciences, education, the arts, and humanities. In addition to APA PsycInfo, we utilized Google Scholar with the same search terms and exclusion criteria to account for more breadth in addition to the depth of social science-focused research. We also examined literature that cited or was cited by articles in the search results to account for relevant literature that may not have appeared using our search terms and to locate the commonly cited foundations of critical autism studies. We reviewed 11 articles in more depth in this review due to their meeting the conceptual criteria for this narrative review. However, it is important to note that there was a significant number of eligible articles not reviewed in detail in this article, especially those that fit under what we have labeled the “descriptive” model of intersectionality. The authors made this decision due to the desired focus on the conceptual framework that authors used for intersectionality. In other words, we focused on the *process* of intersectionality, rather than the *content*. However, we acknowledge that the depth to which we describe each category is limited by the relatively small sample size of articles. Nonacademic works were found by conducting a Google search of terms such as “autism” or “neurodiversity” AND “art,” “advocacy,” “intersectionality,” “race,” “gender,” “sexism,” “LGBTQ,” “LGB,” “LGBT,” “trans*,” “minority,” “women,” and “organization,” excluding peer-reviewed research. We reviewed three examples in more depth because they met the conceptual criteria for this narrative review. However, we acknowledge that there are a significant number of eligible nonacademic works not reviewed and that the depth to which we explored these works is limited by the relatively small sample size. We did not have *a priori* definitions of how authors utilized intersectionality. However, upon reading and analyzing the academic and nonacademic works, we found that utilization of intersectionality was either explicit, implicit, or descriptive.

Writers who utilized an explicitly intersectional framework not only defined and described the framework of intersectionality in their study, but they also used this framework as a central feature of the research question,

methodology, and/or analyses.^{12,34–36} Other writers utilized an implicit intersectional framework, in that they may not explicitly reference the idea of intersectionality, but utilize some of its tenets within the research question, methodology, and/or analyses.^{29,37,38} Finally, some works took a descriptive or categorical approach, such that writers discussed experiences of subgroups of autistic individuals (e.g., autistic people of color and autistic women) that may be underrepresented in academic research or nonacademic media.^{39–41} This descriptive approach is not necessarily concerned with utilizing intersectionality as an organizing framework or mode of analysis, but does serve as a potential foundation for future study that is more explicitly intersectional. Hereunder, we outline some of the literature in critical autism studies that demonstrate these ways of applying intersectionality.

We begin with scholarly works that adopt an explicitly intersectional framework ($n=4$).^{12,34–36} For example, Barnett³⁴ investigated the intersectional nature of harassment faced by autistic adults, especially with relation to sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism. This explicitly intersectional approach allowed Barnett³⁴ to better understand harassment beyond a single-axis framework focusing on ableism because study participants could draw parallels between various aspects of their identities. Hannon³⁵ conducted an auto-ethnography that examined the intersections between the author’s cultural, familial, and occupational positionalities in relation to his role as a Black father of an autistic student. By acknowledging racial disparities among the families of autistic children, Hannon³⁵ provided a narrative focused on the negotiations with his son’s schoolteachers and staff regarding the Individualized Education Plan. Some scholarly articles that utilized an explicitly intersectional approach discussed conceptual and ethical concerns within the field. For example, Cascio et al.¹² highlighted the importance of intersectionality in conducting ethical research with autistic participants. The authors argued that researchers should consider the additional demographic characteristics of autistic participants (i.e., not relying on a single-axis framework of disability) by utilizing inclusive terminology, developing accessible communication strategies, or traveling to meet participants with access barriers. The authors indicate that utilizing these person-oriented research ethics frameworks provides researchers the tools to improve the ethical standards of the study, to create supportive research environments, and to acknowledge the lived world of research participants, through the incorporation of unique considerations such as inclusive terminology and accessible communication strategies. Finally, Strand³⁶ explored intersectionality and its relationship with the neurodiversity paradigm—both of which share the central tenets of diversity and difference. Strand³⁶ examined the history of both theories and implored researchers to deeply consider the solidarity and robust coalitional understanding that could be achieved between proponents of intersectionality and neurodiversity.

Other academic works utilize a less explicit focus on the intersectionality framework, but still integrate the perspectives endorsed by intersectionality scholars ($n=4$). For example, although not explicitly citing intersectionality as a framework, several researchers have addressed neurodiversity and ableism with respect to gender and sexism. Bu-miller²⁹ outlined the parallels and points of contention between feminist politics and the neurodiversity movement,

and Bargiela et al.³⁷ explored how autistic women understand and navigate their identities with respect to both ableism and sexism. Other researchers have examined the parallels between navigating autistic experiences and navigating heterosexism or ableism with respect to other disabilities. For example, Davidson and Henderson³⁸ examined the personal and political ramifications of concealment and disclosure for autistic individuals. The authors delineated a broad spectrum of experiences drawn from parallel processes (e.g., coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ], passing as neurotypical) that informed the process of coming out. Likewise, Kirkham's³⁹ discussion of applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy for autistic children drew parallels between the experiences of neurodivergent individuals undergoing ABA and LGBTQ individuals undergoing conversion therapy. Kirkham³⁹ argued that criticisms of ABA treatments centered on the tenets of diversity and difference, inspired by the intersectionality and neurodiversity movements. By drawing parallels between different experiences of marginalization, David and Henderson³⁸ and Kirkham³⁹ utilize an intersectional framing that emphasizes coalition-building between marginalized groups. In other words, the line between so-called "queer issues" and "disability issues" is called into question, as individuals may gain an understanding of ableism through an understanding of heterosexism.

There are many descriptive articles that outline disparities in autism-related factors (e.g., diagnosis, assessment, and treatment) across marginalized groups, such as people of color and immigrants to the United States ($n = 3$).^{40–42} Although some descriptive articles may not include an explicitly intersectional focus or a framework informed by the neurodiversity movement, they can still provide useful information to establish foundations for further research within critical autism studies. For example, Angell et al.⁴⁰ discussed the disparities in health care diagnosis and intervention among autistic children. Angell et al.⁴⁰ suggested that evidence of racial and ethnic autism disparities even when socioeconomic status is controlled generates a need for more research that focuses on addressing and reducing the cultural and linguistic barriers that autistic people from minority communities face. Despite the lack of an intersectional framework, Angell et al.⁴⁰ utilized health care disparities research to highlight the crucial need for attunement to intersectional factors in the provision of health services to autistic persons. Similarly, Singh and Bunyak⁴¹ conducted a systematic review of qualitative literature that investigated disparities in autism diagnosis and access to care, focusing on the experiences of racial and ethnic minority families with autistic children. Singh and Bunyak⁴¹ found that these families experienced barriers to access rooted at the intersection of ideological, economic, and political domains, and that these barriers were experienced differently based on race, language, and culture. Therefore, Singh and Bunyak⁴¹ suggest that the integration of intersectional frameworks to tackle familial, cultural, and structural barriers would improve diagnosis, assessment, and treatment. Kirkovski et al.⁴² further explored the biases of autism diagnostic procedures, and determined that autistic traits may be camouflaged in women, leading to a substantial bias in diagnostic measures against women. The authors established a need for future research to re-examine diagnostics to create more inclusive and accessible measures. However, as sug-

gested by Hull et al.,⁴³ the evidence for heightened camouflaging in autistic women is mixed, so additional factors should also be considered.

Historically, persons with disabilities found themselves excluded from academic spaces—it is estimated that only 4% of faculty members in the United States have disabilities and 16.4% of people with disabilities have completed at least a bachelor's degree, in comparison with the 25% and the 34.6% of people without disabilities, respectively.⁴⁴ Some professors reported tremendous stigma against persons with disabilities, regardless of their quality of work, which labels them as producing suboptimal scholarship and deteriorating the perception of their departments. In addition, U.S. longitudinal-based studies have indicated that within 8 years of high school graduation only 17.5% of autistic adults enroll in 4-year colleges, and 38.8% have completed any form of postsecondary education.⁴⁵ Owing to the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in academia, nonacademic spaces play a crucial role in the theorization of disability, which can then lead to advances in perspectives within academia. Artwork and activism serve as additional mediums for the integration of an intersectional perspective within critical autism studies. The Art of Autism, a nonprofit organization focused on empowering autistic individuals to participate in the arts, released a comic strip describing the nuances of the autism spectrum, common misperceptions of the condition, and the dangers of generalizations.⁴⁶ The intersectional approach allowed readers to understand that each autistic person is unique, highlighting the need for improved education on neurodiversity and spectral variation. The Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network (AWN) is a national organization that views intersectional activism as the best approach to create meaningful change for autistic people. AWN's "Divergent: when disability and feminism collide" committee reaches out to the community of women with disabilities to work on feminist issues that are influenced by ableism and racism.⁴⁷ Finally, the anthology *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*⁴⁸ provides an excellent example of the integration of intersectionality within critical autism studies and acts as a bridge between academic and nonacademic works. This anthology consists of contributions from autistic people of color across the world regarding the intersections of racism and ableism and includes works that range from more traditional academic chapters to poems and creative works. Nonacademic works are critical for enhancing the understanding of intersectionality within the autistic community not only due to the neurodiversity movement's roots of activism but also because of the historical and continued exclusion of persons with disabilities in academia.⁴⁹

Discussion

Cross-cutting themes

After conducting this brief review, we found several cross-cutting themes related to intersectional scholarship within critical autism studies.

Varying approaches to the incorporation of intersectionality. The theory of intersectionality calls for an understanding of issues in terms of multiple intersecting power structures and social positionalities.⁵ In other words,

when seeking to understand the experiences of persons with disabilities, it is important to also seek to understand how they may differentially experience, benefit from, or enact racism, sexism, or heterosexism, among other forms of power and privilege. We examined a multitude of approaches to the development of an intersectional lens in critical autism studies. The first group takes an explicitly intersectional framework—one that highlights the importance of intersectionality in the investigation of a marginalized community.^{12,34–36} The strength of this perspective centers on the unambiguous discussion of the intersections between varying positionalities (e.g., autism, gender, and race), which bolsters the significance of the scholarship by providing diverse multidimensional experiences for readers to resonate with. As an alternative, we found that some critical autism studies researchers leverage an implicit discussion of intersectionality to integrate diverse perspectives into their focus of study.^{29,37–39} This approach allows many more researchers to improve their scholarship by pointing to the implications of their research on the intersections between autism and, for example, gender or race.

A problem still remains—how do autism researchers in different fields (e.g., biosciences or public policy), who may not discuss the identities of autistic people and focus instead on the development of biomedical technologies and policy frameworks to support this community, integrate intersectionality? We found that a third group exists—researchers who can integrate intersectionality into discussions of disparities in autism-related factors such as diagnosis, assessment, and treatment. These researchers are able to discuss intersectionality primarily through discussions of future research, where the authors identify disparities in the diagnosis, assessment, and treatment of autism according to race, gender, or sexual orientation. Whether taking an explicit, implicit, or descriptive approach to intersectionality, we encourage autism researchers and those outside academia to incorporate intersectionality, as doing so would drastically improve the quality of the field by integrating more inclusive perspectives that improve validity through greater attention to both inequalities at varying intersectional positions and the individual- and group-level causes that drive these inequalities. The result is the creation of evidence that is directly useful in policy changes or other advocacy movements within the social contexts of affected communities. For example, in developing policies and standards regarding diagnosis and access to governmental resources, it would be important to account for cultural, gender, and socioeconomic disparities in *diagnosis* of autism, which may not reflect true disparities in *autism prevalence*.

To more strongly integrate intersectionality into critical autism research, we encourage researchers to refer to articles within the social sciences that describe how to integrate intersectionality into social sciences research in general.^{7,10} These call for properly educating oneself on the roots of intersectionality theory within Black feminism, evaluating how one's proposed work is related to existing power structures, avoiding neglecting marginalized perspectives and experiences through careful consideration of research question and participant sampling, and resisting the tendency to frame experiences solely in individualistic or identity-based factors independent of social and cultural forces (i.e., are the observed differences *caused* by one's

racial status in and of itself, or are they caused by racism, differential access to resources, ethnic socialization?).^{7,10} In addition, given the foundations of neurodiversity movements within activist and disability-rights communities, it is important to engage with diverse autistic communities and movements.

Racial and gender biases within critical autism studies. Disability essentialism, which postulates that there is a defining essence to disability experience and inequality, has historically assumed a White racial identity.⁴ This pattern is also evident in critical autism studies. Although many researchers attempt to integrate intersectionality, they still may undervalue the experiences of persons from marginalized communities. For example, of the reviewed articles, only one (out of 11; 9.1%) explicitly assessed the experiences of people who identify as Black and autistic.³⁵ Eight (72.7%) of the articles, in an effort to integrate intersectionality, briefly mentioned the importance of understanding Black perspectives—either explicitly or implicitly. We believe that more in-depth discussion is necessary for critical autism studies in terms of the intersecting experiences and ideologies when discussing the paradigm of being Black and autistic. In addition, with the notable exception of Brown and colleagues' *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*,⁴⁸ it was more difficult to locate studies that discussed the experiences of persons from varying minority communities, including Asian, Latinx, and Native American communities. We believe that intersectional scholarship within critical autism studies must assess the intersecting positionalities within all marginalized communities, or risk falling prey to the same disability essentialism of the 20th century that assumes that everyone with a disability has similar experiences, regardless of race.⁴

We found that much more scholarship engaged in in-depth intersectional analysis of the experiences of autism within the context of gender and sexual orientation, compared with race and ethnicity.^{25,27} However, these works have also universalized gendered subjects (e.g., highlighting the experiences of gender and autism, whereas neglecting in-depth analysis of other factors, such as racism and classism), running the risk of leaving White women to represent the category of autistic women. We believe that more research is needed into the dual experiences of autistic women from minority communities, challenging the White-centric focus of autism studies thus far. With the advancements of the LGBTQIA+ social movements and the prevalence of transgender and gender nonconfirming individuals within autistic communities,⁵⁰ we also argue for greater depth and precision regarding research with autistic LGBTQIA+ participants, such as the community-based participatory research aims advocated by Strang et al.⁵¹ Given the potential for different experiences of power and oppression (e.g., social pressures, legal, and civil rights issues) among subgroups under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, it is important for researchers to attend to intragroup differences and to intersectional forces that may differentially impact autistic transgender women compared with autistic cisgender gay men, for example. Such research would also allow for depth within subgroups, in addition to the breadth of research across coalitions of autistic LGBTQIA+ individuals. With the inclusion of more in-depth literature, we believe that the silent assumptions will fade

away, allowing for important scholarship that centers the interactions between autism and all aspects of individuals' identities.

The multidisciplinary nature of intersectionality. Very few theories have generated the kind of multidisciplinary and global engagement that marks the intellectual history of intersectionality. This multidisciplinary is particularly relevant in the field of critical autism studies, since autism is a cross-disciplinary topic that reaches basic science researchers, social science scholars, policymakers, and even philosophers. In our review, we discussed works in critical autism studies that integrated intersectionality in discussions about health care services, health disparities, psychological science, and philosophical theories.^{40,41} For example, Angell et al.⁴⁰ investigated evidence of racial and ethnic autism disparities in health care diagnosis and intervention and suggested a need for more research that reduces the cultural and linguistic barriers that autistic people from minority communities face. In addition, Singh and Bunyak⁴¹ assessed autism disparities experienced by marginalized communities, and found that the utilization of intersectional frameworks to tackle familial, cultural, and structural barriers improves diagnosis, assessment, and treatment. Neither of these works exhibited a primary focus on intersectionality—in fact, they were both focused on health care diagnosis and psychological science—yet they were able to incorporate many of the core tenets of intersectionality through the analyses of trends and implications. This incorporation further strengthened the works by avoiding overlooking marginalized perspectives through careful considerations of research questions and sampling preparation, improving validity through greater attention to the disparities at varying intersectional positions, creating a foundation to test new theories, and allowing for deeper analyses into the potential individual- and group-level causes that drive observed inequalities. The observed themes can then be used by policymakers to generate systems level change for autistic people. Leveraging intersectional analysis in a wide range of empirical research—as well as nonacademic disciplines—that is not necessarily defined as intersectional strengthens the research ethics and significance of works by generating new insights from data that are not initially framed through an intersectional prism.

We do not expect every researcher from every field to exhibit a primary focus on intersectionality; however, we do believe that small actions can be taken by researchers to utilize intersectionality and broaden the implications of their work. We encourage critical autism studies researchers to utilize intersectionality as an analytical lens for identifying previously neglected or misunderstood phenomena and challenging fundamental assumptions about methodology and processes, which together may provide unique interpretations of the same facts while also highlighting the experiences of historically marginalized or understudied groups. One of the core tenets of critical autism studies is to challenge medically focused discourse surrounding autism, and we encourage researchers to continue pulling back from a medical-deficit model and to have open discussions about the transitioning meaning of autism. We believe that a mutually beneficial relationship can exist, where we can acknowledge the multidisciplinary nature of intersectionality without compromising the relevance of the

social model within critical autism studies, and the key to doing so is by having actual autistic individuals lead these discussions.

We believe intersectionality can be a bridge between the fields—it connects not only in relation to specific and shifting subjects, but also more broadly to link and engage scholarly subfields, research methodologies, and topical inquiries. Attention to intersectionality will allow researchers to synergize diverse and seemingly unrelated perspectives from different fields, which is the key to understanding and addressing complex inequalities. In addition, many challenges exist with constructing intersectional research within subfields, so facilitating communication across disciplinary divides through intersectionality is an excellent option. Intersectionality strengthens the relations between all autism researchers, allowing for more collaboration and quicker advances to better understand autism.

Conclusion

Autistic individuals constitute a diverse community. Accordingly, intersectionality is a critical concept that highlights the experiences and needs of marginalized groups within the greater autistic community, including autistic people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, non-speaking individuals, and those with greater support needs. Although not a comprehensive systematic review of the existing literature, this review lays the groundwork for identifying patterns in existing critical autism work, while providing direction for future research and creative work. We believe future research and nonacademic work should integrate intersectional frameworks to address the unique needs and experiences of all autistic people, broadening the understanding of autism by unpacking stereotypes and their impact on everyday life. Many academic works center on the experiences of White American or European individuals, and we echo others' suggestions that future studies integrate the perspectives Black, Asian, Latinx, and Native American communities.⁵² In addition, we encourage scholars and activists within cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, and related disciplines to acknowledge the value of neurodivergent perspectives and respect the needs of autistic individuals.

Many academic studies also place an emphasis on the visible manifestations of autism.⁵³ The experience of autism may be invisible; these individuals may appear neurotypical to people with whom they have casual interactions.^{21,23} However, the quality of their lives may be no less adversely impacted by autism or ableism than is the quality of life of people with more noticeable conditions. The perceptions of the visibility of autism often differ according to moderating factors, such as gender, age, and social contact²⁴; therefore, intersectionality can be a core driver of the labeling of autism as visible or invisible. In addition to respecting and better understanding the needs of autistic individuals who may appear less visible, it is important to amplify and listen to the perspectives of nonspeaking autistic individuals or autistic individuals with higher support needs, who may encounter more explicit ableism from those both within and outside of autistic advocacy and research communities.⁵⁴ Research from these diverse perspectives will generate crucial knowledge on the experiences of autism and needs of autistic people.

Intersectionality is a useful framework that shows promise for the greater understanding of autistic and neurodivergent individuals' experiences within broader social contexts. By writing this narrative review, we hope to bring light to the fact that autism does not exist as a unitary experience. Challenging ableism in society requires addressing other forms of oppression because ableism is co-constructed with other forces of oppression in society, such as sexism, racism, and heterosexism. Compared with other social positionalities, disability has received surprisingly minimal attention within the intersectionality literature, and we hope that this review inspires those interested in critical autism movements, critical disability studies, and/or neurodiversity to engage with intersectionality in their academic or nonacademic works.

Authorship Confirmation Statement

This article has a shared first authorship. R.A.V. is credited with the initial idea conceptualization. N.V.M. and R.A.V. both engaged in the secondary conceptualization, investigation, formal literature review, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. N.V.M. and R.A.V. each wrote about half of the article, and edited each other's work. Both authors have reviewed and approved of the article before submission. This article has been submitted solely to *Autism in Adulthood* and is not published, in press, or submitted elsewhere.

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