



# PERSONAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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## BACKGROUND

### Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) & Feeling Different

- ‘High-functioning’ adults are under/misdiagnosed and may therefore feel ‘different’ from others without knowing why

### Proposed Female Autism Phenotype (FAP)

- Male to female ratio of diagnosed cases of HFA is approximately 5.7:1-11:1
- Some females exhibit different HFA traits and may camouflage symptoms; causing delays in diagnosing females

### Marcia’s Personal Identity Statuses Theory

- One’s personal identity provides meaning and continuity to life experiences
- 2 dimensions: exploration and commitment; results in 4 identity types: *Achieved*, *Moratorium*, *Foreclosed*, *Diffused*
  - Achieved identities are the most well-formed; they “know not only who they are, they know how they became that, and that they had a hand in the becoming”<sup>1</sup>

### Personal Identity Theory & ASD

- Autistic features were positively related to exploration and negatively related to commitment in undergraduate students<sup>2</sup>
- LGBTQ minorities exhibited more of an Achieved identity<sup>3</sup>
- Persons in a minority group examine themselves in more detail compared to individuals in a majority group, subsequently impacting identity development

## STUDY 1: METHOD

### Exploratory Research Question

- Does gender and HFA traits impact the development of an Achieved identity in a student population?

N = 306 (65 males; 241 females)

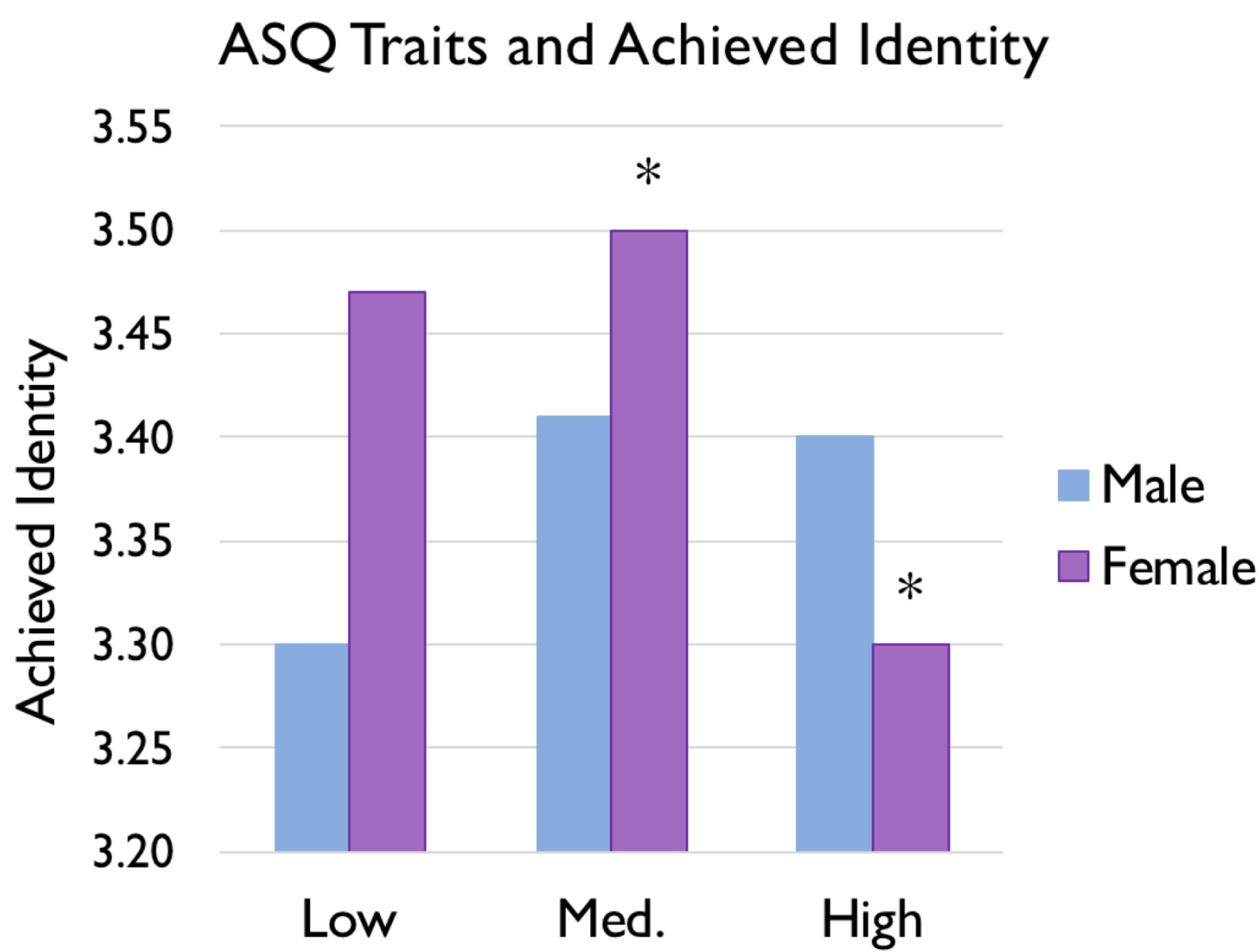
Age: (M =18.83)

Student Sample (Online study conducted with Wilfrid Laurier University students)

### Scales:

- <sup>4</sup> Autism Spectrum Quotient (ASQ): measures level of HFA traits
- <sup>5</sup> The Objective Measure of Ego Identity Statuses Scale (OMEIS)

## STUDY 1: RESULTS & DISCUSSION



Note. Multiple post-hoc comparisons showed significant differences between: medium traits group and high traits group only for females ( $p = .02$ ) on ASQ and Achieved identity

- Only female participants in the medium traits group exhibited a significantly higher Achieved identity

- Supports the existence of the proposed female autism phenotype

## STUDY 2: METHOD

### Purpose

- Investigate the FAP and its relationship to identity formation, age, and psychological well-being in a *community sample* of persons diagnosed/self-identify as autistic

### Hypotheses

- Female participants will exhibit more of an Achieved identity
- Majority of participants will indicate that they feel ‘different’ from others

N = 158 (17 males; 141 females)

Age: (M = 33)

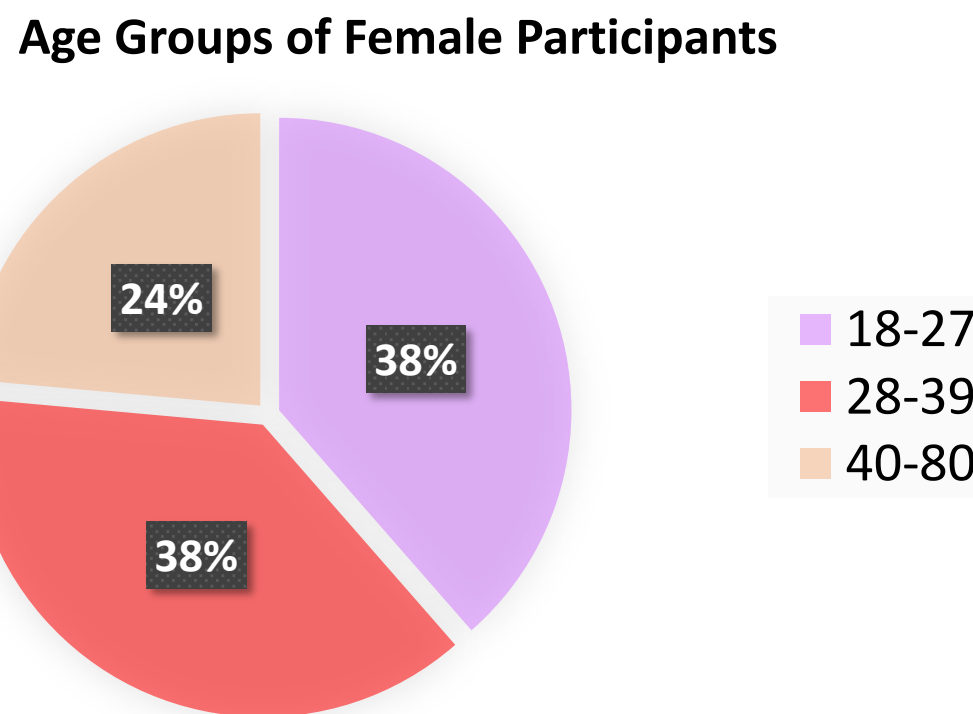
Community Sample (International online study)

### Scales:

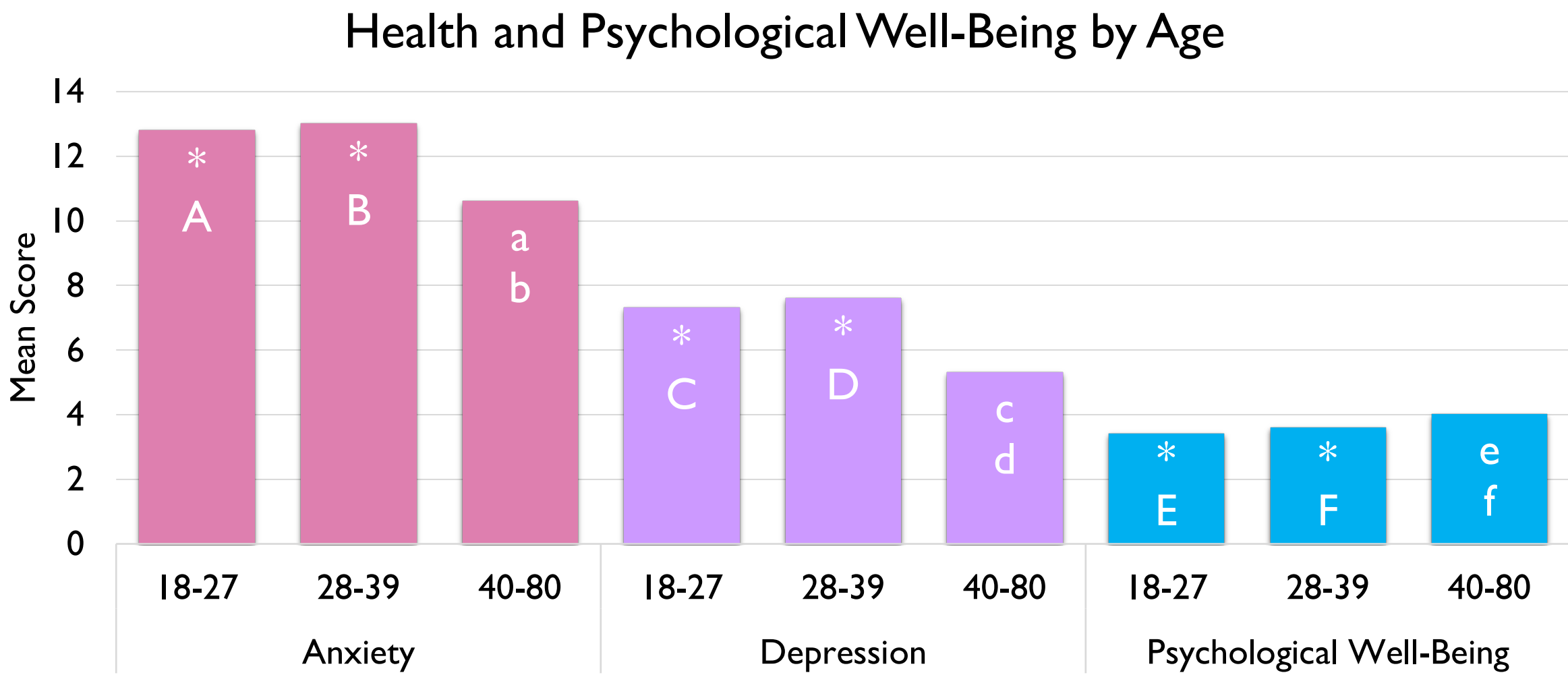
- <sup>4</sup> Autism Spectrum Quotient (ASQ): measures level of HFA traits
- <sup>5</sup> The Objective Measure of Ego Identity Statuses Scale (OMEIS)
- <sup>6</sup> Questionnaire for Autism Spectrum Conditions (Q-ASC)
- <sup>7</sup> Psychological Well-Being Scale
- <sup>8</sup> Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale

### Qualitative

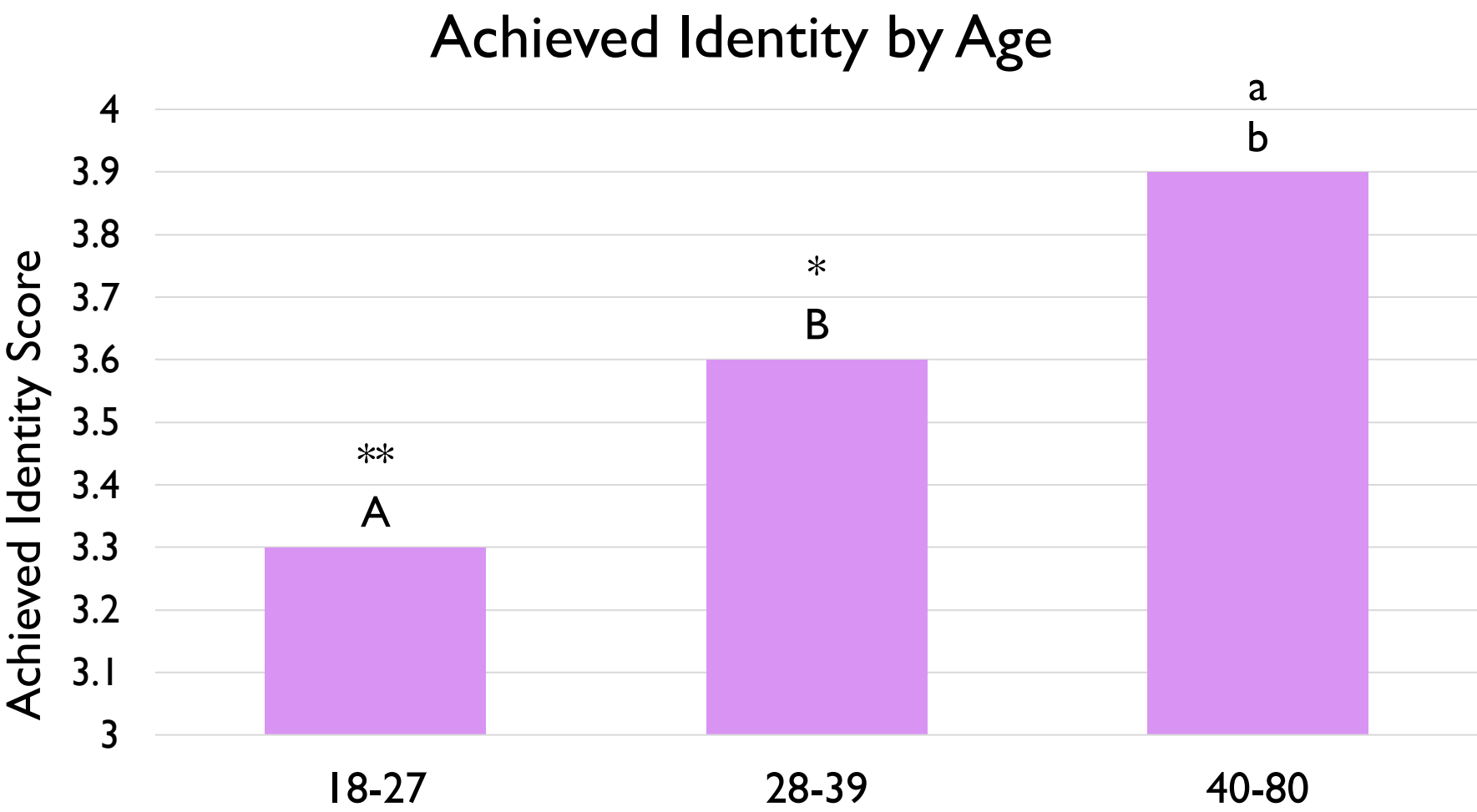
Participants were asked to read this vignette and describe any shared experiences (if applicable):  
"I am standing in a corner of the playground as usual, as far away as possible from people who might bump into me or shout, gazing into the sky and absorbed in my own thoughts. I am eight or nine years old and have begun to realize that I am different in some nameless but all-pervasive way."<sup>9</sup>



## STUDY 2: RESULTS



Note. Multiple post-hoc comparisons between female age groups. Different upper and lower cases of the same letter indicate a significant difference between groups. \*  $p < .05$ .



Note. Multiple post-hoc comparisons between female age groups. Different upper and lower cases of the same letter indicate a significant difference between groups. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

## STUDY 2: RESULTS CONT.

Regression Coefficients of Achieved Identity for Total Female Sample

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Age	0.02**	0.00	.38**	0.02**	0.00	.42**	0.02**	0.00	.47**
Time Since Diag/Identified				-0.01	0.01	-.13	-0.00	0.01	-.01
Time Diag/Identified x Age							-0.00*	0.00	-.21*
ΔR <sup>2</sup>				.02			.02		
R <sup>2</sup>		.14**		.16**			.18**		

Note. N = 139.

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p = .05$ .

### Qualitative

- Many male participants did not relate with the vignette:  
“No, I don’t identify with this statement. When I was little, leading up to the time I was diagnosed, and even after, I was not aware I was much different than the other children.”
- Nearly all female participants, regardless of age, related to the vignette:  
“Other children used my differences to harm me. That is when I came to understand that I am not normal. And that my differences are bad.”
- Only older females spoke about a desire to live authentically and to know oneself:  
“I worked very hard in my teens and 20s to figure out who I am, and what I need.”

## DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- Older females exhibited a higher Achieved identity and psychological well-being, and lower anxiety and depression
  - Perhaps being diagnosed later in life (or not diagnosed at all) impacts levels of ‘feeling different’ and subsequent identity development
- Suggests autism traits are not essentially defects, as there may be strengths associated that are worthy of investigation
- By gaining a deeper understanding of the FAP, one may be better able to create gendered diagnostic tools to more accurately assess females

## LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

### Limitations

- Scales (other than ASQ and Q-ASC) have not been normed on autistic samples
  - ASQ cut-off was below clinical range
- Participants in Study 2 were not required to be diagnosed (only self-identify)
- Many of the scales have not been normed for older adults
- Few males participated, resulting in no comparison group for Study 2

### Future Research

- Investigate why diagnosed/self-identified older females exhibited highest Achieved identity (and less mental health difficulties)
- Examine why older females presented with less mental health difficulties in order to help address the negative mental health exhibited in the younger female groups
- Gather more data on males with autism to shed further light on gender differences in symptom presentation of HFA

## REFERENCES

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