MY FIRST THREE DAYS AS A FIRST-YEAR – THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF AN AUTISTIC STUDENT

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ABSTRACT

My enrolment at university was a significant milestone in my life. During my first three days as a student with autism spectrum disorder, I experienced both positive and negative situations at different campuses, including overcrowded lecture halls, residences, faculty houses, and interacting with other students. My literature review and theoretical interpretation are guided by historical institutionalism and Bakhtin's concept of "outsideness". These frameworks address how historical events shape the social, political, and economic behaviour of institutions in a system that treats new students who must adapt to the university's rules, regulations, and traditions as outsiders. The frameworks mentioned above were used to understand what I experienced during my first three days at university, which set the tone for the rest of my undergraduate education, punctuated by ableness, whiteness, masculinity, and fluctuating forms of support.

Keywords: masculinity, ableness, whiteness, critical incidences, autism spectrum disorder, historical institutionalism, Bakhtin's concept of outsideness

INTRODUCTION

Before 1994, South Africa's racial policies prevented the majority of its population (that is, Black African, Coloured, and Indian people, women, and persons with disabilities) from receiving quality university education equal to that of the minority (White, male, and non-disabled South Africans). People with disabilities, including those with neurodiversity, were treated by South African society at large based on a medical model whereby those deemed to have disabilities were identified by their impairments and differences to align them with what was deemed normal (Russell, Sirota, and Ahmed 2019). On a practical and policy level, this meant that people with disabilities should be provided with special education and treated separately from those in mainstream education.

After the dawn of democracy in 1994, South Africa implemented new policies based on a socio-ecological model in which mainstream education was considered a crucial means of implementing inclusion. Consequently, the post-apartheid, post-1994 Constitution and the Bill of Rights emphasised the right to education. More specifically, the Bill of Rights introduced a subsection on education, Section 29, which states that every individual has the right to education that is free from discrimination (Russell et al. 2019). Consequently, the approach to education shifted from a medical model to a socio-ecological one and focused on removing physical and learning barriers to ensure equal opportunities for all, regardless of race, class, gender, or ability (Landsberg, Kruger, and Swart 2015). As such, it stood in direct contrast to the apartheid-era ideologies of, amongst others, patriarchy, racism, masculinity, ableism, and whiteness.

As a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), enrolling at university in 2012 was a significant achievement. However, during the first week, I felt mostly excluded due to the institution's system, facilities, and traditions by dint of what I later realised were overt forms of masculinity, ableism, and whiteness. The transition from high school to university is vital for first-year students who enter the university environment. However, it can be difficult as all students are expected to adapt to the institution's culture and traditions. This can be especially problematic for students with disabilities as institutional expectations can serve to exonerate them from adapting to the needs of the students without disabilities and is often in conflict with the principles of the institution, as well as the policies and legal frameworks such as Section 29 of the Bill of Rights.

The focus of this article is on my experiences of my first three days at university and it highlights the challenges faced by neurodiverse students seeking university education. By adopting a phenomenological approach, I (as the primary researcher) first had to understand myself before I could understand broader society, including the university environment. These first three days were a cocktail of excitement but, at the same time, left me feeling overwhelmed and lost. The literature on the personal experiences of students with ASD in a university environment, particularly during the vital first days, is sparse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The demographic makeup of university students in South Africa has been rapidly changing since 1994. Despite this shift, there are still visible signs of inequality, especially among underrepresented groups like students with disabilities (Department of Statistics: South Africa 2018). It has been noted that factors such as background, race, gender, and disability can still significantly impact the university experiences of students. In this regard, Jurgens (2020) has warned that students with disabilities may drop out within their first few weeks if they do not

receive the required institutional backing. Even with support, students with disabilities may feel pressured to conform to the, at times, unattainable historical and cultural expectations of the institution.

A university is often seen as a place that follows neurotypical societal norms and expects students and staff to conform. According to Jurgens (2020), traditional universities value academic success, sports achievements, cultural participation, and socialising. The traditional university environment tends to emphasise intellectual and sometimes sporting achievements and a solid commitment to the culture and values of the institution. Additionally, Drori, Delmestri, and Oberg (2013) believe that the standards set by traditional universities can lead to the stigmatisation of students who do not fit the norm and are viewed as different by the system.

However, based on the socio-ecological model, a university should be considered a multiverse, consisting of individuals from different backgrounds, abilities, faiths, and cultures (Alemu 2018). Therefore, the university should create an inclusive milieu to accommodate all students. To safeguard this, universities should establish various communication systems to provide a worthy university experience for all students. The first communication system should involve student-to-student relations, where friendships and social bonds are formed. This is important for academic success and long-term individualised and professional relations. The second is the student-to-academic connection when students choose the qualification they want to study, a significant psychosocial challenge (Thomas 2021). The third communication system is the student-to-university connection in which the institution creates opportunities for students to form their identities in various formats. This could be the student's participation in university-related proceedings, such as sporting and cultural events, including residence life. These relationships can be challenging as certain university cultures and traditions might be exclusive and exclusionary (Alemu 2018).

In light of the above, students, including neurodiverse students like me, enter the university environment with its dominant expectations; however, to fit in and flourish was challenging. First-year students sometimes take risky actions to meet the expectations of their new universities in order to be accepted. To realise such acceptance, students must reach proficiency in thinking, acting, and behaving within the overriding ideological and historical stance of the university, which, according to Gee (1990), includes a hierarchical model that attains a hegemonic masculinity viewpoint and categorises students according to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Moreover, all students have to internalise various roles which then rank them as either insiders or outsiders.

In the university environment, students from underrepresented groups, such as disabled

students, are often viewed as distinct entities, and consequently, they are isolated by dint of their differences. Recent statistics indicate that 7,5 per cent of people diagnosed with some disabilities are registered at universities (Department of Statistics: South Africa 2018). While efforts are in place to transform universities, the imaginings of the previous historical era are often still present in how the procedures and policies of universities as institutions are enacted (Bangeni and Kapp 2005).

A university's cultural environment significantly impacts student identity and psychosocial development (Miller et al. 2014). When students are trying to find their identities, they may be at risk of developing mental health issues due to increased stress levels, anxiety, and paranoia. This risk is even greater for neurodiverse students on the ASD spectrum because some universities still align with the medical model that discriminates against and excludes students with disabilities (Miller et al. 2014). The university environment can pose emotional and social challenges that affect students' identity formation, independent living, self-advocacy, and communication. Other challenges at university include financial strains, overcrowded lecture halls, lack of academic and practical support, inadequate education, access to technology, lack of empathy, relevance issues, and inaccessible facilities for students with disabilities (Gable 2014).

Not all is adverse, though, as the literature also offers insight into constructive experiences where the needs of students with ASD have been accommodated by universities that have employed the socio-ecological model. The availability of student support and the capacity of the institution to foreground inclusivity ultimately enhances the personal and professional development of students with ASD (Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017).

Many universities are moving towards recognising the opportunities and challenges that come with the increasing registration of students with ASD. These students are more likely to face academic, social, and individual difficulties because of a lack of understanding among university employees and students (Van Hees, Moyson, and Roeyers 2015). This article addresses a gap in the literature – the first days that a student with ASD experiences when attending a South African university. In this article, I highlight the critical incidents that I experienced in my first three days and how they impacted me both positively and negatively as a student.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of historic institutionalism examines the impact of long-term coercive structures and practices on institutional and organisational systems (Spitzer 2023). This article focuses on the university as an institution that relies on rules and regulations that can lead to effecting imitating

changes that affect the people in the organisation. In a seminal publication, Selznick (1996, 276) argues that historic institutionalism is the link between policy and social structures (such as gender, status, nationality, and class). This is achieved through the study of historical data and listening to personal accounts or life histories of those people experiencing past events. Consequently, the central focus of historic institutionalism is to shed light on the lives of those people who experience being on the margins of society and to strive to analyse and compare past practices with present reality. Historical institutionalism underscores the importance of considering political and social environments to gain new insights, learn, and improve the institution (Steinmo 2008).

It is essential to integrate historical institutionalism with Bakhtin's concept of outsideness (Pollard 2011, 1–15). Practically just about any student representing an underrepresented population is seen as an outsider who must conform to the specific institution's culture, as their behaviour, actions, and appearance do not align with the norm. Therefore, the theories of historical institutionalism and outsideness are both necessary to understand my experiences as a student with ASD during my first three days at university. I was perceived as an outsider due to my ASD, yet I had to acclimatise to the institutional culture, policies, and practices, which were heavily influenced by history, institutional memory and the practices of the staff and students.

METHODOLOGY

In this article, I use critical autoethnography methodology. This allowed me, as a student with ASD, to have a voice (Jarvis 2021). As per the methodology underpinning critical autoethnographic work, I examined a variety of critical incidents that occurred during my first three days at university. Critical incidents can be viewed as events outside the expected normal experiences that I, as a student with ASD, experienced as posed, actual, or perceived threats (Spencer-Oatey 2013).

The incidents that had a significant impact were initially documented through critical conversations with individuals involved in my undergraduate education, particularly during the first three days, and memory work.

The robust conversations with selected individuals were conducted as per the ethical clearance granted for my study.[1] Additionally, this research approach involved constructing data from the researcher's and participants' viewpoints (Bøe et al. 2013). My intentions were to engage in critical conversations with my co-constructors, to recognise how they experienced me as a student with ASD, and to address the multifaceted questions I had about my first three days at university. Each co-constructor contributed in an exclusive and relevant way, as they

pointed to positive aspects of my time at university while also highlighting the challenges I experienced as a neurodiverse student. My co-constructors shared trustworthy, authentic views and did not avoid the controversial issues that I had encountered. They also alluded to the positive experiences that I, as a student with ASD, had experienced during my first three days at university. In sum, my co-constructors contributed to an in-depth understanding of the seven critical incidents I foreground in this article.

The second research method that helped me recall and reinterpret critical incidents was memory work. To remember specific events, I revisited the campuses where I had studied and used historical artefacts, such as the welcoming programme for 28 January 2012, to jog my memory. I also engaged in self-interviews. These were helpful as they allowed me to revisit important memories related to my first three days at university to connect with my genuine feelings. In the process, I acknowledged submerged feelings that had impacted my experience. Also, through self-interviewing, I reflected on the events that had shaped my experiences during each critical incident. I recalled the comments and behaviour of my fellow students and lecturers, both positive and negative, which had influenced my experiences. Looking back, I imagined how my first three days at university could have been different if the university had been more accessible and inclusive.

By dint of the methodology I followed, the critical incidents I present below helped me to understand why I experienced my first three days at university the way I did.

BACKDROP TO THE CRITICAL INCIDENTS OF THE FIRST THREE DAYS

As a Grade 12 learner from a remedial school, the opportunity to be educated at a university felt like a marvel and marked a significant academic and personal leap in my advancement. My goal was to attend university, improve my social skills, make friends, and study Human Movement Sciences (HMS). However, the school psychologist advised me against enrolling at university due to my ASD diagnosis, warning that the demands of university life might be overwhelming. She also painted a bleak picture of how the university staff and students might perceive and treat me. Despite her advice, I enrolled at a large, historically White residential university.

Incident 1: Structuring disorientation

My journey began on the morning of the university's Welcome Day, 28 January 2012. I immediately felt alienated and overcome by my new environment. There were no signs to guide me and my parents, so navigating the university campus was challenging. I was thankful that my parents had come with me to the Welcome Day, although we had actually arrived a quarter

of an hour late. As we moved closer to the location, the sound levels increased, and more people gathered, which made me feel anxious and fearful. My mother noticed my unease and grasped my hand. As someone diagnosed with ASD, I usually avoid crowds because they overload my senses, but I was raised according to the socio-ecological model and realised that I had to face the day.

I had a similar experience on 30 January 2012, my first day as a student at university. When I arrived, I found the environment to be inaccessible. There were no instructions guiding students where to go nor signs at the entrance gate or parking area to guide me. The unfamiliar setting made me feel anxious and overwhelmed. Furthermore, I worried as I could not find other first-year students on campus. Eventually, I spotted a few students wearing white uniforms, designating them as first-years, waiting for the first orientation session in front of the main academic building. Two senior students dressed in red guided us to the main lecture hall. While walking, I could not help but wonder how I would ever have found the venue without the students' uniforms. I also noticed the lack of signs or guides that would have helped me find my way around. This experience made me realise that I needed a structured support system at university.

As I entered the lecture hall, I was immediately overwhelmed by the many students. For the first time since my primary school years, I experienced sensory overload.[2] I tried to avoid the masses of the crowd by not making any form of eye contact with anyone, and although feeling very anxious, I took a seat in the front row. As I sat there, I grew increasingly anxious because I presumed that the benchmark test that I was about to write would be similar to the compulsory test for potential university students, which I had already taken at the University of the Witwatersrand. My previous experience with the benchmark test had not been a positive one. From past experience, I felt that the lecturers would provide me with reasonable accommodations for additional time.

Incident 2: No reasonable accommodation was provided for me to write a benchmark test

I was disappointed when the examiner in charge of the administration of the benchmark test did not allow me any extra time or accommodations, even after learning about my ASD. Instead, they suggested that I take the test on another day. Feeling like I had no other choice, I left the lecture hall. I found a spot next to the dam on campus where I sat, contemplating what to do next. I could not help but feel that the university should have made provisions for students with special needs by allowing extra time for the test. It was clear to me that the university environment was not supportive of students with ASD, and I even started to doubt whether I

deserved the opportunity to study there.

After finishing the benchmark test, the other first-year students followed their timetables to join the information sessions for their courses during orientation week. I was still unsure where the venues were, so I followed other students to one of the lecture halls where the first information session was being held. I did not recognise any students when I entered the lecture hall. Cautiously, I again chose to take a seat at the front of the class. Feeling unfamiliar with the environment, I did not speak to anyone and did not form any friendships with the other students. The overcrowded lecture halls again caused me to experience sensory overload. This meant that I avoided eye contact with others, a behaviour noticed by most of the students and lecturers over time. Due to my "strange" behaviour, I felt instantly isolated.

Incident 3: Isolationism during the Human Movement Science lecture

I felt a strong sense of isolation as I made my way to the HMS building. I followed a group of first-year students heading in that direction. During a lecture, I bravely disclosed to the lecturer that I had been diagnosed with ASD but still wanted to study HMS. However, the lecturer discouraged me from enrolling in the HMS course, fearing that I could not handle the practical aspects and meet the performance standards. This left me feeling extremely disappointed, as my passion for learning about the science of sport and eventually becoming a rugby team coach was genuine. It seemed that the lecturer had judged me based on my disclosure and physical appearance – I was overweight due to my low muscle tone and overeating patterns, and I was not dressed in sportswear. It was evident from the lecturer's response that they were looking for physically strong, able-bodied, athletic students, and my ASD made me appear weak in their eyes, which, I felt, would bring shame to the course.

Incident 4: Support that I received from the campus psychologist

To cope with the recent news and the accompanying disappointment, I felt the need to discuss my options. Throughout my life, I struggled with rejection even though I was brought up in a home and school environment where my inclusion in all activities and events was the norm. Despite experiencing rejection in the past, the current situation left me feeling alone and needing a solution. I sought guidance from the campus psychologist to navigate this challenging phase. It was a critical moment for me, and I relied on his advice to find a new path forward. I had no choice but to face my situation and strive to make the best of it. The campus psychologist adopted a positive outlook and helped me to consider an alternative direction for my studies. He suggested that I change my majors to History and Psychology. He believed that studying psychology would not only help me learn about myself and my ASD but could also open up

new career opportunities for me. Additionally, the psychologist scheduled regular appointments to help me cope with the disappointment and work on boosting my self-esteem.

Incident 5: Rejection from Faculty House representatives and institution

After my session with the campus psychologist, I headed to a meeting at the Faculty House for students who did not live on campus. It quickly became apparent that the committee members judged the students based on their social class, appearance, and sports achievements. The chairlady's behaviour and her comments to the students made me feel like an outsider. She emphasised that new first-year students had to earn respect by serving the Faculty House Committee and she stated, "There is no room for weakness. If you show signs of weakness, other students will replace you!" This made me question whether I could thrive in an environment that did not tolerate any form of weakness. Despite this, I decided to continue. Later, one of the week's activities was to form friendship groups. Communication and establishing social relationships are challenging for me, and I lacked the confidence to introduce myself. I bravely disclosed my diagnosis to the House Committee members, explaining my difficulty in making friends and how my behaviour, such as being quiet and avoiding eye contact, was due to my ASD. Unfortunately, my explanation was met with dismissive shrugs.

I felt isolated and alone, which again led me to contemplate whether I had made the right choice, in this case, to join the Faculty House. Later that afternoon, when I got home, I explained to my mother that I did not want to join the Faculty House and would instead focus on my academic performance.

Incident 6: Confusion with the timetable

On 31 January 2012, my third day at university, my mother drove me there. I misunderstood the orientation week timetable and thought the classes would run continuously from 8:00 to 15:00, similar to a school schedule. As a result, we arrived at the campus at 8:00. I found it difficult to read the academic timetable, which was printed in A3 book format, and the campus signage did not help either. Fortunately, the only staff member available to assist me was the enrolment officer in the administration building. When I showed her my timetable, she told me I had misread it. Despite feeling surprised, my mother and I decided to wait until my first class started. I was confused and felt that I lacked guidance; I could not drive and lived 50 kilometres away from the university with my parents. While we were sitting on the lawn contemplating my situation, a group of students from a residence, marked by wearing matching black shirts with yellow stripes, skippers, and light brown pants, walked by. They exuded confidence, and it got me thinking about joining a residence.

Incident 7: Decision to stay in the residence

Thinking about the timetable predicament, the daily commute for my mother to take me to the university and back, and the safety concerns of me using public transport, my mother and I had an earnest conversation about whether I should join a residence. At the same time, my mother questioned her ability to support me emotionally as I adjusted to university life. Therefore, the only way out seemed to be staying in a residence to develop socially and establish my identity. A key contributor to my decision to stay in the residence was meeting Sipho, who had attended the same remedial school as me. We knew each other well, and he had regularly visited our home. He saw us sitting on the lawn and approached us. He lived in a residence and believed the experience would benefit me emotionally. Sipho informed my mother that he would introduce me to other students and help me grow emotionally and socially. Knowing my personality profile, he assured my mother that he would support me. We were both seeking to find and establish our identities on campus. On the same day, I secured a place in the residence and became Sipho's roommate. In doing so, we became the first Black and White students to be roommates, much to the disappointment of most of the White students.

DISCUSSION

As part of the analysis for my studies and to make sense of these seven incidents that were critical during my first three days at university, I identified various themes which I brought into conversation with Bakhtin's theory of outsideness and the theory of historic institutionalism.

Ableness or ableism

The first issue relates to ableness. Ableism reflects the values and abilities of many people in society and at universities. It involves the negative labelling and poor treatment of individuals who exhibit traits that are not valued. Guevara (2020) argues that ableism is a form of discrimination similar to racism, sexism, casteism, ageism, and speciesism. Ableism can also be seen as a preference for neurotypical normative abilities, leading to discrimination against those who are less able-bodied.

Barounis (2009, 54) argues that able-bodiedness is based on a medical model that seeks to "fix" disabled students by getting them to conform to accepted behaviour and meet institutional expectations. From the critical incidents that had occurred, it was clear that the university was, for the most part, still adhering to the medical model and was not accustomed to accommodating students with ASD, assuming that these students would need to adapt rather than be accommodated.

During my first three days at university, I noticed that ableism was present in various situations, with students and lecturers displaying this attitude. I encountered this when I had to take a benchmark test, apply to study HMS, and wanted to join the Faculty House. There was a preference for beauty, sportsmanship, strength, and social desirability as ability traits. Because of this, I felt pressure to hide my impairments and not disclose them to university staff and students to avoid discrimination (Mosia 2017).

The issue of ableism became particularly apparent in the HMS module, where the students who dressed in sportswear and appeared athletic were favoured and accepted. As someone with physical limitations, the HMS lecturer discouraged me from enrolling in the course, viewing my condition as a sign of inability. I felt torn between leaving university altogether and following the lecturer's advice to choose a different module. Becoming aware of this ableist mindset, I felt compelled to find a way to navigate the university environment. I sought help from the university psychologist to develop the skills necessary to integrate into a community that historically emphasised sporting prowess. It was clear that I was being labelled as an outsider in an environment tainted by ableism.

Whiteness

Through a series of significant events, I gained an understanding of whiteness and its impact. Whiteness is a social construct formed by historical events and ongoing societal dynamics. According to Harris (1990, 28), whiteness is associated with "racial privilege," and leads to certain advantages for those who possess it. This became evident when I joined the predominantly White residence as a roommate with Sipho. Despite our different challenges (mine as a student with ASD and Sipho's as a male Black African student with a physical impairment), we were both seeking our place at the university. I quickly noticed the entrenched historical culture of the residence, with the House Committee enforcing rules rooted in the past. Sipho and his fellow Black African students were part of the traditional White Afrikaans residence that upheld ableist traditions and drew strongly on a specific historical legacy. By choosing to room together, we challenged the unwritten rule that prohibited students of different races from sharing a room, thereby exposing ourselves to potential isolation, microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and persecution (Gans 2017). It became clear that the rules and regulations needed to change, as both Sipho and I, as part of marginalised groups (a student with a disability and a Black African student with a physical impairment) felt oppressed by the system. By our choice to room together, two marginalised categories – disability and race – were united to advocate for systemic change. I faced immediate rejection from the White male students for disrupting established, White-dominated koshuis (hostel) life.

Masculinity

During my first three days, I experienced hegemonic masculinity in the form of ability and whiteness. The aims of hegemonic masculinity were to establish male superiority by controlling, oppressing, and manipulating those who did not fit the traditional notion of being "male enough" (Flood et al. 2007). I faced the pinnacle of this when the lecturer rejected me as a student in the HMS programme because I did not fit the typical masculine stereotype, and when only male students who embodied hegemonic masculinity were accepted. In other words, I was deemed "not athletic enough" at first glance, and my physical appearance, along with my disclosure of being on the autism spectrum and, therefore, disabled, led to my immediate exclusion.

My experience with other first-year students was similar. I was not welcomed into the social groups formed among other first-year students or created by the University's Faculty House. The reason for this exclusion was my anti-social behaviour due to my ASD. My behaviour included difficulty in social communication, limited eye contact, an introverted personality, sensory overload in crowded environments, and not fitting the typical masculine norm. The Faculty House Committee preferred male students who were more outgoing and physically attractive, and who conformed to traditional masculine ideals. They made it evident that there was no room for perceived "weakness," and I was made to feel that I did not fit the expected masculine characteristics. This exclusion continued when I moved into the residence where my roommate was a Black African student. As a result, I faced rejection and exclusion from my fellow White male students who upheld historical expectations of masculinity at former White Afrikaans residential universities. By contrast, I was accepted by the Black male students who also experienced feelings of being outsiders.

Support

My experiences made me wonder if I could adjust to university life. The staff and students seemed to avoid me or struggled to communicate with me because of my differences. The layout of the university campus made it even more difficult for me, as a student with ASD, to find my way around and locate the different lecture halls. There were very few signs to guide me and no one to help. Even though my challenges were not obvious, I experienced high levels of anxiety due to sensory overload in the crowded lecture halls and the unfamiliar environment. On my second day at university, my first interaction with a lecturer emphasised the physical challenges I faced. When I disclosed my ASD diagnosis and requested additional time for a benchmark test, the examiner refused and suggested that I write the test on a different day at a

different location because my request for additional time was considered unusual. This was made worse by the lack of support services for students with different abilities.

I had neither support nor acceptance. Fortunately, Sipho helped me find a place to stay on campus, and the university psychologist provided valuable support. The psychologist helped me with my immediate needs and began teaching me problem-solving techniques and how to cope with the disappointment of being publicly rejected by HMS. He viewed my diagnosis with ASD as a gift rather than a deficit and started a long-term support plan for me.

CONCLUSION

Being new can be a challenge, especially for first-year university students. Many students at universities, typically aged 18 to 19 years, are brought together in various formal and informal settings and must figure out how to adapt to their circumstances. For numerous first-year students, this initial experience at university is significant and can make or break their academic journey. As a student with ASD, I felt this acutely during my first three days at university. I encountered cultural, structural, and pedagogical practices that were linked to whiteness, ableness, and dominant masculinities, all of which had deep historical roots. I felt like I was being treated according to a medical model rather than a socio-ecological one with the consequence was that I immediately felt like an outsider. Fortunately, I was supported by a school friend and the university psychologist during those first three days in 2012 and this gave me the hope and will to continue.

During these three days, I started to understand the complexities around the policies and models, entrenched cultural practices and traditions, historical influences, the tendency to isolate others, and the limited understanding and accommodation of students with ASD. It became clear that support and rejection were present in this complex environment. In addition, in 2012, the university was still grappling with the political changes of 1994. With the benefit of hindsight, I have been able to examine and reflect on the university's policies, procedures, and culture, on how the university as a public institution constructed me as an outsider, and on the initial alienation that I felt. Fortunately, the university where I did my studies has since advanced how they accommodate neurodiverse students like me. However, to advance the socio-ecological model and ensure equal access for people with disabilities in all facets of university life, all South African universities are urged to distance themselves from the medical model and remove the barriers hindering participation and access. Despite this, remnants of the past are often still present in the form of outdated policies, traditions, and cultural influences that remain deeply rooted in historic institutionalism and that have the potential to make students like me feel like outsiders (Zulu 2020).

NOTES

1. The ethical clearance number allocated to this study by the University of Pretoria is EDU123/19.

2. Sensory overload is when taking in more information than your brain can process. When your brain is overwhelmed by this it enters fight, flight or freeze mode.

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