EXPERIENCING UNIVERSITY LIFE AS AN AUTISTIC STUDENT: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

EMILE GOUWS

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

in the

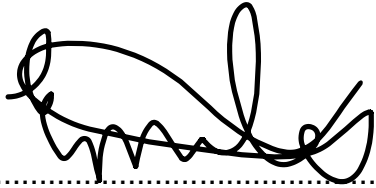**Faculty of Education**

at the

University of Pretoria

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June 2022

Declaration

I, Emile Gouws, student number 12106543, hereby declare that this thesis, submitted in accordance with the requirements for Philosophiae Doctorate (PhD) at the University of Pretoria is my own, original work and has not previously been submitted to any other institution of higher learning. All sources cited or quoted in this research paper are indicated and acknowledged with a comprehensive list of references provided.

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April 2022

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April 2022

Ethical Clearance Certificate

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DEGREE AND PROJECT	PhD	
	Experiencing university life as an autistic student: A critical autoethnography	
INVESTIGATOR	Mr Emile Gouws	
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- Compliance with approved research protocol,
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Abstract

As long as I can remember, I have always had the desire to enjoy the same opportunities that were granted to neurotypical individuals. My enrolment at a university was a major milestone in my life as I wanted to experience what university life had to offer academically, culturally and socially. Yet, as good as it was to be part of a renowned academic institution, I felt excluded because the system, facilities and traditions of the institution had semblances of masculinity, ableism and whiteness. By using autoethnography as a research methodology, I am making my voice as a neurodiverse student heard. In this study, I have focused on my personal experiences as an undergraduate student on the autism spectrum at university through a critical lens. The term 'critical' is primarily used to refer to the analysis of my journey at university with the intention of understanding how the university system accommodates and supports students with disabilities. Self-study enabled me to evaluate the support I received from different role players who contributed in their unique way to my journey. The double lens that guided my literature review and data interpretation was self-awareness theory in collaboration with Erikson's and Chickering's theories on identity development. The two stages of Erikson's theory that were relevant to my study were identity vs role confusion and intimacy vs isolation, which refer to the personal and institutional beliefs, culture and traditions that shape a student's behaviour. On the other hand, Chickering's vectors place an emphasis on the practices, attitudes and beliefs of the university that predetermine a student's success. Overall, Bakhtin's concept of 'outsideness' relates to the above-mentioned theories as all students regarded by the system as outsiders were expected to adapt to the university's regulations and traditions. The above-mentioned frameworks address a number of the learning experiences that I underwent to develop my own identity and become aware of the expectations of the university. The outcome of this study is to impress upon and enable higher education institutions to revise their policy of inclusion by accommodating the needs of all students at all levels.

Key terms: critical autoethnography, masculinity, ableism, whiteness, neurodiversity, autism spectrum

Declaration of Language Editor

Certificate of Editing

I, Brenda Gouws, confirm that I have edited the following manuscript:

Title: Experiencing university life as an autistic student: A critical autoethnography

Author: Emile Gouws

Institution: University of Pretoria

Editing style: UP Harvard

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the two most important mother figures in my life:

Marie Gouws and Kim Rundle McJannet

Dear Mothers,

I am dedicating this thesis to you both as you have supported me throughout this journey. This study would not have been possible without your unconditional love, support and sacrifice. Even in difficult times, when I felt that I wanted to give up, you encouraged me to persevere and finish this journey.

Words cannot explain how much both of you mean to me and the role that you have played in my life. You look beyond the autism diagnosis and accept me unconditionally.

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For this, I salute you both – my mothers, my rocks, my primary supporters.

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To the I Have a Voice board members, thank you for your continuous support.

List of Acronyms

ACS	Academic Service Learning
ADA	American Disability Association
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ANC	African National Congress
APA	American Psychiatric Association
APLIA	Applied Assessment
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BEd	Bachelor's in Education
CBT	Computer-Based Test
CDPF	Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum
DSA	Disabled Student Alliance
FAPE	Federal Act of Public Education
FET	Further Education and Training Phase
ICD	International Classification of Diseases Diagnostic System
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
IDEA	Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualised Educational Plan
IMS	International Medical Services
MBS	Muriel Brand School
MEd	Master's in Education
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
OSA	Objective Self-Awareness
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
RAG	Raise and Give
RRR	Rugby, Reading and Research project
TUKS	Transvaalse Universiteits Kollege

UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UP	University of Pretoria
US	United States
WPRPD	White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

List of Course Module Abbreviations

ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ENE	Electric, Electronic and Computer Engineering
HIS	History
IT	Information Technology
JGL	Literacy Practices
JLO	Life Orientation
JLZ	Literacy in Education
JNM	Research-based Module
LO	Life Orientation
OPV	Education Studies
SLK	Psychology

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

As a member of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) in collaboration with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and, as an autistic adult myself, I strive alongside others to amend constitutions and promote inclusivity to ensure that social, economic, civil, political, cultural, environmental and attitudinal barriers are eliminated for neurodiverse people in all areas of society (Doyle & McDowall, 2021). The term 'neurodiversity' was commonly used in the early 1990s in socialist circles to acknowledge the different brain profiles of people. This was done by analysing the individuals whose brain profiles were different in various mental functions and, therefore, a stereotyped perception existed that these individuals would not be able to receive formal education nor be able to function in broader society (Kirby, Bagatell & Baranek, 2019).

During the period 1948–1994 in South Africa, the government's policy of apartheid (segregation) excluded the majority of the population (Black Africans, Coloureds, Indians, women and persons with disabilities) from receiving quality education equal to that of the minority (White, male, non-disabled South Africans) and from participating in society at all levels (Russell, Sirota & Ahmed, 2019). During the apartheid years, those people with disabilities, including neurodiversity, were regarded as different and, as such, they were treated according to a medical model with the aim of bringing their actions into line with what was thought of as normal expectations (Kruger, 2015). In taking this position, the regime claimed that the problem was vested in the person with a disability, who, therefore, needed a specialised environment where special education and treatment would be provided outside of mainstream or 'normal' public schooling.

Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, education has been regarded as the ideal platform through which the true values of inclusion could be implemented. In this regard, South Africa adopted a new constitution post-1994 and education became a primary focus for all people, regardless of their ethnicity, abilities or socio-

economic levels (Department of Social Development, 2015). The Bill of Rights introduced a subsection on education, Section 29, which states that each and every individual has the right to basic education that is free from any form of discrimination (Russell *et al.*, 2019). The country's education system subsequently moved beyond the medical model, which argues that the disability of the student is regarded as a problem that requires medical or psychiatric treatment, towards a socio-ecological one that focuses on the removal of any physical and learning barriers to ensure equality of opportunity (Kruger, 2015). The socio-ecological model is described as an example of a mindset change, whereby society is willing to make public facilities accessible for all citizens and accept the uniqueness and difference of each individual, despite their race, class, gender and impairment. In short, unlike the medical model, which expects the person to change, the socio-ecological model believes that institutions and society need to change and that they can do so by eliminating ideologies of, amongst others, patriarchy, racism, masculinity, ableism and whiteness, which influence perceptions and the management of societal practices.

When considering my life story as a person with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), I realised that I was raised by my parents according to the socio-ecological model in which I was continuously stimulated and exposed to opportunities with the purpose of helping me grow as a person in my own right and to develop new skills so as to function fully in society.

In this study, I have made use of a critical autoethnography to reflect on my journey through university as an undergraduate student with ASD. My autoethnography is evocative and written as a narrative to interpret and make sense of my lived experiences as an undergraduate student. Adopting phenomenology in my approach, I (as the researcher) first had to understand myself as an undergraduate student before I could understand myself in broader society, including the university (Howell, 2013).

In this chapter, the background and context will be explained. It tells the history of a university as an establishment and the experiences of students whom the South African system regarded as different and who were treated based on a medical

model. Shadows of the treatment were evident in my experiences as a student with ASD at university, which will be explained in the section in which I discuss the rationale and motivation as I positioned myself between self-analysis and the perceptions of others. The focus and purpose of this study explain why I formulated the two research questions. Afterwards, the different concepts and theoretical framework that serve as the lens to guide the study will be explained.

1.2 Background and context

The term 'university' is derived from the Latin word 'universitas' and typically refers to several individuals from different communities working together to obtain the highest level of education in various disciplines (Nurmawati, Rachmiazasi Masduki & Kurniasih, 2021). Considering the South African context, the implementation of policies and management approaches are internationally based and must, therefore, adhere to global regulations. In this regard, South Africa has a strong constitution, especially regarding the implementation of higher education policies such as the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and, most notably, the white paper on higher education, Education White Paper 3 (Department of Department of Education, 1997), which is aimed at transforming higher education institutions in terms of their management, transdisciplinary activities, research and communication (Jansen, 2002). Most importantly, Education White Paper 6, titled *White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (2015) provides clear guidelines on the challenges that disrupt students physically, intellectually and financially within higher education institutions (Jansen, 2002). These are challenges that students with ASD experience daily on a cognitive, emotional and social level. Furthermore, they have consequences such as a decrease in student enrolments, increasing failure rates of students and increases in staffing costs, which affect the reputation of the institution when they occur. At the same time, these challenges force universities to make themselves accessible so as to accommodate students with ASD (Jansen, 2002).

While there is an extreme effort in place to transform universities, images of the past are still present in the manner in which higher education institutions' policies are carried out and managed. Referring to the demographics of students who attend

university, more so now than at any other time in the history of South Africa, students are coming from different backgrounds and communities with aspirations to study. Many of these students have one intention and that is to graduate with expertise so as to contribute to the development of their societies and make a difference in individuals' lives (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005). Despite their eagerness and determination to succeed, their background, race, gender or disability are still met with barriers. The university can improve its facilities to make it more accessible for all students as stipulated by policy documents such as Education White Paper 6 (Department of Social Development, 2015).

Against this backdrop, students enter the university environment and its dominant discourses with a firm intention – in search of identities that are valued. However, to fit in and succeed, they must be able to mould their identities. As Norton (1997) states, first-year students will take extreme measures to meet these expectations and, most importantly, to be accepted. To achieve acceptance, students must attain proficiency to think, act and behave within the dominant ideological frameworks (Kress, 1990). Gee (1990) shares his views, although somewhat dated by now, on a university's historic stance, emphasising the stigma within academic and social circles by referring to the system as a hierarchical model that attains a hegemonic, masculinity viewpoint and which categorises students according to race, class, ethnicity and sexuality. Based on this analysis, all students have had to adopt different roles to be classified as either an insider or an outsider. Subsequently, in an online article written by Stabile (2021), James Madison University was criticised for including controversial rhetoric as part of their first-year orientation programme. The most shocking revelation was that the training sessions which was intended to train students that Christians, white males are 'oppressors' emphasised a hierarchical model by referring to males, religion and race. Thus, those students who were White, Christian and male were regarded as more superior.

Considering the demographic profile of students in higher education in South Africa, inequality is still evident, especially regarding the enrolment of students in higher education who are disabled. The most recent statistics indicate that 7,5 per cent of citizens who are diagnosed with some sort of disability are enrolled in higher

education institutions (Department of Statistics: South Africa, 2018). Halvorsrud (2017) warns that these students will struggle to be academically successful and may drop out if they do not receive the necessary, relevant institutional support. Furthermore, he identifies two fundamental elements that should be included in an inclusive policy of higher education institutions, namely the physical infrastructure and institutional planning, to create a more accessible and inclusive society. Mark and Boruff-Jones (2003) provide different reasons why universities need to change their policies so as to accommodate students with disabilities, particularly students with ASD. This includes requiring universities to change their infrastructure, especially the outlay of lecture halls, administration buildings, residences and social spaces. These authors further recommend that student support services should be made available to care for students with disabilities, such as psychological support and the allocation of additional time during examinations.

With this study, I set out to understand how I, as a student and regarded as part of a minority group (a student with an invisible neurodiverse impairment), experienced undergraduate university life. As per the requirements of any environment, Sedgewick, Hill and Pellicano (2019) observe that each society has its own standards and traditions which can impact the adaptability of the student at university. It is, therefore, important to emphasise the value of first-hand accounts, as noted by Joubert (2016) who regards narratives as valuable sources of data. Accounts of the experiences of an autistic student at university, such as this study, come directly from the coalface. In it, my intention was to understand my undergraduate journey, the challenges I faced and, at times, overcame and how the university shaped me as a student and as a person. During this learning curve, as an undergraduate student, I experienced rejection, isolation and discrimination, when it sometimes seemed impossible to succeed and to function. The facilities and attitudes of some family members, lecturers and fellow students made my university experience challenging. However, I also had some positive experiences in which inclusion was implemented and where I found my 'place'. Through this autoethnography, I aim to create awareness of the plight of students who are part of a minority group, including students with different impairments, by challenging

university policymakers to review their policy to include students on different levels and help them to achieve their fullest potential.

1.3 Rationale and motivation

I am central to this study. In doing this research, I am acknowledging and accepting myself, first, as a student whose brain is neurologically different and, second, as someone who has joined the movement to establish change in the treatment of neurodiverse students in all sectors of society, especially in the higher education context. I am referring to myself as an "autistic adult" as I accepted the fact that ASD is part of my identity which helped me personally to embrace my difference.

My motivation for the study was to understand my journey as a student with ASD with the purpose of making university and their facilities more inclusive and accessible. By means of a critical autoethnography, I have positioned myself between self-analysis and the perceptions of others with the intention of serving as an inspiration for other neurodiverse students with different disabilities who aim to succeed and function at university.

Professionally, with the exposure I received by attending various United Nations (UN) meetings and representing neurodiversity on various international forums, such as the CDPF, I would love to lecture students at universities on inclusive education, especially on neurodiversity. Moreover, I would like to assist faculty members and policymakers to make universities more inclusive by making the necessary reasonable accommodations to support all students with disabilities. I would also like to highlight the true meaning of inclusion at university level, which requires accepting, acknowledging and accommodating all students. I, therefore, hope that this study will be an eye-opener to university policymakers so that they will review its current system, which is often described as too rigid, and make it more suitable to accommodate both students that are non-disabled and physically impaired.

Considering the policies of the university, the traditions and the management of the institutions, this study set out to uncover the university environment through the

eyes of a neurodiverse student and conceptualise the treatment of such an individual through the cycle of exclusion. At the same time, I also hoped to encourage the acceptance of those regarded as different. In saying this, through my experiences as an undergraduate student, I would like to understand the reasons and decisions that some lecturers and students made to accommodate me, even though the university has an inclusive policy that is underwritten by the South African Constitution.

This autoethnography fills a gap in the literature as there are limited autoethnographic studies telling the experiences of students with ASD at university. My experience will hopefully serve as a lens to assess the operation of higher education institutions in terms of their current policies, accessibility, support and opportunities for participation in campus life by looking at the adaptability of staff and students who form part of the majority group on campus.

1.4 Focus of the study

The focus of this study is on my personal experiences as an autistic student at university. More importantly, it focuses on how I established my identity at university in the different settings where masculinity, ableness and whiteness were evident in the attitudes of the students and academic staff and in the principles and traditions of the institution.

1.5 Purpose of the study

By narrating my journey, this study aims to add to the body of knowledge available regarding how universities accommodate students with ASD. It also aims to help these individuals be accepted as part of the larger university community.

1.6 Research questions

In light of the rationale, motivation, focus and purpose of the study, I formulated the following research questions to guide this study:

1. What were my experiences as a student with ASD at university?

2. Why did I, as a student with ASD, experience university the way that I did?

By addressing these research questions, I want to make sense of my personal experiences at university and understand why I experienced university life in the manner that I did and how I developed my identity within it.

1.7 Concept clarification

Concept clarification is regarded as an important step in helping the reader to engage in critical thinking, but it can also help the reader to understand the purpose and use of certain concepts (Stanek, 2017). It can also be described not only as providing a working definition, but also includes the origins, the evolution and the boundaries of the concept (Manning & Gagnon, 2017). Concepts that require clarification are critical autoethnography, neurodiversity, ASD, neurotypical, masculinity, ableness, whiteness and inclusive education.

1.7.1 Critical autoethnography

An autoethnography is referred to as a systematic analysis of the narrator's personal (auto) experience in order to understand the cultural (ethno) experience of the studied phenomenon (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2007). Leading scholars in the field of the methodology Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) note that the researcher tends to make a combined effort to make use of both autobiography and ethnography to synthesise their autoethnography. As such, the writing of it remains ritual and personal, as the researcher applies introspection to form an understanding of their personal experiences. The introspection consists of active involvement through the creation of new concepts, living in the different moments and viewing events that transpired with a political eye (Luvaas, 2019). Ellis *et al.* (2011) further state that autoethnography requires the researcher to challenge their personal assumptions and their own defences, fears and insecurities.

Critical autoethnography, in turn, is a qualitative research methodology whereby the researcher makes use of personal experiences that reflect the political and social experiences of a particular culture studied. Gale and Wyatt (2019) explain that the writing as a form of activism, which is about the ability to affect and be affected not only by themselves but by others. Further, Gale and Wyatt (2019) refer to an autoethnography as academic writing in its finest form, by employing consciousness

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to form academic understanding. Autoethnography was used as a methodology in this thesis to revisit my experiences as an undergraduate student with ASD at university by asking critical questions about why I experienced university the way that I did.

1.7.2 Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the neurological inheritance of different developmental disorders. It has been discovered that students who were diagnosed with ASD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyslexia and alexia had similar brain profiles and were, therefore, classified under the same conceptual umbrella of neurodiversity (Lamb, 2019).

The concept of neurodiversity referred to in this study acknowledges the current global movement which advocates acceptance and acknowledgement of neurodiverse students on different platforms, especially in formal education, including higher education (Ward & Webster, 2018).

1.7.3 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the functional abilities of the individual from birth to adulthood in different environments on cognitive, emotional, social and physical levels (Noakes, 2019). The diagnosis of someone with ASD varies from one individual to the next, but there is generally an impairment in language/communication, social functioning, and a restriction of interests and patterns of behaviour (Willey, 2014). As a result of the mild cognitive delay that the individual may experience, it remains a challenge to transition from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment and to adapt to the requirements of the different environments. The range of challenges disrupting the functioning abilities of the student with ASD at university, for example, include mental health concerns (for example, stress, depression and anxiety) and social challenges (lack of social participation and emotional management). Therefore, students with ASD are at greater risk of social withdrawal, which highlights the need for support services and guidance from the side of the university (Accardo, Finnegan, Gulkus & Papay, 2017). The functioning abilities of students and their successes can be jeopardised

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by the social, emotional and academic expectations of the higher education institution if the necessary support measures are not in place. In sum, the provision of support services and interventions for students with ASD is essential. Accardo *et al.* (2017) maintain that appropriate support measures will improve the ability of a student with ASD to achieve academic outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that students with ASD experience sensory challenges (auditorily and visually), especially in unfamiliar settings. In this regard, it needs to be pointed out that the phonological loop is the part of the brain that is responsible for a person's ability to process and perceive auditory input (Deschamps, Courson, Dick & Tremblay, 2020). Visually, the visuospatial sketchpad is part of the working memory and is critical for the online retention that is responsible for visual and spatial orientation. This process refers to the manner in which an individual processes visual images in the working memory (Turo, Collin & Brouillet, 2021). Linking to ASD, Liang, Guo, Chang and Chen (2018, April) write that the visuospatial sketchpad affects the way the individual functions and reacts in a specific environment, based on environmental constraints, required expectations of that environment and also an individual's past experiences. This may lead to the individual with ASD portraying the flight response in overpopulated environments and not enjoying or participating in the opportunities that are granted to them.

1.7.4 Neurotypical

The adjective 'neurotypical' is commonly used to distinguish between the neurological differences of people, referring to the diagnosis of their disability. It is, therefore, noted that this neologism is widely used by the autistic community at awareness events to label or identify those within broader society who do not show signs of autism or any other neurological disability (Sasson, Faso, Nugent, Lovell, Kennedy & Grossman, 2017). The concept has limited medical or psychological meaning but can evoke positive and negative emotions within the autistic community as the concept compares the intellectual and developmental differences between an individual diagnosed with ASD and those who are not diagnosed in this manner. As such, this concept can be linked to the medical model of disability in

which the perception exists that autism can be cured so that the individual can participate fully in society. This perception has been adopted by some organisations and teaching techniques used in the education field have been employed with this purpose. In saying this, Rosqvist, Chown and Stenning (2020) perceived the neurotypical population as a 'predominant neurotype' or as 'nonsensical' where there are contrasting traits in cognitive, affectual and sensory functioning. The concept can also refer to the neurodiversity movement's motives and continuous struggle (corresponding with the UN's Sustainable Developments Goals for 2030) to illuminate the medical approach toward disability and identify the individual as part of society (Rieser, 2012).

The term 'neurotypical' is frequently referred to in my narrative when I refer to the fellow students with whom I was in contact during my undergraduate studies and also their perceptions of me as a student.

1.7.5 Masculinity

Masculinity is a field of study in which the concept of the male gender is established in social science and extended to a study of everyday life (Harper, Carini, Bridges & Hayek, 2004). Masculinity is socially and biologically influenced as it distinguishes between a set of attributes, behaviours and roles associated with men and boys. The contributions to the study of men and masculinity started to be shaped in the 1980s and 1990s when male attributes that were analysed were regarded as superior to other attributes and with any behaviour that was the opposite being categorised as different (Cornwall, Karioris & Lindisfarne, 2019). Notions of masculinity emphasised the dominance and position of one gender over another. Currently, different male and female identities define their behaviour in different social situations. There are different variations of masculinity, such as hegemonic masculinity, which is applied worldwide as a concept. It occurs in different forms in which the marginalised forms of masculinity are subordinated to the most dominant form and are consequently overpowered. Women, homosexuals and persons with disabilities are seen as lower on the hierarchy (Cornwall *et al.*, 2019). In particular, hegemonic masculinity, to which men can compare their identities and aspire, provides a normative standard (McVittie, Hepworth & Goodall, 2017).

In universities, many students adopt the culture of the institution as critical dispositions exist within the university and can be seen as a symbolic manifestation of a masculine point of view that is dominant and heterosexual in nature. This adopted cultural manifestation is evident in identity formation, as shown in the way that male individuals are dressed, the attitudes they portray and in their behaviour towards others (Sparkes, Partington & Brown, 2007). According to Sparkes *et al.* (2007:1), jock culture, which is an American stereotypical idea that refers to athletes and represents a youth subculture, is evident in students' higher education practices through the portrayal of 'mesomorphy, anti-intellectualism, sexism, homophobia, competitiveness and binge drinking'. Moreover, in the South African context, any behaviour or practices displayed by a person that is opposite to the characteristics of jock culture lays the individual open to isolation or discrimination.

1.7.6 Disability

According to the UNCRPD, the conceptualisation of disability is an evolving concept imposed by society, which concerns an individual's physical, psychosocial, intellectual, neurological and sensory impairments. Disability can also deny a person access to participation in all aspects of life as they might experience social, psychosocial and/or structural barriers (Department of Social Development, 2015).

Disability is associated with discrimination, an act or omission of policies, law, rules and practices that impose burdens, obligations and disadvantages on an individual. Discrimination undermines the human dignity of the individual. It also encompasses the ability of the institution, as well as that of society, to implement policies that might infringe upon the person's ability to self-actualise in an environment by not making reasonable accommodations to their needs (Department of Social Development, 2015).

1.7.7 Ableism

Ableism is defined as a concept that discriminates and implements different forms of prejudice and discrimination against persons with disabilities. Furthermore, it forms part of an institution's attitudes and standards towards those who are different. On this basis, ableism is the seed of favouritism in cultural dynamics in

which a specific ability is preferred (Wolbring, 2008). The opposite behaviour is labelled as 'impaired' owing to physical, mental, neurological, behavioural or cognitive differences (Wolbring, 2008). Ableism can support negative actions and lead to different forms of racism, sexism, classism and disablism toward the minority. In educational institutions such as universities, the ableist attitude can be evident in the institution's structure and in the policies that are implemented to 'fix the individual' to fit the environment (Guevara, 2020). The spotlight is also on the person with a disability in that the institution's expectations test if they are excellent or efficient enough to function at university. According to the institution's expectations, students should meet the academic and social criteria by adapting to the environment with minimum support.

1.7.8 Whiteness

Whiteness is described as a form of allocation in which individuals associate themselves with a specific race. It can also be classified as a societal status resembling inequality, which emphasises the allocation of societal benefits in private and public sectors. Historically, the origin of whiteness dates back to the parallel systems of oppression of Black African and native peoples (Coleman, Collins & Bonam, 2021). In saying this, whiteness became the basis of rationalised privilege, as admitted by Roy (2016), who claimed that historically the language of the majority racial group has a perceived advantage in every aspect of society.

Whiteness is seen as political property that serves as a barrier because it protects the privileged and continues the culture of exclusion and social injustice, especially considering the history of apartheid South Africa when the White race was regarded as more dominant in all aspects of society. While there has been transformation on the political and public fronts, whiteness is still apparent in the management of institutional policies and unconscious practices. To fit the standards of an institution such as a university, all students are expected to adopt its standards in all aspects of university life (academic, cultural and social circles) in order for the students to fit in and to establish their identities.

1.7.9 Inclusive education

Inclusive education is an international system that has been adopted by various countries in which all students, despite their disability, are provided with equal opportunities to participate in an education system free from any form of discrimination, victimisation and exclusion (McKenzie, 2021). Where policies promote inclusive education, students are provided with quality educational opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills (Carballo, Morgado & Cortés-Vega, 2021). At higher education institutions in South Africa, policies were developed and legislation has been implemented to ensure that no student is left behind.

Inclusive education forms part of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 (Government of South Government of South Africa, 1996). Section 29 of the Bill of Rights states that every individual has the right to 'basic education, including basic adult education; and higher education free from any form of discrimination'. To ensure consistency, the framework for an inclusive education system is laid out in the document Education White Paper 6 (Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde, 2012). The revised edition of White Paper 6 provides a realistic time frame in which policies and legislation are outlined that suggest how to transform the South African public service. This framework provides key strategies to achieve a specific framework, such as transforming and delivering an integrated system in our inclusive education system, infusing special needs and support services throughout the system, and providing a holistic development to a barrier-free education system for inclusive psychosocial development thereby promoting individual rights and responsibilities (Department of Social Development, 2015). Another aim is to develop community-based support programmes that address disadvantaged communities and ensure sustainability.

In terms of higher education, the University of Pretoria implements inclusive policies which emanate from Article 24 of the UNCRPD, which are intended to support students with disabilities by ensuring equal participation and opportunities (University of Pretoria, 2013).

1.8 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is the lens that the researcher uses to conduct the study; it helps the researcher to analyse the data and make sense of their research (Kontorovich, 2016). It also provides the researcher with clarity, direction and perspective relating to the intentions of the research (Oddie, 2019).

In saying this, I made use of multiple lenses in this thesis, including objective self-awareness (OSA) theory in collaboration with Erikson's and Chickering's theories on psychosocial development and with a nod to Bakhtin's theory of 'outsideness' (Bakhtin, Holquist & Liapunov, 1990; DeBerry, 2017; Duval & Wicklund, 1973; Garfield & David, 1986). My main intention in choosing these three theories was that they assisted me in understanding the experiences that I, as an undergraduate, had at university and how I searched for my identity on campus. OSA theory explains how the norms and standards of the environment can influence the individual. Chickening's theory on identity development helped to explain the typical experiences of university students and the activities in which they are required to participate to establish their identity. Erikson's theory describes eight fundamental psychosocial tensions that an individual must balance throughout their life and, as such, reflects on the developmental stages an individual with ASD undergoes.

1.9 Research design and methodology

In this section, I provide a snapshot of the research design and methodology I employed in this thesis. In terms of research design, I was required to adhere to certain critical values, such as choosing my sample (the co-constructors in my study), the place where my data was collected and how it was to be collected. Turning to my research methodology, autoethnography was the method that I used to conduct my research.

Table 1: Summary of research design and methodology

Research Design	Strategies that I implemented to address the research problem
Research approach	Qualitative
Paradigm	Critical paradigm
Ontological and epistemological assumptions	Constructivism, truth and reality and the origins of knowledge provide a description of the kind of world we are investigating, in which key role players have their own agenda, thoughts and experiences.
Methodology	Critical autoethnography
Research Methods	Historical artefacts

Critical conversations

Self-interview

My mother's unpublished manuscript

Personal tour on campus |
| | Semi-structured interviews and critical conversations with:

(i) The university psychologist who treated me

(ii) The lecturer from the Department of Early Childhood Education

(iii) My roommate for two years in the residence

(iv) Lecturers who taught me

(v) The self

(vi) Archival materials

(vii) My cousin

(viii) My mother's unpublished manuscript

(ix) Fellow student in residence: The head coach of the residence |

	(x) My father
	I also held critical conversations with my co-constructors to understand the perceptions of the university towards a student with ASD
Data analysis	Both inductive and deductive approaches

The purpose of the summary of the research design and methodology in table format is to provide an organised and structured explanation of the plan that I followed to conduct the research. In brief, my plan that I followed to conduct my research includes the research approach, paradigm, and ontological and epistemological assumptions. More specifically, my research approach is qualitative and my thesis is written in a critical paradigm intentionally in order to change the management style of the universities and to make campus facilities for diverse students more accessible and the overall university experience more enjoyable.

The methodology of this study consisted of the research design as well as the different research strategies I used to conduct and reflect upon my research. My study is an autoethnographic study in which I share my personal experiences as an individual with ASD at university and the challenges I experienced in all facets. Personally, autoethnographic writing created a platform for me to share my personal experiences as a student at university while making it possible for the reader to acknowledge the multiple voices and the unique contribution each individual makes.

1.10 Overview of the study

This study focused on my personal experiences as an autistic student at university. This thesis consists of seven chapters and the overview/outline of the study is unfolded in the following diagram which is an organised and short snapshot of the

outline of the study. With reference to the diagram, each chapter will focus on the following content.

OUTLINE OF STUDY

CHAPTER 1 AN INTRODUCATION OF THE STUDY (Overview) — Overview of study and general framework

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW — Overview of the research topic is presented in literature

CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (Theoretical literature review on the double lens) — Review of literature that explains the theoretical framework of this study

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY — In-depth explanation of the research methodology and design

CHAPTER 5 NOVELLA — My novella that presents my experiences as a student on the autism spectrum

CHAPTER 6 ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION — Analusys of narrative and interpretation of my data and literature review

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMODATIONS — Recapitulation of my study

Figure 1.1 Outline of the study

In Chapter 2, I present the literature I consulted in terms of the experiences of a typical student at university (internationally and nationally) and the experiences of neurodiverse students at university. This chapter will also include some autoethnographies in which students with ASD experience university and how universities experience these students which the system regarded as different.

Chapter 3 starts with an explanation about the theoretical framework and how the double lens, which contains the self-awareness theory in collaboration with Chickering's theory on identity development and Erikson's theory, is well situated when referring to my experiences as an undergraduate student at university. Specific emphasis is placed on Bakhtin's concept of outsideness and how a student with ASD, such as me, was regarded as an outsider at university.

Chapter 4 explains the research design and methodology that was used to conduct the study. Autoethnography as methodology is explained in detail as well as the interviews with selected participants. Measures to ensure ethical compliance and trustworthiness of data are explained.

Chapter 5 is the central part of the study as this is the chapter where my narrative is presented. The contributions of my co-constructors are included as well as the personal artefacts used to support the arguments. Thus, the reader obtains an insider's perspective of my experiences as an undergraduate student with ASD at university and the challenges I was confronted with.

Chapter 6 presents the interpretation of the data gathered. All the data from the first four chapters are clustered into main and subcategories to make sense of the data.

Chapter 7 is the final chapter where the key findings from the literature and the study are presented. The chapter commences by answering the research questions and by making recommendations for higher education institutions to improve their accommodation of neurodiverse students.

1.11 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a general overview of my autoethnography by setting out the background of the study on my undergraduate university life as an autistic student. This chapter began with a brief history of South Africa's past, especially as it relates to how disability – especially neurodiversity – has been viewed. This view changed from a medical model to a social model when the development of policy and legislation that promotes inclusivity in different sectors, especially in higher education was implemented. My life as an autistic student has emphasised this, especially referring to my university experiences. The reader was introduced to my rationale and motivation, the purpose of this study, and the research questions that I developed to guide this study in order for me to identify why I experienced university in the way I did. This directly contributed towards my rationale and motivation to conduct this study. A succinct overview of my theoretical framework was provided as well as the research design and methodology that I used. These will be elaborated on in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. The next chapter will provide a review of the literature on the topic of the experiences of students who are different, students with ASD, how the universities in general experiences students with ASD and how students with ASD experienced universities.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I provided the background to my study, including the focus and purpose, and it explains in summary my undergraduate journey as a student with ASD by means of an autoethnography. To contextualise my study and acknowledge the challenges that neurodiverse students experience at university, I have developed a structure for my literature review to guide the reader from the general to the specific. My literature review's structure commences with a discussion on how students whom the university system regards as different experience university life. First, a deep review will be conducted on what a typical university looks like physically and what is expected of students. Thereafter, documented studies, including autoethnographies, will be presented to show how students who are regarded as different experience university with regard to the influence of diverse kinds of disabilities, students who are physically and/or visually impaired, and students who are neurodiverse and on the autism spectrum. It is also important to note that I drew literature from the Global North and the Global South to provide practical examples of students' experiences at university that show how these students are accommodated. The university system was also analysed according to the medical and social models of diversity.

In Chapter 2, my review of the literature on the experiences of students with ASD at university will provide the reader with the university's point of view and explains how higher education institutions experience students who are different. By dividing the literature review into different themes, I conceptualise the identified foci for review. This will show a gap in research, namely the lack of literature on first-hand experiences of students with ASD at university.

2.2 The 'typical' university and student diversity

Student diversity refers to the ethnicity and cognitive, affective, psychological and physical differences of all individuals in specific environments. Depending on the type of differences within a university environment, Felder and Brent (2005) believe

that it has important implications for the student as it can determine the type of university experience the student might experience. As a public institution, a typical university is regarded as a neurotypical institution that implements neurotypical societal norms and sets standards that each student and staff member must meet and adopt (Jurgens, 2020). The university context is characterised by idolisation of intellectual achievement and a strong adherence to institutional culture and values. Added to this, Drori, Delmestri and Oberg (2013) are concerned that although the ethos of a traditional university strives for perfection by setting high standards that each student and staff member are required to meet, this can stigmatise those students whose behaviour is seen as opposite to the norm and those who are regarded as different. To understand and transform the university system, the typical university must be investigated.

A typical university provides various organised tertiary learning and training activities for students within their fields of speciality (Alemu, 2018). In addition, Alemu (2018) mentions that a typical university is built around metaphorical pillars that include research, teaching, learning and community service. Therefore, the university has a broad purpose and represents higher education institutions and the community of scholars and students involved. When referring to the traditions of a typical university, Jurgens (2020) states that the ideal institution values academic success, sports achievements, cultural participation and socialising. For first-year students who enter this environment, the transition from high school to university is vital as the new student should adapt and live up to the institution's expectations (Beaudry, Ludwa, Thomas, Ward, Falk & Josse, 2019). Dunwoodie, Kaukko, Wilkinson, Reimer and Webb (2020) acknowledge that a university can provide social solidarity and mobility to divided societies and it is a source of universal knowledge that produces skilled professionals in different specialist fields.

The function of the university as a community is the 'cultivation of the individual for the sake of the ideal society'; it, therefore, strives to create inner happiness and lifelong learning as a purpose for each student (Goncharko, 2021:3). Alemu (2018) refers to a university as a multiversity with multiple meanings. The multiversity is comprised of individuals from various backgrounds, religions and cultures. It is,

therefore, the university's responsibility to create a holistic, inclusive environment to accommodate all students. To ensure this, universities must develop a range of communication networks to provide a quality university experience for all students (Thomas, 2021). The first network involves student-to-student relations in which friendships and social bonds are formed. This is a crucial indicator of academic success and long-term relationships. The second network is the student-to-academic connection in which students choose their modules and courses of study and are intellectually and emotionally exposed to their field of choice (Thomas, 2021). The third connection with relevance to an undergraduate student experience at university is the student-to-university relationship. This implies that the institution creates opportunities for the student to participate in forming their identity in various formats. This can be in the form of the student's participation in university-related events as well as sporting and cultural events. This form of networking can be the most controversial as some cultures and traditions seem to benefit the minority but not the majority at university (Mampane, Omidire & Aluko, 2018). In the South African context, the majority of typical students in the university environment have multiple identifications and thus the university environment needs to transform to accommodate them with their diverse academic, emotional, social and physical needs. The traditional South African view of a university is focused on race, political orientation, social class, and academic and sports achievements. Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, efforts have been made to diversify universities and create a more inclusive higher education environment for all students, but more work is required to eradicate inequality and create a new typical university (Mampane *et al.*, 2018).

2.3 Medical vs social–ecological models of student diversity

The medical model refers to how persons with disabilities are seen exclusively through a medical lens which seeks to cure the individual (Rieser, 2012). The model is focused on the exclusion and separation of students in society. Under the medical model, persons with disabilities are categorised according to their impairment and are immediately placed in a disadvantaged position. The perception exists that the person can be healed from their impairment and that the disadvantages will disappear through medical treatment or therapy. The impairment is focused on

excluding their entitlement to live and receive the same opportunities and rights as other individuals, such as the right to education. In the education system as a whole (higher education included), the medical model is evident as students with disabilities are excluded from it and placed at an automatic disadvantage owing to their difference (Rieser,2012).

In the university environment, students with disabilities are in the minority. They are generally regarded as separate entities, and, as a result, they are isolated because of their differences. Referring to international studies, especially in the US, Dolmage (2017) acknowledges the old perception that students with disabilities are generally not allowed to attend university and, as such, are placed in asylums, exclusionary institutions and shadow locations such as prisons and solitary confinement where they are excluded from the norm. Such exclusion can affect students' with disabilities physical, mental or sensory functioning long-term or permanently. Cherif, Movahedzadeh, Adams and Dunning (2013) provide different reasons as to why the students' capability to compete and succeed in their academic courses varies. They mention financial implications, lack of academic and hands-on support, lack of quality instruction, relevancy issues and the inaccessibility of some facilities as challenges that students with disabilities are confronted with at university. To add to this, Gable (2014) argues that the physical infrastructure of some universities is inaccessible, the unavailability of technological assistance is continued and the negative attitudes and lack of empathy portrayed by academic staff impact learning.

Over the past three decades, universities have shown dramatic changes in the institution's management and attitude towards students with disabilities. Brown and Leigh (2020) admit that although the numbers of enrolments of neurodiverse students has increased over the years, certain aspects of the university system have proved to be a functional deficit and tend to disable the individual. Some of the approaches used by universities are to adopt a medical model and to view to neurodiversity as a cognitive difference that can be altered so as to 'fix' the individual. The process is partly responsible for creating systematic barriers and stigmas (Chown & Beavan, 2012). In response to this, neurodiverse students advocate for change in the system whereby a social model would be followed that

would focus on strategies to improve the institution and its practices to make the facilities inclusive and accommodate everyone (Jurgens, 2020). Furthermore, the CDPF (2020) acknowledges that the social model is a rejection of the medical model, which challenges the consequences for and opposes the segregation of those who have a disability. This perspective promotes a transformation paradigm shift towards disability that promotes inclusivity and rejects exclusion and any form of discrimination.

By doing this, Vaccaro, Daly-Cano and Newman (2015) state that universities can contribute to students' sense of belonging and to their ability to adapt to the pressure and challenges of university life. Contrary to the medical model, the social model of disability emphasises the prejudice and discrimination aimed at students with disabilities in a specific environment, including those in an inclusive education system such as a university. The social model is socially created and has little to do with the person's disability or barrier to learning. This rationale distinguishes between disability and impairment and defines disability as explained by Connor, Gabel, Gallagher and Morton (2008) as an oppressive social arrangement that limits participation in community events.

2.4 Experiences of students who are different

The university environment is constituted of differences and, as a result, many students may experience discrimination and prejudice at some time during their undergraduate studies (Morella, 2008). As the student transitions in this environment, they encounter gaps in the system that intersect with oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. The institution's culture of inequality and its policies tend to amplify when the needs of students on academic, social, extracurricular and emotional fronts are not met (Novera, 2004). This is unfortunate, as the students in question may develop mental health problems and need to seek specialised support services, such as a psychologist, to support them emotionally. As it stands, the current inequality displayed by many universities implies that values such as equality and respect towards students who are different are not produced and implemented (Therborn, 2014). The way a university is managed and functions contributes to the belongingness and self-image of the student (Therborn, 2014) .

Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams III and Wiklund (2002) distinguish between how a student, when confronted with stress-related situations, might deal with a situation by either confronting or avoiding it. When students, including students who are construed as being different, decide to confront a situation, they implement several coping methods to deal with stressors. Problem-focused coping techniques and seeking social support are most often associated with the reduction in stressors. When the student decides to avoid the situation, social distancing is implemented and denial seems related to less effective adaptation (Snyder *et al.*, 2002). In most uncomfortable situations, frustration is present which can lead to verbal and physical aggression. This is the ultimate purpose for students with differences– to control their emotions and implement non-aggressive ways of dealing with challenges (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In general, Passer (2001) believes that university students undergo a personal, in depth, psychological transformation to self-actualise and meet the institution's required expectations when in different university settings and confronted with stressors associated with it. In an earlier study, Greenberg and Watson (1998) argued that students form ideas about their thoughts and relationships with others around them by searching for personal acceptance and eventually making sense of their university experience. In saying this, some evidence indicates that students with differences respond positively to learning environments that promote inclusivity because the institution shows concern and interest in their emotional well-being (Plomin & Spinath, 2004).

To conclude, it is evident that students with differences experience numerous challenges at university where policy and perceptions from academic staff and fellow students can have a negative impact on their university experience. On the other hand, the literature has shown that students with differences can overcome their challenges, maintain their difference and have positive experiences at university when the institution adapts its policies and attitudes and implements reasonable accommodations. But, in stating this, not all students require the same level of support or reasonable accommodations depending on their differences or disability. This will be explored in the next section about students who are disabled/physically impaired.

For thousands of years, individuals with a disability, especially those with a physical impairment, have been ascribed special meaning. As such, these individuals, whose mobility, stamina and capacity are affected, such as students with hearing and visual impairments, epilepsy, cerebral palsy or respiratory disorders, have been exposed to negative stereotypical behaviour and were stigmatised. This persists in many cultures and various public institutions such as universities where ableism and disablism are evident (Forum, 2020). Dolmage (2017) notes that the hierarchy in which non-disabled students are placed at the top and students with disabilities at the bottom is still apparent at some universities and this can disempower the student with a disability unless reasonable accommodations are granted to accommodate them. The pervasive discrimination and exclusion can therefore oppress individuals with a disability or physical impairment (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996).

Referring to the university as a public institution, Covey (2013) believes that its reputation exceeds itself by idolising ableism and discriminating against differences, meaning that the university expects their students to meet expectations and to implement these values in everyday life. In this regard, students with different disabilities fit the 'difference' category and are regarded as objects for study rather than purveyors of knowledge (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). However, Brown and Ramlackhan (2021) acknowledge that universities are built around research, and students with disabilities must form part of the body of knowledge to transform the institution.

Referring to the demography of the university environment on an international scale, students with different impairments constitute the minority (Pingry O'Neill, Markward & French, 2012). Besides the unique challenges that students with physical impairments experience, Vaccaro *et al.* (2015) note that most transition challenges for students with disabilities are similar when compared to non-disabled students with regard to social interaction, the attempt to master the academic content and living up to the institution's requirements.

Since World War II, universities worldwide have had a history of accommodating students with disabilities (Alemu, 2018). This is not uncommon as countries around

the world have adapted their constitutions to recognise the rights of persons with disabilities in higher education. In recognition of international disability policies, Tabensky and Matthews (2015) state that policies can be implemented with the purpose of accommodating each student in their unique disability. In retrospect, some challenges that students with different disabilities experience are not always physical, as acknowledged by Tabensky and Matthews (2015) who analysed the brain profiles and neurological development of students with different disabilities. In their analysis, they discuss that these students found it extremely difficult to adapt to the university environment compared to students regarded as neurologically 'normal'. However, in spite of the individualised incapacities of these students, their general aims were like any other ordinary students – to achieve academic success and to participate in university-related social events (Tabensky & Matthews, 2015).

The demography of a university differentiates between the unique differences of students. To explain the criteria that define the difference, Passer (2001) writes that typical students are in an ego-involving environment in which they are competing with each other to achieve common goals. As such, each student's goal is to achieve results in a mastery-involved climate (Passer, 2001). On the other hand, atypical students, who are in the minority, are associated with learning difficulties, disability and the need for additional help with planning, organisation and public access to university facilities (Tabensky & Matthews, 2015).

Another important point that Tabensky and Matthews (2015) make is that students with disabilities, similar to female students and students of colour who are discriminated against, can have challenges with mental health. The consequences of this are the risk of self-harm and an increased suicide rate. This, in turn, has implications for the support services available to assist and guide them. As it stands, the current inequality displayed by some universities implies that values such as equality and showing respect to the marginalised population are not produced and implemented (Therborn, 2014). It is, therefore, important to note that the manner in which a university is managed and how it function contributes to the sense of belonging and self-image of the student.

Zingaro (2015) maintains that students with physical disabilities encounter significant obstacles to attending classes and navigating their environment. What contributes to the difficulties and poor emotional well-being of students with disabilities are discrimination, physical barriers, financial constraints and a lack of understanding from academic staff. The latter responses are unfortunate, because, as Zingaro (2015) indicates, negative emotions among students can precipitate conflict that is based on lack of understanding, empathy and knowledge. Therefore, it is recommended that students with disabilities advocate for their rights by making lecturers and university authorities aware of their challenges and how they can accommodate students with disabilities (Zingaro, 2015).

To help us to understand the way in which students navigate their way through campus, in his study, Zingaro (2015) provides practical examples and scenarios in which students with physical impairments asked for support or assignment extensions. The students used personal resources, such as a mobility aid or a lightweight cane, to navigate their way to classes and to move through the campus. For example, as there were no noises to steer the sound, Dan (a student with a visual handicap) would make loud noises with his cane to announce his presence. He identified the different sounds made by other floor surfaces to guide his movements by tapping on the floor. Research has shown that students with neurodevelopmental disorders have co-existing visual and auditory sensitivity challenges that can lead to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression.

2.4.2 Students with visual impairments

Any form of visual impairment is the result of a congenital condition, brain trauma or illness such as diabetes or multiple sclerosis. Despite the increase in the enrolments of university students with visual impairments in recent years, they remain part of the minority group. In this regard, the research is quite limited as most literature pertains to students with physical and learning impairments (Almog, 2018). The limited research available on the experiences of university students with visual impairments indicates that they often face academic and social challenges due to a lack of knowledge by the universities to accommodate these students on campus. For example, Myers and Bastian (2010) state that students with visual impairments

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often face academic challenges in social environments and do not notify or disclose their challenges to university authorities. Instead, they develop methods or skills to adjust to university life. Referring to the international literature, university enrolments of students with visual impairments remain low. At a university in Israel, for instance, only 400 legally blind students were enrolled and they found that the reading materials were inaccessible, there was limited reading material available in Braille, and no audiobooks were available (Almog, 2018).

Considering students who are blind, Jayus and Khan (2019) state that the National Federation for the Blind of Malaysia estimates that in 2015 there were 7,29 million adults who had visual impairments worldwide. Interestingly, 42 per cent of those were students who were in the workforce and 15 per cent had obtained their bachelor's degrees at accredited universities. Also, students with partial sight problems needed to have reasonable accommodations for them to function, especially in terms of taking examinations or having the use of significant print texts, closed circuit magnifiers, scribes, facilitators and/or computerised word processors.

2.4.3 Neurodiverse students

When considering the history of the management of a university, Ferguson (2008) believes that, since the 1980s, inclusion of neurodiverse students has become a primary objective of universities in the Global North, including the US and Europe. Unfortunately, neurodiversity is neglected in South African higher education where most universities lack the resources (practical and technological) to assist neurodiverse students (Swart & Pettipher, 2018). To add to this, Swart and Pettipher (2018) make an interesting observation that, due to the global transformation of information and technology, lecture rooms are becoming outdated as our society's educational, social and political needs change. Attention to this issue would go a long way in addressing the needs of neurodiverse learners at university. Another challenge is that there is limited research devoted to the experiences of university students with ASD with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD).

Any student diagnosed with ADHD and ADD are among the highest number of students with a disability who attend university. In general, these students cope best at university and meet its expectations despite the everyday challenges they

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experience on social and emotional levels. Bolourian, Zeedyk and Blacher (2018) interviewed 13 fourth-year university students with ASD and ADHD from the University of Southern California to identify the factors which made their experiences satisfactory and unsatisfactory. For most of the students, specialist support services (university psychologist, social skills interventions and first-year readiness programmes) were available to support them leading up to their enrolment at university. One participant in the study expressed gratitude for the positive attitude shown by the academic advisers who had said that such students could succeed if they worked hard and stayed positive (Bolourian *et al.*, 2018). All the students in the study agreed that the transition period from school to university and the high academic standards at university contributed to the challenges they experienced there. These students admitted that their anxiety levels increased because they felt pressure to meet academic standards by competing with other students to get the best academic results. The participants acknowledged that they also experienced challenges on a social level, especially in forming relationships with fellow students. This inability affected the students' confidence levels and self-worth. The participants felt that fellow students judged their abilities and decided that they were not competent enough to complete the same daily tasks, such as attending classes, as successfully as their peers. As a result, the students took matters into their own hands by not disclosing that they were neurodiverse, specifically those with ASD, as they felt fearful that other students might avoid them. The reason behind this action was to prevent the possible discrimination and stigma associated with the disorder in the presence of students and lecturers (Bolourian *et al.*, 2018).

Not all universities follow the same strategies and policies to support neurodiverse students. Many universities follow the Salamanca Statement standards, a benchmark for measuring university progress (Swart & Pettipher, 2018). The Salamanca Statement is a framework which was set up by UNESCO to fight against discriminatory attitudes that might exist in any formal education setup (UNESCO, 1994). Depending on the social hierarchy of the university, neurodiverse students need to find their place within the environment and as such they are exposed to new ways of acting and perceiving which embody their pursuit of social approval or

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disapproval. This is reflected in the social response they receive. Cascio (2012) believes that neurodiverse students can reach their full potential if they receive the necessary support. However, not all neurodiverse students' needs are the same; their challenges differ and they require specialist, individualised assistance. As Shecter-Lerner, Lipka and Khouri (2019) showed, neurodiverse students face many obstacles socially and psychologically on their university journey. For example, some neurodiverse students who face barriers to learning can be included in lessons within the general lecture room. Based on a pilot study in the US where 13 neurodiverse students were asked how they experienced university, eight showed that their self-image was damaged and that they were uncertain about their academic future because of the academic challenges they experienced (Gillespie-Lynch, Daou, Sanchez-Ruiz, Kapp, Obeid, Brooks, Someki, Silton & Abi-Habib, 2019). The primary concern of these students related to their academic performance, their participation and social interaction with their peers, and their overall coping strategies. As a result of their behaviour, these neurodiverse students were estranged from other students in ways that could lead to future isolation, stigmatisation and prejudice.

Referring to the university environment, Milton (2012) analysed the higher education system in the US in general and found that the universities' facilities were not inclusive enough to accommodate neurodiverse students. He mentioned in his study that the lack of understanding came down to an empathy problem from fellow students and the academic and administrative staff who did not require more knowledge to understand the autism diagnosis but needed further education on the social understanding of human differences and the optimal response to such differences (Milton, 2012). Within these norms, neurodiverse students chose to either adapt to the environment's standards or avoid them. To conclude, Milton (2012) was of the opinion that the university's facilities were not inclusive enough to accommodate neurodiverse students. In a later study, Jurgens (2020) referred to the university environment as a neurotypical institution that implemented 'neurotypical societal norms' and, therefore, any behaviour that seemed to be strange or opposite to the norm would be discriminated against (Jurgens, 2020).

However, despite the challenges that neurodiverse students might experience in different university environments, evidence exists to show that they can cope and persevere during difficult times (DuPaul, Dahlstrom-Hakki, Gormley, Fu, Pinho & Banerjee, 2017). Concerning disorders that fall under the neurodiverse umbrella (ASD, ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia), studies have shown that students diagnosed with dyslexia have higher anxiety levels than neurotypical students due to the challenges they experience with reading, semantics, reading comprehension, and the ability to use linguistic context (Bruck, 1992). Corkett, Hein and Parrila (2008) add to this by stating that despite their challenges, students diagnosed with dyslexia cope in unique ways by processing their tasks with oral comprehension and vocabulary skills.

In summary, as argued by Delport (2018), the university environment must change its views about neurodiversity by adopting a social rather than a medical model, as discussed earlier. This argument will continue in the next section when student experiences with ASD at university are explained.

2.4.4 Students with language and speech difficulties

Students with language and speech difficulties remain part of the most vulnerable groups at university as the social and communication aspects remains a fundamental skill that all students require to survive (Crose, 2011). These students, as noted by Rees, Kind and Newton (2019), confirm that their challenges include precision, verbal reasoning and language structures such as syntax.

The enrolment at university of students with language and speech difficulties has increased in recent years and Knight (2007) believes that the internationalisation of higher education has led to this increase in numbers, especially in the last 25 years. Although these students have equal opportunities to enrol at a university, specific challenges affect their functional abilities, such as language barriers in the classroom and their ability to translate or engage in language during instruction. For international students, the transition to universities remains a significant challenge as they find it hard to participate effectively in the lecture room considering the language barriers they experience (Doan, 2012). Other challenges that these students experience include adapting to cultural differences within the institution,

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intercultural communication barriers, classroom interaction, understanding the academic norms and values, and, most importantly, the ability to make friends (Campbell & Li, 2008). Doan (2012) states that as a student she encountered many obstacles with language, cultural differences and academic work in Vietnam. She also admitted that it was challenging initially, but that the support she received from the support services helped her overcome many obstacles (Doan, 2012).

It is clear that some universities fail to provide support to students who have language and speech difficulties as is the case with students with visual impairments (Almog, 2018). Moreover, literature regarding peer relationships indicates that a third of the students with language and speech disabilities do not adapt to the university environment within the first few weeks and fail to adjust to the university's social life (Almog, 2018). These students experience include isolation, stigmatisation, discrimination, and, with an inability to make friends, they are likely be reluctant to participate in activities that require speaking. Moreover, even if the student has adjusted well to the environment and the situation, anxieties of the past may reappear (Mangini, 2021).

2.4.5 Students with epilepsy

Students at university who are diagnosed with epilepsy, which is part of the group of common neurological disorders, are also a vulnerable group (Campbell, Duffy & Edmondson, 2020; Regmi, 2021). Although a student's disorder and symptoms might not always visible, Alzhrani, AlSufyani, Abdullah and Almalki (2021) maintain that discrimination and victimisation occur as a result of lack of knowledge on the part of their student peers. In general, students diagnosed with epilepsy are used to feelings of stigma as a result of socio-economic circumstances. Dugbartey and Barimah (2013) maintain that people with epilepsy face biased perceptions and stigma associated with the disorder. A study in Canada found that the average student's knowledge about epilepsy was minimal and they were incapable of supporting the student with epilepsy. The same notions occurred in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, where a study showed that common misconceptions existed about epilepsy, such as a belief that these students were possessed by

demons and devils (Hijazeen, Abu-Helalah, Alshraideh, Alrawashdeh, Hawa, Dalbah & Abdallah, 2014).

According to Dalton *et al.* (2012), a student at Sussex University in the United Kingdom (UK), who shared her personal experiences, realised that she had epilepsy as a result of unfortunate events in the classroom when she would 'phase out' during lectures. She explained her condition as riding on a rollercoaster when she was required to concentrate in her lesson. In a nutshell, what helped her succeed was that she utilised the university's support system, especially the disabled students' allowance funding because it assisted her during difficult times.

Although there is limited research on students' experiences with epilepsy at university, numerous studies were found on the attitude of students with epilepsy and the knowledge of teachers who had students with epilepsy (Al-Hashemi, Ashkanani, Al-Qattan, Mahmoud, Al-Kabbani, Al-Juhaidli, Jaafar & Al-Hashemi, 2016). The motivation for one study came after the tragic death of a 16-year-old boy following an epileptic seizure as a result of his teacher's lack of knowledge. Al-Hashemi (2016) noted that the diagnosis and label attached to epilepsy affected students' mental health emotionally, academically and psychologically. Stigmatisation of these students usually occurs because others fear an unexpected loss of self-control. To conclude, the continuous discrimination and social attitudes towards students with epilepsy are more harmful than the disorder itself (Al-Hashemi *et al.*, 2016).

2.4.6 Students with hearing impairments

For individuals with hearing impairments, the variation of their loss determines the different types of reasonable accommodations required for them to cope in society (Cavender & Ladner, 2008). Considering the university environment, deaf and hard-of-hearing students are proportionately well represented at universities. In the US, for example, 48 per cent of these students are enrolled at higher education institutions (Boutin, 2008). Students with hearing impairments encounter challenges in communication and socialisation (Safder, 2012). Although the following source is dated, it can still be regarded as relevant as the US Department of Education reported that 16 per cent of the students who enrolled at university had a hearing

impairment as the primary disabling condition (U.S Department of Education, 1999). These students used federal vocational rehabilitation programmes to assist them inside the university's lecture halls. With the everyday challenges these students experienced with hearing, Hong, Wang, Yuan, Xu, Jiang, Yan and Chua (2011) found that they struggled with the skills necessary to solve problems and plan. Cheng, Hu and Sin (2016) report that problem-solving entails comprehending the problem text and coherent planning. Consequently, deaf and hard-of-hearing students find it extremely difficult to cope if the university environment is not accessible and they face tremendous environmental adjustments when entering a mainstream university environment (Cheng *et al.*, 2016). Unfortunately, many drop out for numerous reasons such as increased depression and loneliness (Lukomski, 2007). However, the advances of assistive technology provide the potential to increase educational resources worldwide and make learning accessible for students who are hard of hearing (Boutin, 2008).

In conclusion, despite the different impairments and unique experiences of students with disabilities at university, the literature showed that students with different disabilities found various settings of the university inaccessible in terms of the physical infrastructure, financial constraints and different perceptions from staff and fellow students. As mentioned in the literature, these factors have an impact on the students' academic well-being and also contribute to their sustainability and success rate at university. Although the literature also included numerous studies that recalled students' experiences at university, there is a desperate need for first-hand accounts, which are regarded as very valuable. In the following section, I provide some autoethnographies of students' first-hand experiences that are different at university.

2.4.7 Autobiographies of neurodiverse students

Autoethnography is not only a methodology in which researchers choose a format for their research but it is also a platform that enables researchers to locate themselves in a larger culture in ways that are critical and reflexive.

Autoethnographic stories are stories of or about the self that are told through the lens of culture. They are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to

know, name and interpret personal and cultural experience. With autoethnography, we use our experience to engage ourselves, others, culture(s), politics and social research. In doing autoethnography, we confront 'the tension between insider and outsider perspectives, between social practice and social constraint'. Hence, autoethnography is a research method that uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences. It acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships (Adams, Ellis & Jones, 2017).

These creative research practices become catalysts for and are invigorated by intuition and spontaneity while methodological guideposts offered by the autoethnographic scholarly community provide indispensable orientation as researchers move into the unknown. Despite the foregrounding of the self or 'auto', autoethnography is not solipsistic or narcissistic. The contingent, fragmentary selves that are made visible become multifaceted, translucent lenses through which to make new and generative meanings of complex cultural phenomena, with wider implications for social change (Pithouse-Morgan, Naicker, Pillay, Masinga & Hlao, 2016).

Considering the university experiences of students who are different, in her autoethnography, Morella (2008:4) notes that students with visual impairments reported greater challenges than those with non-visual disorders. Moreover, discrimination against these students was high, and they were, unfortunately, classified under the same umbrella as students without visual impairments. As such, students with visual impairments required assistance and were usually responded to with denial, disbelief and animosity. In most instances, autoethnographies of such students can be healing and personally transformative. Personal accounts are a vital part of education and research and they have the power to transform our belief system or attitudes. Morella (2008) states that personal accounts enable the population of 'previous colonialism' whereby different students can tell their stories and personal experiences.

Pate (2011) wrote an autoethnography on his personal experiences as a student diagnosed with cerebral palsy. From his everyday experiences at university, he

found that the university was unprepared for him and facilities were thus inaccessible. The higher education institution needed to adapt its daily schedule and overall management to accommodate his needs by making the physical infrastructure, lecture halls and parking lots more accessible. Referring to his personal experience, his first days at university were most intimidating as he believed that he was the only student with a physical disability in his class. He further mentioned that the transition period was challenging as he had come from a supportive school environment, but that he eventually succeeded thanks to the support of a primary support figure and assistant. If it were not for this support, he would not have overcome the barriers he was confronted with during his undergraduate studies. Yet, despite these challenges, including victimisation, discrimination and underestimation did not prevent Pate (2011) from participating in social events. In doing so, he found himself in a unique insider position as well as a purpose to help others.

In another autoethnography, Smith (2012) portrayed herself as a unique insider who analysed her personal experiences as an individual with an acquired brain injury (ABI). In her autoethnography, she chose to explore the influence of her brain injury as one who belonged to the same culture as her participants. The participants in the study by Smith and Sparkes (2008) were clients of a local head injury rehabilitation centre. As an individual with a brain injury, Smith explored her experiences while engaging in creativity during her recovery from ABI and embarking on her master's degree. As an ABI survivor, she used autoethnography to explore her cultural and subjective experience.

2.4.8 Self-awareness and identity development of students who are different

All students who enter university are obligated to cope with every aspect of the university environment, so they must adapt to the environment. When speaking of international students, Le, LaCost and Wismer (2016) note that students encounter language and culture gap challenges. Comparing local and international students, Jin, McDonald and Park (2018) found that the institution's culture resonates with those who share its attitudes, values, goals and practices. In saying this, students tend to choose which activities they want to participate in and which are congruent

with their identities (Jin *et al.*, 2018). As Hatch and Schultz (2004) note, the sooner students can identify who they are, the greater their chances of adapting to their identities.

To add to this, Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) confirm that choosing their majors remains one of the greatest psychosocial challenges that students face, especially those students who identify as homosexual. In a quantitative study conducted at a Colombian university, Miller, Balmer, Hermann, Graham and Charon (2014) sampled 16 homosexual and 26 lesbian, undergraduate, international students who were regarded as outsiders at a foreign university. They found that in the process of finding their identities, students are at risk of developing mental health problems as a result of higher stress levels, anxiety and paranoia. The study proved that in light of the occurrence of homophobia on some campuses today, the climate on campus influences students' identity development and psychosocial development (Miller *et al.*, 2014). In sharing his personal experiences as a homosexual male at university, Stevens (2004) wrote that identity development was one of the most significant aspects of his life, leading to self-acceptance and acknowledgement. He discovered that an individual's interpersonal development occurs in six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. To complete the process of identity formation, the environmental context is crucial as students are required to navigate the campus. It is important to note that perceptions of the environment can affect the ability of the individual to establish their identity, and this is required when they are considering whether to disclose their homosexual identity (Stevens, 2004).

Different features can influence the identities of students with disabilities, especially those with ASD, such as the impact on their identities and how they transition from school to university. The importance of choice and being able to make sound choices is part of self-determination for all students, especially students diagnosed with ASD. This diagnosis is neurologically based. Challenges that occur within and outside the university environment contribute to students' identity formation and include emotional and social challenges, as well as independent living, self-

advocacy and communication challenges (Cox, Thompson, Anderson, Mintz, Locks, Morgan, Edelstein & Wolz, 2017).

The literature review of this section explored the different studies on the self-awareness and identity development of students' who are different. These studies identified the barriers experienced by students with disabilities that influenced their identity formation at university. Drawing on their personal experiences, university students with disabilities elaborated on the treatment they received from academic staff and students in response to their differences, which shadowed characteristics associated with the medical model as well as the policies and traditions where disability was seen as a disadvantage and social ill. Not all studies focused on the negative aspects as some students also had positive experiences at university, especially at institutions where the social model of disability was implemented and where some facilities were adapted to accommodate the students' needs. In the following section, I will engage with the literature on how students with ASD experience university and how the environment and the perceptions of the environment contribute to the construction of their identities.

2.5 Students with ASD who attend university

ASD has been placed under the spotlight recently as a result of the advocacy of autistic adults and parents. Consequently, new ways are being sought daily to better support autistic adults and understand autism diagnoses. ASD manifests differently from one person to the next and neat comparisons cannot be made between students on the spectrum, especially at university and in the lecture room (Magnusson, Rai, Goodman, Lundberg, Idring, Svensson, Koupil, Serlachius & Dalman, 2012). Universities often challenge students diagnosed with ASD because of their difficulties in dealing with the social and communication skills required to participate in lectures (Carrington & Harper-Hill, 2015). Among the minority groups of students who are regarded as having an automatic disadvantage by their normative peers within the university environment, students diagnosed with ASD are rapidly becoming the fastest growing population and universities are required to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate them (Kasari & Smith, 2016).

Referring to the demography of students with ASD who attend university, Donaldson, Idomskaya, McCoy, Raymaker and Nicolaidis (2020) note that there has been limited research conducted in recent years related to ASD students' experiences. Referring to university students in the US, White, Elias, Capriola-Hall, Smith, Conner, Asselin, Howlin, Getzel and Mazefsky (2017) found that 1,9 per cent of students who enrolled at universities were diagnosed with ASD. However, many did not graduate. In the US, research by the Department of Education showed that of the young adults with ASD who enrolled at a post-secondary institution within six years after graduating from high school, only 35 per cent finished their studies as opposed to 51 per cent of neurotypical students (Zolyomi, Ross, Bhattacharya, Milne & Munson, 2018). In related research, Cox *et al.* (2017) found that only 34,7 per cent of individuals with ASD who attended college within six years of leaving high school in the US graduated. Notably, one out of four autistic adults have unique abilities (strengths and weaknesses) and differences in behavioural and emotional domains. As the literature shows, there are limited statistics available from other parts of the world on the successful pass rate of students diagnosed with ASD.

2.5.1 Documented studies of experiences of students with ASD at university

Among the minority groups that were regarded as being at an automatic disadvantage by normative peers within the university environment and based on the lack of support and understanding from the higher education institution, students with ASD remain highly vulnerable to failure. Depending on the variation of their diagnoses, students with ASD without an intellectual disability have a lower rate of enrolment at university compared to neurotypical students (Anderson, Stephenson, Carter & Carlon, 2019).

The social challenges that students with ASD experience have to do with their general inability to communicate with academic staff and classmates. The failure to communicate in a university setting could contribute to academic challenges such as the ability to engage in group projects and, thus, achieve educational outcomes (Hoffmann-Longtin, Rossing & Weinstein, 2018). In terms of the university's social life, the need for support is as critical as ever for students with ASD to enable them to transition from school to university life. This is stressful because students with

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ASD often struggle with changes in routine and have a need for predictability (Hoffmann-Longtin *et al.*, 2018).

Considering the university environment, many students with ASD find that they develop depression, anxiety and loneliness based on the inaccessibility of and perceptions within the university environment. Hoffmann-Longtin *et al.* (2018) note that the general support from universities is insufficient, but most of the specialised programmes are costly (bearing in mind the need for academic staff training and the engagement of technical service providers). Another important point that Hoffmann-Longtin *et al.* (2018) make is the inability of universities to accommodate persons with ASD in terms of dietary requirements. This is fundamental as it contributes to the student's potential to focus and grow as a healthy, whole person. According to Berding and Donovan (2016), nutrition plays a major role in accommodating the individual with ASD and helping them to reach their full potential.

As students with ASD transition into the university environment, gaps within the system intersect with other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. An institution's inequality and policies can amplify when the academic, social, extracurricular and emotional experiences of these students are not met (Gillespie-Lynch, Bublitz, Donachie, Wong, Brooks & D'Onofrio, 2017). Universities tend to follow a holistic rather than a personal-centred approach by assuming that all students receive the same tuition and support services. The personal-centred approach comprises the evaluation that is done to identify the most efficient method to support the ASD student. Students with ASD need specialised support to experience success in inclusive teaching and learning environments. This requires educators to identify and recognise individual needs, the severity of ASD, emerging skills, areas of strength, and special interests. Modification of the learning programme needs to ensure that learners with ASD have access to the curriculum (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2017). Smaller class sizes, assisted learning, curriculum modification and differentiation can assist a student with ASD.

The challenges that these students experience in adjusting to the university environment and with communication, planning and organisation tending to affect their self-confidence, they will hesitate to disclose their diagnoses with autism as this affects their identity. To take this significant step, Cox *et al.* (2017) have found that students are reluctant to disclose their diagnoses spontaneously, instead they might only choose to do so as their need, academic expectations and situation demand. The ASD student must experience extreme measures to reveal who they are by seeking formal accommodations and ensuring that they are accommodated during, for instance, assessment periods. For example, Adam, a student with ASD, was initially sceptical about disclosing his diagnosis to fellow students and lecturers. It was not a decision that was made spontaneously. However, due to the academic challenges he experienced, he was compelled to disclose his diagnosis and ask for additional time and assignment extensions. To safeguard himself from possible confrontation with his lecturers, he asked the disability office on campus to provide him with the necessary documentation to prove his diagnosis (Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano & Newman, 2016).

2.5.2 Autoethnographic studies of students with ASD at university

As discussed above, autoethnography methodology combines the researcher's self within a particular context to investigate a cultural phenomenon (Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 2004). As such, autoethnography can be used to explore identities in different contexts (Spieldenner, 2014). The purpose of autoethnography as a methodology is to contribute to changing ideas and searching for new ideas in research through the linking of personal narrative and scientific knowledge (Adams *et al.*, 2017). Adams *et al.* (2017) further note that there is a lot of criticism about the objectives and practices of mainstream social research which seeks universal truths, especially with regard to social relations and identities (race, sex, age, sexuality, ability, class) but also to how the research is written and interpreted. In this regard, I am investigating first-hand accounts that retell students' experiences with ASD at university but unfortunately the research on this topic remains limited. In my quest to find autoethnographic studies on students' experiences with ASD, I found only two, and these were not narrated by the individual but by therapists and parents.

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Hannon (2017), for example, wrote an autoethnography on the impact of the ASD diagnosis on someone. As a Black father of a student with autism, his evocative autoethnography highlights his culture and family and discusses how identities intersect and shape experiences. From a South African perspective, a limited number of autoethnographies exist that explain an adult's or parent's perspective with ASD. An article by Clasquin-Johnson and Clasquin-Johnson (2018) reflects their lived experience of parenting a child with autism, focusing on their search for education and therapeutic intervention. However, this article does not elaborate on the experiences of an autistic student at university but focuses on the socio-economic gap that exists in South Africa where the less fortunate do not have access to proper care. Inequality has been exposed as these parents could not afford the early intervention and therapies.

By reviewing this literature and comparing it to the value of this study, I found that a gap exists for autoethnographic work of autistic students and their experiences at university. More importantly, this study will fill the gap in providing the insights of a student with ASD from the Global South.

2.5.3 How does the university experience students with ASD?

Despite differences among students, inclusive education underpins the broad principles of dedication to building a more democratic society, an unbiased education system (Crowther, Dyson & Millward, 2001). Van Hees, Moyson and Roeyers (2015) note that as the enrolment of students with ASD increases, they are at a heightened risk of academic, social and personal exposure due to a lack of knowledge from the university staff. This emphasises the urgent need for universities to make reasonable, evidence-based accommodations through interventions that will make university facilities accessible for all students with disabilities (Barnhill, 2016). This means that universities must put greater effort into making facilities more inclusive and accommodate all students, especially those diagnosed with ASD (Crowther *et al.*, 2001). In doing so, legislation that requires institutions to respond to individual requests will need to be intensified.

2.5.4 University policies on ASD and other differences

Despite differences among various students, universities must take ownership and accommodate students' different learning needs (Crowther *et al.*, 2001). This idealised position provides education and scholarship through teaching, research and public service, but its ethos corresponds to achievement goal theory which focuses on how successes are made by individuals but also on how the achievement environment influences that goal. To achieve this in higher education, universities are obligated to follow Article 24 of the UNCRPD which states that everyone has the right to receive education and be considered a channel of integration and social participation (Forum, 2020). This situation involves public powers to ensure that this right regarding the diversity of all students is implemented and promoted (Milton, 2012).

From a South African perspective, the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) published in 2015 states that all South African citizens are equal and that society is inclusive, regardless of disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2015). The WPRPD is built on nine pillars specifically created to illuminate discrimination against persons with disabilities. The purpose is to remove barriers that prevent participation and access and protect the rights of persons with disabilities in all spheres of life (Zulu, 2015). Referring to the South African university environment, Zulu (2015) believes that universities are pressurised to meet the standards of the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Act 4 of 2000), an act that prevents and prohibits unfair discrimination and harassment. This corresponds to the values of inclusive education as it addresses the ever-changing requirements of communities to acknowledge democratic principles. In saying this, all universities need to support the concept of equal educational opportunities for all students (Swart & Pettipher, 2018). In the South African context, Mampane (2016:116) believes that inclusive education can only be achieved when 'the education systems are made accessible to all students with different disabilities, including those with severe intellectual and behavioural disabilities'. This means that universities are required to make reasonable changes to the facilities to accommodate all students. He further believes 'that the grassroots of inclusive education are when the education curriculum prepares pre-service

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educators with pedagogy and methods to teach diverse learners in all university systems' (Mampane, 2016:119).

It is the moral responsibility of the university to ensure that the facilities are accessible for students with physical disabilities. The institution is obligated to make facilities accessible for students to interact with their peers and to provide access to information (Forum, 2020). In comparison to studies of the first-hand experiences of these students at universities elsewhere, South Africa is still in the process of enforcing the right to education for many students with disabilities, especially those with neurodevelopmental disorders (Zeliadt, 2017). For example, of the 1 684 autistic students in the Western Cape, South Africa, 940 are at universities, but 744 are on a waiting list. The waiting period for those on the lists can be as long as three to four years.

With the implementation of the UNCRPD, universities have made much more effort to make facilities more accessible to all students, especially students with different disabilities by providing them with equal opportunities to participate in an education system free from discrimination. Since the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation, most universities have been adept at making university facilities more inclusive and accessible. However, as Van Hees *et al.* (2015) note, universities are still struggling to find support to accommodate students with ASD. International and local legislation have responded to individual requests for academic accommodations by students with disabilities.

Referring to international policies, the Disability Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in the US stipulate that universities must provide reasonable accommodations and adjust (Abu-Hamour, 2013). In other countries, such as Jordan, laws have been implemented such as the Jordanian Constitution on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities for the year 2007 and Article 4, Section (B) which stipulates that the Ministries of Education and Higher Education should provide persons with disabilities with opportunities in higher education (Abu-Hamour, 2013). In the northern hemisphere, the UK has good policies for accessibility and inclusion, but these policies are not always supported by staff and educators as some students with disabilities and ASD are not given access nor are

they included. Universities in the UK are provided with funding from the government to make universities more accessible and inclusive, yet more is required and some students with invisible disabilities hide their impairments by not disclosing them to university staff to avoid discrimination (Mosia, 2017). In Canada, there is also a framework of support as the constitution has a charter of 15 rights and freedoms which are informed by the Human Rights Act of 1976.

This means that all individuals should have an opportunity to be accommodated in any form of society without being prevented from doing so based on race, age, sexual orientation, disability or family status (Matshidiso, 2007). Like Canada, South Africa has institutionalised human rights and diversity since 1994 when the state became a democracy but, unfortunately, students with disabilities remain vulnerable as they are victims of discrimination (Matshidisho, 2007). In response to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, South Africa published Education White Paper 6, which represents Government's thinking on how it can contribute to the development of rights and equal participation in any sector, especially in higher education (Department of Social Development, 2015). By implementing this policy, many institutions provide support services for those with different impairments but this is limited to those who are blind, deaf and/or paraplegic. Each university in South Africa has used Education White Paper 6 to create their inclusive policy for the institution that each staff member and student must adhere to, such as the University of Pretoria's Policy on Students with Disabilities (University of Pretoria, 2018). As stated in the procedure, the university has aimed to create a holistic framework to create an inclusive environment for all students. The policy states that the university will encourage and foster a positive environment free from discrimination and victimisation.

2.5.5 Universities and their treatment of students with ASD

As all countries worldwide have much ground to cover when it comes to inclusive and accessible university facilities, implementing these policies remains a problem as some universities are still not inclusive enough to accommodate students with invisible impairments such as ASD. As such, Soudien (2012) acknowledges that students who have been diagnosed with ASD struggle to adapt to new

environments in terms of the university's infrastructure, the curriculum and the attitude of the academic staff (Murray, Wren & Keys, 2008). The following sub-headings explain how the university experiences students who are different, including students with ASD.

2.5.5.1 International perspective on treatment of university students with ASD

Numerous studies throughout the world, as acknowledged by Jin and Ball (2019), have addressed the various forms of inequality which need to be overcome to enter universities. The notion is to transform universities and it is required for the students to change and adapt to the environment's expectations (Jin *et al.*, 2018). This is significant because in the past decade universities have become more responsive to making new first-year students' transitioning easier, especially students with ASD, by implementing transitioning programmes and support services. Although these systems are in place, the quality of the education, the institution's management and the activities that the students participate in are under scrutiny (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

In Belgium, Van Hees *et al.* (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 autistic students about their experiences of university life. They reported that these students experienced challenges regarding the curriculum, socialising with unfamiliar students and living independently. Similarly, in Australia, most students with ASD were unhappy about the lack of social and emotional support that they received when they disclosed their university experiences to the management of the university (Cai & Richdale, 2016). The students admitted that the management did little to support them with their challenges in terms of communication skills, time management of academic demands, and therapy to deal with anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. The research indicated that the students with ASD struggled with the transition from secondary to higher education. It was a significant challenge for the students with ASD to adapt and change their routines to fit in with the expectations of the unfamiliar environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When a student with ASD is enrolled at a university, the student's family expects the student to perform academically and the management and members of

the institution to be sensitive and considerate to the challenges the student experiences in terms of social interaction, communication and their ritualistic behaviours (Siew, Mazzucchelli, Rooney & Girdler, 2017). This expectation seems to be unrealistic, as most students with ASD believe that universities do not accommodate their needs. By following a deficit approach, the student's strengths are not capitalised on in learning activities (De Martino, Harrison, Knafo, Bird & Dolan, 2008). Autistic students learn differently because their central coherence is weaker and they have impaired ability to grasp visual gestalts (Matshidiso, 2007). Australian universities use peer mentoring in which a fellow student is selected as a peer to provide support, guidance and objectives in terms of their academic and psychosocial objectives. These peer mentoring programmes are popularly implemented for first-year undergraduate students to help with their introduction to an unfamiliar environment. Peer mentoring aims to improve the student's academic performance, reduce the stress associated with the transition to higher education, report on their well-being, and improve retention (Masataka, 2017).

Australian universities have changed significantly as policymakers have implemented policies and changed their structure to make the facilities and the university more accessible for everyone, especially for students with ASD. The universities have intensified their module and course choices to make it more flexible and more innovative for students with ASD. In doing so, they have internationalised their higher education system, which has had a significant impact on student diversity, and they have adjusted their teaching and learning, the curriculum and delivery with the purpose of accommodating the sensory needs, and the attention levels of the students. A critical contribution to this change was made when students with ASD described their experiences of entering university to university authorities. This allowed issues to be identified by the administration and the management of the institution as noted by the students (Soiferman, 2017).

Soiferman (2017) gave examples of universities in the UK where new first-year students dropped out of university as a result of the transition challenges that they experienced. Part of the problem is that new first-year students struggle to adapt to the expectations of the university. Other studies, such as those by Butler (2006),

have found that the students were, at times, dissatisfied with the instructors and lecturers in the university environment. In retrospect though, the students diagnosed with ASD who studied at these universities believed that the university provided a good learning environment as the classes were smaller and the lessons innovative. The professors were trained and willing to accommodate the students by guiding them during the orientation week. But not all students with ASD experience university in the same way, especially students with different disabilities such as dyslexia.

In other studies from the UK, students with ASD found the structure of the university environment challenging as the classes lacked structure, and the activities were beyond their learning abilities. These students believed that the universities were incapable of accommodating their needs and that academic professionals emphasised rational thinking instead of the social and emotional development of the student. With apparent reference to students with ASD, the specific needs of the students made mainstream inclusion challenging and could be mitigated if the needs of the ASD students were met more explicitly (Carrington & Harper-Hill, 2015).

In general, Van Hees *et al.* (2015) mention that some universities are unprepared to accommodate students with ASD based on ignorance, pre-existing generalisations, unsupportive policies and the lack of knowledge from academic staff. Some faculties believe that the inclusion of students with ASD will disturb lectures, and unfortunately they have neither the time nor the patience to accommodate students with ASD (Gibbons, Cihak, Mynatt & Wilhoit, 2015). To avoid any form of discrimination and victimisation, students with ASD in the US feel more comfortable attending community colleges for numerous reasons, including the avoidance of enrolment interviews, smaller classes (Wang, 2015), ease of staying at home with their parents, and the cost of tuition fees (Conway, Haines, Frey, McHenry, Nagler, Gassner, Kelty, Magro, Mooney & Grandin, 2015).

In a study on the enrolment of students with ASD at a university in the US, Zolyomi *et al.* (2018) provided statistics regarding the registration of students with ASD and those who dropped out of the school system. According to their statistics, 0,7 per

cent and 1,9 per cent of the students with ASD exceeded all expectations by meeting the criteria at the university and graduating at the end of their courses (Anderson *et al.*, 2019). The graduation rate of students with ASD is 39 per cent in general. Jackson, Hart and Volkmar (2018) add that 17,4 per cent of students with ASD attended a four-year university programme. Based on research, the estimated prevalence of the success rate of students diagnosed with ASD has increased in recent years as a result of scientific discoveries, general awareness in the fields of psychology and education, and the change in the diagnostic criteria (Smith, 2012). Despite the up-curve, Thompson, Falkmer, Evans, Bölte and Girdler (2018) warn that higher education enrolments do not guarantee future success. According to international statistics, numbers of university students with ASD remain low as a quarter could not complete their study courses before graduation (Thompson *et al.*, 2018). Because of this, a quarter of these students dropped out of university by isolating themselves and failed to become contributing members of society. There are many reasons for the low success rate, but Shattuck, Narendorf, Cooper, Sterzing, Wagner and Taylor (2012) believe that the management of the universities is responsible, as there is a lack of transitioning improvements in secondary education institutions.

In terms of the Global South, from a South African perspective, universities took matters into their own hands, especially the University of South Africa (UNISA), by developing elective modules for students who specialised in inclusive education, especially students with ASD. The course that teaches about ASD has been subdivided into different modules. The first module is called 'Understanding autism spectrum disorder' (CSUAS16–Understanding ASD) in which the history of ASD is discussed and various theories and stereotypes are dealt with, with reference to the medical and social models regarding disability. The second module of the course deals with inclusion strategies for ASD (CSUAS17–Inclusion Strategies for ASD (Autism)) and this teaches more about inclusion and approaches that educators and service providers can use in the classroom.

With the numerous challenges faced by students with ASD at university, adjustment and transitioning remain significant challenges. Glennon (2001) states that students

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with Asperger's syndrome (now known as high-functioning autism) confirm numerous stressful situations within the university environment. The transitioning process is affected by the different social rules in the environment and the residences (Glennon, 2001). From the university's perspective, in general, there have been multiple attempts to establish support services to identify these students' challenges within the university environment. Some universities are desperate to acquire knowledge and information about the barriers that students with ASD experience at university (Kasari & Smith, 2016). As noted by a study undertaken to obtain the universities' point of view (Hoffmann-Longtin *et al.*, 2018), general support from universities is insufficient as most specialised programmes are costly, having to take academic training staff and the engagement of specialised service providers into account.

In general, it seems that universities are determined to implement a social-approach model which recognises the person behind the diagnosis. As noted by Massoumeh and Leila (2012), universities use a wide range of educational strategies to accommodate their students. This idea draws on making reasonable accommodations and having the adjustments in place to meet the challenges of the students to remove the barriers they are confronted with.

2.5.6 Self-awareness and identity development in the student with ASD

For any adolescent with ASD, the core symptoms that they experience cognitively, emotionally and socially affect how they function in broader society (Genovese, 2021). Psychological elements that need to be considered, which include self-awareness and identity formation, are the ability of the individual to accept themselves unconditionally and the ability to adjust to the environment that defines their ethnic, cultural and social roles (Genovese, 2021). In saying this, identity development can be more difficult for individuals with ASD because their self-concept and self-worth can be affected based on their different perceptions. To add to this, Hendrickson, Woods-Groves, Rodgers and Datchuk (2017) acknowledge that students with ASD experience challenges when transitioning from environment to environment, especially from high school to university. Some of these challenges correspond with the typical challenges that all students experience, such as the

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navigation of campus, the adjustment to residence facilities and fellow students, developing study routines, surviving social settings and implementing problem-solving and executive functioning skills. As difficult as it is, the students choose to either take a fight response by adapting to the environment's standards or flee by avoiding them. The challenges that students with ASD experience in the cognitive, emotional, social and physical domains will affect their self-confidence, and they will hesitate to disclose their diagnoses with autism as this affects their identity.

But there is a silver lining as Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert and Wolniak (2016) acknowledge that students in their study showed positive long-term effects with regard to cognitive development, critical thinking, academic self-concept, locus of control, independence, self-efficacy and psychological well-being. This means that the students show signs of coping in the university environment. An autistic student achieves academic goals through academic support and educational resources (Salas, Aragon, Alandejani & Timpson, 2014) and through hard work, determination, discipline and perseverance.

Krueger and Maiese (2018) and Jurgens (2020) believe that a student's positive self-concept comes down to activism of the environment in which the internal and external (embodied and embedded) influences shape the cognition and behaviour of the neurodiverse individual. This activism, which Jurgens (2020) refers to as different influences from the institution, can affect identity formation and prompt behaviour through the environment (standards, legislation, expectations, social habits) and through the willingness of others to make reasonable accommodations to other students in that environment. Cullen (2015) mentions that these students should receive individualised academic and social support and states the need for a personal services/support coordinator or administrator (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014) as their road to self-actualisation seems to be steeper when compared to neurotypical students.

There are expected standards and behaviour within any university that each student is required to meet beyond enrolment. The notion of hierarchies and multiple masculinities exist that symbolise control and marginalisation. In the university environment, hegemonic masculinity exists that complies with the university's

norms and standards and meets 'hegemonic expectations'. The most common form of masculinity elaborates on the typical behaviour associated with youth and student activities which includes participating in university-related social events, participating in sports events and socialising with students who are not diagnosed with ASD.

The relationship between the student with a disability and the lecturer is an essential component of the success and functioning of the student. The relationship between student and lecturer needs to be upheld to ensure personal growth (Cox *et al.*, 2017). Cox *et al.* (2017) warn that this is not always the situation as continual labelling occurs inside and outside the lecture hall. This sort of behaviour continues along different avenues, especially in the student environment, where satisfaction and a sense of community amongst students are encouraged (Altschuler & Kramnick, 1999).

As the neurodiverse university population grows, most higher education institutions may fail to provide these students with the necessary support to survive (Griffin & Pollak, 2009). Authors such as Papay and Bambara (2011) prove that most American universities provide intervention programmes such as campus-based inclusion models focused on developing social communication skills for students with autism. Barnhill (2016) distributed a survey to 30 higher education institutions to determine if they offered specific support services to support students with ASD. The results of the study reveal that very few institutional programmes were flexible and comprehensive. To put this in context, some scholars have speculated that some universities fail to validate the observations and lived experiences of students with ASD in European countries, South Africa and Australia (Gelbar, Smith & Reichow, 2014). Nachman and Brown (2020) believe that the campus climate plays an influential role in the development and functioning of the student. Rankin and Reason (2008) define campus climate as the respect and dignity portrayed by the academic staff and fellow students towards each other. In doing this, Leake and Stodden (2014) found that when students feel socially accepted, they develop a sense of belonging that is reflected in their academic performance.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature I reviewed provided different perspectives on how students with various disabilities experience universities worldwide (Global North and Global South). Although it became a global mission of universities to accommodate all students, glimpses of masculinity and ableness are still evident in the cultures, traditions, policies and attitudes portrayed and implemented by universities. As such, principles of the medical model are still apparent at some universities that unfortunately discriminate and exclude students with disabilities, including physical, speech and language, visual and hearing impairments, epilepsy, and neurodiversity, which impact their identity development. Not all is negative though, as the literature also presented the positive experiences of students with disabilities, particularly students with ASD. At universities where the social model was implemented, support services were available to accommodate the students, the institution embraced inclusivity, and the students established their identities faster.

While the research findings show that universities are starting to understand the challenges that students with ASD experience, further insight and first-hand accounts are desperately needed, especially in countries from the Global South where limited statistics are provided in terms of enrolment and graduation rates of students diagnosed with ASD. Referring to research in ASD, there is currently a gap in the field of autistic researchers researching their personal experiences. My autoethnography in which I share my personal experiences at university will fill this gap.

In the next chapter, the theoretical perspectives that inform the study will be discussed using the double lens of OSA theory, Erikson's theory on psychosocial development and Chickering's theory on identity development. These will be used to discuss the different stages a student with ASD undergoes to function and self-actualise in a university environment. I will also give a nod in the direction of Bakhtin's theory of outsideness.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES INFORMING MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, a review of the literature was undertaken and the studies of others about neurodiverse students' experiences at university, specifically students with ASD, were presented. In Chapter 2, I also provided a comprehensive scholarly presentation of the literature on the experiences of university students who form part of the minority on campus, such as students regarded by the system as different, in addition to students with ASD. The last part of the chapter focused on how some universities experience students with ASD. In this chapter, the theoretical framework that guided my autoethnography will be explained.

A theory is a foundation. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) state that past events can be explained and predictions made for future occurrences based on the application of their theoretical framework. Then, Schober, Rauscher and Kehl (2017) explain theory as a school of thought about the social world and justify the specification and measurements of reality. The purpose of a theory is to gain knowledge of the world within a specific social context, to find the researcher's identity within the social system and to determine how it shapes their personality (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Although theory is indispensable in research, it cannot guarantee direct improvement to practice or a solution to a problem; it only presents a framework for analysis and a clear explanation of reality (McLean & Syed, 2015).

The applicability of a theory is of the utmost importance, as it provides a set of guidelines for an integrated approach and ties in with proper research procedures (Corzo, Wilkie, Vesga, Lindholm, Buitrago, Rivera & Sanabria, 2020). In saying this, a theory has precision, in the sense that it can provide definitions and explanations, and it makes specific predictions about future encounters (Corzo *et al.*, 2020). Wacker (1998:361) has an innovative view of theory, which he sees as a list of virtues, such as 'uniqueness, parsimony, conservatism, generalisability, fecundity,

and internal consistency', that every researcher would like to see in their research script. These virtues encourage the researcher to think critically and participate in dialogue to generate new knowledge and solve research-related problems (Corzo *et al.*, 2020).

OSA theory in combination with Chickering's theory on student development and Erickson's psychosocial theory on identity development form the basis for this study. This threefold combination is used to explain the different stages of development that students go through during their university experiences, particularly students with ASD. Through this theoretical lens, I was able to identify the insights of the methodology (Grantham, Jespersen & Płaszewski, 2020) and through autoethnography, explore the concept of 'outsideness' in the universal environment in which human beings associate. The pioneer of the concept of outsideness was the Russian philosopher, literacy theorist and scholar Bakhtin (1895–1975). Outsideness, which I will also employ as part of my theoretical framing, refers to intersubjectivity, that is, how we perceive the world and how we see ourselves inertly, as well as how we see other individuals in a social world (Pollard, 2011). This theorisation helped me to reach an understanding of my lived experiences as a neurodiverse undergraduate student at university. Bakhtin (1990) acknowledges that the study of the self and others can perpetually violate each other. At the end of this chapter, I will explain how individuals can experience outsideness in a university environment and establish their identity.

3.2 Bakhtin's concept of outsideness

Bakhtin has increasingly been recognised as one of the most important literary theorists of the 20th century. His work can be seen as complex, however, the theoretical part of this thesis hones in on one of his theories in particular, his theory of outsideness in autoethnographic work.

The concept of outsideness refers to an individual's connection between their own and other's cultures, which helps them to shape their identity. Bakhtin denotes those different perceptions of the world as a fundamental tool to help us to see and understand a world that we cannot see ourselves (Pollard, 2018). Jabri, Adrian and

Boje (2008) state that the concept of outsideness is where a phenomenon occurs in which a person is regarded as an outsider within a specific environment and where others adopt its culture. Bakhtin's work has little to do with power relations. He searches for personhood and identity with general assumptions, consciousness and enablement (Thompson *et al.*, 2018). To understand the individual or the specific culture, Hijazeen *et al.* (2014) note that one is required to be located outside the object of their understanding. Adjustment to the particular culture remains a challenge. As Bisley (2016) points out, individuals always remain outside their potential whole, will be isolated for longer and expected to sustain themselves and adapt. Meaning that the student would not be able to adapt and show their true potential within the particular culture.

In terms of my study, I was enrolled at a university that embraced an ableist culture and approach and, as such, I was regarded as an outsider whose behaviour, actions and appearance was incongruent with the norm and I was considered not masculine enough. With my differences, I needed to analyse the university environment, as noted by Bøe, Kristoffersen, Lidbom, Lindvig, Seikkula, Ulland and Zachariassen (2013), to ascertain that the individual is required to distance themself from a direct relationship while simultaneously reflecting on themself by interacting with others, and engaging with the purpose of formulating understanding. In addition, Harvey (2018) notes that identity formation occurs when the self begins to make sense when it is in continuous interaction with the environment and by engaging with it (Harvey, 2018). As noted in my autoethnography, I wanted to find and establish my identity in numerous settings within the university environment. I believed that I was regarded as an insider in some environments and situations and an outsider in others. As a researcher using autoethnography as my research methodology, I realised that s crisis existed with my outsideness because my 'self' was continuously violated throughout the research process. Bakhtin's view is that we are entirely reliant on the other's position outside of themselves, as we are continuously in the standpoint with others, considering views relative to our consciousness (Harvey, 2018). For Bakhtin, intercultural understanding involves simultaneously entering into and remaining outside while observing another culture, and, by being an outsider, neither participant is culturally threatened but perspectives are broadened

and mutually enriched (Bakhtin *et al.*, 1990). This includes using the knowledge, perceptions and differences of individuals in terms of their age, gender, ethnic background, culture, religion, class, education, sexuality, family relations, tastes, attitudes, values and beliefs, and, most importantly, disability (Bakhtin *et al.*, 1990). However, Pollard (2018) maintains that our differences are not absolute, but arise from the field of sameness and are, therefore, a product of tele-transformation in which people share these differences and expectations within the same environment (Jabri *et al.*, 2008). As Jacques (2019) writes, intersubjectivity is influenced by interaction and engagement. The research can be implied in an autoethnographic manner, in which one understands oneself for healing and analyses the relationship and the participation of others to create meaning (Jacques, 2019).

Overall, it is only through the eyes of another culture that a foreign culture can tell and share its meaning. Using OSA theory, Erikson's theory and Chickering's theory on psychosocial development as a double lens explains how I established my identity as a student with ASD at university, all the while keeping Bakhtin's theory of outsideness in mind (Covarrubias & Stone, 2015).

3.3 Objective self-awareness theory

OSA theory was developed in the 1970s by Duval and Wicklund (1973) and was initially used in social psychology circles to evaluate the progress, feelings and learning experiences of individuals in a stimulating environment (Pinel & Bosson, 2013). The theory is process-related and focuses on the well-being of the self and its ability to adapt to the expectations of the external environment (Silvia, 2012). Any external environment, such as a university, has traditions that are conveyed in various contexts which require the entities involved to respect and uphold them. As acknowledged by Wasylkiw and Clairo (2018), the norms and standards within the institution predict the attitudes, actions and behaviour of the academic staff towards students who are perceived as different. More importantly, these norms and standards reflect how the individual perceives themself and consequently acts and seeks out support in times of need.

Focusing on the individual, the founder of this theory, Duval (1975), refers to it as a cybernetic model that focuses on self-regulation and can be used as an asset to achieve important goals (Forber-Pratt, Merrin, Mueller, Price & Kettrey, 2020). Zhu, Teng, Foti and Yuan (2019) explain that OSA theory evaluates the norms and standards of a specific community and merges with the principles of Gestalt theory in which common discrepancies are reduced. Wasylkiw and Clairo (2018) propose that these norms incorporate stereotypes that establish their own self concepts. By being self-aware and mindful, the individual develops compassion through exercising kindness. Neff (2012) proved that being compassionate leads to lower levels of depression and anxiety.

Individuals can therefore reinforce their behaviour based on environmental stimuli. Figure 3.1 is a visual representation of OSA theory and the various changes that an individual undergoes to become self-aware. It is also important to note that the three figures in this chapter, Figures 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, use the same colours. This represents a similarity in development processes and stages that individuals with ASD experience in unfamiliar environments. The use of different colours was purposely chosen to show similarities between the different development stages the theories represent and how each process relates towards each other. Although each theory represents a different lens, the purpose remains similar which leads towards the individuals search to establish their identity in a specific environment such as a university. Not only does the use of colours in the figures represent consistency throughout the chapter, but it is also a visual representation of how the three different theories relate and correspond to each other in my reflections on my personal experiences at university.

Figure 3.1 Personal interpretation of OSA theory (Adapted from Rochat, 2003)

Figure 3.1 is designed according to the whole person process cycle which I adapted for the purposes of this study (Carswell, 2020). The different stages in which an individual develops are designed as an interlocking wheel which represents continuity and repetition throughout an individual's life. Rochat (2003) explains that the continuity in Figure 3.1 shows that an individual's self-awareness develops according to their specific needs each time they enter a new environment. As the student enters an unfamiliar setting, they have to become accustomed to the particular environment with its new regulations and expectations. During this stage, the individual introspects and models their behaviour according to the expectations of the environment. Through numerous observations, the individual will start to compare their behaviour to others in similar surroundings and may experience feelings of jealousy, disappointment and anger (Silvia, 2012). In a time of transition, the individual will experience some form of uncertainty and disorganisation as the change of environment and expectations require them to adjust their behaviour (Berry & Ward, 2006). Within this transition, the individual must adjust to the environment by making use of two forms of adaptation: learning alternative

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behaviour methods to be able to cope in the environment of the host culture; or learning methods to be able to deal with anxiety (Keats, 2010).

The second level of development usually takes centre stage as the individual progresses through life (Silvia, 2012). During this period, the individual settles into a specific environment by first accepting themselves and then trying to cope with all the requirements. As a result, the individual moves to the third level of self-awareness which is goal-orientated and they will start to feel competent to complete work independently. As individuals progress, they reflect on their past experiences, evaluate the milestones and achievements, and remember critical moments (Silvia, 2012). By reflecting on and comparing their experiences to others in the same environment, the individual achieves permanence, when the whole journey is taken into consideration and their personal growth is analysed. The final developmental stage is called meta self-awareness, in which the different stages of development come full circle and where different factors such as personal self-image are of primary importance.

Duval and Wicklund (1972) have opposite views of OSA theory, as they believe that individualistic views must always be aversive and objective in unfamiliar environments. Depending on the manner of the discrepancies, individuals need to first look internally at themselves to evaluate their capabilities and to see if they meet the standards. Any show of weakness can lead to possible confrontation, exclusion or failure (Liebling, Seiler & Shaver, 1975) .

In a universal environment, the outcomes, standards and requirements change consistantly and have an immediate effect on the individual's self-concept. As the theory focuses attention on the individual, Berman, Montgomery and Ratner (2020) warn that discrepancies between the person's ideals and achievements can reappear. Unexpected pressures may arise and personal reactions such as self-criticism and disappointment may affect the individual's self-esteem when they are struggling to adapt to environmental circumstances or to an institution's expectations (Ickes, Wicklund & Ferris, 1973). Individuals who are self-aware, have good self-esteem, are rational thinkers and have a strong self-will are equipped to

confront challenges and, therefore, ensure that they achieve the required outcomes (Duval, 1975).

To understand OSA theory fully, one needs to understand that the theory has three ramifications (Forber-Pratt, Lyew, Mueller & Samples, 2017). The first ramification of the approach is self-focused and grants an opportunity for self-evaluation, discovering the discrepancies, and the ability to make crucial decisions under challenging circumstances (Forber-Pratt *et al.*, 2017). Forber-Pratt *et al.* (2017) further believe that through self-assessment and introspection, individuals can establish their own identities and improve their self-esteem by adapting to the environment and by meeting the required expectations. When individuals focus on themselves, their self-esteem comes into play and they have a choice to adjust to the expectations of the new environment (Carver & Scheier, 1981).

The standards of a specific environment usually exceed those of the personal view of the individual and, therefore, self-reinforcement is required to reduce self-standards. Each context has a common discrepancy, and the only way that individuals are equipped to solve it is to be able to trust their instincts (Forber-Pratt *et al.*, 2020).

Lund (2020) further asserts that identity acceptance links to personal appraisal, healthy decision-making in terms of lifestyle, healthy social relationships, the implementation of problem-solving skills under challenging circumstances, and political activism.

A critique of OSA theory is that while the theory is self-focused and honest it can evoke one's membership and perception of a stigmatised group (Pinel & Bosson, 2013). An individual's self-view of a specific situation contributes to their identity formation but Wicklund (1979) makes an important point by stating that situational factors can contribute to public stigma of the self-concept of the individual. Wicklund (1979) also writes that the core of the theory is for a person to refer to themself as an object; it is assumed that the person will find shortcomings in themself before identifying the strengths.

Other researchers such as Duval (1975) support the argument that the theory is primarily focused on external events rather than looking at the individual as a whole, which would classify the theory as self-motivational. The possibility of providing dual attention to the self and to the environment is illuminated and, as such, the self-discrepancy would result in a negative self-concept as one compares personal attributes and efforts to the expectations of the environment. Feize (2020) warns that self-focused attention is postulated to be an aversive condition in which an individual is confronted with numerous embarrassment-provoking instances that can affect their self-concept and identity. Feize (2020) further argues that OSA theory must elaborate more on the internal process of identity formation and self-acceptance rather than on the continuous search to find acceptance from extrinsic influences. On the other hand, Kreibich, Hennecke and Brandstätter (2020) state that the self is of object status within their surroundings, and, as such, the context becomes goal-orientated, and personal aspirations are put aside to allow immediate attention. This can become a salient trait in which the self becomes neglected.

In any formal environment such as a university, students who are proclaimed as different must continually adjust their behaviour in other avenues (socially and emotionally) to fit into the environment and try to avoid any form of discrimination and victimisation. Despite the random modifications I made to my behaviour, judgement and isolation occurred in different settings of the university environment.

By evaluating identity, Krause *et al.* (2005) believe that the stigmatised identity forms part of psychological functioning. Therefore, an individual's 'defamed' identity becomes the object of self-focused attention and ought to play a 'significant part in their psychological functioning' (Krause *et al.*, 2005:12). This means that as a student with ASD I was aware of the expectations of the university and was, therefore, motivated to achieve personal goals and exceed expectations.

The different critiques of OSA theory are very diverse as noted by Duval and Wicklund (1973) who believe that people view themselves objectively according to the standards set out by a specific environment. The student therefore has an important choice to make: to avoid any form of discrepancy or to confront the situation (Silvia, 2012). However, as these authors confirm, there is still much

conceptual work to be done with regard to the application of this theory, and the arguments remain controversial. The conceptual work refers to my ability as a researcher to understand the variables of OSA theory and how I can relate and apply it in my personal life. The critique of OSA theory is useful to me because I can relate to the challenges that I experienced as an undergraduate student and it motivates me to look critically at my university career to see if the difficulties that I experienced relate to the principles of the theory. Concerning my personal experiences, I believe that it is essential that universities accommodate and look after the well-being of students on their journey of self-development.

As explained in section 3.1, OSA theory is one of three theories that form part of the threefold lens that I am using to analyse my autoethnography. When referring to identity development, the concept of outsideness can be explained as the ability of the individual to merge and take on the external image by understanding the culture of the other culture. With reference to my study, it refers to me as an individual with ASD enrolled in a university environment that preferred ableism and masculinity. In addition, it refers to how I experienced outsideness in different social environments within the university. Bagshaw (2016) notes that outsideness can be referred to as the author who knows that he is different and knows that he remains separate from the rest of the students. In the case of my study, the rest of the students knew that I was different, and, as a result, I was immediately isolated and did not form part of any social groups. In my autoethnography, I, as the narrator, have represented my experiences and, at the same time, assumed the role of an outsider within a specific culture (Bagshaw, 2013:5). Doing this provided me with the opportunity to learn and interact. Bakhtin's concept of surplus comes into consideration as the individual is entering into another's world and is required to formulate new understanding and engagement. Relating to OSA theory and translating it to my study, individuals can adapt to their environment and get used to its expectations. In my study, I discuss how I adapted to the circumstances and expectations of the university from my first to my fourth years.

As one of the foremost experts on OSA theory, Wicklund (1979) predicts that the individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviour could trigger self-awareness and

identity. In a more current publication, Chella, Pipitone, Morin and Racy (2020) write that the particular environment determines the behaviour that is required and that this has a direct impact on an individual's self-awareness and identity. To meet the necessary standards, these authors warn that individuals are frequently conscious of the kind of stigma and discrimination that exists within a required environment. To avoid any negative responses to themselves, individuals modify their behaviour to adapt and alter the stigmatised identity, which reflects my undergraduate experiences (Chella *et al.*, 2020).

3.4 Erikson's theory of psychosocial development

Erik Erikson (1994) is known for his theory of psychosocial development which maintains that an individual develops their personality through each learning stage (Stark & Traxler, 1974). Orenstein and Lewis (2020) write that individuals must master eight sequential stages which influence their biological, psychological and social functioning throughout their lives. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development are: trust vs mistrust; autonomy vs shame; initiative vs guilt; industry vs inferiority; identity vs role confusion; intimacy vs isolation; generativity vs stagnation; and ego integrity vs despair. These will be explained in this section which discusses the implementation of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development.

Orenstein and Lewis (2020) postulate that through each stage of development, new experiences, new decisions and new challenges occur. Both positive and negative experiences can define each stage throughout one's life, during which virtues are developed as one's wisdom and maturity level increases. Each learning stage has different challenges that the individual needs to overcome by using internal psychological drives and personal self-will. Another critical aspect to consider is the inner motivation that drives the individual to adapt to their environment, confront newly met challenges, and gain the strength to make the transition successful (Berman *et al.*, 2020). The following figure (Figure 3.2) comprises two illustrations which are visual representations of Erikson's theory; the left-hand illustration represents the different ages of an individual, and the right-hand illustration indicates the corresponding stages of psychosocial development.
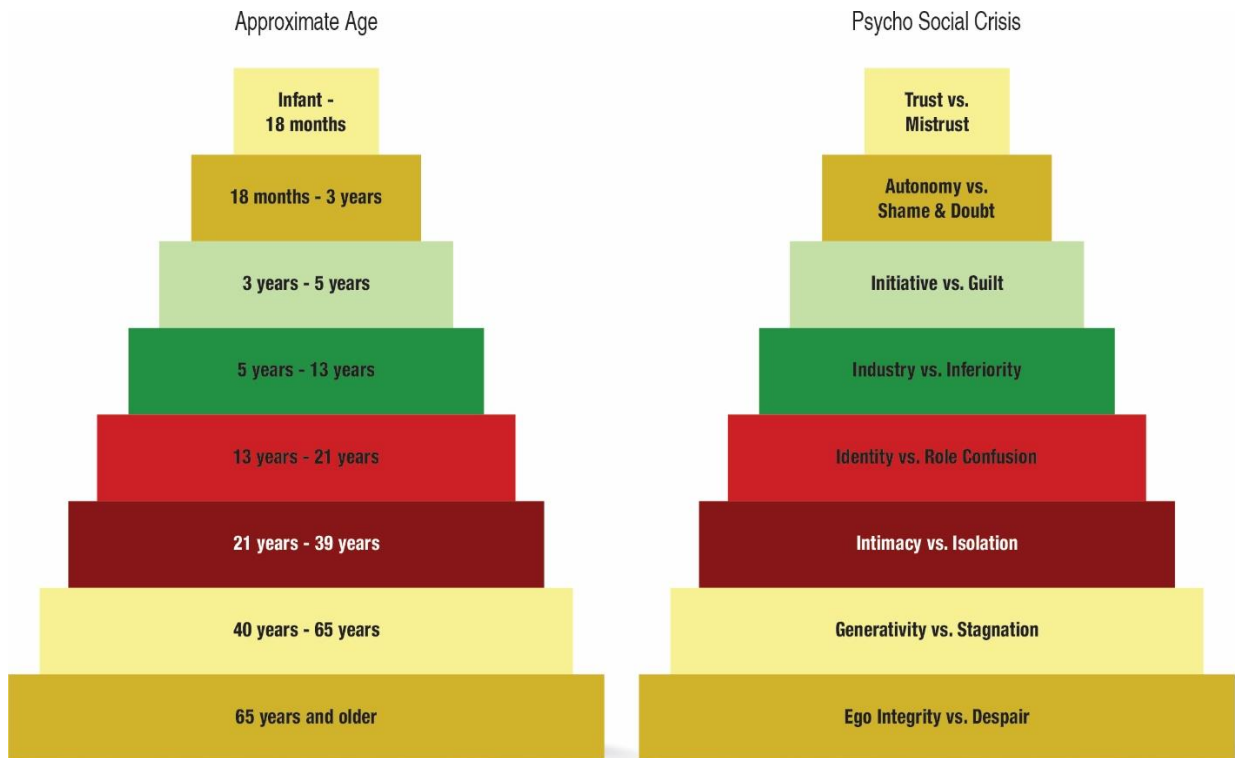
Figure 3.2 Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (DeBerry, 2017)

Cherry (2019) maintains that during the sequence of each stage throughout the individual's development from childhood to adulthood, a psychosocial crisis occurs which can have a positive or negative outcome on their personality development. For the purpose of this thesis, the two stages that are relevant in my study that correspond with Bakhtin's concept of outsideness are the phases of identity vs role confusion and intimacy vs isolation. During the identity-vs-role-confusion stage, students start to develop the identity that influences their behaviour and development throughout life. During this phase, students are in their early years of adulthood and will, therefore, feel the need to become independent in search of their true self in relation to the required environment. Students are unsure about their future and also feel a sense of insecurity. Identity refers to the set of beliefs, ideals and values that shape an individual's behaviour, and they therefore need reinforcement to realise a strong sense of self and feelings of independence. By adapting to the environment, the teenager feels competent and develops the necessary self-confidence to live up to the expectations of the environment and

solve common discrepancies independently. As maturation occurs, the student also develops a greater need for socialising and the forming of friendship groups and assumes characteristics that reflect the choices they make. On the other hand, based on the differences in brain development, the self-concept and general awareness of individuals with ASD develops at a later stage, and they find it challenging to adapt to unfamiliar environments and meet required expectations (Johansen & Varvin, 2020).

To develop their own identity, the individual needs to undergo different experiences over time. Identity formation does not occur automatically, and the individual must, therefore, try to ensure that their identity is sustained. Individuals work daily on their identity formation through the numerous actions they undertake, such as their participation and communication with members from the same peer group. By doing this, the individual is in search of personal self-acceptance from a specific peer group and can, therefore, recognise the values and ethos of the targeted group or environment. By embracing the offer of acceptance, individuals are committed to participating in group activities and to forming part of the specific environment by making minor modifications to their behaviour. Throughout this phase, the adolescent is confronted with an internal physiological revolution which revolves around identity and self-definition (Sharma, Saha, Sreedharan & Paul, 2020).

During this phase, emphasis is placed on the ego development of the individual when they participate in social events. The student's ego identity continuously changes as a result of new experiences and interactions that they experience in the different social groups. This phase is connected directly to the intimacy-vs-isolation stage, in which the individual develops the need to explore personal relationships. The individual risks more by exploring different social settings and meeting new people. By being socially involved, students might become exposed to exclusion, personal isolation and loneliness. This sort of behaviour can be devastating, as the student can be emotionally affected and struggle with psychological issues such as depression.

Ego identity is developed through social interaction, therefore, it changes as the individual develops. The behaviour that the student portrays is associated with

numerous factors, such as ego and mood strength, rebellious behaviour and physical complaints (Kidwell, Dunham, Bacho, Pastorino & Portes, 1995). Erikson (1968) believes that students are exposed to unfamiliar people with different brain profiles and, therefore, move out of their comfort zone to pursue an academic career. At first, the individual might feel frustrated, angry, vulnerable, confused and conflicted. As time passes, however, the student becomes used to the environment by experiencing 'psychological relaxation' in which an internal change occurs and a sense of purpose, meaning and direction is felt.

Erikson's theory predetermines a child's development from a very young age to adulthood. The development of students with autism is delayed, especially in unfamiliar environments such as a university, and this has an impact on the students' overall functioning (Anderson *et al.*, 2019) which makes the leap to university very complicated. Not only do students need to find their own identity and succeed academically at university, but they must also try to operate and survive on a social level (Johansen & Varvin, 2020).

Erikson (1968) explains that different kinds of stressors or trauma can affect identity, for example, identity delay, identity threat and identity loss (Johansen & Varvin, 2020). Erikson (1968) believes that the seeds of identity are sown during the very first stages when the child starts to develop their character from a young age. As reported, the individual might lose interest in old patterns and seek to adapt to the environment with new expectations. It is at that point where the child forms their identity. Depending on the age of the individual, Cherry (2019) postulates that any individual's self-awareness can develop. This phase goes back to the identity vs role-confusion phase when students form their own identities. As a result, students compare and measure their experiences against the environment. It is also within this phase that the student has expectations and makes informed decisions. Cherry (2019) further highlights the different stages of development. The first stage is a general awareness of the required behaviour in the specific environment and the second stage is the awareness of other people's reactions and responses towards the action in the same situation. General knowledge about the environment leads

the individual to reinforce or model their behaviour to meet the expectations and even exceed the expected outcomes (Berman *et al.*, 2020).

Schachter (2005) has suggested that where Erikson's theory deals with adolescence, it refers to the age period associated with middle to high school, and, as such, more emphasis is focused on the child's identity development. However, there is limited focus on identity development from early childhood. Various scholars, including Marcia (1993) who picked up that in a much earlier version Erikson had offered greater detail about the process of identity formation during adolescence, criticised Erikson's theory on psychosocial development. He acknowledged that identity development was an inherent emerging adulthood component but he was concerned that the serious developmental challenges that an individual is confronted with throughout their adulthood was not considered (Schachter, 2005). Schachter (2005) further states that Erikson's theory of psychosocial development does not emphasise the role confusion that adolescents experience, as the individual seriously questions their character and their personal view of themselves when confronted with challenging situations (Bosma, 1995).

Another critique of Erikson's theory on psychosocial development, as discussed by Rattansi and Phoenix (1997), was that the theory needed to be adapted to fit into postmodern times when analysing an individual's identity. The familiar environment, personal, mental health, and socio-economic circumstances all needed to be considered. Providing a similar opinion, Schachter (2005) believed that Erikson attempted to create a universalistic theory to create a context to the theory, but he questioned the relevance to a constructive transformation intended to meet the postmodern challenge. Orenstein and Lewis (2020) place a great deal of emphasis on the formation of postmodern identity. They consider aspects such as social change, cultural contradictions, personal circumstances and the involvement in different contexts with a different set of norms, role models and modes of interaction which might cause disarray (Schachter, 2005). It is also notable that Erikson does not provide immediate solutions to the crisis, but rather a sequential analysis of the expected behaviour.

Erikson's theory is regarded as a psychoanalytic theory and it still requires elaboration on other important elements of identity development, especially around sexual tensions between children (Orenstein & Lewis, 2020). By contrast, McLean and Pasupathi (2012) note that Erikson developed a lifespan theory since the psychosocial theory of development was considered. With regard to my study, Erikson's theory on psychosocial development is only relevant when considering the different stages an individual undergoes to formulate their identity in an unfamiliar environment, especially individuals with ASD.

Considering Bakhtin's concept of outsideness and the development of any individual in general, this study pertains to the experiences of a student with ASD at university. As with any other student at university who is part of a marginalised group, they experience the same level of identity tension that influences their self-concept (Alemu, 2018). As mentioned, Erikson's theory is constructed from a perspective that excludes the lives of marginalised population groups, especially individuals with ASD. Therefore, different populations from the marginalised groups must interpret Erikson's theory which presents the perspective from a particular standpoint. As Samsanovich (2021) notes, these individuals can interpret the different developmental stages according to their lived experiences and automatically criticise the problematic areas. In saying this, my study fills the gap and adds a different perspective from an individual's point of view, that is, someone who is regarded as an outsider in a universal environment such as a university. In saying this, this study adds to the existing literature by elaborating on how I, an individual with ASD, established and overcame numerous barriers at university in order to formulate my identity but who also tried hard to be part of the university community by adopting the university's culture and adhering to the institution's regulations. Samsanovich (2021) makes a bold statement by writing that Erikson's theory was not designed to be applied to an individual with ASD as the individual might never meet the expectations. In my case, as a student with ASD, I interpreted Erikson's theory based on my personal experiences at university and analysing my university experiences according to the eight stages of Erikson's theory. This will be analysed in Chapter 6.

3.5 Chickering's theory on identity development

Similar to Erikson's theory, Arthur Chickering (1967) developed a theory focusing on students in higher education that explains the process of how an individual develops their identity (Tanaid & Wright, 2019). Comparing the two theories, I found that Chickering's theory investigates the different stages that students develop throughout their university career while Erikson's theory on psychosocial development focuses on maturity development. Chickering (1972) further states that students need to position themselves within the university environment before they undertake different tasks and explore the relevant avenues within the academic institution (Tanaid & Wright, 2019). Schafer, Cleaveland and Schafer (2020) acknowledge similarities to Erikson's theory, as they believe that students undergo a psychosocial crisis when involved with and exposed to different situations. These authors further mention that the exposure is positive, as it presents students with opportunities to shape their own identities.

Chickering (1969) proposes seven vectors of development which explain how an individual or student strives to reach their full potential in an occupation of their choice. Chickering (1972) further suggests that each of these vectors requires students to acquire certain practices, attitudes and beliefs to be able to persist in higher education (Duplantis, 2020). The theory emphasises the conscious level of students who are, first, aware of their surroundings and, second, aware of the expectations the environment requires. Figure 3.3 is a representation of the different stages of development and the processes a student undergoes during the period of their university studies.
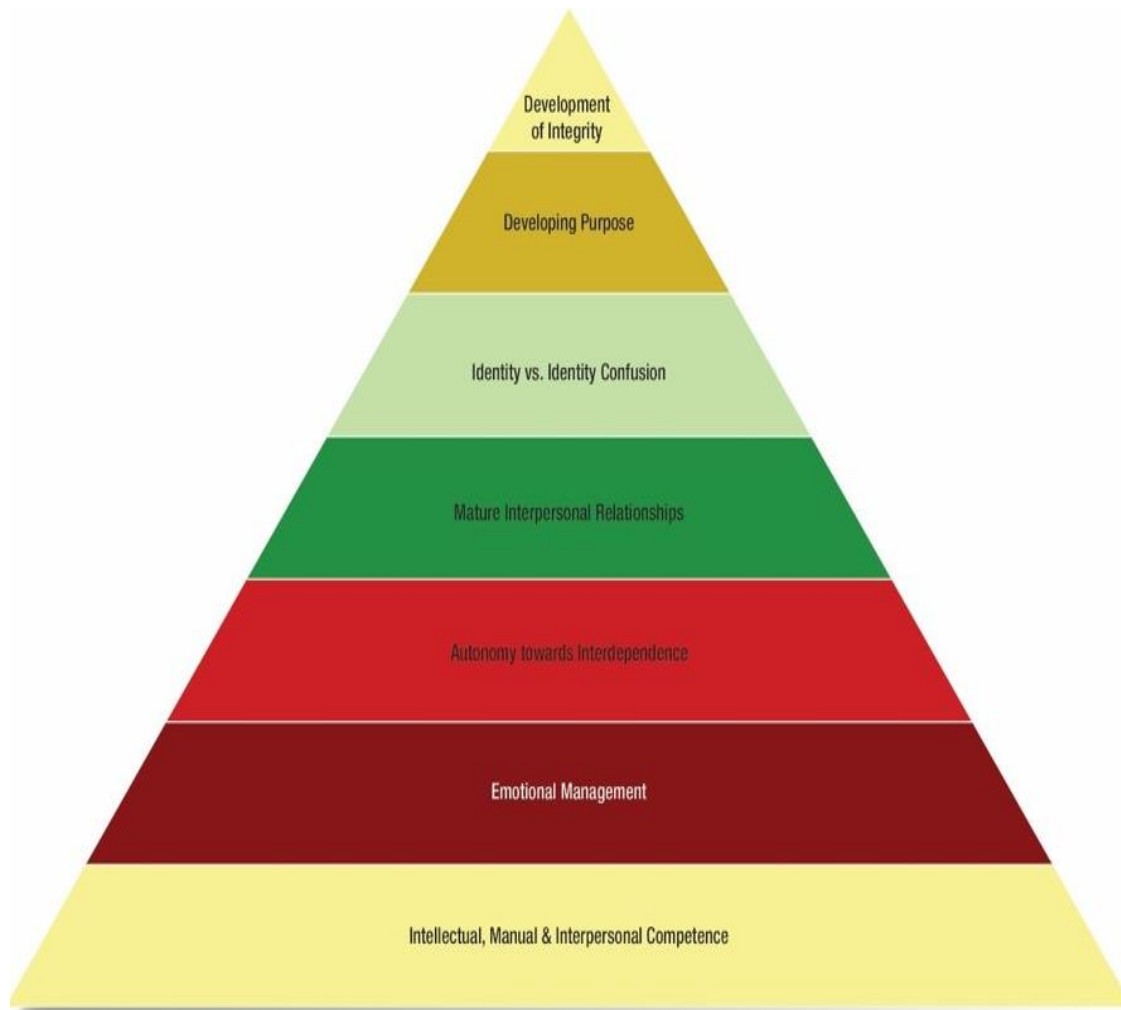
Figure 3.3 Personal interpretation of Chickering's theory on student development (Adapted from Strauss & Howe, 1991)

The first vector consists of the student's development and transition from high school to university. The student becomes aware of the expectations that are required in this environment and, therefore, the need to modify their behaviour to meet the standards. To acknowledge this, Maddah (2019) notes that universities encourage all students to develop some form of competence intellectually, emotionally and socially. The standards are incredibly high, as indicated by Schafer *et al.* (2020) and a student does not achieve intellectual, manual and interpersonal competence overnight – it takes time. In this period of transition, personal and academic setbacks can occur and these experiences can affect the students' self-esteem and confidence levels. As the students' general awareness starts to develop, they start to compare their university experiences with other students' and,

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therefore, question their capabilities (Schafer *et al.*, 2020). Schafer *et al.* (2020) add that the student is very vulnerable because the numerous institutional barriers with which they are confronted (for example, high academic standards and the difficulty level of the content) affect their attributes and motivation levels. The student has, therefore, a choice to respond by fight or flight. If students decide to choose the fight response, they stay and persevere during difficult circumstances. On the other hand, if students opt for the flight response, they give up and leave university (Schafer *et al.*, 2020).

The second vector that Chickering proposes is the process of social construction in which the student explores the different social aspects of university life. During this phase, the student develops a desire to create friendships and to participate in social events within and outside the university environment (Schafer *et al.*, 2020). When students have fulfilled this desire, they begin to want to explore the social environment further by meeting more people. This action is based on the students' free will and does not require permission from parents, peers and teachers. During this stage, students experience a psychological crisis where throughout this learning curve, the student becomes more competent to become interdependent and form long-term friendships, to manage and control emotions, and eventually to achieve the ultimate purpose of graduating from their undergraduate studies (Duplantis, 2020).

The third vector in Chickering's theory is the task of becoming autonomous by thinking critically about situations and by being independent (Chickering, 1969). In this period, students may feel self-contained, with the desire to be independent and competent in voicing their own opinions. The student shows signs of coping, and will implement short tasks, such as establishing short- and long-term goals that are dependent on intellectual and interpersonal competence (Chickering, 1999). Parental approval becomes less critical, and the decisions that students make contribute to their independence (Chickering, 1972). Becoming aware of one's emotions is vital to implementing coping strategies to control their feelings optimally and to cope with the venture (Chickering, 1993). The seven vectors of Chickering's theory include the ability of the individual to develop competence, manage

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emotions, develop autonomy toward interdependence and develop mature interpersonal relationships, identity of purpose and integrity. In this study, I focus only on the first three vectors which have had a direct influence on my life, namely the development of competence, the ability to manage emotions and the establishment of identity.

Through these new experiences, the student becomes more competent intellectually, mentally and interpersonally (Duplantis, 2020) and personal growth and change is evident. In this way, students experience an internal difference within themselves in the university environment (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Great emphasis is placed on the support services available to assist students in need of psychological assistance. This is not to be underestimated. As Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) explain, the student may experience a form of distress that leads to future challenges in terms of their academic achievement, career development and personal relationships (Chickering, 1969).

Chickering's theory of student development has faced criticism and can be described as a controversial theory that is advocacy-focused, with the purpose of uplifting the youth (referred to as Generation Z) who are trying to find their identities and the power to 'change the world'. Seemiller and Grace (2017) believe that the role of identity development is to empower the youth to rebuild broken systems that continue to oppress marginalised populations. This generation, Generation Z, feel competent to fight for their rights and continue to work on their studies. Seemiller and Grace (2017) further mention that Chickering describes seven developmental stages that a student undergoes to develop and self-actualise, but he does not seem to consider the submerged challenges that can affect their academic performance and functioning capabilities. Taking the emotions of students (neurotypical or neurodiverse) into consideration, the expectations and standards of the environment can become excessive and overwhelm their ability to cope and succeed. In an earlier publication, Strauss and Howe (1991) emphasised the need for emotional support and efficient management for students in order for them to be successful in managing difficult situations. Emotions are difficult to manage,

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especially for university students, affecting their behaviour and inclining them towards stress, depression and excessive drinking (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

The next developmental stage that the individual moves through is autonomy towards interdependence. Chickering emphasises the building of resilience and the benefits it possesses, but Trinko (2018) believes that Chickering's theory of psychosocial development is only intended to benefit larger communities rather than the minority (the Generation Z population). These larger communities lose sight of and are caught up by the challenges that the environment has to offer. The minority, however, is the opposite, as they prefer to be action-orientated and seek initial change (Trinko, 2018). Trinko (2018) notes that Generation Z is aware of how higher education perpetuates systemic oppression and they strive to create institutional change in their universities. The hope is that they transfer this energy and momentum to their communities and workspaces when they graduate (Jin & Ball, 2020).

The current literature on student development focuses on the perceptions of monoracial students (students with white skin colour), neurotypical students and students from advantaged backgrounds and, as such, there is a gap in the literature (Tanaid & Wright, 2019). Another gap in the field pertains to the masculinity and ableness that is implemented by society at any institution. Literature regarding this concerns gender, homosexuality and race, but not attitudes toward any form of disability. Referring to gender studies, many academics acknowledge that there is a gap in the literature relating to education. Davis and Brock (1975), for example, note that men are perceived as the dominant sex and, as such, deserve the right to be the main participants in higher education. There is no mention of disability.

The collaboration and representation of the three theories that I have used to relate and explain my different experiences as an undergraduate student at university according to the different categories is represented in Figure 3.4.

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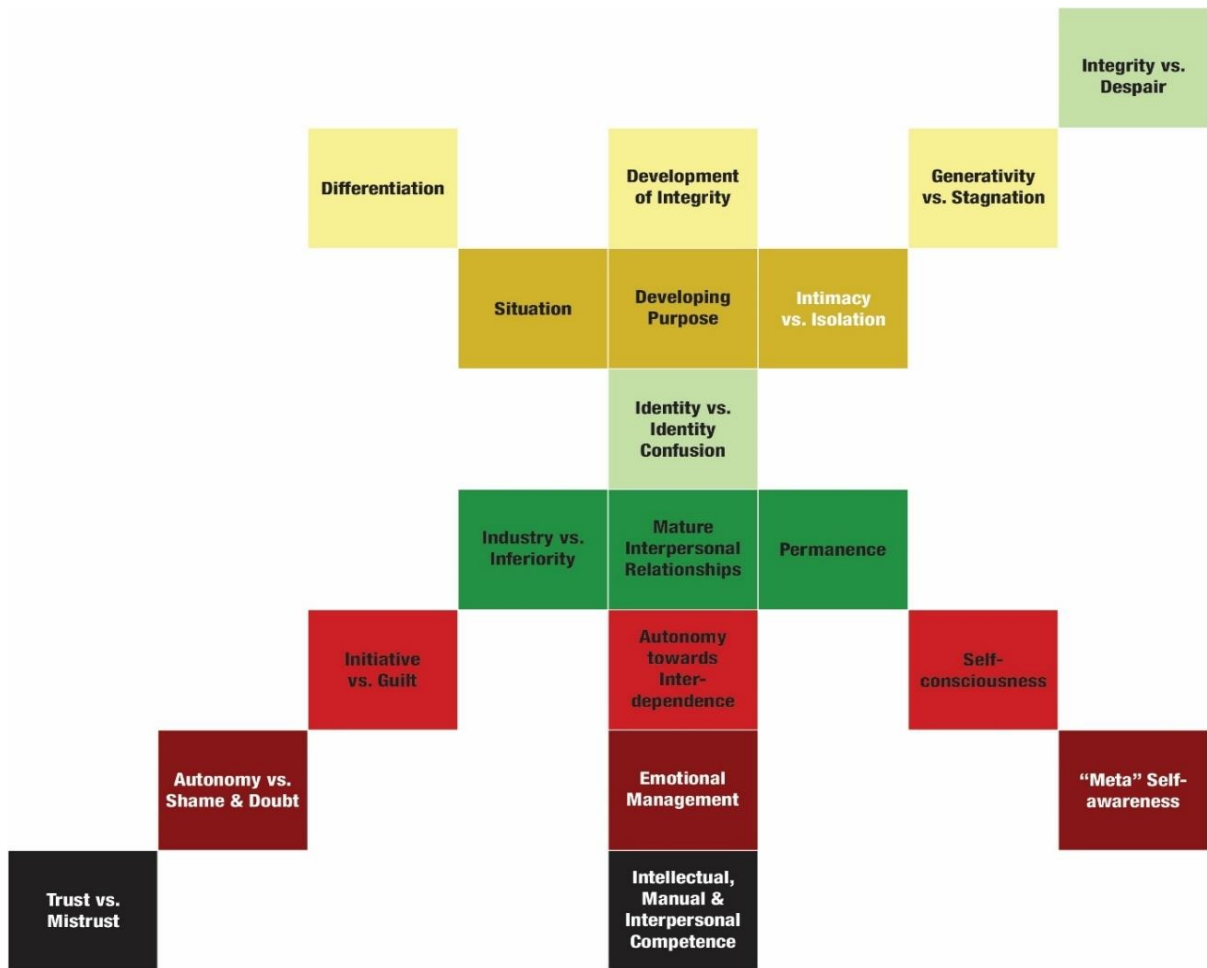
Collaboration of all three theories

Figure 3.4 My interpretation of Erikson's epigenetic diagram incorporating components of OSA theory and Chickering's theory of identity development (Adapted from Erikson, 1994)

As shown in Figure 3.4, all three theories meet at the centre of the stages of development, where the individual is somewhat familiar with the expectations of the environment but needs to confront specific learning experiences to form their own identity and become self-aware in unfamiliar settings. As OSA theory focuses on the functioning abilities of the individual in a different environment, the individual tries to adapt to meet its expectations. As in any unfamiliar situation, the individual experiences a crisis with regard to their identity that can cause feelings of discomfort, anxiety, uncertainty and/or disorientation (Figure 3.2). These feelings correspond with the crisis phase, in which individuals modify their behaviour

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according to the expectations of the required environment. As students are more focused on their careers, a crisis can occur with regard to their identities as they are using and implementing skills that were taught previously and also acquiring new ones. Owing to unfamiliar expectations and the new pressure that may arise from the new environment, the individual may also experience some anxiety and stress.

Chickering's theory of identity development (cf. section 3.3) explains the identity development of students in higher education. This theory represents the seven vectors that explain the process of student development on academic, emotional and social levels at university. Similarities occur between both OSA theory and Erikson's psychosocial development theory as, according to all three theories, the student comes to terms with their identity. Owing to the new expectations of university life and growing involvement with the university environment, certain threats emerge as students are exposed to and encounter various discrepancies throughout their undergraduate years. The discrepancies could involve criticism, victimisation, discrimination and possible isolation from fellow students and academic staff. The underestimated groups that exist and are usually discriminated against at university are women, students of colour, and homosexual and bisexual students (Komives & Woodard Jr, 2003). The traditional form of masculinity is based on creating environments that relate to power and privilege (Barone, Wolgemuth & Linder, 2007). This systematic oppression of the minority portrays an attitude of sexism (Covarrubias & Stone, 2015). The stereotypical emotions that are portrayed by the dominant group show a lack of emotional awareness and acceptance regarding students who are different.

According to Paruk, Chickering, Long IV, Uher-Koch, East, Poleschook, Gumm, Hanson, Adams and Kovach (2015), Chickering (1993) focuses on the journey that students needs to embark on to be able to formulate their identity. Little emphasis is placed on the responsibility of the universities when it comes to ensuring that each student can pass their examinations and eventually become high-achieving professionals. More notably, it is essential for the university staff members to understand how different students who attend university formulate their identities and how the university can contribute to their development by ensuring that each

student is accommodated (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, Garfield and David (1986) have noted that Chickering's work is uniquely suited to promote the development of human potential and that the university plays an essential role in doing so (Garfield & David, 1986).

Bearing Chickering's theory on identity development and Bakhtin's theory of outsideness in mind, the focus in this study is on my journey as an undergraduate student with ASD. It [My journey] addresses several of my learning experiences which made me aware of the expectations of the university and reinforced my will to succeed against all odds as an outsider. In retrospect, this study elaborates on how I progressed from remedial school to university, and how living up to the standards of the higher education institution was a significant challenge. My experiences correspond with the suggested integrated model (Figure 3.4). I am writing in the first person when I refer to my transition from high school to university to adapt to the different university settings.

By viewing Chickering's theory through a theoretical lens, I have made sense of my undergraduate years. The opportunity to study at university was a major personal step in self-actualising and forming my own identity. Despite the challenges, the learning curve has shaped me both as a student and as a person (Duplantis, 2020). Considering the experiences of students with ASD at university, international statistics indicate that between 0,7 and 1,9 per cent of students with ASD form part of the total student population at university, and, unfortunately, these students have a very low success rate (Gurbuz, Hanley & Riby, 2019). As part of the minority at university, these students' challenges might include non-verbal and verbal signs, such as limited eye contact, limited speech in conversations, and executive functioning (time management, implementing and portraying tasks in a comprehensive manner) (Mann & Karsten, 2020).

Regarding other students, Mann and Karsten (2020) maintain that environmental variables influence one's behaviour and reactions to certain situations in an unfamiliar environment. This includes changes in schedules, the key individuals involved in the environment, and rules and regulations. Mann and Karsten (2020) believe that regression in students is prominent by their presence at university,

meaning that students whose behaviour and actions are opposite to those of the norm are automatically isolated and discriminated against and, as their intellectual and social incapacities limitations are visible to others, they are regarded as outsiders. Owing to the unfamiliarity of the environment, pose significant challenges to the individual's functional abilities. Also, these students can evoke discriminatory responses from other students in the environment in future and, as such, each individual needs to adapt their behaviour to avoid feelings of personal discomfort or any form of negative remark. Therefore, the university environment needs to make university facilities accessible for these students (Brightbill, 2020).

3.6 Conclusion

The lens through which I conducted this study was based on OSA theory, which emphasises the different learning phases a student goes through at university. This framework appropriately addresses several learning experiences that led me to become self-aware and aware of the expectations of the university. Secondly, using Chickering's theory on identity development, I explained the process and learning curves that students experience to be able to form their own identity in an unfamiliar environment. It took me three years to get used to the difficulty level of the academic work, to socialise with my peers and to function independently. Finally, I applied Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity development, which explains the different stages of development a person goes through to develop self-awareness. From the perspective of an autistic student, this threefold framework with a nod to Bakhtin's concept of outsideness is appropriate. The reason for this is that it addresses many of my learning experiences and experiences that any individual might undergo to adapt to unfamiliar environments. In the case of my study, I am referring to my personal experiences as an autistic student at university and how I needed to adapt to the environment. In the next chapter, the research methodology that I used explains how I constructed my data and research.

CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, based on Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (1958), Chickering's theory on identity development (1969) and Bakhtin's concept of outsideness (1895-1975), OSA theory was discussed. In this chapter, I will discuss the research design and methodology of this choice in detail.

This study is an autoethnographic account of my experiences as a student with ASD, and the typical challenges that neurodiverse students experience at university. This study covers commences the period from the end of my matriculation examinations to my university enrolment as an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Education. During this time, I experienced challenges in the different environments and settings as I moved through university, but there were some support services available to accommodate my needs. To share my account, I need to explain the research design and methodology that I followed, as well as the research methods.

In this chapter, I differentiate between a research design and methodology. The research design is commonly regarded as a blueprint of how a researcher should plan and work to answer their research questions. As explained by Tirado Taipe (2019), the design shows how the research is created, coded, constructed, analysed and interpreted (6 & Bellamy, 2012). On the other hand, the research methodology is focused on the methods and processes that the researcher uses to conduct their research. It is akin to a specification of the strategies or approaches that a researcher uses to answer research questions and draw conclusions (Rubin & Bellamy, 2012).

This chapter explains how I crafted my autoethnography to retell my account in the form of a novella, which places emphasis on character development and plot development, compared to a novel, which places emphasis on several primary characters in different settings. More importantly, Cardona-López (2017) notes that the length of a novella is shorter than most novels but longer than a short story and

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that a novel is usually divided into chapters in contrast to a novella, which is divided according to the narrator's preference.

My reasons for writing a novella was to be the primary constructor of my story. I retold my undergraduate experiences as a student with ASD and included the contributions of other role players during this period of my life. My novella is unique. My experiences were categorised in different time frames and I used other methods to support the text. These methods helped me to refresh my memory and remember the different experiences that I had experienced. Some methods that I used required me to take drastic measures, such as revisiting more than one research site where I conducted my research, of which the Faculty of Education (Groenkloof Campus, University of Pretoria) was the central point. This was where I spent most of my time as an undergraduate student and so I made a personal tour of the university, this campus to recall and refresh my memories, both pleasant and unpleasant. I revisited the lecture halls, the male residence, the dining hall, the leading sports field and the library. During this process, much introspection was done. I thought back on my development as a student and the learning experiences I underwent that shaped me as an autism self-advocate, specialist teacher and PhD student.

In the last section of this chapter, I will explain the different methods that I used to interpret and analyse my data and how I ensured trustworthiness and ethical compliance. To familiarise myself with the policy frameworks that are used as a guide for public institutions and various departments to ensure inclusion and accessibility are being implemented, I completed a series of training sessions on the WPRDP with the National Council for Persons with Disabilities. Another reason why I attended these training sessions was to develop insight into disability rights awareness from a South African perspective and into the purpose of the implementation of the applicable legislation, codes and guidelines (Department of Social Development, 2015). This process helped me to identify the gaps in our higher education institutions, especially where these gaps concern the implementation of reasonable accommodations to assist students with different forms of disabilities.

4.2 Research design

Research design is referred to as a blueprint that guides the researcher to answer their research questions (Sarantakos, 2012). A research design, as explained by Kennedy (2018), is a series of stages or tasks that researchers use to conduct their research. This can only be achieved by explaining a research paradigm, research approach, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the researcher's empirical work (Heppner, Wampold & Kivlighan Jr, 2008). Maxwell (2012) refers to a research design as a sequential approach that involves decision-making relating to a research project by considering the essential elements, such as theories, the use of different methods, and resources. Other researchers, such as Akhtar (2016), describe a research design as a cohesion of qualitative methodologies in which the researcher understands their research but also aims to persuade the scientific community by being aligned to its epistemology and ontology.

Maxwell (2012) asserts that the research design reflects the quality and coherence of the research study, which is directed to a particular audience. This process also provides researchers with some form of perspective and confidence that they are able to address the research purpose and focus by proposing answers to the research questions (Maxwell, 2012). Added to this, Wang (2015) and Creswell and Creswell (2017) acknowledge that both the strengths and weaknesses of the research design assist the researcher to examine the relevant research questions compellingly and systematically. The research design, therefore, aids the researcher to achieve credible, trustworthy results (Lewis, 2019).

To separate a good research design from a bad one, the researcher must separate each step to see if the variables are appropriately defined and explained. This process differs from the traditional understanding of the concept because it is pre-established and details are provided as to how the researcher can collect their data and what techniques can be used to collect it. More importantly, Schaefer and Alvesson (2020) note that a good research design is essential for obtaining strong evidence for derivative knowledge claims.

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In this regard, my study forms part of a qualitative approach which is situated in the critical paradigm and aligned with the epistemology and ontology of my study. The research design enables me to explain how I chose my co-constructors and other methods to construct my data. The details of the research design will be explained in the next section.

4.3 Research approach

The research approach is a structured plan and procedure that consists of the basic steps a researcher follows to collect their data by analysing and interpreting the information (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Most importantly, the qualitative research approach, as explained by Okeke (2015), is a form of rational inquiry, where the researcher uses a variety of research tools to make sense of and interpret the generated data. Considering the different research approaches, Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest the above-mentioned approach according to the type of data the researchers are required to generate, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography or case studies. This approach also includes the researcher's perspectives on what settings they choose to investigate, the role players they want to approach, the processes to consider and the techniques they intend to follow to conduct their research (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

According to Adams *et al.* (2017) Social researchers started to 'radically rethink' how they conducted and represented their research. They desired more realistic and responsible ways of researching the experiences of others, raised concerns about what any person could 'know, verify, and responsibly present as cultural 'truth'',' and wanted 'accounts that foregrounded dialogue, incompleteness, the impossibility of separating or collapsing life from/into text' (Van den Broucke, 2019).

Considering the characteristics of qualitative research, credibility and authenticity were considered and applied in this study. In stating this, the two goals that qualitative researchers seek to achieve in their research are to ensure that its consistency can be reviewed by other researchers and that the findings can be re-used in future publications, thereby showing that ethical considerations have been met (Mays & Pope, 1995).

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The challenge, though, is that qualitative research is dependent on numerous variables and consists of numerous aspects which are quite controversial, as admitted by Creswell (2013) who stated that a qualitative approach requires interpersonal skills which relate to 'a state of mind and the organisational conditions which allow that attitude of the participant to be expressed'. Furthermore, Creswell (2013:45) warns that the researcher should not portray any form of bias and acknowledges the participants' views as credible. Another critique of qualitative research is that the approach is too rigid as it lacks generalisability and is too focused on personal impressions (Mays & Pope, 1995).

In general, the contributions of the participants in autoethnographic research are rather complex, as explained by Ellis *et al.* (2011). The approach can be seen as confrontational and constitutive, yet it contributes to the richness of the text and introduces unique ways of thinking, feeling and understanding. Although the experience is enriching, Kim and Lee (2021) and Wertz (2011) warn that the research is not undertaken in a controlled laboratory setting and, therefore, they encourage the researcher to engage with participants in conversations and interviews. In this regard, Kyngäs (2020) writes that it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that rigour is implemented through the research design, data collection methods, and analysis (Kyngäs, 2020). But overall, qualitative research is flexible and no preconceived assumptions are formed (McNabb, 2020).

The research approach of my autoethnographic study was, as explained, qualitative and was primarily focused on seeking meaning, understanding and interpretation of both my personal experiences and the experiences of others (my co-constructors) and their interpretations of me as a student with ASD at university. Importantly, my study involved the main qualities of qualitative research in answering the research questions. The different perspectives and experiences of my co-constructors of me as a student with ASD were voiced through critical conversations in their natural environment (be it online or in their home or work environment). The data were constructed through the contributions of me and my co-constructors.

In my autoethnography, my co-constructors made use of memory work when their true, authentic and honest contributions of me as a neurodiverse student were

revisited. All that my co-constructors shared was, in my view, honest. They mentioned some aspects which were positive but also some that were negative. Their views represented their general perceptions and assumptions that could be true of any student with ASD at university. This representation shows that my study, which is situated in a critical paradigm, enabled me to construct narratives about my and my co-constructors subjective experiences and thus obtain multiple interpretations of me as a student with ASD at university (Pope, 2006). Importantly, by having critical conversations with my co-constructors, I got to know each one better by understanding how they experienced me as a student with ASD. The input from my supervisor helped and encouraged me to use different qualitative methods, which will be explained in the data analysis section of this chapter.

4.3.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is explained by Covey (2013) as a set of beliefs, values and assumptions about how individuals view the world and formulate understanding. It can also be classified as a lens to prove to the researcher that multiple realities exist, and that they could challenge current perceptions and views to initiate change (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Generally, the critical paradigm believes that realities are constructed and shaped by political, economic, cultural and social forces and are influenced by the values of the environment. But, at the same time, Cohen, McCabe, Michelli and Pickeral (2009) argue that inequality exists in society as certain groups of people hold more power than others due to their ability, race and class and that this oppresses them.

In addition, Lang (2020) asserts that a paradigm includes five areas of scholarship – 'discovery, engagement, application, integration and teaching'. The paradigm is a way of producing science based on claims about the world and it fosters ways of thinking to solve the research problem (González-Márquez & Toledo, 2020). From this viewpoint, the world is viewed as subjective and influenced by the values and the social positioning of advocates, including the researchers themselves (Al Sabahi, Wilson, Lavis, El-Jardali, Moat & Vélez, 2020).

However, the critique of the critical paradigm exposes certain inequalities in a society, such as where the majority is being oppressed and the minority do not want

to hear about it. Furthermore, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the inequality that exists in society and the subordination and powerlessness of other groups' freedoms (Cohen *et al.,* 2009). Forces or interests are identified that place a social group into relative powerlessness, or indeed power, and question the legitimacy of that position or situation. The second critique of the critical paradigm is that the researcher is not always neutral and objective as a result of their past experiences and own values, which influence their perception and points of view in different situations (Asghar, 2013).

I, therefore, situated my study within a critical paradigm as its intention is to emancipate the under-represented groups at university by arguing that certain groups of people hold more power than others because of their race, class or disability and that these inequalities therefore oppress them (Cohen *et al.*, 2009). This standpoint encouraged me to conduct this study to make university authorities and other concerned, interested parties aware of the challenges that students with ASD experience by referring to the critical incidents that shaped me as part of the minority at university and as a student. From my first-hand experience, I found university to be an oppressive and stereotypical environment that isolates people in this position through existing inequalities within the system. The initial purpose for conducting this study was to initiate change by ensuring that universities are more accepting, inclusive and willing to accommodate students with ASD.

In writing this autoethnography, I was ideally positioned in a select culture (neurodiverse students at university) to conduct a critical reflection of my undergraduate experiences and to make sense of my journey (Idris, ZA & Sulaiman, 2018). In this situation, I was making my voice as a student with a disability enrolled at university heard. To support this, Yeng Sin, Azlan Mohamad and Chiun Lo (2009) stress that public institutions' views (for example, that of universities), perceptions and hardships are shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender-based forces which can provide valuable insight, not only through analysing and exploring the current situation but also through the formulation of ideas and the need for greater autonomy and inclusivity within universities (Maree, 2012). This came through in the critical conversations that I had with my co- constructors as their

voices represented the attitudes and perceptions that existed towards me as a student with ASD.

Through the retelling of my personal experiences and the contributions of my co-constructors in the form of a novella, I was able to identify and recognise the masculine and ableist ideologies at the university which influenced the perceptions and actions of the lecturers and my fellow students towards me. As a result of my experiences, I needed to adapt to the standards of the university. I was always conscious of the ableist ideology of the university and had no choice but to adjust my behaviour to meet the standards of the institution and absorb the negative attitudes and comments that were directed towards me (Idris *et al.*, 2018).

As a student, the inequality that I experienced at university and the unequal representation of students with ASD at university also encouraged me to use the critical paradigm to frame my study. I believe it has led me to advocate for social justice and change the university system for the better to ensure that the facilities are equally accessible for students with ASD (Cohen *et al.*, 2009). In any research, the research approach, paradigm and methodology are principally informed by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the study (Asghar, 2013). More importantly, the critical paradigm addresses fundamental beliefs about the nature and process of a study, the researcher's ability to acquire knowledge (epistemology), and the way the researcher perceives the world (ontology).

4.3.2 Epistemological assumptions

Epistemology refers to the assumption that meaning is formed from reality. More importantly, epistemology refers to the basis of knowledge that the researcher requires to formulate understanding and make sense of reality (Brooks, 2018). The researcher can do this by acknowledging that the world consists of assumptions beliefs, intentions, attitudes and values and by asking key role players about their experiences, about how they construct meaning and about how they acquire new knowledge about a phenomenon (Asghar, 2013). Knowledge is gained through social interaction and communication as the relationship between truth, belief and reasoning is being made (Asghar, 2013).

The critique of epistemology, as Gwaravanda (2019) notes, is that it is dominated by Western ideologies, especially in the field of education, which simultaneously creates an automatic struggle between different population groups from different parts of the world. As my study is written in the critical paradigm, my personal experiences, in which I observed that the university environment preferred masculinity and ableist behaviour, were relevant. The epistemology, though, stresses how students with different impairments such as ASD are treated and how different role players within the university environment experience students with ASD at university.

As far as society in general is concerned, individuals with disabilities have been oppressed and form part of the minority. Individuals with disabilities feel that their rights are not being met as the ableist, masculine attitude is transferred to society. Internationally, individuals with disabilities become self-advocates and are required to advocate for their own rights in order to initiate change for equal opportunities and treatment. Examples can be taken from the history of the American Disability Movement, especially during the 1970s, as narrated in the Netflix documentary *Crip Camp,* in which a group of young people with disabilities attended a camp to discuss human rights and the inequalities that they witnessed and experienced (Rak, 2020). By attending this camp, they did not experience inequality. Maybe by attending the camp, they became aware of the inequality that existed on various levels and the camp became the beginning of a series of activism movements in which drastic measures were taken to create awareness, change laws and to fight for equality in society. In terms of my experiences at university and my reasons for writing this study, I needed to go through different experiences, hardships, disappointments, sadness and rejection in life to become a self-advocate by fighting for change in society and inclusion.

4.3.3 Ontological assumptions

Ontology is the study of how reality exists based on personal interpretations and assumptions and it is the basic interpretation of how the researcher sees the world (Weiss, 2019). The knowledge system accepts that multiple realities exist and that each person's point of view is based on subjective experiences (Gontier, 2018). By

reading relevant research studies, I discovered that these realities are determined based on the principles of metaphysics, where nature, the cause, and the identity of a phenomenon are investigated, and that these are based on truth, reality and the existence of knowledge (Weiss, 2019). In addition, research can be explained by referring to guidelines, such as whether social reality is external or if their contributions are a product of personal consciousness (Fru, 2017).

Considering the ontology of the critical paradigm, the paradigm is reformative, striving for a better world. This is affiliated to the purpose of this study, which is to formulate change in the university environment and change its policy systems to accommodate students with ASD. As a student, I realised that the university environment consists of ableist, masculine ideologies and that it constitutes its norms for a particular group of students who are equally involved in adopting the rules that coincide with the standards of the university. Ironically, this sort of attitude and perception exists outside the university too, as restrictions are imposed on them in social, cultural, economic and environmental domains. This attitude towards me as a student with ASD corresponded with the medical model at university. My impairment was seen as a weakness, a deficit and a threat to the reputation of the university. I immediately identified a power struggle, as students who fitted the masculine, ableist category were idolised and automatically accepted. As a result, students who portrayed behaviour that was opposite to what was expected, or who did not fit the associated behaviour were isolated and discriminated against. At the same time, the different perceptions of some role players and the behaviour that was portrayed towards me made me question if I was capable and worthy to attend university and to have a place on campus. These questions stuck with me throughout my undergraduate studies and were a driving factor for me to conduct this study. I wanted to explain why I experienced university the way that I did. This explains my choice of research methodology for this study.

4.4 Research methodology

In this section, I will deal with the research methodology. I will begin by giving a general overview of what a research methodology entails. Importantly, a methodology is essentially concerned with the understanding of the research

process and, in particular, the methods related to the techniques or strategies a researcher uses (Silverman, 2013). Tellis (1997) states that the researcher follows principles and methods, either qualitative or quantitative, to collect their data. Considering this study, I will first unpack the nature of self-study and discuss why it was adopted. This will be followed by the data analysis procedure that I implemented. I will then explain autoethnography as my methodology of choice and, more specifically, critical autoethnography. Thereafter, in the final chapter, I will address issues of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability of the study, all of which enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Fru, 2017).

The methodology that I selected in this study, critical autoethnography, enabled me to have a voice and it showed me how to construct, change and make sense of my experiences in a wider world. I had a particular focus group in mind, that is, students with ASD (Jarvis, 2017). The quality of the data which researchers collect can be determined by the methodology of their choice, which includes documentation, research methods and theoretical interpretations (Dumay & Cai, 2015).

The critique of a methodology as described by Dumay and Cai (2015) elaborates on the fact that it can only be measured by its contribution to research by answering the research question, while its value can contribute to knowledge in general. Therefore, I used autoethnography as my research methodology to explain how I, as a student with ASD, experienced university life. I used different research methods to co-construct my data, which supported my choice of co-constructors, who were chosen based on the role that they played during my undergraduate studies. Each of these co-constructors made a unique contribution to my study as they brought different perspectives and insight to my narrative (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2015). The following section will explain the above methodological choices in detail as self-study and autoethnography are connected.

4.4.1 Self-study and Autoethnography

Self-study is seen as a research genre that generates knowledge and formulates understanding from the researcher's personal perspective (Feldman, 2003). Self-study encompasses literacy representations of study as it is regarded as an evocative methodology consisting of personal reflection and professional

development (Gregory, Diacopoulos, Branyon & Butler, 2017). Furthermore, Ergas and Ragoonaden (2020) define self-study as an umbrella concept in which autoethnography and critical autoethnography are branched, since it is an ongoing process that links concrete and abstract thoughts. More importantly, the individual is conceptualised between the personal and social and challenges the traditional notions of research. Other researchers such as Sharkey and Peercy (2018) warn that the natural process of self-study is stressful. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the researcher to manage these tensions because the process is evocative but, at the same time, provides insight into the maturing challenges of practice by engaging with the participants to support, encourage and provide a critical and analytical analysis of the research process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

I am centre stage in my study and this research methodology granted me the opportunity to introspect, which was self-initiated. This process of introspection is interactive and innovative and is used to explore the individual's concept with the purpose of understanding themselves better. It is also important to note that self-study is not uncommon as it ranges across various disciplines and professional fields (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey & Russell, 2007). Other authors with the same opinion such as Ergas and Ragoonaden (2020) believe that self-study also brings a combination of the philosophy of practice and ontology to the fore, as the self is situated in relation to others. This corresponds with the role of autoethnographer as insider–outsider, an autoethnographer being a researcher who shares their personal experiences, but they are also required to delve deeper into the literature to understand the broader phenomenon of the culture being investigated. This is applicable to my autoethnography as I am sharing my personal experiences as a student with ASD at university with the aim of understanding my undergraduate experiences and why I experienced university in the manner that I did. Retrospectively, I was investigating and reflecting on university culture and how the university as a public institution experienced me as an outsider.

When analysing my personal experiences, I realised that, based on the behaviour which was exhibited towards me by staff members and fellow students, I was under the impression that I was the only student with ASD at university. I also believed

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that the infrastructure of the facilities was inaccessible and did not accommodate my needs. By doing self-study through autoethnography, I was forced to confront and recall memories that affected my self-confidence and overall functioning abilities at university. My personal experiences at university are relevant as they represent the common challenges that students with ASD experience within the university environment and the different processes they are required to undergo in order to find their identity and 'place'. Self-study granted me the opportunity to analyse different aspects of my undergraduate years and, by critically reviewing the experiences (mostly academic, emotional and social) that shaped me as a student and as a young adult, enabled me to grow as a person. In doing so, the process granted me the opportunity to compare my experiences with those in the literature with the purpose of making sense of my personal journey by writing this autoethnography, as explained in the next section (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

4.4.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography as a form of self-study is an approach that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand the particular culture being studied (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Other authors such as Boylorn and Orbe (2016) envision autoethnography as a project that gives voice to previously marginalised experiences by answering questions and intersecting both personal and cultural standpoints. Wall (2006) explains that this methodology is emerging as a qualitative research method which is situated in postmodern philosophy and is linked to the growing debate about ethics and the voice of the individual in social research as the stories that are written are reflected upon, analysed and broadened within a particular context (Wall, 2006). The danger, though, as mentioned by Adams *et al.* (2017), is the reliance of autoethnography on personal beliefs, perspectives and observations that reflect on the personal experiences of the researcher and can appear to be as confrontational or harmful to the dominant group which opens doors for criticism (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016).

By 'narrativising' myself, I, as the researcher, gained an enhanced understanding of myself as a student with ASD at university, which was the initial focus of my study, but I also gained insight into how the university environment experienced me as a

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student, which was different. The focus was, however, on my personal experiences as a student with ASD. First-hand accounts such as these must be based on honesty and integrity, and it is, therefore, the researcher's top priority to consider verisimilitude when retelling their personal experiences. When doing this, the researcher must include reports, historical documentation and corresponding photographs to ensure the legitimacy of the narrative. As an autoethnographic storyteller and lead constructor, I knew that facts could and should be verified. But this did not justify my experiences and feelings about my past which shaped me as a person today. Therefore, this personal account required me to use different research methods to collect my data. The process included critical conversations with my co-constructors as well as a personal reflexive method called self-interviews to recall memories from my undergraduate years. To gain insight into the opinions of the critical role players, my co-constructors, who played specific roles during my undergraduate stages, shared their personal experiences with me. I first wrote about how I, as a student with ASD, experienced the university environment and how I persevered to adapt to the regulations of the public institutions. In fact, my study represents how students with ASD adapt and function according to the expectations of the university and how I navigated my way with specific assistance (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

Since autoethnographic writing involves highly personalised accounts in which the author draws from their personal experiences with the purpose of understanding a particular discipline or culture, Sambrook (2015) notes that the methodology is criticised for focusing more on the individual than on the research question and culture. Another critique of autoethnography as a methodology is that the movement shies away from traditional research methodology and tends towards a more personalised approach, which affects the quality of the data, as the emotions, psychological introspection and environment of the participants are considered. Referring to my study, although I am the lead constructor in my research, this study is situated in the critical paradigm which represents how students with ASD experience university life in general and how the environment perceives these students based on their difference. The purpose of this kind of autoethnography is to analyse my undergraduate years critically by referring to the hardships and

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successes that I experienced with the purpose of changing the university environment that shaped me as a person.

4.4.3 Critical autoethnography

More specifically, the methodology I employed was that of critical autoethnography which is explained by Tilley-Lubbs (2016) as an innovative approach where the researcher becomes a participant in the study by allowing themself to be at the forefront of the research conducted in vulnerable and marginalised communities. Similar to autoethnography in general, the researcher is granted an opportunity to form part of the culture being studied but, at the same time, looks at their personal experiences through a critical lens with the purpose of formulating understanding and initiating change. For other researchers such as Holman Jones (2013), autoethnographies are artistic, analytic demonstrations of how engaging the researcher is with themself, others, cultures, politics and social research.

Autoethnography is a painful process but it can be rewarding because you are getting to know yourself in a much deeper way and this provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and for the world. The I refer to the researcher who looks inwards as well as outwards. Autoethnographic forms help us to view the world holistically and naturalistically and they are a way of being in the world. In every autoethnographic study, the project has the distinguishing feature that the account is always in the first person. The researcher makes themself the object of the research and the goal is to evoke emotional experiences in readers. The text of the story is replete with a narrator, characterisation and a plotline, akin to aspects that relate to biography. Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography. In stories, people are depicted as characters. Epiphanies or crises can provide dramatic tension around which the story will revolve, and in which the resolution is pointed and gives meaning to the story. Good or bad experiences shape part of the human condition to process the personal experiences (Ellis, 2004).

By doing this, Kennedy (2018) wrote, the researcher undertakes introspection and views the complexities through the lens of a critical pedagogy, as critical autoethnography is a combination of ethnography, autobiography, and critical

pedagogy, meaning that the theorising is continuous and links to concrete thinking and acting (Holman Jones, 2007). In general, critical pedagogy encourages deliberate engagement with uncomfortable situations that involve trauma and tensions. It unsettles identities and requires a deeper level of understanding. In stating this, Boylorn and Orbe (2016) acknowledge that the researcher can refer to themself in a marginalised community. By doing this, the researcher is in a subjective position, reflecting on personal experiences and forming a perception of a specific culture. As a central part of the culture, the opinions of the researcher are based on 'past sociocultural, historical, political and economic events and circumstances that shape reality for the student' (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016).

Based on this, my study indirectly referred to the workings of the higher education system, in particular the University of Pretoria, to accommodate students who are 'different', especially those who are diagnosed with ASD. Critical pedagogy as part of a critical autoethnography critiques existing views from a specific culture and is viewed from different perspectives such as a 'racial, classed, gendered, sexed and disabled perspectives' (Ellis *et al.*, 2011:273). Considering my study, the perceptions still exist that individuals diagnosed with ASD are not equipped to study at university and, as a result, make my study more groundbreaking as my undergraduate university experiences and my achievements prove the opposite of the perceived notion. This was evident throughout my undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Education where I felt that there was a preconceived perception of me as a student with ASD based on the treatment and behaviour of key role players. This attitude was also transferred to the lack of support services available to support me on campus in the social and academic domains, which contributed to my mental health and changed my life. It is, therefore, critical for me to share my personal experiences as they are the driving factor to change the education system to become more inclusive and accessible for students with ASD. To drive this concept throughout my critical autoethnography, I have used the techniques of different research methods that contributed to the construction of this critical autoethnography.

4.4.4 Research methods

Research methods refer to the specific procedures a researcher uses for co-constructing, collecting and analysing data (Duffy, Hatton & Sallis, 2018). Maree (2012) notes that research methods are referred to as an integrated strategy whereby the researcher uses various tools to collect and analyse data. Referring to autoethnographic writing, the data can be collected in a variety of ways, such as recalling information, working with documentation, and interviews (Chang, 2016). The researcher follows specific procedures to ensure that the research adheres to the ethical considerations of the academic institution (in this case, the University of Pretoria) (Furman, 2018). The research methods that I chose were important in helping me to produce my autoethnography in respect of both thinking and writing my narrative in the form of a novella and placing it in its own political and cultural context.

My personal account was supported by historical artefacts that corresponded with the data and experiences of the co-constructors and me during the period that the critical autoethnographic methodology was followed. The research methods that the researcher implements provides the platform for them to generate data by using different methods which can contribute to the construction of an autoethnography. This was the case when I elaborated on my university journey and supported the text to emphasise the challenges that I underwent in order to survive at university. The benefit of this was that it ensured that the research process followed occurred in a credible and trustworthy manner (Heppner *et al.*, 2008). In doing so, I reduced bias, distortion and random error. With reference to my study, I emphasised my role as the main constructor and the value of the different co-constructors who formed part of my research.

Referring to research in general, Creswell and Creswell (2017) add that the researcher uses these methods to reflect on different participant roles and the journey that the main participant takes in the study. In saying this, my co-constructors' contributions were included in my narrative as they supported the written text and added trustworthiness and validation to my research. The sampling method that I used was purposive sampling, where the targeted population

(identified co-constructors) was pre-selected based on their involvement with me as a student with ASD at university in different time periods (Okeke, 2015). Key individuals who were present during my undergraduate studies were purposely selected and the methods that I chose to construct my novella were memory work, critical conversations and self-interviews. The settings where these conversations took place remained neutral as my primary purpose was to make my co-constructors feel comfortable and get the most out of our conversations, as explained in the next section.

4.4.5 Critical conversations

Conversations are regarded as a method of research that obeys the principles of ethics. Furthermore, the research method is understood as a way to collect data but, more importantly, to formulate understanding from a researcher's perspective (Bøe *et al.*, 2013). To emphasise the importance of conversations, researchers value their contribution to understanding knowledge generated and knowledge shared. Researchers who consider conversation must adhere to specific characteristics. For example, the conversation must be conducted between the researcher and the co-constructors, and co-constructors must have a mutual understanding by acknowledging their perspectives and experiences. The second characteristic flows into the third as the constructed data will lead the constructor to draw conclusions and formulate new understandings. The fourth and last characteristic to consider is that conversations are not bound by time, are not controlled and are not finalised until the constructor has generated their data (Feldman, 2003).

Although co-construction is intended to incorporate various forms of interaction with my co-constructors, this does not mean that the data was well received by me, as some of the data collected and some of the contributions were sensitive and difficult to confront. This type of conversation, as noted by Ellis (2004), considers the feelings, emotions and thoughts of the co-constructor who is encouraged to self-reflect on a sensitive topic. Importantly, the in-depth understanding of the co-constructor contributes to the rigour and context of the novella through communication. In saying this, my intentions to engage in critical conversations with

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my co-constructors were to identify how they experienced me as a student with ASD and address important but complex questions with them.

My co-constructors were encouraged to self-reflect and be honest about why they treated me the way they did. To construct the required data in the most profound way possible, I identified three main questions that I posed to the co-constructors. Having these questions placed me, as the researcher, in a position to engage in conversations where the co-constructors could share their personal point of views about certain phenomena without any disruption. Similar to the process of a semi-structured interview, the questions were pre-selected and open-ended and ranged from the co-constructors' personal experiences to general observations (Okeke, 2015).

I conducted a critical conversation with my co-constructors of choice because they were, in their unique ways, key role players during my undergraduate studies. I chose them as co-constructors for my research based on their involvement with me during my undergraduate studies. By the time I informed them about my research and asked them for their consent to participate and adopt the co-constructor persona, they were more than willing to participate and share their perspectives on their experiences with me. To get trustworthy and honest perspectives, I was required to make them as comfortable as possible. Also, I emailed the questions for our conversations to them for preparation purposes.

As I intended to have critical conversations with my co-constructors, I did not shy away from asking difficult questions, asking them to think critically about how they as co-constructors experienced me as a student at university. In saying this, critical memory thinking is an important component of construction as it occurs during the data analysis process when questions are asked to provide a social platform for participants. The process consists of values such as interpretation, stance, identity formation, emotion and cultural perspective that represent reality (Bertin & Masson, 2021). With reference to my study, each co-constructor's contributions were unique and relevant as they mentioned some positive characteristics of my journey but also the challenges that I experienced as a neurodiverse student compared to abled-bodied and typical students. During each conversation, the co-constructors' points

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of view, experiences, and levels of empathy were influenced by their prior experiences, both positive and negative, with students with disabilities whom they had previously lectured or taught. On the positive side, it was evident through the critical conversations how accommodating and empathetic most of my co-constructors were to students with different disabilities. It is also important to note that not all my co-constructors experiences were similar as most of them had never taught students with disabilities before and, therefore, their perceptions and actions were different. Through the critical conversations that we had, each co-constructor acknowledged that the process of reflection contributed to their understanding of ASD and, for the majority of the current lecturers at the Faculty of Education, helped them to identify challenges so as to improve as lecturers and to be equipped with knowledge to accommodate future neurodiverse students.

Most of my co- constructors witnessed my growth as a student and were aware of the challenges that I experienced. Unlike traditional one-to-one interviews, the main constructor (myself) and the selected co-constructors encountered one another during my undergraduate years and thus shared common memories. To obtain their valuable and analytic contributions, multiple conversations were held with them because the different sets of data were too overwhelming for one session. The possibility was kept in mind that during the intensive conversation process, co-constructors views and perceptions might change.

During the critical conversation process, I listened to the views of my co-constructors and I reassured them that I would listen to their personal opinions about me as a student. Most of my co-constructors' frameworks represented their view of me as a student with ASD by recalling specific striking memories (good and bad). By remembering some events and reflecting on the experiences and the learning curve I had undergone, the co-constructors were granted an opportunity to introspect, find peace in the process and reflect on my journey as a student and the progress I made. To place emphasis on my co-constructors contributions, the critical conversations took place in Afrikaans and although it would have added to the authenticity of the study, the Afrikaans transcript was followed by an English translation. Afrikaans is the home language of most of my co-constructors and were

more comfortable, expressive and explained their contributions in more detail. However, having both contributions lengthened the text and made it tedious. I, therefore, made the decision to only include the English translation in my novella.

Although the process is enriching, Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto (2015) warn that microaggressions can occur in which unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalised group, such as a racial or ethnic minority, takes place as a result of the reminder of submerged memories and the occurrence of feelings and emotions. This process could have had an impact on the self-esteem of the co-constructors and constructor who may have been reminded of rejection and stereotyping. However, all was not negative and the process might also have brought peace, self-acceptance and closure to specific events or feelings that have had an impact on the well-being and the emotional state of the parties involved. Overall, all my co-constructors provided their trustworthy and honest perspectives and did not want to avoid them. During the critical conversations, experiences were different (positive and negative) as I dealt with microaggressions within the university environment. In retrospect, I also gained some positive experiences from my co-constructors, who embraced the inclusive attitude by including and accommodating me in the best possible way.

Co-construction, personal (self-interview) and subjective (critical conversations) continued and the documents (artefacts) which represented my undergraduate university experience were analysed and reviewed. The co-constructors of my research were:

me (the self) as the lead constructor,

the university psychologist,

a lecturer from the Department of Early Childhood Education,

lecturers who taught me at the Faculty of Education,

the residence rugby coach,

my roommate of two years,

my father, and

my cousin.

All these co-constructors contributed in their own unique manner and their experiences were honest and truthful which will be explained in detail in the next section.

4.4.5.1 Memory work of the self

Indigenous researchers refer to memory work as a Euro-Western tool that is primarily used in autoethnographic studies where the narrators and the participants' memories of a social, cultural and political nature are analysed (Ellis, 2014). These memories are unique and information-precious. In saying this, memory work has different epistemological meanings and differs from indigenous storytelling traditions. Memory work is explained by Baikie (2020:48) as a 'search of intelligibility'. It is a platform for a group of people to engage collectively within a specific culture and to provide their opinions about the world. For the researcher, introspection is done through the continuous search within oneself. Personal memories are reconstructed as new and different meanings are formed, which changes the individual (Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006). The process allows the researcher to think back and reinterpret old events with insight and perspective (Baikie, 2020).

The critique against this method is that the emotional bias which the researcher portrays could influence their memory and remembrance of past events (McDermott, 2020). Another critique that McDermott (2020) makes is that the narrator's memory can only serve for a certain amount of time and, therefore, the danger exists that the researcher can forget some critical information which can affect the quality of the data. As I am well aware of the critique, I crafted my autoethnographic account by making use of my selected co-constructors' memories to uncover their opinions and perceptions of me as a student. To recall some events, I also revisited historical artefacts which were associated with that specific memory and conducted a conversation with myself. Lastly, I did a personal tour through the Faculty of Education to revisit the facilities to remember my undergraduate journey

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as a student with ASD and to take photographs of the facilities, infrastructure and campus.

In an autoethnographic study, the researcher is usually the lead constructor in a process that is evocative and self-reflective. In autoethnographic studies, self-interview is an appropriate method for the constructor to use to recall essential memories and get in touch with their true emotions (Allet, 2011). During the self-interview process, the constructor uses a variety of methods to collect data using self-recording and, thereafter, transcriptions. By using a recording device, the constructor can listen to recordings and select the most appropriate parts necessary for the research (Allet, 2011). It is also highly relevant for the constructor to make use of photographs and personal historical documents to refresh their memories and recall information. In my role as the main constructor for my study, I was required to conduct a self-interview to recall important memories and experiences as an undergraduate at university.

As a student with a disability at university, I experienced rejection, isolation and discrimination within different university settings, and I was required to adapt to the different situations and standards of the environment with limited support. My main aim in this study was to identify why I experienced university the way that I did. During my self-interview, many emotions were involved as I recalled my experiences as an undergraduate student. Submerged feelings were present that affected not only my experiences but also my life. During this process, I thought back on the experiences that shaped my identity in different time frames. I also remembered my fellow students' and lecturers' comments and their behaviour towards me which influenced my experiences (good and bad). While thinking back, I imagined how my university experiences could have been different if the university facilities were more accessible and inclusive.

Some of the memories that I recalled were a painful reminder of the rejection that I experienced as an undergraduate student as the memories were tough. I wanted to avoid them because they affected my university experience and my functioning abilities at university. As I reviewed my undergraduate journey, I reflected on how far I had come and how each experience shaped me as a student and person. This

process also helped me to understand and make sense of how I, as a student with ASD, survived, coped and succeeded at the University of Pretoria with the odds stacked against me. During this time, I was also required to refresh my memory by making use of different archived materials (primary sources) such as original photographs from my undergraduate years and different personal artefacts that helped me to shape my novella (Allet, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, I had many people who played a critical role during my undergraduate studies and shaped me as a student and person and their role is, therefore, discussed in the following subsection.

4.4.5.2 The university psychologist

The university psychologist, Dr Venter, was my primary support during my undergraduate studies. I received therapy once a week, during which I was supported cognitively and emotionally.

My objective during our interview conversation was to give him the opportunity to share his experiences of me as a student and find out the reasons why he implemented the different therapeutic techniques that he used to assist me with the academic, emotional and social barriers I experienced, the aim of which was to improve my self-esteem. The lockdown period – a period when the university was closed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic – provided an appropriate time to conduct interviews with him. As requested, my conversation questions were emailed to him for approval and for preparation purposes. During the conversations via scheduled phone calls on various days, Dr Venter answered the questions in a summary format with the purpose of clustering and recalling key moments. To make sense of the data shared, Dr Venter and I later had continuous consultation sessions via Zoom meetings to discuss his contribution in depth and to analyse his position as a therapist. During these individual consultations, Dr Venter discussed his experiences with me, including the first time we met at university and how he supported me on various aspects, such as dealing with the different challenges I experienced in different settings at the university. He explained to me how to deal with disappointment, formulate conversations and develop study methods. In his conversations, he also recalled how she required additional assistance from other

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mentors and read the latest literature to help me as I was one of the first students with ASD that he had assisted at the university of Pretoria.

4.4.5.3 Lecturer from the Department of Early Childhood Education

Dr van Staden was a prominent figure during my undergraduate studies as she taught all my classes from first to fourth year. I was privileged to be chosen as her class representative and teaching assistant. She witnessed my development from a shy newcomer to a confident student. It was relevant for her to share her personal experiences and observations of my behaviour in class during lectures. Her contributions are relevant as she details how my behaviour and appearance changed throughout my undergraduate experiences.

As a lecturer who taught many undergraduate students at university, Dr Van Staden's contributions were based on her professional opinion of me as a neurodiverse student in her classroom. She shared her thoughts via the social media platform WhatsApp where she sent recorded voice messages that I transcribed. It is important to note that the WhatsApp recorded function was the only accessible tool to conduct this conversation as she had moved to another country. In her contributions, Dr van Staden was truthful and honest and she always compared my behaviour and appearance with the rest of the students in her class. She was an employee at the university, but she was also someone who cared for me like a mother.

4.4.5.4 Lecturers who taught me at the Faculty of Education

During my undergraduate studies, numerous lecturers taught me in different modules such as History, Life Orientation Methodology, Learning Support, Literacy and so on. Throughout my education, each lecturer had their unique relationship with me. Some lecturers were sensitive to my needs and tried their best to include me; others were unapproachable. During this self-reflection process, I realise now that some of the decisions that the lecturers made were based on the standards and requirements of the university. Although the inclusive university policy references Education White Paper 6, it is within the lecturer's power to decide whether they want to make reasonable accommodations to account for the student's needs. Where these lecturers were still employed at the university, I had critical

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conversations with them and they assisted me in writing this narrative as I co-constructed their data. The purpose, though, was to gain their insight into how they experienced me as a student with ASD and why they experienced me in the way that they did.

4.4.5.5 The residence rugby coach

Johan was the residence rugby team head coach whom I had admired ever since my involvement with residence rugby. Johan was also a fellow student with a disability who became a quadriplegic after a severe rugby injury he had sustained years earlier. As one of the people I looked up to in the residence, it was relevant to have a conversation with Johan during which he explained his personal experiences of me as a student with ASD and his intentions when choosing me as his team manager. The critical conversation with Johan was vital as he provided valuable insight into my unique contributions to the rugby team, but also my process of developing my identity with the rugby team. Johan was contacted by phone via the WhatsApp platform to discuss his experiences with me as a student with ASD. Johan was also encouraged to write a written contribution which encouraged him to think carefully about his experiences with me as a student with a different impairment. During the conversation, Johan was full of praise for me as a student who had contributed to the rugby team. I asked questions about the time of my involvement when he made the choice of choosing a second manager. It was a question that I had always wanted to ask as I felt rejected during that time and I wanted closure. I was also determined to hear Johan's thoughts of me as an undergraduate student as the rest of the students in the residence referred to him as a hero and a role model.

4.4.5.6 My roommate of two years

Kabelo (my schoolfriend) and I attended the same remedial high school and matriculated together. As school friends, we enrolled at the same university and we chose to be roommates in residence. It was quite a controversial decision, as we were the first multiracial pair to share a room. I visited him at the school where he was teaching to conduct the critical conversation. During this process, I discussed the essence of co-operative skills and whether students with neurodiverse needs

and disabilities receive adequate support in the residence. We both came from a remedial school environment that was safe and secure, and although we had different impairments, we were both thrown into the deep end and were vulnerable. More importantly, I wanted to hear his point of view as an African student who attended university in search of his identity with reference to both of our experiences (as an African student and as a student with ASD) in a universal environment such as a university which had specific traditions and expectations that each student was required to meet.

Although our university journeys were different, we had similar aspirations with reference to surviving and coping in the residence amidst its masculine and ableist standards. My main intention was to ask him how he experienced me as a student with ASD as I felt that I placed unnecessary pressure on him to assist me during my first couple of weeks at university, bearing in mind that he was also eager to establish his identity on campus as a Black South African student in a dominant White university and residence.

4.4.5.7 My father

Although my father was not primarily involved in my development as a student, he was present during the first weeks of my transition from school to university. He was also present in the discussions with my mother to decide whether it would benefit my studies and global development to place me in residence. It was relevant to have a conversation with him to hear his opinion of my first couple of weeks at university. It was an unusual experience to have this conversation with my father as he was not involved during the critical moments during my undergraduate years. We never had a close relationship but, due to the unfortunate passing of my mother, it was critical to include him as a co-constructor. He represented not only his voice, but also my late mother's as he expressed and shared not only his own but also her concerns which she had communicated to him. One of the comments that he made was he was concerned about my safety at university as I seemed vulnerable but in the same breath he also expressed the pride and happiness that they both felt when I succeeded by graduating. More importantly, my father expounded on the discussions that they had late into the nights considering my emotional well-being

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as their child with ASD at university and the importance of my succeeding at university, despite the odds that were stacked against me.

It was a painful process as I wished that my mother was one of my participants because she had an insider's perspective of the fear, anxiety and hardships I underwent as an undergraduate student during my transition from remedial school to university. It would have been extremely valuable to have her insight on those first couple of weeks of transitioning. I would have benefitted from her participation as she would have elaborated on the fact that she was unable to support me like she did as a school student.

4.4.5.8 My cousin

My cousin Elna played an important role during my first two years at university as she used to drive me to university some mornings. As a fellow student in the Faculty of Education and an aspiring teacher, she was aware of the expectations of the university and the standards of the institution. The purpose of the conversation with her was to ask her about her personal perceptions of me going to university, especially as a student with ASD. As a co-constructor, Elna played a critical role because she elaborated on her experiences of me as a family member who was enrolled at the same Faculty and in the same courses as she was. My cousin always portrayed an aversive attitude towards me and, in my personal opinion, represented the masculine and ableist attitude which was associated with the university environment. During our critical conversation, my cousin was honest and acknowledged that her treatment of me was based on how she was treated as a student at university by other family members. At the same time, it was a difficult conversation to have as I was always motivated and encouraged to prove people wrong, especially my cousin, who had her doubts. I saw the enrolment at university as my road to independence to show that I was not living under my mother's shadow and that I deserved an equal opportunity to attend university and find my place.

The contributions of my co-constructors were supported by the artefacts that I included in my novella.

4.4.6 Artefacts

Archival materials are referred to as primary sources. They are the original documents that enrich the research process (Scott-Hawkins, 2018). In my study, these materials, which served as evidence for the written texts, included past emails from lecturers to explain my academic progress, university letters that recorded my academic performance, certificates of participation, marked tests, and previous assignments and photographs of me as an undergraduate student. I also kept the inclusive policy of the University of Pretoria (the Disability Unit Policy on Students with Disabilities) in mind by comparing my undergraduate experiences with this document and questioned whether the principles and guidelines set out in it were followed and implemented.

Towards the end of my search to construct my novella, I completed my final task by doing a field visit to the Faculty of education with the intention of taking photographs of the facilities and also to refresh my memory and think back on how I experienced the faculty. It is important to note that each artefact helped with the co-construction of the data and contributed to the construction of my novella.

The emails to and from my lecturers were included in my novella, as they formed part of my communication with the lecturers. I had asked them to provide me with the basic recommendations during examination sessions such as concession times. Importantly, this artefact was first used as a tool to help my co-constructor refresh their memories during our critical conversations and remember back to that time. Secondly, it was included in the novella to support the text, especially those sections in which I discussed the support I had received at university. To protect the identity of the lecturers whom I emailed, I removed their names from the text.

The inclusion of the marked assessments is a representation not only of the academic challenges that I experienced, but also how much I improved in some modules such as OPV and History and how much I had grown since my first year. These artefacts were stored and scanned before I included them in my novella. Similar to the photographs that I included in my novella, they provided a visual illustration of my university experiences and symbolised the university environment and how a student with ASD was required to fit into this environment in order to

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function in various areas. In saying this, some of the photographs of me and my co-constructors (Kabelo, Johan and the residence rugby team) that I included in my novella were taken by them. With their permission, especially from my former roommate and the residence rugby coach, Johan, I included the photographs in my novella, which contributes to the document's flow and adds rigour to my novella. The photographs that I included also illustrate my growth and the continuous struggle I had to establish my identity as a student with ASD at university. By analysing the photographs that referred to my physical appearance from my first two years on campus, it was evident that I struggled to adapt to the university environment and to establish my identity amongst able students. Retrospectively, the rest of the photographs in the novella showed how my appearance changed and illustrated my mental health at that time.

The photographs that were taken from my personal tour through campus of the university facilities (lecture rooms, offices, male residence, social settings and the sports field). During the personal tour, submerged emotions, such as happiness and sadness, were present as I thought back on the hardships and the continuous struggle I experienced in trying to function and find my 'place' at university, particularly considering the different microaggressions that existed on campus.

An important source of information was my late mother's unpublished manuscript in which she narrated her feelings and experiences during my first two years at university and in which she expressed the concerns that she had of me adjusting to a new and unfamiliar environment. In her manuscript, my mother shared her feelings from a mother's perspective on my enrolment at university. As any mother, she was optimistic but also scared that I might not meet the expectations of the institution. I looked vulnerable and the university was not ready to accommodate a student with ASD.

Lastly, the University of Pretoria underwrites an inclusive education policy. The policy strives to make the university environment more accessible to all students from different backgrounds, races, cultures and especially with various disabilities. Through reviewing the document and referring to my personal experiences as a neurodiverse student at university, I evaluated whether the values of inclusion were

fully implemented according to the content of the document. To improve my understanding of inclusion concerning legislation, as well as of the reasonable accommodations that universities are required to implement, I familiarised myself with Education White Paper 6, as well as the United Nations sustainable development goals, with the purpose of analysing my novella and identifying the barriers that were present during my undergraduate studies. In this instance, the concepts of policy compliance and policy reliance were weighed against each other with reference to my personal experiences as a student with a disability and how I was accommodated. While analysing the policy paper and comparing it to my personal experiences as a student with ASD, I found that policy reliance had been implemented because there was a disability unit available on campus. Retrospectively, policy complaints have been raised in my novella as I have questioned whether the university implemented the guidelines presented in this policy in accommodating me and by providing me with the reasonable accommodations to succeed at university. It is worth mentioning that there were some lecturers who knew about the policy and tried their utmost to live up to the policy of inclusive education.

4.5 Data analysis and presentation

The method of data analysis, as explained by Washington, Karlaftis, Mannering and Anastasopoulos (2020), is a framework to make sense of the information constructed and artefacts from existing literature as well as from the conversations with my co-constructors. According to Washington *et al.* (2020), to find correlations and form an understanding, the researcher forms subgroups within a general category of the data gathered. Considering my study and the first phase of my analysis, I was required to provide various steps to show how I constructed my novella and, in doing so, I made use of an inductive approach in which I interpreted my data to create my critical autoethnography. The contributions from my critical conversations with my co-constructors formed the basis of my interpretation. As it was difficult to obtain some of my co-constructors' contributions owing to distance, some provided me with written contributions that I included and combined with the transcription of my data.

To explain the inductive approach, Gibbs (2012) notes that no preconceived perceptions are formed of the data, and, by following this approach, I was required to follow a couple of processes to analyse my data. First, I listened to the recorded conversations and familiarised myself with the content shared before I transcribed the contributions on my laptop. During the transcription process, submerged emotions came forth as I thought back on my undergraduate years and the hardships that I had experienced. By reviewing the transcribed data systematically and critically, I implemented different coding techniques to group similar kinds of information together in different categories and found the related ideas and themes by referring to my novella (Gibson & O'Connor, 2003). The next part of my data analysis was the inclusion of my historical artefacts for my novella.

A similar process was followed when I analysed my artefacts for my novella as I chose specific artefacts from my undergraduate years (photographs, emails, certificates, study guides, examination answer books and university letters) that were relevant to my story and which represented my university experiences. It was, at times, easy to find relevant artefacts and include them in the relevant text as most were electronically available on emails and on the university database. However, other artefacts, such as university letters, study guides and old examination answer books were stored and kept in a file for safekeeping until they were required to be scanned and placed under different sections in my novella. Contributions were derived from my late mother's unpublished manuscript and they and her voice were included in different sections of my novella. As difficult as it was emotionally to read, it was highly relevant, especially regarding the end of my school career and the first couple of weeks at university (see sections 5.2 and 5.3). She had explained in written text how I experienced university by describing the challenges that I experienced, especially during my first couple of days as an undergraduate student.

The historical artefacts such as the photographs that I took from the Faculty of Education were included to support the novella and the text. The historical artefacts such as emails, letters and messages emphasised the attitudes and perceptions of lecturers towards me as a student with ASD. The photographs and study guides that I included in my novella represent the experiences I accumulated at that time

and the specific setting at university. The photographs that I took on my personal tour through the Faculty of Education were also included as they provided a visual illustration of the experiences I experienced in different settings at university and helped to formulate an understanding of the environment.

My second level of data analysis was where I worked with my story (as explained in Chapter 6) by reading my novella again and by dividing my story into themes and patterns. The next process would be to place the identified themes into categories as one or more associated themes can give meaning to the data. By working with my story, I was required to look critically at my novella through different theoretical lenses as I identified main themes that derived from my novella such as masculinity, ableism, whiteness powerlessness, race and many more. For each theme, I looked through different theoretical lenses. In this process, certain themes such as whiteness, masculinity, ableism, able-bodiedness, powerlessness, race, friendship and many more were identified. The predetermined themes derived from the literature were followed through in my novella. Identity development, which is a major part of my theoretical framework that recurs throughout my novella, will be further explored in Chapter 6.

4.6 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness measures the quality of the research according to consensus of credibility, transferability, verisimilitude and conformability. By assessing the quality of the criteria, the researcher evaluates the accuracy and trustworthiness of the research findings. This is discussed in this section with reference to my study (Kyngäs, 2020). To ensure trustworthiness, I did member checking in which my co-constructors shared their experiences with me as a student with ASD. Their contributions were supported by different sources such as historical artefacts which I have placed in an appendix. I changed my co-constructors' names and residences to protect their identities and the reputation of the university.

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4.6.1 Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude maintains that any information and conclusions should be near to the truth. According to van Rooij and Baggio (2020), the greater the probability that research findings are plausible, the higher the likelihood that the tests will be more relevant. Campbell *et al.* (2020) maintain that verisimilitude creates a sense of believability in research findings. Rose and Johnson (2020) concur that it is the degree to which an analysis aligns with reality. Referring to my study, my co-constructors' contributions were supported by my novella which they confirmed by providing their personal opinions as to why they perceived me in the manner that they did. As acknowledged by Arnberg (2020), autoethnographic studies need to be constructed in a manner of faithfulness and must be honest and as near to the truth as possible. The annexures and letters that are included in the study support my contributions and the co-constructors' perspectives.

One of the biggest criticisms and questions considering autoethnography as methodology comes from Holman Jones (2007) who regards autoethnographers as open and honest, which could expose them to the world. By being honest, the individual is automatically placed in a disadvantaged position, making them vulnerable and potentially open to stigmatisation and future discrimination. Autoethnographers are accused of common self-indulgence which is linked to narcissism as one is continuously referring to one's past experiences. There are two parts auto (self) and ethnography (society) and this evidence which contributes to how I experienced university as a student with ASD which contributes eventually towards verisimilitude as my experience corresponds with other students with ASD at university. Therefore, to ensure that verisimilitude is implemented in this study, it is important that the novella not only expresses my opinion as the main character in my story, but also that it reflects the culture and world view which is being studied. By sharing my personal experiences as a student with ASD at university, I am well aware that this study also represents the experiences of other students with ASD in general at universities around the world. Although the diagnosis might be different, the challenges remain similar academically, emotionally and socially. In stating this, my study represents a realistic view presented in the autoethnography. Finally, to ensure verisimilitude, my co-constructors were provided with a draft of my

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autoethnography to read critically and provide comments if they were uncertain about anything. In the annexures attached, one of my co-constructors wrote a letter to confirm that the versions which formed part of my autoethnography were as close to the truth as possible.

4.6.2 Credibility

Credibility correlates with verisimilitude as the researcher must convince the reader that the events or research findings are credible. I ensured credibility in my personal account by making use of personal and historical artefacts to support the novella as well as the views of participants. Besides the critical conversations that I conducted with my co-constructors, I was required to conduct a self-interview to understand my real emotions and to guard me from researcher bias. The researcher should remain neutral to minimise their subjectivity and to maximise their credibility (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999). By including the views of the co-constructors, the personal artefacts and my mother's unpublished manuscript, I obtained the most sincere and honest version possible. During the conversation process with my co-constructors, I was required to continuously refresh their memories by showing them relevant artefacts to help them remember, as some of the co-constructors were retired or had resigned from the university. Through the data analysis process, I also had conversations with my supervisor who revised my research questions and advised me to think critically about the type of interviews and critical discussions that contribute to the rigour of my autoethnography. My supervisor also encouraged me to talk to other researchers in the field about autoethnography and the interview technique that I used, read relevant books and attend conferences, locally and internationally where I talked about ASD and placed emphasis on making society more inclusive and accessible for all students with disabilities .

4.6.3 Transferability

Transferability refers to the process whereby the research findings are transferable to other contexts. In autoethnographic studies, the researcher positions themself in the middle of a specific culture of sharing their experiences and views (Tirado Taipe, 2019).Tirado Taipe (2019) also considers the reader's perspective by stating that when the reader reads the research, transferability of a study will grant them an

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opportunity to relate to the study if it overlaps with their personal situation and experience. By retelling my personal experiences as a neurodiverse student at university, I realised that universities do not accommodate students who are different, especially students diagnosed with ASD, in all facets of university life. My novella can be used as an example to which students with ASD can relate in instances where they feel that their needs are not fully accommodated or where they feel pressurised by the culture and traditions of a university. It can also be used for university policymakers to read and learn from the first-hand experiences of a student with ASD at university. This study can be used as a pioneer study to transform universities and make the facilities more inclusive. The study has aroused attention and the university will gain access to insider knowledge through my experiences as a student with ASD in all facets of university life.

4.6.4 Conformability

Conformability in research refers to the consistency that the researcher implements throughout the account. Conformability is a criterion of trustworthiness in which continuity is reflected throughout the account (Hadi & Closs, 2016). The findings are recorded and, over time, can be followed through when conclusions are drawn. Including the views and the perceptions of external forces ensures that actual variations are included. Researchers are encouraged to make field notes to ensure that they acknowledge their emotions and recognise their growth processes. By doing this, the researcher is able to provide their sincere and honest opinion. As Hadi and Closs (2016) write, self-reflection enables the researcher to identify their position in the autoethnography and how their views influence the research findings. Referring to my growth process as a PhD student, I identified my position in the research through reading and analysing the literature; I was able to pre-identify themes which provided a frame for my findings. I structured my novella according to these themes to remain consistent.

Conformability was evident throughout my study. I implemented consistency by communicating from the same point of view as my co-constructors by emailing them to ask their permission to participate in my study. All my co-constructors received the same letter and signed it. As for the interviews that I conducted, I used the same

strategy of recording my co-constructors' contributions on my cell phone and transcribing them afterwards (whether it was by face-to-face interview or online). I used the same strategy for myself, as the main participant of my study. As I transcribed and analysed my co-constructors' different contributions, certain themes derived from the data emerged which all co-constructors touched on during their interviews, such as identity formation and development as an undergraduate student. It is also important to acknowledge that there were certain themes that I derived from the data, such as masculinity, ableism and whiteness, which are the main themes in my novella and data analysis.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethics refers to specific guidelines and principles that the researcher follows to conduct their research according to the standards and regulations of the university. These ethical regulations in research consider issues such as safety, information consent, privacy and confidentiality (Zimmer, 2010). Other researchers, such as Renik (2011), provide a traditional definition where ethics is explained as a code of professional conduct which distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable measures. Renik (2011) further mentions that individuals can interpret, apply and balance these norms as understood in the light of their own experiences and values.

As my study was conducted under the auspices of the University of Pretoria, I was obligated to meet the ethical requirements set by the institution. This required me to implement specific procedures with regard to fieldwork and the presentation of the autoethnography. Before I conducted any fieldwork, I guaranteed my co-constructors in writing that I would not make their participation public and I would protect their identities by using pseudonyms where requested. The involvement of my co-constructors was based on free will; they were not obligated to participate and if they experienced discomfort they could withdraw from the study at any time. I respected my co-constructors' identities and privacy. Although my experiences with certain co-constructors was negative, I regarded their contribution as valuable to my development as a person and as student. In relation to ethics in research, it was important to keep my dignity and mutual respect for my co-constructors by asking them for a suitable time for a meeting and for a location where they would

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be most comfortable. It was also appropriate to email them the research questions before the meeting to help them prepare for the process that followed.

To ensure that I adhered to the ethical considerations of the University of Pretoria, I applied for ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. This process started in December 2019 and in February 2020, the Registrar and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University approved my application. The process involved rigorous scrutiny whereby I was required to explain in detail my intentions for my research and the reasons behind my choice of co-constructors. After gaining ethical approval, the next step was to provide each of my co-constructors with a consent letter to explain the purpose and intention of the research and the reason for my request for their participation. The risks of their participation were explained, and the co-constructors were welcome to ask questions related to their participation. To help me with the transcription, most of my co-constructors helped me to answer the questions asked.

As an insider (student diagnosed with ASD) and the main participant in my autoethnography, the participation of my co-constructors provided a subjective perspective of my behaviour and development at university. My perspective and sentiments were weighed against the contributions of my co-constructors, which shows that I avoided the trap of only perceiving my own point of view as acceptable.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the steps that I used to conduct my research as well as my choice of research design, methodology and methods. I discussed my methodology and motivated why I chose autoethnography. Self-study, autoethnography and critical autoethnography refer to my approach in selecting co-constructors and criteria for selection, as well as the roles that the co-constructors played in my novella. I explained how I ensured trustworthiness, verisimilitude, credibility and conformability as well as ethical compliance.

In the next chapter, I will present my novella based on participant contributions and personal artefacts that illustrate my journey through my university career as an undergraduate student with ASD.

CHAPTER 5
NOVELLA OF MY LIFE

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents my personal experiences as an undergraduate student with ASD at university as well as the experiences of my participants (former lecturers, a university psychologist and fellow students) who witnessed my growth as a student and as a person. The data constructed for my novella are supplemented by my critical conversations with these participants as well as historical documentation using photographs, registration documentation, past examination answer sheets, and letters and emails to lecturers. My novella, as the means to present my story and key experiences, has been structured from my initial days at university to my undergraduate graduation ceremony. As an undergraduate student at the University of Pretoria, I became familiar with the transformative policies that were used as a catalyst to address the inequalities inherited by previously marginalised, disadvantaged groups. However, I found that as a student with ASD, the implementation of these policies was not adequate for students with various diversities. Through the retelling of my personal experiences, I will demonstrate that stigmatisation, discrimination, lack of support and prejudice are still rampant in the case of students (like me) who are part of a marginalised group such as neurodiverse students and that the facilities in the higher education landscape are not inclusive enough to accommodate their needs. I will also indicate how these lacunas impacted my emotional well-being. Through the data generated by the retelling of my experiences at university, I was able to identify and highlight the failures and the opportunities that exist for universities to accommodate neurodiverse students and, as a result, identify opportunities to support these students.

The genre of a novella is defined by Good (1977) as a narrative of medium length that is neither historical nor comparative but rather a classification of sub-genres with characters and a plot. For the purposes of my novella, each critical experience as an undergraduate student had its successes and challenges, which served as

unique learning curves and contributed to my identity formation. These experiences constitute the focus and framework of this chapter.

This novella is presented in different time frames, starting with the completion of my school years.

5.2 At the end of my school career

As a matriculant coming from a remedial school, having the prospect to study at a university seemed like a miracle and presented a major academic and personal leap forward. I went into my final matriculation (Grade 12) examination with high hopes of studying Human Movement Sciences (HMS). Mika Brink Secondary (MBS), my secondary school, was a protective environment that supported its students in the cognitive, emotional, social and physical domains. Four students from the school received university exemptions and ironically all four of us enrolled to study education at the University of Pretoria. It was the first time in the school's history that, despite our respective disabilities, four students met the requirements to enrol at university. My academic marks throughout my Grade 11 and 12 years met the admission requirements for study at any higher education institution in South Africa. The following image (Figure 5.1) is a group photograph of the matriculation group of MBS just before the final matriculation examinations in 2011.

Figure 5.1 Group photograph of the matriculation group of MBS in 2011 before the final Grade 12 national examinations

In the photograph, I am the student in the first row, third from the left (indicated by the red arrow). My friend and future roommate at university is the student on the right in the reclining position (indicated by the blue arrow). This was the last photograph taken of the Grade 12 group before the final examination and before the students left to pursue their lives after school. The two students in the front of the picture were the head leaders. My friend, Kabelo (indicated by the blue arrow) was deputy head boy. I was a prefect.

MBS is a remedial school situated in Brakpan, a mining town on the East Rand, Gauteng, South Africa. The school is classified as a provincial, public, special school and is subsidised by the provincial Gauteng Department of Education. The school accommodates students with physical disabilities and also those who experience barriers to learning and development, that is, neurodiverse students. The school accommodates approximately 900 learners from Grades 1 to 12. To my knowledge, I was the only student with ASD in my peer group. The school eventually accepted me because I did not portray any of what they regarded as behavioural problems. From the time of my enrolment, I felt academically comfortable in the environment as the workload and level of difficulty of the academic content matched that of a mainstream school. The only real challenge that I experienced was on an emotional and social level as I was unfamiliar with the environment and with my fellow students. The latter immediately noticed my asocial behaviour, which they could not understand. I was, therefore, mostly excluded from social groups and did not form any friendships. I felt rejected and decided to consult with the school psychologist for assistance in dealing with this problem. During our one-on-one consultations, we discussed my self-esteem as well as the communication challenges I experienced which led to my social distancing. I was honest in telling her that my communication skills were below average and, therefore, I did not know how to interact with fellow students.

These sessions continued beyond my Grade 12 year as Dr Gilford, the school psychologist, assisted me with career and emotional counselling. In line with her observations, she discouraged me from enrolling at a university because she believed the demands of university life would be unattainable with me as an

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individual diagnosed with ASD. Dr Gilford made us (my fellow Grade 12 students who aspired to pursue an undergraduate degree) aware of what university life would be like and how staff and students were likely to perceive the non-disabled. In my weekly consultation with her at school, she told me that university students could be brutal and that any unusual behaviour would be isolated. She was the only staff member who understood my emotional and social challenges and was concerned that the students at university would regard these as weaknesses. Dr Gilford was not the only staff member who opposed my decision as some of the educators also felt that I would be emotionally vulnerable and that I would not be able to cope with the pressures of university life. In addition, I displayed high levels of anxiety during the final matriculation examinations even though I received additional time to complete my examination papers. She believed that my anxiety would also affect my coping abilities at university. At that stage, I felt angry and disappointed as my parents and I had never doubted my capabilities, although I realised later that he only had my best interests at heart. In my critical conversation with my father, he admitted that he had thought that the school psychologist underestimated my abilities to succeed at university. He explained, 'I don't know if she doubted you. In my opinion, she underestimated you. But you've proved the contrary.'

The school psychologist then recommended that I should still pursue a qualification in Sport Sciences (similar to the HMS module at the University of Pretoria) but at a smaller training centre near my home in Bedfordview, a suburb in western Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg. At first this sounded like a reasonable idea that I could consider but it clashed with my personal aspirations of attending a reputable tertiary institution. At that stage of my life, as a young adult, I wanted to establish my own identity and going to university would provide me with an ideal opportunity to develop and grow as a person. Eventually I convinced Dr Gilford that I needed to pursue my dreams and aspirations. I wanted to fill the void that I always experienced and I always wanted to improve my social skills so that I could make friends.

Despite my interest in sport, my mother and I discussed the options and we eventually decided that education would be my best choice, as my interest in sport could still be pursued and it could be combined with my love of working with children.

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Besides her optimism, my mother also had her concerns which she explained in her unpublished manuscript. She wondered if I would be able to cope in a university environment:

> What now! He can go to university, but can we risk it? Why not? He worked so hard and proved he could. There are few obstacles to sort out. What about transportation? Not even talking about adjusting. Socially, our waters can be stirred, but let's try! Because Emile gets along well with children, he can consider studying education. Yes, we realise there are obstacles, but he still has four years to develop socially and emotionally.

As concerned as my mother was, my father was optimistic when I evidenced the fruit of my hard work at school. In his response, my father acknowledged my dedication:

> The fact that you wanted to go to university is a very big achievement. You wanted to go because you wanted to prove yourself. I remember that you worked very hard to get university exemption. You had to work much harder than the other learners in your peer group. You wanted to be better than others. You've shown a lot of good leadership qualities. Through your hard work, your marks were better than the rest of the children of your peer group.

My father also admitted that he and my mother wondered if they had made the correct choice by allowing me to study, but they were willing to take the chance as it was one of my personal aspirations. My father said, 'We always doubted whether it was the right thing to do. But because you had the drive and the determination to prove yourself.'

At the end of my Grade 12 year, my final marks were higher than the required Admission Point Score (APS), proving that I could further my education. Figure 5.2 is a copy of my Grade 12 matriculation certificate. Note that I majored in Mathematical Literacy and not regular mathematics, as determined by the subject choices offered at MBS.

Identity number 9302175117085		
Subject	%	Achievement level
Afrikaans Home Language	63	5
English First Additional Language	68	5
Mathematical Literacy	66	5
Life Orientation	80	7
Business Studies	63	5
Consumer Studies	69	5
Tourism	79	6
***	***	*

Figure 5.2 My final Grade 12 marks

In her unpublished manuscript, my mother described the morning I received my final Grade 12 marks:

> There is an electrifying sense of excitement in the house. Half-past nine, we arrive at school to receive Emile's results. With excitement, I first grab the results and Emile peeks over my shoulder and calculates his grades. One distinction in Life Orientation and for Tourism Emile received 79 per cent. The Mathematics teacher gives me a form to complete. We certainly will be requesting a re-mark of the Tourism paper. Emile's overall average for all his subjects is 70,2 per cent. He has received university exemption and has indeed decided to study further. Emile's school career has reached a climax, and he is going to enter the grown-up world with a feeling of pride. He had a hard time sustaining the pace in Grade 12 but has proved to himself that he can manage.

It was the end of my school career but also the start of my journey as a university student. I had graduated from a protective school environment and, although I did not realise it then, I was about to enter an environment that exuded masculinity and ableism. Before enrolment, I was required to complete the benchmark test to ensure that I was at the required academic standard before registering at any accredited higher education institution. I wrote the benchmark test the day after my final Grade 12 examination on a Saturday morning at the University of the Witwatersrand which is situated in Johannesburg. Benchmark tests are intended to predict academic and

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other forms of achievement in aspiring university students. I found this to be an unsettling experience as I could not study in preparation for these tests. The benchmark question paper was about 75 pages in length and different sections dealt with different subjects based on the national school curriculum. I was anxious when I wrote these tests as I had received remedial education so I was not exposed to benchmark learning material nor to subject electives such as Physics, Chemistry or Mathematics.

When I recognised that questions were too difficult to answer, I decided to refrain from answering them because I did not study those subjects at school and was unfamiliar with the concepts. I felt it was unfair to test my limited competencies, because nationally I had proved, by means of my Grade 12 results, that I was on the same level as the other matriculants. However, I was glad that the test itself did not use the medical approach that I discussed in section 1.1 to evaluate me, thus I was not labelled and my differences did not distinguish me from the other students. As I considered my primary and secondary school experiences, I felt like any other student who was writing a formal examination with other students. Notwithstanding that this was the first time that I had written a test in a university environment, at that moment, I was introduced to the subculture of a mainstream environment. Immediately the fear was evoked of possible discrimination and victimisation. I wanted to protect myself and rather stop participating in the benchmark tests due to my anxiety, but, at the same time, the desire to live independently, to cope without family support and to form new friendships were so strong that I continued. To explain this drive neurologically, my brain processes information differently from neurotypical students (see section 2.5). I had already experienced at school that through learning I am able to allow my brain to strengthen the connections between the weakened neurons. I realised then that if I did not adapt and stimulate my brain, I would not strengthen the weaker synapses and my brain would lose its plasticity.

Returning to the benchmark test, I found four sections straightforward as they dealt with topics from the subjects I had studied at school: Afrikaans, English, Business Studies and Tourism. I completed these sections with ease and within the allotted time. The sections I struggled with the most were Geography, Mathematics and

Technical Drawing. I completed the examinations in the extra allotted time, which had been added due to my mild cognitive delay, but I walked out of the lecture hall with my confidence shaken. The results appeared online after three weeks and, as expected, I received a mark of 35 per cent, which showed that I was below standard (the average mark for the group that wrote the benchmark test was around 53 per cent). I was disappointed and shocked as the mark reflected failure, but then I realised that results should not bother me much since I knew that the benchmark test was only a formality and that my application to study education at the University of Pretoria was approved. However, the results of the benchmark test made me aware of certain shortcomings and sounded a bleak reminder that I would have to work very hard as the academic standards were higher than those at secondary school. For a moment, I doubted my capabilities and questioned if I would cope at university. I continuously referred to the school psychologist's concerns about the ableist approach preferred by universities. If the benchmark test was a blueprint of what students could expect on an academic level at university, I would be in for an uphill battle.

The day before Welcoming Day at the University of Pretoria (24 January 2012), I was anxious and afraid of the unknown. Despite my fears, there was also a sense of excitement for the journey ahead. To express my excitement, I wrote a Facebook message to my old high school friend, Kabelo, to wish him the best for Welcoming Day. He replied shortly after via Facebook (Figure 5.3), thanking me and mentioning that he would see me the next day.
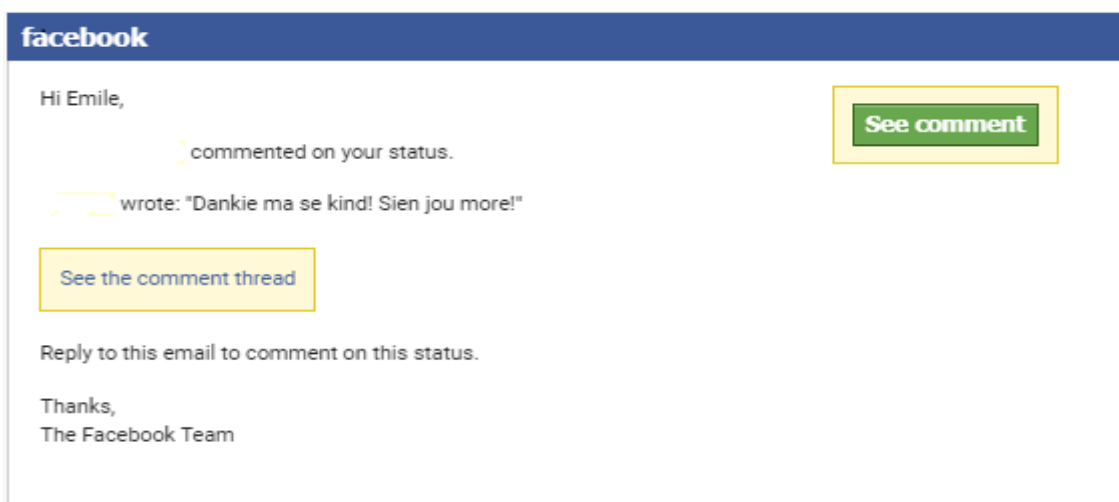
Figure 5.3 Email notification from my friend in connection with Welcome Day

Kabelo and I had been friends since Grade 8 and, although we were in separate classes, we always had mutual respect for each other. We had a close relationship and would occasionally call each other nicknames such as 'Ma se kind' *(*Mom's child), which symbolised brotherhood. I wrote the message out of respect for him and his journey ahead as we both came from a protective environment and were about to enter an environment that would be unfamiliar to both of us.

I also wrote this message with the hope that our friendship would last throughout my university career. I hoped that we could develop emotionally and socially on this journey by meeting other students and forming friendships with them. This feeling increased as I became conscious of the shortcomings in my development, and I wanted to fill that void in my life. Despite my academic achievements at school, my biggest desire was to experience the social life that university had to offer and participate in the same social experiences as my peer group. Throughout my school career, I experienced a general exclusion from social groups. It felt as if I was alone on an island and I saw the university environment as my way out. The question that remained was if I would still experience exclusion or if the rest of the students would accept me unconditionally. I was not sure if there were any other students with ASD enrolled in the same courses as me, but I suspected that I was the only one.

That same afternoon, Kabelo also posted a message of encouragement on his Facebook timeline. With the message, he posted the last photograph of the two of us in our school uniforms at the end-of-year school prizegiving function (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 The last photograph of Kabelo and me before we embarked on our university journeys

Figure 5.5 Facebook comment from Kabelo about our approaching university journey

My schoolmate's post emphasised the achievement of the school's matriculation group, especially the four students who had achieved university exemption. In his post, he wrote that we were about to make history! In this message, Kabelo also highlighted our friendship and history together. In context, the term 'slaka' is a slang expression used to express the strong friendship and bond that we shared (Figure 5.5).

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5.3. My first week at university

The first week at university is dedicated to orientating new students. I spent that week (22-28 January 2012) familiarising myself with the higher education environment, getting used to my fellow students who attended the same lectures as me as well as becoming accustomed to the ableist expectations of the academic institution. I was well aware that orientation week would be either 'make or break' with regard to all aspects of university life as my cousin had already shared her experiences as a first-year student with me.

My university career commenced on the morning of the university's Welcome Day, 22 January 2012. It was a big moment for me as it marked the start of becoming independent. The main ceremony started at 07:30 on the Main Hatfield Campus (Lynwood Rd and Roper Street, Hatfield, Pretoria), 3,7 km from the campus of the Faculty of Education. This was followed by mini-ceremonies at the various campuses. The venue was packed with families, friends and upcoming first-year students. The parking areas outside and inside the university grounds were full and we were asked to park in the basement parking area. As we got out of the car, a member of the security detail escorted my parents and I to the amphitheatre where the ceremony took place. I was overwhelmed by the surroundings. As there was no signage to direct us to the ceremony, we struggled to find our way around the university campus, and I was relieved that my parents had accompanied me to the ceremony. We were 15 minutes late.

The closer we moved to the venue, the higher the noise levels became and the crowd swelled. I felt anxious and fearful as we moved closer to the masses. My mother monitored my behaviour and decided to hold my hand when my reactions started to change in the crowds. My father recalled my first day at university and remembered my behaviour on that special day:

> The open day was a very busy day. There were a lot of students that day on campus. The hall was full and we almost didn't get room. You were very scared and uncertain. But I think you were ready for it as you wanted to pursue undergraduate studies and you wanted to prove yourself to others.

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Although I was fearful, I did not resort to avoiding eye contact or self-soothing movements such as rocking. Throughout my early childhood, my mother was my primary support figure and, as such, she taught me different techniques such as breathing exercises that I could use when I experienced sensory overload and not hyper-focusing on the responses and reactions of other people. When we found a seat away from the crowd, she and I had a short conversation whilst listening to the presentation. In a few words, she told me to look at the fellow students and explained to me that all first-year students attend university for the same purpose and that each one has a unique journey. She encouraged me to focus on my journey. After the presentation, we remained seated for a few minutes and she pointed out students with their parents passing us. I realised I had to change my behaviour if I wanted to fit in with the university environment. The students that I observed were carefully dressed and their posture, attitudes and appearance showed that they were typical university students who would flourish in all avenues. On the other hand, comparing my appearance to theirs, I felt that my physical appearance and my behaviour in general was not masculine.

On that day, the University of Pretoria welcomed more than a thousand first-year students to the Faculty of Education. After a brief introduction, the new students and their parents were asked to move to the buses to be transported to their various campuses for the opening and be welcomed by the respective Deans and the registration staff. My parents decided to take the bus to Groenkloof, the Education campus. We sat at the back of the bus. A member of the Day House Committee who was seated in the middle of the bus communicated with everybody and highlighted the positive aspects of being a student on the Education campus and spoke about the opportunity to become a member of the faculty's Day House. When the bus stopped on the Faculty of Education's campus (Figure 5.6), I looked through the window at the students and their parents disembarking from buses and cars and moving to the gym hall where the welcome was to take place (Figures 5.6 and 5.7). On our way to the gym hall, the noise of students laughing and chatting with their friends and their parents became louder. The following pictures of the gym hall (outside and inside) were taken on my personal tour where I revisited the Faculty of

Education. The red arrow in Figure 5.7 indicates the seats in which I and my parents sat on the day of the opening.

Figure 5.6 The road from the bus to the gym hall

Figure 5.7 The gym hall where the new first-year students were seated next to their parents during Welcome Day at the Faculty of Education

After the opening ceremony at the Faculty of Education, Mr van Niekerk, Head of Student Administration, shared the logistics of the orientation programme and the choice of subjects. The orientation-week programme, which included various booklets, agendas and modules, was distributed to all the students. The orientation week was scheduled from 28 January to 5 February. The programmes promised that the activities would be both fun and educational and all aspects of student life would be addressed.

Outside the gym hall, students from the Faculty Committee of the Faculty House Tambotie, and House Committee members of the student residences Moeggeploeg, Rose, Sunflower and Blossom were available to recruit new students. After the ceremony, I visited the campus library, the computer centre, the client service centre and Tuks Sport Centre. While my parents and I walked to the different venues, I noticed two first-year students who had attended primary school

with me; they were surprised to see me. As a child, I was not part of their friendship circle and would, therefore, have been automatically isolated. If my memory serves me correctly, their friendship group consisted of learners who were elected as head boys or head girls at their respective schools and who performed well on the sports field. It always bothered me that these learners did not take the time to know the learner behind the diagnosis. Despite my questions, I was happy to see them as they were the only students I knew and I considered the possibility of moving forward with them.

I had always longed to experience university life and the decision to disclose that I am a student with ASD to most of the faculty members, especially to the Dean of the Faculty, was important to me. The Dean was very friendly and welcomed me with open arms. She immediately introduced my parents and me to different staff members and service providers. I appreciated that she remembered my name and tried to make me comfortable with the surroundings for that short period.

Despite the positive feedback that we received from staff members from the faculty, my parents were concerned about my coping capabilities and well-being on campus. Another primary concern for my parents were the travel arrangements to campus every day as we lived on the East Rand, 60 km away, outside the precincts of Pretoria. Even before the open day, my parents had considered whether it was the best option for me to travel from home to campus daily. To obtain a driver's licence had been one of my primary goals and I became more independent after learning to drive, but I was still inexperienced and my safety was the primary priority. The most considered option at that stage was that I would drive every morning to the Gautrain's Rhodesfield Station (Kempton Park) and take the train to the Hatfield Station (Pretoria) from where I would walk to the main campus and take the bus to Faculty of Education (Groenkloof). The concern was that due to my spatial challenges, I might get lost and not find my way from the Gautrain to the main campus. I remember the conversations my parents and I had about the topic and how they questioned whether I would be able to take the right trains from Sandton to Hatfield. They voiced their concern by asking, 'Are you able to walk in the right direction from the Gautrain station to the main campus?' The alternative was to drive

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to campus every morning with my cousin, but there were also concerns about the time I would spend travelling as our timetables clashed. The most reasonable decision at that time was for me to travel with my cousin daily for safety reasons. My parents also wished to save on fuel and money. As an autistic adolescent, I might have appeared vulnerable to strangers based on my behaviour in unfamiliar environments and, due to this, I would have been an easy target when using the train. My father explained:

> You drove with Elna which spared us effort and expenses spent on fuel. Since she drove in that direction, it was ideal for us. I had to pay her for her services.

The morning of my first official day as a first-year student (30 January 2012) was filled with excitement and curiosity. I even remember the weather that morning; it was a cloudy day. As always, I felt a bit apprehensive going into a new environment and I did not know what to expect. In new and unfamiliar environments, I questioned my functional abilities and I wondered if my fellow first-year students would accept me unconditionally. To look like a first-year university student, I decided to wear my white University of Pretoria shirt with blue jeans and blue sneakers. My feelings were surreal; I was an official undergraduate student at the University of Pretoria! Because it was my first day, my father decided to drive me to campus that morning. As we arrived around 07:15, my father drove past the entrance gates to drop me off. I recall the different buildings and I was concerned whether I would ever be able to function in this environment. In Figure 5.8, the red arrow indicates where my father dropped me off on my first day at university and Figure 5.9 shows the path that I followed.

Figure 5.8 The parking area at the entrance to the Faculty of Education

Figure 5.9 The path that I followed

Looking around, I did not see any directions or signs at the gate or in the parking lot to direct me where to go. This contributed to my anxiety levels; I was also concerned because I did not see any first-year students. It would have been normal for any student to find their way across campus, but I found it extremely difficult as I was not familiar with the environment and setting. My father left for work without making sure that I was safe. As I watched his car depart, I knew that I was on my own and that I needed to find my way.

Eventually I came across a small number of first-year students (recognisable by their same white clothing) who were waiting in front of the Aldoel entrance for the first orientation session to start (Figure 5.10 indicated by the red arrows). Two senior students dressed in red guided us to the big lecture hall, Aldoel 1, to write the university's own benchmark test for new first-years. As we walked, I wondered how I would have found the building if it were not for the similar clothing the students wore. Again, I did not see any signs or specific guides to assist us in the different lecture halls.

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Figure 5.10 Two perspectives of the path that continued until I saw the oval in front of the Aldoel building entrance

At that moment, I realised that I needed a structured support base in place on campus. I immediately thought of the implementation of a 'buddy system' that could be beneficial to help me find my way. As we walked to the lecture hall, a group of male students caught my eye. They were dressed in black and yellow, walking together with a member from their House Committee, who guided them to the Aldoel 1 lecture hall (Figure 5.11). Comparing my behaviour to that of these students, I saw they looked relaxed and organised. I immediately realised that they were members of one of the male residences on the Groenkloof Campus (Faculty of Education).

Figure 5.11 Two perspectives of the path inside the Aldoel building from the entrance to the Aldoel 1 lecture hall

As I walked into the lecture hall (Figure 5.12), my senses were immediately overwhelmed by the number of students who were sitting in the lecture hall. For the

first time since primary school, I experienced sensory overload which manifested in my sight diminishing and sensory blindness occurring. This meant that I could not see the faces of the rest of the students passing by. I felt very anxious and decided to sit in the front row, as indicated by the red arrow (Figure 5.13).
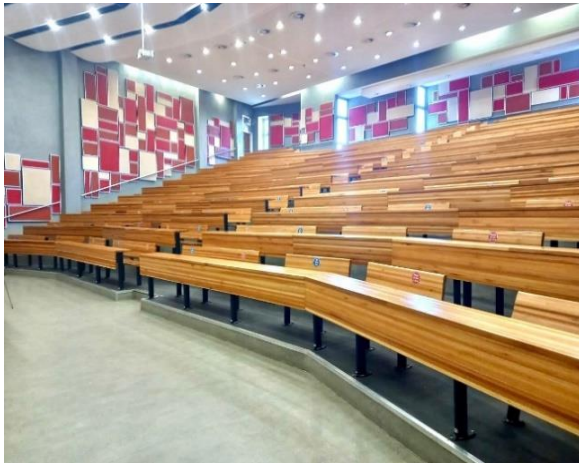
Figure 5.12 Inside the Aldoel 1 lecture hall

Figure 5.13 The first seat where I sat as indicated by the red arrow

As I sat there, I grew more anxious because I assumed that this test would be similar to the compulsory test for prospective university applicants, which I had already written at the University of the Witwatersrand. My experience with the previous benchmark test was not good and, at that moment, I wanted to avoid the situation and not write the examination.

All I wanted to do was prove that I could be independent. As a child, my parents exposed me repeatedly to unfamiliar environments so that I could focus, perform and rationalise on a higher-order level. The examiner who managed the administration of the benchmark tests was very strict and mentioned in front of the class that all students who required extra time must write on another day. As confused as I was, I took the chance and walked out of the lecture hall. At that moment, I repeatedly asked myself if I had made the right choice. I kept asking myself if I would I benefit from this. Was it the right decision? What would my mother say? To obtain reassurance, I phoned my mother to gauge her opinion. My mother responded honestly. She told me that I needed to make sure of the new test venue,

time and day and that the assessment of the situation was in my hands. I decided to sit next to the dam in the campus gardens and contemplate my decision. As I sat there, I watched the other first-year students leave the building. Their faces looked happy and it seemed that friendships had already been formed. I was disappointed that the university did not plan to accommodate students with special needs by providing concession times from the outset.

After writing the benchmark test, all the first-year students followed their timetables to attend the information sessions of their required modules. Still confused about the whereabouts of the venues, I used my discretion and followed the rest of the students to one of the lecture halls where the first information session was held. Through observation, I saw the university environment was not like a school environment, but rather it was similar to a workplace. Each student minded their own business by attending their classes and probably receiving good grades. As I walked into the lecture hall, I did not recognise any of the students, and, as a protective mechanism, seated myself once again in front of the class. I did not speak to anyone. This became my common behaviour and most students and lecturers noticed it.

The first thing I did was to take out my notepad and my pencil case to make notes just for this lecture. My cousin told me before the start of the orientation week that the university environment was not like school and that the lecturers would not spoon-feed any student. She also referred to Charles Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest – weak and lazy students would not survive. Planning and organising remained one of my biggest challenges and this became evident on my first day as I lost a couple of my stationery items along the way, together with a notepad.

The first information session that I attended was presented by the Library staff; it aimed to introduce first-year students to the university library website and provide pointers as to how to reference information. I found the lecture very informative and exciting but could not recall or implement the knowledge that was shared by the presenters as my senses were overwhelmed by the mass of students who sat behind me. To reduce my anxiety levels, I implemented self-soothing movements such as rocking and continuously looking around the lecture hall at students.

Although my visual memory is excellent and my biggest asset, an overpopulated environment presented challenges, such as my inability to recognise facial expressions because I could not detect the faces of other people, the sensory blindness I referred to previously. I remembered that my mother used to tell me that this is how my brain protects itself from overstimulation. However, I decided to refrain from running out of the lecture hall (flight response).

I was excited to attend the next information session – the HMS module. I was intrigued by the module as sport is a passion of mine and I was very interested and motivated to learn about the science behind a sportsperson's performance and the different muscles involved. My passion for sport is not coincidental as I have grown up in a family where my brother is an athlete and medal winner on a national level and was Gauteng champion for eight years in athletics. I was his most enthusiastic supporter. I had a thirst for knowledge. I never stopped reading books about rugby and enjoy rugby and athletics as a spectator. Through reading, I stored rugby information in my mental library and could happily retrieve the information when needed. Visiting rugby stadiums and watching the best rugby players in the world playing and also reading about the sport increased the activation of my amygdala.

To avoid the crowds of students, I generally arrived first at class along with another student who came from the same primary school as me. As the students came into the lecture hall, I noticed that some students were dressed in sportswear. As the students passed by one-by-one, I recognised some of their faces as they were well-known junior rugby players and athletes who had represented South Africa at the junior level. The lecturer only gave a brief introduction to the lesson. I felt a little bit uncomfortable, as all of the students who had enrolled for the HMS course looked very athletic and fit.

I did not look athletic and I did not participate in any sports at that time. Instead, I enrolled in HMS with the purpose of living out my passion. Throughout the class, I felt that the atmosphere was comfortable as the students were motivated to communicate during the lecture and were encouraged to work on their cell phones and laptops. There were also numerous disturbances throughout the lesson. For example, I remember when the lecturer received a phone call from her son. In spite

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of disruptions, the lecture went very well and I was very excited to start my tuition as a HMS student.

The module consisted of theoretical and practical work, and the lecturer encouraged the students to take notes. In saying this, the lecturer distributed notes that provided the students with guidelines on how to summarise the content. The document below (Figure 5.14) is a copy of the booklet that was distributed. My excitement can be seen by the fact that I wrote my name on the sticker pasted on the cover page. The cover page of this booklet is titled, 'Note-taking during lectures' (translation). Mr Fourie said that HMS students were required to take notes during lectures as the information shared in lesson time would form the basis of the end-of-term examinations. By providing us with the following guide, we would be helped to take notes during lesson time effectively.
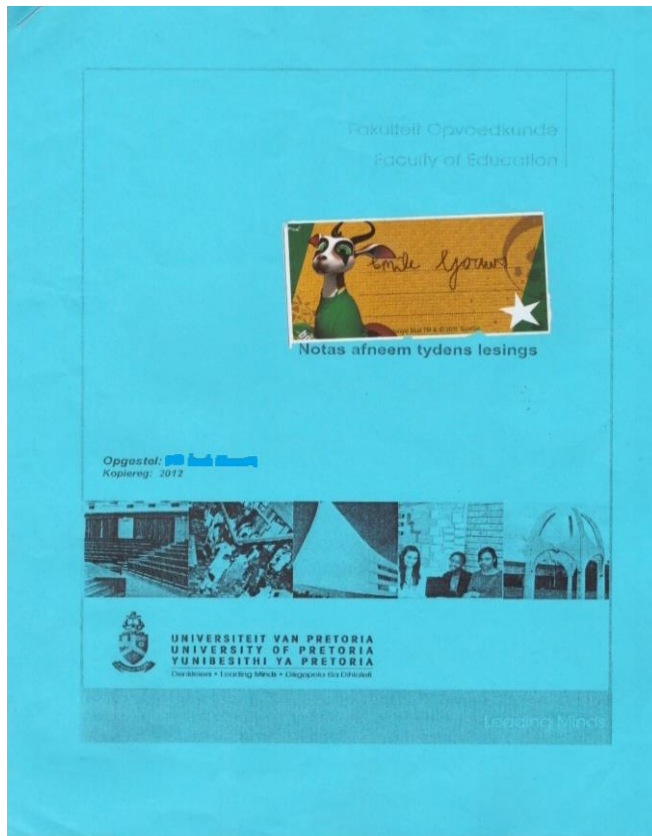
Figure 5.14 The first notes that I received in the HMS class.

After the lecture, I went up to Mr Fourie to introduce myself and I asked him if I would be able to meet the requirements since I am a student with ASD and also have low muscle tone. At first, I assumed that Mr Fourie would accommodate my

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needs as I had observed students ahead of me approach him and discuss their concerns. What also encouraged me was that I had heard a senior student on the Welcome Day provide information about the HMS course to first-year students at the information table. From a short distance, I overheard Mr Fourie's response to students' questions and how he encouraged them to participate in the upcoming module. However, when I approached Mr Fourie, his demeanour changed suddenly, her approach became cooler and she responded by saying that I would struggle in the practical component which consisted of physical activities. He recommended that I first get a doctor's note (a muscle assessment) to receive approval. In short, Mr Fourie recommended that I rather consider another module that would accommodate my needs.

I was extremely disappointed after the conversation. I felt that I was at a crossroad and had to make a choice between abandoning university or taking the Human Movement Science lecturer's advice and choosing a different module. I felt that the lecturer had judged me based on my challenges and my physical appearance. I was overweight and was not dressed in sportswear. I also believed that when I affirmed my autism diagnosis to the lecturer, he used it to reject my participation. I was the only student with ASD who had enrolled for the course, and the lecturer saw it as a weakness. It was made clear through the lecturer's response that they were looking for non-disabled, masculine, athletic students. To help me process the news, I phoned my mother to share my feelings and ask her advice. After I had told her about the conversation, she advised me to make an appointment with Dr Venter, the campus psychologist, to discuss my options. In general, my mother followed a 'glass half-full' approach, where she encouraged me to ask for advice and redirect my study direction.

When I asked my father about my sudden change in modules, he gave a sigh of relief as he believed that I would have been isolated immediately since my personality and physical physique did not fit the profile of a Human Movement Science student. He explained:

> I remember there was an incident with one of your subject choices that encouraged you to change your study direction. In my opinion, I was glad that

you didn't choose Human Movement Sciences, because there isn't a big market for it and if you continued you would have reached a dead end. Emile, you weren't an athlete and a sportsperson. You would have struggled with the module because you have a low muscle tone. The fellow students would have isolated you because you were different. It didn't fit your emotional profile either because people would easily criticise you if you made mistakes. A sports person has a super-ego of perfection and unfortunately it's not qualities you have.

In the same conversation, he further mentioned that I did not have the skills to pursue a career in physical education. Considering my emotional and social vulnerability, my father believed that if I had continued to pursue my studies with Human Movement, it would have had a negative impact on my mental health. He added:

I'm so glad you did not choose to study further at that sports institute. But I doubted your abilities because you were not fit. You would not have made it. You would have been an emotional wreck. As a person, you can't deal with criticism. You take everything personally.

That same afternoon, I asked for directions to visit Dr Venter. Numerous academic staff directed me to the gym hall where his office was situated. I did not have a prior appointment but I was in a crisis and I needed his advice and guidance. Dr Venter remembers the day we met:

I remember the day very well when you knocked on my door in the Sports Building. I opened the door and there you were, standing in front of me. I wanted to introduce myself, complete all the formalities and make an appointment with you, but you looked tense, as if you wanted to get something off your mind. There was enough time for a short discussion, and I decided to lead you to the therapy room.

After he invited me to his office, I told him about the incident in the HMS class. He listened to my story and we discussed the module choices. After a couple of minutes, he recommended that I change my major subjects to History and

Psychology. I briefly disclosed my diagnosis and said that I believed that Psychology would help me to learn more about myself and ASD. Dr Venter recalls the conversation and my body language that day during our discussion. According to him, I looked disorganised and disoriented. He explained:

> Your body language was attentive, and your body posture was closed. You leaned forward, whilst your arms were folded. You made limited eye contact, although it seemed to me that you were trying hard. Your approach was short, formal, and, in a very coherent way, you explained your situation to me.

Dr Venter found it necessary to first assist me with career counselling as it was critical for us to decide our way forward after the disappointment I experienced not. It was a make-or-break situation for me and I needed her advice to find an alternative solution in the time of misery. Dr Venter recalled the period, and also shared his intentions and feelings during the sessions, stating:

> I decided to focus on the most natural part of your request. I am fully aware that I played for time, it was easy enough to send you for psychometric tests, to provide you with formal feedback afterwards and to give some recommendations on what to study, but what then? The primary approach in therapy is first to analyse the context, and subsequently to associate the person within his surroundings. After you provided me with the symptoms and challenges you are confronted with as an individual with ASD, I wondered to myself if education was the right vocation for you.

One of my lecturers, Dr van Staden, who taught me for the four-year period, remembered the first time I walked into her lesson. She recalled:

> I will never forget the first time when you walked into my class. I have the fondest memories of this overweight boy with long hair, dressed in sports clothing, with the most unusual, coloured takkies. You looked like a spectator who was going to attend a rugby or soccer match. You always took a seat in front of the class on the right-hand side. You did not mix with fellow students. I remember that you were entirely reserved and always isolated during my classes.

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In the same breath, Dr Venter explained his interpretation of the situation and remembered how shocked he was when I disclosed my ASD diagnosis:

I was shocked when you started with 'I am an autist'. Then you gave me a textbook description of all the symptoms you have. When you had completed it, you mentioned to me that you could not continue with Human Movement Sciences and that you needed professional guidance. As confused as I was, I asked you if it was only career guidance you required and you answered in the affirmative. As a psychologist, you made me think very deeply. As a service provider, one tends to have individual perceptions about autism, and one is that emotions are absent to a great extent or that emotions are blunted. You're careful. It's fight or flight.

After our discussion that afternoon, Dr Venter recommended that I schedule a weekly appointment with him so we could discuss my week and the emerging challenges that might influence my emotional and social well-being. During my conversations with Dr Venter, he admitted that our initial meeting had led him to study autism in depth with the purpose of supporting me in the best possible manner. Dr Venter explained:

During my planning for our therapeutic intervention, I had a supervision appointment with a colleague, the late Prof. Franna Grootboom; he was [a] head of department at UP for a long time. He was a mentor, colleague and friend whose judgement I valued very highly. I told him briefly about you and asked him for advice. His response was brief, and he explained it to me as follows:

Autism is a communication disorder. Communication and relationships are two sides of the same coin. As you also know, dysfunctional relationships lead to psychopathology. Focus on relationship building and communication. Make sure that the student acquires the necessary communication skills to survive in everyday circumstances.

Unfortunately, it was not easy to teach someone about relationships and its different variations. No textbook explains the grammar of relationships in so many words.

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Awareness of Dr Venter's support made me comfortable to share my feelings and experiences with him. One of the reasons why he recommended a weekly appointment was to ensure that I dealt constructively with disappointment. Dr Venter remembered:

> You did not have much room for manoeuvring. Referring to your matric results and your subjects, they only allowed you to study Education or a pure BA. Our initial thought was for you to move into a pure BA direction with History as a major. Throughout our conversations, you made it very clear that you are passionate about education, and you also expressed the need to contribute and assist school learners. In saying this, the most logical choice was to have History, Psychology and Learning Support as electives. At that precise moment, I realised that your first year was going to be very difficult. I decided to focus on your strengths and abilities. I remember that you were deeply disappointed that you could not study Human Movement Sciences, and my responsibility was to ensure that we dealt with that disappointment. I remember that I reminded you that you could satisfy your love for the sport in different ways at university. You also became involved with your residence rugby's statistical analysis of matches.

As a student, I had no choice but to adapt to the circumstances. Despite my disappointment, I saw the Psychology module as an opportunity to learn more about myself and ASD. Throughout my school career, I had always wondered what the diagnostic criteria were for ASD and if the diagnosis is common amongst children. But, most of all, I hoped that by choosing this subject, I would be able to understand and accept myself for who I am. I was also confident that I would perform well in History as I enjoyed reading history books and my long-term memory was good enough. I left the consultation with a sense of optimism and encouragement. Although I did not receive what I wanted, I felt that we had found a solution to the problem at hand. The next move was to receive the assistance from the administrative staff to assist me with the change of modules. The change of modules happened on the day of the registration.

The first Psychology (SLK), History (HIS) and Education (OPV) classes that I attended were overwhelming, as the majority of the first-year students attended these lectures at the same lecture hall, since Education was a compulsory module for all students. History was also a very popular subject. During the first three days, I felt like I was in a maze. I was frustrated and confused. In these lessons, fellow students who sat next to me moved away or refused to speak to me and I felt rejected and isolated. The only acknowledgement I received was from the lecturers when I approached them about my diagnosis with the purpose to plan, organise and identify the requirements of the module.

For the first two weeks, I attended the information sessions as scheduled on the orientation timetable, and, in that time, I felt that my anxiety levels decreased, but I still varied in my functioning capabilities. I was concerned that I would miss out on the social opportunities university life had to offer and I wanted to make friends outside my family circle. I signed up to become a member of the Faculty's Day House to familiarise myself with the campus, to get social exposure and to form friendships.

For the first two days of Orientation Week, I was a member of Tambotie Day House. The orientation period took place from 30 January to 7 February, and, on this day, numerous events were organised with the purpose of orientating and introducing new first-year students to the university environment. During this week, Tambotie focused on ensuring that the first-years who did not stay in a residence received support to prepare them for their academic careers. Tambotie is known as a day house operative in student life that allows students to participate in social events, such as the Ienkmelodienk musical event, RAG and most sports events on campus. It was the only day house on campus at the Faculty of Education and had a significant membership among students who studied Education. The House Committee members were neatly dressed in blue suits, blue shirts and red ties. Tambotie Day House does not exist anymore and has been replaced by another faculty house. The House Committee members were unfriendly and on the first day had already identified their favourite students whom they wanted to include in their friendship circle. It was notable that the committee members made their judgements

based on social class, physical appearance and sports achievement. I immediately felt like an outsider, as no committee member or student came across to introduce themselves to me to make me feel comfortable.

By looking and listening to the conversations between House Committee members and first-year students, I realised that relationships had already been established. My opinion was not considered because they ignored me. To illustrate, I asked a question which I directed to the Chairperson relating to the responsibilities of first-years as members of the day house. The Chairlady responded to my question seconds afterwards with, 'A stupid question gets a stupid answer'.

I felt humiliated because she spoke loudly enough for other students to hear. During this meeting, the Chairperson said that new first-years needed to earn respect by being in the service of the House committee. To quote the words the Chairlady used in her briefing, 'There is no room for any weakness. If you show signs of weakness, other senior students will replace you!'

When I heard this, I wondered whether I would fit into a social environment that did not allow any form of weakness. During the afternoons, the day house offered different activities to the students at the campus facilities such as at the Amphitheatre. Communication and the forming of social relationships was one of my primary challenges, and I did not have the self-confidence to introduce myself. One of the activities for the week was to form friendship groups. I immediately explained my diagnosis to the House Committee members and referred to my inability to make friends. They claimed to understand my situation, but their body language conveyed a different message.

My primary responsibility at university was my academic work, and I was convinced that I might become preoccupied with social events hosted by the Faculty House. I discussed the situation with my mother, and I decided that my primary responsibility should be academic work and that any social event related to the university should come second. Little did I know that my projections would take an unexpected turn the next day when I decided to join a male residence.

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Numerous factors contributed to the decision my mother and I made that day. It all started that morning while driving to university. My mother had decided to drive with me to discuss my university experience so far. The traffic was hectic and I drove below the speed limit in the fast lane. The cars hooted continuously, and we realised that travelling by car daily to campus would endanger my safety. The people who drove behind us hooted, overtook me and made negative comments. One driver drove past and remarked, 'You may not drive on the highway'. My mother was very stressed and said that we needed to make an alternative plan for transport until I passed my driver's licence in my third year.

The second challenge was that I did not understand the orientation-week timetable correctly. The academic timetable was overpopulated with dates and lecture halls. On the orientation timetable, the different phases were all on one schedule. My planning was problematic, and there was no campus signage to guide me. The only member of staff available to help me was the enrolment officer in the administration building.

When I showed her my timetable, she told me I had misread the schedule. As astonished as I was, my mother and I decided that we needed to stay there until the class on campus took place. In her unpublished manuscript, my mother explained the events that transpired that morning:

> The second day, we sat on the lawn at Groenkloof campus (Faculty of Education). I am speechless because Emile did not listen to me. We drove too early, and he didn't even have class at 08:00. He forced me to leave home at 06:00 in the morning, but he only had class at 14:30. We had to sit on the lawn for seven hours counting our toes! He expected me to take him back home and try to travel with the Gautrain later in the afternoon.

As we walked through the campus, we sat on a hill in front of the two female residences, Rose and Blossom, opposite the administration building, observing what was going on around us. I had to consider residency, but first we wanted to assess the environment. There are four residences on the Faculty of Education's campus, and the staff assisted the first-year students who stayed in residence.

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Order and discipline were the order of the day, and I would adapt to a controlled environment.
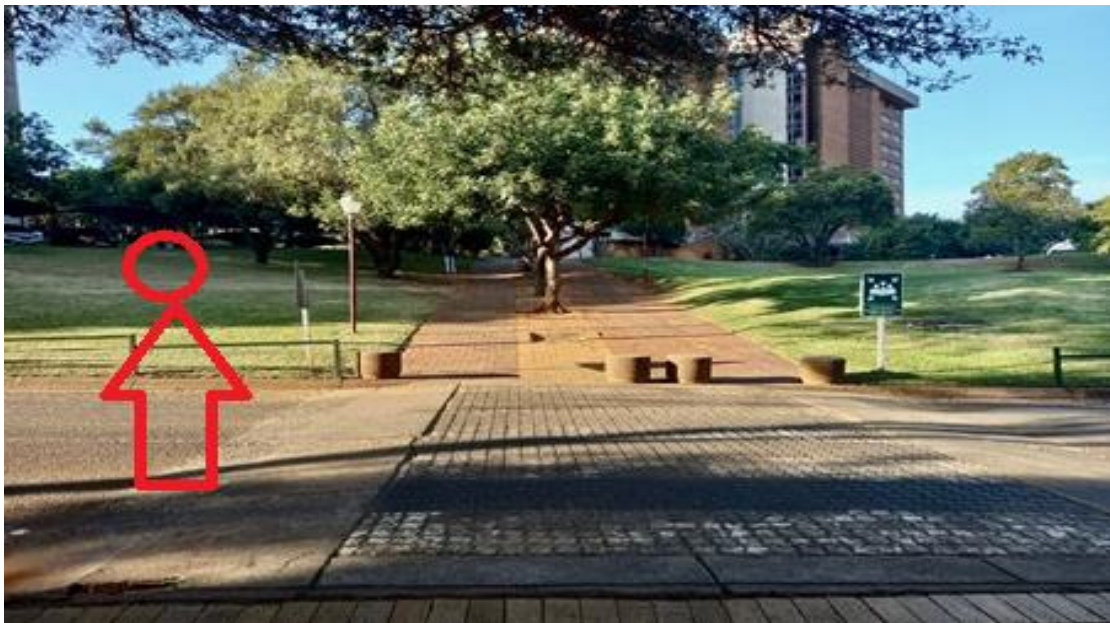
Figure 5.15 A long shot of one of the female residences on the premises of the Faculty of Education

My mom sat next to me (as indicated by the red arrow in Figure 5.15) and asked me whether I would consider residency. She was weeping as she spoke to me. She told me she could not drive me daily to campus because she was still ill after a nervous breakdown. Driving with my cousin Elna was the only option but was not ideal according to my mom as this would mean that I would be dependent on her for transport. At the same time, my mother questioned her ability to support me emotionally to adjust to university life. Therefore, the only way out was to stay in residence. We discussed my timetable, and while we were looking at the scene, we saw a group of students unified by their clothing (black shirt with yellow stripes, skipper and light brown pants) walking in a line. The students behaved with assurance and confidence in that environment and we decided that I must join a residence.

We based the decision on what had transpired that morning in the car and my desire to be independent and develop socially as a person. To our surprise, we saw Kabelo amongst the first-year residence students that morning. When we called him, he

came willingly and shared some of his experiences in residence. Kabelo was enrolled in the residence from the first day of Orientation Week and, by the look on his face, he already had a couple of stories to tell. It was the first time we had seen Kabelo since our matriculation year and his appearance seemed to have changed slightly with his long hair. He told us that the first-years did not respect the House Committee and that the House Committee members were extremely strict. Beside the lack of sleep, Kabelo said in the same breath that he enjoyed university life and persuaded me to join his residence. In a later interview, he recalled:

> I believed that staying in the Residence would benefit you emotionally. You needed to grow as a person. The residence environment was hard and not always easy, but you needed to shake off the 'mommy's boy' perception.

Kabelo was the one student who knew me best as he was aware of the challenges I had experienced. He confirmed in the discussion that he was the right person to support me.

> We came a long road together. We knew each since Grade 8. We spent much time together, not only at school, and I would visit you over weekends and holidays. We went on countless trips together with your family. I saw that as an ideal opportunity to get to know you better as person and as a friend.

I did not hesitate for one moment to seek available occupancy. The administration officer, Miss Atkinson, confirmed that there was still a room available and my Grade 12 marks met the requirements. After the confirmation, my mother and I went to the residence where I introduced myself to the staff.

The maintenance officer at the residence, Uncle Solomon, escorted me to Room 318 on the eighth floor. In the room stood a steel bed, a plastic chair, a cupboard and a small wall unit for books. It was a double room as the wall unit divided the room in two. I stayed in the most important residence at the Faculty of Education, which was ten stories high. The walls in my room were light cream with a brown skirting; the dusty floor was a light blue tile. The view from the room was beautiful, as the window was situated opposite the famous Telkom Tower that shines at night, a blue neon light visible from the R21 highway on the way to campus. I had heard

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from conversations of fellow students that the black and yellow residence was famous for socialising and party events. We booked a room in the residence and arranged that I would share a room with Kabelo. As soon as my mother left, Kabelo showed me around campus and introduced me to his network of friends in the residence. By showing me around, he helped me to familiarise myself with the environment and, by communicating with his friends, I quickly realised that these students were also on a learning curve and searching for social acceptance.

Although it was an unfamiliar setting, Kabelo sat next to us and promised my mother and I that he would introduce me to the students. Kabelo was a natural decision to support me as we had a good relationship and I would benefit emotionally and socially by being in his company. This immediately put my mother at ease. My mother then left, as she explained in her unpublished manuscript:

> I burst into tears, asking Emile if he thought it was a good idea to stay in the residence. Together we wept on the lawn because he knew we would have to make drastic decisions. We booked him a room and thankfully one of Emile's co-scholars and school friend, Kabelo, approached us. The child requested to share a room with Emile. I'm glad because at least Emile knows someone.

Kabelo acknowledged in our later conversation for the purpose of this thesis that I was nervous as this was an unfamiliar environment and I needed to get used to the people involved:

> I observed your behaviour and you looked very nervous. I was aware that you were overwhelmed at first, but this would come to pass as you loved people and I knew you would get along with them soon.

In the afternoon, Kabelo introduced me to other first-years. It was a friendship group of four friendly students who were also dependent on each other for support. The students looked exhausted as they had not slept the previous night, and their unhappiness was based on the treatment they had received from the House Committee members. They were very upset and said in a closed conversation that their rights had been violated. At that moment, I acknowledged Kabelo's position as a student who was also searching for his identity on campus. Kabelo was a Black

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African student who was enrolled in a traditional Afrikaans residence that tried to force their ableist traditions on all students. Like me, he came from a protective education environment directly into a university setting. Although I was dependent on his support, I needed to consider his position and his needs.

My father showed his gratitude by commenting on Kabelo's friendship and our decision to share a room:

> Because you and Kabelo had known each other for years, this was the ideal option. It was good because he was the only person in the residence you knew. I think he was a big pillar for you, especially since both of you were studying education.

Despite my father's optimistic view, he was also concerned that Kabelo and I might be judged, as we were about to enter an unfamiliar environment that might not accept multiracial friendships. He added:

> Colour did not play a role. We didn't raise you that way. If race was a problem for you, you and he would not have been friends at school. I remember that you and Kabelo had a good bond and the school environment embraced your friendship. What was good was that he was the only person from the same peer group who was willing to accept you with the unique challenges you experienced as an individual on the autism spectrum. I was concerned, as both of you were now entering the adult world and there might be judgement towards you as students from different races.

The Black African community was accepting of me, as they were also part of a vulnerable group at university. One could tell that the Black African students were uncomfortable in that environment. From the first, I felt more comfortable speaking to Kabelo and his friends because they accepted me for who I was. In retrospect, the Black African students were accepting of each other and the spirit of ubuntu was evident in the way they supported each other. As a White student, I was comfortable asking for advice and assistance from fellow Black African students, as I had also experienced rejection and isolation. I had been warned that the House Committee members portrayed a no-nonsense attitude and a typical army approach. I listened

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to the advice but disclosed to a member of the committee that I was autistic because I realised they would pick up that my behaviour was different. To my dismay, they did not know how to handle my revelation and avoided me. Despite the apparent discrimination, I enjoyed my independence, just like the other students, and proved that I could live independently.

Life in the residence benefitted my emotional well-being but also my academic performance. I am saying so because I had heard that university students who boarded in these residences (also called internals) achieved better grades compared to external students of equal academic ability; the former tended to link their studying to success and work harder. Internals are also more likely to seek the information and help needed to succeed in their situation.

5.4 In residence – my first two years

After I enrolled at the residence, my school friend and roommate Kabelo and I shared a room in the Moeggeploeg Residence. I was glad that he had agreed to share a room with me, because he did not show any prejudice towards me and understood my needs. I longed for self-acceptance and my self-esteem improved every time I passed assessments or completed work independently, and students in my inner circle who associated themselves with me supported me.

The Tuesday afternoon when my mother left the campus to fetch my clothes (24 January 2012), we cut the proverbial umbilical cord. The decision to depart from the house of my parents was vital for me to live independently and develop coping skills. The next morning my mother contacted Dr Venter on campus to assist me emotionally. Dr Venter remembered the conversation with my mother and recalled the tone of her voice as urgent:

> I remember the conversation with your mom and her tone of voice was one of urgency and concern. She asked me to assist you with career guidance but also to deal with disappointment that you received from the Human Movement Science's lecturer. She feared that you would be an easy target for emotional abuse as you appeared to be gullible.

The Moeggeploeg Residence was known as the largest male residence at the University of Pretoria. It was a ten-storey building (Figure 5.16). In that year, 2012, enrolment at the residence was 90 first-year students The residence had traditions and set rules that new first-year students had to obey. First, House Committee members made it clear that the first-years in the residence were to be known as 'plants'. The residence required that the new first-year students remain in the building for the first two weeks before going home for weekends. In residence, students would greet each other with a firm handshake and look each other in the eye. The aim was to gain one's fellow students' trust and to form friendships.

Figure 5.16 The Moeggeploeg Residence

Most importantly, first-year students were required to greet the House Committee members, the seniors and also each other. Each house member had a different title and the students had to greet them accordingly. The house father was called Prof; the chairman was Oupa; the Ienkvoog (first-year guardian) was Pa; all House Committee members were Master; old House Committee members were greeted as Groot Oom; and the seniors and rest of the residence students were Oom. It was quite a handful to remember and smacked of Afrikaner patriarchy. The first-year students were required to remember the titles and greet the House Committee members on every occasion. In the presence of the House Committee members, one could feel the tension as they walked around to observe the first-years. There

was not a single sound. They demanded respect, especially in the presence of the Chairman of the Residence, who had long, black, curly hair and a dark brown beard. One could sense that the first-years were very cautious, as he was someone you did not want to confront.

The House Committee members demanded respect from the first-years and would give names to the students, such as Jar in reference to eerste jaar (first year). As I was new to the residence environment, I could not figure out the reasons for these greetings or the intentions behind the nicknames. The dress code of the House Committee members conveyed a professional image with each young man dressing in a yellow tie, a jersey and a neat blazer embossed with the residence logo, a tiger. One of the responsibilities of the House Committee members was to ensure that the first-year students familiarised themselves with the Orientation Week timetable and to make sure that first-years explored and understood all facets of university life.

At first it was scary, but exciting at the same time. I had always wanted to test my boundaries by moving out of my comfort zone to develop new skills. To fit into the residence environment, I needed to adapt my behaviour and ensure that I wore the appropriate clothing to suit that environment. As I walked past the other first-year students, I was singled out because I was still dressed in my regular clothing instead of my Ienk drag (first-year residence uniform). The afternoon of the first-year line-up, a House Committee member told me to stand in the line, which was categorised according to the floors. First-years stood every morning, afternoon and evening in front of the residence and also at the dining hall. Figure 5.17 demonstrates the discipline and dress code as the new first-years lined up in front of the dining hall before everyone dispersed.

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Figure 5.17 First-year students in their uniforms lining up in rows in front of the dining hall according to their floor and room (Mulalo, 2012).

As the Head of House was looking over the crowd of first-years, he noticed me – the odd one out. He singled me out as the one who wore the 'French shirt'. As I walked toward him, he shook my hand and asked my name and when I had arrived. I told him my name, and he immediately introduced me to the rest of the group. In his introduction, he asked the rest of the first-years to make me feel comfortable and to help me familiarise myself with the rules of the residence and the different activities that first-year students are involved in. I eventually received my Ienk drag from a member of the House Committee before I joined the rest of the students for the next activity. First-years of the residence were required to wear this uniform throughout Orientation Week and every Wednesday thereafter.

The moment I dressed in the Ienk uniform, the students saw me both as a student with a difference and as someone who was part of them. This uniform symbolised unity and tradition, and I was fortunate to be part of it. I immediately joined the rest of the group on the sports field to participate in various sports such as rugby, soccer, basketball and tennis. These events took place every afternoon between 16:00 and 17:00 to show the first-years the kind of events the residence participated in. As we walked to the sports field, I noticed that many of my fellow students talked about their high school experiences, and I realised that they came from popular and well-

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known schools across the country. Several students were well-known sports athletes and had represented their schools on the national level. This first-year group was very strong and performed exceptionally well, not only on the sports field but also academically and on a cultural level. On a cultural level, first-year students were encouraged to participate in the Ienkmelodienk extravaganza held on 6 February at the Amphitheatre on the main campus. This was a singing and dancing event in which all day houses and residences competed. The House Committee decided that the theme was 'Boxing' and we, as first-years, would perform a dance involving a boxing match.

For the first week, we practised every night for two hours in the gym hall to get the moves right for the short performance. For someone with low muscle tone, the dancing moves were fast and very difficult, and one particular student told me to avoid the practice as I would embarrass the residence. I was momentarily astounded when the student confronted me during a practice session but I just kept quiet. As I was new to the residence environment, I knew that I would be emotionally and socially vulnerable, because I was not familiar with the rules of the environment and wanted to avoid any form of conflict. Dr Venter admitted in a conversation that one of my most significant learning curves was to be able to confront students who had a negative response to me. He told me, 'You needed to learn to stand up for yourself against bullies and people who wanted to break you down; learn to identify and express your needs.'

It was an exciting time. Both my roommate, Kabelo and I knew that we were on a learning curve that would stimulate us emotionally, socially and academically. The following email notification from Facebook Messenger (Figure 5.18) explains our excitement for the upcoming events. It is important to note that a Facebook friend of Kabelo) commented on the photo of us both.

facebook

Hi Emile,

_____ (friends with _____) commented on photo of you.

_____ wrote: "@_____ till I _____ manery"

Go to comments

Reply to this email to comment on this photo.

Figure 5.18 Facebook comment by my roommate which reflects the pride we felt as first-year Moeggeploeg students

We were very excited to participate in the upcoming RAG fundraiser, in which first-year students from the men's and women's residences teamed up to fold paper flowers and build a float. The floats were exhibited at the annual fundraising event on Saturday morning. Every night of the week, we folded flowers for two hours. The RAG committee of both residences decided on the 'Smurf' theme (Figure 5.19). To our disappointment, the other residences' floats were more attractive and technologically advanced than ours.

Figure 5.19 The Smurf float constructed by Moeggeploeg first-year students for the University of Pretoria's Jool or RAG float (Source: SwartSoosMambaKat, 2012)

Despite our disappointment, it was an enjoyable event and I participated in the RAG fundraising walk (Figure 5.20). In this walk, the first-year students of the different residences and day houses walked in the streets of Pretoria with a donation can into which spectators could deposit donations for charity and community upliftment purposes. Note that I am the student on the far left (indicated by the red arrow) with the can in my hand. I moved to the left to avoid the sensory overload from most of the students in the centre.

Figure 5.20 My participation in the RAG fundraising event (Source: SwartSoosMambaKat, 2012).

During the fundraising event, I noticed that students had already formed different friendship groups, especially within this first-year group. These friendship groups were established primarily by the students who sat together in the dining hall.

The dining hall was the venue where all the students came together to meet, socialise and share their personal experiences. I found it extremely difficult to sit next to these students as they did not speak to me. It was also noticeable how the

different groups in the residence environment arranged their seating apart from each other in the dining hall. Black African students sat at one table, another table had students who participated in the residence social and cultural events, another the rugby players, and another the IT students and students who studied engineering. But, as a student with a neurodevelopmental disorder like autism, I did not find my group. The only option that I had was to try join these groups or sit on my own. When I tried to join the groups, I would be excluded from their conversations. I immediately got the impression that either the students did not want to associate with me or they did not know how to communicate with me. The students noticed that my behaviour was different, especially during the orientation week. I kept on feeling and experiencing that the Black African students accommodated me best. For example, it was a Black African student Dave who helped me with additional lessons in the residence.

There were numerous reasons why I believed that there was a pre-conceived perception towards me based on my unusual preferences and behaviour as a student with ASD, such as the choice I made to share a room with my school friend who was a Black African. For most students, staying in a residence was the first time that they were mixing with other race groups and, for the first time in the residence's history, students of two different races had decided to share a room. It was a historic moment as it broke the race barrier and, as a result, comments were made and my roommate and I were judged. We were prepared for these comments as the residence had strict rules regarding people from different races sharing rooms. We contravened the norm and most White students in the residence found this social rule-breaking unacceptable. We were already regarded as outsiders, the norm rejected us, and we needed to overcome this barrier to survive in the residence. Figure 5.21 is a Facebook post that my roommate posted to explain the challenges we experienced on campus in our first year (as a Black African and as a student with a disability). In his Facebook post, Kabelo emphasised the culture of the residence by referring to the treatment dealt out to new first-year students.

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12 May 2012 · 👥

My self nd milies, first day at varsity - we looked like grade ones (G)
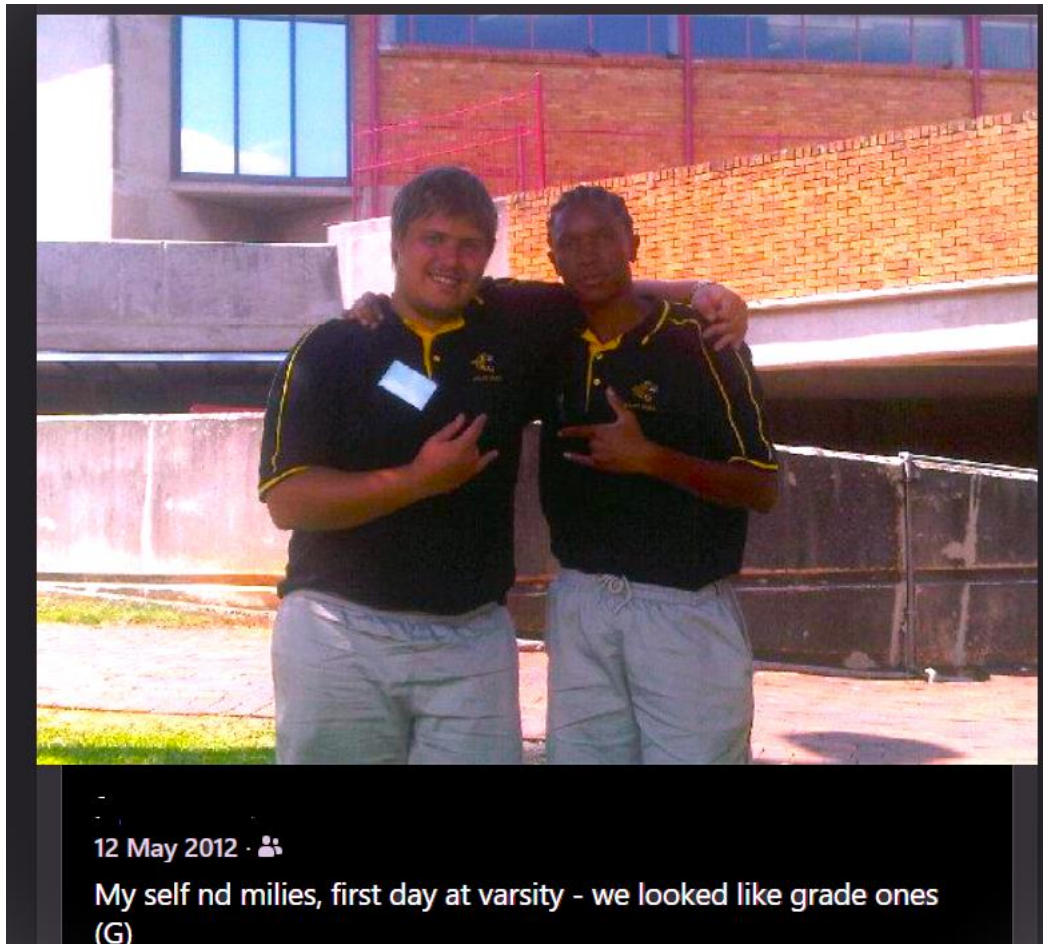
Figure 5.21 A Facebook post that Kabelo shared on his personal timeline. This photo was taken during our first couple of weeks at university.

Secondly, my social behaviour changed significantly at social events and limited my communication in the presence of fellow students. Additionally, all the House Committee members noticed that my anxiety levels were too high in unfamiliar circumstances such as 'The Prison Walk' where the first-year students were formally introduced to the senior students in the residence. During the Prison Walk, the first-year students had to run up the stairs, while the senior students made a noise and broke glass bottles with the lights dimmed. It was a traumatic experience as my auditory senses were overloaded; I decided not to participate further in the Prison Walk. The Prison Walk is part of the tradition of the residence, which usually happens at the end of Orientation Week. This event is intended to eliminate any form of weakness that students might portray and prove that they are masculine. It was a traumatising experience for me and most first-year students. The majority of

the first-year students, especially the Black South Africans, believed that this event discriminated against their rights and forced a White Afrikaans tradition on students from diverse backgrounds. My decision not to participate further in the Prison Walk contributed to the exclusion I experienced. Questions were raised about my emotional well-being and my ability to survive in a residence environment that prefers masculinity.

When I asked Kabelo about his personal feelings about sharing a room with me, he admitted that he was excited at first, but he did not make the decision lightly as he had already formed a friendship bond with his previous roommate. He explained:

> I found it surprising that you have decided to join a residence, as you never planned to go. When you came, I already had a roommate who I already bonded with and who I had to abandon in favour of you. At first, I was excited that you decided to share a room with me as it was with someone who was my friend and someone that I know, someone who understand me and who I understand. But to look at the picture globally, we changed perceptions as we were the first students from mixed races to share a room. We made history!

Fellow students acknowledged my difference and were careful in the way they approached me. They did not see me as particularly intellectually capable because I needed time to process information and express my feelings in basic conversation. It was one of my primary concerns that I discussed with Dr Venter. During our conversation, he agreed that I needed to develop essential skills to be able to communicate and make conversation with fellow students. A great asset of Dr Venter's therapy was his thorough understanding of the university, especially the residence environment, and he could, therefore, relate to the challenges I experienced. He had worked with numerous students who had struggled to adapt and find acceptance in the university environment. Dr Venter remembered:

> You have experienced for yourself how easily your conversations derail; for example, when the guys talk rugby and someone makes a mistake when discussing a rugby match, without hesitance you would correct that person. In doing this, you would have been isolated based on your honesty. What you said was true or virtually correct, but you had to learn that the impact on the listener

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is not always well received. You needed to learn to put the facts into words in a different way. We looked at how one's communication style changes when you are in 1) a leader-follower relationship 2) function in an equal relationship or 3) whether you are in a power struggle. This means you had to adapt your communication style to changing contexts or conversation partners. The teacher, for example, cannot talk to her husband in the same prescriptive way as to her students. It required an awful lot of courage from you, and it was also difficult for you to experiment with behaviour between the spectrum of rigid communication patterns on the one hand and flexibility on the other. You were afraid of making mistakes. Moreover, I understood your fear. I also realised that I could teach you the principles of communication. However, there are subtle elements that a person is confronted with in relationships that cannot ever be predicted or captured with a communication recipe.

Students observed when I experienced social chaos because my behaviour was different. For instance, I preferred not to join the rest of the male students at the club house of the residence for social events or parties. However, in spite of my differences, I felt that I deserved the same opportunities as the other students to enjoy the student lifestyle. I wanted to belong and forced myself to speak to students, but they still distanced themselves. Every time I attempted to interact with students in residence was a win for me because I had to step out of my comfort zone to communicate with them. I could not help overhearing their conversations and they broke away when I approached. I wished that they would invite me to join their discussions. Once, in my first year, a fellow student asked me why I preferred to sit alone. At that moment, I did not answer him. It was a difficult question to answer as I had experienced rejection from my fellow students and they did not know how to communicate with me. My roommate also had his own friendship group based on his academic schedule. I had the choice to proceed with Kabelo's group, but I felt uncomfortable and preferred to make my own friends. Kabelo acknowledged in our conversation that he felt frustrated at times as he felt that I did not grant him the space that he required to form new friendships and to express himself. He said:

> You were a cool roommate at first, but I realised later that our interests and value system differed as we clashed over minor situations. For instance, if I brought a female along for a visit, you would not be happy. You would express your unhappiness if I invited five guys over. I perceived it that you felt threatened by them and that it would influence our friendship.

I understood his frustration as he was also trying hard to find his place at university. As such, I decided to move out of my comfort zone by communicating with others and to make myself available for social interaction. The only way I could do this was to get involved with the rugby team to make friends. By asking Dr Venter about his strategy to improve my social skills and to develop the ability to form relationships, he said that his focus shifted from the therapy to communication:

> I apply 16 interpersonal variables in therapy. If you can learn to build a relationship with me, you will also be able to do it 'out there'. In your case, the biggest challenge was to find your place in the residence, to build friendships.

Dr Venter encouraged me to work on my communication skills in residence with fellow male students. He encouraged me to consider a general topic such as rugby and start short conversations with fellow students. Rugby was the primary sport in residence, and all the students who participated in the sport were accepted and invited into the different friend groups. Although I did not play the sport, I wanted to be part of the team and receive acceptance from everyone. Speaking about the history of the game and sharing random facts would be the gateway to achieving my goal. Despite my efforts, I found having conversations challenging as I would provide random facts about the sport instead of following the flow and adapting to the direction of the conversation. In our weekly therapy session, we discussed the different reasons why I experienced rejection in conversations. Dr Venter reiterated the fact that that I was too honest in my talks and others would, therefore, immediately lose interest.

Fellow students also noticed that I was reserved and could be easily manipulated. I had the desire to form an amiable relationship and would, therefore, avoid any possible form of conflict with students in residence. Dr Venter reminded me that I needed to be firm and confront students who appeared manipulative. When

discussing the numerous incidences with Dr Venter, he analysed my responses. He concluded that I had a fixed moral system and that I considered others' emotions, which prevented me from confronting students:

> The one thing with which I had a problem was that your Godly awareness did not allow you to do anything to other people who would appear unloving to you, and it was difficult for you to confront people. You always considered other people's needs and emotions above yours. You and I discussed that a student's needs must be hard to navigate in residence. There came a time when you needed to confront students, but you felt it was unacceptable for you to use swearing and bad language against the people who were not on your frame of reference.

Confrontation became a common problem and affected my relationship with fellow students in the residence. Dr Venter recalled several scenarios which escalated to a point where their actions reflected blatant disrespect – from borrowing my television over weekends to asking for money. I was incapable of standing up for myself, she noted:

> What stood out for me was the students from the female residence who wanted to diminish you, and the unflattering remarks they made towards you when you waited to walk from class to the residence. It was devastating to you. I was outraged and thought it would justify suspension. An aspiring teacher who is capable of bullying and verbal abuse is not allowed to work with children. I needed to convince you that the problem was not with you but with them. After analysing the different scenarios and discussing this with you, I was convinced more than ever that you should come over stronger or more assertive to prevent and stop hurtful and abusive behaviour against you.

I realised that I needed to become stronger as a person to develop my communication skills and improve my self-esteem. I saw the involvement in residence rugby as an ideal opportunity to grow as a person and also to be involved in sport at university. During the second week of orientation, the Head of the Sports Committee introduced the new first-years to the rugby coach, Johan.

What made this remarkable was that Johan has been a quadriplegic from the age of 14 years when a devastating rugby injury changed his life. I saw Johan as an inspiration and role model, who proved that one can still achieve one's goals despite the challenges. As another student in the residence who had a disability, it provided hope, as the rest of the students in residence accepted Johan unconditionally. Johan enjoyed the respect and recognition from the whole residence for his contributions to the rugby team. He was regarded as the ultimate hero, as he had sacrificed his body for the sport. All the students in the residence wanted to associate with Johan and were willing to help him with accessibility around campus facilities. Although I appreciated the fact that Johan was being accepted by all students in residence, I was confused that I, a student with a neurodevelopmental disability on the autism spectrum, did not draw the same basic level of respect and reasonable accommodation. My desperation to be accepted in the residence made me decide to associate myself with Johan in the hope of being accepted. By associating myself with Johan, I had the idea that I would receive the same level of respect. As my desire increased, I eventually approached Johan one afternoon to ask him if I could get involved with the team as a team manager. Without hesitation, he accepted the offer as well as the responsibility. In our conversation, Johan recalled the day I introduced myself to him, admitting that he realised that I was not a player based on my clothing:

> Unlike the other first-years, I noticed that you were not wearing toxins (spiked shoes) or training clothes. It was my first encounter with this young man who was still wet behind the ears. Your first words were, 'Hello coach, I cannot play rugby, but I would like to be part of the team.' I could not see at all that he was autistic. Because I am in a wheelchair – quadriplegic, I broke my neck playing rugby – I cannot perform physical tasks such as unpacking cones, inflating balls, taking out diving bags and much more. Without hesitation, I made you my team manager and you undertook this position as team manager with pride.

As a manager, I washed the rugby jerseys after each match and kept a daily attendance register for the players. No matter the responsibility, I was proud to be part of the team. Figure 5.22 is a photograph taken at a training session at the Faculty of Education's sport field.

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Figure 5.22 The team and I during one of the training sessions on Groenkloof Campus. I am third on the left wearing with the red sport shirt with the keychain around my neck (indicated by the red arrow).

I attended each training session in the evenings from 19:00 on the campus rugby fields and it was the highlight of my day. Johan remembered these practice sessions:

> We practised Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings from 19:00 to 21:00, before the league would start. Who was always the first person to show up at my apartment before we went to the rugby field? Emile! Your punctuality immediately struck me. Always willing and excited to help where you could. With match days, you made sure the jerseys were neatly unpacked in number order.

However, because the academic pressure at university was demanding, I had to make the decision not to attend rugby training on a regular basis, despite it being a

time of relaxation and enjoyment. As cycle tests and term assessments drew closer, I decided to stay away from training for up to two weeks as I studied and completed assignments in my room and caught up with work. I was always behind with my studies, and some senior students criticised me for staying away from training, but little did they know that my grades had dropped when I replaced my study time with rugby activities. Despite my interest in the sport, I struggled to cope with the heavy academic workload, and, over time, I did not cope with both responsibilities. The one student who truly witnessed my academic challenges was Kabelo. He recalled my work ethic late at night and my continuous struggle to grasp concepts:

> When it came to work, you were a very hard worker like it was in high school and it did not change. I remember that at nights you would study at the library when I came back from my classes late at night. You were always in front of your books as you needed more time compared to the usual student to complete tasks and study for the exams.

It became so critical that a senior student confronted me before a training session telling me that I was irresponsible and that I did not deserve the title of manager of a rugby team. Although Johan understood my academic challenges, he decided to appoint a second manager the following year. This decision caught me off guard, and I was disappointed. This decision affected my self-confidence and motivation. The other manager was a former rugby player and a popular figure in social groups. He had a strong personality and was a good organiser. Observing his comments and critiques of my performance, I believe he saw me as the weak link of the team and he might have contributed towards my replacement. Despite this, my friendship with Johan remained strong, and I still maintained the same responsibilities within the team, especially on match day when Johan would ask me to take the time on a stopwatch while the game was on. He wanted me to record the basic statistics of the rugby match. The following photograph (Figure 5.23) was taken at a game. I am holding the yellow tablet on which I recorded the match statistics. The student next to me was the second team manager.

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Figure 5.23 My fellow manager of the under-20 Moeggeploeg rugby team and I before the final (Wild Fire Matt, 2013)

Johan remembered the conversations we had before and after rugby practices:

> The more I talked to you, the more I realised how intelligent you were. I have never come across anyone who has so much knowledge of rugby history. It was only when I asked you how you managed to remember so well that you told me you were autistic.

Johan also gave me responsibility on match day to fill the water bottles and put out the jerseys for the team. When asked about the duties at the rugby matches, Johan remembered:

> Our friendship only got stronger as the season continued. I remember that you started as a shy, slightly withdrawn first-year, and developed into a spontaneous social person. All of us at rugby could see you getting more and more involved. All the players and I had so much respect for you. You quickly completed all the tasks assigned to you with care and precision. It made you an eager and capable team manager – my right hand.

The team played every Tuesday at 18:00 at LC de Villiers Sports Ground (now the Hillcrest Sports Campus), South Street, Hillcrest, Pretoria. To attend the rugby

matches, a few other students and I assisted Johan by driving with him to the rugby matches and helping him to carry the equipment. Although I was excited to take part in the rugby matches, I was nervous, as there would be a crowd of spectators supporting their own teams from all the residences. At the rugby matches, I was sensorially overloaded as the noise levels were too high. I was aware of my behaviour in the environment and would, therefore, do masking – a behaviour modification technique used by autistic adults – to fit into an environment and pretend that I was okay, because I wanted to take part and be part of a team. However, some students noticed that my behaviour was different. I went through phases when my conscious levels diminished because of sensory sensitivity. I would not make eye contact and would basically move away from the crowd as far as possible to avoid sensory overload. In this sort of environment, victimisation and discrimination would occur and, as such, judgement would appear when any behaviour contravened the norm.

Kabelo witnessed this first-hand and also agreed that my behaviour changed tremendously in crowds at rugby matches and questioned my intention to join the rugby team. Did I join the rugby team for the love of the sport or did I get involved to receive acceptance and please other people? He stated:

> So, you were outgoing and involved in activities hosted by our residence, especially with the rugby. If I can remember correctly, you were appointed as something – the manager. So, you were willing to be part of society. But like I said, whenever I looked at you, you always wanted someone's approval. So there was uncertainty from your side. In an overcrowded environment, you looked very nervous, because you were not used to the environment and were not sure how I would react in front of people.

Neurotypical students did not want to have an autistic friend because they had a negative perception of neurodiversity. If you observe my behaviour in a social environment, my uniqueness is visible and students would ask, 'Why doesn't he make eye contact? Why does he look around? and why is he so nervous?' They did not understand autism and how sensory information overwhelms me. However, Dr

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Venter understood my behaviour and explained the reasons behind my limited eye contact in overstimulating environments to me as follows:

> Interpersonal relationships can be overwhelming for a young child who still knows nothing about life. There is a real threat, and I cannot do anything. This is why eye contact was problematic for you. When you look a person in the eye, you see a lot more detail than another person does. In response to this, you refuse to make eye contact and, as such, you will try to get away from that burning voice that comes from the other person's eyes.

Although I was considered to be part of the first-year group, I knew that it was only a matter of time before they dismissed me. I became replaceable when people noticed my differences. Dr Venter and I discussed this topic in our weekly therapy sessions when referring to the stares and comments I received from other students. During our sessions, Dr Venter followed the glass half-full approach by making me aware that the University of Pretoria, as a higher education institution, has a robust judgement system. As such, each student's behaviour and responses are analysed. When reminding him of that therapy session, Dr Venter mentioned:

> Everything that a student has already done or is about to do is evaluated. As such, the feedback can be harsh, straightforward and ruthless. You are in an ongoing process of finding your identity. As a student, you have to adapt according to the circumstances and expectations. You need to develop that hardiness and the ability to get up again if you have fallen. It is a process that every student needs to undergo.

As we discussed my experiences as a student in the residence, Dr Venter remembered the conversations we had on my ability to confront students if I received any negative comments, saying:

> I remember one incident where a student told you that you were a nerd. At the moral level, you had a fixed value system. It was so firm that I wondered if you were ever going to let it go a bit in order to stand up for yourself. There comes a time when you need to confront students and put them firmly in their place but it was unacceptable to you to use the kind of language that males would

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understand to indicate that you have had enough, as it was outside your reference framework.

Despite the negative comments directed at me, I persevered as I did not want to isolate myself from the learning opportunities. I wanted to be involved in the team discussions although I never shared my opinions or analysis of the matches. The following photograph (Figure 5.24) was taken during a half-time talk at the finals. Note that I am the student in blue next to Johan, the team's head coach.

Figure 5.24 Half-time chat between the coach (Johan) and the players during the final (Wild Fire Matt, 2013)

I was part of a winning team; they achieved the unachievable by winning the under-20 rugby competition twice in a row. The following two photographs were taken after two consecutive finals where the Moeggeploeg under-20 team won the residence championship (Figures 5.25 and 5.26). I am the student with the long hair, centre stage (blue, black and yellow jacket) at the victory celebration at the LC de Villiers Sports Ground, now Hillcrest Campus (indicated by the red arrow) in Figure 5.26.

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Figure 5.25 The Moeggeploeg rugby team crowned under-20 champions of the residence tournament (Source: Chandler, 2012).

Figure 5.26 The team and I that won the under-20 residence championship for the second consecutive year (Wild Fire Matt, 2013). I am the student situated on the left with the blue shirt and coloured key holder around my neck.

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I felt a sense of satisfaction as I had contributed to both teams but was eventually disappointed because I was not acknowledged for my contributions to the team over a two-year span at the end-of-year function. All the players, substitutes and my co-manager who were involved received certificates. I was excluded again. In an article about the rugby published on a wheelchair website on his involvement in rugby, Johan wrote a piece about his experiences as coach of the under-20 rugby team. He acknowledged the role of his assistants in the success of the team's achievements.

As quoted in the article:

I want to thank my two managers that assisted me in coaching. This might have been my last year coaching at Moeggeploeg because of some opportunities that came up. I hope that the winning tradition will continue and that our name will be engraved on that cup again. Like I always say to my Patriots, 'CLEAR EYES, FULL HEARTS, CAN'T LOSE' (Lombard, 2013)

When we discussed both successive residence rugby victories, Johan mentioned something about my contribution to the team:

> As the coach of the Moeggeploeg u/20s rugby team, I can say with conviction that your part was indispensable in our success. You are indeed a 'team player' and always put others before yourself. No matter how cold the winter morning and evening exercises were, you were there – even giving each player a shot of sherry to enjoy after a cold hard workout.

Even though I was not rewarded with a certificate for my services, Johan acknowledged my hard work and my dedication in a letter of appreciation that he wrote to me (Figure 5.27). In the letter he acknowledged that our friendship had grown stronger throughout the seasons:

> As time went on, we became good friends. I have the world's respect for you. Despite your autism, you [have] already reached incredible heights and touched people.

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I asked him to write me a reference that I could present one day at the school where I teach.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I know Emile Gouws for almost three years now. I was the Coach of the ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ rugby team that won the University of pretoria'sSteinhof Cup in 2012 & 2013. During this period he was my team manager.

. Emile Gouws is courageous men that have a positive attitude and is the best manager I could have asked for.

I respect him for the knowledge of the game he loves so dearly rugby.

He is a hard working unselfish person and never complained about something that I asked him to do.

He is very committed and loyal to the game rugby. He is also very trustworthy and has the ability to operate on his own when necessary.

He can overcome anything that will be thrown to his side.

I will strongly recommend him in any position of it sort and more.

Kind regards

Figure 5.27 Letter of appreciation for my CV from Johan, who acknowledged my work as a manager

Despite the numerous challenges I experienced, Johan acknowledged my growth in terms of my communication and social interaction with him and fellow students:

If there is one person who deserves only the best, it is you. First a small tree, that turned into a big tree. Your loyalty, kindness and sincerity will always remain with me.

At the time when I experienced challenges academically, emotionally and socially, my weight escalated. My diet was a problem because I was a comfort eater and did not exercise regularly. My food choices were poor and my portions were too big. The dining hall accommodated different cultures and religions in terms of food choices, but not for students with ASD. I eventually gained the confidence to introduce myself to the manager of the dining hall to ask if they could accommodate my diet as well as my portion sizes when cooked meals were available. The dining hall did not accept any form of cash and all the products were bought by swiping your student card. In my first-year, the custom was for students to order breakfast and dinner electronically the night before. It was nice to have a cooked meal in the mornings and evenings, but I was concerned about money as students had a limit of R300 a day (equivalent to three meals a day). The manager of the dining hall was polite but explained to me that he could not accommodate my individual needs and that I must choose from the menu. As someone who was sensorially sensitive, I did not eat food like soup or rice, based on their texture and had, unfortunately, no choice but to eat unhealthy foods such as bread and foods that contained sugar. There were days when I did not eat breakfast, only lunch and dinner. On some days, my meals consisted of a breakfast wrap, a pie and maybe a packet of chips (fries). It was also a period when I did not know how to eat a healthy diet and would overeat during the week due to stress. I did not follow a strict diet, and, as a result, my weight became a problem and fellow students and lecturers saw it. One of the lecturers who was involved in my undergraduate studies, the Life Orientation lecturer, Dr van Staden, witnessed my journey as a first-year student and shared her opinion on my appearance:

You were overweight. You tried to establish your identity. I always got the idea that you were trying to make a statement with the long hair and with your unique dress code. You had your style.

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It was evident that students and lecturers held preconceived ideas about me as I was evaluated by my appearance and behaviour. Without their effort to get to know the person behind the diagnosis, I was already marked as an outsider. Any behaviour or dress code contrary to the norm was isolating and discriminated against.

When I asked my father about my dress code at university, he remembered that it was always a problem which contributed to the negative perceptions held by fellow students:

> You always had a problem [with] your clothing. You always tried to look neat, but it didn't fit the university environment. You always wore tracksuits. You looked untidy with long hair and a beard.

From my first visit to Dr van Staden, she welcomed me with open arms. She was the first lecturer to whom I disclosed that I was on the autism spectrum. She received the information calmly and reassured me that I could come to her for assistance when I required it. After I disclosed my diagnosis to her, I felt a positive change in her attitude toward me. She took a nurturing position (similar to the role of a mother) and was concerned about my emotional well-being during lectures. Academically, I reassured myself that there would always be helpful lecturers. My only concern was my emotional and social well-being, especially when it came to forming relationships with fellow students in the residence. It bothered me that I did not have any friends apart from Kabelo on campus and in the residence. I wanted to form part of a friendship discussion, especially in the dining hall, as it was the place where all students in the residence met for social interaction.

The dining hall was also very popular in the evenings, hosting dining events such as Valentine's Day and year-end functions. It was always a highlight for the students who stayed in residence, and they made use of the opportunity to invite the female residences to attend the dance with them. This was an exciting period for the residence. Yet, it was a stressful period for me as I was not looking forward to the big crowds and I did not have anyone who could attend the function with me. Considering my communication skills, I did not know how to communicate with fellow students. Again, I required the assistance of Dr Venter to help me to acquire

the skills to communicate. Dr Venter remembered my need to understand how communication affects responsiveness, especially in non-verbal behaviour:

> What you do or say can have an impact on the type of conversation that you have with your partner. It might not have been in your intentions to confront people or to bring the worst out of them, but you needed to learn about the different manner in which an individual can engage or talk to others. How one says something can affect how the person responds.

No matter how hard I tried, I still received rejection and this made me cautious. The most common event the dining hall hosted was the Valentine's Day dance. I had the choice not to go but I did not want to avoid it. So, I needed to put my insecurities aside and ask somebody to go with me.

The male students had asked students from female residences to accompany them to the dance. I went through my possible options and eventually invited two students, but unfortunately both rejected the invitation. The first student declined the offer with the excuse that she was diagnosed with a 'stomach virus'. I was not upset that she refused as I barely expected that she would agree to it. I was not the most handsome boy and not very masculine and she was quite an attractive student. The next student I asked was hesitant and had a valid reason that she had a very jealous boyfriend. I was disappointed and considered going on my own. My roommate, Kabelo, and I agreed to attend the function together to get a free meal.

At the event, all the couples were neatly dressed and made attractive pairs. The food was exceptional and the dessert was appreciated by all. The students enjoyed the dance. At first it seemed strange to attend the function with my roommate. All the couples danced and chatted whilst I sat there and watched. My roommate and I dressed up for the function and enjoyed the food. We were spectators, but we enjoyed the evening. I only communicated with the students who approached me because the environment was too crowded.

Later, the dining hall was changed to a study area specifically for first-year students to provide a venue for quality time to study. The dining hall became overcrowded as it attracted some day students as well. Owing to sensory overload, I preferred to

buy my food either from the supermarket or the campus canteen. Usually it was tranquil in the afternoons and, therefore, I enjoyed peace and calm in the campus cafeteria (Figures 5.28). It was also a time when I experienced change personally and academically.

Figure 5.28 Inside the cafeteria on campus

My academic performance improved tremendously after my first couple of months as I familiarised myself with the academic expectations of the institution by becoming aware of how to study and summarise my content for examinations. However, my academic placement in the residence was not secured. Students needed to reserve their place in the residence based on their academic performance and an academic performance above 50 per cent was the minimum requirement. Compared to the rest of the students, my final mark was low and so I was automatically placed on the waiting list. In response, my mother secured my placement by writing a letter to the administrator to persuade her to book my place. My placement was successfully reviewed for both 2013 and 2014 – my second and third years.

5.5 Beyond my third and fourth years

As a third-year student in residence, I was privileged to be one of the students to qualify for a single room and, as a senior student, I enjoyed the independence and privacy. Another privilege was that senior students in the residence were eligible to stand for the House Committee. At first I was frightened to stand as I was not a popular student in the residence and I did not have the support from fellow students. Approximately 20 students stood for the House Committee. The requirements were that students needed a semester mark of 55 per cent, and they needed to give a short speech in front of the whole residence at the annual House Committee Circus in one of the lecture halls. As always, I discussed my participation with Dr Venter. During our therapy session, he wanted to know my reason for standing and how I would deal with the disappointment if I was not elected. Dr Venter shared his honest opinion when he heard I considered standing for the House Committee as follows:

> Your best story, which became a metaphor to me, was when you decided in your third year to improve your leadership skills and to stand for the sport portfolio as a House Committee member. I remember wanting to talk you out of standing. I know how merciless the students are against the candidates who stand and thought that you put yourself too early in a public, judgemental situation where no humanity or mercy would be shown.

I listened to what Dr Venter said about the intentions and feelings of fellow students toward students who stood for the House Committee. After he spoke, I shared my preferences with him and thus convinced himself that I wanted to participate in this election with the purpose of gaining experience and social exposure. He eventually agreed and wished me good luck for the House Committee Circus. Sharing his feelings about the situation, Dr Venter said the following:

> At that time, I knew very well that when you set yourself a goal, you would do your best to achieve it. You showed remarkable resilience and hardness that impressed me. You could bounce back when disappointed. I had, however, made sure that we arranged a follow-up appointment to deal with the expected disappointment and damage control.

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The night of the House Committee Circus, all the candidates had to stand outside the hall before presenting their speeches and answering questions. As the students were asked to proceed inside the hall, my anxiety levels increased. At that stage, I wanted to avoid the situation, but I needed to proceed and endure the lessons on this learning curve. When the time arrived for my presentation, one could hear the uncomfortable silence from the students in the crowd. I heard a slight laugh from a student as I walked toward the podium. I started my presentation by explaining to them my intention to run and the learning curves I encountered during my first two years in the residence. After my speech of three minutes, the students asked me questions about House Committee responsibilities. One senior student questioned my abilities as an autistic student to stand for a leadership position. At first, the Chairman of the Residence told me that I did not need to answer the question, but I wanted to answer it. I responded by reminding him that I had worked hard to get where I was, against all the odds. I ended off my presentation with the phrase, 'Don't judge a book by its cover'.

In response, I received a standing ovation from every single student in the crowd. It was a fantastic feeling, where I eventually felt that I had received the acceptance that I had been looking for since my first year. I received congratulations from the majority of the students, both from the male and female residences on campus. The following day I told my mother of the events that happened the previous night, and she expressed how proud she was that I had stood up for myself. She told me that I needed to share this with Dr Venter, as he had feared that I might experience rejection during the event. At my following weekly appointment with him, I related the events that had transpired the previous night. He told me that he was so proud of me and that I handled the situation professionally. In our conversation, he replied with the following words:

> After the House Committee Circus, you were quite disappointed that you were not elected. I was so incredibly proud of you that day when you told me about the course of matters.

As proud as he was when thinking back on that event, he reminded me again of my response:

Can you remember? You presented yourself well and were cool, calm and collected before the entire house. And then there came that one student who cried out from the crowds, 'But you are autistic?' Furthermore, you were on your feet and you gave him the best response any person can provide – I could not formulate a better answer than that. Even more, a better answer than my sons could come up with and one that no one can find in a textbook. 'Do not judge a book by its cover. I will be there to serve my residence, also you'. This response was simply brilliant! The house came to their feet and gave you a standing ovation. What a beautiful experience and memory.

Immediately I felt that I was part of the residence and that they had accepted me with my differences. From that night, the mood and the behaviour from the rest of the students changed towards me. The students greeted me and had a short conversation with me, even if it lasted two minutes. It felt good to be acknowledged by the rest of the residence, but I knew that my academic performance was my priority. Although I was not elected to the house committee, I received the affirmation that improved my self-confidence and made me finally feel part of the residence.

Although I enjoyed my time as a third-year student in residence, I missed the company of a roommate and, therefore, decided to become a day student for my fourth year. It was not a decision that I made lightly, but I believed that it would also benefit my academic performance if I was in my home environment. I, therefore, decided to proceed with my decision, and consequently I gave notice to move out of the residence in an email sent to the Tuks Residence. I felt sad that I had to move out of residence, but I thought that it was the right time to do so and to focus more on my future in education.

My father believed that moving out of the residence in my third year was a good decision as it benefitted me academically. Now I could receive the support that I required from my mom. He said:

I was not so involved in your undergraduate studies and university career, but I remember feeling that you would benefit academically from staying at home. Maybe you felt like you wouldn't make it academically, so you had to become a

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day student. You needed help on the weekends with planning and organisation and being closer, at home, was the best option. The volume and the difficulty level of work got harder and so you needed more support.

Despite the challenges I encountered while adapting to the residence environment because I was different, I overcame much of it with determination, hard work, courage, support from specific individuals, and ongoing perseverance. Dr Venter analysed my journey from the first day I was enrolled in the residence and admitted that my first couple of weeks in residence were not easy. Still, I defeated all odds to fit in and survive. According to Dr Venter:

> It was not easy, but you persevered. I remember that you could not find your place within the group. You were marginalised. Yet you had decided boldly and determinedly to find your place. Those first months had to be hell. I remember the headaches you developed during Orientation Week. We conducted several conversations about adjustment. I helped you understand how your senses register much stronger stimuli than other people do. I tried to explain this on the standard distribution curve, that you perceive your observations at the highest four percent of intensity, such that you are almost overwhelmed by what you see and register. Residence actions were difficult – the visits to Hatfield and non-residence interactions, too. You did not drink together with other students and therefore were seen as an outsider.

> Nevertheless, you stuck it out. That first semester I was very concerned that you would develop an adjustment disorder, but you got through it. I also realised that the first month would be crucial as to whether you would stay in the residence or go back home. That was when I saw how brave you are. You jumped into the deep end and swam.

5.6 The sadness and disappointment I experienced at university

Overall, my biggest disappointment was as a result of the university environment itself, because I felt that my needs were not accommodated physically nor academically. The setting was not suited to the needs of a neurodiverse student with ASD and the university staff were unaware of the kinds of challenges that I faced. I chose not to disclose the different challenges I experienced to academic lecturers or to fellow students out of fear that this would lead to possible discrimination. By contrast, I felt comfortable to disclose my challenges to my roommate as he was aware of my struggles and always tried to be considerate. Although I adapted my behaviour and adjusted my appearance to fit in, the environment and infrastructure on campus exacerbated these challenges.

I had always wondered why I experienced face blindness in a crowded environment. Dr Venter explained the reason one morning during a therapy session. He taught me about how my brain receives sensory input and how it protects itself from sensory overload.

To avoid everyday campus life, I escaped the crowds by finding a peaceful place (plekkie in Afrikaans) on the sports field on top of the stands, indicated by the red arrow (Figure 5.29). It was a special place as it had a beautiful view over the campus sports fields (Figure 5.30) and it was the spot where I usually sat to think and have peace.

Figure 5.29 My 'place' on the sportsground

Figure 5.30 View over the campus sports fields

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The atmosphere in the lecture halls was boisterous and, as such, it was challenging to study and concentrate. The most frustrating part was that I could not take advantage of new technological advances because I needed to ask permission from the respective lecturers in the classes to use various devices such as an audio and video digital recorder that could have helped me to study.

Lecturers tended to perceived me as a shy student, but I was struggling with the sensory overload which prevented me from coping in a big lecture hall. At night, I restored my short-term memory by integrating information that comprised the visuospatial sketchpad (what I see and perceive) and phonological loop (my inner thoughts and voice that holds my speech-based form) to my long-term memory. My visual memory is excellent but in an overcrowded environment the visuospatial sketchpad component does not store visual and spatial information. Before I fell asleep at night, I would recall the events of the day and put everything in order. If there was too much to process, I would suffer from insomnia (a sleep disorder in which I struggled to fall asleep). I forced my nervous system to adapt to environmental changes daily because I experienced the same sensory input differently from neurotypical people.

One of my disappointments was my experience with my first-year Psychology modules (SLK). The lecturer did not allow me to record my lessons with a recording device as it was apparently against the Department's ethical regulations. The lecturer encouraged me to make use of the study guide (Figure 5.31) when preparing to study for semester and cycle tests. The pages in the study guide included summaries with possible questions in each chapter that served as a broad guideline for students to study and prepare for tests. The following figure depicts the cover page of the SLK study guide. It is worth mentioning that the study guide is printed in Afrikaans with the wrong module name, Department of Electric, Electronic and Computer Engineering (ENE). This mistake confused me as I wondered, at first, if I was attending the correct lecture. The lecturer confirmed and apologised for the error.
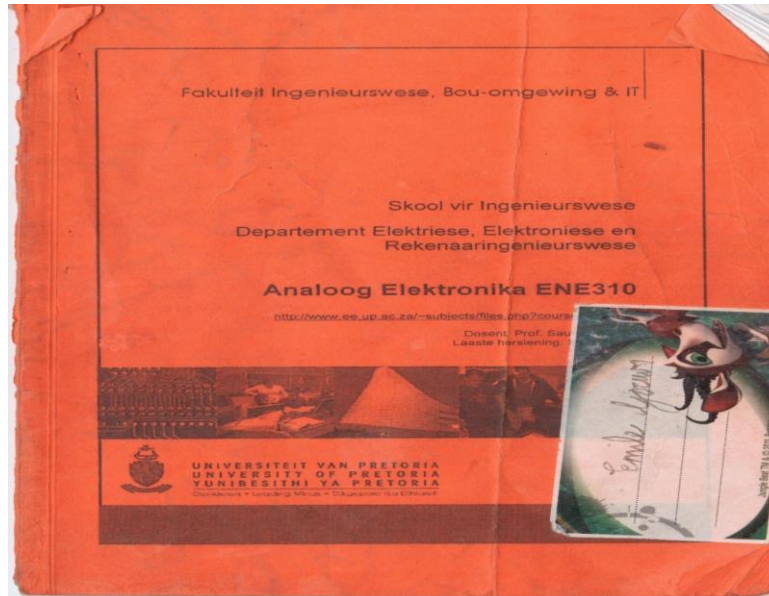
Figure 5.31 My first-year SLK 110 study guide

My mother helped me to prepare for the Psychology test by writing the page number next to the important questions in the textbook that I needed to study. The questions were the only guide that we had to study from. She decided to study with me as she also had an interest in psychology, and, from this process, interesting discussions evolved. My mother had always tried to make the content relevant to our personal circumstances, such as my autism diagnosis and mental health in general. Our discussions were always deep, honest and real. The one discussion that stood out for me was when we discussed the topic of suicide. We investigated the causes that might lead an individual to think about and consider such a fatal action. From the conclusions that derived from the content, the two major causes that lead to suicide are major depression and overwhelming regret. We looked specifically at 'invisible' disorders like ASD and how factors like isolation, discrimination and exclusion can influence an individual's mental health. My mom used this opportunity to inform me about the importance of an accessible society free from discrimination and victimisation. As a young adult with ASD, I did not understand how the above-mentioned factors could affect one's mental health until later in my studies when my own mental health came under scrutiny (see section 5.3).

The Psychology lecturers had refused to make the study notes, which would summarise each chapter, available to students. Again, it was stated that this was against the Department's regulations. The only available support system to assist students was the tutor, who advised me to use the study guide, to refer to the abbreviations of the different terms, and to answer the questions. As planning and organisation were my biggest challenges, my mother assisted me with examination preparation by organising the content for me. In SLK, my mother made notes in the study guide (Figure 5.32) which guided me to where the answers could be found in the textbook. Although I received examination exemption, I failed SLK (semester 1) in that academic year but repeated the subject in my second year and passed.

(Selfinstruksie opleiding)	aan jouself gegee word, tydens kritieke fases van die hanteringsproses.
Somatic relaxation training (Somatiese ontspanningsopleiding)	Om, op 'n willekeurig wyse, hoë prikkelbaarheid te verminder of te voorkom deur die toepassing van spierontspanning.
Stress (Stres/Spanningsdruk)	Terme, met uitgebreide betekenisse, wat ondermeer verwys na (1) situasies wat hoë eise aan 'n organisme stel, (2) die kognitiewe, fisiologiese en gedragsresponse op sulke situasies en (3) die volgehoue transaksies tussen die individu en veeleisende situasies.
Stress response (Stresreaksie)	Die patroon van kognitiewe, fisiologiese en gedragsreaksies op eise wat 'n persoon se hulpmiddels oorskry.
Stress-induced analgesia (Stres-geïnduseerde analgesie (pyn-ongevoeligheid))	'n Afname in pynsensitiwiteit wat voorkom wanneer endorfiene onder stresvolle situasies afgeskei word.
Stressors (Stressors)	Situasies wat eise aan organismes stel, wat hulle hulpmiddels uitput of oorskry.
Transtheoretical model (Transteoretiese model)	'n Model van gedragsverandering wat die fases van pre-oorweging, oorweging, voorbereiding, aksie, onderhoud en terminasie insluit.
Type A behaviour pattern (Tipe A-gedragspatroon)	'n Ervaring van dringendheid, kompeterendheid, gedragseise en vyandigheid wat 'n risiko faktor in koronêre hartversaking kan wees.
Vulnerability factors (Kwesbaarheidsfaktore)	Situasionele of fisiese faktore wat die vatbaarheid vir die negatiewe impak van 'n stresvolle ervaring verhoog.

HOOFSTUK 17: SIELKUNDIGE VERSTEURINGS

Leerdoelstellings

Na bestudering van hierdie hoofstuk, moet jy tot die volgende in staat wees:

1. Beskryf die demonologiese, behavioristiese, kognitiewe, humanistiese en sosiokulturele perspektiewe op abnormale gedrag.
2. Beskryf die kwesbaarheid-stres model van abnormale gedrag en hoe dit persoon-situasie interaksies illustreer.
3. Verduidelik die mees algemene gebruikte kriteria (m.a.w. die "three D's") van abnormaliteit. *handboek*
4. Definieer betroubaarheid en geldigheid soos wat dit toegepas word in diagnostiese klassifisering sisteme. *handboek,*
5. Lys die vyf diagnostiese asse van die DSM-IV. *61 78 6 tabel*

6. Som die verskille tussen die ICD en die DSM op.

7. Beskryf die effekte van psigiatriese etikettering op sosiale en self persepsies.

8. Onderskei tussen bevoegdheid en kransinnigheid as wetlike konsepte en verduidelik hoe hierdie konsepte onlangse hofsake geaffekteer het. *bl. 788 in handboek*

9. Beskryf die vier komponente van angs. *bl. 789 (tabel*

10. Lys vyf tipes angsversteurings en beskryf die simptome wat met elkeen geassosieer word. *bl. 22 in oranje boek*

11. Bespreek die bydraes van waarneemingsleer en kondisionering, asook biologiese, sielkundige, kognitiewe en sosiokulturele faktore tot die etiologie van angsversteurings.

12. Onderskei en kontrasteer tussen die drie somatoforme versteurings en bespreek hul etiologie.

13. Beskryf die drie tipes dissosiatiewe versteurings en hul oorsaaklike faktore. *b pienk bl. 20 bl 22*

14. Beskryf die trauma-dissosiasie teorie van dissosiatiewe identiteitsversteuring en hoe kritici dit uitdaag en verklaar. *bl. 23 in handboek*

15. Beskryf die twee hoof gemoedsversteurings. *bl. 20 in handboek bl. 798*

16. Beskryf die vier klasse van simptome wat depressie karakteriseer, en beskryf die geslags verskille in simptoom manifistasie. *bl. 802 in boek*

17. Verduidelik hoe genetiese en neurochemiese faktore verwant kan wees aan gemoedsversteurings. *bl. 802 - Tabel*

18. Beskryf die kognitiewe triade ("cognitive triad"), die depressiewe attribusie pattroon en aangeleerde hulpeloosheid met betrekking tot depressie. *Oranje boek tabel* *las*

19. Beskryf hoe Lewinsohn se leer teorie die afwaartse spiraal wat in depressie voorkom verklaar. *bl. 807 - leer tabel*

20. Beskryf die sosiokulturele faktore wat verwant is aan die voorkoms, manifestasies, en geslagsverskille in depressie.

21. Beskryf die motiewe vir selfmoord, identifiseer die waarskuwingstekens van selfmoord, en stel riglyne voor om 'n persoon te help wat selfmoord wil pleeg.

22. Definieer skisofrenie en beskryf die hoof kognitiewe, gedrags, emosionele en perseptuele eienskappe van skisofrenie. *Oranje boek tabel*

23. Beskryf die verskille tussen die vier hoof tipes skisofreniese versteurings. *oranje boek tabel* *bl.813*

24. Beskryf bewyse oor hoe genetiese, neurologiese en biochemiese faktore betrokke is by die ontwikkeling van skisofreniese versteurings.

25. Verduidelik hoe sielkundige, omgewings en sosiokulturele faktore verwant is aan die etiologie van skisofrenie.

26. Bespreek die aard van persoonlikheidsversteurings. *Oranje boek bl. 22*

27. Beskryf antisosiale persoonlikeheidsverteuring en bespreek die etiologie daarvan. *bl 19*

28. Beskryf die Schachter–Latané studie en hoe dit die emosie-tekort teorie ("emotional-deficit theory") van antisosiale persoonlikheidsverteuring ondersteun.
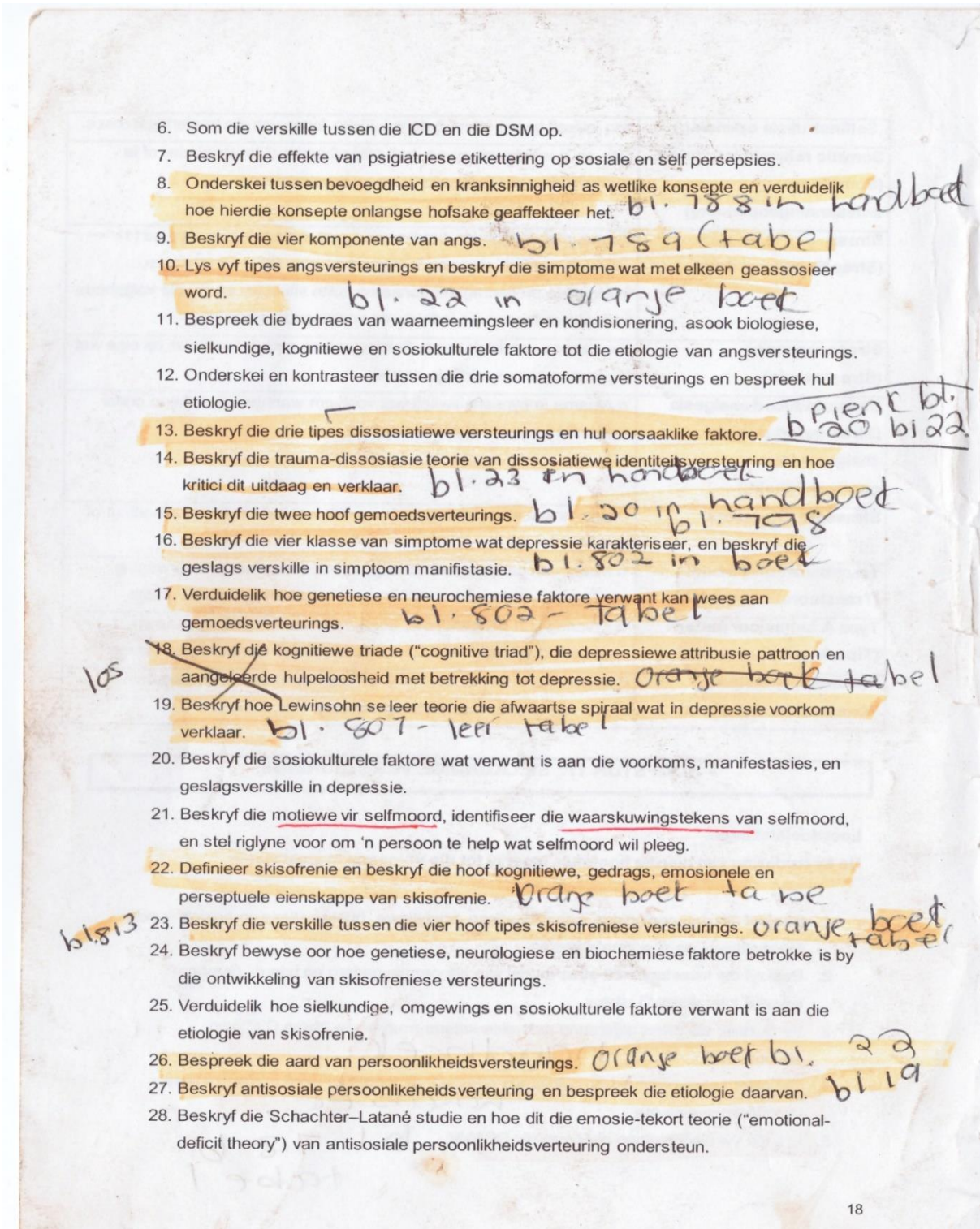
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Figure 5.32: Notes that my mother made to answer the questions in the SLK (Semester 1) study guide in preparation for the term test

Ironically, SLK (Semester 1 and 2) became the modules that I struggled with the most for numerous reasons. First, I felt that the lecturers made use of a direct

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teaching method during the lesson and did not include the contributions and opinions of the students. Secondly, continuous assessment opportunities that provided students with opportunities to improve their semester marks were limited. Although I was in frequent communication with the lecturer and tutor about the different ways in which they could accommodate me, their freedom to make decisions was limited as they needed to consult with the Department first. Thirdly, I came to realise that the lecturers in most of my modules, especially Psychology, did not know how to accommodate my sensory needs on an academic level although they were obliging when I consulted them about the challenges I experienced during lectures.

One of the few lecturers who accommodated me in a concrete way during my undergraduate studies was my History lecturer, Prof Groenewald. During our discussion, he admitted that I needed the additional assistance to be able to perform to the fullest potential:

> I do not remember in detail, but I can recall that I got more involved with you than any other students because you required more support from a lecturer than most other students, simply because you needed it.

The support that Prof Groenewald referred to was especially the provision of additional time during tests and examinations.

During my first therapy session with Dr Venter, I told him about the challenges I had experienced in class, especially note-taking during lectures. I also made him aware that I had received additional time during tests and examinations while at secondary school. After reviewing my portfolio from school, Dr Venter recommended that I gain permission to use an audio recorder to record my lectures and receive extra time during semester tests and examinations. He wrote a letter (see appendix A and B) requesting that I receive an additional 15 minutes per hour during each test or examination. The process of applying for additional time did not bother me much, but the intention of the process concerned me because personally I felt that I needed to prove my neurodiversity.

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Both my requests, that is, to receive additional time in lessons and to use an audio recorder in class to record lectures, were granted. The lecturers were more than willing to accommodate my needs, but they requested that I remind them a week in advance before writing a test or examination. When interviewing Prof Groenewald about the concessions I received during tests and examinations, he mentioned the letter that he had received:

> You needed extra time for your tests and exams because if I remember correctly, I received an official letter signed by the university authorities. My attitude was that the authorities would not provide such a letter to a student if it were not necessary. I did not question it at all. I allowed the extra time, but you had to remind me each time you required it.

Not all my lecturers were keen to grant me this privilege because of past teaching experiences and personal perceptions, which influenced their professional behaviour towards me. Mrs Smit, a lecturer, questioned the validity of providing additional time for tests and examinations. I noticed the frustration in her voice every time I applied for extra time. Her responses were impersonal and cold. Though I did not take any offence, I realised that this might be the first time she had organised additional time for a student with special needs. I was also aware that lecturers had a specific protocol that they were required to follow when a student was granted extra time. In comparison to other lecturers to whom I applied for additional time, I felt that Mrs Smit was not keen on making what I felt were reasonable accommodations. In saying this, her past teaching and lecturing experience is an example of such a situation that affected my academic performance and the lecturers' perception of me.

In her written contribution, Mrs Smit acknowledged that she had confused me and another student, Sam, and that her past teaching experience with Sam had influenced her perceptions of me. Mrs Smit shared her story and past reaction to me:

> It was wrong to let my resentment towards parents influence any of my professional behaviour. I will never forget Emile as an undergrad student because I made a HUGE mistake. In one of my other classes, there was a boy

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(Sam, pseudonym) physically looking quite similar to Emile. Sam and Emile were in the same year and taking the same classes, but in different groups.

Sam used to be one of the learners in the school where I was teaching prior to working at the university. He must have started studying later in his life, because I taught him a long time ago although I remembered him. When I was teaching Sam and Emile, I confused the two boys since Sam's appearance had changed slightly over the years and I had not seen him in ages. I thought Emile was Sam. So, when Emile would come to my office to arrange extra time etc., I did not treat him like I would do other students with the same issue. I do not have much experience with students with disabilities.

The lecturers were not the only parties involved in the organisation of additional time; I also needed to present this letter to the invigilator. The examiners were significantly stricter and always checked the date of the letter to ensure that it was legitimate. I needed to renew the letter yearly to continue to receive additional time.

As I proceeded, the process changed. At the end of my second year, Dr Venter resigned from the university and referred me to the Disability Office to renew the letter, which they did. It was quite a process to apply for additional time to write computer-based tests, as multiple parties needed to provide permission. I followed the same procedure with each modules to organise extra time. I reminded the lecturer by sending an email, and I was then advised to inform the IT laboratory and ask their permission as well. I needed to plan on my own to ensure that I received additional time for each computer-based test (CBT). The lecturer would immediately respond with an email if they needed additional information, such as in the example below about the language test I was about to write (Figure 5.33).

Exam CBT on the 17th November ➤ Inbox x

Emile Gouws   Thu, 13 Nov 2014, 09:40

Morning Prof.
I would like to inform Prof. that I am a student who receives exstra time for tests and examinations.
My time slot is from 10:00
I receive 15 minutes per hour.
In the past cbt tests,The Lecturers would print theTest and I would write it under supervision in a office.
Thank you

Thu, 13 Nov 2014, 21:59

Dear Emile
I am forwarding this mail to   and   who help arrange these matters. Then print-out really complicates my life considerably. Is there no way that you can work with a reader??
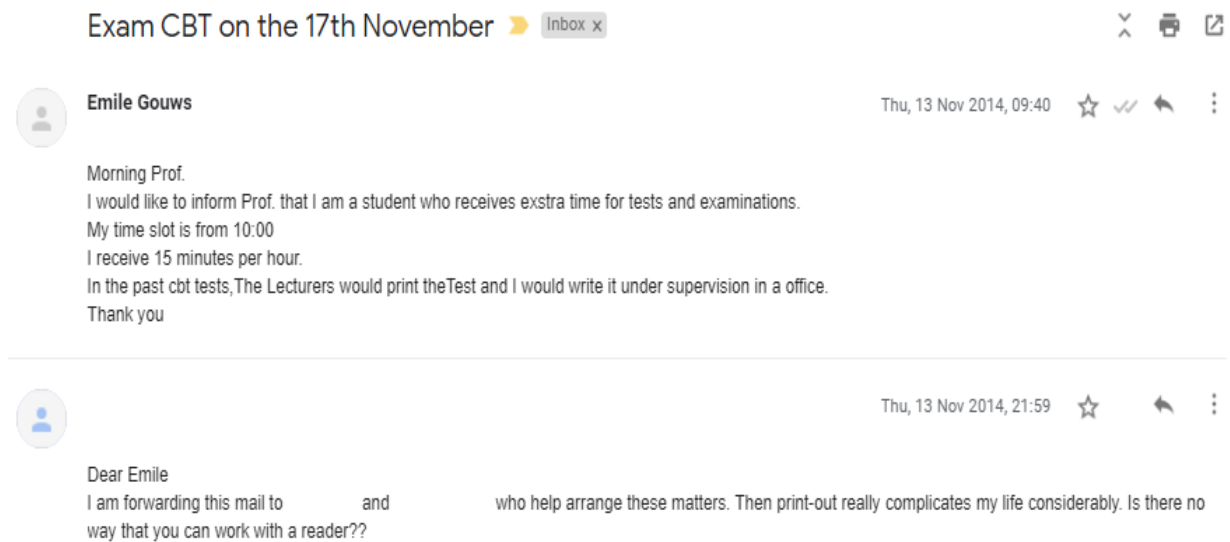
Figure 5.33 Email and response from the lecturer about the organisation of additional time for a CBT

After the first three emails, I realised that this lecturer was frustrated and confused. I understood that the lecturer as well as the IT lab were unsure how to provide support as it was the first time that they had provided additional time for a student.

While reading the lecturer's email, which asked if I needed a reader, I realised that the lecturers were not informed about ASD and that they were not comfortable in accommodating my needs. To support me, Mr Heslop (Head of the Disability Unit) wrote to the lecturers and CBT organisers to explain that I did not need a reader. I felt relieved that I had received support from the Disability Unit. However, I was concerned that it required numerous emails from the lecturer to the different parties involved to provide me with only 15 minutes of additional time on the CBT at the IT lab. I was also confused that other lecturers from the rest of my modules provided me with extra time without difficulty and did not mention a reader. I eventually received additional time on the IsiZulu CBT examination and received a mark of 73%.

Fellow students noticed that I was receiving additional time during tests and examinations and this led to isolation and discrimination. Prof Groenewald admitted during the conversation that he wanted to avoid any misunderstanding among the students about preferential treatment.

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I did not want the other students to think I was giving you an unfair advantage. The letter from the authorities was proof of your need, and you have to protect the student from the other students, but they will eventually find out. But you were not the first student who had to start earlier.

I recall one occasion when a student confronted me in front of other students and asked the reason for my unusual behaviour. I was emotional and not ready to discuss my neurodiversity with him and eventually decided to walk away. From the corner of my eye, I noticed his friends who stood near him and I was deeply embarrassed. They realised that I did not fit in and mocked me for what was inappropriate. When reflecting on the confrontation, Dr Venter acknowledged that I would be an easy target for bullying because I was 'different'. He recalled the situation:

Maybe you will remember the case more accurately, but the student replied in the conversation, 'So that I could show my friends what a (retard) looks like'. It could have broken you if you had not gained some perspective on bullying behaviour and learnt interpersonal manoeuvres to protect yourself from them. You also had to learn that you have a particular impact on people and, therefore, are not powerless when facing them.

Dr Venter admitted further:

You were very reluctant about my suggestions. Such language was not part of your vocabulary. Through it all, your fine sense of humour made the difficult aspects of being human more comfortable to discuss. As in other areas of your life, you have also learnt to protect yourself from bullying.

At first, it was not easy to implement the skills that Dr Venter taught me, as I did not have the confidence levels to confront fellow students. In the back of my mind, I felt that I was already in a disadvantaged position as I was the only autistic student on campus. I never complained to the Dean about how the students treated me and tolerated their foolish behaviour. My parents wanted the best for me and brought me up in a neurotypical society. However, they did not realise they had placed me

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in an abusive environment whereby my differences were not embraced. Dr Venter remembered:

> I do not know what the policy says, [but] I believe it was addressed. From my practical experience, I think it is necessary to cultivate a climate where bullying behaviour (or abusive behaviour) is most strongly rejected and should have inevitable consequences. You cannot just insult, belittle or exclude a fellow student. It is a form of discrimination and abuse of power. Especially Education students should be chastised for it. I unfortunately encounter too many cases where students show this type of behaviour towards each other. I realise all too well that we are referring here to values and norms that are difficult to influence.

I felt alone in dealing with the disappointment I experienced on campus. I did not receive the support that I expected from family members, especially my cousin Elna, who also studied Education. She acknowledged during our critical conversation that we did not see each other on campus due to our hectic schedules:

> We did not see each other as much on Campus, as we had classes at entirely different times, but on the odd occasion when we did pass each other, it appeared you were in good spirits.

We only saw each other on Monday mornings and Friday afternoons when we travelled together to and from residence. As my mother had an arrangement with Elna, I was confident that she would support me, but, due to our hectic schedules, it was practically impossible. Besides the confusion, I felt that my father's family did not expect me to study education, and Elna admitted it during our conversation:

> We did not expect that you would study education. Education was not your first choice. What I can remember was that you wanted to study psychology.

In our therapy sessions, Dr Venter and I discussed the situation with my cousin and we discussed possible unreasonable scenarios that might reoccur in her presence. It was hard to come to terms with the fact that my cousin was ashamed of me studying at the same faculty as her and, therefore, did not want to associate herself with me. Dr Venter remembered our conversations about my relationship with Elna:

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I still remember our conversations about your cousin; nevertheless, you have always treated her with respect. Trying to accommodate her as much as you could, adapt to her needs and even meet ridiculous demands such as getting out of the car far from the residence and carrying your suitcases all the way to the residence.

I got the impression that Elna did not want to associate herself with me. When I discussed our relationship with her, she admitted that she was strict but had good intentions. She commented, 'I taught you to be independent. You had to learn how to function independently (socially and academically).'

By being aware of her intentions, I realised my learning experience would be uphill and Elna also acknowledged it. Despite the negative feedback I received, it was still my dream to study at university. At the time, my biggest fear was that the students would feel the same way as Elna and would not accommodate my different ability and I was shocked when Elna revealed her true feelings to me one morning regarding my presence at campus. She asked me on our way to campus whether a student who attended a remedial school would be able to cope at university. According to her, it would be a tremendous challenge for a neurodiverse student to be able to cope academically and socially. During this conversation, she indicated that she thought I would not be able to use defence mechanisms to support myself. As we discussed this topic for the first time after many years, Elna remembered:

Yes, your parents made the right decision. You were granted an opportunity to grow socially and academically. In my opinion, you had the chance to learn some of your best life lessons whilst staying in residence.

When I asked Elna about her friendship groups, she replied:

I was not part of a big friendship group, and to be honest they did not know that we were related. Therefore, no, they did not make any comments about you.

I always questioned my behaviour and the kind of perception that students might have had about me. First impressions are decisive and when students met me, I had the impression that they did not expect to meet an autistic student on campus.

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I was always conscious of my behaviour in social environments, and I knew that I did not make eye contact with many students during conversations.

I was aware that fellow students formed a negative perception about me with the fixed idea that an individual with ASD is not capable of studying. Nevertheless, I learnt that I needed to accept myself for who I am, learn more about my capabilities and develop as a person. In saying this, the Life Orientation lecturer, Dr van Staden, who witnessed my growth as a student from my first year, remembered my behaviour from our very first conversation after class:

> I can remember that as we talked, you struggled to look me in the eye. After a while it became easier for you. What I also realised is that when I asked questions in class, you answered them and did not state your opinions.

I was proud to be a student at the university, and, despite the challenges, I experienced the freedom of movement that I had been seeking, and every learning experience changed my life. The social environment threatened my emotional well-being, and, as such, I disconnected from busy settings. This reaction was evident in my body language and behaviour, and other students, such as my former roommate, Kabelo, noticed this and felt that it contributed to my frustration level:

> You were nervous about being in crowds or [with] many people because you did not use to it and you were shy in front of people. When I watched you, it is as if you were not sure how to react in front of people. You wanted to please them. It was a bit of a challenge facing the crowd and communicating with different people.

Each day, I got out of bed to follow my purpose and ignored the behaviour of students who believed I did not belong. Although I was blamed for my divergent behaviour, this did not stop me from studying. Despite the disappointment of not studying HMS, I accepted my differences and stopped blaming my condition. The approach of the medical model to disability is to blame a person for their differences and to endeavour to 'fix' their so-called shortcomings. However, I did need not be repaired; instead, I had to learn to accept my differences and identity.

Self-acceptance was an ongoing challenge, as I struggled to form social relationships with fellow students. Psychologically I developed negative thought patterns and doubted my self-worth because of my struggle to form relationships with other students. The continuous rejection that I experienced affected my well-being and aggravated the impact of stressors. The feeling of rejection overwhelmed me at one point during my undergraduate studies. As a result, an unfortunate incident occurred when I bought over-the-counter sleeping pills and took six. After taking the pills, I realised my mistake and told my mother that I overdosed on sleeping tablets. She took me to the hospital. They admitted me to the ICU for three days because I had developed arrhythmia (a medical condition where one's heart beats at an uneven rate). After they released me from ICU, the psychologist at the hospital booked me into rehabilitation for two weeks to receive therapy and to rest. During my stay in the hospital, I saw patients who had suffered from depression for years, and I felt that I did not belong there because I did not think that I was in a state of depression. I met a patient in the psychiatric ward who had tried to hang himself at home because he felt his wife had rejected him. During our counselling sessions in the mornings, we discussed different coping mechanisms to deal with rejection. During these sessions, I changed my attitude and appreciated life, reflected, learned to be self-aware, and strengthened my bonds with people who cared about me. During these two weeks, I learnt to accept my differences. I landed up in the psychiatric ward because I had reached a breaking point. My expectation to gain acceptance from my peers at university was too high.

One morning, a psychiatrist visited me in the ward and I was fortunate to meet his autistic son. We spoke mostly about autism that morning. The doctor prescribed medication for depression and my behaviour changed. It was beneficial to take the antidepressant drugs because they restored the neurotransmitter activity in my brain to normal levels. However, I realised that the medication suppressed my sleeping patterns, and I weaned myself off the antidepressant tablets after a few months because I did not want to become dependent on any form of medication.

I am glad that I did not refuse treatment when I developed depression because I realised the importance of looking after my emotional well-being. If I develop

depression in the future, I know that I must get help. After my recovery, I made positive lifestyle changes. I decided not to live according to the expectations of others because that left me unfulfilled, empty and unsure about who I am, as they do not accept my differences.

During this time of healing, I valued social interactions with my family and was encouraged not to search for acceptance from students that I would not be able to get. After I was discharged from hospital, I acknowledged that I could not put my life in danger by buying medication over the counter without consulting my general practitioner.

During this period in my life, I learnt more about my own behaviour. To accept my differences empowered me because I took ownership of my actions and identity.

5.7 The attentive and inattentive university

As an undergraduate student, I simultaneously familiarised myself with the transformative policies of the university, especially considering reasonable accommodations, and the systems that were in place to accommodate students. These policies included making facilities accessible for students from different backgrounds, races and learning difficulties. Despite the fact that the faculty had a student support centre available to support students academically and emotionally, these students were required to survive at university and meet the institution's expectations. Throughout my high school career, my mother believed in my capabilities. She supported and encouraged me to dream and not to give up on life. In high school, she endeavoured to reduce my stress and planned my activities with me. When teachers did not believe in me, my mother supported me and assisted me daily with my schoolwork.

By the time I enrolled at university, the situation had changed. I started to work independently. My mother was not able to support me as she was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. I knew that I could no longer receive academic support from her. I recall a memory from my first year when I asked her to critically read an essay that I had written for my first History assignment. To follow the content took her a

few hours. However, during this challenging time, she still took time to support me. Although my marks were below average, she encouraged me not to quit.

When asking my father about how he and my mom felt about my staying in the residence, he mentioned that it was difficult but the emotional and social exposure benefitted me as it taught me independence:

> For me and your mother it was hard because we saw you struggling and also because we missed you. Your mother wasn't there to support you. But you needed to learn to become independent. You had to learn to survive on campus and, to go through that process, you had to adapt and show perseverance.

When my mother became aware of her anxiety disorder, for the first time in her life, she encouraged me to seek external support. She also assisted me with the process of finding external support by contacting key role players such as the university psychologist, Dr Venter, to assist me with the everyday challenges I experienced academically, emotionally and socially. Dr Venter commented on the profound role that my mother played and reminded me of a conversation he had with my mother before we met:

> I also recall a conversation with your mother. She was deeply concerned about you. She realised that you were making a giant leap to go to university. She knew that her 'special bird' was now being kicked out of the nest and had to fly. She talked so nicely about you. She told me how hardworking and disciplined you were and that you were open, friendly and honest. In the same sentence, she mentioned that you never complained about extra work, nor did you ever get angry. She asked me to help you, and said she knew her child would not disappoint me. Her faith in you and love for you struck me profoundly, and I believe it was one of the reasons why I never for a moment doubted that you would achieve your degree at the end of your four-year term.

Dr Venter reminded me of the pillar of strength my mother was by supporting me academically and socially as a school learner:

> From my perspective, very definitely. You came from MBS – the support there is different from other schools. You had your wonderful mother who made

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summaries with you and helped solve your problems and was your absolute pillar of strength. She empowered you. By also commenting on our relationship, Dr Venter referred to the relationship between the therapist and client–student in general.

The therapeutic relationship is unique. It's not like in education where you teach a child certain principles, he writes exams and either passes or fails. It is a process of growth and development, and only the client knows when he experiences the need or is ready to explore certain situations or emotional experiences further. It's voluntary.

After my initial meeting with Dr Venter and based on what transpired after the therapy session, he thought that it would be appropriate if we booked ongoing therapy sessions, based on my emotional well-being. During our first therapeutic session, Dr Venter disclosed his position from a therapeutic standpoint and noted that it was essential to form a relationship of trust and establish rapport. Therapy was needed to build my self-concept and reach the place of individualisation without walking around with the label of 'autism'. According to Dr Venter:

After this process of therapeutic intervention, I worked from an exosystemic position, which would be punctuated by cognitive behavioural therapy, logotherapy, person-centred therapy and would even look at intraspecific insights to enrich the text. My point of departure is that I am building a relationship with a person in therapy, and not a relationship with their symptoms.

During our therapy sessions, he assisted me to overcome barriers to problem-solving and his advice contributed to my emotional welfare. My self-confidence was at an all-time low, and it reflected in my conversation and dress. Dr Venter also remembered my 'boy' image and recalled that he analysed the impression that I had created:

I think the predominant emotions I could observe were insecurity, fear, compunction and anxiety. You had adopted an apologetic posture – bent forward and uncomfortable with eye contact. Your attire was strange – different

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from the average student. Your hairstyle was odd to me too. I immediately summed you up as a well-educated young man. You explained your problem to me very logically. What shocked me was how you referred to yourself. You started the conversation with, I'm an autist. I show the following symptoms; you had backlogs, challenges. I was overwhelmed. I thought to myself that there was no way you would adapt to the university context.

I asked Dr Venter to assist me in forming social relationships with fellow students. As discussed in Chapter 5, this had become a major concern for me. It was one of the aspects I wanted to improve to be able to survive on campus and in residence. What I took from these sessions was that I struggled with the self-confidence to confront students and speak to them on campus or in the residence. One of the reasons why I chose to avoid interaction was that I did not want to damage the relationship and perception that the students had of me. I mentioned this to Dr Venter and we discussed different techniques that he could use to help me. He eventually decided that role play would be appropriate. One of his favourite techniques was to role play any possible social situation I might encounter on campus or in the residence. He recalled:

> We started focusing on your needs. You wanted to establish close relationships. I had to teach you what your impact is on people. I used modelling by mimicking certain situations such as not making eye contact with you and then asking you what it does to you, that is, body language within role play. You have begun to learn that a relationship is circular. That one must learn to change your behaviour if you want to provoke a different reaction from your conversation partner. That just turning the other cheek when someone insults you is not the only solution. You are not powerless. It was part of the process of freeing yourself from the helpless grip that autism had on your life.

The implementation of the skills Dr Venter taught me was not easy as my communication skills were weak and I faced great challenges in expressing myself verbally and converting my thoughts into sentences. Communication took time owing to the slowness of the motor cortex that controls the muscles in my speech centre. To address this barrier, he asked me to write a blog daily to share my

thoughts and experiences in written format. When I regulated my everyday experiences on campus, I recalled feeling sad because I blamed myself when students rejected me. Another problem that I experienced was regulating my emotions, as well as reading the facial expressions of other students, such as sadness or happiness. In my diary entry, I mentioned that I experienced facial blindness which meant I could not read the expressions of others in overcrowded environments. I was honest in my writings when I explained that I preferred smaller settings as my brain protects itself from overstimulation and it is safer for me to understand my neurological differences.

Dr Venter acknowledged this and made the effort to explain the neurological development of an individual with ASD to me. He also emphasised that most challenges I experienced were neurologically based, which explained why I remember information intensively. Dr Venter explained:

> Your concentration on the thalamus impairs the encoding of fresh memories, and, therefore, you encode new memories in your long-term memory. The hippocampus organises information forms when encoding and in memory consolidation. The problem with long-term memory is that it cannot forget factual details.

He explained, furthermore, that my brain remembers specific information and conversations because of several brain regions, including portions of the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, which are involved in retrieving declarative memories. Although it seemed like an advantage, I struggled academically to plan and organise my assignments and content. This challenge did not go unnoticed. My Life Orientation lecturer, Mr Potgieter, admitted that it was something that he should have helped me to manage. Looking back, Mr Potgieter remembered how I struggled to break down information, which led him to recommend a tutor to support me:

> You struggled to narrow the content down in assignments and tasks. If I think back now, I could have assisted you more to ensure that your work was more structured.

Initially, in general, the lecturers were aware of the challenges I experienced, but I never disclosed to them that I was diagnosed with ASD due to fear of possible exposure, prejudice and exclusion. I felt that they preferred ableism and that their perceptions of me would change if they compared me to the rest of the students in the class. When I asked Dr van Staden about this and if she had ever noticed during her lessons that I was a student with ASD, she revealed:

No Emile, not at all! And to tell you the truth – I never even knew you were on the spectrum. As a lecturer, I never got any indication from the university's management that I had to accommodate you – I remember that it was you who told me you should get extra time. I granted it because I believed you. I'm glad I didn't know you were on the spectrum, because maybe I would not have acted so spontaneously towards you!

When I asked the Learning Support lecturer, Mrs Chite, the same question, her opinion differed from Dr van Staden's. She also did not know initially that I was a student with ASD and treated me on an equal basis to the rest of the students, but, in general, she felt that it would be advantageous to the lecturers if they were made aware of the diagnosis of a student, and it would be beneficial for the student's academic performance. Referring to her personal experiences as a lecturer at the university, she explained:

There are many lecturers who have no background knowledge about autism. In the second place, I think that one should be made aware of it. I only found out later about your diagnosis. Lecturers should be made aware from registration. The university must simply make an effort to inform the lecturers because students never have the liberty to tell lecturers such things. I think it will help lecturers if they are aware of it. They must also have practical guidelines on how to support the student.

After the introduction to the different lecturers, I made a personal appointment with each one to disclose my autism diagnosis to them in order to avoid discrimination and victimisation by fellow students. I also confirmed that I required additional time during tests and examinations by providing them with a permission letter. By

disclosing my diagnosis to them, the lecturers were more than willing to accommodate my needs and respected my honesty. In supporting this, Mr Potgieter acknowledged my courage by making the following comment:

> There weren't many students who came to me to explain what their challenges were and how they should be accommodated. Not many of the lecturers have the training or the background in psychology to accommodate students with ASD.

Both Mr Potgieter and Mrs Chite had Psychology and Learning Support backgrounds, and their prior knowledge in practice contributed to their understanding of autism and how to accommodate me in the classroom setting. I felt comfortable in both lecturers' presence as they showed that they were concerned about my emotional well-being by always asking me how I felt before lectures. Mr Potgieter felt that my decision to study education benefitted me academically and socially as the academic staff at the Faculty of Education were more understanding of students with special educational needs and students who were classified as part of the minority. During our conversation, Mr Potgieter made the following statement:

> I want to add that you came to me and to us (Faculty), and we understand the background and the diagnosis itself; but what about the students themselves, who, for example, study Engineering Science or BCom who do not have knowledge about the type of disability? It can be quite a challenging process.

To support this, Mrs Chite compared the Main Campus to the Faculty of Education and admitted that the atmosphere and the setting were more comfortable and more suitable for a student with ASD. This environment contributed towards my success: As Mrs Chite stated:

> One cannot compare Groenkloof Campus to the main campus. Groenkloof Campus is a much friendlier environment. The main campus is too large, impersonal and overwhelming. There are thousands of students. Students studying at the main campus get incredibly burdened, and therefore Groenkloof

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Campus will be the ideal campus. Groenkloof is a lovely campus. It's big, the surroundings are beautiful, and the atmosphere is comfortable and different.

I was always aware that the Faculty of Education was a suitable study environment for me as the atmosphere was friendlier (Figure 5.34) and not as crowded as the main campus. As a first-year student in residence during Orientation Week, I had experienced the main campus and from that moment, I did not take to the atmosphere, as the campus was full of students with one intention – to attend their classes and to socialise.

Figure 5.34 A beautiful view of the facilities of the Faculty of Education

The main campus is much bigger than the Education campus, and they are two very different environments: the one smaller and friendlier and the other large, impersonal and judgemental. This was another topic that I discussed with Dr Venter – how incredibly sensorily overwhelming the atmosphere was. Dr Venter remembered the conversation as follows:

During Orientation Week, where you had to go to the Hatfield Campus where there were many students, it was very overwhelming. I tried to explain to you that you observe stimuli very strongly, which floods your receptors with everything you see. We could see how the interaction had an impact on you, in the end, when your body started rebelling against the interaction. We talked

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about the non-verbal communication and especially the appropriate dress code students needed to wear at university.

Despite my apprehension, my best strategy during Orientation Week was to endure the large crowds of students and move through the different dining spaces where I could inquire from students the whereabouts of the Disability Unit. I needed to come out of my comfort zone and ask students for directions. Most students were not even aware that the university had a Disability Unit and a Disability Officer, Mr Heslop, as there were again no signs or posters available. I eventually overcame this obstacle and made use of the services of the Disability Unit. The offices of the Disability Unit were not easily visible as the space allocated was hidden in an alley between two lecture halls. As I walked into the office, I noticed that the environment looked relaxed as the students socialised with each other. At first, I thought that I was in the wrong office. The environment did not look formal. Eventually I received the assistance that I required. I was also advised by Mr Heslop that I needed to include the Unit in all of my emails to lecturers when requesting additional time to ensure that my needs were accommodated.

I also believe that the lecturers appreciated the support from the Disability Unit which provided them with email guidelines on how to support me. Mr Potgieter maintained that the Disability Unit's support was vital for my academic functioning and must, therefore, receive more credit. In the conversation, he said the following:

> We should not forget the contribution the people of the Disability Unit have made. As a student, it was immensely challenging to adapt to the University and examination conditions.

To add to this, he mentioned that the Disability Unit did not support me as much as others since I was capable of writing independently but stressed his gratitude for the support the staff provided to students who required a scribe.

> Those people have come to help you with exams. You could, for example, write without aid and accommodate yourself in that way, but some of the students with special needs really need someone to just sit there with them in the stressful environment.

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Once I had disclosed my diagnoses to the lecturers, the support that I received from the tutors, psychologist and lecturers from various modules (Life Orientation and History specifically) enabled me to succeed in every subject and to self-actualise. Whether it was with planning, providing information about the content, or providing me with additional time, their support was beneficial. Tutors assisted me with planning, regulating task performance, advising on problems and developing strategies. When I asked Prof Groenewald about his decision to support me, he said with assurance that it was a 'natural decision' and part of his moral responsibility as an educator:

> I carried out my obligation. As an educator in general, I felt that this is the example I want to set for students, because many students who study History and also the other subjects I have offered finally go into education. I tried to set an example. As a lecturer, I also had role models. I felt I wanted to be just like that lecturer.

Dr van Staden also accommodated me. She encouraged me to succeed by granting me additional time during tests and examinations. From the moment I met her, I found her very friendly and she immediately acknowledged my difference by reassuring me that she would accommodate me in any manner possible. In our conversation, she explained that she did not judge me based on the challenges I experienced. She believed in my capabilities.

I was privileged to attend the classes of these lecturers who understood my needs and were willing to accommodate me. I felt that they saw a person and not a diagnosis. Both Prof Groenewald and Dr van Staden admitted that I was the first student with ASD whom they had taught. Even after I had informed them of my diagnosis, they decided that they were going to treat me equally, just like the rest of the students.

Prof Groenewald said the following:

> When I ran into you, I decided that I was just going to treat you like any other student: I would support you as much [and] as far as I could, but without making it blatant. I did not want the other students to think I was favouring you. The

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letter from the authorities was a confirmation and one must protect the student from the other students but they are eventually going to realise it. But you were not the only student who had to begin [a test] earlier. Previously, I had quite a few students that I needed to help, for example, students who had very poor eyesight, and then there were blind students too. Still, they had to write at the Disability Offices, where there were people there supervising and they could accommodate them. I was never physically there to see how they wrote the exams, but my responsibility was that I sent them the exam paper the day before, and I would receive the answer sheet electronically afterwards. I have lots of empathy for people with special educational needs.

When a lecturer decided to support me, my perceptual processing benefitted and it was easier for me to retrieve information. As a student, I appreciated the time and effort that the lecturers put into supporting me. In modules that required higher cognitive thinking such as History, time management remained one of my biggest challenges and this intensified as I neared examination time. The timetable was designed in such a manner that the two modules with the most credits were written a day after each other. The content of a module such as History was overwhelming, and the workload exceeded the time allocated per semester.

In preparation for my upcoming examinations, my sleep patterns were disrupted, and I needed my mother's help to organise and summarise the content. Modules like History (second and third year) were difficult to study as the workload was heavy and there were no specific guidelines to lighten the workload. The second-year History content consisted of South African history from 1888 to 1994. When discussing my academic progress with Prof Groenewald, he admitted that the amount of work, as well as the prescribed material, was unreasonable and that the prescribed books made the confusion amongst students worse:

The nature of the work was such, because the books we used could not tell stories, which meant that many students were uninformed about the topic we were discussing. I felt to use the time to establish an understanding of history which was in question here. The job was to get fellow students so far, rather

than to argue about issues of which they knew very little. It did not make much sense to me.

When I asked Prof Groenewald about his observations of me as a student in his lecture, he remembered me as a committed student who attended most of his lessons and who participated in class discussions:

> I cannot remember in depth, but I can remember that you were a conscientious student and that you attended class regularly. You were committed to participating in class discussions from time to time, even though there were not many of them.

Despite his satisfactory comments, he admitted that, as a student, I required more attention than other students. Prof Groenewald remembered:

> What I do remember is that I had more to do with you as a student because you required more time from a lecturer than many other students. After all, you needed it. Compared to the usual student, you were the opposite. As lecturer, your typical student will function independently in silence where there is limited interaction, unless one asks a question.

Although the assessment opportunities and class discussions were limited, the research topics were simple, and the assignments were given a month in advance before submission. Prof Groenewald was open and honest with the students, and he also encouraged us to make notes in the textbook, as the end-of-year History examination was an open-book test. He adapted the module with the intention of building the students' semester mark by making class discussions compulsory. As the weeks progressed, my confidence levels increased and I enjoyed the lessons as a result of the positive classroom climate that was created. I informed Prof Groenewald of the additional time I required for my end-of-year History examinations. As always, he was helpful and when I wrote him an email to ask for his approval, he responded promptly and positively, saying that he would provide me with the extra 15 minutes per hour.

Based on his willingness to provide me additional time and support, my marks for semester tests exceeded that of the class average. With regard to this test, the tutor

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invigilated the process, because the Prof Groenewald was unable to attend. The tutor was informed about my request and allowed me to start 15 minutes before the time. Although it took me longer to write than the rest of the students, I eventually finished. This open-book test was on an easy topic, the discovery of diamonds and gold, and I received a mark of 64 per cent.

My second History test went well as the assessment consisted of a long question. This time Prof Groenewald provided us with only one question. I remember that I was excited to write this test as I found the content interesting and easily understandable and it was continuously repeated throughout the term. We started the year discussing American History and especially the circumstances and conditions under which the American Indians lived. I went confidently into the test, which contributed to my mark of 67 per cent. On receiving my mark, I spoke to Prof Groenewald to thank him for providing me with additional time; he was quite happy with my mark. Still, he mentioned that I needed to provide more information in my essays to receive a better mark.

In my third year, the History 310 students were privileged to once again have the internationally renowned historian Prof Franco Olckers as our lecturer. He remembered me from my first year and advised me to work hard. The difficulty of the history content increased. We discussed the New World as a theme, with particular focus on the lives of the three most prominent communist and fascist leaders in Europe during the 20th century: Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler.

Prof Olckers provided the students with notes to avoid any confusion and to summarise the content in its simplest form. The notes were categorised according to different topics and themes. The structured material summarised the content neatly for all the History modules from first to third year. Similar to my first year, I was impressed by the way Prof Olckers presented the lessons and how he accommodated every student based on their academic needs. Although the assessment opportunities were limited, the research topics were simple and the assignments were given a month in advance before submission. He gave clear

instructions and we did note-taking in the book as the final examination was an open-book test.

In preparation for the final examinations, my mother and I made additional notes on the lecture notes (Her notes are marked in red) (Figure 5.35).
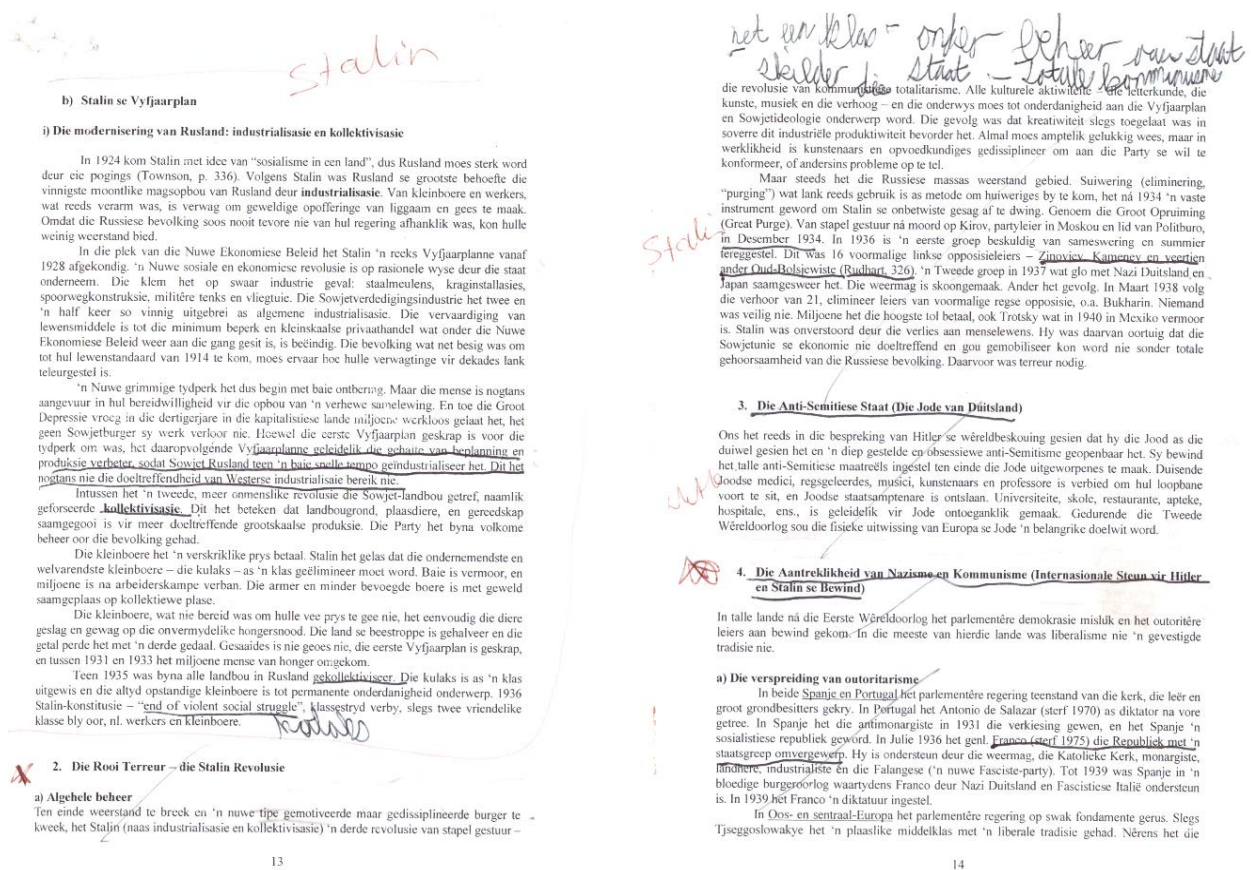

Figure 5.35 Two pages of the History 310 notes which I made during our lessons in preparation for the final examinations

Thanks to the support that I received from Prof Olckers and my mother, my semester mark was the highest it had been since my first year in History.

In faculty-based modules such as Life Orientation and OPV (the Education module), the lecturers were aware of my challenges and tried to accommodate my needs to the best of their abilities. Similar to what Prof Olckers had said about my participation in lessons as well as the quality of my work, Mr Potgieter described me as a hardworking student who did more work than what was expected from the

average student. Despite his positivity, he had been honest when he admitted his awareness of my struggle with planning and organisation and that it was something he could have worked on and improved as a lecturer. Mr Potgieter told me:

> I think you struggled a lot in class, not with work but to make the work less. I think it's something we noticed with you. You struggled to process all the information and to be able to summarise it in words.

To support this from a psychologist's perspective, Dr Venter felt that I could complete the content successfully, but reminded me that one of my challenges was to narrow the content down.

> You worked to summarise the content because you were so afraid of making a mistake that you did not want to leave anything out. You had to learn the hard way that you had to write less because time caught up to you. But I had full confidence that you would improve in this regard. I never doubted you – no, let me say, the most excellent part of you – is your general knowledge and how well you can communicate. I can remember how we just talked about what you learn in history class. I'd be so interested in it that we'd have no therapy time. This is something in you that I admired. Your thinking ability.

In other faculty-based modules, such as OPV and ACS (Academic Service Learning), the lecturers from both modules were more than willing to provide me with the necessary additional time in examinations. My OPV lecturer was not sure if she was allowed to permit me to have the extra time, so she requested that I email the module coordinator, who assured me that he would organise supervision. However, as most lecturers were not available to assist me individually, they recommended the assistance of a tutor who had an Educational Psychology degree to help me with planning and organisation.

During interventions with the tutor, I did not discuss the content of the modules because the damage to that part of the association cortex that affects my speech, thinking and problem-solving makes my mental processes slower, therefore, stuttering and repetition of sentences are present when I communicate. What I needed help with was fluid intelligence and novel problem-solving, which would

enable me to improve my reasoning and think cohesively to solve everyday problems. When I learn, I tend to use fluid intelligence (the ability to think abstractly, reason quickly and implement problem-solving skills) most often, and my cognitive processing is delayed. Therefore, I was the only student who spent more time with a tutor than other students. I also struggle with meta-components so the tutor assisted me with planned and regulated task performance, problem-solving and the development of strategies. When the tutor supported me, I benefitted from perceptual processing in which she made use of continuous repetition and broke the concepts down into smaller units. This process made it easier for me to retrieve information and make sense of the content.

The support provided was beneficial, but it was my responsibility to study individually for my tests and to persevere in spite of barriers. My marks improved, and I appreciated the help I had received because I would never have survived the university environment without support. During the support sessions with the tutor, we reflected on the content that was discussed during the lectures. I was dependent on the support and knowledge that I received from the tutor during the one-to-one sessions and benefitted from these sessions, which was reflected in my academic performance. Before every session my anxiety levels were high because when the lecturer assisted me with numerous modules, I compared my communication skills and subject knowledge to those of other students. This contributed to my low self-esteem; it was similar to situations in which I would normally have taken the flight response. I, therefore, required assistance from Dr Venter to help me improve my communication and interaction skills with fellow students. Dr Venter remembered:

> You had to learn that you can make meaningful relationships with people. Your diagnosis of autism does not prevent this. It is a skill that can be acquired. My problem with diagnoses is that they are so deterministic. Almost as if to say, 'This is how I am. I was made that way and leave it at that. Accept me as I am.' This is something that paralyses me in therapy, but it's my private view. You had a low self-esteem. This had to change. In therapy we spoke about incidents in your early childhood which could have led to a negative self-concept, how one's self-image is socially constructed and why the feedback which you

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received as a child from your environment is so important in the formation of your self-image. It was probably not the intention of certain family members, teachers and even therapists to break you down but their words and behaviour had that effect on you. I was shocked in my soul to hear of a previous therapist who wanted you to understand that you should accept yourself as you were. That you could not grow and develop further as a person. Her recommendation was that you should go and see the movie, Forrest Gump.

Notwithstanding his insights, Dr Venter acknowledged that my self-esteem needed to improve.

During our therapy sessions, he assisted me with overcoming problem-solving barriers and his advice contributed to my emotional welfare. With his guidance, I developed competencies that allowed me to cope with the demands of the environment and encouraged me to pursue my goal to graduate. With his support, I passed every semester, and he encouraged me not to doubt myself. Dr Venter summed up as follows:

I have experienced you as someone who is honest and takes a good look at himself. You came to me to conceptualise in words what your problems were.

As I became more aware of the academic and social expectations of the institution, I felt more competent to work independently. The additional support that I received improved my self-confidence and self-esteem, and my expectations rose when I felt that I could succeed despite the challenges I experienced.

5.8 Self-actualisation

As a young adult, my road to independence differed from the rest of my peer group. There came a point in my life where I wanted to become independent and not rely on support from family members for travelling and my academic responsibilities.

Another important phase in my journey to independence started late in my second year when I went for my driver's licence test. It was the second time I had gone for my driving test since my matriculation year in 2011. Back then I had unfortunately

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failed the test due to minor mistakes and afterwards decided that I needed to wait before retaking it.

This time, the feelings I experienced were different as I was aware of the expectations. I was well prepared and my anxiety levels were less. South African society has a negative perception of autistic people and driving but I was ready to prove my critics wrong. I was a third-year university student when I passed my driver's licence test, but I was, at that stage, not an experienced driver. All the same, we decided to determine the risk of driving to campus daily. The decision was made based on my academic performance and also with consideration for my emotional well-being. I felt competent academically, having familiarised myself with the academic standards and the environment. My parents believed that it would benefit my academic performance if I became a day student.

In all honesty, I welcomed the decision as I felt competent and had shown signs of coping in the environment. I was familiar with fellow students, as we attended the same classes and they were aware that I was different. The Life Orientation lecturer, Mr Potgieter, remembered that he saw a change in the behaviour of the students:

> I began to notice that the students had started to get used to you. That you were there, you were doing things. That is how you fitted in, and that's how they should be with you. So, they almost started accepting you for who you were in a certain way. In the beginning, it was different. They didn't know you, but when the students started to know you, they started including you. They also started understanding and noticed what they should do with you and what they shouldn't do.

He was not the only one who noticed a change in behaviour. Dr van Staden also admitted that she saw a change in my behaviour towards other students:

> As you progressed further, especially from your third year, I began to see that you started talking to other students. What impressed me a lot was the gentle way you spoke to them – you were always decent, friendly and considerate.

It was only after two years that I became comfortable in the university environment as well as with my studies. I was starting to work independently and coped with the

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academic workload. I also started to understand how one prepares for tasks and assignments. I began to approach my studies differently and started to summarise my work. I came to the realisation that I did not have to remember all the content, and, as a result, my academic performance improved. As I grasped the content, I started to communicate in class discussions, and it contributed to my prior knowledge and preparation for examinations.

Key role players noticed it in different areas too. Other lecturers marked the change and growth in self-confidence. Mr Potgieter remembered:

> Over the years, your confidence grew tremendously to a point where you started asking questions, where you could ask the questions you needed to. You found your voice. It could also help the lecturer to evaluate the class situation and then to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate you.

The Learning Support lecturer, Mrs Chite, agreed and remembered my diligence and my commitment to attending lectures and completing assignments to the best of my ability. She noted:

> What I remember is that you were in class and that you never missed a class. I looked at your marks again and you always had full marks for class attendance. Your diligence was immediately noticeable, especially with your work. You were very attentive. But I didn't notice it that way at the time because the student groups were large. As time gave rise to your fourth year, I saw you participated in class discussions and when asked a question, you immediately raised your hand and gave very meaningful answers.

In class, presentation and attendance were, for me, the fundamentals for most lectures and contributed to the semester and final mark in the module – especially in modules such as History, Learning Support and LO. Although Prof Groenewald could not remember in detail, he remembered that I expressed definite opinions in the History class. However, he sometimes did not agree with them:

> I can't remember in detail, but what I definitely can remember is that you had an opinion and it was very important to me. I always say I have more respect for a person who has an opinion than a student who has no point of view even

if my own differs from it. In particular, a student must have an opinion. But the majority of the students did not care enough to form one.

Mrs Chite also commented on my class attendance:

> What I can remember is that you sat in class all the time, and I think as a lecturer it means something when a student has habits. Students who sit at the back of the lecture hall, they will always sit in the back.

I enjoyed participating in lessons more and more in my second year, and it also benefitted me academically and socially. Academically I realised the importance of my growth as a student teacher, and the value of the knowledge I learnt to implement in practice. I wanted to excel in most of my modules and I would continuously ask the lecturers for advice, or even about the content that was prescribed. Mrs Chite remembered:

> I thought about this a lot, and especially in your third year, when you visited me frequently in my office to tell me all about the information and articles you read. It meant a lot for me as a lecturer, as I realised that you were thinking critically about the information.

During this phase, I eventually realised that I had found my purpose and that I could relate to the content because I came from a therapeutic environment. I was passionate about Learning Support. As a student who studied Intermediate Phase teaching, I attended the same modules as the students who studied under the Early Childhood Education Department (ECD). It was an exciting experience, as the students who studied ECD had prior knowledge of other modules that prepared them for the Literacy and Learning Support modules. The Literacy lecturer, Dr Human, remembered me as a student in her lecture and recalled that I was the only male student in the class.

> I did not immediately notice anything extraordinary about you, except that you were a male amongst the female students and that you were seated next to females.

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It was uncomfortable at first, as I was not used to attending all-female classes but I was motivated to acquire knowledge and contributed to the lessons. Dr Human added:

> I think it was during class when you answered a question that I noticed you were different. Also, to my surprise, even if I observed you as different, you contributed actively in class and appeared to be self-confident.

Dr Human also remembered my behaviour during the lectures. Even though I did not always participate in her lessons, I tried to ask questions, prompting her to say:

> I cannot recall incidents where you were uncomfortable in class. Still, I remember that I always tried to accommodate you by asking you questions during class, to have you involved in the discussions. I remember you always asked me questions about the content of the module after class, or when you saw me in the corridor, or in my office.

I enjoyed both the Literacy and Learning Support module assignments as they were practical. In the Learning Support module, Mrs Chite assigned a project where we were instructed to make Learning Support resources that educators could use to evaluate and improve the perceptual skills of the students. The second part of the assignment was to implement and test these resources each week with a child. I was excited, as it was the first time that I would implement the knowledge that I had gained in practice at a school. I received good marks for the assignment, and I noticed that Mrs Chite appreciated my hard work and my contributions to the project. Mrs Chite remembered my project and the container I had made with my resources:

> I really cannot think of anything you communicated with fellow students. But I remember that you gave very meaningful answers in the classroom. At Tuks the classes are large, and, as a student, you were more interactive than the majority of the students who never talk. Even with that group of ten students where I evaluated your containers, we had quite a nice chat and you explained the different devices. There was nothing wrong with your communication skills. It was excellent. In your third year, you could do it with ease.

I had a similar experience with the examination assignment that the Literacy lecturer assigned to us. Students were required to work 10 hours individually with a child after school These sessions provided us with practical experience to facilitate the young learner's reading, reading comprehension and creative writing tasks. At the end of the therapeutic sessions, we needed to submit a comprehensive portfolio with the marks that served as evidence for the number of sessions we had had with the learner.

When I received this assignment, I was frustrated at first because I was not involved with a school at that time and I did not know any learners who could assist me with this project. My mother played a pivotal role, as she identified a suitable learner who lived close by our family home. I stayed to help with additional reading and writing exercises to improve his reading comprehension. The student's name was Rhys and he struggled with reading and writing. I assisted him every weekend with reading and writing as seen on the following register, with a photograph taken of our last session (Figure 5.36).

BYWONINGS REGISTER

DATUM	TUISBESOEKE NAWEKE	HANDTEKENING VAN MOEDER
12 October 2013	12h00-14h00	
13 October 2013	12h00-14h00	
14 October 2013	13h00-15h00	
18 October 2013	14h00-16h30	
19 October 2013	12h00 – 14h00	
20 October 2013	12h00-14h00	
26 October 2013	15h00-17h00	
TOTAL HOURS WITH		13HOURS AND 13 MINUTES

Figure 5.36 Rhys, his mother and I. Rhys's mother signed the attendance register on the days I assisted him with his reading and writing

After seven weeks of reading and writing assistance, Rhys's reading improved tremendously, and his mother was grateful for the help I had provided. I eventually received a good mark for the assignment, and the lecturer thanked me for the excellent work that I had delivered and was glad that I had found this assignment to be a positive learning experience (Figure 5.37).

Figure 5.37 Rubric for my JGL 200 examination assignment

Overall, both the marks for Learning Support and the Literacy modules contributed to my average for the final mark sheet. My marks improved tremendously every year. This was evident in my final third-year marks when I received four distinctions (Figures 5.38 and 5.39).

Dr van Staden commented on my academic performance in my second and third years and acknowledged the improvement:

Term: 2013	Program: BEd		Plan: Intermediate Phase		
	In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Bachelor of Education				
Module code	Module name	Credits	%	Results	
OPV212	Education 212	20.00	52	Pass	
OPV222	Education 222	20.00	70	Pass	
JGL200	Literacy practices 200	24.00	67	Pass	
JLO210	Life orientation 210	12.00	63	Pass	
JLO220	Life orientation 220	12.00	58	Pass	
GES220	History 220	20.00	55	Pass	
SLK110	Psychology 110	12.00	52	Pass	
SLK120	Psychology 120	12.00	50	Pass	
GES210	History 210	20.00	56	Pass	

Weighted average % for term: 58.84   Cumulative weighted average: 56.64

Figure 5.38 My final second-year mark sheet

Term: 2014	Program: BEd		Plan: Intermediate Phase		
	In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Bachelor of Education				
Module code	Module name	Credits	%	Results	
JLO330	Methodology of Life orientation 330	6.00	78	Pass with distinction	
JLZ300	Literacies in education 300	6.00	60	Pass	
JMH330	Methodology of History 330	6.00	63	Pass	
ACS300	Academic service learning 300	6.00	75	Pass with distinction	
OPV312	Education 312	30.00	72	Pass	
OPV322	Education 322	30.00	85	Pass with distinction	
JMD351	Methodology of Learning support 351	6.00	78	Pass with distinction	
JLO310	Life orientation 310	20.00	55	Pass	
JLO320	Life orientation 320	20.00	53	Pass	
GES310	History 310	30.00	64	Pass	
GES320	History 320	30.00	72	Pass	

Figure 5.39 My final academic record for all my third-year modules

You did relatively well, but, in the beginning, you struggled – not that you failed. As you evolved as a person, your emotional development influenced your social development. It went hand-in-hand with your academic development. The more self-confidence you acquired, the better you performed. You found your place where you could do well. Your marks improved greatly in your third and fourth years. As my communication skills improved, my leadership skills improved too.

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Consequently, two lecturers (History and Life Orientation) elected me as their class representatives. It was a significant honour for me to be appointed as class representative as I had never held a formal leadership position before at university. The responsibility was not demanding, since I only needed to communicate infrequently with the lecturers in this role. When I asked Prof Groenewald why he suggested me as a class representative, he explained that it was due to my regular attendance of his History lectures.

> The probable reason I chose you is because you were in the class. It was a very practical reason. A class representative should be physically in the class on a regular basis. So who was a better guy – I probably knew you the best. There was also a very strong female student who I considered for the position, but it ultimately came down to attendance. A lecturer is not looking for an obscure class representative. They look for someone with whom they can cooperate.

There was no pressure from the lecturers or from the students' perspective, as there were only eight students in the class and we enjoyed a good relationship. I only recall one meeting which the Head of the History Department arranged with the tutors in the department to discuss challenges and opportunities for improvement.

In the Life Orientation module, my role as class representative was different because I was in frequent communication with the lecturer to represent the students and share students' concerns with her. Although I was proud of being a class representative of the module, I was surprised that the students chose me as I was never part of their friendship group. When I asked Dr van Staden for her reason for the choice, she said, 'With the election, I got to know you better, and you always sat in front of the class and you were so helpful.'

Comparing the task of class representative in the two modules, the position in Life Orientation was more interactive as I communicated more often with students. I also performed administrative tasks for the lecturer. Dr van Staden remembered:

> I would, for example, ask you to compile lists or to fetch and display materials. I saw that I could trust you with anything I asked you to do. I would also ask you

to make announcements, and I was astonished at the confidence you had standing up in class and talking to the students. You had authority, and they listened to you. I remember the day the students had to designate a class representative – you were the only nomination, and no one nominated any other students. You were everyone's choice! You just walked into this 'office' as a class representative as if it were made for you!

Through each interaction and communication opportunity, my confidence improved. I felt that despite our differences the students started to accept me in an academic setting, which was different from the residence. Dr van Staden summed it up:

> You were always modest, friendly and considerate. When you were chosen as a class representative, you started blossoming. Because you also managed administrative tasks, the students sought your help, and you always tried to accommodate them. I could see they respected you.

My self-confidence was at an all-time high and I believed that I had self-actualised as a student. However, I was still concerned that I did not have the necessary practical skills to become a teacher. So, taking into consideration that I was going to do practical teaching in my fourth year, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I knew that I needed more practical experience in a school-based setting. I shared my concern with my mother and she recommended that I go to a local school in my hometown and ask the school principal if I could observe and learn once a week on a day when I did not have any classes. I agreed with my mother and went the following day to the school to ask the principal. He said that he would love to assist me. However, I needed a letter of approval from the university to acknowledge that I was a third-year student at the University of Pretoria and that the University permitted me to work once a week at the school with the purpose of gaining more teaching experience.

A week after I visited the school, I was advised by the head of the Humanities department to make an appointment with the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Education, Prof de Bruin, to grant me permission. I made an appointment one afternoon with the Deputy Dean and discussed my concern and my intentions. Prof de Bruin was, at first, curious and he asked me about my background and my

modules at school. Whilst talking to Prof de Bruin, he went onto his computer to check my marks on the system.

Without me informing him, Prof de Bruin saw my marks for Psychology and History. He acknowledged that my marks had improved slightly from my first and second years and, after a lengthy discussion about my future, he approved my application to gain more experience once a week at the school in my hometown. However, he cautioned me that it must not interfere with attendance in classes. He wrote a letter to verify his approval (Figure 5.40).

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19th March 2014

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Education
Office of the Deputy Dean
Tel: 012 420 5556   Fax: 086 696 8871

The Principal.

Dear Madam/Sir,

Emile Gouws: 12106543: Introduction

This is to confirm that Mr Emile Gouws is an education student of the University of Pretoria. He is currently registered for the third year of the four-year Bachelor of Education programme specialising in the Intermediate Phase.

He seeks to voluntarily serve the community by assisting learners who show learning difficulties.

Mr Gouws takes responsibility for any projects in which he participates.

Yours sincerely,

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
DEPUTY DEAN
2014 -03- 1 8
UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
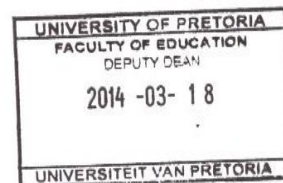
Figure 5.40 Letter granting permission from the Deputy Dean of the Faculty to do practical teaching

With this letter, I obtained permission to work at the school once a week. The experience was unique. By attending classes and also assisting the teacher with classroom management and lesson presentation, I got a glimpse of various teaching methods as I observed her. It was a learning curve, and, although I made

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mistakes, the mentor teacher encouraged me to persevere, improve on my lesson presentation and implement the skills that I had learnt in my undergraduate studies.

By being involved in the teaching practice, I had the opportunity to implement my knowledge of the content of Learning Support and to test different perceptual toys. The following photograph was taken whilst working at the school once a week, implementing and trying out some of my perceptual games (Figure 5.41). The students in the photograph were in Grade 4 and tested this game as part of a Life Orientation lesson.

Figure 5.41 Teaching practice: The learners testing a game that I had made as an assignment for Learning Support

I saw this as an advantage leading up to my fourth-year teaching practice, in terms of knowledge and skills. Mrs Vermaak, my mentor teacher at the school, commented on my lesson participation. She acknowledged that the general knowledge that I shared was valuable:

I remember that you were involved with the school, you did things with the kids and then even reported back in class. It was great that you took the knowledge and then practically implemented it, and then gave feedback.

As I approached my fourth year, I felt confident that I would do well in my teaching practice the following year. I also excelled in other areas. The lecturers invited me to participate in additional faculty-based research opportunities such as the Rugby, Reading and Research (RRR) project. The Literacy lecturer, Dr Human, asked me to participate in a PhD study that she was supervising which focused on the teaching of rugby through reading. With the help of the university's first rugby team, the rugby players assisted with the coaching of the primary school rugby team. The following photograph shows the students who formed part of the RRR programme. Dressed in the university's tracksuit jacket, I am indicated by the red arrow in the photograph (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.42 The students who participated in the Rugby, Research and Reading project

I was the only student from the Faculty of Education who was not a rugby player or assistant who took part in the research. I was given a great deal of responsibility as a lecturer and manager of the project and I was asked to design cards every week in terms of the positions of the game, the national heroes who played the same position and the various set pieces. Sessions were held at the school at 07:00 every Wednesday morning for nine weeks. I was so enthusiastic that I took the initiative to print the pictures, laminate them and write out keywords that made them more understandable. I was very proud of my work and excited to share my knowledge with the learners. I rose every morning at 05:00 to attend the reading sessions as shown in the photograph below (Figure 5.43).

© University of Pretoria

Figure 5.43 Showing learners the illustrations in the book that we read during the RRR project

The sessions were not only enjoyable for the learners but also for the rugby players. They rewarded me for my positive contribution and effort with a certificate from the university which we all received in acknowledgement of our work.

Based on the final marks of my third year, I was promoted to my fourth year. All my modules had been passed for the first three years. Dr van Staden referred to the progress I had made since my first two years and stated that I had grown tremendously as a student:

> It was incredible to witness your metamorphosis. Getting to experience how you blossomed from an uncertain first-year into a confident fourth-year student was incredible.

The first process for me at the start of my fourth year was to register. I was excited for my final year but also nervous because, as students, we were going to do our teaching practice at a school. Contributing to my anxiety was that students were expected to choose a school for the first part of their teaching practice. I was not familiar with any schools in Pretoria, and I was unsure if the students would accept me if they knew that I was diagnosed with ASD. The teaching practice section

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reassured the students that they would inform us of the process in choosing schools online.

A couple of weeks into my Teaching Practice, I received confirmation that I would be assessed by Mrs De Wet. Mrs De Wet was a former lecturer at the university, and she had a reputation for being strict on student teachers during their practicals. I also learnt from my mentor teachers at the time that Mrs De Wet was a frequent visitor to the Faculty of Education where she took part in the assessment of student teachers. In the weeks leading up to my first lesson assessment, my cousin informed me that Mrs De Wet was very strict and that I needed to be fully prepared for my lesson. A week before my assessment, I made an appointment with her on a Friday afternoon to discuss my first lesson.

Mrs De Wet introduced herself and we went to the classroom where I was going to teach to have a private meeting. While she observed the classroom, she told me what she expected of me as a student teacher and which tasks should have been completed before the first assessment. There were many improvements I needed to make to the classroom as well as to my teaching style. Mrs De Wet told me that she was going to assess my lessons according to the rubric and that I should adhere to the expectations to receive a good mark. After the meeting with Mrs De Wet, I discussed my planned lesson with my mentor teacher and asked if I could practise my lesson in preparation for the assessment. She agreed, I made the learners aware of the evaluation and I pleaded with them to be on their best behaviour.

I wanted to make my lesson presentation interesting. As I was going to be assessed in the Life Skills class, I chose the theme of 'bullying', which was a common problem at the school among learners. In my lesson preparation, I decided to include different resources during my introduction, such as an animation video and international newspaper articles about the occurrence of bullying in schools around the world. I prepared a comprehensive PowerPoint slideshow for the students. The morning of 11 May 2015, Mrs De Wet attended my Life Skills lesson and assessed my lesson presentation.

The students were well-mannered as they stood outside the classroom and greeted Mrs De Wet politely. As she assessed my file, she listened to my lesson presentation and saw that the students enjoyed the video and group activity. As the lesson progressed, Mrs De Wet noticed that the students became increasingly disruptive; my lesson and their attention spans were at odds. After the class, Mrs De Wet had a meeting with me to discuss my marks and mentioned some aspects I could improve on. Mrs De Wet first congratulated me on a fantastic lesson and said that she appreciated the use of different resources in my class. She mentioned that I needed to grasp the students' attention more and maintain it.

A week after my first assessed lesson, I arranged a second lesson where Mrs De Wet could again assess me. I wanted to improve on my first lesson, and, as such, I decided to play a practical game of guessing emotions during the introduction, followed by group work on the different emotions. My prediction for the effectiveness of my second lesson plan was accurate as the students enjoyed the game and the group activity. I noticed that students enjoyed and responded well to practical activities.

For my second Teaching Practice, I decided to do my practicals at a school in the neighbourhood where we lived. The reason why I chose to do my practicals at this school was that it was the same school where I had previously performed my weekly observations. It would also be more convenient for me personally as the school was about 15 minutes from my house. I was comfortable with the environment, the teachers and the learners. I had a good relationship with my mentor teacher, who taught Life Skills at the school. As she was also head of the subject and the school counsellor, she provided me with many opportunities to teach and learn. These opportunities boosted my self-confidence to teach in front of a class. On the day of the assessment, my mentor teacher assessed my lesson. I took into consideration the knowledge that I had gained from my first teaching practical at Western Primary School and implemented it in my class.

However, Rose Primary School did not have the same technological resources available as Western Primary School. To ensure good marks, I needed to make adjustments to be able to carry out the introduction, development and conclusion I

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had planned. In response to the difficulty, I brought my projector and laptop to school. I had prepared a lesson on social media and made use of different resources.

After my lesson, my mentor teacher gave me advice on how to improve my classes, especially how to capture the students' attention.

During my second practical lesson to be assessed by my mentor teacher, I took her advice and took greater care to capture and sustain the learners' attention. She came to the Social Sciences classroom to assess me. I had prepared a lesson on Ancient Egypt and, by using a PC game called 'Ancient Egypt', I gained the learners' attention; they enjoyed the game. The mentor teacher was impressed by how well the students responded to the lesson in which I made use of a video game. In the end, the risk paid off and she gave me a mark of 95 per cent.

On the second page of the assessment rubric, there was a section available where the mentor teacher could provide feedback and advice for student teachers on their lessons. My mentor teacher provided positive advice on my class and wrote the following on the assessment form:

> Mr Gouws's prior knowledge fits in with the lesson presentation as discussed earlier. The use of technology was outstanding and captured the attention of the students immediately. In the game, the students followed the instructions coherently on how to build a house, but it was also important to tell the students from which materials the Egyptians built their homes.
>
> It is an excellent presentation.

The mentor teacher also mentioned my continuous interaction with the students, that there was good discipline – I adhered to the rule that no student should shout out the answer in class – and noted that it was evident that students grasped the idea through the use of technology and games about Ancient Egypt.

As a student teacher, I felt that the learners from both teaching practice sessions enjoyed my lessons and appreciated my presence. The students were respectful and spontaneous in my lessons. I formed a bond with the students and portrayed

empathy, especially to those who experienced barriers to learning. It took time to get used to the expectations but I developed a passion for teaching and functioned quite well compared to the other students who had completed their teaching practice.

When the students returned from Teaching Practice, I was changed both physically and emotionally. I enjoyed my Teaching Practice time and felt that I had contributed. During this time I had been introspective, evaluated my strengths and decided to truly, for the first time, accept myself for who I am. It was a long journey that was now coming to a conclusion. As a result, I wanted to improve my self-concept and chose to work on my body image. On my return to campus, I received positive comments from the rest of the students and lecturers. One of the lecturers who noticed the physical and emotional change was Dr van Staden, who said that I had progressed tremendously:

> I watched your progress drastically change from who you were at the start and who you had become in your fourth year. It seemed to me like a revolution. You'd lost a lot of weight, and you'd cut your hair very short. Over the years, your hair has become more traditional. It seemed to me you found your identity. I remember you and I had a long conversation, and you told me that you had practised with the kids and did all the activities with them. Because you did LO and Physical Education with them as well, you had lost all your weight. You then started to dress very nicely. You started to adopt a formal style with a smart shirts, pants and shoes.

At the end of the year, I received my final academic report, and I saw that I had received distinctions in all my modules except Research Methodology. It was the first time in three years that I receive a distinction in the majority of the modules (Figure 5.44).

Term: 2015	Program: BEd			Plan: Intermediate Phase	
	In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Bachelor of Education				
Module code	Module name	Credits	%	Results	
JLD400	Learning support 400	24.00	82	Pass with distinction	
JMH430	Methodology of History 430	12.00	79	Pass with distinction	
JLO430	Methodology of Life Orientation 430	12.00	82	Pass with distinction	
JNM410	Research methodology 410	18.00	55	Pass	
JNM420	Research project 420	12.00	81	Pass with distinction	
PRO400	Teaching practice 400	60.00	86	Pass with distinction	
JNH454	First aid 454	3.00	985	Complies with requirements	

Weighted average % for term: 79.87   Cumulative weighted average: 67.09

OUTCOME: Complies with qualification requirements

On 2015-11-30 the abovementioned student complied with all the requirements for the Bachelor of Education qualification. It will be/was awarded/conferred on 2016-04-12 .

Figure 5.44 My final marks for all my subjects in my fourth year

At the same time that I received my final academic record, I received my letter of confirmation that I had complied with all of the requirements for the qualification of Bachelor of Education in Intermediate Phase. I was invited to attend the Faculty of Education's Graduation Ceremony held on 12 April 2016, where I was presented with my undergraduate degree. It was a wonderful afternoon, as my hard work, sacrifice and determination under challenging situations had paid off tremendously. I was not the only student who attended the ceremony; three students from my school also received their degrees, including my friend Kabelo. It was the first graduation ceremony of the year and an impressive 496 undergraduate and postgraduate degrees were to be awarded. The following photograph (Figure 5.45) was taken by my mother where she and my father sat on the balcony at my undergraduate graduation ceremony. The red arrow in the photograph is just an indication of the row where I was placed based on the phase that I had studied.

Figure 5.45 A photograph of the undergraduates on Graduation Day taken by my mother

The following certificate was awarded to me at the graduation ceremony and shows that I had graduated with a Bachelor of Education in the Intermediate Phase (Figure 5.46).

Figure 5.46 My BEd certificate from the University of Pretoria

It was a tremendous honour for me to receive my degree. Considering the numerous challenges that I had been confronted with during my first year, I doubted my abilities but kept persevering. My mother and father were tremendously proud of

me. I showed that any student can persevere and adjust to any environment with support. In our discussion, my father expressed his emotions that day by sharing a conversation between him and my mom.

> I was sitting next to your mother at your graduation ceremony and I told her during the proceedings that Emile functions on a high cognitive level. You don't have to help him anymore.

All in all, it was a major milestone in my life and this is reflected in my graduation photos with my family (Figure 5.47).

Figure 5.47 My parents and I after my graduation

After I obtained my degree, I visited Dr Venter to thank him for the support and guidance he had provided to me throughout my undergraduate studies. In his response, he stated that he saw a different student in front of him:

> You had self-actualised, and later there were no more specific problem areas for us to explore in therapy. You had to apply what you had learnt. Your confidence had increased and you turned into an outlier. When I saw you in

your Honours year, I barely recognised you. You started focusing on sports and lost noticeable weight.

It was a sign of individual maturation. Towards the end of our conversation, Dr Venter mentioned that our therapy sessions had deepened his own insight into therapy. He explained:

> I will always owe you a debt of gratitude for allowing me to expand and deepen my understanding into therapy and my field of study through the privilege of working with you. Thank you for faithfully keeping your appointments. Thank you for the candid and honest conversations. Thank you for the appreciation you have always expressed and thank you for strengthening my faith in my own work and field. Thank you for breaking the restrictive label around the necks of young people whose lives are affected by autism.

In the conversation I had with Mr Potgieter, he stated that I had succeeded against all expectations, not only at university but also in life as a result of the support that I had received from crucial role players:

> Look where you are today. You are a perfect example for many people. But it is just because someone allowed you to be yourself and to walk the path. People like your mother, Dr van Staden, were definitely two of the people who believed in your abilities and believed in your potential.

5.10 Conclusion

In this novella, I have dealt with my undergraduate years as a student at the University of Pretoria, where themes such as masculinity, ableness, whiteness, race, place etc. are described. What is clear is that being a neurodiverse student at a former White, Afrikaans institution with a specific culture was not always easy to adjust to. I was exposed to its traditions and cultures but I found its interventions and constructions difficult and jarring because whiteness and different kinds of masculinities were embraced by fellow students. It was not always easy for me as a neurodiverse student to adapt to the university environment, but I always tried my utmost best to fit in. Ironically, it was in certain masculine environments such as at the rugby practices where I had my best social interactions. In the context of

whiteness, I established my place in the company of Black South African students who seemed to accept my difference unconditionally.

In terms of my education, I had the best support one can think of from some lecturers. In some modules, such as Psychology, it was a real struggle to cope because some staff members and environments within the university context embraced aspects of the medical model and struggled to see me as a member of their community. Other key role players, such as my parents and Dr Venter, followed a social approach, supporting and guiding me through the different challenges I was confronted with on academic, emotional and social levels. There were times that I could not rely on support from the disability office as I was experiencing emotional lows which affected my academic performance. In this chapter, emphasis was placed on how I established my identity by referring to the theories of Erikson and Chickering, OSA theory, and by moving beyond Bakhtinian's concept of outsideness towards self-actualisation. I experienced this towards the end of my fourth year when I started teaching students at schools and I began to excel in different avenues. In the next chapter, I will work on my novella and engage with some of the identified themes and topics in depth.

CHAPTER 6

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF MY NOVELLA

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I shared my personal experiences as a student with ASD at university in a novella. I constructed the data through critical conversations with key role players (co-constructors) and supported by different personal artefacts. The novella was broken up into different time frames ranging from the time I completed school through my first year and up to the end of my fourth year at university. In this chapter, I will be working with my story. In this second level of analysis, I will propose different themes related to my research questions, addressing my experiences and why I experienced university the way did. To be able to identify the themes of my novella, I was required to work constructively by making sense of the critical incidences that make up each idea (Brandt, 1998). The findings from my novella are divided into themes what are interrelated, and also closely connected. This will be linked with the theories that I used in my theoretical framework (Bakhtin's theory of outsideness, OSA theory, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Chickering's theory of identity development) which will be linked to my identity formation as a university student diagnosed with ASD.

6.2 Route map of themes

The following themes had a strong presence in my novella: hierarchical masculinity, ableness, whiteness, friendship, support, plekkie (place), mental health, and being and becoming, which also relates to the typical experiences of students with ASD at university.

6.2.1 Hierarchical masculinity

Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell's theory of hierarchical masculinity acknowledges the different degrees and forms that masculinity can take in different settings (Lusher & Robins, 2009). Furthermore, this theory explains the interdependencies between structural, individual and cultural factors in relation to masculinity, which conceptualises the power struggle occurring between male sexuality and gender (Barron, Struckman-Johnson, Quevillon & Banka, 2008). The

concept of hegemonic masculinity is intended to make the male gender more superior to others by controlling, oppressing and manipulating those who are not perceived as 'male enough' (see section 1.7.5). On the other hand, hierarchical masculinity (which describes the interaction between multiple masculinities) is underpinned by certain characteristics being associated with manhood and which are valued and regarded as the norm, such as being muscled, superior and attractive. It forms part of Connell's four dimensions of gender relations, which differentiate between power, division of labour, cathexis and emotional ties (Flood, Gardiner, Pease & Pringle, 2007).

Referring to the inequality that occurs in society, hierarchical masculinity sheds light on the issue of gender inequality and the imbalance of power and, therefore, different forms of men belonging to marginalised groups, including ethnic, religious, economic and sexual groups (Schippers, 2007). Male attributes (excluding femininity, homosexuality, heterosexuality and other minority groups, such as those divided by race and gender) are placed in a more dominant position by society, in an interplay between identity formation, social interactions and power (Jewkes, Morrell, Hearn, Lundqvist, Blackbeard, Lindegger, Quayle, Sikweyiya & Gottzén, 2015). Bolluijt (2021) adds that other forms of masculinity, such as toxic masculinity, contribute to stereotypical behaviour and are characterised by domination, aggressive behaviour, competitiveness and athletic attributes that are placed in contrast to any form of weakness in an effort to isolate and oppress weakness.

Importantly, hierarchical masculinity is diverse and complex, and, therefore, it also focuses on aspects of toxic masculinity where physical strength, dominance and heterosexual prowess are ranked. Therefore, the attributes of hierarchical masculinity can relate to other themes such as ableness and able-bodiedness in society as it rejects persons with disabilities (Chouinard, 2010). Gorman (2005) notes that masculinity can also correspond with whiteness, as it relates to the racial prejudice that exists between one group and another (Feagin, 2013).

Relating to my autoethnography, hierarchical masculinity was evident from the first moment I enrolled at the university as my fellow students never included me in their social groups because of my weird, anti-social behaviour. By 'weird', I mean limited

eye contact, my physical appearance and dress code. I was forewarned of this as a possibility as a learner by the school psychologist, who, in her words, characterised the university environment as 'mean', meaning that only students with a strong and daring personality, or those who were physically attractive, would survive; in other words, those with a certain normative masculinity. Although she supported me with my career choice, she recommended that I still pursue a qualification in HMS, but at a smaller training centre near my home rather than at a large university so as to avoid exclusion (see section 5.2). At first, I did not agree with her, as I personally thought that she underestimated my physical capability to study at a university where three other students from my remedial school had also studied. Yet, in hindsight her position had merit because I realised in my first year that the students embraced the masculine attitude, especially in the faculty houses and residences, by idolising male students who were physically attractive, outspoken and spontaneous, and who embraced a certain student lifestyle by, for example, misusing alcohol on campus.

On my first day as a new first-year student, during my interactions with members of the day house, hierarchical masculinity was evident in the behaviour of House Committee members. They preferred to socialise with students who fitted their criteria and made their judgements based on social class, physical appearance and sports achievements. In other words, they exercised toxic masculinity stereotyping. When I experienced these unfamiliar situations, I contemplated whether I would fit into a social environment which did not allow any form of weakness in the form of me being on the ASD spectrum, my introverted personality, my body weight, my dress code and my neurodiverse brain. My difference was clearly visible, so much so that the chairlady of the faculty house affirmed this statement at the introductory session by telling me that there was no room for any weakness and that I would be replaced, meaning that only certain masculinities would be embraced. This reaffirmed the statement that I was not a 'man' or at least man enough and did not fit this category with its characteristics of masculinity (see section 5.3). My behaviour was opposite to the so-called masculine norm – I was not a social being, I did not drink alcohol and I tended to be very responsible. I was also very uncomfortable in social environments and hardly ever participated in the residence social activities.

This sort of behaviour was carried through in most of the different settings in which I moved throughout my undergraduate studies. I was introverted in the manner in which I was trying to negotiate my way around the university, and I did not know how to socialise or begin and end a conversation (see section 5.4). As a neurodiverse student, I was under severe pressure to meet the university environment's masculine expectations. But I did not meet the criteria of a typical male student, as explained above.

A fellow student and family member who was aware of my challenges and journey with ASD, my cousin, was also of the opinion that I did not meet the criteria of a typical male university student. She made the comment that weak and lazy students – code for those at odds with a toxic masculine attitude – would not survive and would be automatically excluded (see section 5.3). Her perceptions and views were notable in the attitudes and behaviour of the House Committee members as they had already identified their favourite students whom they wanted to include in their friendship circle. This general attitude corresponds to Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and to 'survival of the fittest' in the context of Social Darwinism (see section 5.3).

In general, this attitude persisted in the setting of the male residence where I stayed (Moeggeploeg), where hierarchical masculinity was emphasised by the way in which the residence implemented its policies and was managed. The rules and regulations that the residence implemented for first-year students included them having to wear the same uniform and to participate in the residence social events by socialising with female students, drinking, and participating in the main 'sports' of rugby and swearing. Senior students undermined new first-year students by implementing and enforcing these traditions and rules. These rules also included the greeting of House Committee members by shaking their hands, remembering their names and calling them by their rank. It was also a time when there was an unwritten social norm that students from different races did not share rooms. The Moeggeploeg Residence was then the largest male residence at the University of Pretoria, and, therefore, the House Committee were strict in instilling discipline and familiarising the students with the masculine culture of the residence and the

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institution (see section 5.4). As a student who came from a remedial school environment and a home where I was loved and supported for who I am, I immediately felt like an outsider. First and foremost, I was a student with ASD, so I tended to avoid social events when they were overcrowded because I was sensorially overwhelmed. As a result, I struggled to participate in residence activities because I had high anxiety, facial blindness and the inability to engage because the university, at residence level, did not have processes in place that could accommodate my differentness.

Another strong resemblance to toxic masculinity was to divide the strong from the weak during the obligatory Prison Walk, in which new first-year male students were required to participate. This activity of being made to run up the stairs with lights dimmed and breaking bottles around you was demeaning, disturbing and destabilising but it was part of the masculine tradition of the residence in which first-year students were obliged to participate. They were also not allowed to show any form of weakness (see section 5.4). These events made me feel overwhelmed and anxious, as well as afraid, nervous and weak. The majority of the first-year students believed that this event discriminated against their human rights and enforced a White, Afrikaner, male tradition on students from diverse backgrounds. My decision not to participate further in the Prison Walk contributed to the further exclusion I experienced, and, as such, questions were raised about my emotional well-being and my ability to survive in a residence environment.

Rugby, which represented manhood and toughness, was a sport in which masculinity was prominent. Controversially, the residence rugby team did not live up entirely to the masculine code as the head coach of the residence rugby team, Johan, had a physical disability as a result of a rugby injury he had sustained years before. Thinking back, by taking masculinity into consideration in terms of respect, Johan's disability still acted as a sign of his masculinity, as he had made the ultimate sacrifice by getting injured in a sport that was tantamount to a religion in South Africa. Despite his rugby injury, he continued to follow his passion by coaching the residence rugby team with success. As a result, Johan was respected and admired by all the students in the residence. Although we both had impairments and despite

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my involvement in rugby, it was clear that Johan's disability garnered greater respect, than mine. As a student with a physical disability, Johan was regarded as invincible (see section 5.3) and his decisions regarding my participation were later rejected when he left because of a lack of understanding regarding my position. After all, I was not a rugby player myself and was thus dispensable.

Theoretically, referring to Bakhtin's concept of outsideness and how it relates to hierarchical masculinity, the concept was also evident in most of the university environments in which I moved. This was especially true in the residence, as the students were seated based on their interests and friendship groups, and those who did not fit neatly into these categories were isolated. In general, I was regarded as a masculine outsider and, being aware that I am different, I knew that the possibility of my exclusion was much higher and that I needed to adapt my behaviour to function academically, emotionally and socially at university, which corresponds to the first vector of Chickering's theory of intellectual, manual and interpersonal competence. In saying this, I did not take exclusion from the different university environments in which I moved well, and I always longed to be part of the masculine group. To become an insider, I decided to participate in residence rugby, so accepted the responsibilities of team manager (see section 3.2). I wished to receive the same amount of respect that the head coach, Johan, received as a fellow disabled student. Yet, even though I did feel a sense of belonging, judgement was still shown toward me, as I was unacceptably 'different'. Johan was authentically male and different but he too was fighting for his space in the hierarchy of masculinity. I was included to help with the rugby because Johan had a certain empathy for me – we were both differently impaired and both fighting for our acceptance. But I was excluded from other aspects of the team because the rest of the team did not understand my impairment (see section 5.3). This was reaffirmed when Johan left. I felt abandoned because the new coaching staff did not have the same empathy as he did and they refused to accommodate me.

The toxic masculinity that I encountered in residence prevented me from being able to socialise with others, who were, perhaps, masking their vulnerability and differentness to be accepted into the hierarchy of masculinity in the team and in the

residence and other spaces on campus. It hampered my ability to showcase my gifts and humanity. I was forced into an anxiety filled space of fight or flight.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development must also be considered. As a student with ASD, I was required to uphold the standards and traditions of the White, Afrikaans, South African university culture I found myself in. The university upholds the highest standards to which each student aspires, as per the university norm at the time, but failure puts the student in danger of academic and social exclusion. During this time, I experienced Erikson's first stage, the trust vs mistrust phase. In this phase, being unfamiliar with the environment of toxic masculine behaviour, I needed to familiarise myself with the standards of the institution and the type of male behaviour that would be acceptable, formally or informally. Even though boarding with Kabelo helped me to find my way, it was an extremely difficult time, as I felt that I was the only student with ASD at university.

As vulnerable as I was socially, I had only one option, and that was to try to join these groups (for example, rugby) or resign myself to being on my own. This corresponded with Chickering's social vector (see subsection 3.5.1), as I felt desperate emotionally and socially to join and form new social connections. However, when I tried to join, I would generally be excluded from their conversations. I immediately got the impression that the students either did not want to associate with me, or they did not know how to communicate with me because of my differences. The male, Black African students accommodated me because they were also part of a marginalised group, also striving for acceptance in a residence that strove for masculinity, whiteness and superiority and they were, therefore, automatically regarded as outsiders because the environment had a predominantly Afrikaans traditional influence (see section 6.2.3). Also, all male House Committee members noticed that my anxiety levels were very high in unfamiliar circumstances, such as during the Prison Walk, which meant that conversations were had about my behaviours and inability to perform their rituals, which again isolated me. Through these conversations, they were showing how powerful and masculine they were and making me feel incredibly vulnerable and weak (see section 5.3). The Black African students had empathy and accepted me for who and what I am.

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This same attitude was applied when one student questioned my ability to become a House Committee member. I realised that I needed to stand up for myself and challenge this negative attitude and this perception towards difference (see section 5.3). I also realised that it was in my own hands to establish happiness, and to find my 'place' as a male student on campus. This notion can also refer to implementing a medical model that aims to change the students, 'fixing' them to achieve acceptable behaviour and to meet the institutions' expectations. This masculine attitude was adopted by the practices of the institution, specifically the HMS and staff members, preventing self-actualisation and growth, which will be explored in depth in section 6.2.2. That was when I realised that although the university had its inclusive policies to accommodate students with disabilities, it is a lecturer's choice whether to implement them, as in the case of the refusal of extra time to complete examinations.

In my undergraduate years, I was regarded in a masculine sense as an outsider to the hierarchical masculine norm. I was aware that I was diagnosed with ASD. I knew that the possibility of my exclusion was much higher and that I needed to adapt my behaviour to function academically, emotionally and socially at university.

6.2.2 Ableness and ableism

Ableism reflects the values and abilities of many a society, and while doing so designates negative labelling and relegates poor treatment to individuals who show traits other than those valued, which leads to discrimination against the less able person (such as persons of different ability, sexuality, race and gender) (Wolbring, 2008). Wolbring (2008) further acknowledged that ableism is a classification between various groups, which can be likened to other forms, such as racism, sexism, casteism, ageism and speciesism. Ableism can also be regarded, as I will argue by drawing on my novella, as a preference for neurotypically normative abilities, in which discrimination occurs against the less able-bodied (Stoll & Egner, 2021) (see section 1.7.9). Other authors, such as Chouinard (1999), have noted that ableism is an ideology that is based on the exclusion of persons with disabilities, especially referring to able-bodiedness. Able-bodiedness, in which the physical attributes of the individual affect their ability to use their body to its fullest capacity

and where any show of weakness is isolated and regarded as not normal, will be discussed in this section (Smith, Mallick, Monforte & Foster, 2021). These ableist standards affect societies and other organisational structures in which stereotypical behaviour, prejudice, discrimination and social oppression towards persons with disabilities, including invisible disabilities, chronic health, psychiatric conditions and others, exist (see section 1.7.9).

In general, ableism has a negative connection to most persons with disabilities as it refers to their inability to perform specific tasks or participate in certain events effectively. Society, including the universities within them, provides context to both ableism and able-bodiedness as concepts. Sociologists believe that ableness can be connected to able-bodiedness, as physical appearance and strength are preferred and, as such, can be viewed as superior, stigmatising alternate perceptions and excluding others (Monforte, Smith & Bennett, 2021). It is also important to note that able-bodiedness relates to performance and production and examines a set of assumptions about people with presumed and assumed disabilities, such as whether they are capable of performing tasks (Campbell, 2014). Ableness, referred to in a later publishing by Campbell (2014:842) as a 'seduction of sameness', is based on equality and a heightened devaluation of ideas, practices, institutions and social relations. Critics such as Barounis (2009:54) exposed masculinity and ableness by the visual mechanisms through which, for example, disabilities and homosexuality distance themselves from the perceived norm. Able-bodiedness can also refer to implementing a medical model that aims to change the so-called disabled students, 'fixing' them to achieve acceptable behaviour and to meet the institutions' expectations. I was, as can be gleaned from my novella, immediately under the impression that the university was not used to accommodating students with ASD and, therefore, assumed that students would need to adapt to the residence and campus.

Throughout my undergraduate studies, the ethos of ableism was evident in different settings at university and in the actions of students and lecturers who had adopted this attitude in academic and sports achievements. Based on their behaviour, there was a distinct preference for beauty, sportsmanship, strength and social desirability

as manifestations of ableness in different settings at university, especially in the Faculty Houses and in my residence. The Faculty House had readily formed perceptions about me, having chosen students whom they regarded as able by giving them their Faculty House uniforms and by remembering and calling them by their names.

This was a common behavioural trait which House Committee members also exhibited towards me, as my behaviour was different and strange compared to the rest of the students and their societal frame of reference. Yet in the residence, there was no immediate emphasis placed on me on my first day in residence. I looked able-bodied in my French sports shirt and looked similar to the rest of the students in terms of my physical appearance (see section 5.4). Deep down, however, I was aware that I was different and thus differently able. When I dressed in my 'Ienk' uniform, I did not feel like an outsider, and felt part of the first-year residence group (see section 5.4). However, this was but a veneer as I was still regarded as an outsider by the rest of the students based on the challenges that I portrayed socially, emotionally and physically. As a student with ASD, I struggled at times to meet the ableist expectations of the residence. I struggled to participate and engage socially in the different social events such as, for example, with students from the female residences that the male residence Moeggeploeg hosted. Physically, I was overweight and could not participate in the traditional residence events, and my fatigue levels were extremely high. Fellow students in the residence and House Committee members immediately noticed that I was different and judged me accordingly as a less-abled person (see section 5.4). The judgement that I experienced on campus, especially from female students, gave me the impression that there was a lack of knowledge about ASD. Additionally, the feeling of rejection and isolation that I experienced from the different social groups in the residence (in the dining hall and at social events) made me feel weak. By not inviting me to sit with them in the dining hall, I came to believe that ASD was seen as a social ill and a disability. It was clear that other students also struggled under the ableist regime of the university and needed to adhere to the regulations to 'fit in', as comments were made to them and set rules governed their behaviour, such as the mixing of students from different races in rooms, which was against the institutional culture of

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a residence that tried to uphold the Afrikaans traditions as it relates to whiteness. Students who were part of the minority were rejected and immediately isolated in various settings on campus, based on the fact that they were regarded as not able and would be associated with any behaviour seen as a threat to the regime of the Afrikaans traditions, such as not participating in the social events hosted by the residence and using foul language (see section 5.4). The students who participated in rugby (where I tried my utmost to fit in) fitted the ableness requirement as the players were mostly from the same race (White) and participated regularly in the residence social events, such as parties every Thursday afternoon at the club.

On the sports field, able-bodiedness was ever-present. This was especially noticeable during my first year, as the senior students and the House Committee of the residence defined the students according to the various sports they participated in, such as rugby, soccer, basketball and tennis (see section 5.4). I also came to the realisation that the school from which the student came played an important role in the reputation of the student and signalled their ableness in a similar way to their sports achievements. Several students were well-known sports athletes and had represented their schools on the national level. My first-year group was very strong in this regard and performed exceptionally well, not only on the sports field but also academically and on a cultural level. As a neurodiverse student, I wanted to find my place and my identity within this very able group. This led me to come out of my comfort zone to participate in cultural events such as the annual RAG competition, although this made me vulnerable, as I had low muscle tone and did not carry out the moves correctly (see section 5.4).

During my first couple of weeks at university, I noticed that some students were dressed in sportswear and that their sports achievements were acknowledged by the different lecturers. This was especially true in the HMS module, where the students looked very athletic and fit and thus able (see section 5.3). Sport is a passion of mine, and I was extremely disappointed after the conversation with the HMS lecturer who recommended that I not enrol for the course due to the physical limitations or perceived inability that I experienced. I felt that I was at a crossroad and had to make a choice between abandoning university or taking the HMS

lecturer's advice and choosing a different module. I felt that the lecturer had judged my ability based on my challenges and on my physical appearance. Now being aware of the ableist ideology, I did not have any choice but to find a way to survive in this university environment. I had felt the urgency of forming part of this ableist ideology, and so I decided to consult Dr Venter, the university psychologist, for assistance in developing the skills needed to communicate with fellow students and make friends.

He too, was aware of the ableism (prejudice) which existed in the residence, and elsewhere in the university and, therefore, advised me to focus on my strengths, such as talking to students about rugby, sharing rugby facts and starting short conversations with fellow students. Dr Venter also advised me that I should get involved with the residence rugby team, as it would give me the sense of belonging that I always searched for and would improve my self-confidence.

My involvement in the residence rugby team gave me purpose and an opportunity to mix with able students, and I took my responsibilities seriously. Although I felt that I belonged, there was a lot of criticism aimed at me, as the rest of the rugby players believed, at some stage, that I became reluctant to carry out my duties, which later led to the appointment of a second manager who was a former rugby player, deemed more able a popular figure in social circles and who participated effectively in the social events hosted by the residence. When I heard this, I was extremely disappointed that the head coach and fellow students believed that he was more able of performing the managerial duties than I was (see section 5.4). In my view, this was a low level form of bullying.

As a student with ASD, I was replaced because the judgement I experienced affected my self-confidence, and Dr Venter made me aware that the institution, include the rugby teams, itself had a robust, ableist, judgement system and that each student's behaviour and responses were under continual analysis. He reminded me that the feedback I could expect from students and lecturers might be harsh, straightforward and ruthless (see section 5.4). I was further reminded that, especially in the case of lecturers, there was a fixed perception of a typical student as one with ability, deemed able, and that any behaviour opposing the standards of

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the institution would be interrogated, especially when a student was asking for additional time for tests and examinations. The faculty required me to obtain a permission letter at examination time before the session started. It was a complicated process and I felt that I needed to prove that I had a disability. The lecturers questioned if I was eligibly disabled. The majority of the lecturers consequently followed an ableist approach which assumed that disability is, as per the medical model, a social ill of society and can be curable (see section 5.5).

At times, I felt that I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, as I needed to decide whether I should disclose that I was diagnosed with ASD to the different lecturers. My intellectual and social incapacities were becoming visible, and that made me prone to broader forms of judgement (see section 3.3). Some lecturers acknowledged that I was an adult with ASD and thus differently able and tried to make reasonable changes to accommodate me in the lecture halls, while other lecturers did not bother to accommodate me. The lecturers who did not want to provide, for example, additional time to me had a more accommodating attitude toward able-bodied students. In other modules such as SLK (Semester 1), did not allow students to have access to the summarised study notes to study for tests and examinations and, as such, the lecturers encouraged the students to study from the textbooks. As a student who also experienced challenges with planning and organisation, I was placed under severe academic pressure to cope and to pass the SLK examinations. At that time, my self-confidence was low. I felt that my impairment was not accommodated and I felt that I was at a crossroad and had to make a choice between abandoning university and looking for greener pastures or sticking it out (see section 5.6).

In terms of Bakhtin's theory of outsideness, I was immediately classified as an outsider in an ableist university environment. In the university environment itself, these were the social groups that I moved in and the module choices I had made, especially considering HMS. My father acknowledged that I had made the right choice not to enrol for HMS, as I did not possess the capacities to perform well in sport or in any other leadership position. As a sports coach, I would be required to know the rules of the sport and required to take criticism (see section 5.3). Another

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critical incident in which ableism and masculinity took its finest form was in the residence, especially when I decided to run for the House Committee. I was not as popular as the norm and, therefore, the House Committee saw me as incapable, and they underestimated my ability to lead. The rest of the students from the residence followed their direction and doubted my ability to become part of the House Committee. Dr Venter warned me about standing for the House Committee, as I would place myself in a judgemental situation based on ableness where students would show no humanity and mercy in evaluating me. At the same time, taking Chickering's theory of differentiation and Erikson's identity vs doubt phase into consideration, I experienced feelings of jealousy, uncertainty and disorganisation as I wondered why other students were idolised and respected based on their abilities in sports achievements and their physical appearance not only in the residence but also at university in general. I compared my behaviour and appearance with the rest of the 'able' students on campus and in the residence. Another incident where I strongly questioned my ableness was when an Indian male student approached me, asking to take a photo of me to show his family back home. This incident was the pinnacle of judgement about my ableness as I was not perceived as abled-bodied male and looked vulnerable and different (see section 3.3).

I concluded that my ASD diagnosis was seen as a weakness and deficit and that the university was not ready to accommodate a neurodiverse student on campus and at university. In my view of my undergraduate experiences, ableism existed in the environment and was ever-present in the university's management system, academic courses in the residence environment and in the students behaviour. Ableism is also connected to whiteness which I will now turn to in working with my novella.

6.2.3 Whiteness

Whiteness is defined by Tanner and McCloskey (2022) as a socially constructed concept. It is a formation of racial identity based on historic events and current developments. Harris (1990:28) states that whiteness is the property of 'racial privilege' from which the privileged race has certain societal and public benefits

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(Harris, 1990). As such, whiteness is a continuous barrier to any effective change of racial classification which is operated to protect the dominant power (Tanner & McCloskey, 2022) (see section 1.7). Other researchers such as Jarvis (2021) regard whiteness as a default standard in which the behaviours and actions associated with 'white culture' are compared to all other races and cultures, objectifying them and applying stereotypical behaviour to those individuals who do not meet and adhere to white norms thereby isolating them. Referring to the intersecting axis (spheres) of privilege, domination and oppression, certain groups were regarded as more superior than others. During my time at university, other groups such as women, people of colour, persons with disabilities and students who are unattractive were oppressed (Coleman *et al.,* 2021). As such, much of White identity was formulated around the absence of identity, meaning that the identity of the individual might have been intentionally crafted to suit the wants and needs of the specific environment (Coleman *et al.*, 2021).

In the South African context, the White population was historically privileged in terms of the ownership of property, racial representation in law and society, unbiased education and the assumption of intellectual, social or financial capability and unbiased credibility (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). The inequality that exists due to the legacy of apartheid and colonialism is reflected in the manner in which public institutions such as universities are managed (Barolsky, 2021) (see section 1.7). Whiteness constitutes and demarcates ideas, feelings, knowledge, social practices, cultural formations and systems of intelligibility that are identified with or attributed to White people as 'White'. Adonis and Silinda (2021) mention that social inequalities characterise the policy of apartheid in all aspects of social life when considering race, especially when referring to the policies that were implemented in higher education, the legacy of which was still very present when I entered university.

Pattman and Carolissen (2018) believe that the system of apartheid was evident in the management of higher education in South Africa as segregation was implemented by distinguishing between people from different races, which had an impact on university culture (Steyn, 2007). Although South Africa has come a long

way since 1994, the system of apartheid has powerfully laid down its social mark. It remains a top priority for university authorities, academic staff and students to fight for inclusion and accessibility, and to illuminate social injustice (Othman, Laswad & Mat-Roni, 2021). Throughout history, and especially from a South African perspective, race refers to the inequality between people from different races, predominantly White and Black. In terms of the epistemology, policy, pedagogy and curriculum of the South African education system, the structuring of higher education systems and existing policies were devoted to benefitting White students and simultaneously excluding Black African students (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Referring to this study, race relates to themes such as whiteness but it also refers to the implementation of different policies, attitudes and management of the institution (Hsu, Yang, Parikh, Anderson, Chen, Cohen, He, Mohanty, Lash & Mills, 2021).

According to Steyn (2007), a university is defined by its culture, assumptions and traditions while the hierarchy of race mainly refers to 'white power' (Amico, Ashina, Parascandolo & Sharon, 2021). White power can also correspond to important concepts other than race, such as ableness and masculinity (Lewis, 1997), as the marginalised group are automatically excluded and continuously discriminated against. Considering the manifestation of society, especially during the apartheid years, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (Act 47 of 1953) in particular is an example of how this segregation law was enforced racially, creating separated education facilities. Though we are now in a democracy, the consequences of laws such as these are deeply set in the institutions which abided by them for decades, as evident in my story (Gans, 2017).

Throughout my undergraduate studies, I was not seen as an authentic White person because of my autism diagnosis. I did not believe that I was better or more superior than other students, and neither did my fellow White students. My perceptions reflect my morals and values, especially as I did not portray any form of prejudice and discrimination against students who were from different races. In fact, in the household I grew up, race or perceived whiteness was never a debatable topic and included a strong anti-discriminatory value system. I continuously implemented this

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value system throughout my high school years, especially while forming my friendship with Kabelo (see section 5.2).

Looking back on my friendship with Kabelo, although we were in separate classes, we had mutual respect, and our friendship grew beyond high school and into university. Both of us entered an unfamiliar environment that was unknown to us (see section 5.2). Although our challenges were different (mine as a student with ASD and Kabelo's as a Black African student), we were both searching to find our place at university, on campus and in the residence by participating in social events such as the RAG and the residence rugby (see section 5.4). As soon as I enrolled in the residence, I became aware of the standards and regulations of the residence, as the House Committee had clearly stated their rules. I understood Kabelo's situation as well, as he and his fellow Black African students were enrolled in what was then still a traditional, White, Afrikaans residence which extended its ableist traditions to every constituent member. Indoctrination followed a typical military approach that included verbal abuse through swearing and hazing by forcing new first-year students to participate in the Prison Walk. This was implemented by the House Committee members who discriminated against individuals who were part of the minority group, namely the Black African students and me as a student with ASD) (see section 5.4).

The vast majority of the Afrikaans students in the residence did not understand the autism diagnosis. My behaviour, actions and attitude were not typically White. They were the opposite of what the Afrikaans students imagined, especially when I made the decision to share a room with Kabelo (see section 5.4). Owing to that decision, Kabelo and I experienced isolationism as it broke the tradition of the residence and fellow students in the residence started to spread rumours amongst the predominantly White students by questioning my decision to share a room with a student from a different race. This was disappointing, as the rest of the students were not aware that Kabelo and I had known each other from Grade 8, and that he understood ASD and would help me to find my way around campus (see section 5.3).

As such, the Black students embraced both our friendship and me as an individual. In the past (the apartheid policy of separateness), students who were Black African or disabled would be isolated and did not receive the same opportunities as able, White students. Kabelo and his fellow black African students were, therefore, dependent on each other, lending their support by visiting, moving around with and encouraging each other on a daily basis. My actions showed the true idea of transformation (see section 5.4). I was not authentically White, I was not your typical Afrikaans student, I was not very masculine and muscled, I did not use offensive language nor portray aggressive behaviour, and I did not drink alcohol. I received my acceptance and assistance from the Black African students, especially from Dave who was willing to assist me with additional computer lessons in his room (see section 5.4).

The students on campus realised that I was different because my behaviour was not typical or associated with what was deemed White behaviour. The Indian student who took a photo of me to show to his family and the group of White female students who asked to take a photograph to show everyone what a 'retard' looked like (see section 5.6) made me doubt my capabilities. I could not understand why I experienced rejection from my fellow White, Afrikaans students and I firmly believed that I was the only student on campus who had been diagnosed with ASD. These incidents made me feel like an outsider (Bakhtin's theory of outsideness); I felt like a foreigner amongst the White, Afrikaans-speaking students and needed to work hard to receive my acceptance from them by getting involved with the residence rugby team. Despite my best efforts to portray my management duties to the best of my abilities, I was still regarded as an outsider, someone who was easy to replace with another first-year student who was a popular figure amongst senior students in the residence and who would uphold the whiteness tradition. Chickering's theory and Erikson's theory of identity vs role confusion (see section 3.3) were evident in my undergraduate experiences at university where there was a strong sense of 'racialised identity' considering not only whiteness, but also blackness and Asianness, which automatically enforced separateness on campus. This was evident on the sports field where predominantly White, male, Afrikaans students participated in the rugby while the Black African students generally participated in

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soccer (see section 5.4). There was no doubt as to which race was the most dominant, as the residence rugby team would receive the majority of the support from the residence whilst the residence soccer team would receive the minimal support. Considering the policy of the university at the time, the traditions of the residence, the language the students and lecturers spoke, and the naming of the activities students were obligated to participate in, these were purposely implemented to elaborate on the power struggle between senior and first-year students but which benefitted only students from a specific race – namely White. Chickering's theory fits with how the students positioned themselves within the university environment before undertaking various tasks or activities (see section 3.3). Chickering's second vector of emotional management is also relevant as I developed the determination to become part of the Afrikaans tradition at university (see section 3.4). As a White, Afrikaans-speaking, student with a disability, I felt uncomfortable with the traditions and regulations of the university, finding them to be oppressive and discriminatory. This idea of whiteness brought about an atmosphere of separateness and it affected my self-confidence. I did not feel that I belonged beside my fellow White students, and therefore associated myself strongly with Kabelo and the rest of the Black African students on campus (see section 5.4).

The residence authorities did not allow students from different races to share a room. With my Black African roommate's decision to share a room, we exposed ourselves by challenging the system where isolation, microaggressions, discrimination, harassment and persecution could occur (Gans, 2017). The reaction of other students to our decision corresponded with ableism, as there was unfair discrimination against me because I did not have the rest of the students' capabilities. The rules and regulations needed to change, as the marginalised group (a student with a disability and a Black African student) felt that the system had oppressed them. Two categories (disability and race) joined forces to change the system's regulations. I experienced rejection from fellow White students who were afraid of the unexpected and felt excluded in a university that welcomed students worldwide.

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Bakhtin's theory of outsideness was ever-present during my undergraduate years, especially in the residence, where its regulations categorised us students who were regarded as different into subgroups by placing the first-years in different rows in front of the residence (referring to race). As Wolbring (2008) describes, there were acts of unequal and discriminatory treatment from the 'privileged population' and, in the case of my study, that privileged population was the students who were White, male and able.

Looking back on my undergraduate years, the racial divide was evident as students from different races were trying to establish and find their 'place' at university. This corresponds with Erikson's first stage of trust vs mistrust. OSA theory is also relevant as I experienced a crisis (differentiation stage) with regard to finding my place at university. The crisis caused feelings of discomfort, anxiety, uncertainty and disorientation. Despite the continuous struggle, it was then that the stage of permanence started as I began to trust some students and was more comfortable asking for advice and assistance from Black African students who had also experienced rejection and isolation as part of the minority. This corresponds with the identity vs role confusion stage, in which I first tried to establish my place and find acceptance amongst students from different races (see No. 3.3.2). During this time, it was challenging to resolve this tension, as I wanted to experience similar experiences to ordinary students at university. But yet again, I felt that the environment was not ready to accept a student with ASD. With self-discovery, I came to the decision that it was up to me to find my own plekkie (place) at university, both socially and physically, which will be discussed in the following section.

6.2.4 Plekkie

A small personal space or place (plekkie in Afrikaans) as a concept is continuously referred to as a solid, sentimental and emotional attachment for the individual. The association with the environment represents cultural identity and security. General attachment refers to personal commitment, the satisfaction of the environment, and belonging associated with a place (Chow & Healey, 2008). As Moore (2000) notes, place possesses social, cultural and historical significance and holds numerous psychological meanings which help an individual to formulate their identity. Bryant

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(2021) states that place conceptualises the journey of an individual (positive and negative) and is referred to as how an individual shapes their identity in the environment with the specific cultures and definitions at the university.

Ranging from different environments, place can have a concrete and symbolic meaning. The concrete meaning of the concept 'place' refers to a private and comfortable spot or setting that the student chooses which they feel comfortable participating in or can otherwise use to avoid sensory overload, and, in terms of my experiences as an undergraduate student at the University of Pretoria, it refers to me trying to find my place within different spaces.

The continuous search to find my identity occurred in different concrete settings, such as the residence where I dealt with the insecurities and disappointment in the way that House Committee members treated me because of my disclosure that I am diagnosed with ASD (see section 5.4). The residence environment in general was seen as an unsafe environment by me, as I was viewed as an outsider as defined by Bakhtin's concept of outsideness. I had left my home environment to go and study to find my place and develop as a person but I struggled to find my place in the residence. I did not receive the acceptance from White students in the residence but rather from Kabelo and the rest of the Black African students because I was not seen as a typical White person on campus and in residence (see section 5.4). Despite this, there were times when I needed to avoid Kabelo and the residence environment, as there were conflicts between us, especially when he unexpectantly brought friends (including women) to the room (see section 5.4). At times, I felt frustrated. Kabelo and I had arguments about how I regulated this frustration. Although we were good friends, we also had some disagreements about our choices as our value systems were different. I, therefore, used my networks of places to escape, especially in terms of the physical setting, to the top of the pavilion at the Faculty of Education's sports field where I could reflect on my day and avoid the stressors of the residence environment and campus. This place was a secluded spot and importantly was one where I did not feel like an outsider. Kabelo knew about my spot and found me there at times (see section 5.6).

Although Kabelo enjoyed my company as a roommate, he also wished to form friendships with students from his own race and establish his place amongst the students who participated in the RAG competition and cultural activities. In response to this, I realised that I needed to establish my own place in the residence, especially in the rugby fraternity of which the majority were White students. As suggested, Dr Venter encouraged my involvement in the residence rugby based on what had transpired after I disclosed to the HMS lecturer that I was a student with ASD (see section 5.4). Despite the disappointment that I received in this time of uncertainty, Dr Venter encouraged me to turn this into an opportunity and he motivated me to find my place through different avenues at residence, such as joining the residence rugby team. I took his advice, joined and I immediately felt comfortable as I had finally found a way to participate in my passion and the sport that I love. Considering the theoretical framework, especially Erikson's fifth stage and the OSA theory stage of identity vs role confusion, I always had the desire to be part of the social culture at university. So I searched for my place with the purpose of being accepted by the different social groups in the residence, which was why I joined the team. I believed that I had found my place for a period of time when I participated in the residence rugby. As team manager, I experienced personal satisfaction, as I was regarded as part of the group and not as an outsider. But overall, after rugby practices and matches, I remained part of the isolated minority (see sections 3.2 and 3.3).

A contributing factor to my comfort was that I shared the same passion with fellow student with a disability, Johan, the head coach of the rugby team, who received me with open arms. I established my presence and place within the team and I enjoyed the activities and responsibilities (such as unpacking the rugby jerseys or assisting Johan at practices with the packing of cones). The responsibility gave me a purpose and was a relaxing activity after a busy day on campus and in the residence (see section 5.4). Even though I found happiness and a plekkie by participating in the rugby, I lost my place when Johan replaced me with another student whom he and the rest of the senior students believed was more capable. The attitudes of the rest of the senior students and Johan reflected ableism as they did not show any empathy for the challenges that I portrayed. To deal with the disappointment, I continuously made appointments with Dr Venter to share my feelings and deepest

emotions. Our weekly consultations were a safe space for me to talk about autism openly and about the challenges that I experienced. Dr Venter's assistance was mostly helpful in my first two years when I needed to make module changes to History (HIS) and Psychology (SLK). My first two years were extremely challenging academically, and I struggled to find my place in the different modules due to the inaccessibility of the physical infrastructure and the overpopulated lecture halls in core modules such as SLK and OPV (the Education module). For me to find my place, I decided to sit at the front of lecture halls to protect my senses and to concentrate on the task at hand (see section 5.4).

In some modules, I felt that the medical approach was followed as I was judged based on my impairment, especially when I asked for the implementation of reasonable accommodations such as additional time and permission to take audio recordings of the lectures. Most lecturers contributed to my frustration levels as they were not willing to accommodate me in lessons. They believed that it was not the place and the time to ask for assistance. When Dr Venter resigned, I needed to find a new place where I would receive the support that I required. It was, therefore, recommended that I visit the Disability Unit on the main campus (see section 5.6). My first experiences when visiting the Disability Unit were disappointing and I felt uncomfortable. I first needed to take a bus to the main campus before I found the Disability Unit's offices. I assumed that I would find my place amongst students who were themselves disabled. Despite receiving my letter from the Disability Unit, I felt uncomfortable. The environment itself gave the impression that the offices were a safe place for students with disabilities but did not necessarily provide the support the students required to succeed (see section 5.6).

 I eventually found my place doing modules such as HIS (Semester 1), as most of all the lecturers from the Department of History and Heritage Studies went out of their way to accommodate me by providing me with a fair chance to succeed. The History lecturers helped me to establish my place by always being available when I asked questions and making study notes available for students (see section 5.7).

There were other lecturers with whom I established my place too, such as the lecturers from the ECD Department as these lecturers were also accommodating

and understanding. Specific lecturers like the Life Orientation lecturer, Dr van Staden, supported me throughout my undergraduate studies by accommodating me with additional time during tests and examinations. She was also concerned about my physical appearance and remembered during the critical conversations that I was an overweight boy with long hair who wore rugby shirts during lectures (see section 5.4). Dr van Staden placed a lot of emphasis on my physical appearance, especially when I referred to my networks and how it affected them when I moved back home from the residence for financial reasons. Moving back to my home environment benefitted my mental health and my academic performance as I felt comfortable there with my support system. My mother helped me with planning, organisation and examination preparation. By making this decision, my mental health improved, I started to lose weight, my academic progress improved, and my social skills started to develop (see section 5.5).

Considering identity formation, students diagnosed with ASD are required to formulate their identity by adapting to the university environment. One of the factors that affected my ability to establish my place was the challenge I experienced in terms of the infrastructure at university, such as the overpopulation of lecture theatres. Other factors included classroom management, the attitude and perception of the lecturers towards me, and the support services that were available to accommodate me.

6.2.5 Support

The concept of educational support encompasses the implementation of different strategies, courses and support systems to accommodate the student (Collins, 2009; Weerts & Ronca, 2006). In the context of my study, support and accessibility were interrelated and played a pivotal role in the context of support by paving the way for the improvement of ideas, methods and making improvements to a vast range of fields to ensure that I coped and functioned independently (Greco, 2018). My study places an emphasis on how I, as a student with ASD, experienced the university and its facilities and what measures were taken to make facilities accessible and support services available. Importantly, accessibility does not only refer to the concrete but also to the abstract, as emphasis is placed on the physical

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infrastructure or places that are inaccessible as a result of the implementation of an institution's policies (Brody, 2016). Furthermore, the general meaning behind support is to make public facilities like universities more inclusive and accessible to everyone. Support can be regarded as a contemporary thought that is traced back to human dignity, equality, autonomy and participation. By implementing certain measures in a masculine, White-dominated and ableist environment, public facilities will be encouraged to become accessible, though it is a balancing act that requires the implementation of different policies and managing the growth of the population, the geography of a location, its physical infrastructure and having the right systems in place (Brody, 2016).

Taking the support that I received on campus into consideration, I felt that I did not receive the necessary support at university as the infrastructure and facilities were not accessible enough to accommodate the challenges that I experienced on campus. Heading into my first day at university, I believed that the university only accommodated students who were able-bodied, as explained by my cousin Elna. In many ways, my cousin Elna made me aware that at university, students can only be identified by their student numbers which meant that the university did not care about the students' emotional well-being and condition (see section 5.4). Remembering these words, I developed the perception that the university environment was not made for a student with ASD (or, for that matter, any other neurodiverse students) to function, which I experienced first-hand on my first day as I struggled to navigate my way around the campus and different lecture halls (see section 5.4).

Inequality was immediately evident, as there were no signs to point me in the right direction. Although my challenges were not visible to the eye, my anxiety levels were extremely high as a result of the sensory overload that I experienced on my first day of Orientation Week. My senses were overloaded as soon as I walked into the lecture hall full of students waiting to write the benchmark test (see section 5.3). The environment was unfamiliar, especially with the large number of people who had enrolled as first-year students. Another challenge that I experienced was that the examiner of the benchmark test chose not to provide me with additional time. It

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was disappointing how the lecturers perceived me, because I looked abled-bodied and part of the norm – a White, Afrikaans-speaking student. The examiner to whom I disclosed that I had been diagnosed with ASD immediately recommended that I write on another day at a different venue because of my unusual request to receive additional time. Furthermore, there were no arrangements or support services available to assist students who were differently abled (students with ASD or with different impairments). Another request that the coordinators of the second benchmark test had for me was to provide them with a letter from the university authorities (such as the university psychologist) to show that I required concession times; this became the norm for all the tests and examinations that I wrote (see section 5.7).

To get the support that I required academically and emotionally, I was referred to the student support centre on the Education campus where I met Dr Venter who helped me through this dark time and space as he had the experience and willingness to assist me. Dr Venter helped me to implement problem-solving techniques to deal with disappointment and to choose different study modules such as SLK and HIS (both semester 1 modules) (see section 5.7). Dr Venter also helped improve my self-esteem as I believed that the university perceived ASD in a negative light. During the period that I consulted with him, there were many contributing factors that led to the development of my low self-esteem, such as negative perceptions, the judgement that I experienced on campus, and the negative comments and remarks fellow students made to me on campus. The support from Dr Venter was beneficial as he helped me to improve my self-confidence by referring to my diagnosis with ASD as a gift and not as a deficit (see section 5.7). During one consultation, he showed me why I experienced the university in the way I did by referring to my brain's development. He explained to me how I am neurologically different and in some ways more competent and intelligent than many students on campus. He encouraged me by saying that there was no doubt in his mind that despite my challenges, I would achieve my goals and succeed at university. After the session with him, my perception changed, and I was confident that I could function and self-actualise (see section 5.7).

On a social level, Dr Venter also helped me improve my social relationships and this automatically increased my self-confidence. I started to make friends and participated in residence events, especially when I nominated myself to stand for the House Committee elections. During this time, negative comments were made to me, but with assistance from Dr Venter, I developed the self-confidence to stand up for myself (see section 5.4).

On an academic level, Dr Venter provided me with a letter to gain additional time during tests and examinations and permission to audio record my lectures. Dr Venter was not the only support figure to provide me with a letter to receive additional time as the Disability Unit also had the authority to provide students with concession times. When Dr Venter resigned, I had no choice but to travel to the main campus and approach the Disability Unit. As the communication between the student and the lecturer, some lecturers welcomed my application for additional time, such as the lecturers from the Department of History and Heritage studies and from the ECD Department. They provided me with more than enough additional time and with seating where the lecture halls were not overcrowded (see section 5.7), while in other modules, such as SLK (Semester 1) and OPV, I experienced the opposite as the lecture halls were overpopulated. Other lecturers were also reluctant to provide me with additional time or allow me to audio record my lectures which contributed to the academic challenges that I experienced in modules. Owing to these challenges and because the Department of Humanities implemented the rule that the lecturers' summary notes should not be made accessible to students, I failed my first-year module. In retrospect, students being required to make their own notes during lectures corresponds with the ableist system (as mentioned in section 6.1.2) and makes no accommodation for non-ableist students, even though I had informed the lecturer that I had been diagnosed with ASD. As a result, I was required to study late into the night and early morning at home to make notes for examinations and tests (see section 5.6).

Although my experiences were easier in HIS (Semester 1), I needed to get used to the academic expectations. This experience corresponds with Chickering's theory of identity development. I got used to the institution's standards and developed the

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self-confidence to function by achieving good grades in subjects like History (see section 3.5.1). During this phase, identity vs role confusion (from Chickering's and Erikson's theories) was also prominent as I could not understand why some lecturers were more open and willing to accommodate me than others. The third stage of Erikson's theory, initiative vs guilt, came into play as I questioned my capability to attend university. As a student with ASD, I was an object of pity owing to the policies and attitudes towards neurodiversity. I was excluded from numerous opportunities, such as studying HMS, and the accommodation of my needs as a neurodiverse student was treated as an imposition.

Exclusion occurred in multiple formats, but I felt it most on the social front, where I was rejected because my behaviour was different in social situations. Although there was support from other lecturers and staff, there was no disability office on the Groenkloof campus to support my everyday needs. In general, I felt that the institution did not have experience teaching students with ASD and lacked insider knowledge on it, which contributed to the lack of understanding of how to accommodate me (see section 5.7). The only option I had was for me to travel by bus to try to find the disability office with the knowledge that I had never visited their offices before. Despite the challenges that I experienced, I eventually received assistance but it would have been easier if there had been a disability office at the Faculty of Education. At that moment, I questioned the disability policy of the university that was published in that year (2013) and which included the intention to benefit all students with disabilities including those with invisible impairments such as autism.

The disability policy of the university further contributed to the ableist culture and knowledge gap and explained the pervasive negative attitude and miscommunication at play. They contributed to the perception and assumption that different students must adapt to the environment without reasonable accommodations. Reality has proved that some policies are implemented in the best interest of all members of society, and that they must be continuously moderated to understand a culture better. In general, policies are put in place to initiate change and ensure that the university's rules are understood and speak to,

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in the case of South Africa, the Constitution. In my personal experience, these policies affected my academic and social functioning. The policies proved that the system did not provide reasonable accommodations for me as a student with ASD. When I wanted to apply for any form of concession, I was required to follow the basic steps repeatedly, which shows that the policies were strict and rigid and did not allow any form of accommodations, and this rigidity was transferred to the traditions and culture of the university (Bolton, 2021).

Personally, I found that the residence culture influenced my perceptions and those of the rest of the students, and, therefore, the fifth stage of Erikson's theory, industry vs inferiority, is considered active at this time. The traditions and rituals of the residence encouraged the rest of the students to show stereotypical behaviour which affected their ideas and opinions (see section 3.4.1). Also, the traditions of the institution had a major influence on the students' functioning abilities and their identity formation, but, in terms of my personal experiences as a student, they also made me realise that I was not the only student who was subjected to these policies and traditions. This allowed me to formulate friendships with students in similar positions and those who were also regarded as outsiders.

As a student with ASD at university, I was extremely fortunate to receive the support that I did, and each disappointment and success helped me to build my character and improve my self-esteem. It is evident that if it were not for the support I received on campus and from the lecturers, it would have made my undergraduate experiences more difficult, affecting my likelihood to graduate.

6.2.6 Friendship

Friendship is considered to be a relationship between two people which involves a common interest and has two very critical dimensions: interdependence and voluntary participation. In saying this, Edmonds (2015) defines friendship as an emotional, social and personal connection between two individuals who have a mutual understanding. Tillmann-Healy (2003) believes that friendship is an interpersonal bond characterised by continuous communication processes where there are dialectical tensions that occur, such as affection, instrumentality, judgement and acceptance within each relationship. In saying this, Sargent and

Thomas (2021) also add that friendship provides an ideal opportunity for both parties to introduce cross-cultural perspectives which can be beneficial as they offer each other the chance to learn from one another. The values that individuals seek in friendship and which attract each party to the other includes having similar qualities including trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty and acceptance. However, friendship can also cause conflict where there are cultural differences, hostility or controversies such as rejection, isolationism accusations and betrayal. Where friendships exists in institutions such as a university, the bonds between people involve commitment.

Friendship can be influenced by the atmosphere and environmental climate, such as masculinity, ableness and whiteness. As these exist within a universal environment, such as a university, they affect relationships and place unnecessary pressure on the friendship between the students (Dryburgh, Ponath, Bukowski & Dirks, 2021). Marler, Bruce, Abaoud, Henrichsen, Suksatan, Homvisetvongsa and Matsuo (2021) believe that a university's traditions and culture can determine the student's university experience, especially how a friendship between two parties is perceived. I experienced the struggle to formulate friendships with one of my biggest desires being to make friends and establish my identity at university. For me to do this, I was required to improve my communication and social skills with other students at the university. As a student with ASD, this was difficult, as my vocabulary was limited, and I was forced to move out of my comfort zone to form relationships with fellow students on campus and in the residence, other than Kabelo with whom I had established a prior relationship. The other person that I was familiar with was my cousin Elna, whom I regarded as a friend and part of my support system since she had promised my parents that she would look out for me on campus. To my surprise, the opposite occurred as her aversive behaviour, jealousy and prejudice to me were portrayed when I saw her on campus and she responded rudely to my greeting in front of her friends (see section 5.6).

I also recognised other students on campus who had enrolled for the same degree as me. Two were from MBS and two were from my primary school. Although we knew each other, it was impossible to formulate a friendship group with them as

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each one of us had different modules and classes at different times. Therefore, I relied on the friendship of Kabelo, whom I regarded as one of my only supports during Orientation Week, especially in the Moeggeploeg Residence (see section 5.3). Considering the residence and room allocation, it was ideal for Kabelo and me to stay together. He understood ASD, so it made him the ideal candidate to help me familiarise myself with the environment (see section 6.2.3). We had a mutual understanding and a common purpose but acting against society's perceptions (the residence's perceptions) influenced our friendship. We were both isolated due to interpersonal and cultural differences. Different forms of discrimination existed within the environment, as fellow students in the residence made comments about my friendship with Kabelo. This corresponds with the idea of ableism, as the residence were not used to having two students from different races as close friends. Our decision went against residence culture, customs, beliefs and standards.

Although we felt quite comfortable in each other's presence, my friendship with Kabelo became a symbol against masculinity and whiteness as we broke the traditions of the university. Yet, despite Kabelo's commitment to helping me, he also had personal desires such as formulating new friendships, especially with Black African students, by sitting with them in the dining hall every day and by attending their activities in the evenings and over weekends. By observing his actions and decisions, I realised that I could not rely on him all the time to fill that social gap, and, therefore, decided to establish friendships amongst the Afrikaans students (see section 5.4).

The majority of the White students rejected me by not inviting me into their friendship groups. They did not invite me to sit with them in the dining halls or attend social gatherings or outings with them. Another reason why I was not part of any friendship groups in the residence and on campus, was because I was diagnosed with ASD and was, therefore, not considered authentically White, able and masculine enough. It reflected the residence environment's preference against the disability movement, preferring a stereotyped behaviour to those whose behaviour was the opposite of the norm (Wolbring, 2008). Although upsetting, I did not have the self-confidence to

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confront the students, which led me to consult with Dr Venter who helped me to improve my social skills and eventually make friends. Our therapeutic sessions were helpful. He advised me to combine my passion and ambition for rugby as a navigation tool to reach my end goal to make friends. By listening to what he said, I joined the rugby team and became good friends with Johan due to both of us having disabilities. I enjoyed my friendship with Johan, as he had a similar passion for rugby to my own. By associating myself with him, I hoped that I would receive the same respect and honour he had received by the residence (see section 5.4).

As presented in my novella, friendship was a central theme, as it contributed to my sense of belonging at the university and in residence. As Gyimah (2021) noted, friendship can help to build an individual's morale and, at the same time, enhance their behaviour, but development can be affected by the perceptions and standards of society. Considering the culture and standards within an institution (notably the policies and regulations), friendship can signify segregation and polarisation from others, especially where those from demographically marginalised groups, such as race, disability and socio-economic groups, are considered (Benner & Wang, 2014). Despite these perceptions, friendship can reduce deficits and increase belonging, and the satisfaction the individual experiences adjusts the individual's performance. This corresponds with the double theoretical lens of Erikson's stage of intimacy vs isolation and the second vector of Chickering's theory on student development when I made a rational decision to move out of my comfort zone and try to socialise and become part of friendship groups. However, exploring different social groups also left me exposed and vulnerable, and it opened the door for discrimination, victimisation and isolation (see section 3.5.1).

Looking back, despite the differences between Johan, Kabelo and I, we were able to establish friendships. When analysing this, I became aware that each student, despite their differences, was required to establish their identity and survive in this ableist, masculine environment. Despite the perceptions held by the rest of the residence on the types of friendship I experienced with Kabelo and Johan, they contributed to my sense of belonging and positively affected my mental health.

6.2.7 Mental health

An individual's mental health connects their emotional, social and psychological well-being. Gillan and Rutledge (2021) affirm that mental health affects how each individual reacts to challenging circumstances and the choices they make to deal with stress and any form of anxiety. Similar to mental illness, Lopez and Snyder (2009) present certain symptoms for a specific duration which coincides with distinctive brain and social functions and provides dimensions of predictors such as emotional and psychological well-being (personal growth and social well-being) to see how the individual fits into a particular social environment that can contribute to an their mental state (Oishi, Diener, Lucas & Suh, 2009). Other authors, such as Fidler, Prince, Van Deusen, Esbensen, Thurman, Abbeduto, Patel, Mervis, Schworer and Lee (2022), stress that mental and physical disorders can contribute to mental health if the burden of mental disorders is likely to have been underestimated because of the connection between mental illness and other health conditions.

It is, therefore, required that ASD students receive fundamental support to function at university. In terms of the neurodevelopment of an individual with ASD, mental health is a prevalent need, as acknowledged by Cage, Di Monaco and Newell (2018) who state that all students experience forms of anxiety, stress and depression in unfamiliar environments, especially when their needs are not being accommodated. The perceptions of individuals in the university environment can also lead to self-doubt which can contribute to mental health challenges. These challenges can be defined as the uncertainty and unsureness within an individual, their scepticism about something and the lack of confidence that they have in themselves, according to (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008). Self-doubt is quite common in students diagnosed with ASD and it is, therefore, required that they receive the fundamental support to function on campus. If not supported, the individual can experience forms of depression, anxiety and stress, which could lead to severe consequences such as suicide (Fidler *et al.*, 2022).

Although individual students diagnosed with ASD can function independently in a universal environment such as a university, there must be certain adjustments and

support systems in place to accommodate them. Masculine, ableist ideologies can contribute to the state of their functioning abilities and can affect their mental health (Cage *et al.*, 2018). One of the integral parts of individuals with ASD is their eagerness to be accepted and appreciated. A great deal of stigma exists among unrepresented groups, including students diagnosed with ASD (Cage *et al.*, 2018).

In terms of stigma against autistic people, Sasson *et al.* (2017) found that non-autistic individuals such as academic staff and fellow students tend to make rapid, unfavourable judgements about those with ASD. I relate to this finding as I felt powerless because a pre-perception existed about me, especially by the school psychologist, who doubted my ability to function at university (see section 5.3). She believed that my anxiety levels were too high and that university students would identify my difference by making negative comments and remarks to me that would affect my self-confidence levels. Although the school psychologist met with me to express her concerns on the intensified anxiety I portrayed, she made me aware of how harsh university students can be. Based on this meeting, I doubted my own abilities and wondered if I would ever succeed at university. Members from my internal support system, such as my father, also raised concerns based on my module choices (see section 5.3). Another person who shared that similar masculine opinion was my cousin Elna, who continuously reminded me that only the strongest students would survive at university and that university lecturers did not care for students with ASD. Role players such as the school psychologist and my cousin cautioned that the university was a universal environment with high standards and requirements where only a specific type of behaviour was accepted. I was disappointed with their remarks and I wanted to prove that I could succeed and meet expectations regardless of the challenges. It was contrary to my aspirations, and I assumed that their stereotypical opinions represented societal stereotypes about the minority (see section 5.3). Elna and the school psychologist's words came true, as I experienced first-hand how cruel undergraduate students could be, especially the chairlady from the faculty house who made an inappropriate remark in response to a question I asked, commenting that a stupid question got a stupid answer.

At the same time, I experienced first-hand how the university lecturers followed ableist and masculine ideologies, especially the HMS lecturer who recommended I drop the course after I disclosed to him that I am a student with ASD. His recommendation and suggestion to re-register for another course affected my self-confidence and emotional well-being. I immediately felt depressed and humiliated (see section 5.6). Another critical incident where I received a lot of criticism was my decision to room with a Black African student. This decision increased negative perceptions towards me since senior Afrikaans students thought that I was selfish and lame. Although I was happy with my decision, I did not appreciate the comments made to me about this decision. In response to my decision, I was not invited into social groups and was regarded as an outsider amongst the White students (see section 5.4). My self-confidence levels were low and I doubted myself based on particular events and the actions of students towards me, such as the female student who made a negative comment when I asked her to accompany me to a Valentine's dance and the other student who wanted to take a photograph with me on campus to show everyone what a 'retard' looked like. Isolationism also occurred at places where I felt the most comfortable such as at the rugby when Johan decided to appoint a second manager because I was absent from the training sessions due to academic commitments. When I heard of this decision, I felt disappointed as these students did not show empathy for my needs, especially Johan, a fellow student with a disability (see section 5.4).

I also experienced isolationism academically. The lecture halls were overpopulated, there were disruptions in class routines, and notes and reading material in fundamental modules such as SLK (Semester 1 and 2) (see section 5.6) were unavailable. Personally, I had reached a point where I felt that I did not belong at university, as my behaviour was different from the rest of the students on campus. I familiarised myself with the characteristics of depression, especially during my second year when my mother helped me to prepare for the Psychology examinations. We discussed suicide in a lengthy conversation, especially the factors that can lead any individual to consider it. I had support from psychologists which helped me through this dark time and space. There were many contributing factors that led to the development of my low self-esteem, such as the negative

perception and judgement that I experienced on campus, the negative comments and remarks that fellow students made towards me, the lack of knowledge from lecturers, and the inaccessibility of the infrastructure (see section 5.6).

The challenges that I experienced in terms of my mental health were evident in my weight, as my eating habits were poor while in the residence. As my weight escalated, my health deteriorated because I did not exercise, and I did not care how I appeared physically on campus. Some of the lecturers, such as Dr van Staden, admitted that I looked like a sports fan that might attend a rugby match (see section 5.6).

The continuous systematic discrimination and isolation reached a climax when I was admitted to the psychiatric ward of a hospital for two weeks after I took seven tablets. I kept comparing myself to able-bodied students and my experiences were analysed according to the medical model. My experiences were seen as a deficit corresponding to Bakhtin's concept of outsideness because I was judged based on my diagnosis and my physical looks in the different settings I moved in. My mental health reflected my emotional state, social skills and physical appearance. I felt powerless and like someone who did not fit into the university environment.

6.2.8 Being and becoming

'Being and becoming' is referred to as the initial growth and process that a person undergoes in a particular environment to self-actualise and function independently. 'Being' can be classified as an individual's cognitive state and the circumstances they find themselves in. From that vantage point, an individual constructs reality through the objects they associate with as a human being (Hanson, 2017). On the other hand, 'becoming' is how the individual formulates their identity and evolves core aspects of personality and deeds (Schwartz, 2016). In this process of becoming, feelings such as fear and insecurity are isolated. The process of being and becoming reveals that the balance between doing and being is a central part of a person's development and is dependent on both doing and being. It is a process in which we are true to ourselves and to discovering our capabilities. As such, 'becoming' adds a sense of future to the idea of 'being' and holds notions of transformation and self-actualisation, whereas the 'being' is usually a sign of self-

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growth, professional practice, student teaching and learning, or social and global change for healthier lifestyles (Schrewe & Martimianakis, 2022).

For any individual to self-actualise in a particular environment, they must receive the necessary support systems to cope and these systems must always be available to guide the student in a university environment when mistakes are being made. Generally, the university management plays a critical role in the student's development and identity formation, as the policies and support systems ensure that the student achieves their goals.

Individuals experience a sense of sameness and continuity across time and different contexts and ranging from identity synthesis to identity confusion (Gordon, 2022). Identity synthesis refers to a self-determined set of ideas, values and goals, while confusion represents an inability to develop a workable set of goals and commitments that an individual wants to achieve based on their identity (Schwartz, Hardy, Zamboanga, Meca, Waterman, Picariello, Luyckx, Crocetti, Kim & Brittian, 2015). Considering how identity develops throughout the years, the development trajectories are sketched based on normativity's psychosocial and health outcomes. Importantly, as Erikson (1948) acknowledged, identity development is an ongoing psychosocial process that balances assimilation and accommodation and is necessary for developing a mature, flexible and coherent identity (Mercer-Mapstone, Guitman & Acai, 2019).

As an undergraduate student with ASD, I adjusted as best as I could to the environment as I changed internally. I simultaneously realised in my third year that the students and the lecturers had begun to change towards me through the showing of empathy. The students changed towards me in the residence after I stood up for myself at the House Committee selection circus. Fellow resident students saw an internal change in me as I stood up for myself, telling the students not to judge me based on my autism diagnosis. After my speech, I received a standing ovation from the entire residence and compliments from students from the female residence. My self-confidence and social relationships with fellow students improved as they acclimatised to me (see section 5.4).

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The development of my self-confidence did not occur overnight. Rather, a series of events took place. Immense efforts from different key role figures helped my self-confidence blossom, which occurred simultaneously with my fourth-year teaching practice. It was a steep road during my first two years at university and I believed that I could rely on her support and guidance, however, I soon realised that my expectations were unrealistic and that my mother could not support me due to her illness.

Despite my late mother's health challenges, she was familiar with the different academic, emotional and social challenges that I was confronted with that made my undergraduate years an uphill battle. In response to the challenges, she encouraged me to make my support base strong in the different circles I moved in at university. The support that I received from Dr Venter, who assisted me with one-to-one concessions, helped me to deal with the disappointment that I experienced in the residence, the disagreement with another student, working through the academic challenges, organising with concession time letters, and familiarising myself with the summarisation of the study notes. His continuous support helped me to cope and understand how the university lectures worked. By attending these sessions, my self-esteem improved and my attitude changed towards my academics.

Personally, I experienced Erikson's autonomy vs shame stage when I started to self-actualise. This occurred when I obtained my driver's licence and developed the self-confidence to drive from home to university every day. Considering my mental health, my attitude towards my academics changed as I got used to the process and understood how the university lectures worked and what its ideals were. I felt more competent and started to show signs of coping academically in my third year by completing assignments and tasks independently (see section 5.9). I began to participate in lectures by contributing to lessons and sharing my personal points of view. Retrospectively, the lectures who taught me saw an internal and external change, especially the History and ECD lecturers, who complimented me on the amount of weight that I had lost (see section 5.9). The lecturers also noticed the emotional growth that I showed and, in response, they gave me more

responsibilities, such as being a class representative and the primary communicator between the students and lecturers. Fellow students who attended the same lectures as me agreed with the decision to make me class representative as I portrayed leadership skills through my work ethic. This stage in my third and fourth years of study gave me a sense of self-recognition (establishment of identity), and I reflected on my academic performance, the improvement of my communication skills, my physical presence and the ability to complete assignments independently. I became capable of emulating and articulating my values through my academic performance and functioning abilities. This corresponds with the final stage of Chickering's theory of identity development in which I finally achieved a sense of belonging and developed sufficient self-confidence to function and succeed in a universal environment such as a university (see section 5.9).

As any third-year student going through a transitioning phase, when I was about to progress from student to teacher, my focus shifted from university to teaching and as a result of the level of expectations from the Faculty of Education, I needed to gain experience in the education field. It was also appropriate for me to gain experience as a student teacher to accommodate my anxiety levels and ensure that I would succeed. The guidance from some lecturers and the university psychologist contributed significantly to the development of my identity. The support and advice that I received from them helped me feel competent enough to cope with the environment academically, emotionally and socially. I underwent an external transformation as I created a close bond with most of the lecturers, and they saw actual growth in my development to a point where some of them appointed me as a tutor for their modules.

The mentor teachers assigned to me in two schools (Western Primary and Eastern Primary School) contributed to my functioning by familiarising me with the school environment and creating an environment that would help me to succeed. This small responsibility that was granted helped me develop my self-confidence further and to develop as a person and future teacher. As a student teacher, I enjoyed my teaching practice. Both teaching practice environments allowed me to succeed as my mentor teachers and mentor lecturer were impressed with how I presented my

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lessons and controlled the students. I had a long-term goal to graduate and did so when I received my Bachelor of Education degree (see section 5.8).

My growth at university was inseparable from the relationships I developed with the different support figures that I needed to survive on campus and formulate my identity. Evidently complex forces worked extremely hard to get me to that stage where I became partially competent to cope at university. The most critical components considered in being and becoming refer to how the individual with ASD transitions from a child at school to a young adult through identity formation and self-efficiency. Looking back at my undergraduate experiences, I developed from an insecure undergraduate student to a fourth-year graduate who felt competent to teach at schools and establish his place. I must add that this was a long, arduous and, many times, a lonely journey. As self-confidence grows and the student proceeds with their studies, they start to become competent to implement their knowledge, skills and attitude in practice, and their sense of identity is formulated. I believe that I experienced a sense of intellectual competence. I grasped the functioning of university structures and discovered how to succeed. One of the signs of self-actualisation involved my emotional well-being and the development of my social skills. I realised the importance of my body image and, when this change occurred, my self-confidence improved and I felt competent to succeed in my teaching practice and to graduate. I also developed the desire to complete a PhD one day.

6.3 Conclusion

As I was working with my story, I found many themes that could be derived from my novella but the most powerful themes that emerged within the South African higher education context were hierarchical masculinity, ableness, whiteness, friendship, support, plekkie (place), mental health, and being and becoming. Looking back at my undergraduate experiences as a neurodiverse student with ASD, these themes were intertwined and corresponded to how students with ASD in general experience university. The literature showed that the historic past of a country, and the traditions and culture of a university have a major impact on the management of the university and the policies that are implemented. These policies can determine how the

institution embraces inclusion and influences how students, such as students with ASD, experience university. Considering the South African perspective, the concepts of masculinity, ableness and whiteness influence policies and people's perceptions, which can directly impact a student's university experience. As the above-mentioned themes resonated with my identity formation as a student with ASD, Bakhtin's theory of outsideness was ever-present as I was almost automatically seen as an outsider and needed to find my place within an environment that was not ready to accommodate a student with ASD. The journey was not easy and I was confronted with many challenges during my undergraduate studies. As such, the onus was placed on OSA theory and Erikson's and Chickering's theories on psychosocial development to explain how I self-actualised. In the last chapter, I will engage with the findings and conclude this study.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, I worked with my novella to come to generate firm findings. In this chapter, my study will be concluded. By looking backwards and reflecting on my study, I will provide an overview of the different chapters. After that, I will return to the findings gleaned from Chapter 6 by bringing them into conversation with the literature and the theories underpinning the studies. The purpose of doing this is to propose possible answers to the research questions posed:

- What were my experiences as a student with ASD at university?

- Why did I, as a student with ASD, experience university the way I did?

I will conclude this section with a thesis statement on the contribution that I hope my critical autoethnography as a neurodiverse student has made to the literature. Thereafter, I will share my personal, professional and methodological reflections and make recommendations based on my experiences as an undergraduate student with ASD at a former White university at which hierarchical masculinity, ableness and whiteness were powerfully omnipresent in its daily practices.

7.2   Review of the study

As this section provides an overall review of the study, I will refer to previous chapters and explain what was covered by highlighting the critical points of each.

7.2.1 Chapter 1

In Chapter 1, I provided an overview and introduction, the framework, and my rationale and motivation for conducting this study. First, I provided the context and purpose of a university and the universal policies that govern these institutions internationally and locally. Most importantly, from a South African perspective, reference was made to Education White Paper 6, which provides clear guidelines on the challenges that disrupt students physically, intellectually and financially at university. The purpose of Chapter 1 was to illuminate any inequalities that arose

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as a result of the prolonged effects of the apartheid system and how the system discriminates against those from different backgrounds, including those from different races, genders, disabilities and classes.

I further provided my rationale and motivation for doing this study by introducing my two research questions. The focus of this study was explained by seeking the observations of my co-constructors on their experiences with me as a student with ASD. I further explained this by highlighting the theoretical framework and methodology that I used in the fourth chapter.

7.2.2 Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature related to my research topic. The review consisted of literature explaining how different students experience universities worldwide. While there has been a global effort of universities to make facilities accessible and inclusive, it has become the global mission of universities to accommodate all students, and, as such, the literature that I examined students who were different, such as those who were physically, visually or hearing impaired, neurodiverse students, students with language and speech difficulties, and students with epilepsy. To get an insider's perspective, autoethnographies were sought to find out how these students experienced university and how they searched for their identities. To narrow the subject, themes were identified to structure the experiences of students with ASD at university by re-looking at the policies that impacted their university experiences. Lastly, the literature was reviewed on how universities experience students with ASD, considering their identity development and general self-awareness.

7.2.3 Chapter 3

This chapter continued with my literature review but focused on the literature of the theoretical frameworks that were used as a lens for this study. The main theories that I concentrated on considered individuals' identity development in new, unfamiliar environments, for example, Bakhtin's theory on outsideness. Key elements of the other theories I examined, that is, OSA theory, Chickering's theory on identity development and Erikson's theory on psychosocial development, were

discussed by considering students at university with differences, like me, a student with ASD. I also dwelt on how I planned to use these theories.

7.2.4 Chapter 4

In this chapter, I described the research design and methodology I applied in this study to answer the questions posed. I followed a qualitative research approach, with critical autoethnography as my methodology of choice. An in-depth explanation of the research design and methodology was put forward. The research paradigm, the critical paradigm in which my study is situated, was explained along with the inequalities affecting the minority at university. Referring to critical autoethnography, the approach, my intentions of using critical conversations, the selected co-constructors and data collection methods were all explained. To ensure that my study adhered to the University of Pretoria's ethical considerations, I explained how I ensured trustworthiness, verisimilitude, credibility and conformability.

7.2.5 Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, I represented my personal experiences as a student with ASD at university in a narrative format. In this novella, different short accounts were written that described my journey as a student with ASD at university, from undergraduate to graduate in the Faculty of Education.

As explained in my methodology chapter, I collected my data by conducting critical conversations with my co-constructors who played a significant role in my undergraduate studies. To support their contributions, the novella included historical artefacts, such as photographs of the university facilities, which helped me to recall my experiences as a student in residence, emails to lecturers, letters from the university authorities, pictures taken from important pages in my study guide, and my late mother's unpublished manuscript, which provided a parent's perspective and concerns regarding a young adult with ASD about to embark on their journey to attend university.

This novella took me on a journey of self-exploration and introspection. I was wrote short stories which represented different time frames. The first time frame, titled 'At the End of My School Career', describes the end of my school career and the start

of my university enrolment. The second time frame explains my first couple of weeks at university and my struggle to adjust to the university environment. My third time frame is titled 'My Experiences as a Student in Residence'. It explains how I struggled to establish my identity in a university environment that preferred ableism, whiteness and masculinity in the different settings I moved through. The fourth time frame explains the sadness and disappointment I experienced at university and consists of critical incidents from different time frames of my undergraduate studies which influenced how I experienced university. Of major influence were the different perceptions of various lecturers, fellow students and some family members who impacted my self-esteem.

Not all that is described is negative as the next time frame explains the support that I received at university from different role players, such as the university psychologist who assisted me with module choices and dealing with disappointment. He also wrote a permission letter enabling me to receive additional time during tests and examinations. This support extended to the different lecturers who supported me by granting me extra time. It is interesting to note that all the lecturers who supported me had previous experience working with children, such as in a teaching position, or had a family member diagnosed with ASD.

The attentive university of time frame six refers to the university system and how the university experienced me as a student with ASD. Time frame six is a more in-depth explanation of how I experienced the university environment and how the environment experienced me as a student with ASD. Emphasis was placed on the support that I received from Dr Venter and how I implemented his advice in different settings within a university environment that needed to adjust to me. Time frame six included the different opinions of lecturers which reflected the perceptions of the university environment towards me as a student with ASD

This final time frame explains how I survived and, despite the odds, succeeded and self-actualised academically, emotionally and socially. The critical incidents of this time period started in my third year as a confident student who had become used to the university's standards and expectations and developed into a confident adult who was encouraged to pursue postgraduate studies.

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7.2.6 Chapter 6

In Chapter 6, I presented the analysis and interpretation of my narrative and my theoretical framework. To analyse my novella, themes were selected based on the findings of my first research question and explained why I experienced university in the way that I did. The following themes had a strong presence in my novella and considered a South African perspective: hierarchical masculinity, ableness, whiteness, friendship, support, plekkie (place), mental health, and being and becoming, which also related to the typical experiences of students with ASD at university.

In the second part of my analysis, emphasis was placed on the theoretical frameworks that I used to conduct my research, that is, Bakhtin's theory of outsideness, OSA theory, Erikson's theory on psychosocial development, and Chickering's theory on identity development. Looking back at the different theories and considering my journey as an undergraduate student with ASD, each theory was relevant. OSA theory explains the individual's different experience in a simulating environment while Erikson's theory on psychosocial development predetermines a child's development in different avenues from childhood to adulthood. As ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, I immediately saw these different stages throughout my undergraduate studies as a student who was required to become accustomed to the expectations and standards of the university. Chickering's theory on identity development refers to a student's typical experiences at university. Part of my analysis was to implement my undergraduate journey as a student with ASD and my road to identity formation according to the double lenses in my study.

7.3 Proposing answers to my research questions

This section will grant me the opportunity to draw on my findings relating to the focus and purpose of my study. The research questions that I posed in Chapter 1 will be reviewed to show how adequately the study addressed the research questions. Importantly, this is a qualitative study and, therefore, I cannot generalise the findings. I will now link my analysis and interpretation to propose answers to my two research questions.

7.3.1 Research question 1: What were my experiences as a student with ASD at university?

This study revealed my experiences as an undergraduate student with ASD. To be enrolled at university was a significant opportunity for me. I had always desired to be registered as a university student and to experience the culture, traditions and social aspects of university life. I was proud to be an undergraduate student at the University of Pretoria, but both good and bad experiences shaped me as a student. I realised that the experiences that I experienced were based on how accommodating the environment was and to what extent the lecturers and students embraced me as a neurodiverse student with ASD.

I saw the university environment as my gateway to confronting the challenges that I experienced emotionally and socially. I felt that I deserved similar opportunities to the rest of the students, and I wanted to establish my identity and find my place amongst them. International studies indicate that students with ASD found transitioning from secondary to higher education difficult. It was challenging to adapt and change their routines to fit into the expectations of the unfamiliar environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Students with ASD are automatically regarded as outsiders in a Bakhtinian sense since they are exposed to masculine and ableist traditions. Sometimes, White cultures and their first developmental stages correspond with the first phase of Chickering's vector, namely intellectual, manual and interpersonal competence. During this developmental stage, students become aware that they are required to adjust their behaviour to meet the expectations of the university. As an undergraduate student coming from a remedial school environment and being on the ASD spectrum, I knew that I needed to work harder than most first-year students. My desire to be socially accepted corresponded with Chickering's second vector, namely emotional and social competence, so I familiarised myself with the cultural activities and traditions of the university, such as the residence rugby team and organised residence socials and I got involved in social events. I knew that I was emotionally vulnerable as fellow residence students found my actions and behaviour strange and weird. I was automatically regarded as an outsider as my behaviour was incongruent with the norm and, as such, fellow students decided to distance themselves from me.

At such moments, I felt that I was the only student on campus. I experienced isolation and loneliness because I felt that the university environment and the students were not ready to accommodate a student with ASD. Referring to international studies, all students with ASD find it challenging to adapt to the university environment (Anderson, Carter & Stephenson, 2018; Cascio, 2012; Roberts & Birmingham, 2017). With the emphasis on the student's emotional and psychological well-being, OSA theory focuses on the ability of the student to adapt and meet the criteria of the university environment. Critical factors determining a student's functioning and comfort level are the implemented policies and attitudes of the lecturers and fellow students towards that student (Silvia, 2012). Unfortunately, students with ASD, like me, experience a tremendous amount of pressure to succeed and meet expectations at university. International studies have shown that first-year ASD students drop out of university due to the transitioning challenges they experience at university (Siew *et al.*, 2017). During my first couple of weeks at university, considering the difficulty level of the academic content, I too felt that university was a bridge too far and I considered dropping out. Another factor that contributed to my experiencing social insecurities was that most White, Afrikaans-speaking students – my group – rejected me, while the Black African students embraced my difference. However, as a White, Afrikaans male, I wished to participate in the same activities as the rest of the Afrikaans-speaking students, but, due to my difference, I was not invited to form part of their social groups. During this time, I compared my behaviour and appearance to that of the other students, which corresponds with OSA theory. I was introspective about my behaviour and compared it to the behaviour of those who fitted in. The divide between the different racial groups was everywhere, especially in the dining hall, where the different friendship groups were seated next to each other daily. At this time, masculinity, whiteness and ableism were evident which meant that I experienced rejection from most of the Afrikaans students who were idolised based on their social development.

Those students who accepted me unconditionally had a disability themselves, such as fellow student and head coach of the residence rugby team, Johan, who had a physical disability but he was highly respected by the rest of the students in the

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residence. By analysing the other students' behaviour and attitude towards Johan, I realised that I wanted to be accepted by the rest of the residence group in the same way. As someone who also had a disability, I had the same desire to be accepted.

There were also the two separate incidents in which two students humiliated me. In the first, a group of female students confronted me about my appearance and, in the second, an Indian student wanted to take a photograph of me, describing me as a 'retard'. This contributed to my low self-esteem and the development of depression, which led me to take seven sleeping tablets. According to the literature, many students with ASD find that they develop depression, anxiety and loneliness based on the inaccessibility of the environment and the perceptions within the university environment (Zukerman, Yahav & Ben-Itzchak, 2019). I was at breaking point. I found all aspects of university life difficult, especially the facilities, which were inaccessible, and the lecture halls, where I experienced sensory overload every day due to the crowded lecture halls. As a result, I required individual assistance from a tutor to help me. Referring to the literature, sensory overload is not the only challenge that students with ASD are confronted with at university. Other challenges reported include non-academic issues, such as difficulties with social skills, interpersonal deficits, organisational and time management difficulties, and problems meeting academic demands (Fleischer, 2012). It is, therefore, required that students with ASD require specialised support, such as from the university psychologist, to help with the transition from school to university.

As a student with ASD, adjusting to the academic expectations of the university was hard and, as such, the assistance from Dr Venter was vital. He assisted me with career identification, module choices and emotional counselling during the private concession sessions with him on a weekly basis, such as when he helped me deal with the disappointment and rejection that I experienced on campus. Dr Venter also helped me to develop methods to study for core modules such as SLK and OPV, as the lecturers did not want to make the notes available for students. Dr Venter's assistance was also valuable with social counselling when I experienced rejection in the different social environments that I participated in on campus and at the

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residence. Personally, I appreciated Dr Venter's assistance very much as he taught me how to confront students and how to deal with disappointment, which is a challenge for any student with ASD.

Not all my undergraduate experiences were bad. I also had positive experiences at university, such as when I received acceptance from my friend Kabelo and the Black African students in the residence. I also received acceptance from lecturers who had past experiences teaching students with ASD and who provided the reasonable accommodations to me in the classroom, such as extra time and allowing me to audio record my lectures. Generally, students with ASD contemplate whether they should disclose their diagnoses with the purpose of seeking formal accommodations and ensuring that they are accommodated during the assessment periods (Anderson *et al*, 2018). As a student with ASD, I was afraid to disclose my autism diagnosis to the lecturers as the possibly existed that I might be judged based on my difference. At first, I contemplated whether I should disclose my diagnosis as I was in an unfamiliar environment and did not know how accepting the lecturers would be of me. By taking the chance to disclose my autism diagnosis to the HMS lecturer, my worst fear came true as the lecturer immediately questioned my ability to participate and complete the HMS course and, at the same time, labelled me as an outsider. When I heard the HMS lecturer's response, I felt disappointed that I was immediately classified as an outsider and this contributed to my decision not to enrol for the module and to change my course. During this time of change, I wondered whether I had made the correct decision to disclose my ASD diagnosis and whether I had placed myself in a disadvantaged position by being honest.

On a positive note, those lecturers who were willing to accommodate me with additional time in their classes understood the challenges that I experienced and, as such, went out of their way to include me in their lessons. I experienced great satisfaction and inclusion in modules such as History and some modules from the Department of Early Childhood Education as I found that these lecturers were very accommodating towards me. Other students with ASD also had positive university experiences when the environment was accommodating and inclusive. Importantly,

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students with ASD found that lecturers and professors who were the most accommodating were former teachers and were trained and willing to accommodate the students by guiding them.

All students with ASD undergo a transitioning phase in different environments and I experienced this, especially in my third and fourth years (Lei, Calley, Brosnan, Ashwin & Russell, 2020; White *et al.*, 2017) when I transitioned from education student to student teacher. I enjoyed implementing the knowledge that I had gained from my first three years at university and implementing those skills in the classroom when I completed my teaching practicals. During this phase, I experienced Chickering's last stage called autonomy towards interdependence in which emphasis is placed on the resilience of the student to persevere in difficult circumstances and to become accustomed to the environment

By that time, I felt as if my undergraduate experiences had come full circle as I had made connections with fellow students and put the knowledge that I had gained into practice. Overall, at the end of my undergraduate studies I achieved my ultimate goal by graduating with a Bachelor of Education at the autumn graduation ceremony.

7.3.2 Research question 2: Why did I, as a student with ASD, experience university the way that I did?

In this section, I will propose a theoretical answer as to why I, as a student with ASD, experienced university the way that I did. One of the major themes which derived from my narrative was the theme of 'place' and my journey to establish my identity on campus. As a student with ASD who came from a small and protective educational environment, I struggled to adjust to the expectations of the university, which portrayed masculinity, whiteness and ableist ideologies by idolising students who were physically attractive, participated in sports and, for example, used alcohol excessively. Generally, students with ASD struggle to adjust to the university environment as their behaviour and actions are measured against the norm.

During the first period of transitioning from school to university, especially referring to OSA theory, students with ASD experience some form of uncertainty and

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disorganisation, as the change of environment and expectations require them to adjust their behaviour (Berry & Ward, 2006). Within this transition, students have a chance to adjust to the environment by learning alternative behaviour methods to cope and meet the required expectations (Keats, 2010).

Considering students' development, Erikson's first stage of identity vs role confusion is present as the students are in search of their identity within the university environment. In order for ASD students to develop their identity, they should have certain experiences which includes the making of decisions that impact their university journey. Another popular decision that students with ASD should make during the first phase of Erikson's theory is not to disclose to the lecturers that they have been diagnosed with ASD due to fear of oppression and isolation that can be portrayed by lecturers and fellow students (Cox *et al.*, 2017). In saying this, the students feel that their behaviour and actions are measured according to a medical model which explains the continuous exclusion and discrimination that they experience on campus (Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum, 2020). This attitude has been embraced by the university as reflected by its policies and perceptions by academic staff (Siew *et al.*, 2017). I can reflect on the exclusion that students with ASD experience at university as I was instantly isolated and identified as an outsider based on the ASD tendencies that I portrayed in the residence and on campus. At that moment, I initially thought that I was the only student with ASD at university when I experienced the different settings within the university as inaccessible. Some lecturers who taught me did not have previous experience in teaching students with ASD and, as such, struggled to accommodate me in the classroom. In retrospect, some lecturers chose to accommodate me on campus, whereas others chose not to, based on their past experiences and their lack of experience in working with students with ASD. Interestingly, generally the lecturers who accommodated me were past teachers who had had experience with teaching and lecturing students with ASD, and they were more empathetic towards my needs than the rest.

Despite my positive experiences within the university environment, the negative ideology was transferred from the university to the residence because the traditions

of the institution reflected the ableism and masculine ideologies. Through the implementation of these policies, all students felt that the residence implemented old traditions which resembled traditional Afrikaans culture to which most minority groups felt inferior. Considering the experiences of all students with ASD at university, their difference, appearance and actions were continuously judged based on a medical model which saw the autism diagnosis in a disadvantaged light. As such, they became victims of different forms of victimisation and abuse. I can speak personally about fellow students' aversive behaviour towards me after my autism diagnosis was exposed. In different environments, my autism tendencies were noticeable when I participated in organised residence social events, and I became a victim of emotional and social abuse as a result of my response to challenges. For example, I did not participate in the traditional residence events, such as the Prison Walk, when we had to run from the bottom of the stairs to the top and which I felt was an unreasonable demand. The senior students did not, however, understand my sensory challenges in such an overpopulated environment. As a result, I was isolated and formed part of the minority group on campus.

A prime example of the masculine, ableist ideology was the policies that Black students, homosexual students and students with disabilities were subjected to. These policies governed the manner in which the residence was ruled, such as controlling which ethnic groups could room together. These policies discouraged students from showing any form of weakness and fostered an environment where autism tendencies were targeted. The university's policies were strict and rigid and it took a lot of effort to ensure that reasonable accommodations were implemented towards a students with ASD, whereas internationally, such as at Australian universities, policies were changed significantly to make their facilities more accessible to student with disabilities, especially students with ASD (Anderson, Stephenson & Carter, 2020; Lilley, 2013; Soto-Chodiman, Pooley, Cohen & Taylor, 2012). Those universities intensified their module and course choices to make them more flexible and innovative for students with ASD. In doing so, they internationalised their higher education system, which has had a significant impact

on student diversity, and adjusted their teaching and learning to accommodate these students' needs.

Despite my disappointment, my eagerness and desire to learn and form part of the university environment was greater than anticipated, and I experienced the first phase of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development called identity vs role confusion where there was a continuous search by me for my place at university. For any student with ASD, there is a silver lining. Mayhew *et al.* (2016) showed that there were positive long-term effects on cognitive development, critical thinking, academic self-concept, locus of control, independence, self-efficacy and psychological well-being in these students and they showed signs of adjusting to the university environment (Salas *et al.*, 2014) through hard work, determination, discipline and perseverance. This period refers to the permanence period in OSA theory and Erikson's stage of intimacy vs isolation as ASD students show adjustment, emotional and psychological growth in the university environment by accepting themselves and adjusting to the university environment. Personally, I eventually found my place physically by finding a place on the sports field where I could think and reflect about my daily experiences. On an emotional level and by keeping Chickering's fifth development stage (autonomy vs interdependence) of student development in mind, I established my place by forming relationships, coping with the academic workload, and participating in different events within the residence. Overall, as some of my co-constructors acknowledged, despite the ableist, masculine ideologies that existed on campus, I coped quite well. The Faculty of Education campus was smaller than the main campus, and there were some academic staff who were more accommodating, having previously had experience with ASD.

The writing of this critical autoethnography created a platform from which I could share my personal experiences as a neurodiverse undergraduate student in a masculine, ableist environment. Therefore, it can be seen as a representation of the experiences of a specific minority group in the South African context. To provide a broader picture, this study contributed to the literature as it challenged traditional views on what the university regarded as normal. This traditional viewpoint

corresponded with the traditional medical model as the institution and students idolised academic success, sport achievement, cultural participation, and socialising. On the other hand, students who did not meet the idolised criteria and standards were isolated (see section 2.3). Generally, the university environment should be a universal environment that is diverse and open, has multiple meanings, and is made up of individuals from different backgrounds, religions and cultures. However, students with different impairments are relegated under the 'marginalised' umbrella and are likely to be isolated and, possibly, discriminated against.

As such, this study exposed the university through the experiences of a student with ASD by reviewing its policies, traditions and educational practices and the effect it had on the functioning abilities of the student. Throughout my undergraduate years, themes like whiteness came through strongly in the attitudes and perceptions of fellow students towards students who were Black and those with a disability such as me. Despite the hardship and isolation that I experienced from the Afrikaans-speaking students, I felt acceptance from the Black African students who were also a minority group on campus. I felt that my unique being and abilities were embraced by the latter, and I was accepted.

Looking back on my undergraduate years, I am proof that students with ASD can succeed and find their identity at university. Moreover, this study contributes to the literature on the experiences of students with ASD at university from the greater South. I was a student with ASD who was part of the minority on campus and who succeeded (with the different levels of support) at a typical formerly White, Afrikaans-speaking university. By elaborating on the positive and negative experiences that I experienced at university, I hope that universities will learn from my autoethnography by looking first at their policies regarding the challenges that students with ASD are confronted with by making support networks available and also by making changes to their management and physical infrastructure.

I hope that this critical autoethnography can contribute to the research in ASD by filling the gap that currently exists in the field with regard to the identity development of such students by drawing on the personal account of a student with ASD at a university within a specific societal context. Referring to the 'critical' aspect in my

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autoethnography, I assessed the operation of my university in terms of their policies, accessibility, support and opportunities available to support students with ASD. By analysing my personal experiences as an undergraduate student, it is evident that the university system needs to change to accommodate the needs of students with ASD and other neurodiverse students.

This study acknowledges the challenges that students with ASD experience at university, and, as such, I adopted a specific structure to guide the reader from the general to the specific by including documented studies from the Global North and Global South as well as autoethnographies on the experiences of students with different disabilities (Bolourian *et al.*, 2018; Dalton *et al.*, 2012; Doan, 2012; Hannon, 2017; Pate, 2011; Smith, 2012; Stevens, 2004; Zingaro, 2015). More importantly, my literature review draws from the practical examples of students with diverse kinds of disabilities, especially those who are physically and visually impaired, neurodiverse or diagnosed with ASD. The literature review exposed gaps that exist in the literature by considering the general experiences of students with disabilities at university. Most of the literature that exists considers the experiences of students with physical impairments. The gap exists where students with psychosocial and neurodevelopmental disorders are limited and, therefore, this study fills the gap as it retells the experiences of a student with ASD at a South African university.

The next section will explain my personal and professional reflections on this study.

7.4 Personal–professional reflections on the study

Doing this research took me on a road of exploration, discovery and self-actualisation as an undergraduate student with ASD at university. Paramount to my study was critical self-reflection as to why I experienced university the way that I did. Personally, this study allowed me to think back on the hardships, loneliness but also positive experiences that I experienced. My reflections brought up emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration and some glimmer of happiness in terms of the university officials and students on campus and in the residence. This study also granted me the opportunity to confront hardships, my differentness and submerged emotions head on by having critical conversations with myself and with my co-

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constructors. By having critical conversations with my co-constructors, my intention was to get their views but also to find closure by obtaining critical information as to why I was treated the way that I was from the co-constructor's point of view, and to reconcile within myself my differences and move on with my life with continued reflections on what I uncovered through this critical autoethnography. I now look back on these experiences with insight, some objectivity and rational thinking, understanding and accepting my undergraduate experiences as a real breakthrough in order to reach self-actualisation as a person and as a self-advocate.

Professionally, I have come to the realisation that first-hand accounts are valuable, particularly with reference to my critical autoethnography in the form of a novella as I live these experiences on a daily basis. My critical autoethnography helped me to establish the need for me to work in the field of autism. It is important to educate society, especially the university community, and to give a voice to the neurodiverse voiceless in South Africa. The knowledge that I gained by working through my study, especially by means of my theoretical framework, helped me as I continuously looked back on my experiences and the developmental changes I went through, and which I still go through, by putting the theory into practice. This knowledge has helped me in my present work as a specialist educator and researcher with regard to how individuals with ASD establish their identity in an educational environment.

In saying this, the methodological reflection will explain how I generated my data and how it shaped my autoethnography and the observations I made.

7.5 Methodological reflections on the study

This section covers the critical reflection on the methodology employed in my study. The design and methodology used in this study were chosen to address the research questions posed. Writing a critical autoethnography was an innovative process, as self-reflection and introspection was paramount for me as a student with ASD.

Holman Jones (2016) writes that the 'critical' in critical autoethnography is an ongoing, movement-driven concept which links concrete and abstract thinking and acting process. I found this to be very true. Using critical autoethnography as my

research methodology, I was required to think critically, alone and with others, about how I, as an undergraduate student with ASD, experienced university. I was forced to think back on how I was treated as a student and relive, remember and feel the rejection, discrimination, victimisation, loneliness and isolation but also the acceptance and triumphs that I experienced as an undergraduate university student. The process was emotionally exhausting but it made me reflect on my undergraduate journey and realise how much I have grown as a person with a deep understanding of ASD and how I and other students formulate their identity development at university. My general observations about my personal journey as a student with ASD were supported by my chosen methodology which helped me to shape my novella, such as having critical conversations with my co-constructors, as each of them played a unique role in my journey as an undergraduate student. In saying this, the contributions of each of my co-constructors were extremely valuable as they represented the views and perceptions regarding students with disabilities, especially students with ASD, at university. Even though their perspectives and contributions were sensitive, they were, in my view, generally honest and truthful, and they represented the general perception of lecturers, the institution and society in general of me and other students with ASD.

It is worth acknowledging that most of my co-constructors were former teachers and practitioners in the education field, and, therefore, their tolerance levels and willingness to accommodate me as an undergraduate student and to assist me during this PhD process speaks volumes about their nature and their humanity. My other co-contractors with whom I did not have a positive experience during my undergraduate period were also willing to form part of this narrative as co-constructors, but rather chose to make a written contribution or provide short responses to questions asked. These co-constructors were family members, such as my cousin, and some lecturers who taught me. By taking both into consideration, the observations that I made were that my co-constructors who had experience with neurodiversity were very accommodating and inclusive, while other co-constructers were very averse when asked to provide reasonable accommodations to support me. Overall, my general observation was that, as a student with ASD, I was quite fortunate to study at the Faculty of Education at UP as the environment was

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geographically smaller and some of the lecturers were familiar with ASD and were knowledgeable as to how to accommodate me during a lecture.

During the transcription of the data, the different conversations that I had with my co-constructors revealed that their perceptions were shaped by their past experiences (personal or in practice) and showed how the existing ideologies implemented contributed to my functioning abilities as an autistic student. From observations that I made from the critical conversations that I had with all my co-constructors, they were all aware that, as a student with ASD, I was vulnerable and would automatically be isolated due to the masculine, whiteness and ableist ideologies that existed on campus. In retrospect, there was no doubt in their minds that I would self-actualise on campus, but it would indeed be an uphill road.

My novella as the product of my methodology was written under extremely difficult circumstances considering the Covid-19 pandemic. These circumstances forced me to construct my data differently, by having critical conversations with my co-constructors online via video call due to the social distancing regulations. Although I successfully engaged in critical conversations with my co-constructors, there was a physical distance between us which made it difficult to read their emotions. I also experienced personal setbacks, as my late mother passed away during this time. Her passing left a major gap in my study. She would have been one of my co-constructors and her perspectives would have been invaluable. Throughout my life, my late mother was the parent with whom I bonded and relied on for support. However, her voice is still included in my novella in the form of her unpublished manuscript. Other invaluable artefacts were also included in the novella: photographs, letters from the university, emails to and from lecturers, and scanned old examination answer books and study guides. My personal tour through the campus was also helpful, as it helped me to think back and remember critical incidents at various settings at the university and to reflect on the hardships that I had experienced.

I hope that this critical autoethnography can contribute to the research in ASD and will help to fill the gap that currently exists in the field in terms not only of the identity development of students with ASD at university but also their personal accounts.

This leads to the recommendations I am making to universities, lecturers and students based on the answers to my two research questions.

7.6 Recommendations based on the study

Each research question has been addressed separately as the following recommendations are made with the purpose of making universities more inclusive and accessible for students with ASD. As such, the following recommendations are suggested in terms of policy, opportunities for future research, lecturers' attitudes towards neurodiverse students, and the support services available to accommodate students with ASD.

Considering the policies that universities implement, the policies must be transparent and must provide reasonable accommodations to make the campuses more accessible. In South Africa, universities underwrite Education White Paper 6 in the Constitution in which the institutions are obligated to implement reasonable accommodations for all students to succeed despite the numerous challenges they are confronted with. It is, therefore, required that universities become policy reliant by making changes in their universal design, such as providing signs for students to help them to navigate their way on campus or having an assistant or navigator available on campus to assist students who are recognisable either by colour or by wearing a badge.

The changes in universal design also includes the availability of support services on various campuses such as having a disability unit which is more central to assist students immediately with academic, emotional and social challenges that they will encounter throughout their undergraduate journey. The disability unit would also assist the lecturers with plans on how to accommodate students with ASD best. In saying this, one of the major challenges for students with ASD is sensory overload, especially in crowded lecture halls and, therefore, universities should have multiple classes per module to limit the overcrowding of lecture halls and thereby accommodate students with sensory overload. Another recommendation that university authorities should consider is the implementation of a traffic light system which would be automatically controlled by the lecturer. With the traffic light system,

the different noise levels in a lecture hall can be determined and measured. The different lights measure the frequency of the noise levels according to colour: red – the frequency of noise levels is high; orange – the frequency of the noise levels is medium; and green – the frequency of the noise levels is low enough for the lectures to continue. By accommodating the sensory challenges that students with ASD experience at university, students with ASD can participate in lessons and self-actualise.

The following recommendation is directed at the development of university staff. Training should be provided for staff on how to embrace the social model and accommodate a neurodiverse student in the lecture. As such, lecturers form part of the larger student support network. To assist with the training, universities can include Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPO's) and Non-Profit Organisations (NPO's) to provide neurodiversity training to lecturers. They can inform them about the spectrum and the different challenges confronted by students with ASD with the purpose of accommodating them at university. These training sessions should include relevant insider information such as how to accommodate an ASD student's anxiety and sensory challenges and how staff can become more accommodating by, for example, making necessary study notes in their modules available to support the student both in their classes and for examination preparation. Lecturers are the first point of contact for students with ASD and they should have a basic understanding of the spectrum to be able to create a strong support base for their student with ASD.

One way in which universities can strengthen and improve their support structures is to make more research available in which students with ASD share their experiences at university. This recommendation is based on the gaps that I identified in my literature review, referring to past and present research done on students with disabilities who attend university and, more specifically, on students with ASD from the Global South who experience university and autistic students who have written autoethnographies.

The second avenue that needs to be improved and invested in is research into ASD, especially research on the experiences of students at university. We currently find

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that the majority of the specialists and published articles are from the US, Great Britain and Sweden (Black, Mahdi, Milbourn, Thompson, D'Angelo, Ström, Falkmer, Falkmer, Lerner & Halladay, 2019). The majority of the research that was reviewed was from the Global North which depicted the daily experiences of students with physical disabilities (Vincent & Chiwandire, 2019). It did not discuss the challenges and support services available to students with physical disabilities in countries from the South, such as South Africa, and other African, South American and Australasian countries. This means that more authentic research on neurodiverse students in the Global South is needed to make universities more inclusive and accessible for all students.

Another major gap in autism research is that there is limited research on the identity development of students at university with much of the research that has been conducted explaining the different challenges experienced by these students at university. Limited research was available to explain the process that students with ASD undergo to formulate and develop their identities within the university environment (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016).

To be able to understand the true experiences of individuals with ASD, first-hand experiences and narratives are the most information-rich research methodologies. They allow the reader to gain insight into the experiences of students with ASD, relate to theory and they contribute to the conformability, credibility and reliability of the research because more researchers elaborate on the challenges and positive experiences that students with ASD have at university.

Although there is a lot of literature available and more research has been conducted in recent years, there seems to be a gap in the field, especially when referring to autoethnographies in which students with ASD share their first-hand experiences at university. More importantly, the research or novellas, especially autoethnographies, that are available are predominantly focused on ECD, and do not retell the experiences of students with ASD at university internationally. Autoethnographies serve as a promising vehicle to weave narratives together, especially when elaborating on social conditions and generating the justice agenda (Chan, Harrichand, Anandavalli, Vaishnav, Chang, Hyun & Band, 2021). The use of

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autoethnography evokes an examination of cultural issues within a context and can unsettle inequalities and barriers that the individual experiences. In this case, the examination is directed at students diagnosed with ASD. The methodology includes the same traditional modes of qualitative research and provides a deep and firm understanding of philosophies underpinning autobiography and cultural study. It is, therefore, very valuable to learn how individuals with ASD experience university by studying first-hand accounts.

More research on the experiences of students with ASD at university would place emphasis on the quality of the support services available at university to assist students with ASD. The quality of the support services at university is critical, especially today, as the numbers of students with ASD enrolling at universities has increased over the years. As such, universities have been required to implement different support units on different campuses, such as university psychologists, to accommodate students and assist them with their mental health (Anderson *et al*, 2018). By making use of the student support centre and disability unit, students with ASD can receive the reasonable accommodations necessary to succeed and fulfil their potential, such as getting permission to receive concession times for tests and examinations and to audio record lectures.

The support services that the university provide can also fill the communication gap between students with disabilities and university authorities by assisting them to make the university accessible and inclusive for everyone. For instance, the disability unit can nominate students with disabilities to join the Student Representative Council to represent the voices of students with disabilities at university. This notion can lead to the creation of different peer-support subgroups (such as a neurodiversity support group) that represent a specific disability. By becoming part of this group and spending time with students with similar impairments, students with disabilities could feel that they belong and, in turn, contribute to the improvement of their self-confidence and their ability to accept themselves unconditionally. This would also eventually lead to the student's disclosure to the lecturers about their ASD diagnosis, which would help the lecturers to understand the student's particular needs and how to accommodate them in the

lecture room. It is important to note that most students do not disclose their ASD diagnosis to the lecturers due to the possibility of discrimination and victimisation being directed towards them, and the belief that doing so can leave them exposed. But, as all public institutions follow an inclusive education policy, lecturers are obligated to accommodate students with different disabilities and give them an equal opportunity to participate and succeed.

The training that would be provided to lecturers on how to accommodate students with ASD should also be provided to the tutors in their respective modules. The training that the tutors would receive on neurodiversity can help them to understand the student's academic challenges. The tutors should preferably have a Psychology or other learning support background and familiarise themselves with ASD and the associated challenges of neurodiverse students. It would also be appropriate if the tutor could keep a record of the student's attendance of the tutor sessions and inform the lecturer on the student's progress.

In general, universities should consider how the university environment could have an impact on the functioning abilities of the student with ASD and should integrate the voices of neurodiverse students to improve university facilities and ensure that the environment is inclusive for all students.

7.7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have challenged the traditional way of how universities work by exposing the different cultures and traditions that existed and one university and which I exposed through the retelling of my personal experiences as a student with ASD at university. Critically, ideas of whiteness, ableness and dominant masculinities were analysed and exposed in my autoethnography as these ideas were reflected through the policies of the institution and the attitudes of the students and lecturers.

Through this autoethnographic study, I questioned the idea of what the university regards as 'normal' and challenged the system, specifically in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria and universities in the Global South as limited

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research is available on the first-hand experiences of neurodiverse students in this geopolitical context.

This study is a testimony of what I went through and what I had to endure to succeed – including loneliness and troubling circumstances. In doing so, I contributed to the understanding of how students with ASD like me experience higher education, its management, policies on structural and educational levels, and student life. In hindsight, my autoethnography elaborated on the understanding of policies and infrastructure that require change with the purpose of accommodating neurodiverse students, especially students with ASD who are studying at large, complex universities.

I am not arguing that I have solved any of the above-mentioned issues in my thesis. I did, however, critically engaged with the issues in a reflective manner by means of my methodology and, in so doing, shed light on a university which, at times, showed wonderful levels of support (corresponding with the social model), but at the time same time showed glimpses of being stuck in the medical model.

My autoethnography contributed to the literature of neurodiverse students at universities from an African perspective and I challenged and disrupted ideas of toxic and hegemonic masculinity, whiteness and ableness. Importantly, ideas that emerged from my novella include the spirit of ubuntu and the care that I received from the Black African students when compared to White, Afrikaans students. I also provided insights into what it took to shape and form my own identity as an undergraduate student, autistic adult and future educator.

What also emerged was the compassion and support of certain staff members and students. In this regard, I am arguing that the theoretical contribution that I am making is that ideas of compassion need to be foregrounded and integrated into the undergraduate educational curriculum at universities. In the end, I hope that I showed what was working but, at the same time, elaborated on key areas that need to change in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. The purpose of this is to truly transform the university so that all students are welcomed into an

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environment free from any form of discrimination and victimisation, including neurodiverse students.

Overall, as an individual with ASD, I was required to adapt to the University, but the university environment needs to change to accommodate the needs of students like me. Drawing on Christina Cushen, universities, including the University of Pretoria, '[have] to change, because I can't change myself. I am always going to be autistic as it is in my DNA. Being neurodiverse is what makes me unique'(Cushen, 2022:2). Students like me need to find a purpose by studying at university and working. The hope is, therefore, that this study will create understanding, compassion and acceptance to accommodate students with ASD, like me, in a university environment free from any form of discrimination and victimisation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Letter of request from Dr Venter for additional time

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Student Support

15 February 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

REQUEST ADDITIONAL TIME FOR TESTS AND EXAMINATIONS

Student: Mr Emile Gouws

Student number: 12106543

Mr Gouws has approached Student Support, with regards to obtain extra writing time in tests and examinations. Mr Gouws suffers from a learning disorder and working speed and reading speed is very slow and therefore struggles to compete the tests and examinations in the allocated time.

We therefore request the following:

Time concession: 15 minutes additional writing time per hour.

In case you need any further information regarding proof for these requests or any other information about the services that Student Support and the Disability Unit renders, you may contact us on the given telephone numbers. Please don't hesitate to call us should you be uncertain about the way in which we can assist you in helping the student.

Your co-operation in this regard is much appreciated.

Division of Student Support
Department of Student Affairs
Student Affairs Building R2-13
University of Pretoria
PRETORIA 0001
Republic of South Africa

www.up.ac.za

APPENDIX B: Letter of request for use of audio recorder in class

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Student Support

20 Februarie 2013

Wie dit mag aangaan

Versoek om van `n bandopnemer in klasse gebruik te maak

Student: Mnr Emile Gouws

Studente nommer: 12106543

Mnr Gouws het Studente Ondersteuning genader vir hulp met sy studies en die bepaalde
leerprobleem wat hy ondervind. Mnr Gouws is `n sterk auditiewe leerder en vind baie baat daarby
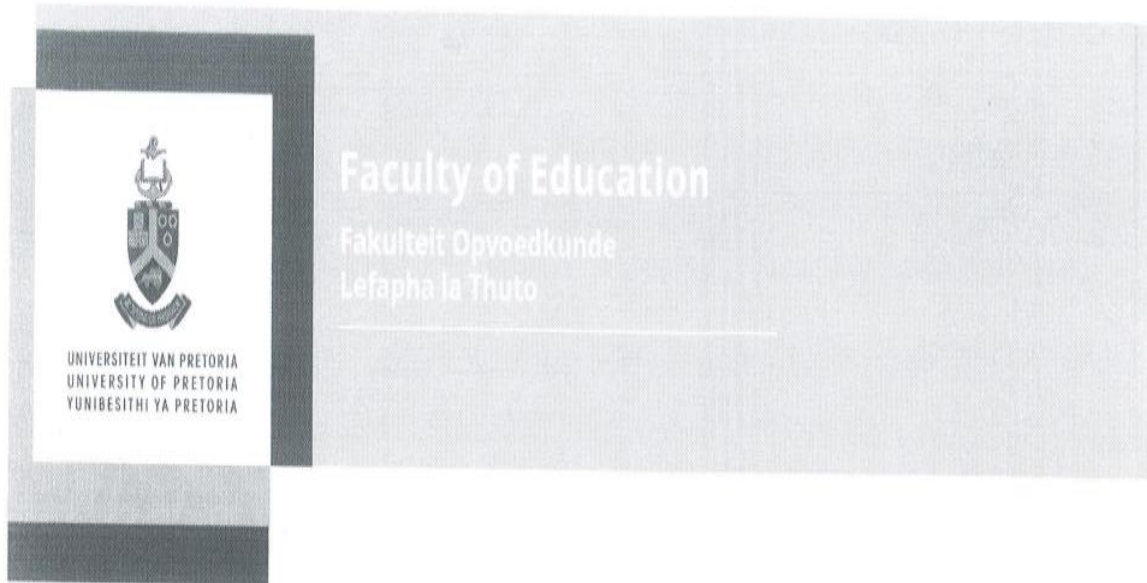om van `n bandopnemer gebruik te maak.

U is welkom om my te kontak vir verdere inligting.

Die uwe

Division of Student Support
Department of Student Affairs
Student Affairs Building R2-13
University of Pretoria
PRETORIA 0001
Republic of South Africa

www.up.ac.za

APPENDIX C: Agreement to participate as a co-constructor in this research project – Ettienne Gouws

PERMISSION FOR RESEARCH

The nature, objective and possible safety implications have been explained to me and I understand them.

I understand my right to choose whether to participate in this research and that the information will be handled confidentially. I am aware that the results of the research may be used for the purposes of publication.

I hereby voluntarily grant my permission to participate in this autoethnography as a co-constructor

Signature: _____   Date: SEPTEMBER 2020

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