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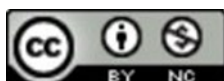
Adjusting the volume: The paradoxical experience of secure care for autistic young people

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Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of secure care on the identity narratives of autistic young people. The research made use of a flexible diary method and semi-structured interviews, analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). It sought reflections on the experiences of autistic young people who were living, or had recently lived, in Scotland's secure accommodation services. By listening directly to young people, this research offers a unique contribution to knowledge about life for a group often described as 'hard to reach'. It considers the intersection of autism and secure care through the lenses of relationships, residence, and rules. Due to the ambivalence, incongruence, and dissonance experienced by young people, it proposes that there is the potential for secure care to create barriers or supports, in relation to communication and attachment (through relationships); sensory differences (through the residence); and need for structure and routine (through the rules). In considering what is already known about autism in restricted settings, a number of recommendations are made for future practice, including in relation to congruent communication, ambivalent experiences, belonging, hyper-empathy, symbolism, masking, environmental adaptations, sensory connectivity, dichotomous thinking, information sharing, the autistic experience, and individuality of risk management.



Introduction

This paper offers a summary of doctoral research which explored an experiential perspective of the impact of secure care for autistic young people, framed through the lens of their identity. Children who are 'looked after' in residential care, including secure care, have been seen as lacking value and importance (Colton, 2002). They have been left feeling 'othered' (Independent Care Review, 2020), with associated labels generating negativity (Urquhart-Stewart & Wylie, 2021) as young people try to make sense of constructions of themselves as either a child in danger or a dangerous child (Enell & Wilińska, 2020). Additionally, autism is often a lens through which others narrate people's lives, resulting in individuals being removed as the authors of their own stories (Yergeau, 2017).

There is anecdotal evidence that increasing numbers of autistic young people are being placed in secure care or 'juvenile correctional facilities' (Thompson, 2018; Jolivette & Swoszowski, 2020), however there is little research or data to support this (Allely, 2018; Myers, 2004). Due to the developing human rights agenda (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2019; Children's Commissioner for England, 2019; Scottish Government, 2019), autism, youth, and placement in secure care are of current political importance. Several studies and initiatives have been undertaken to examine each of these areas individually (Wilson, 2022). However, there is limited research and policy which has taken account of the intersection of the three, and that became the purpose of this study.

Autistic young people's voices and lived experiences are notably absent in the literature, and a recognition of how their experiences may in turn influence the development of identity has lacked consideration. So, I aimed to adjust the volume of current dominant discourses in order that autistic young people's voices be heard, by exploring the impact of secure care experiences on the identity narratives of autistic young people. My research addressed the above-mentioned gap by examining secure care as a containing environment which is made up not only of the physical environment (the residence), but also the relationships, and the expectations, rhythms, routines, and responses (the rules) (Emond et al., 2016).



Methodology

The research made use of a flexible diary method and semi-structured interviews to explore the impact of relationships, residence, and rules in the context of secure care, on the identity narratives of autistic young people (Wilson, 2024). This was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). It sought reflections on the experiences of autistic young people who were living, or had recently lived, in Scotland's secure care accommodation services. It engaged with 19 young people through a staged approach between August 2022 and May 2024. My thanks go to all the young people who engaged with this research project, and to Andi, Bobby D., Bobbie M., Charley, Lindsay, Sammy and Ziggy (pseudonyms have been used) whose data is presented here.

Findings

The findings showed four key themes which were all paradoxical. The use of 'versus' in the titles of the themes is illustrative of the elements that sat in tension.

Due to Grandin's (2009) autistic cognitive types (visual, verbal, and pattern thinkers), there was a focus on visual methods in the research, and as a result use has been made of a rich picture to support understanding and accessibility of findings (see Figure 1). This was developed iteratively with a freelance illustrator (Shorrocks, 2025) and is designed to demonstrate the key themes, alongside young people's articulated experiences.

Theme 1: Care vs restriction – care

Whilst several young people commented on the quality of staff, they did so in the context of previous residential placements. For Bobby D., their experience of staff seemed to contradict the fear and uncertainty they felt about being secured. They noted that 'the staff were nicer than where I lived before'. This challenges the dichotomous or 'black and white' thinking commonly associated with autistic people (Suzuki & Hirai, 2023) as they were able to think about their experience as both bad and good at the same time. Lindsay, however, seemed unable to identify particular people of importance and found reflection on relationships difficult. They advised that people made them feel 'good' and that they could talk to



staff, however expressed that they did not feel well understood by staff and had felt better understood in their previous placement.

Ziggy's ambivalence was particularly visible as they provided conflicting responses about who they spent time with, what had impacted them, and what they would miss most, suggesting that they felt uncomfortable disclosing how important staff really were to them. Ziggy noted that they spent time with staff, that the staff were better than where they had lived before, and that they were 'mair motivated [...] don't just care about the money [...] They're more understanding'. However, at other times Ziggy indicated a dislike of staff: 'some staff just shouldn't be allowed to work in this place.' In contradiction to this, despite reflecting positively on some individual members of staff, Sammy refers to relationships being 'forced', and to staff as 'these people get paid to care for me', as though indicating that in some way dilutes the authenticity of relationship.

Nurturing relationships of being known, and feeling seen and connected, may have helped young people to discover parts of themselves. After all, for many of us, feeling understood is what makes us feel cared for and makes life meaningful (Donati, 2011). Being known appeared to help young people to know themselves, meaning they may well have left with a more authentic identity. For this to occur there needs to be a genuineness to the relationship, which can be difficult to achieve when staff enact emotion management, and a 'guarded side' (Ellis & Curtis, 2020) of themselves. Despite this, Ellis and Curtis (2020) reported staff becoming emotionally invested in young people, showing there was an authenticity to the relationship. This is an example of the tension that exists in managing 'appropriate boundaries' in residential child care, simultaneously being close enough, but not too close (Steckley, 2020).

Despite numerous positive reflections on their experience of secure care, Bobbie M. exhibited a level of ambivalence, advising 'the good things, sort of overrule the bad things'. This is echoed through Sammy's use of 'yeah, some positives', and Andi's 'I feel like yes and no'. This may be reflective of the wider societal ambivalence around residential child care, as seen through the attitudes of policy makers and the public. These young people's experiences are symptomatic of the intersection of care and control (Hankivsky, 2014), which is in itself paradoxical. Tensions such as this, and those between risk and justice, or protection of individuals and others, have been present throughout the history of secure care (Gough &



Lightowler, 2018). Care itself is constructed on a basis of risk (American Psychological Association, 1993), including people who are both at risk from others and who pose a risk to themselves or others (Enell & Wilińska, 2020). Additional tension arises when disability intersects with care and control (Gormley, 2021), and risk and vulnerability (Myers, 2004).

Theme 1: Care vs restriction – restriction

Some young people made use of symbolism to support their sense-making with respect to deprivation of liberty. For example, Lindsay referred on repeated occasions to 'the big, locked doors' as a symbolic physical representation of their loss of liberty. Ziggy offered further examples of symbolism:

[...] TVs are in boxes. So they're trying to make it look safer, but it's not [...] Naw it's more like they're trying to cover up - making it look safe, but it's not [...] Aye, the TV boxes are breakable [...] I just dinnae like that they have stuff up that makes it look safer, but it's not.

This may be related to Ziggy's construction of truth as an autistic person. Due to the differences in theory of mind from the allistic population (Baron-Cohen, 1989), the inconsistency of the setting may feel dishonest, with the 'TVs in boxes' (typical practice in a secure care environment) offering a symbolic concrete example of this.

Semiotics describes the communication of meaning and sense-making of the world around us, through signs and symbols (Trifonas, 2015). Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) refers to the impact on identity formation of the way in which we are understood by others, combined with how we see ourselves, and our use of symbolic gestures to communicate with others. The physicality of the secure environment is a concrete reflection of the level of perceived risk (Lovell & Skellern, 2020) and offers a physical symbol of the stigma experienced. The impact of this symbolism may be more profound for autistic young people, who are more likely to process information visually than the allistic population (Grandin, 1995; Kana et al., 2006). It is interesting to consider the ways in which the symbolism found in secure care impacts on young people's perceptions of self, and their interpretation of others' perceptions of their self (Huang et al., 2017). Theories of material symbolism recognise that



physical objects can influence a person's life and therefore their sense of self (Layne, 2000), and that this is best understood within the sphere of children and young people (Yin & Schiphorst, 2009). Barone (2016) illustrates this with examples of communities of young people connecting symbolically through alternative clothing or music.

Emond (2016) writes of the symbolic and metaphorical forms of communication in residential child care practice, as both objects and food take on meaning and express something beyond their material being. It is widely understood that young people communicate in a variety of ways (Garfat, 2004), and that this is particularly true for autistic young people (Ortega, 2009) and those experiencing secure care (Bryan et al., 2015). Therefore, concrete symbols of the environment (such as 'big, locked doors', or 'TVs in boxes') may be better understood by autistic young people experiencing secure care than abstract ones. Symbols are often used as an augmentative or alternative form of communication (AAC) (Bondy & Frost, 1994; Tobii Dynavox, 2020) for autistic people, as a method of concretising abstract concepts. Symbolic interpretation of the environment may support autistic people's understanding of abstract concepts such as loss of liberty, and safety, in a similar way, as 'symbols can be thought of as physical or material representations of something that can often be considered invisible' (Emond, 2016, p.38).

Theme 2: Structure vs flexibility – structure

A significant proportion of young people's stories related to structure. This applied both in relation to macrostructures such as power and agency, and microstructures such as routines and a lack of flexibility. Sammy described finding it difficult to accept autism as a part of their identity, which is suggestive of a rejection of labelling and deficit constructions of autism (Bagatell, 2007; Goodley, 2013). Sammy advised:

I just say that I dinnae have it all of the time, even though I know I probably do [...] When they say 'that's because of your autism', I say 'shut up, I don't even have that!' even though I know I probably do.

Day (2022) describes young people in English youth justice systems being labelled due to neurodivergent behaviours, which forces them into a disabling cycle as they go on to behave in a way that fits that label. Bobby D. described being physically labelled, as the result of wearing a



sunflower badge (designed to show they were autistic): 'I don't like when, sometimes like when people find out about my autism they don't talk to me they talk to the person I'm with.' This shows Bobby D's lived experience of stigma as a result of societal constructs, both through the lens of autism and through an allistic lens.

Alongside the stigma of being autistic, young people described the additional stigma of experiencing secure care. For example, Andi's ambivalence as to how they felt about secure care was seen through their use of both 'I felt like I belonged' and 'I didn't deserve to be there'. It could be Andi had heard from others that they 'didn't deserve to be there' as a form of stigma which had become internalised. McMurray et al.'s (2011) research found that looked after children may reject elements of their identity that could be deemed stigmatising or put them on hold due to uncertainties about their future.

Lindsay also showed a conflict between the construction of their loss of liberty and their view of their self, finding it difficult to make sense of this loss of liberty. This difficulty may have been exacerbated in the context of their expressed views of themselves as a good person who does well. This view of a 'good self' is incompatible with the societal construction of children who are deprived of their liberty, likely creating a sense of incongruence for Lindsay. If secure care is seen as a place for 'bad kids' then it may create an illusion for young people living there that they are, therefore, bad. For those who felt a sense of belonging there, that sense of being bad may have been even stronger.

There are parallels here with Ellis' (2018) research in an English secure children's home, which found that young people perceived they were viewed by others as 'naughty' or 'bad', regardless of the reason for their placement. Similarly, Enell and Wilińska (2020) found that young people in Swedish secure care tried to rationalise their sense of self as either a child in danger or a dangerous child. The intersecting stigmas of being secured and autistic shape young people's identities as their combined influence generates negativity (Urquhart-Stewart & Wylie, 2021) and creates interdependent systems of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989).

The conflicting sense of being both bad and good appeared to me to influence young people's developing identities, creating an ambivalent self, as evidenced in young people's difficulty with articulating their own



identities. Thiel's (2012) intersectional model explores the historical difficulty with accepting that children have the potential for both innocence and deviancy and is reflective of the tension that still impacts on policy today, where children who do not comply with societal norms are perceived as a threat (Davis, 2013). Whilst it is recognised that secure care will be a difficult experience for many young people to process due to the nature of being away from their family and deprived of their liberty, for autistic young people there are particular challenges in making sense of ambivalent experiences due to a reduced capacity for cognitive dissonance (Suzuki & Hirai, 2023).

Theme 2: Structure vs flexibility – flexibility

When the rules in secure care varied to take account of individual young people's needs, this felt inconsistent to young people participating in my research, which they then deemed to be unfair. Whilst young people express a desire for consistency, they simultaneously have a desire to be treated as individuals and have their needs responded to in a tailored way. Congruence (Anglin, 2002) offers a way of managing this tension. The concept of fairness is often an important one to children (Shaw et al., 2014), however some young people were developmentally better placed to make sense of this than others. For example, thinking about whether the variation in rules was fair, Bobbie M. was able to rationalise this. They gave examples in relation to items allowed in the bedroom, education classes, or recognising that sanctions could vary for different young people:

[...] it's different young people for example things you can have in your room. Um what you do at school, what courses you do depending on your education and what level you're working at. Um how long you can be, whether you can have recreation or not, whether you have - what time you go to bed for example if you don't go to school [...]

Andi also recognised the individuality of environmental restrictions and that these were dependent on young people's ability to demonstrate their level of regulation. Andi acknowledged the complexity of having different rules for different young people:

Sometimes I was like 'oh they're unfair' when I didn't understand them at first, like I would ask for like things in



my room that 'no, you're not allowed that' and I'd be like 'pfft' like raging at them. But then like, then they would explain why and I was like 'oh well that kinda makes sense' but I was like 'but that's some people, not me' [...]

In contradiction to the benefits of standardisation of practice is the flip side - of policies and rules being applied indiscriminately - known as blanket rules or restrictions. It could be argued that these offer consistency of practice, however they fail to take account of individual risks, and often restrict a person's rights including their liberty (Department of Health, 2015). The launch of the Restraint Reduction Network's 'blanket restrictions toolkit' in 2022 was co-authored by Alexis Quinn, an autistic individual who has experienced restrictive secure environments. The toolkit advises using the 4Rs (rules, reasons, rights, and review) to understand blanket restrictions. Lindsay gave three clear examples of blanket rules in relation to, kitchen access: 'Like you should be allowed unsupervised in the kitchen and that. That could be changed'; internet access: 'Erm YouTube and that. Yeah internet access. Yeah. You're allowed it in 'resi's', but you cannae in secure'; and the use of earphones:

Strict [...] Silly like you're only allowed to have one earphone on. That's quite silly [...] Because you should be allowed to listen with two [...] Because in case staff shout on you but you can still hear them with two.

Ziggy also expressed a view of unfairness at overly strict rules: 'Annoyed. They were [...] too strict man.' This was reiterated by Sammy who voiced a sense of injustice in having the same rules for everyone: 'Some just don't make any sense and makes this place feel more like a prison and less like a home [...] Some of them I think are just total and utter stupid, and some of them are alright I guess.' Their sense of injustice may be related to their status as people society views as different. There may be learning, for example, in Sammy's perception of disproportionality in the unit's responses to harm to self, which led them to feel overly restricted:

...like for example if someone was to take one thing off me because I had misused it that's fine, but then they would just take literally everything, everything off me, ban me



from every single room in the place, yeah it just doesn't really make any sense, I just think it's a bit stupid.

Theme 3: Nurtured vs scared – nurtured

Another way in which young people constructed how it felt to be 'locked up' was through sensory impact. This may be specific to autistic young people due to their differing sensory needs from the allistic population (Adamson et al., 2006; Barkham et al., 2013; National Autistic Society, 2024; Schaaf & Lane, 2015). Andi recalled the noises from their day of admission being significant, and in particular that 'there was a lot of banging and noises, doors shutting behind you', which was perhaps a symbolic representation of feeling 'locked up' and the fear they felt that may have been exacerbated by sound sensitivity. Ziggy recalled the very specific 'sounds of the garage door'. Common practice has been for young people to enter secure care via a secure garage (Gough, 2017), such that the sound of this closing would likely have evoked similar feelings to Andi's. Alongside this, Ziggy recalled from the day of their admission 'a strong smell of bleach/disinfectant'. Smell is a particularly powerful sensory experience due to its 'direct route' to the hippocampus and amygdala in the limbic system, where emotions and memories are based (Walsh, 2020).

The sensory experiences from the day of admission will have informed young people's sense-making: 'To make meaning out of the world and successfully engage with the environment requires the ability to perceive sensory information from the world and integrate that information in meaningful ways into states of consciousness' (Mueller & Tronick, 2020, p.255). In their exploration of an enactive approach to cognition, Ezequiel et al. (2018) touch upon the concept of participatory sense-making; how we make sense of the world through our bodies' experiences. Similarly, Nicolaou et al. (2022) argue that physicality be recognised as the embodiment of emotion.

There has been increasing interest in recent years in creating neurodiverse (HOK, 2019) and autistic spaces (Matusiak, 2024; National Autistic Taskforce, 2024). This has included the use of checklists for autism friendly environments (Simpson, 2016) and the autism ASPECTSS design index (Mostafa, 2020). Andow et al. (2023) describe the balance between safety and homeliness as important to achieve in a secure children's home setting, with the space normalised. As well as creating a



child-friendly environment, they recommend the use of soft close doors, careful use of alarms, and innovative lighting. Thompson (2018) echoes this, outlining the need for sensory sensitive and trauma-informed environments when supporting autistic children and those who have experienced trauma.

When reflecting on others' autism awareness, Bobby D. described how their own sensory needs varied daily depending on arousal levels, which made it harder for others to understand: 'It changes quite a lot so sometimes I can be okay with people touching me and sometimes I might not. It changes all the time and on different days I can handle different amounts of sensory stuff.' In contrast to this, Bobby D. also reported a positive sensory experience from their day of admission: 'I remember having a shower and it was a very, very nice shower coz I hadn't showered in like four days and I was very dirty and covered in blood so it was a very nice shower.' The experience of showering in a 'very, very nice shower' and simultaneously becoming clean by washing away the blood and dirt could be viewed as symbolic of being cared for. It also offers a potential therapeutic 'blue space' experience (Turner & Moran, 2019). In exploring the careful control of water in prison settings and the therapeutic benefits of 'blue space', Turner and Moran (2019, p.211) describe how even being able to access the cell shower or view water through a window had the potential to offer prisoners benefits such as 'an embodied interaction with the world 'outside' of prison' (p.211).

Theme 3: Nurtured vs scared – scared

For some young people, the level of stress created by admission to secure care appears to have made it difficult for them to process or retain information, with both Sammy and Charley advising that they didn't remember their first day. Sammy advised: 'Mmm, I don't really remember much about my first day here, it was ages ago,' whilst Charley stated, 'I don't remember my first day'. Bobby D. advised that their admission to secure was 'scary coz there was a lot of new people'.

It appeared Lindsay was unable to remember exactly how they felt, stating, 'I was probably scared'. This may have been due to a level of overwhelm that made it difficult to process or retain information including how they felt. These stressors may be experienced as mini-traumas, which have a cumulative impact on young people's wellbeing over time. Day (2022) found that the environmental stressors of justice settings had



a disabling impact on neurodivergent young people, and it is possible this is what these young people are reflecting here.

There was an experiential element to Bobbie M's reflections on the search procedures for admission to secure care. Having been searched previously appeared to give them a better understanding of what to expect during a search, helping them to make sense of the experience:

Yes. Well they were very good um, they put the dressing gown on me, wand you down, make sure you not got anything. Fairly standard, um you know, I'm used to that sort of thing at that point so I didn't have an issue with it. Personally anyway.

Other young people were able to articulate the importance of understanding the rules and daily routines by saying that it would have been helpful to know this prior to admission, and that they hadn't had this information. This is illustrated by Lindsay, who advised it would be beneficial for young people moving into secure to know about the rules and 'how it works'. Lindsay advised that the lack of communication at the point of admission meant that it had been difficult to understand what was happening which had impacted upon how they felt at the time. In their use of 'how it works', it seems to me that Lindsay is articulating that there is a framework, a script of sorts, that they have not had access to. Similarly, Bobbie M. referred to this as 'the structure of the place':

I think they need to know the routine. They need to know who the staff are [...] They also need to know sort of the code of behaviour, so how to conduct yourself in front of other young people [...] Just people they need to know um just the structure of the place, the behavioural patterns, the routine, um and just who they're working with and their peers.

This framework of rules offers answers, in some respects, that would support young people to make sense of why things are the way they are. There are strong parallels here with the way autistic people experience the social world, with its unwritten, unexplained rules, which are often difficult to make sense of (Jolliffe, 1992, as cited in Howlin, 2004).



Similarly, Ziggy expressed that routines were the main thing they thought new young people moving in would need to know about, which shows how impactful the routines were for them: 'I would tell them the routines of the house, although they might sound strange it's something that works in the house.' This is an aspect of practice that is applicable to all residential child care settings, as expressed by Emond et al. (2016, p.95): 'Providing a clear explanation of what we do here and why [...] can help them begin to understand that these routines serve a purpose and are part of the way we express our care for them.' It may be especially important for autistic young people, given the significance of routines and structure for autistic people, with their presence providing a sense of predictability and safety (Wing, 1996).

Theme 4: Belonging vs loss – belonging

Young people articulated benefitting from a sense of community through shared experiences with peers. For example, Ziggy described young people 'sticking together': 'But then we'll all back each other up saying "naw we didnae dae that". Aye but we've done it but we're no telling anybody that we've done it.' They rationalised this as resulting from living with others who'd had similar experiences: 'It's just different having people that you actually get on wi. That they go through the exact same as you [...] The kids. We've all been through the same sorta stuff.'

Schinkel and Lives Sentenced Participants' (2021) research on a sense of belonging amongst the prison population found that there was a cultural element to this, such as shared characteristics and language, and that these similarities tended to increase the sense of belonging. Carey's (2019) research with autistic young people living in low secure wards highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships for autistic young people whilst living in secure care, finding that changing relationships were a key theme, and that shared experiences with peers were impactful. In thinking about their own dysregulated and self-injurious behaviour Andi echoed Ziggy's reflections on their similarities with other young people:

Everyone knows kind of the criterias of being in secure so all like 'we know you struggle with that' so they don't mention it kind of [...] but in [most recent secure unit] you'd do something and they don't judge you for it coz they do the exact same things coz they struggle [...]



Whilst some young people articulated a sense of belonging with the group or secure community, others, such as Sammy and Bobby D., expressed a feeling of not belonging. For Sammy, the sense of being an outsider seemed to be enhanced by the mix of young people they were living with who were placed on both welfare and justice grounds:

[...] I thought like the mixture of people that have like committed serious crimes and the people that just can't keep themselves safe, I think it's a bit unfair and a bit stupid to put them all in the same place [...]

There is an alignment here with Ellis' (2018) research in an English secure children's home, which found that young people placed on welfare grounds felt that they did not belong in secure care.

Ziggy reflected on the impact of living with other young people who may often be dysregulated, and how this could result in something akin to a group sanction: '[...] how unsettled the group was when I arrived [...] my outings changed and then got cancelled because of other young people being unsettled.' Similarly Bobbie M. advised that other young people's behaviours could impact on their experience, or that daily life could be unpredictable due to others' behaviour: 'Some people, some people how they can act or behave it makes me feel a bit down [...]' This challenges some of the dominant theories of autism with respect to how others' emotional experiences are understood. Kimber, et al. (2023) challenged the autistic empathy deficit narrative in their research which found a high proportion of hyper-empathy amongst the autistic population. Notwithstanding the fact that what is known about hyper-empathy in the context of autism is still emerging, it is likely the high levels of trauma present in secure care increase autistic young people's own levels of dysregulation and distress.

Social isolation and loneliness are common amongst autistic and other neurodivergent young people (Shiltz et al., 2024). Due to differences in theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, 1989), where other young people's experiences do not reflect their own, the sense of not belonging and dissonance for autistic young people may be increased, both of which are known to increase identity management behaviours such as masking or camouflaging (Hull et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2017; Pearson & Rose, 2021). It seems to me that seeing ourselves reflected in others validates our



identity and increases our sense of belonging; when we are part of an intersectional minority the chances of finding this are decreased as the numbers of people who represent us are lower. Where autistic young people had the opportunity to benefit from shared experiences, there was the potential for young people's enhanced belonging and connectedness with their 'tribe'.

Theme 4: Belonging vs loss – loss

The displacement from home communities called young people's identity into question, as it would for any of us. Being surrounded by different accents, eating different foods, seeing different sights, and listening to a different radio station, because of living somewhere different can lead one to question if one is still the same person. All the senses are implicated, which I believe has increased consequences for autistic young people, who may experience the world in a heightened sensory manner. Enhancing access to sensory language may help to reduce the communication barrier (Cosslett, 2025). Music, for example, can access memories through its direct connection with the hippocampus (Shariatmadari, 2025). Sensory experiences offer opportunities for young people to connect with a more authentic sense of themselves and build more positive identities and may reduce the sense of displacement.

There were conflicting views from young people as to the benefits versus the drawbacks of being an unknown at the point of moving into secure care. For Andi, there was a sense that it was important to be around people who knew them well:

[...] Staff are like 'oh it's a [boy/girl]' but they don't know like my age or nothing, they don't know anything about, like the managers know all that stuff, so they have to wait till they can, like to know their name.

Bobbie M. on the other hand positioned being unknown as 'a fresh start in a new environment'. This appeared to lead them to construct secure care as a bridging (Anglin, 2004), transitional (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010), or transformative experience (Paul, 2014), acknowledging, 'the step forward this has given me to better myself as a person'. It seemed that entering secure care as an unknown had given Bobbie M. an opportunity to be a new person and change their life: 'Changed. I think I've changed a lot by



the time I come in here in the first place, but I feel like I've still got room to change more and better myself for the community.'

In contradiction to this, Sammy articulated a sense of 'stuckness' and inability to change. This was shown in their use of 'they try, but it doesn't really work.' This may have been related to Sammy nearing the end of their time in secure care, and therefore the 'fresh start' narrative feeling less relevant to them, showing that how young people feel about belonging in secure care could shift over time. Thompson (2018) acknowledged the impact of loss as children transition in and out of secure care, including within this the loss of identity if young people's and others' perceptions of them have changed because of their time in secure care. It is likely this will be of increased significance for autistic young people due to the particular complexities of transitions (Autism Network Scotland et al., 2017; Iemmi et al., 2017). As autistic identity can impact on social identity (MacLeod et al., 2013), if young people come to understand their autism better because of their time in secure care there is the potential for this to impact how young people see themselves and how they are seen by others. This may offer opportunities for them to open up their 'back stage' worlds (Goffman, 1959), with a decrease in identity management behaviours such as masking or camouflaging (Hull et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2017b; Pearson & Rose, 2021), and associated increase in positive self-identity and authentic life (Bagatell, 2007; Bradley et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2021).

Schinkel (2015) found that where imprisonment was constructed as a transformational experience this was due to a need to give the sentence purpose, with changes mentioned by prisoners including the space and time to think. This 'space and time to think' was alluded to by Ziggy, who spoke of benefitting from the peace by sitting and relaxing in the garden. Ziggy was able to reflect that things were easier now, and that they were calmer and less stressed due to the impact of secure care. It may be that young people were drawn to the narrative of a 'fresh start' because they needed this narrative to cope with their time in secure care, or were reflecting a narrative offered to them by others. However, it seemed to me that for some participants their time in secure care really had been life altering.



Recommendations

The data showed that there was potential for secure care to create barriers and supports, in relation to communication and attachment (through relationships); sensory differences (through the residence); and need for structure and routine (through the rules). The recommendations are therefore structured around these three areas which were central to the research project. Given the prevalence of intersectionality in young people with 'multiple minority identities' (Levine & Breshears, 2019) in this research project, some findings may be relevant to all young people, however some will be specific to those who are autistic.

Relationships

It is likely that becoming known enables the positive development of a more authentic identity for young people experiencing secure care. It is therefore important that we consider engaging with young people in ways that enable them to feel known, whilst taking account of their communication preferences.

Secure care should aim to offer autistic young people an experience that feels less ambivalent by ensuring their individual needs are appropriately met. It may be that opportunity-led (Ward, 2002, 2004, 2007) and/or life-space work (Keenan, 2002) that helps young people process contradictory emotions and experiences would be of benefit in supporting young people to develop a more authentic identity, particularly if delivered in a sensory or holistic manner.

It is crucial that we give cognisance to the significance for young people of belonging to the group when making decisions about admissions. This might be considered with respect to admissions assessments, the ways in which units are structured, and how staff support engagement between young people.

Secure providers should consider how they can mitigate the potential impact of hyper-empathy and any associated distress on autistic young people placed in their care. This may be through admissions and matching decisions as outlined above, risk assessment and care planning, or the consideration of appropriate interventions to respond to dysregulation and distress.



Residence

Secure providers should continue to consider semiotics in environmental design through a more congruent use of symbolism. This may mean ensuring that food is presented in a manner that looks and feels nurturing; that the latest technologies are utilised to limit the requirement for secure fixtures; and that environmental symbolism is given consideration more broadly, for example to support communication needs.

Any work undertaken to develop secure care experienced young people's emerging sense of self must support the challenge of any internalisation of imposed stigma. This may be in relation to autism, other minority aspects of young people's identities, or the intersections of these.

Environmental conditions that reduce autism-related stigma, and therefore the perceived need for masking, may be a useful consideration for secure settings, particularly the significance of attending to sensory experiences in a secure environment. Giving ever increasing cognisance to sensory experiences should include consideration of acoustics or soundproofing, spatial sequencing, varying lighting, escape spaces, compartmentalisation, transition spaces, sensory zoning, and careful use of colour and pattern.

Secure care centres may benefit from considering ways in which access to all young people's sensory language can be enhanced. Through consultation with young people this may include, for example, consideration of food, music, or environmental smells.

Rules

Future practice must be attuned to autistic children's paradoxical experiences of secure care. This means that any associated uncertainty, and resulting anxiety, should be reduced to a minimum. Autistic young people should be given additional support in making sense of ambiguity. To do so would offer a parallel process to that of dichotomous thinking and would support increased cognitive consonance.

Secure units should contemplate how important information, such as daily routines and rules, is communicated to young people. This may include consideration of what information is able to be shared with young people prior to admission and the range of accessible communication styles



utilised to share this information, for example photos or videos of adults who will be caring for them, the key worker if that's been established, their room, other rooms, the building(s) and grounds.

With the increasing prevalence of autistic children in secure care settings, greater cognisance may need to be given to the ways in which autistic young people experience the rules in secure settings. This could be done through consultation with the autism community. It is recommended that the implications of autism, for each individual young person, be attended to and reflected in care planning.

Whilst recognising the significant importance of risk management in a secure environment, consideration could be given to further individualising risk management strategies. Alongside this, risk assessments or behaviour support plans could be used to detail the strategies that young people find soothing when distressed, and to identify steps to mitigate any associated risks.

Conclusion

The key themes of this research provided stark examples of the ways in which participants experienced secure care as both bad and good, and in turn informed how they made sense of their experience and how that sense-making impacted on their identity construction. Paradoxically, the strength of young people's contradictory experiences was both surprising, as tensionality of experience had not arisen though the literature review or engagement with key theories, and unsurprising given the paradox of care and control, and the paradox of dominant autism narratives. When autism and secure care intersect it appears that this paradox is strengthened, and it would seem that this finding is unique to the autistic population of young people experiencing secure care.

Too often, autistic young people's voices have been excluded and silenced. Just because they are not always verbally articulate does not mean that they don't have something important to tell us. As Bryan (Sky News, 2025) said recently 'non-speaking is not the same as non-thinking'. This research project aimed to adjust the volume to enable secure care experienced autistic young people's voices to be heard. I implore you to listen to them.



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About the author

Charlotte Wilson has over 20 years' experience working in a variety of residential child care settings. She has recently been undertaking her doctoral research at the University of Strathclyde, looking at the impact of secure care experience on the identity constructions of autistic young people.

