

Blogs: Vehicles Towards the Integration of People with Autism in society

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acknowledgments	4
Chapter 1	5
Introduction.....	5
Literature review	10
Chapter 2	41
Theoretical Framework.....	41
Methodology.....	43
Chapter 3	48
Blogs as a platform for the integration of people with autism in society	48
Blogs that were written by individuals with autism	63
Chapter 4	134
Comparison between blogs that were written by individuals with autism to blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism.....	134
Chapter 5	138
Conclusion.....	138
References	143

Abstract

This thesis uses the social model of disability as a theoretical framework in order to examine the way that blogs contribute to the integration of people with autism in society. An online ethnography approach is used in order to examine posts from eight blogs that were written by individuals with autism or by parents of individuals with autism in 2015. The thesis identifies issues that concern individuals with autism. In addition, the thesis explores how the writers of the blogs address these issues and therefore, provides people with autism and their parents with the opportunity to share their own point of view. The thesis compares the findings of blogs that are written by individuals with autism to blogs that are written by parents of individuals with autism in order to find similarities and differences in the way that both groups perceive issues that are important for people with autism.

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Chapter 1

Background

As part of my career experience at an elementary school in Israel, I was an educational assistant for a child who was on the autistic spectrum. During my work, I came to know a child with many wonderful qualities, who had difficulties creating social relationships. One of the reasons for these difficulties was the struggle of the child to express himself in socially appropriate ways. This communication barrier caused him to feel frustrated and misunderstood. It led to social isolation from his peers. After my experience with this child I was motivated to conduct a research project that would help individuals with autism feel more included and better understood by society.

Introduction

“The internet has been to the autistic community what sign language has been to the deaf community. A channel of communication that allows them to speak for themselves” (Newton, Kramer & McIntosh, 2009, p.463)

Blogs are places in which people with autism can express themselves (Newton, Kramer & McIntosh, 2009). Therefore, via blogs we can learn about some of the struggles of people with autism and the way to improve their situation in society. Guided by these research questions this study will identify some of the difficulties of people with autism, as they are described on personal blogs that were written by people with autism and on blogs that were written by people as part of the autistic virtual community. Furthermore, I will identify key suggestions to improve the lives of people with autism.

This study focuses on the issues that people with autism experience, in order to increase the level of awareness in society to issues.

In addition, blogs of parents of persons with autism are also included in this research project. I decided to include these blogs because I aim to also learn about the experiences of individuals with autism who are low functioning and cannot use the computer. The aim is to learn about the experiences of these individuals via people who are familiar with their experiences.

The study addresses the following research questions:

Main question: How do blogs facilitate the integration of people with autism in society?

Sub question: How do blogs work as a place that helps to identify issues that concern people with autism?

Sub question: How do blogs work to address the issues that people with autism experience in society?

Definitions:

Autism- “Autism has been defined and diagnosed in terms of communication impairment, co-occurring with qualitative abnormalities of social interaction and restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests” (Arciuli& Brock, 2014 , p. 1).

Blogs: “Blogs (short for "web logs") are web sites that reflect an author's informal thoughts on topics of personal interest. Most blogs include a central column of entries, or "posts," with the most recent post at the top and side column links to other posts.

Blogs may have one author or many, and most invite comments from readers” (Jones, 2012 p, 16).

Online autism communities: the term “online autism communities is defined as online communities that involve users affected by or interested in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), related to or providing supports for people with ASD, and blogs generated by such users are referred to as autism blogs” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.312).

Culture: “Culture may be understood as a consortium of communication (or a bundle of messages) that a given people have in common: their shared experiences shared perceptions and values, shared consciousness” (MacDonald, 1991, p.10).

Autism is a prevalent disability around the world (Obeid, Daou, DeNigris, Shane-Simpson, Brooks, 2015). In England, approximately one percent of the population has autism (Orsmond, Shattuck, Cooper, Sterzing, & Anderson, 2013). In a survey that was conducted in 2012 by Statistics Canada, autism was mentioned as one of three most prevalent disabilities (Marshall, Bizier, Fawcett & Gilbert, 2015). However, despite the high number of people with autism in society, “Research suggests that adults with an ASD often experience social isolation with approximately one-half to two-thirds of this population having no close friendships” (Orsmond, Shattuck, Cooper, Sterzing, & Anderson, 2013, 2710).

One of the reasons for the high degree of social isolation for people with autism might be misconceptions about autism in the general population. The misperception of autism is usually caused by lack of understanding of the disability. (Huws & Jones, 2010). In a study conducted among parents of children with autism, a large number of

parents claim that “lay people view children with autism as unintelligent, undisciplined and rude. Moreover, some parents felt that they are stigmatized by their child’s autism because of the lack of knowledge lay people have about autism“(Huws & Jones, 2010, p.331).

The media, which purports to be a source of reliable information for the wider population, often presents autism in a misleading way: “Individuals with autism are rarely the focal point of empowering content, instead appearing in movies and fictional television programs as social outcasts whose behaviors are rejected by society. Journalists have equated mental disabilities such as autism with violence, danger, instability, and hopelessness” (Holton, Farrell& Fudge, 2014, p.192).

This study aims to increase the level of understanding among the general population concerning individuals on the autistic spectrum, by providing a glimpse into the world of individuals with autism, a world, which is often hidden due to communication barriers (Arciuli & Brock, 2014). Interaction with the social environment is the main difficulty of persons with autism (Arciuli & Brock, 2014). “Even high-functioning individuals with age-appropriate language skills struggle in conversational settings and may have difficulty with turn-taking and knowing how much information to provide” (Arciuli & Brock, 2014, p.1).

The internet has the ability to allow more convenient communication for people with autism (Newton, Kramer & McIntosh, 2009). Biever, (2007) describes the advantages of the web for autistic people. The author states that “In the past few years, people with all forms of ASD -- from Asperger's to the more severe forms, known as "low-functioning" or "classic" autism -- have taken to the web, joining virtual worlds, writing blogs and

posting videos on websites such as YouTube.”(Biever, 2007, p.26).The article suggests that the characteristics of the web allow easier communication for people with autism than communication in the real world. Firstly, the anonymity of the internet offers people with autism the opportunity to avoid any disclosure of their disability. Secondly, in comparison to “real life” (Biever, 2007, p.26) communication, the web allows persons with autistic time to think about their response to the other person. In addition, the web allows more “control over the interaction” (Biever, 2007, p.26).

Many individuals with autism specifically choose blogs as an alternative way to communicate with the environment. Blogs allow people with autism to communicate without the social skills that are required during a real life interaction: “As a means of communication and social interaction blogs separate the author from the reader in both space (physical distance between computers) and time (delay between posting an entry and potential responses) making blogging a distal communication modality” (Newton, Kramer & McIntosh, 2009, p.463). Hence, many individuals with autism feel more comfortable using blogs as a tool for interaction.

This study uses blogs as a methodological tool in order to educate society about the life of individuals with autism and the issues that concern them. The study seeks to promote a positive attitude toward this disability. Previous studies have shown that a better understanding of autism might help to reduce the stigma around this disability (Obeid, Daou, DeNigris, Shane-Simpson, Brooks, & Gillespie-Lynch, 2015). For instance, Obeid, et al. (2015) compared the stigma surrounding autism in Lebanon, with limited means to educate the population about autism, and the USA, which has greater resources to educate society about the disability. The study found that in the USA,

where there is better understanding about autism the stigma is less than in Lebanon. In addition, the study showed that appropriate training about autism has the ability to reduce stigma.

Literature review

This literature review discusses significant academic sources in the area of disability and autism, such as disability culture and the integration of people with autism in society. The literature shows the advantages of the virtual space and blogs for people with disabilities and particularly people with autism. There is significant data concerning the positive impact of the web on people with disabilities. The literature clearly indicates a significant positive influence of the internet specifically on individuals with autism. However, there are very few articles that specifically address individuals with autism and the usage of blogs.

Disability culture

Gilson & Depoy (2000), in their article examine the concept of disability as a culture. The authors claim that the base of disability culture is the mutual identity of the group as people with disabilities. This identity unites the individuals as a cultural group. "Cultural views of disability suggest that all individuals who define themselves as disabled belong to a unique group which shares experiences, tacit rules, language, and discourse. In this view, the notion of disability is one of group belongingness and distinction from other groups who do not share the disability identity" (Gilson & Depoy, 2010, p.209).

The authors examine the benefits and disadvantages of disability culture. One of the important advantages of disability culture that were mentioned is the creation of disability community. It provides individuals with disabilities with the opportunity to communicate with others: "Thus, community provides the forum for interaction, whereas culture provides the tacit rules and values governing that interaction, as well as an ongoing narrative of human experience within diverse groups" (Gilson & Depoy, 2010, p.213). The authors also examine the disadvantages of the creation of disability culture. They claim that the belonging to a mutual culture may cause conflict between the individuals. They state, "Who belongs to the culture is a constant source of tension and may position people with diverse conditions against one another as a political advantage is sought (Gilson & Depoy, 2010, p.214).

Reeve (2002) makes links between "disability culture" (Reeve, 2002, p.503) and the creation of "disability identity" (Reeve, 2002, p.503). The author claims that disability culture helps to unite people with disabilities and therefore, promotes the formation of disability identity. The creation of disability identity helps individuals with disabilities reject the oppressive attitude of society toward them. A way to adopt the disability identity is to "come out" as a disabled person, to claim the label in a positive manner through disability pride and to become part of a disability movement which offers a political and collective experience of disability. Coming out as a disabled person entails replacing the dominant medical model public narrative about disability with a social model narrative (Reeve, 2002, p.503). The author highlights an important point about disability identity. She challenges the idea of one unified identity for all disabled people.

She claims that the disability identity is affected by other factors such as the type of disability.

In addition, Devliegera, Alberechtb & Hertzc (2007) show how the environment can impact on the creation of culture among people with disabilities. The authors discuss the creation of “disability culture in a group of young African–American men with violently acquired spinal cord injuries” (p.1948). They address culture “as both the process and result of meaning making activities expressed through signs, symbols, language, rules and ceremonies” (Devliegera, Alberechtb & Hertzc, 2007, p.1949). The authors examine the factors that are vital for the creation of “disability culture” (Devliegera, Alberechtb & Hertzc, 2007, p.1948). Six African–American individuals participated in this study while hospitalized. The participants have a history of violence and gang activities. The study found that the supportive environment of the hospital allowed the creation of disability culture. It created conditions that enabled participants to let go of their violent identity and embrace a new identity (Devliegera, Alberechtb & Hertzc, 2007). In addition, the existence of disability culture is noticeable in the hospital: “Using wheelchairs for mobility, doing “wheelies” over a curb, wearing a catheter bag, going to physical therapy, recognizing disabled parking signs, using transportation with lifts, going outside to advise inmates in the Juvenile Court against gangs and demonstrating in old neighborhoods against violence are all examples of the shared signs, symbols, language, ceremonies and rules that mark a disability culture” (Devliegera, Alberechtb & Hertzc, 2007, p.1955).

Darrow (2013), discusses the importance of recognizing people with disabilities as a cultural group. The author refers to teachers and their responsibility to acknowledge

disability cultural identity of individuals with disabilities in their class. The article claims that individuals with disabilities are connected by mutual past experiences of discrimination by society and resistance (Darrow, 2013). They share their mutual experiences: by the creation of “music, literature, and other expressions” (Darrow, 2013, p.33). Moreover, people with disabilities who share mutual culture share the collective pride of being individuals with disabilities. The author makes several suggestions to teachers in order to help them to be “more culturally responsive” (Darrow, 2013, p.33). The author suggests that teachers should educate themselves about the history of “students with disabilities” (Darrow, 2013, p.34) in order to understand current experiences of students in their class. Another important point that the author makes is that teachers should maintain a positive “respectful terminology” (Darrow, 2013, p.33) when addressing individuals with disabilities.

Gold (2008), explores the way that disability culture comes into expression online. The author addresses “disability support communities” (Gold, 2008, p.27) on the web. He claims that these communities have an important role in increasing the social participation of people with disabilities. The article suggests that “online social structures have distinctive virtual culture” (Gold, 2008, 27). Often these communities share valuable medical knowledge through online discussion. The communities usually have a unique disability culture that supports the appreciation of valuable knowledge and avoids negative feedback (Gold, 2008). The author claims that disability culture comes into expression in online communities by the usage of “collective identity” (Gold, 2008, 28) when addressing other participants in the communities. For instance, “Within online

communities people with rheumatoid arthritis refer to each other as Rheumies, persons with Crohn's- colitis refer to each other as CD'ers" (Gold, 2008, 28).

The internet helps individuals with autism to create their own culture. It creates new opportunities for them to identify themselves as a cultural group, such as sharing similar experiences. "Autistic differences in perception and 'processing' tend to involve Other ways of being-in-the-world, separate senses of selves and space that give rise to distinctive cultural experience, and so also, cultural expression. "(Davidson, 2008, p. 793).

Parsloe (2015), discusses the ability of the internet to promote autism culture. The article aims to answer the question "How do those with high functioning autism and Asperger's syndrome communicatively construct an Aspie identity on the Internet?" (Parsloe, 2015, p.341). Aspie is an alternative name for people with high functioning autism (Parsloe, 2015). The author analyzed forums in the autistic community. He conducted interviews with individuals on the autistic spectrum who are active users in online forums for persons with autism. The study found that online communities for people create an autistic culture and therefore reinforce the autistic identity. Via the community persons with autism are introduced to other individuals with autism that share similar experiences (Parsloe, 2015). The sense of community leads to great self-esteem among the members of the community regarding their culture and disability. "Aspie online community members identify elements of an Aspie culture of which they can be proud" (Parsloe, 2015, p.351) and they perceive their symptoms in a more positive way. Many people with autism have an "obsessive interest in detail" (Parsloe, 2015, p.346). Although some professionals may see this tendency in a negative way. It

was described in the forum and by the participants as an “Aspie superpower” (Parsloe, 2015, p.346).

Integration of individuals with autism in society

Society emotionally oppresses persons with disabilities by “psycho-emotional disablism” (Liddiard, 2014, p.116). “psycho-emotional disablism is a relational form of disablism embodied through experiences of ‘hostility or pitying stares, dismissive rejection, infantilisation, patronizing attitudes, altruism, help and care on the part of non-disabled people’ which ‘frequently results in disabled people being made to feel worthless, useless, of lesser value, unattractive, a burden’ (Liddiard, 2014, p.116). Studies showed that people with autism often experience psychological difficulties such as depression and anxiety. A study that was conducted among children with autism indicated that among the 44 participants of the study, 84 percent experienced some level of anxiety. Furthermore, other studies showed that about 70 percent of adults with autism experience depression (Sterling, Renno, Storch, Ehrenreich-May, Lewin, Arnold, E., ... & Wood, 2015). As expected, some of the blogs discussed their experiences dealing with depression and anxiety.

Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals with autism are less satisfied with their life than individuals that are not on the autistic spectrum (Schmidt, Kirchner, Strunz, Brożus, Ritter, Roepke, & Dziobek, 2015). The situation of children with autism improved significantly in recent decades. However, the life outcome of individuals with autism often remains poor (Howlin, & Moss, 2012). “Even in studies conducted in the last decade, the mean percentage of people assessed as having a good–very good

outcome, or as living independently or semi-independently, remains below 20%” (Howlin, & Moss, 2012, p.270).

The literature identifies potential barriers to and the poor integration of autistic individuals in society:

One of the barriers that was identified in the literature is unemployment of individuals with autism. The rate of unemployment among people with autism is significantly high. A research project that was conducted in Canada, in 2008, reveals that just 56 percent of persons with autism, participated in the workforce at some point in their lives. Moreover, in United Kingdom, the employment rate of people with autism is even worse. A study that was conducted in United Kingdom, in 2004, indicated that only 34 percent of individuals with autism had a job (Chiang, H. M., Cheung, Y. K., Li, H., & Tsai, L. Y. 2013).

Employment is significant for the well-being of people (Hammer, 1993) “Recent research has documented the relationship between long- term unemployment and mental health problems such as depression and low self-esteem among unemployed young people” (Hammer, 1993, p.407). However, although the importance of employment for the well- being of individuals, a research project that was conducted among families of children on the autistic spectrum found that 51 percent of families felt that their children would not be employed in the future and...only one family felt their child would hold a regular job” (Autism grows up: opportunities for adults with autism” (Graetz, 2010, p.34).

The literature around autism suggests that interaction difficulties may have a negative impact on abilities to maintain and gain employment (Vogeley, Kirchner, Gawronski, van Elst, & Dziobek, 2013). People with autism have difficulties to take part in conversations with others. Especially conversations which require fast reactions. “This is relevant to all the different formats of informal social encounters such as small talk or the generation of “first impressions,” which rely substantially on nonverbal communicative signals such as gaze, facial expression, and gesture. This also affects professional life, often leading to difficulties in obtaining and maintaining employment” (Vogeley, Kirchner, Gawronski, van Elst, & Dziobek, 2013, p.197).

However, research suggests that the “characteristics of the individual” (Chiang, Cheung, Li & Tsai 2013, p. 1833) is just one factor to predict the integration of persons with autism in the workforce. Family support and “Job characteristics and employer support” (Chiang, Cheung, Li & Tsai 2013, p. 1833) have also an influence on the employment experience of individuals with autism.

Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros & Heinitz (2016), identify barriers individuals on the autistic spectrum experience in employment and suggest ways to overcome them. The participants were individuals with autism who were in the workforce. The researchers used questionnaires to identify barriers that these individuals experience on the job. The researchers identify three main barriers “social, formality, and job demand problems” (Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, & Heinitz, 2016, p.6). For example, before entering the workforce most of the individuals were concerned that they would have communication difficulties with other individuals in their workplace. In addition, the authors identified solutions that focused on self-adapting and solutions that based on outside assistance.

For example, people with autism who work in a position that is designed for a person with autism try to deal with problems at the work place by themselves before asking for assistance outside the workplace (Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, & Heinitz, 2016).

Lilley (2013), explores the difficulties that parents of children with autism who wanted to register their children to schools in Australia face. The researcher examined the experiences of 22 mothers who have children on the autistic spectrum. The article found that mothers of autistic children often faced stigma around autism and were rejected in an informal way by representatives of schools, although there is a legal entitlement for individuals with autism to attend public school in their area. As a result, some participants had to register their autistic child in a school which is far from their homes. Cathy, one of the participants who wanted to register her son at a school in her community, was encouraged by the representative of the school to register her son in another school, by implying that the school could not handle children with autism. “The spokesperson clearly assumed Cathy was considering enrolling a child diagnosed with autism and went on to tell a number of stories about how the school coped badly with ‘these’ students” (Lilley,2013, p.521).

Staniland, & Byrne (2013) identify the attitude of peers as a barrier for inclusion of children with autism in schools. The researchers examined the influence of education on the attitude of pupils towards individuals with disabilities. They provided children in a regular school setting with information and education about autism. The study found that the children did not change their “behavioral intentions” (Staniland, & Byrne, 2013 p.2823) toward their peers with autism, after the end of the program. In other words, “contrary to prediction, there were no associated improvements to their behavioral

intentions to engage with their high functioning peers” (Staniland & Byrne, 2013 p. 2823). However, the children had more “knowledge” (Staniland, & Byrne, 2013 p. 2829) and “positive attitudes” (Staniland, & Byrne, 2013, p.2829) toward autism.

Elder, Brasher & Alexander (2016) identify the” barriers to early diagnosis and treatment of underserved individuals with autistic spectrum disorder and their families” (Elder, Brasher & Alexander, 2016, p.412). The researchers use qualitative methods such as conducting focus groups with individuals who are knowledgeable about the subject, such as people with autism and their family members. The main barriers to “early diagnosis” (Elder, Brasher & Alexander, 2016, p.414) that were identified are the “need for better educated providers and more effective and timely means of connecting families of individuals with ASD to available resources” (Elder, Brasher & Alexander, 2016, p.414). The participant suggested overcoming this obstacle by providing better education to professionals in the area of autism. One of the main barriers to “early treatment” (Elder, Brasher & Alexander, 2016, p.417) is the high cost of treatment. In addition, another important barrier that was identified is the relatively low number of services that are offered for treatment of individuals with autism. The participants of the study suggested overcoming this difficulty by increasing funding to organizations.

Giarelli, Ruttenberg & Segal (2013) identify barriers that individuals with autism experience in their transition from childhood to adulthood. The researchers “defined transitioning as the time when the adolescent identifies personal goals for life after secondary education with respect to college education, vocational training, employment, and/ or independent living” (Giarelli, Ruttenberg & Segal, 2013, p.563). In order to

explore the barriers, they conducted interviews with young adults on the autistic spectrum. Some of the participants were concerned that difficulties that are related to autism such as communication barriers will prevent them from achieving their goals. However, the participants also point to external barriers that can prevent their successful integration in society as adults: “These extrinsic barriers were institutional barriers that they saw in a potential work or school/living environment. The three institutional barriers most often reported were: (1) inflexibility of the environment (n = 11, 78%); (2) inadequate orientation for the experience (n = 7, 50%); and (3) coworker negativity (n = 6, 42%) (Giarelli, Ruttenberg & Segal, 2013, p.568).

Transition from childhood to adulthood of individuals with autism

Examine shifts in the behavior of individual with autism before graduating school and afterwards. Every few years the researchers collected data about the children to evaluate their situation. While being in high school most of the children lived home. However, after graduation, more than half of the participants moved to different residential settings, such as residence in the community or institute. There was only a small number of participants who lived on their own. The results of the study showed that the symptoms of individuals with autism were improved during high school. However, this improvement slowed down after graduation. The researchers provided possible reasons for these changes: “we find changes in disability-related services the most compelling prospect. In addition to the disruptive effects of changing from school to adult day activities, it is possible that the slowing of improvement in the autism behavioral phenotype following high school exit is reflective of the less stimulating adult

occupational and day activities than those experienced in school” (Taylor & Seltzer, 2010, p.1442).

Wehman, Schall, McDonough, Olinelli, Riehle, Ham and Thiss (2013), discuss project SEARCH in the USA. The study examines two case studies of students who participated in the project. “Project SEARCH is a business-led transition model where schools create collaborative partnerships with local large businesses such as hospitals, bank centers, or government centers. Such businesses afford students in transition to adult life the opportunity to work in internships across their senior year of high school” (Wehman, Schall, McDonough, Olinelli, Riehle, Ham and Thiss, 2013, p.145) This program’s goal is to help individuals with autism in the transition process in order to increase the chances for after high school employment a for students with autism. High schools often have difficulty to adjust the transition process to the needs of students with autism. ”Most of these students present uniquely challenging social and communication deficits despite also showing remarkable skills in different areas. The challenge for teachers and parents is to match the strengths of young people with ASD to work and community environments where they can succeed” (Wehman, Schall, McDonough, Olinelli, Riehle, Ham and Thiss, 2013, p.144). A research that was conducted in the USA explored the outcomes of the transition of individuals with autism to adulthood. The data indicates on poor outcomes. “Data analysis on youth who exited high school revealed that 32% attended postsecondary education schools, 6% had competitive jobs, and 21% had no employment or education experiences at all” (Wehman, Schall, McDonough, Olinelli, Riehle, Ham and Thiss, 2013, p.145). The case studies showed that the project helped individuals with autism to gain employment after

high school, by providing them with a meaningful work experience during high school and helping them to learn new tasks with the assistance of a job coach. The work experience were adjusted to the strong abilities of each participant.

The virtual space and people with disabilities

Jaeger (2011) explores the importance of the internet for people with disabilities. The book indicates that the internet allows people with disabilities to engage in numerous activities such as employment, education and leisure activities. The author claims that individuals with disabilities benefit from advanced technologies that the internet offers. For example, people with certain intellectual disabilities benefit from technological advancements in communication via text (Jaeger, 2011). The author presents significant findings from 2000 regarding the way that persons with disabilities perceive the influence of the internet on their lives. These show that “In 2000, people with disabilities who were able to access and use the internet were already reporting notably larger benefits from the internet in some areas than the general population” (Jaeger, 2011, p.5). Moreover, people with disabilities acknowledged that the internet helped them receive more global information, increased their standard of living by providing them access to different services and introduced them to others (Jaeger, 2011).

Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, (2011) emphasize the positive impact that the virtual space has on the lives of people with disabilities. The authors discuss the impact of “virtual worlds” (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011, p.80) on people with chronic disabilities. The study argues that such worlds have a positive influence on people with chronic disabilities. The article points to a few of the advantages of these

worlds. Firstly, the virtual worlds (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011, p.80) offer people with chronic disabilities the opportunity to engage in diverse activities from their own place of residence. This is an advantage for people with disabilities because “Individuals with lifelong disability may experience physical, financial, and transport difficulties with community access in real life” (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011, p.81). Moreover, these worlds allow people with disabilities to interact with other people anonymously. This communication might be more comfortable for some individuals with chronic disabilities because it allows them to distance themselves from the stigma surrounding their disabilities. (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011). The virtual worlds (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011, p.80) allow individuals with chronic disabilities to create their own virtual character. This possibility provides users with the ability to “make a choice on how to be perceived within the virtual world” (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011, p.81).

Shpigelman, & Gill, (2014) discuss the benefits of the virtual space for people with disabilities. The authors focus on the usage of the social network, Facebook, among people with intellectual disabilities. The study suggests that “Social media can serve as another environment for people with intellectual disabilities to keep up close relationships, give and receive social support, experience enjoyment, and feel like non-disabled people” (Shpigelman, & Gill, 2014, p.1602). Therefore, the study argues that people with intellectual disabilities benefit from the usage of Facebook because it helps them decrease their social isolation. Individuals with intellectual disability usually have a smaller circle of friends and often it mainly consists of other persons with intellectual disabilities. Facebook provides individuals with intellectual disabilities with the

opportunity to interact with people and to express themselves. Hence, people with intellectual disabilities enjoy the usage of the social network and use it on a weekly basis (Shpigelman, & Gill, 2014).

Jones (2012) emphasizes the positive qualities of the web. This study demonstrates how blogs are important for people with learning disabilities. The author discusses the way that people with learning disabilities can use blogs to improve their writing in a classroom setting. One of the most important points is that in contrast to mandatory classroom writing assignments, blogs are a more social assignment experience. "Classroom blogs offer several benefits for writing instruction, most notably the creation of an authentic audience for writing. Writing is a social practice that takes place in the context of ideas and relationships" (Jones, 2012, p.16). He suggests that blogs allow people with learning disabilities to present their own message. Another advantage of blogs that is that blogs allow people to acknowledge the influence of their writing by receiving feedback from readers. (Jones, 2012) Furthermore, the author claims that "For students with LD who may struggle with generalization, blog writing offers an experiential environment that does not have to be translated to the real world, it is real" (Jones, 2012, p.19).

The virtual space and people with autism

The most significant difficulty for individuals with autism is personal communication with others (Thunberg, Ahlsen, Dahlgren, 2011). However, although this difficulty they have an interest connecting to others. Studies showed that people with autism have the desire to be part of a romantic relationship. However, although, some desire romantic

relationships they have difficulties archiving those relationships (Roth& Gillis, 2015).

“Survey of 61 men and 68 women with ASD from ages 21–73 years found that 41 % of the sample had never been in a romantic relationship of 3 months or longer, 59 % were not currently in a romantic relationship (but had been in a relationship in the past), and 79 % did not engage in a sexual activity in the previous month” (Roth& Gillis, 2015, p.134). Three out of four bloggers are married.

Moreover, social relationships are valuable for people on the autistic spectrum; they can lead to achievements in different areas of life. (Carter, Common, Sreckovic, Huber, Bottema-Beutel, Gustafson, J. R., ... & Hume, K, 2013). In addition, there is evidence that social relationships have a significant influence on human health. For example, lack of social relationships can have a devastating impact on the human body (Uchino, Cawthon, Smith, Light, McKenzie, Carlisle,... & Bowen, 2012). For example, “Low social support and high social negativity are related to greater cardiovascular reactivity during acute stress and elevated ambulatory blood pressure (ABP) during daily life” (Uchino, Cawthon, Smith, Light, McKenzie, Carlisle,... & Bowen, 2012, p.789).

Although social relationships are important for well-being, people with autism often find it difficult to successfully participate in social situations. The difficulty of people with autism to be part of social situations can lead to the feeling of social rejection and frustration. (Chen, Bundy, Cordier, Chien, & Einfeld, 2016). “The majority of adolescents and adults with ASD, including those with mild forms of the diagnosis such as Asperger’s syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA), report high levels of social isolation and negative experiences in social situations compared to controls”(Chen, Bundy, Cordier, Chien & Einfeld, 2016, p. 1,403).

The literature clearly indicates that people with autism experience difficulties in creating social relationships in an environment where face to face interaction is required. Carter, Common, Sreckovic, Huber, Bottema-Beutel, Gustafson, Dykstra, & Hume, (2013) support this argument. The researchers described the possible difficulties which students with autism may experience in a social environment. The researchers argue that persons who are on the autistic spectrum have difficulties to “engaging in conversations, reading non-verbal cues, and building age-appropriate friendships .Many youth with ASD also struggle with the pragmatic aspects of social interaction, including topic management, reciprocity, intonation, and gaze management” (Carter, Common, Sreckovic, Huber, Bottema-Beutel, Gustafson, Dykstra, & Hume, 2013, p.94). In addition, lack of appropriate social behavior can increase the communication difficulties that people with autism experience when they interact with people within their age group. “For example, repetitive behaviors and limited flexibility can make it difficult to navigate the dynamic social world and lead to exclusion from certain peer groups.” (Carter, Common, Sreckovic, Huber, Bottema-Beutel, Gustafson, Dykstra, & Hume, 2013, p.94). Furthermore, the tendency of individuals with autism to focus on a few limited topics when interacting with others may decrease the willingness of people to communicate with them. In addition, individuals with autism are at risk of having mental disabilities. Society “stigmatizing” these disabilities which leads to social isolation of people with autism (Carter, Common, Sreckovic, Huber, Bottema-Beutel, Gustafson, Dykstra, & Hume, 2013, p.94).

Van Asselt-Goverts, Embregts, Hendriks, Wegman, & Teunisse (2015) show the gap in creating social relationships between people with autism and the general population.

The researchers compared the social circles of persons with autism, persons who have intellectual disabilities and the general population. The study found that the social circles of persons with autism are significantly smaller than the social circles of non-disabled individuals. "Participants with ASD had a smaller number of network members ($p = .046$), informal network members ($p = .022$) and family members ($p = .013$)" (Van Asselt-Goverts, Embregts, Hendriks, Wegman, & Teunisse, 2015, p.1195). Moreover, people with autism claimed that usually, they did not initiate the interaction with their social circle (Van Asselt-Goverts, Embregts, Hendriks, Wegman, & Teunisse, 2015).

In contrast to the difficulties of face to face communication, the literature clearly indicates that people with autism benefit from using the virtual space as an environment to assist them in creating social interaction. The main value of the internet for people with autism is that it allows interaction without the need to meet in person. Moreover, the internet allows its users to communicate without using body language and facial expressions. It allows them to communicate while having the appropriate time to consider their reaction. Therefore, the internet allows persons with autism to create social relationships that they might have difficulty to create in real life (Davidson, 2008).

The internet introduces persons with autism to other individuals who have the same disability. These meetings allow them to make new social connections and to provide each other with significant information about the disability. Furthermore, these encounters promote advocacy for people with autism in society. (Davidson, 2008).

Kuo, Orsmond, Coster, & Cohn (2014), discuss the way that individuals with autism use the virtual space. Ninety-one persons with autism participated in this study. The study found that almost all the participants use computers (98 percent) and that

individuals with autism spend more time using the computer than watching television. The study found that most participants use a computer to surf the web and that some individuals with autism use the websites to create social interaction. The researchers examined the type of website that individuals with autism visit, the results indicate that one type of website that some persons with autism visit are “sites for either maintaining or establishing relationships (e.g. friendships and intimate relationships)” (Kuo, Orsmond, Coster, & Cohn, 2014, p.918).

Kenway, (2009) discusses the virtual environment and autism. The author discusses the impact of the internet on people with autism. The article introduces the reader to some of the main advantages of the internet for people with autism, its ability to connect different persons with this disability. Other individuals with autism can provide valuable information about autism and decrease the number of misconceptions about the disability (Kenway, 2009). People with autism can have a “support system” (Kenway, 2009, p. 99) online. This support is important because some people with autism find it hard to receive support face to face. In addition, the internet helps people with autism to feel that they are understood by society. “Long live the Internet—people can see the real me, not just how I interact superficially with other people” (Kenway, 2009, p.99).

Parsons, Leonard, & Mitchell (2006) demonstrate the way that the “virtual environment” (Parsons, Leonard, & Mitchell, 2006, p. 186) can be used to enhance the social abilities of persons with autism. They used a virtual application which aims to educate people with autism regarding appropriate behaviors in social situations. Two participants with autism were selected to test the application. The participants faced

social situations such as finding a free seat on a bus or a coffee shop. The participants were guided by the program in order to reach the desired behavior in these situations. The researchers evaluated if the participants progressed from using this program. The study found that the participants appreciated using this program and gained in their social understanding (Parsons, Leonard, & Mitchell, 2006)

Cheng & Ye (2010) demonstrates the way that the virtual space has the ability to educate persons with autism regarding proper communication. The authors examined the way that computer application can educate students with autism about appropriate social behavior. The researchers used a computer application which simulates real life situations in the “classroom” (Cheng & Ye, 2010, p.1070) and in “outdoors” (Cheng & Ye, 2010, p.1070). The application used a “3D animated social situation with reading sound”, “speech function” (Cheng & Ye, 2010, p.1070), “text- communication” and a “3D expressive avatar” (Cheng & Ye, 2010, p.1070). Three pupils with autism used this application and were guided by it, in order to increase social understanding. “Social events utilizing emotion-based questions were presented on the computer screen, and the participant could listen to the question, or click the play button to see the animated scenario” (Cheng & Ye, 2010, p.1072). Social skills of the participants were tested before and during the use of the application. All the participants showed improvement in their social abilities.

Davidson (2008), explores “how interaction in virtual worlds enables recognition of complex other ways of understanding and expressing experiences that hold potential for real world outcomes” (Davidson, 2008, p.792). In order to understand the communication of people with autism online, the author examines different

autobiographies (Davidson, 2008, p.791) written by persons with autism. The author claims that the virtual space holds numerous advantages for people with autism. A person with autism can use cyberspace in order to build social relationships (Davidson, 2008). In contrast to real life communication, persons with autism can interact via computers in a way that is “clear, satisfyingly straightforward and accurate” (Davidson, 2008, p.796). Body language is not involved in interaction via computer. This way of interaction has the ability to reduce the anxiety that people with autism experience when they interact with other people (Davidson, 2008). Also, the “delay in a response” (Davidson, 2008, p.796) that the communication via virtual space makes it easier for autistic people to interact. Cyberspace allows people with autism to meet other people on the spectrum and exchange valuable knowledge about the disability and new treatments (Davidson, 2008). Moreover, the main advantage of the internet is that it is a “form of communicative media that enables people to organize” (Davidson, 2008, p. 798). Therefore, the internet helps people with autism create their own “culture” and to “advocate” (Davidson, 2008, p.799) for themselves.

Henderson, Davidson, Hemsworth, & Edwards (2014) discuss the positive impact of the virtual space on people with autism. The authors present a survey that was conducted online among persons with autism examining the way that they use the web. The study argues that online writing may lead to “important political possibilities” (Henderson, Davidson, Hemsworth, & Edwards, 2014, p.504) for individuals with autism. They claim that the internet allows the creation of social connections with other persons with autism and therefore it provides individuals with autism with the sense of belonging and “community” (Henderson, Davidson, Hemsworth, & Edwards, 2014,

p.512). This community allows people with autism to be united and to have a political advantage as a group. For instance, one of the participants in the survey mentioned “we share a condition, and we need to take care of each other. There is too much bigotry in research and the media, and most of us are too powerless, so we need this connection We’ll always need to network online” (Henderson, Davidson, Hemsworth, & Edwards, 2014, p.514). Another important point brought up in this article is that many people with autism use the internet in order to receive medical advice from other users. The “Self-diagnosis provides a means to resist or at least bypass professional ‘medicalization’ and ‘control’ of AS by clinical experts” (Henderson, Davidson, Hemsworth, & Edwards, 2014, p.515)

Autistic communities online

Parsloe (2015), discusses the research question “How do online spaces facilitate the communicative construction of an autistic identity?” (Parsloe, 2015, p.337). The author examines the way that online community produces more positive autistic identity. The author conducted interviews with ten members of the “Aspies Central” (Parsloe, 2015 p.336) community and examined posts that were published in the community. The article suggests that “Online communities provide a space where geographically isolated Aspies can unite in re-framing Asperger’s syndrome positively” (Parsloe, 2015, p.344). The article suggests that the autistic community provides autistic people with the opportunity to address their disability as normal. The author claims that one of the steps for embracing autism identity is seeing autism as normal. In addition, members of the Asperger’s community attempted to dismiss the negative approach toward their symptoms and to” reclaim the “symptoms” of their diagnosis as positive elements of

their identity (Parsloe, 2015, p.346). The community provided the members with the opportunity to present themselves as “their own advocates” (Parsloe, 2015, p.348) and therefore to present themselves as individuals who have an impact on their own life.

Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Brownlow & O’dell (2013), “explore ways in which online communities interested in autism represented autistic issues and identity” (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Brownlow & O’dell, 2013, p.371). The authors examined four online communities. They raise an important point about autism communities, claiming that online communities encourage the development of autistic identity and promote advocacy. The aim of the autistic communities is to provide a space which offers alternative interaction that will eliminate the need for real world interaction. The authors claim that some of the members of the autistic communities challenged the perception that individuals with autism should adjust themselves to the mainstream society. The authors discuss the way that autistic communities address issues that concern individuals with autism. They claim that autistic communities “prioritize autistic thinking and autistic issues and therefore enable the development of empowering autistic discourse through which questions and challenges can be posed to the wider neurotypical society” (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Brownlow & O’dell, 2013, p.375).

Roffeei, Abdullah& Basar (2015), examine the way that autistic communities on Facebook provide support for parents of individuals with autism and people who work with them. The research examined posts in two online groups which aim to provide support for their members and increase public knowledge about autism. The study found that in online communities the most common posts were about information about autism. Another common theme was receiving or providing advice about autism. The

research found that online communities on Facebook provided individuals with the opportunity to receive “emotional support” (Roffeei, Abdullah& Basar, 2015, p.380). “Emotional support messages are related to sharing and describing emotional and psychological encounters that normally represent seeking comfort” (Roffeei, Abdullah& Basar, 2015, p.380). They found nine themes that addressed emotional support. “The nine sub-themes include Relational Support (Relationship), Physical/Virtual Affection, Sympathy, Empathy/Understanding, Encouragement, Prayer, Consoling, Gratitude, and Congratulation. Relational support includes friendships and companionship within the communities” (Roffeei, Abdullah& Basar, 2015, p.380).

Sarrett (2016) explores the way that online community provides individuals with autism with the opportunity to diagnose themselves as autistic. The author explores the way that diagnosis is made and the reactions of other members of the online community to the diagnosis. The author is “interested in exploring how self-diagnosis is discussed by autistic people and how it challenges biocertification—a process by which social identities are acknowledged and confirmed through medical, governmental, or psychiatric practices and documentation” (Sarrett, 2016, p.24). Some of the reactions supported the self-diagnosis by online communities and some rejected it. Some of the supporters acknowledge that it may be difficult as an adult to receive an official diagnosis of autism. They claimed that people who diagnose themselves know their traits best and therefore, have the ability to recognize that they are autistic. In addition, the opponents to self-diagnosis claim that people who diagnose themselves should not speak on behalf of the autistic community, because they do not really understand what individuals with autism who have a medical diagnosis are going through (Sarrett, 2016).

Blogs and autism

Besides referring to the virtual environment as a whole, the literature also focuses on the way that persons with autism use blogs. However, as mentioned above the number of works which refer to this area is very limited. I found that few articles focused on the content in these blogs and the ideas that are presented by individuals with autism, In addition, I did not find any articles about autism and blogs addressing barriers that individuals with autism experience.

Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, (2015) present an important work in the area of autism and blogs. The authors examined subjects that were discussed on online blogs that were written as part of “autism communities” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.312) and on private blogs that were written by individuals with autism. The language used in these discussions was examined as well. The study aimed to answer two research questions. The first question is: “is the content—posts and comments—generated in ASD communities (Autism) different from other communities (Control)?” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.312). The researchers compared blogs in autism communities and other blogs which discuss diverse topics such as nutrition and animals. The study found that topics which related to autism were more prevalent in blogs that were part of the autism communities. The most common discussion in the autism communities dealt with social situations. “The main concerns people with autism face in their activities of daily living: social communication and interactions” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p. 316). People with autism frequently discuss their experiences in the educational environment. In addition, the study found that the writers of blogs in the autism communities used more “words with

negative emotions” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, 317). For example, “anxiety and anger words” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.317) were more prevalent in autism communities than other communities.

The second question of this study is: “is the content that the members of ASD communities make in their personal blogs (Personal) different from what they contribute to their ASD community blogs (Community)?” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p. 312). Following comparisons between private blogs of people with autism and blogs that were written as part of the autism community, the researchers found that the “autism community” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.312) focused on discussions about autism. “Autism-related topics were used more in community than in personal blogs, including autism diagnosis medications, schooling and social skills” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.319). In addition, the study found that in private blogs “informal and unprepared text” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p.319) and “swear words” (Nguyen, Duong, Venkatesh, & Phung, 2015, p. 319) were more common.

Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh (2014) examine the characteristics that exist in autism communities blogs .The researchers focused on the mood of the blogs, the language, and content that is common in these blogs. The researchers compared these factors in autism communities to other online communities. In addition, they performed statistical tests in order to determine the “predictors of autism posts” (Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh, 2014, p.484). The results of the study indicate that in contrast to other communities, autism communities frequently present negative mood. The “majority of moods preferred by autism communities are in low valence, including

confused, frustrated, depressed and angry” (Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh, 2014, p.480). In addition, the study found that social skills are one of the most common themes in autism communities. Another common theme is school. The researchers suggest that the high probability of the existence of this topic in autism communities Posts can indicate that persons with autism experience some difficulties in the school setting due to social difficulties. In addition, the study found that “social process”, family” and “humans” have a high probability to appear in posts that are part of the autism community (Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh, 2014). However, the researchers found that the “social process, friend (e.g., buddy, friend, neighbor), is a negative signal in autism posts” (Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh, 2014, p.485).

Newton, Kramer, & McIntosh (2009), examine whether persons with autism use different words in their blogs than nonautistic bloggers. The article argues that the internet reduces the communication barriers of autistic users. It is a place that allows “time for effortful socio- emotional processing strategies” (Newton, Kramer, & McIntosh, 2009, p. 463). Furthermore, “non- verbal behaviors are unnecessary” (Newton, Kramer, & McIntosh, 2009, 463) when using the internet. Therefore, the researchers assumed that there will not be a difference between the online interaction of autistic person and other bloggers. They compared between the autistic blogs and other blogs in five words categories “ melancholy”, “ Ranty”, “metaphysical”, “work“ and “social” (Newton, Kramer, & McIntosh, 2009, p.465). The researchers analyzed the usage of language in these five categories. The study “found no fundamental differences between the pattern of word usage in blogs of ASD and NT individuals” (Newton, Kramer, & McIntosh, 2009, 465). However, despite the resemblance in the five categories, the researchers found

“much greater variance for bloggers with ASD than for NT bloggers in word use on the social factor” (Newton, Kramer, & McIntosh, 2009, p.465). It is possible that this outcome is a result of the social isolation of people with autism.

Parents of people with autism

It is important to explore the relationship between parents and their children with autism. In this research, I will present some important studies which discuss the influence of having a child with autism on parents and the way that parents perceive their autistic children. Raising a child with autism might be emotionally difficult for parents of children on the autistic spectrum. It might cause them to experience negative emotions such as stress, anxiety or even depression (Tonge, Brereton, Kiomall, Mackinnon, King & Rinehart, 2006). Although these negative emotions can appear in parents of children with other mental disabilities, “Mothers of children with autism are more likely to suffer from depression than mothers of children with intellectual disability (ID) without autism and mothers with typically developing children”. (Tonge, Brereton, Kiomall, Mackinnon, King & Rinehart, 2006, p.561).

In addition, the relationship between the child and the parents have an influence on the well- being of the child. Rejection by the parent is one of the risk factors for children to experience mental health issues while they are adults. (Sreinhausen, Metzke, 2001).

Benderix, Nordström, & Sivberg (2006), explore the relationship of parents with their autistic children. The researchers conducted interviews with parents of children with autism and asked them “what is it like having a child with autism and a learning disability” (Benderix, Nordström, & Sivberg, 2006, p.632). The researchers found that

having a child with autism helped the parents to be more tolerant toward others individuals with disabilities. However, despite this positive impact of having an autistic child in the view of the parents, parents of autistic children also had a negative attitude about having a child with autism. For instance, some of the parents felt “Grief and sorrow about not having a healthy and typically developing child” (Benderix, Nordström, & Sivberg, 2006, p.633). In addition, some of them felt stress due to the behavioral difficulties of the child. Furthermore, for some of the parents “it was a relief for the family when the child moved to the group home” (Benderix, Nordström, & Sivberg, 2006, p.635).

Brobst, Clopton & Hendrick (2009), explore the impact of having a child with autism on the parents. The study compared parents of people with autism to parents of children without disabilities. The study found that having an autistic child may have a negative impact on the parents’ mood and relationship. “The parents of children with ASD reported more parental stress and greater trouble with child behavior problems; they also reported somewhat lower total social support and relationship satisfaction than did the parents in the comparison group” (Brobst, Clopton & Hendrick, 2009, p.46).

Sikora, Moran, Orlich, Hall, Kovacs, Delahaye, Clemons and Kuhlthau (2013), discuss the way that parenting a child with autism affects family functioning. The researchers examined the connection between behavioral difficulties of the child and different aspects of family functioning. Therefore, they included in the research one hundred and thirty-six families who are raising autistic children. The researchers divided the autistic children into two groups, based on their behavior. “Externalizing behaviors (such as aggression and hyperactivity) and more covert, internalizing behaviors (such

as anxiety and withdrawal)” (Sikora, Moran, Orlich, Hall, Kovacs, Delahaye, ... Kuhlthau, 2013, p.308). Children who demonstrated more externalizing behaviors had more negative impact on the function of their family. The aspects of family functioning that were negatively influenced were “Negative Feelings About Parenting, Social Relationships, Impact to Siblings, and Impact to Marriage” (Sikora, Moran, Orlich, Hall, Kovacs, Delahaye,... Kuhlthau, 2013, p.312). Moreover, the study found that internalizing behaviors did not have an influence on family function. The authors suggest that the possible reason for the great impact of externalizing behaviors on family functioning is the extensive care that these children demand in order to prevent risky behavior (Sikora, Moran, Orlich, Hall, Kovacs, Delahaye,... Kuhlthau, 2013).

In addition, Bougher-Muckian, Root, Coogle, & Floyd (2016), explore the way that parents of autistic children react to the emotions of their children. The researchers compared the reactions of parents of autistic children to the reactions of parents of non-disabled children. The researchers suggest that the way that parents react to the emotions of their children is important because “children learn about emotions and emotion regulations through the ways in which parents respond to their children’s emotions” (Bougher-Muckian, Root, Coogle, & Floyd, 2015, p.1584). In order to examine the topic, parents answered questioners with their expected reactions to different situations. The researcher “examined how parents’ responses to children’s expressions of fear and anger differed between the two groups” (Bougher-Muckian, Root, Coogle, & Floyd, 2015, p.1587). The study found that parents of children on the autistic spectrum showed more reactions of acceptance when their child expressed anger or fear than parents of nondisabled children.

Shu, Hsieh, Hsieh, & Li, (2001) explore the parenting experiences of mothers of children of children on the autistic spectrum and the way that they handle raising a child on the spectrum. The data was collected with qualitative methods= focus groups and interviews. The researchers found three major themes that the mothers address: “ 1) the perception about their disabled child 2) their special concern for caring for this child 3) reclaiming and discovering self through understanding the meaning of mothering” (Shu, Hsieh, Hsieh, & Li, 2001, p. 205). The results show that mothers recognize the difficulties of their autistic children such as having behaviors that are different from the behaviors that are accepted in society and emotional difficulty in handling the situation. However, the mothers also recognized positive traits of their autistic children such as the ability to remember numbers. In addition, the mothers show concern about different aspects of the life of their child such as concern about their child's difficulty to develop social connections with other children. For example, one of the mothers was concerned that she would not be able to know if someone would bully her son, due to his communication difficulties. In addition, the study found that the mothers have mixed feelings about their motherhood. “Sometimes they are the mother of a normal child. Sometimes they become the mother of a disabled child. The feelings of being a good or a bad mother are mixed up” (Shu, Hsieh, Hsieh, & Li, 2001, p.210).

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

Autism is often viewed in our society as a medical disorder which requires treatment. For instance, the education system aims to provide treatment for individuals with autism in order to integrate them into society. Furthermore, persons with autism are perceived by nondisabled individuals as “different” (Milton, 2012, p. 885) from the “normal” (Milton, 2012, p.885) society (Milton, 2012). This approach toward autism represents the medical model of disability which defines disability as a deficit. The medical model focuses on the symptoms of the disability as the cause for the poor outcomes of individuals with disabilities (Williams & Heslop, 2005). Furthermore, “It classes people by their medical diagnoses, labels them in such a way, and considers the ‘problem’ as an individual’s difficulty” (Williams & Heslop, 2005, p.232).

This research approaches autism from the social model perspective. The social model views persons with disabilities as being a disadvantaged group in society. This model recognizes that society creates disability, by its negative attitude toward disabled people and their exclusion from “full participation in society” (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013, p.442).

The social model of Disability Studies has evolved over the years in opposition to the medical model of disability. This approach focuses on the role of society in oppressing people with disabilities (Griffo, 2014). The model claims that society is “disabling persons who need to move, establish themselves, communicate and relate to others in a different way” (Griffo, 2014, p.150). At the beginning of the twenty one century, a new form of the social model was developed. This model is called “bio-

psycho-social model of disability” (Griffo, 2014, p.150). This model suggested that disability is a diverse concept (Griffo, 2014). “This model highlights the close relationship between a person's states of health and contextual factors, mainly environmental, which can either encourage or obstruct their social participation. Aspiring to unify the medical and social models, adding in individual psychological factors, this model is also based on a model of justice that points out society's responsibilities regarding the condition of disability”. Lastly, it was created as a version of the social model that connects between the “bio-psycho-social” and “human rights” (Griffo, 2014, p.150). This model “gave a static picture of a person's situation, has been revised, freeing it from a primarily medical understanding of someone's characteristics. A dynamic dimension to the situation of persons with disabilities is introduced through the concepts of impoverishment and empowerment, and this is linked to respect for human rights” (Griffo, 2014, p.150). This model created a shift in the way that disabilities have been viewed by society. The model connected between disabilities to the idea of human rights. Before to the creation of this model “It can be said that the idea of justice that underlay the various models of disability had for the most part been governed by the concepts of health and rehabilitation, welfare, compensation and protection, as had the related policies and services” (Griffo, 2014, p.150).

The social model was created by disability advocates and scholars (Goering, 2015). One of these scholars, Oliver, presented the social model in the 1980's (Oliver, 2013). “Oliver notes that “impairment is, in fact, nothing less than a description of the physical body. Disability, by contrast, is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have

physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities” (Goering , 2015, p.135).

The social model brings innovation in the way that people with disabilities are seen by society. “The first principle of social model research is that it is led by the views of disabled people themselves” (Williams & Heslop, 2005, p.234). “Historically, autistics have been spoken for by others—by parents and a slew of specialists” (Kenway, 2009, p.99). One of the reasons for this attitude is the perception of individuals with autism by nondisabled society (Kenway, 2009). The image of a person with autism “is of a child unable to speak for himself, requiring interpretation, intervention, advocacy” (Kenway, 2009, p.99). This thesis will challenge this historical point of view about autism. The study will provide the opportunity to learn about the experiences of autistic people, not only from the point of view of persons who are close to autistic individuals but also from the point of views of autistic persons themselves.

Methodology

This research uses “online ethnography” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 238). Online ethnography research requires a deep understanding and adoption of the principles of ethnography as a research method (Cordoba-Pachon, J. R., & Loureiro-Koechlin, C. 2015). Ethnography is being used in the qualitative research. The main purpose of this method is to provide a description of a culture (Byrne, 2001). “Culture has many definitions but usually consists of origins, values, roles, and material items associated with a particular group of people. Ethnographic research, therefore, attempts to fully describe a variety of aspects and norms of a cultural group to enhance understanding of

the people being studied” (Byrne, 2001, p.82). In the past, ethnography was used to examine “other’s cultures (that is, those outside a home culture and usually regarded as less well developed) “(Draper, 2015, p.36). Today, ethnography is more often used to explore “local and ‘near’ communities” (Draper, 2015, p.36).

The basis of ethnography as a research method is the belief that reality is subjective and depends on different factors. For example, one of the factors that may influence on a study is former perceptions of participants. (Draper, 2015). Hence, ethnography aims to explore cultural meanings but it “does not claim to be the ‘true’ picture but, in acknowledging that there is no universal knowledge, it provides the opportunity for a range of interpretations” (Draper, 2015, p.37).

With this research method, the researcher has a significant role in the research; they take part in the cultural environment in order to observe and study the participants of the cultural group, therefore, the researcher him or herself serves as a methodological tool (Byrne, 2001). In addition, this method acknowledges that “the position of the researcher is never neutral. Ethnography makes the influence of the researcher explicit, rather than trying to erase it” (Draper, 2015, p. 38)

Online ethnography is a legitimate way to conduct research in many disciplines in the academy. In online ethnography the researcher uses the virtual space as a research tool to explore social environments. “The fodder of online ethnographers is largely composed of locations occupied by disembodied persons, and observations are based on communication within networks (Berg & Lune, 2012, p.238). Furthermore, online ethnography aspires to gain knowledge about the participants of the study and their way

of life (Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Koechlin, 2015). The main advantage of conducting a research project online is that the “online social media offer numerous forms of social interactions and relations that only occur in cyber space” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p.239).

The role of the researcher in online ethnography is similar to his role in an ethnography research outside the virtual world. The researcher brings to the field his/her personal perspective and makes decisions about which story to tell (Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Koechlin, 2015). “As with traditional (offline) ethnography online ethnographers are to generate understandings of people’s perspectives from the inside while also viewing them and their behavior more distant and critical ways” (Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Koechlin, 2015, p.191).

This study analyzes posts from eight blogs that were written by individuals with autism or by parents of persons with autism in the year 2015. This number of blogs was chosen for this study because it is a manageable amount for a research project at the Master’s level. All the information in the blogs was provided on the web voluntarily and it is free for the use of the public. Furthermore, there is no need for a password to access this data.

The blogs that will be analyzed for this study are:

Life with Aspergers

(<http://life-with-aspergers.blogspot.ca/>).

Confessions of an Asperger’s mom

(<http://confessionsofanaspergersmom.blogspot.ca/>).

Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch

(<http://inneraspie.blogspot.ca/>).

Letters from Aspergia

(<http://www.lettersfromaspergia.com/>),

Looking for Blue Sky

(<http://www.lookingforbluesky.com/>).

Stimeyland: get your quirk on

(<http://www.stimeyland.com/2007/03/about-stimey/>).

Squidalicious

(<http://www.squidalicious.com/>).

We go with him: On the road with our son Charlie in autismland

(<http://autism.typepad.com/>).

The blogs for this study were selected because of their high quality and the large number of posts. I found the blogs via the web search engine, Google. Some of the blogs were selected as “ten best blogs from parents of autistic children” (Evans, 2013) by “the stir”

http://thestir.cafemom.com/toddlers_preschoolers/153607/10_best_blogs_from_parents) and the others were selected as “Top ten Asperser’s blogs of 2015” (Lyon, 2016), by the website “Psych central” (<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/03/06/top-10-aspergers-blogs-of-2015/>). The blogs that were written by parents of people with autism were also included in this study in order to provide a voice to persons with low functioning autism who have difficulties using the computer. However, it is important to remember that the blogs that were written by parents with autism may not completely reflect the reality of individuals with autism. These blogs tell the stories of individuals with autism as they were perceived by third parties. It is possible that their perception is biased or inaccurate. Therefore, I will look separately at these two databases and compare them.

I analyzed the data using “complete coding” (Braun, & Clarke, 2013, p.206). In complete coding “you aim to identify anything and everything of interest or relevance to answering your research question, within your entire dataset. (Braun, & Clarke, 2013, p.206). In “complete coding, you code all the data that is relevant to your research question, and it’s only later in the analytic process that you become more selective” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.206). I went through all the data and looked for themes and sub-themes that are related to issues that concern people with autism. Complete coding provided me with a rich picture of issues that are meaningful for persons with autism, and allowed me to explore how individuals with autism or their parents address to issues that concern people with autism.

In addition, I noticed there was a large number of data that discussed the same themes. A possible reason for this might be the tendency of individuals with autism to be repetitive in their conversations (Parr, Hunter & Ligon, 2013). Therefore, I had to choose the strong themes for the study. For example, in the theme psychological difficulties, I selected data that will describe in details how the individuals feel when they experience psychological difficulties such as depression.

Chapter 3

Blogs as a platform for the integration of people with autism in society

I focus on blogs and the way that blogs, as part of the virtual space, promote the integration of persons with autism in society. The data of this study indicates that blogs provide persons with autism with the opportunity to express themselves, discuss their experiences and to create a supportive community.

Sharing of feelings

This thesis indicates that blogs help parents of children with autism to improve their well-being and accept their children by sharing their feelings online.

For example, the writer of the blog *Confession of an Asperger's Mom* describes the way that her blog assists her to share emotions:

Having a public forum where you share some of your deepest feelings and emotions can be dangerous. I totally went left the other night on this blog. I was feeling completely overwhelmed and pissed off, so I purged all of my feelings in writing. I don't have a therapist (*dumb I know*). I have some

really good friends and family members who care, but no one knows everything that's going on in my life. Besides, I can't say everything in one conversation. I don't often get to have a telephone conversation without it being interrupted. It was therapeutic for me to get it all out. (AspergerMom, March, 20, 2015)

The writer uses her blog to deal with difficult experiences in her life. She finds the writing process to be a meaningful part of her life and she even uses her blog as a replacement for real life therapy. Moreover, she writes in her blog experiences that she does not even share with her closest friends and family.

Moreover, besides helping parents of children with autism to overcome difficult times, this thesis shows that blogs directly help individuals with autism to improve their mental health by expressing themselves and sharing their emotions. The writer of the blog *Life with Aspersers*, describes the positive impact of blogging on his well-being: "I've dealt with most of the symptoms of my own Asperger's via the internet and forums. I don't need a psychologist because for me, blogging, writing and discussing things with my peers (who are also on the autism spectrum) is therapy" (Bollard, D, July, 23, 2015).

The writer mentions that the internet and blogs provide a space in which he can discuss his disability. It is a place in which he can meet other persons with autism and share experiences. This process is so meaningful for him that it dismisses his need for therapy in the real world.

Autistic Culture

This study demonstrates how blogs promote the creation of autistic culture. In this section I will show how blogs reflect autism culture by providing individuals with autism a platform to share experiences, to discuss issues around autism and to present cultural items.

Sharing of experiences

The writer of the blog *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch* describes how she uses blogs to share her own experiences with others and to assist them:

I have made posts and talked about meltdowns on my blog before. It's not a new topic for me, by any means, however, it's not something that happens to me often. When it does happen it's such a heightened state of emotion that the details of how I feel, what triggered it, and how to recover fades with every hour after I am in a relatively calm state. As usual, I cannot speak for everyone on the spectrum, but I can tell you how I feel, and hope that in doing this that some of what I say may help someone else, especially parents of autistic kids who don't have the ability to explain things. I'm 36, and barely am able to have the insight to be able to advocate for what I need to recover from meltdowns (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 8, 2015).

It is my autistic honest way of thinking. I feel like I post about when things are good and bad. I post about what I did wrong, and what I did right, and what I am trying now. It's important to me that others get something from reading my blog. It's important to me that my experiences serve others in either lesson of what to

do, not to do, or as a place to feel not alone (The Introverted Matriarch, January, 9, 2015).

In these quotes, the writer describes how she shares her experiences with other individuals with autism and their parents. She acknowledges that other persons with autism probably face similar difficulties and wants to help them to deal with these difficulties by learning from her own experiences.

Learning from other's similar experiences

Bloggers not only use their blogs in order to share valuable experiences but also to learn from other people on the spectrum or their parents, who share similar experiences:

The writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergia* uses blogs in order to receive advice from other people with autism:

Anyway, enough about me. I'm interested to hear from other people on the spectrum: *are you a night owl too, or are you an early riser? Or do you have a non-standard sleep pattern? Do you have insomnia? (And do you have any tips to deal with it???)* I'm really interested to see what trends emerge... (Letters from Aspergia, September, 12, 2015).

Outside of my various open shelves and conspicuous reminders of things to do, my decorating style's pretty minimalist. This is great for cutting down sensory stimulation, but it also means the important stuff doesn't blend into the general background 'noise' of clutter and decorative doo-dads. Do you have a similar issue? I'm curious to know whether it's an Aspie thing or just something of my

own. And what techniques have you come up with to handle it? I'm always very keen to hear how other people deal with issues like these. For all the tricks I've come up with there are bound to be loads more that I haven't thought of, but you might have (Letters from Aspergia, July, 19, 2015).

The writer directly approaches other persons on the spectrum. She is curious to find out if other people with autism have similar experiences. Learning from the experiences of other persons with autism helps her to receive significant information about her disability.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Squidaliciouse* is also interested in hearing from other persons about similar experiences:

“How have your recent IEPs, transition meetings, post-school experiences, and future planning gone so far? Feel free to share your experiences in the comments.” (Des Roches Rosa, April, 27, 2015).

In this case, the writer is a mother of a child with autism who experiences the transition to adult life and she is interested in learning about the process from other parents.

The writer of *Looking for Blue Sky* claims that blogs introduced her to other persons who share similar experiences:

Blogging arrived at the perfect time for me: I'd become bored stupid with mainstream magazines that depict a life so different to mine, or interests I have yet to embrace. I found a whole world of special needs blogs that helped me

become a better parent, and find others like me. Who knew that was even possible? (Looking for Blue Sky, May, 1, 2015).

The writer of this quote claims that blogs helped her reach to other parents who have autistic children and therefore, to improve her parenting skills.

Creation of a discussion around Autism

Moreover, blogs encourage social interaction by providing the opportunity for other persons with autism or persons who are interested in autism to leave a comment about the blog. For instance, the writer of the blog *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch* wrote a post about friendships. In this post, she discusses her expectations from friends and her relationship with friends in her life. This post leads to a discussion about acceptable boundaries in friendships, between the writer and two other readers. For instance one of the readers wrote:

Very true...excellent thoughts on friendship. I count myself very blessed to have a best friend who meets those requirements...having her it's less of a need to meet with anyone else's needs...but I used to fill everyone around me with gifts, words and time...till I got so sick and slowly learned boundaries in cognitive therapy over a 5 year period- I can safely say I am fairly good at boundaries now but I still have my heart thud when I have to implement them...and I have become more of a happy hermit....u are right in empathy and funny thing is some of my favorite friends online and offline are Aspies who defy the stupid medical definition of our "capabilities" with empathy...we just express differently...as I see in your post you were always very empathetic (almost like me when I was so much I felt others

pain too much) I am glad you are valuing your path too. This was such an encouraging post thank u for sharing it (Kmarie Audrey, August, 10, 2015)

In this comment, the reader who has Asperger's reinforces the writer's point of view about friendship and shares her own experience around boundaries in friendship.

In response another reader wrote the following comment:

Thank you both for your wise and helpful words. I've been thinking soooooooooo much about boundaries. I am not naturally good at them nor do I understand them; while I try to keep my impact on others low and humble, I find others' opinions and emotional states impact me enormously. Working on that!!!!
Coming from an abusive and toxic family, my friends, in particular my best friend, have basically saved my life. AND they understand when I need to retreat etc.
Love (Full Spectrum Mama, August, 10, 2015)

In this comment, the reader expresses her positive opinion about the post and describes her experiences in creating healthy boundaries in a social relationship.

We can see that posts lead to deeper discussion about autism and relationships and lead to interaction between three individuals who have autism. The post encouraged them to share with each other experiences and to learn from each other.

We can find another example of the way that comments on blogs encourage social interaction between individuals with autism in the blog *Life with Aspergers*. The writer discusses in the post "When your child keeps making a big deal out of injury" the idea that there are children with autism who are very sensitive and autistic children who are

not sensitive at all. The comment for this post demonstrates the significant impact of the post on the reader:

It's kind of funny but this makes me think of when I was younger. As a baby I didn't cry much, there's actually a story about my aunt babysitting me and me falling, apparently, I just sat there. This completely explains how I could fall and scrape myself and not stop playing while everyone else freaked out over how bad my wounds were. Of course, then I'd cry over the idea of getting them cleaned because I couldn't stand to be touched. I haven't been officially diagnosed with anything (mainly because my psychiatrist made me anxious and I quit going) but I'm pretty sure if I had, posts like this would have helped my parents deal with me better when I was younger. Just, great posts.

(RavenSerendipity October, 13, 2015)

This post made the reader rethink about his experiences as a child. He is now more aware that the symptoms that he had as a child or even a baby indicated that he has autism and could have led to an earlier diagnosis.

Cultural items

Blogs allow persons with autism to share information about cultural items and therefore, encourage the promotion of autistic culture. Some of the writers share and discuss with the readers information about books that are related to autism. For example, the writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergia* addresses to the book "Welcome to Holland".

If you've spent any time in autism circles, you've probably come across Welcome to Holland, a piece by Emily Perle Kingsley that uses traveling to an unexpected destination as an analogy for having a child on the spectrum. You have bought a ticket to Italy, you've tooled up on Italian phrases and been pinning Italian landmarks for months... and you land in Holland instead. Please check your seat pocket for personal belongings before exiting the aircraft. I have always felt uncomfortable about the piece, for ways I could not quite express. But now I have figured it out. You didn't buy a ticket for Italy. You had a ticket for an unknown destination, and that's what you got.... People are people. When you make a new one, you get an improbable little bundle of genetics and evolution and star stuff who is utterly unique and almost entirely unpredictable. Every child is a mystery tour (Letter from Aspergia, July, 25, 2015).

In this quote the writer criticizes the approach of the book that parents of children with autism expect to have a certain kind of a child before birth and then ended up having a completely different child. The writer claims that parents should address every child as a unique creation and not to have any expectation.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Life with Aspergers* discusses the book "*Temple did it, and I can Too: Seven Simple Life Rules*" by Jennifer Gilpin (Bollard, December, 16, 2015):

Temple did it, and I can Too: Seven Simple Life Rules" by Jennifer Gilpin Yacio is a children's picture book based on Temple Grandin's seven life rules for growing up with autism.... The book more or less tells a "lite" version of Temple's story and at 25 pages, it's clearly aimed at young readers. There are two fonts used

throughout the book, on for the story and the other for Temple's words. When it comes to the rules, the book addresses the reader directly giving both the rule and advice for following them... All in all, this book serves as an excellent introduction to this extraordinary woman and is a great starting point for helping kids with autism to get their life goals and actions aligned (Bollard, December, 16, 2015).

In this quote, the writer recommends a book about autism. By recommending the book the writer shares cultural knowledge and helps parents of children with autism to receive better tools to educate their children.

Autism advocacy

Another way that blogs promote the status of individuals with autism in society is by using forums as a platform for autism advocacy. Some of the writers use blogs as a space to discuss issues that are important for persons with autism.

For example, the writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergia* writes a post in which he describes why it is important to acknowledge the disability of persons with autism:

You know who'd love to hear all about how ASD isn't a disability? People who are looking for a reason to not employ us, not include us, not educate us, to withhold the accommodations and consideration we need to be contributing members of society. Maybe even the service providers who are stretched to their limit and need to make a decision about which cases they turn away today (Letters from Aspergia, March, 22, 2015).

The writer suggests that society has an interest in not considering autism as a disability. The writer claims that by determining that autism is not a disability society could make an excuse for declining services for persons with autism. This approach reinforces the social model of disability. "This model "posits that disability is socially and politically constructed and is characterized by systemic barriers" (Sisti, 2015, p. 553). In Canada, the policy of disability depends on policies of different systems. "It is complicated by our federal system, enormous diversities within the policy field and competition among disability organizations for resources and funding" (Mckenzie, 2010, p. 507). So therefore, it is not surprising that the writer claims that society can use policy that only people with recognized disabilities receive certain services.

By discussing this issue via the blog the writer raises the awareness for this issue.

In addition, the writer discusses the important issue of diagnosing of autism in adulthood:

It can actively block you from other help you need. Somehow having an ASD diagnosis seems to make you ineligible for mental health treatment. Have I told you about the time I was turned away from a mental health unit while actively suicidal because, and I quote, "Aspergers isn't a mental health issue"? Because that's a thing that happened (Letters from Aspergia, January, 28, 2015).

The writer claims that having a diagnosis of autism can prevent individuals with autism from receiving appropriate mental health services because some mental health services do not recognize Asperger's as a mental health disability. In addition, by

declining to provide people with autism with mental health treatment, professionals assume that a person cannot have multiple disabilities.

Furthermore, the writer discusses an event in which he was suicidal. Richa, Fahed, Khoury, and Mishara (2014) present studies about autism and suicide. "The most relevant study was conducted in 2013. It compared 791 children with autism to non-austistic depressed children and typical children. The findings favored a 28-fold increase in suicide behavior in the autism sample compared to the typical children; 10.9% of children with autism had suicidal ideation and 7.2% had made attempts (Richa, Fahed, Khoury, and Mishara, 2014, p. 336)

The writer of the blog *Life with Aspergers* uses his blog in order to raise the awareness for the issue of bullying toward person with autism:

I want the world to see what we (the people on the autism spectrum) are up against. If we're constantly suppressing the bad comments then nothing gets discussed and it becomes hard to explain to others that, as a group, we're frequently bullied. I like to think that I am a compassionate person and I would love to remove the "hate speech" from my comments section but it's too important in highlighting our struggles to remove. I'm not sorry that it offends people because it deeply offends me too. It needs to offend us. If some of the negative comments get you riled up, then that's great because it means that you see them for what they are and you're seeking social justice (Bollard, December, 27, 2015).

The writer explains how he uses his blog in order to increase the awareness for bullying toward individuals with autism. He does it by exposing the negative comments about autism that people leave on his blog. The writer believes that these comments will help to show the world the negative attitude of society toward autism.

Blogs were used in order to raise the awareness of the false perception of society about individuals with autism. For instance, the writer of the blog *Squidalicious* discusses the approach of society toward autism as a curable disease:

Dustin and Leo are not that far apart in age. If I'd still been emotionally invested in the misinformation-based belief that autism is an injury and that Leo could be cured if only I found the right potion, how different would all our lives be right now? Would I feel like a failure as a parent? Would Leo's birthdays be thinly disguised pity parties? Would any parties actually be about and for him? Or would I still be part of those toxic communities that consider publicly complaining about and degrading autistic children "honesty" instead of degradation? If I got openly and deeply depressed about Leo not being "cured," would those community members commiserate with me, or dismiss my depression signs as "what autism mamas are like," instead of helping me find real, and realistic, resources to help us both? Would I internalize stories of parents who considered murder their only option when they failed to "fix" their kids, watch the misguided and horrifying public outpourings of support for those parents' "burdens," and be influenced by them? (Des Roches Rosa, November, 11, 2015).

The writer raises awareness to the way that society views persons with autism and to the negative consequences of this point of view. The writer refers to the assumption in society that autism is a defect that has to be fixed. This point of view belongs to the medical model of disability which addresses disability in terms of “rehabilitation and restitution” (Fisher & Goodley, 2007, p. 67).

The writer claims that if she would view her son’s autism as curable, she might be devastated if she could not achieve this goal. Moreover, the writer even mentions that this assumption may lead to devastating results.

In addition, the writer discusses the tendency of society to perceive persons with autism as violent:

Why does the media continue to perpetuate these myths about autistic people planning mass murders?... it's because of assumptions that autistic people lack empathy, because people mistakenly assume empathy is a monolithic state. But there is a distinct difference between cognitive empathy (recognizing physical and social emotional cues and acting on them, which can be difficult for autistic people) and emotional empathy (identifying with another person's recognized emotional state, which autistic people can do just fine). Autistic people have their own ways of reacting to emotional situations, people who aren't autistic can mischaracterize their autistic peers as unfeeling -- when in fact, it's usually the opposite that's true: autistic people are often overwhelmed by emotional empathy to the point of paralysis (Des Roches Rosa, October, 7, 2015).

The writer suggests that society with the encouragement of the media makes a false connection between violence and autism. The writer claims that this connection is made because society perceives individuals with autism as having a lack of emotional connection with others. This assumption about autism is wrong because in reality persons with autism are very emotionally affected by the environment.

In conclusion, this section demonstrated how the unique nature of blogs facilitates the integration of people with autism in society. The section showed how blogs, allow individuals with autism to create their identity as a cultural group, by promoting social interaction with others and the sharing of similar experiences from the world of autism. Furthermore, the posts indicated that blogs create a virtual space that allows the promotion of autism advocacy by discussing issues that are significant for people with autism.

This section will address the two sub-questions:

- **How do blogs work as a place that helps to identify issues that concern people with autism?**
- **How do blogs work to address the issues that people with autism experience in society?**

The main goal of this research project is to show how blogs serve as vehicles for the promotion of the integration of people with autism in society. By identifying issues that concern people with autism, blogs have the ability to raise the awareness to the interests, needs and concerns of individuals with autism and therefore to improve their social status. Furthermore, professionals can use the data in order to provide better care for people on the autistic spectrum.

This thesis predicts that some of the issues that concern people with autism are difficulties in different areas of life, such as employment and education as a result of barriers that society puts in front of autistic people.

This section will analyze and compare between blogs that were written by individuals with autism and blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism.

Blogs that were written by individuals with autism

This section analyzes and discusses four blogs that were written by individuals with autism (*Stimeyland: get your quirk on*, *Letters from Aspergia*, *Life with Aspergers* and *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch*). Some of the bloggers have children with autism as well. Hence, they discuss their personal experiences and their children's experiences from the point of view of a person with autism.

The following are the main issues that were mentioned in the blogs:

Relationships with others

Romantic relationships

The writer of the blog *Stimeyland: get your quirk on*, describes her mutual experiences with her husband, Alex:

Sure enough, Alex and I still have lingering regrets over that day. We regret that we only got kittens for the kids and not for ourselves. As lovely as three kittens are and as wonderful as the three cats they grew into make our lives, not a week goes by when Alex and I don't speculate on *how much better* our lives would be if we had five cats instead of three (Stimey, May, 31, 2015).

Fourteen years ago, Sam was two months old and Alex and I were looking to do Santa right. We spent significant brain power making sure that he had the best first visit with Santa possible. We checked with all the parents we knew to find out which Santa was The Best Santa and we ended up driving, like, an hour away to a mall where we had heard that The Best Santa worked (Stimey, December, 14, 2015).

By describing her experiences with her husband, the writer demonstrates unintentionally for the readers of the blog, that people with autism have ordinary experiences with their significant other like anybody else. By showing that persons with autism are equal in their romantic relationships to other members of society, she fights the tendency of society to undermine the “emotional well-being” (Liddiard, 2014, p.116), of persons with disabilities (Liddiard, 2014). The writer shows that people with autism, like any other individuals, needs emotional relationships in order to be happy.

In contrast to the blog *Stimeyland: get your quirk on*, other blog writers chose to expose the difficulties of people with Asperger’s in maintaining and keeping a romantic relationship. The blog *Life with Aspergers* discusses the point of view of many individuals with Asperger’s on romantic relationships:

One of the most common social misconceptions that people with Asperger's frequently develop is the idea that they are entitled to a girlfriend -- and particularly in places like the United States, there's a level of “beauty” that these girlfriends are expected to have. They don't seem to take personality into account

at all. Over the years, I've met many people with Asperger's syndrome who have become fixated on the idea that they are supposed to have been "given" a model girlfriend and that if they asked one out and knocked back, then the girl in question was denying them a "right" (Bollard, June 8, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes the social misunderstanding of people with Asperger's about the creation of romantic relationships. The writer claims that persons with Asperger attempt to achieve an unreachable beauty ideal and become frustrated when they cannot achieve this goal. The writer continues and even describes how this misunderstanding of social norms can lead to risky behaviors:

I've seen cases where these feelings of "stolen rights" trigger dangerous behaviors and violent outbursts. It's one thing to fight for your right to water but it's entirely different to become violent simply because you believe you have a right to a person (Bollard, June, 8, 2015).

In addition, besides difficulties in entering a romantic relationship, the blogger describes the difficulties of people with autism during the relationship itself:

Taking ownership of problems is something that is important in every relationship but it's especially important in a relationship where one or more partners have Autism Spectrum Disorders, including Asperger's syndrome. This is because partners with ASDs have low tolerances for specific things, such as certain smells, sounds, events or arrangements. At the same time, people with ASDs are

often the loudest or most disturbing people in a room due to their stimming behaviors or misunderstanding of social norms. (Bollard, February, 21, 2015).

When my wife and I were first married, some of my OCD quirks were quite noticeable. For example, all of my books, CDs etc were in strict alphabetical order. My wife liked playing CDs but she would never put them back in the right place. We got around the problem in two ways. First, I realized that I was the one who valued order, not my wife. I told her that if it wasn't obvious where the CD should go that she should just leave it out for me to put away. Thus, I owned the problem. Going a step further, though, I bought blank CD cases and fill them with letters on the spine (A-Z). This made it easier to find where things should go but more importantly, it occupied blank spaces. We got to the point where my wife would take a CD out and when she went to return it, there was only one empty slot where it could go (Life with Aspergers, February, 21, 2015).

In both these quotes the writer describes how the symptoms that people on the spectrum experience may influence their romantic relationships. However, in the second quote, the author shows that with mutual understanding there is a way to overcome certain difficulties.

Social relationships

Some of the writers discussed their disappointment with their lack of social connections and the negative way that other individuals perceive them:

I don't know a lot of about social etiquette. I don't have a buzzing social life, and I don't do girl's night out. I forget to do simple things like say hello or goodbye to

people. I am moderately faceblind, so I will walk right past people I've known for years in a public place leaving to look like a space case at best, and a snob at worst (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 9, 2015).

I'm really bad at people. I can't strike up conversations or keep them going outside of specific scripted situations. I can't tell who's friendly and safe and who's a potential rapist or murderer. I can't make relationships happen, and if the other party makes them happen I struggle to hold up my end until it either crashes and burns or withers miserably away. I take things literally and miss subtext, and am blind to the overarching narrative chain of which this present interaction is just one link. I can't keep track of who's who in social networks. I just can't do people (Letters from Aspergia, February, 1, 2015).

The bloggers express negative emotions of frustration and self-blame as the result of their poor social connections. The writers blame themselves for their social failures and do not acknowledge the partial role of society as the cause of these failures. We can see that the writers use the pronoun "I" in a negative context. "I do not know" (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 9, 2015), "I do not do" (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 9, 2015) "I cannot make" (Letters from Aspergia, February 1, 2015), "I cannot tell" (Letters from Aspergia, February 1, 2015), "I cannot keep" (Letters from Aspergia, February 1, 2015,) "I cannot do people" (Letters from Aspergia, February,1, 2015). This approach that points to the disability as the cause of the exclusion of persons with disabilities in society belongs to the medical model of disability. The medical model address the disability as an illness that prevents the integration of persons with disabilities in society (Scullion, 2009).

Moreover, one writer even expresses emotions of jealousy and frustration of other people's abilities to maintain a social relationship.

For all my social graces are awkward, I work really hard at them. I put a lot of effort into interpersonal stuff and try really hard to be competent in my interactions with others. So it is really frustrating when some jackass comes along, acts like a complete dick, treats everyone around them like shit, and still has people hanging off their every word (Letters from Aspergia, September 6, 2015).

In this quote, the writer expresses his dissatisfaction about the social success of people that he thinks do not deserve this success. She does not understand why those people have so many friends so easily while she struggles to expand her social circle.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch* expresses emotions of loneliness and rejection:

There has been this heavy feeling that pulls me into a mood that is hard to define. I think it is loneliness, but it is so much heavier than any generic lonely feelings that I have had before. When it strikes in full it renders me anxious, desperate and disconnected from others. I feel bitter from the years of rejection. I feel like I have no tools, and no way to fully remedy this situation. I don't know what it is, or where it comes from. It is just here, and I have to deal with it (The Introverted Matriarch, November, 28, 2015).

I will always be the person that everyone likes from a distance, but never up close. Up close is awkward. It means accepting my quirks. It means knowing that

I speak what I think, and understanding that I think in a very different way than others. It means.... well, I don't know... It's been over a decade since I had best friends to call, and idle chat over dinner. I don't know what it is about me that is off-putting, and it's likely that if I did I would be unable to fix it, anyway. How do you fix your personality? I mean, my character is good. I am honest, and a loyal friend, etc... It's my essence that bothers people (The Introverted Matriarch, November, 28, 2015).

She clearly expresses her frustration about her limited social circle. The writer expresses her desire to have close friendships, however, despite her willingness to make social connections, she admits that society refuses to accept her. In contrast to other blogs, in this quote the writer recognizes her good qualities such as good personality. However, as other writers, she also blames herself for the social exclusion.

In addition, the writer expresses her frustration about the lack of social support in her life that is a result of lack of social relationships:

I don't have the support network to back me up. If I'm home late after an Auslan class or rehearsal there won't be dinner in the oven thanks to a helpful partner or housemate, there's nobody to help out with the extra housework that comes with living alone, there's nobody to hold me if I just need a damn good cry. 99% of the time I am completely OK with this. I choose to live alone because not having anyone to split the chores with or come and see that hilarious cat video is a fair exchange for not having to deal with the inevitable interpersonal awkwardness and drama. But I need to remember when I'm comparing myself to other people,

that they've probably got a network I don't (Letters from Aspergia, February, 15 2015).

The writer expresses her frustration about the feeling of loneliness from living alone without a friend or a partner. The writer feels that she does not have support in difficult times in her life. However, although the social isolation is hard, the writer chooses to continue to live alone in order to avoid uncomfortable social situations. This quote is important because it shows that sometimes persons with autism choose to isolate themselves from society because they do not want to be judged by it.

Communication

In addition, one of the difficulties, which was mentioned in blogs, that prevents people with autism from creating a social relationship is conversation with others. The writer of the blog *Life with Aspergers* described the specific difficulties that people with Asperger's face in interaction with others:

Conversations with People with Asperger's Syndrome can leave you with a Wrong Impression. One Sided Conversations -People with Asperger's often seem to dominate conversations, turning the topic to things that interest us (special interests) and then talking until the listeners make their escape (Bollard, December, 2, 2015).

Being Direct- People with Asperger's often ask very direct questions, for example asking an elderly person exactly how old they are or aggressively asking multiple questions about a given purchase which interests them (Bollard, December 2, 2015).

In this quotes, the writer describes the difficulty of persons with Asperger's to leave a good impression during the conversation. Although the author recognizes some negative aspects in the communication of persons with Asperger's, it can be assumed that the point of view of the writer on people with Asperger's is actually positive. The writer mentions that "Conversations with People with Asperger's Syndrome can leave you with a Wrong Impression"(Bollard, December, 2, 2015).Therefore, it can be assumed that the writer recognizes that persons with Asperger's have good qualities that do not come into expression during a conversation due to communication barriers.

In addition, the blog *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch* also discusses communication's barriers:

The fun I thought I was going to have is slinking back into my imagination where it belongs, and reality is setting in. I realize that most people know others, and are all standing in groups chatting. I am not. I am off awkwardly standing on my own, or with my family. I know some people, but don't know how to jump into the chatting circles. The rules to how this occurs are a mystery to me. I try to smile, and look friendly, but I don't know if I should make eye contact, or how to begin a conversation. What to say, or how to say it is confusing. I can't work anything out quick enough. I hope others will initiate conversation with me, but they don't (The Introverted Matriarch, March 28, 2015).

In this quote, the writer describes her experience at an art show event. The writer expresses her frustration about not being able to be involved in the conversation. The other people who participated in the social event did not try to initiate a conversation with her. Everyone was part of a social group and people did not pay attention to her

difficulties. This quote can indicate that some persons in society do not make enough effort to include persons with disabilities who have difficulties in communication.

The negative emotions that were expressed in these posts support the work of Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh (2014). In this study, the researchers analyzed posts from blogs that were written about autism experiences. The study found that negative moods were highly common in the posts. The researchers indicated that some of the negative moods were “confused, frustrated, depressed and angry” (Nguyen, Duong, Phung, & Venkatesh, 2014, p.480).

Employment

Employment rates

The blogs in this study indicate that employment is an issue that concerns individuals with autism. One of the bloggers describes the difficulty of individuals with autism to enter the workforce:

One of the biggest obstacles autistic adults face is acquiring gainful employment. It is hard to find an accurate statistic, but from the research that I have done the numbers of autistic adults that are employed can fall as low as 50%. None went over 55%. That percentage is grim, but they look even bleaker when compared to the stats of other disabled adults. While the numbers may have been presented differently on various sites the one thing that I found they all had in common were that they all stated that autistic adults had the highest

unemployment rate of any of the other disabilities (The Introverted Matriarch, August 31, 2015).

In this quote, the writer is concerned about the poor employment rate of people with autism. The writer conducted her own research about the situation and is using her blog to show the figures to the public.

Reasons for unemployment

The blog *Life with Aspergers* refers to the reasons that people with autism face difficulties in employment:

In children with Asperger's syndrome, this reliance upon routine is much stronger and has a good chance of following them into adulthood. *This results in fearful and often "housebound" adults.* Obviously, adults with these issues tend to find it difficult to work and to relate to others. They may also need to take more time off than others in the same jobs and they may be unable to cope with even low amounts of stress. This, in turn, makes it harder for them to find a job, or to keep one. Of course, in the long run, money problems often lead to independence problems (Bollard, May 13, 2015).

In this quote the writer points on the tendency of some individuals with autism to follow strict routines as the cause for unemployment of people with autism. The writer addresses the issue of unemployment of individuals with autism from the medical model perspective, which suggests that the cause for the disadvantage of people with disability in society is their disability (Scullion, 2009). The writer blames the disability itself for the unemployment of people with autism and completely ignores the role of society. For

example, he does not address the accommodations that the workplace should provide to address to the tendency of a person with autism to maintain routine and help them to be more employable. For instance, from my experience, one of the accommodations that employer can provide, is a monthly calendar with scheduled tasks. This calendar will help a person with autism to keep a routine.

The writer ignores qualities that employees with autism may bring to the workplace. Some people with autism rely on strict routine but they may have, qualities that will make them valuable for the employers. “Growing research on adults with ASD suggests that this population may possess qualities and attributes that can enable them to excel in the workplace. For example, individuals with ASD often display a keen attention to detail, a willingness to engage in repetitive activities, trustworthiness, reliability, and timeliness” (Parr, Hunter & Ligon, 2013, p.609).

In addition, we can see that the expectations of the writers for future employment of people with autism are low. The writer predicts that individuals on the autistic spectrum who rely on routine may find it difficult to gain and maintain employment. This approach of the author is not surprising due to the low expectations of society regarding the employment opportunities of individuals with autism (Graetz, 2010).

Benefits of employment

The writer of blog *Stimeyland: get your quirk on* describes the positive impact of employment on her life:

This isn't about my commute, but I realized something the other day. It is almost exactly a year since I started working. I realized something else as well. Ever

since I've started leaving the house to go to work, I haven't had any long depressed stretches like I'd gotten used to. Yeah, it's been harder to fit in some of the things I want to do and I still don't have perfect mental health and it turns out that people who have jobs actually DO sometimes get a case of the Mondays, but I've discovered that purpose and structure are really good for me (Stimey, May 7, 2015).

In this quote, the writer describes how employment helped to improve her mental health by keeping her occupied, by providing daily routine and adding purpose to her life.

Psychological difficulties

One of the bloggers describes her negative experience of having depression:

Hello, depression. I said to myself. I see you are sneaking in behind your buddy anxiety. I recognized all the bad thoughts that lie to me until I am living in a shadow of who I am as a symptom of depression. They convince me that I am not worthy, and when they sneak in behind thoughts of fear I am so vulnerable that I believe them (The Introverted Matriarch, September, 27, 2015).

In this quote, the writer discusses the negative consequences of depression. She describes how depression hurts her self-esteem and causes her to doubt her self-worthiness.

In addition, some of the bloggers describe depression as a long-term condition:

Eeep! I'm so sorry for my long, long silence. I've had a rough couple of months with depression, family drama, some work-related overload, and just not being terribly well organized (Letters from Aspergia, July, 4, 2015).

What had brought me to that point? Surely it was not an overnight thing? It couldn't have been, and it wasn't. I have been depressed on, and off for the last 23 years. Quite a lot more on than off, I should say (The Introverted Matriarch, October, 12, 2015).

As much as I hate to admit it, I am still about as depressed as I was when I wrote that entry almost 4 months ago. That is astounding to me. If I didn't have a blog that detailed this I would not believe it. It has not seemed like 4 months. I think that is kinda how we get caught in a lot of patterns, though. We kinda get used to it, and for me this down feeling had kinda become my new norm (The Introverted Matriarch, January 26, 2015).

In this quote, we can see that depression is a condition that affects the writers for months or even years. Depression becomes an integral part of their life.

Furthermore, the writers describe the way that they deal with their depression:

The doctor entered the room and asked how I was. Not well, I responded dryly. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here, right? She laughed as if she hadn't heard it before, or maybe she just wasn't expecting it from me. I had no energy for pleasantries, and small talk. My words were dry and blunt. Any fears I may have held about what others might think of me were simply gone. It had been swept away in a torrent of blackness that had enveloped my entire being. It was such an odd feeling to be absent from anxiety, as it was replaced with a depth of depression that reached further down than I knew existed. In that office, that day I sat there with the last bit of strength I could muster, and admitted that I needed help (The Introverted Matriarch, October 12, 2015).

As I have written about recently ([HERE](#)) I have begun a new round of antidepressants after a particularly trying bout of depression. It was not your typical gray depression, but rather it was a life changing kind that required action. Not just action from an outside source, such as an antidepressant, but also action in changing my life, and the way I think to be able to sustain a more positive lifestyle (The Introverted Matriarch, April, 14, 2015).

To do lists have been a really helpful tool in digging myself out of this big hole of inertia, depression, and fail I've landed in over the last few months. But all lists are not created equal, and it took me quite a few false starts before I made lists work for me. Here's what I've learned... (Letter from Aspergia, July, 5, 2015).

In these quotes, the writers share the actions that they took in order to overcome their depression. One of the writers approaches a medical professional for medical

advice and prescription of medications. In addition, she declares that she is planning to take steps to transform her life for the better. The second writer tried to make his life more organized in order to overcome the depression.

Besides experiences of depression, the writer of the blog *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch* describes her high level of anxiety:

The day before yesterday I got a haircut. It wasn't much different, and I felt okay, and comfortable about it. I was feeling overwhelmed in general that day, but nothing that would rise to my attention as noteworthy. I posted a picture of my new do on Facebook. Then, my husband came home, and seemed not to even notice, or give much thought to my new haircut even after I asked about it. This made me feel really anxious. I began to fret. I immediately felt like I should not have posted a picture of it, and I deleted it from my timeline. Anxious thoughts filled my brain from thinking that I was wrong to make a big deal out of something so small as a haircut to feeling like maybe it didn't look very good. (The Introverted Matriarch, September, 27, 2015).

In this post the writer describes her anxiety after she did not receive any reaction from her husband to her new haircut. When her husband did not notice her new haircut she started to doubt her look and was very anxious.

Furthermore, the writer describes how too much anxiety can lead to anxiety attacks:

This afternoon I had a meltdown. It was an epic one that had been building for quite some time. When it hit I was unable to identify it, and stop the torrent of emotions from flowing out. What triggered it was not one thing, and with me it

almost never is. I had been operating above the level of my capacity for a couple weeks now. School enrollment and appointments have devoured my days. So much paperwork, and talking to people. Social engagements, and all the while keeping up with regular household stuff, too had me teetering. I knew I was teetering, but there was not much I could do. I used every coping skills available to me, but it was not enough (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 8, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes a “meltdown” (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 8, 2015) that she experienced due to many responsibilities that she took on herself for a long time.

Furthermore, the writer describes the devastating feeling of having an anxiety attack:

When I am in a meltdown situation it's the worst, rawest, most desperate feeling in the world. I am out of control, and my world is spinning. Sometimes I might cry, but that isn't real often. As a matter of fact, not much emotion ever registers on my face, so there is little for the other people in my presence to clue into other than my behavior (The Introverted Matriarch, August, 8, 2015).

In this quote, the writer discusses how anxiety attacks affect her well-being. When she experiences anxiety attacks she feels hopeless and loses control of her actions.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergia* describes the way that having psychological difficulties such as anxiety impact her life: “There are a whole bunch of life skills I've been slow to learn because at the age I should have been learning them I was dealing with the whole depression, anxiety, undiagnosed Aspergers thing” (Letters from Aspergia, February15, 2015).

In this quote, the writer described how coping with negative psychological conditions was so difficult that it distracted her from learning essential skills.

Cognitive difficulties

Some of the writers discussed coping with cognitive difficulties such as concentration difficulties, sensory difficulties and engaging in special interests:

Concentration

It is common for people with autism to have difficulties in concentration. For example, studies showed that around 60 percent of children with autism had struggled in keeping concentration (Tsai, 2000)

The writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergia* discusses his difficulty in maintaining concentration:

Focus! While my many experiments in finding techniques and tools and systems to get myself organized are just about keeping my head above water, none of it comes naturally to me. I'm easily distracted, I struggle to focus on anything (even my special interests, really) and generally, the inside of my head looks a bit like this... That means it takes me longer to get things done than you'd expect, so sometimes I end up overwhelmed by what would be a normal workload for someone else (Letters from Aspergia, February, 15, 2015).

In this quote, the writer described how difficult it is for him to focus on his daily assignments and how this difficulty has a negative impact on his ability to complete tasks.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Life with Aspergers*, who is autistic himself, discusses providing medication for his autistic son in order to keep him concentrate:

Our eldest has spent a decade on Ritalin/ Concerta and we can attest to the fact that it doesn't present any serious side-effects (at least, not in him). We've always kept him and his brother off Ritalin on weekends except where there are events requiring significant focus. We stop the Ritalin during the holidays too, with the aim being to allow the boys to fully "be themselves" and hopefully learn to self-manage their unfortunate outbursts and impulses. Sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't (Life with Aspergers, Thursday, July, 23, 2015).

The writer describes his experiences of providing his son Ritalin for increasing his concentration abilities. The father speaks in favor of Ritalin and claims that it does not cause significant side- effects. However, he chose to stop providing his son Ritalin for a while in order to let him behave in his natural way.

Sensory

Two bloggers referred in their posts to difficulties with sensory sensitivity.

“Sensory stuff. Because my brain doesn't filter stuff out like most do, I have to consciously handle a lot of noise, smells, textures and other inputs most people aren't even aware of unless they concentrate. That takes energy. It's why I'm done with a party or trip to the show a lot sooner than most people: it's just too much, and I'm exhausted” (Letters from Aspergia, February, 15, 2015).

In this quote, we can see the huge impact that sensory sensitivity has on the writer's life. The writer describes his struggle to handle the sensory stimulation without feeling

overwhelmed. This difficulty causes him to limit his attendance in social events that have a lot of stimulation.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Life with Aspersers* discusses the way some people with autism experience exposure to pain:

Some people with Asperger's syndrome are actually quite good at shutting out pain while others seem to feel every single cut, bruise or scrape in the most traumatic way. It's also not unusual for a person with Asperger's syndrome to sit at both ends of the spectrum at more or less the same time. Different types of pain register quite differently (Bollard, July 31, 2015).

In this quote, the writer addresses the issue sensitivity to pain. The writer mentions that individuals on the autistic spectrum react differently to pain. This approach shows us that people with autism are different and contradicts the perception in society that all people with disabilities are the same.

Special interests

People with autism usually have a narrow range of topics that they find interesting and have an extended knowledge in those topics (Winter-Messiers, 2007). The writer of the blog *Thoughts of an Introverted Matriarch* describes her special interest:

As some of my longtime readers know, one of my more subtle special interests is dream interpretation. It's really not too far a jump from their to one of my bigger interests, psychology. I don't do the reading for omens type of, but more along the lines of deeper understanding of what my dreams represent about what I am

feeling behind the scenes, so to speak (The Introverted Matriarch, March, 11, 2015).

In this quote the writer shares with the readers her interest in dreams. It can be understood from the quote that the writer enjoys her special interest. In contrast to the attitude of this writer, the writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergia* finds it more difficult to handle his special interests.

Have a slight problem with my special interests. Hell, let's call them what they are: obsessions. Most of mine are media related - TV shows or comedy mainly, with a side helping of books, comics, and movies. That means they take time to watch or read or pore over and enjoy. On the whole, it's time well spent because I love it, I learn things, and it helps build my knowledge and skills for the writing and theatre-related stuff that is my living. But the time my special interests take eats into the time available for that writing and theatre-related stuff, self-care, keeping the house clean, and generally being a vaguely functional adult (Letters from Aspergia, August 9, 2015).

In this quote, the writer claims that he struggles with a large amount of time that his special interests are consuming. Although, he finds his special interest entertaining they prevent him from focusing on other areas in his life.

Addressing issues that concern individuals with autism

Some of the bloggers discuss and provide their own advice and solutions to some issues that concern persons with autism. Here are the areas which were addressed in some of the blogs:

Education

The writer of the blog *Life with Aspergers* attempts to find a solution to the unprofessional attitude of staff to pupils with autism in the educational system, by presenting an event from the news.

In Australian news this week, there was a story about a school principal who was fired for attempting to use a cage to restrain a child on the autism spectrum who was experiencing meltdowns. Why this is Wrong: There is a lot to be said about this situation but first things first; was the education minister right to fire that principal? While I hate to see anyone out of a job, my answer here is an unequivocal "yes! (Bollard, September15, 2015)

In this quote the writer describes an event in which a principal locked an autistic child in a cage due to his difficult behavior. The writer expresses his complete disagreement with the principal's actions.

Furthermore, the writer describes his suggestions regarding how to prevent these events from happening in the future and to ensure a more professional educational system for individuals with autism:

There really needs to be local and roving resources with lots of experience with autism who can be called at a moment's notice to deal with problems which are too far outside of the experience of normal teaching staff.

Meltdowns are something that really needs to be handled by very experienced personnel. In addition, the taskforce should be given the job of looking over and approving modifications for students with special

needs. It should not be possible for teaching staff to design and implement their own solutions without an independent review. Not only will this prevent "crazy solutions" such as cells, but it may help to "socialize" clever solutions to allow good ideas to benefit more than one school (Bollard, September 15, 2015).

The writer of this quote suggests that actions of the educational staff should be supervised by professionals who are specialized in autism. These individuals should decide on the appropriate actions that should be taken in complex cases such as meltdowns of pupils with autism.

Medical professionals

The writer of the blog *Life with Asperger* discusses the role of the medical system that individuals with autism are required to change their doctor when reaching the age of eighteen.

The other important point that our developmental pediatrician raised was that once kids reach eighteen (our eldest is turning sixteen in a few months), they are really classified as adults and he can't continue to see them but must hand them off to a psychologist. I thought about the transfer process from one doctor to another and I have realized that a complete handover could be quite traumatic for the kids. I'm sure that these transitions are done with care, perhaps over six or so months but I can't help feeling that we're actually lucky that our pediatrician is moving away (Bollard, July 23, 2015).

The writer who has autism and is a father of a child with autism, discusses the idea that a sudden transition between doctors can be difficult for a young person with autism and describes how he plans to help his son to overcome this difficult transition:

We are going to start the transition phase early and instead of seeing our pediatrician once every six months, we'll see him annually (and see a psychologist with a background in autism in the alternate six month period). This will allow us to stretch out the transition period just a little longer and it will hopefully keep the two doctors in communication (Bollard, July 23, 2015).

It can be understood from this quote that the way to overcome the negative effect that a sudden change in doctors can have on a young person with autism is to start the transition early and to make it a process.

Parenting a child with autism

Some of the writers advised parents how to become better parents for children with autism. The writer of blog *life with Asperger* recognizes the influence of parents on the behavior of their children on the autistic spectrum:

Asperger's syndrome can present many challenges. In particular, sensitivities to noise, smell, and light can make it very difficult to perform "normal everyday" tasks. Parenting and teaching styles can also impact how children interact with their peers and their environment on a permanent basis (Bollard, May, 13, 2015).

A child who is "mollycoddled" may grow up to be less adventurous than his peers. He may be less inclined to take risks and more inclined to follow routines. He may even begin to develop dependencies on objects, for example, a "medical

kit" and may become unable to leave the house without following a specific routine and taking specific objects (Bollard, May 13, 2015).

These quotes suggest that parenting style has a role in shaping the behavior of the child. The writer provides an example that a child whose parents are over protective can be more dependent than his peers. This approach recognizes the external influence of individuals in society on the behavior of people with autism and does not point to the disability itself as the only responsible factor and therefore it represents the social model of disability.

In order to avoid a parenting style that will have a negative influence on children with autism, the writer suggests that parents should encourage their children with autism to be socially integrated into different areas of life:

If you're a parent and the person with increasing anxiety is a child then you're in a good position to intervene and make a lasting positive change. Some of the things that you can do to help the change are to encourage your child to use public transport to get home from school (ideally for kids aged 13 and older), join a club with similarly aged individuals, for example; scouts or join groups who share similar interests such as computing, chess, reading, drama or cinema. It doesn't matter if your child doesn't seem to learn anything from the group, it's all about developing social skills and the confidence to mingle with others. Of course, if you detect that your child is receiving negative feedback, such as bullying, from the mingling, then should not force them to continue. It has to be a positive experience (Bollard, May 13, 2015).

The writer claims that parents have an important role in assisting their children in overcoming their social anxiety. The writer suggests that the parents should expose their children to positive social encounters in order to increase their self-image and their social skills.

Furthermore, the writer of the blog claims that parents have an important role in helping children on the autistic spectrum to overcome mental difficulties:

If your child is approaching their teen years and is still a constant crier, then you really can't leave it any longer -- you need to get involved. First of all, you need to evaluate your child for issues. For example, consider and if necessary, consult with a doctor. Does your child exhibit unusual sensitivity to light, to touch or to sounds or smells? If so, it's possible that your child has Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Has your child experienced psychological trauma? Normally people mentally associate psychological trauma with child abuse but that's not necessarily the case. Children are very sensitive to the world around them and they take a lot of "background" information on board. If your child's reactions don't seem to stem from medical or psychological issues, then it's time to push forward with behavioral modifications intended to reduce the crying (Bollard, July31, 2015).

In this quote, the writer explains that parents of children with autism should get involved in their children's lives and try to refer them to the necessary professional assistance.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Letters from Aspergers* also discusses the important role of parents in the life of children with autism. The writer writes a post that is called “My mum's awesome. Let's talk about that” (Letters from Aspergia, August 1, 2015). In this post, he discusses his mother's positive parenting style. We can learn from this post about the optimal attitude of parents toward their children with autism:

“Mum understands the concept of sensory-hostile clothing, and that made my young life much easier. She let me choose my own clothes and dress myself as soon as my wobbly motor skills were up to the task, even if that meant a catastrophic confection of clashing colours, football shorts and thongs (the kind you wear on your feet, thank you) that meant I tended not to look particularly pretty or put-together. Fortunately, the whole pink/princess thing hadn't really taken off yet, so a little girl could get away with blue terry-towelling shorts and a Vegemite t-shirt (Letters from Aspergia, August, 1, 2015).

“Because Mum understood how hard social interaction was, she didn't push it. Of course, she wanted her kid to do extracurricular things and have friends, but if it wasn't working and if I was unhappy and didn't want to go, I didn't have to, no questions asked and no pressure” (Letters from Aspergia, August1, 2015)

In these quotes, the writer describes how her mother allowed her to make independent decisions and accepted her differences. Furthermore, the writer's mother did not pressure her to make social relationships that she did not feel comfortable to make.

Social relationships

It can be learned from the blogs that one of the ways to increase social skills is by self-learning. Some of the bloggers mentioned that in order to improve their social skills and build positive relationships they work on themselves and try to learn from the environment about the proper social behavior:

Though, I do like to be around people, sometimes. The times that I am in groups with others I am typically on the sidelines. I'm not much for a lot of back and forth talk. I am an observer. I am always watching, and analyzing. I am an avid people watcher, and much of what I have figured out about the way people behave is by carefully studying them. Since social behavior is such a mystery to me anyway I tend to just kick back in most social situations, and take mental notes. After doing so for so many years I have a pretty good catalog of human behavior to draw from when figuring out people's character, and intentions. I have been around so many different types of people, and situations. Some would be considered unsavory by many, but then that is a part of the process of really understanding people for me (The Introverted Matriarch, April 13, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how she is insistently trying to learn the way that people communicate with each other, by observing their interactions. The writer invests a lot of effort to reach this goal.

In addition, the writer discusses the attitude that she has when she is learning social behaviors:

“One has to remove the personal judgement and be able to ask why others do what they do. I don't distinguish other's behavior as right, or wrong. Instead, I am more interested in what motivates them to do what they do. Why do they make the choices they do? Why do they feel the way they do?”(The Introverted Matriarch, April 13, 2015)

The writer claims that in order that the learning process of the social skills will be effective, she needs to be objective and not to focus on the justice of the situation but to focus on what caused the social behavior. We can learn from this quote on the attitude that individuals with autism should have when they desire to learn new social skills.

In addition, we also can learn from the blog Letters from Aspergia that self- work is the key to improvement of social skills: “For all my social graces are awkward, I work really hard at them. I put a lot of effort into interpersonal stuff and try really hard to be competent in my interactions with others” (Letters from Aspergia, September 6, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes the great effort that she invested in order to gain social skills.

In contrast to other blogs, the writer of the blog *Life with Aspergers* also suggests a way that people with Asperger's can improve their social skills: “The person with Asperger's needs to work on, some things develop naturally over time and sometimes others need to be more understanding and more accommodating” (Bollard, December 2, 2015).

In this quote the writer claims that in order for a person with autism will improve his social skills he has to work to improve them. In addition, the writer claims that society

needs to provide proper accommodations for people with autism and to be more tolerant.

In conclusion, this section identifies issues that concern individuals with autism. As predicted, some of the issues are barriers that society puts in front of individuals with autism. However, some of the posts were written from the medical point of view and therefore did not recognize these issues as a result of society's negative attitude towards individuals with autism. For example, one of the issues that were discussed is reasons for unemployment of individuals with autism. The writer who discussed the issue put the finger on the symptoms of the disability as the cause for unemployment, instead of recognizing that society might be also a factor.

Moreover, the bloggers focused more on a variety of difficulties of individuals with autism instead and did not address the positive aspects of autism. For instance, the research found that some individuals with autism have extraordinary abilities in specific areas (Conson, Salzano, & Grossi, 2011).

Although there was a negative approach in some posts, some of the issues that were identified in this section were positive. For example, one blogger (Stimey, May, 7 2015), discussed how employment had transformed her life for the better.

In addition, this section examined how individuals with autism address issues that are significant for them. It was interesting to see that most of the writers addressed issues from the social model point of view, For example, the blog Life with Aspergers (2015, September, 15) recognizes that in order to provide better response to the

behavioral difficulties of pupils with autism, the educational system needs to change. The writer put the finger on society instead of on children with autism.

Blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism

This section will analyze blogs that were written by parents who have children on the autistic spectrum (Looking for Blue Sky, Squidalicious, We go with him: On the road with our son Charlie in autismland, confessions of an Asperger's mom).

This is the main issues that were mentioned in the blogs:

Technology

Studies have shown that technological devices have great benefits for individuals with autism. The devices have the potential to assist individuals on the spectrum therapeutically and to reach educational goals. Moreover, they have the ability to have a positive impact on various aspects of their life, such as effective interaction with others and the gaining of valuable behavioral skills (Grynszpan, Weiss, Perez-Diaz, & Gal, 2014).

The approach in the blogs toward the use of technology by children with autism is contradictory. One of the bloggers perceives technology as a negative influence on her child:

Charlie now navigates his days without an iPad or other electronic, computer chip device with batteries that *better be recharged*. He did have his years of dependency and attachment to his iPad (or rather, iPads, as Charlie proved, in typical fashion, to prefer not to give up his original balky-after-water-infusion-and-aerial-spins iPad in favor of a spanking brand-new shiny version; he carried two

neatly stacked atop each other for some years). Charlie's aforesaid dependence and attachment to the iPad was apparent immediately after he acquired his original one. It was no accident that I named one iPad malum, Latin for "apple" and also "evil" or rather "evil thing" (Chew, September 26, 2015).

It is clear from this quote, that the parent feels that too much reliance by her autistic child on his iPad has a negative impact on his independence. Moreover, the parent expresses such a strong reservation for her son's iPad that she calls it negative nicknames such as "evil" (Chew, September 26, 2015).

In contrast to this approach another blogger perceives technology as a tool that has the potential to improve the life of individuals with autism:

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the wearable technologies research of Matthew Goodwin, or of W. Samson Cheung at the University of Kentucky and his Little Helper software for Google Glass — but these are technologies that are going in the right direction, which is that they have the potential to help autistic people be better autistic people, instead of trying to normalize them. So you can look at Mr. Cheung's Google Glass and realize that its ability to help people identify others' facial expressions and moderate voice volume are actually things that could potentially help some autistic people in situations like job interviews. These are things that can help with social function and adaptation -- in ways that benefit autistic people themselves, and not just the people they're socializing with (Des Roches Rosa, May 22, 2015).

In this quote, the parent is optimistic about the new technological inventions that will allow people on the autistic spectrum to have a better understanding of social interactions. The writer emphasizes the importance of having technological devices that will benefit individuals with autism instead of society itself.

In addition, the writer provides another example of the way that technology has the ability to benefit individuals with autism:

I don't know if you're familiar with the work of Phoebe Caldwell, who is a UK sensory issue experts. But she is an advocate of simple tech making huge differences, such as the kind of noise-canceling headphones that helicopters pilots wear, which screen out background noise yet still allow for conversation — again, just for functioning, because for many autistic people sensory issues are actually a huge impediment to learning, and if you don't actually screen for sensory issues using *low* tech, in many cases, then autistic people are going to be disabled *not because of their autism* but because of the environment that they're in (Des Roches Rosa, May 22, 2015).

In this quote, the writer discusses a technological device that may have the ability to overcome sensory difficulties of individuals with autism and to assist them to function better in society. The focus of the writer is on the individual with autism and the ability of the device to make him feel more comfortable with his environment.

Furthermore, in another post the writer demonstrates how a technological device may help her son:

We also confirmed that Leo will be (finally) getting a symbol-to-speech AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) device in the next few weeks, to supplement his limited spoken language. His SLP [Speech Language Pathology] and the schools' AAC [Augmentative and Alternative Communication] specialist were careful to emphasize that Leo will be essentially learning a new language and that it would be easier for him if we could provide an immersive environment, i.e., if we used AAC with him as well. As our insurance will not cover two devices, I've downloaded a complementary iPad AAC app, and will be learning to use it. I am certain I will be making much use of the strategies and advice at the excellent site [PrAACtical AAC](#) (Des Roches Rosa, April, 14, 2015).

In this quote, the writer mentions that a technological device can help her son to enrich his linguistics abilities. Furthermore, the writer mentions an important issue that sometimes it is difficult to afford the necessary technology. Therefore, the mother looks for alternative solutions that are available for free online.

The writer of the blog *Squidalicious* suggested ways to make technology more adaptable for individuals with autism:

“I’d like to see more available apps, not just in terms of the kind of learning and adaptive tech some people on this panel and in this room are doing, but in terms of making *screenings* more available. I’d also like to see more recognition that speaking is not the most efficient means of communication for many autistic people. My final thoughts on forward-thinking goals and dissemination for ASD tech:

1. Help, don't try to normalize autistic people. Keep the humanity of autistic people in the front of your mind at all times. They are people, not projects.
2. Implement good design -- there is so much good tech content stymied by bad design!. This can also ease localization into other languages and cultures.
3. In many countries and regions (e.g. Accra, Ghana) there is often no or little wifi, or even available devices. Tech has to work under those conditions" (Des Roches Rosa, May 22, 2015).

The writer of the quote suggests that in order for technologies to be efficient for individuals with autism they should be more adaptive to their specific needs. Moreover, the writer claims that developers of autistic technologies should accept and embrace the differences of individuals with autism instead of trying to develop technologies which will attempt to make them part of the mainstream. Cassidy, Stenger, Van Dongen, Yanagisawa, Anderson, Wang, Baron-Cohen and Cipolla (2016), showed how developers of technologies embraced the unique abilities of individuals with autism in order to teach them new skills. For instance, one technology used the ability of autistic children "in constructing patterns" (Cassidy, Stenger, Van Dongen, Yanagisawa, Anderson, Wang, Baron-Cohen and Cipolla, 2016, p. 194). Using this technology, "children with ASC aged 4–7 years old passively watch trains with real human faces interact in a number of social situations over a period of 4 weeks. Post intervention, the children with ASC reached typical control levels of emotion recognition, and training transferred to new situations not included in the original intervention videos [6]. There was also some anecdotal evidence that children showed increased eye

contact and interest in people post-intervention” (Cassidy, Stenger, Van Dongend, Yanagisawa, Anderson, Wance, Baron-Cohen and Cipolla, 2016, p. 194).

Leisure activities

Leisure activities have an important role in the lives of persons with autism. They encourage them to gain new skills and to increase their developmental process (Little, Sideris, Ausderau & Baranek, 2014). Some bloggers discuss the involvement of their children who are on the autistic spectrum in these activities.

One of the bloggers describes her son’s hobby:

As I have been learning, bike riding with Charlie is fun. Since he was a toddler-who-didn't-toddle (Charlie walked at 16 months) and even before (Charlie was one squirmy babe-in-my-womb, a ceaseless riot of kicking, hiccuping and twisting about through the last couple months of my pregnancy), he has had a thing for motion. It is a trait he shares with Jim myself having, as has been noted in this household, an easy readiness for sitting in one place for an awfully long time with my eyes focused on a screen or book. Charlie is not going to be driving any cars so it was a good thing indeed Jim taught him to ride bikes (Chew, April, 14, 2015).

In this quote, the writer discussed the hobby of her son- bike riding. The writer describes the need of her son to be in motion from a young age and that her husband taught his son to ride a bike in order to fulfill this need.

Furthermore, the writer of the blog *Looking for Blue Sky* also discusses the benefit of a hobby for her son:

My son is having a go at learning to play the piano. I really hope he sticks with it as he seems to have some ability. Yesterday we listened together to my favorite piano piece - I used to bash it out very loudly and badly any time I was stressed as a teenager. Am hoping that playing an instrument will help him too (Looking for Blue Sky, December 31, 2015).

The writer explains how she is planning for her son to learn a new hobby in order to help him overcome negative emotions. We can see that in both posts the hobbies have a purpose of improving the life of individuals with autism.

Education

Relationship with peers

Relationships with peers are important in order to ensure successful integration of individuals with autism in the educational system (Ranson & Byrne, 2014) The writer of the blog *Squidalicious* discusses the importance of inclusive education:

As for his actual placement: He's going to stay in the same classroom, with the same amazing teacher and staff. I firmly believe an inclusive educational environment would be ideal for Leo, but that option is not currently available in our area. (To be clear: By 'inclusion' I mean an educational environment where Leo would be part of classes in which he could participate, given the proper support, on a regular school campus. I do not mean forcible mainstreaming with no supports.). If inclusion was available, I'd be looking to the site Think Inclusive for advice and strategies to ensure Leo was included properly and not just superficially, or (eep) problematically. Though his school does do reverse

inclusion, and I have been assured by Leo's teacher that it is a peer-to-peer rather than an "assigned friends" scenario. I would not be pleased if my son was being treated as a project rather than a person (Des Roches Rosa, April 27, 2015).

In this quote, the writer speaks in favor of inclusive education, in which the autistic child can study with non-disabled peers. The mother preferred this option, but because of outside circumstances, she is unable to do so. This post brings awareness to the problematic attitude of the educational system toward autistic children. The best interest of autistic children sometimes is not achieved due to restrictions such as availability of schools in the place of residency.

Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of the way that the inclusion is performed. She mentions that the ideal way for inclusion is by treating the child who has autism as an equal peer in the classroom. Crosland and Dunlap (2012) does not completely agree that individuals with autism need to be treated equally to their peers. They claim that individuals with autism need to receive support that is adjusted for their needs. They present the "SW-PBS" (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012, p. 260) model. This model suggests that "all students receive supports at the universal or primary tier" (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012, p. 260), however more extensive support will be given for students with difficulties (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012).

In addition, the writer of the blog *Confession of an Asperger's Mom* describes how her son created his own unique social group in order to create an inclusive environment:

The first year of high school was tough! But look at you now! You have started your very own club at school. It has flourished to include those who just don't feel comfortable anywhere else ...whether they're on the spectrum, have ADHD or they just feel different. You include them and make them all feel that they are important (AspergersMom, February, 19, 2015).

In this quote, the writer discusses the way that her son overcame his social difficulties by creating a group in which he will feel belonging. All the group members are different from the mainstream society and therefore, he does not feel different.

Despite the efforts of children with autism to integrate into the school environment, they still face difficulties:

On this particular day, this young lady (and I used the term lady loosely) went off on an entire rant about Blue in front of their whole Computer Science class, after Blue disagreed with the teacher. The girl was not involved in the conversation. The teacher was not offended, but she was. When he came home, he was still pretty livid. As we approached bedtime he started to spin himself up about what had happened. "She's just a real b*tch! I hate her! And what's worse is she's smarter than me. Her class ranking is higher! She doesn't even work hard.

Everything just happens naturally for her (AspergersMom, February13, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes an event in which her son had an argument with one of his peers. His peer who does not seem to be aware of the child's communications difficulties, did not accept his way of interaction and humiliated him in front of his class.

The writer continues to describe the way that her son dealt with the incident:

I am just checking in to let you know I have the matter resolved. I had a sit down conversation with the other student and my Computer Science teacher. We explained Aspergers to her and now she gets it. And it turns out she doesn't hate me (AspergersMom, February19, 2015)

In this quote, we can see that the incident was resolved through education regarding autism.

The writer discusses another important difficulty that her son experiences while attending school:

I picked him up after a rough day at school. He had been working on a group assignment over the past couple of weeks for his Spanish 3 class. Group assignments have never been a picnic for Blue. I'm sure the same holds true for many people with Aspergers. There's all of that social communication that has to take place, along with compromise and listening to other people's ideas. This can prove to be quite difficult for a person who usually thinks that his ideas are best. However, collaborating with others is a skill that we all eventually have to use in life (AspergersMom, November 3, 2015,).

In this quote the writer describes how school assignments that may be easier for other children are difficult for pupils with autism due to their difficulties in communication with others. The group work requires collaboration and interaction with others and therefore, individuals with autism may find it hard to take part in this kind of assignment.

Academic performance

One of the writers discusses the learning experience of her son in the special education class:

It's Charlie's last day of school today and, as he is technically in the 12th grade ("technically" as Charlie, since his first days in a classroom in 2000, has always and only been in special education programs and schools and his academic work has never accorded with his grade level and biological age), it is his last day of high school. Charlie is a member of the Class of 2015 (Chew, June 12, 2015).

In this quote the writer claims that the educational level in a special education class that her son participates in, is below what is expected from his age group. In this quote, the writer does not mention if she thinks that his abilities are higher than the educational level in the class. Hibel, Farkas and Morgan (2010), discuss the educational standard in special education classes in the USA. The authors claim that "Children and youth placed into special education consistently display below-basic levels of academic achievement" (Hibel, Farkas and Morgan, 2010, p.313). Furthermore, children who study in special education have less opportunities to study in advanced level in the future. The author recognizes, that sometime children wrongly misplaced into special education class (Hibel, Farkas and Morgan, 2010).

In addition, in the USA, in order that people with autism succeed academically in school, the school has the responsibility to provide them proper accommodations (Coffey & Obringer, 2004). The writer of the blog *Confessions of an Asperger's mom* discusses an incident in which her son who has autism did not receive proper accommodations:

They ran out of time and the project was not complete. The teacher supposedly said, she would give them extra time. She then later decided that their band obligations were “not her problem.” So, she recanted her offer. At least this is the way that Blue describes the situation. Who knows what kind of miscommunication actually took place (AspergersMom, November 3, 2015).

In this quote, we can notice two problems. The first one is that the child who has autism claims that he did not receive his accommodation of time extension. The second one is that due to communication difficulties the child may misunderstand the situation.

The writer described how her son attempted to resolve the situation:

Who can you speak with to help you communicate with this teacher?” I asked. “I looked for my tracking teacher, but she’s not in her room.” “Do you think you could find Ms. B.?” (the Special Ed. Lead) I asked. “Maybe.” Try to do that, I’m sure she can help you communicate,” I said (AspergersMom, November 3, 2015).

In this quote, the writer describes how the educational staff supported her son at the educational setting. The writer describes the way that her son used the tracking teacher in order to receive assistance to better communicate and resolve a difficult situation.

Autistic Children’s attitude toward school

The writer of the blog *Confession of an Asperger’s mom* writes about her son's negative experience in high school: “It was his senior year and we all were anxious to get him out of the high school environment. And by we, I mean his father, myself and

his high school special education team. High school was crushing his spirit, making him so unhappy and angry” (AspergersMom, October 23, 2015).

In this quote, the writer describes how the negative experiences in high school had a negative effect on the mood of her child.

In addition, the writer of the blog Looking for Blue Sky discusses the way that some children deal with negative experiences at school: “The thing about school refusal is that most people don't see it coming. It's diagnosed in retrospect, after a pattern of not going to school has been established. No-one seems to realize that it's affecting your child until it's become a habit” (Looking for Blue Sky, October, 7, 2015)

The writer of the quote describes how some children refuse to attend school. Furthermore, she refers to the problematic approach of parents to their children's refusal. The parents usually miss the problem, until it becomes part of the routine. The writer does not mention if children with autism tend to skip school or children in general. The literature does not discuss specific tendency of children with autism to skip school.

Mental health

Studies suggest that parents of children on the autistic spectrum tend to have more mental difficulties in comparison to parents who raise non-disabled children. There is a strong link between the functioning of the autistic child to the mental situation of the parents. The less functioning the child the greater the risk of parents experiencing mental difficulties. The mental difficulties of the parents can be caused by the nature of the difficulties that they experience while raising children on the spectrum. Raising a child with autism can be frustrating for a parent because, due to communication barriers

of the child, it is hard to build with the child a healthy parent- child relationship (Falk, Norris & Quinn, 2014).

The writer of the blog *Looking for Blue Sky* describes how raising a child with autism affects her sleeping experience:

Sleep has been an ongoing preoccupation ever since special needs entered my life 19 years ago, mainly because most aspects of the night shift are out of my control. But not my choice of clothes! I live in a cold old house remember so pajamas are the order of the day. Normally bought from the high street, but recently there seems to be nothing nice aimed at anyone over 40. So I was thrilled to find [this pair](#) on Amazon: they're soft and warm and *don't* have bunny ears or 'funny' logos. I *may* be tempted to buy more (Looking for Blue Sky, December 29, 2015).

The writer expressed how she lost control of her own sleeping experience due to the unpredictable sleeping routine of her children with disabilities. However, she is trying to gain at least a small amount of control by choosing her own night clothes. Furthermore, the writer address her children as special needs instead of calling them persons. It can suggest that she emphasizes their disabilities over their personalities.

Besides losing control of her sleep the writer mentions that she experiences depression as a result of parenting a child with autism:

Being terrified of the future and unable to enjoy the present. Sadness because your children have no real interest in Halloween. Guilt at complaining because you don't have 'real' depression. Eating too much chocolate and wishing you

could drink too much wine. But you don't because you know it will only make you feel worse. And feeling worse because you know you can't. Feeling fat and old. And then eating too much and not exercising. Doubting your parenting strategy, and wondering are you making everything worse. Feeling sick and tired of being sick and tired. Trying to find something to treasure each day. And reasons to be cheerful every week. Moments of joy when your non-verbal daughter smiles at you. Pride and delight when your elder daughter excitedly recounts all the highlights of her working day. Relief when your autistic son has a good day. Release when you get the time to write it all out on your blog. That's what depression is for me (Looking for Blue Sky, October 31, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes in detail the way that she feels when she experiences depression. The depression negatively affects her self-worth and self-confidence.

It is interesting to learn the difference between the way that the writer reacts to a successful day of her non-disabled daughter to the way she reacts to a successful day of her autistic son. The writer mentions that she feels emotions of pride when her daughter succeeds. "Pride and delight when your elder daughter excitedly recounts all the highlights of her working day" (Looking for Blue Sky, October 31, 2015). However, when her autistic son has a good day she feels relief: "Relief when your autistic son has a good day" (Looking for Blue Sky, October 31, 2015). We learn that the expectations of the mother for her autistic child are significantly lower than her expectations for her non-disabled daughter.

In addition, the writer describes how her mental situation is affected by the intensive care that her autistic child requires:

This year, July stretches ahead with appointments every weekday, each means that I seem to spend hours trying to plan the best strategy to ensure that they successfully happen. Sometimes they don't. Outings will be to the supermarket and the therapist, not the beach and playground. It's looking like a summer of dull grey days, no matter what the weather (Looking for Blue Sky, July, 2, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how she cannot enjoy the good weather that the summer has to offer, because she had to attend the medical appointments of her autistic child. She predicts that this summer will be negative for her.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Confession of an Asperger's mom* also describes how the pressure involved in raising a child with autism affects her well-being:

Recently, I had to make some tough decisions about Red. It was really hard for me as any decision is these days. My capacity for decision making has been severely handicapped in recent months, maybe even years. Being in a constant state of panic can do that to a girl. My anxiety has been through the roof! I can think something to death and back to life again, and still can't decide whether or not to move forward. What if this happens? What if that goes wrong? What if I ruin the rest of his life? (AspergersMom, July 10 ,2015).

In this quote the writer describes how she has to make numerous decisions regarding her autistic son's future and how the uncertain outcomes of these decisions cause her anxiety.

The writer compares the feelings that she has from dealing with her autistic child to a “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” (AspergersMom, May 13, 2015).

I know that I'm not alone. A lot of autism parents feel the same level of hatred for holidays. It's because of how our children may or not behave with the extra pressure and anxiety. It's a part of this thing I call Autism PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). PTSD is an anxiety-based disorder that happens when a person has experienced trauma or has repeatedly been exposed to traumatic events. PTSD can occur to soldiers who have been in a war zone or to a victim of a crime. Autism PTSD is when you are consistently experiencing traumatic events in your home or out in the community while raising your child with autism, who may fall apart emotionally, act out physically and have a meltdown at any given moment (AspergersMom, May 13, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how parents of children with autism need to deal with the repetitive unpredictable negative behavior of their children, such as meltdowns in public places. The writer compares the exposure to these events to exposure to traumatic events and therefore, she claims that parents of children with autism experience “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” (AspergersMom, May, 13, 2015).

Furthermore, the writer describes how she experiences Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: “I cannot breathe. I cannot exhale. Most days I can feel the vibration of my heart beating, like a bass drum. I attempt deep breaths, trying to slow my heart rate. The fix is only momentary. I'm living in PTSD mode. Always preparing for the next explosion. This is not a sustainable life” (AspergersMom, October, 8, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how she experiences strong physical signs of stress due to the unpredictable behavior of her son. I found that the literature does not address specifically to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among parent of individuals with autism. However, it recognizes that parents of people with autism experience stress. "Parents of children with autism reported higher levels of stress than parents of children with Down's syndrome, developmental disabilities, or other psychiatric difficulties" (Siman - Tov & Kaniel, 2011, p. 879). The level of stress depends on the functioning of the child. "The greater the severity of the disability, the more distress reported by parents" (Siman - Tov & Kaniel, 2011, p.880).

Moreover, in another post the writer also expresses emotions of stress and even reveals emotions of hostility toward her autistic son: "The ride to and from therapy within itself stresses me the hell out. I'm a captive audience, keyword, captive. I'm a hostage, trapped in a small space listening to his ranting, arguing and debating. There have been times when I just pull over until he shuts up!" (AspergersMom, April 29. 2015).

Before I closed my door I told Red if he touched the door (he usually starts beating on it when I close it) or if he touched Blue's door, I would call the authorities. He couldn't believe it. He stands there looking at me, and says "Why are you so mad? Why are you being this way? "Really? Why are you getting so angry, just because I'm doing everything within my power to make you angry? (Confession of Mom, April, 29, 2015)

In these two examples, we can see that the writer express a very strong disappointment in her autistic child's behavior. It is clear that his behavior has a negative influence on her emotional state. She believes that his actions are meant

intentionally to hurt her and she even does not feel comfortable to spend time with him in a small space without the option to leave it.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Squidaliciouse* also describes how the behavior of her son affects her emotions:

His mother, on the other hand, took several hours to recover from the what-could-have-happened adrenaline rush of having her happy, expectant son being denied admission to a favorite place, eventually resorting to a double shot of reposado mezcal with orange slices, once the kids were to bed. Is it Leo or is it his mother who had the better set of coping skills, do you think? (Des Roches Rosa, October 18, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes a situation in which her autistic son was denied entry to a place that he wished to attend. The son was not emotionally affected by this incident. However, his mother, who is used to her son experiencing meltdowns as a result of this kind of situation, was so afraid that her son would experience a meltdown in a public place that it took her hours to emotionally recover from this experience.

Support for parents

The amount of social support that parents receive has an impact on the way that they will adjust to the idea that their child has autism. Parents who receive support will tend to adjust more easily to family life with a child who has autism: "Social support has been defined as "information leading the person to believe that he is cared for and loved, valued and esteemed, and is important in a network of mutual obligation and communication" (Siklos & Kerns, 2006, p.921)

Professional Support

The writer of the blog *Looking for Blue Sky* discusses the importance of receiving support from professionals:

Issues around secondary school continue for my son, and so do the meetings and appointments. But for me, the best news of the week was a member of his team backing me up all the way, with everything that I've been doing and everything that I've suggested. Hopefully, that endorsement will help me to feel less of a parenting failure (Looking for Blue Sky, September, 17, 2015).

In this post the writer describes how reinforcements from professionals who are familiar with her autistic son, her behavior and actions make her feel better regarding her parenting skills.

The writer, a parent, describes educational support that she receives from professionals: "Despite everything, I am getting out. I met a friend for coffee and made a short appearance at my yoga and dance classes. And I began a 6 week autism parenting course run by my son's service provider. It is going to be interesting, and a bit emotional too I think, but hopefully I will learn something useful" (Looking for Blue Sky, January, 29, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes her positive expectations from a workshop that meant to educate parents who have children with autism. We can see that the writer approaches the workshop as a positive activity in her life, like yoga lessons and meeting with a friend.

In addition, the writer describes the support that she receives from her therapist:

I shared some of these feelings in therapy today. *Have I told you how much I love my therapist?* She makes me think about myself for a change. We dive into my feelings and she from judging redirects me myself. Instead, she helps me to congratulate myself for both simple and extremely complex things that I have accomplished. She helps me to acknowledge the transition that I'm going through (AspergersMom, November, 13, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how the support that she received from her therapist assists her. She discusses how the therapist helps her to feel better about herself and to view things from a more positive perspective.

In contrast to the positive outcome that professional support can bring, the writer of the blog *Squidalicious* discusses her feelings when this support is not helpful:

I am not proud to have once considered my sweet Leo "damaged" because I believed the cure-hawkers who had little interest in Leo's welfare but vested interest in the contents of my wallet. Guilt and anger over being duped when Leo and I both needed so much post-autism diagnosis support is part of what drives my advocacy work now (Des Roches Rosa, February, 9, 2015).

In this quote the writer claims that instead of supportive professionals she faced professionals who took advantage of her situation and were interested in charging her money in order to provide harmful treatment for her son. The mother implies that she went to these professionals because she needed support after her son was diagnosed with autism.

Community Support for parents

The writer of the blog *Squidalicieuse* describes how people in the community help her to stay strong:

That those of us who have been involved in advocacy and activism for a while never forget that people (disabled and non-disabled) who come from outside the autism and disability acceptance and rights models often need time to absorb what is and isn't ableist and hurtful. I've said this many times: but I don't know where I'd be without so many patient but firm role models and friends (Des Roches Rosa, December, 12, 2015).

In this quote, the writer mentions that people who are not part of the autism advocacy community frequently unintentionally mistreat people with autism. She describes how the support of her friends helps her to deal with the attitude of society toward autism.

Community support does not have to be face to face. The writer of the blog *Looking for Blue Sky* discusses the way that support can be obtained from the virtual world:

But there is one thing that makes a difference now: wherever you are, if you are on the internet at all, then the special needs community will be with you.

Supporting, advising, sharing, hugging. Perhaps you will make it through to the other side, perhaps to be strong and independent, they will be able to live a good life with their differences. Then those families who have already made it will hold out a hand to welcome you, and those still in the tunnel will cheer you on.

Because we all hope to join you one day. Out the other side (Looking for Blue Sky, February, 27, 2015).

The writer describes how the internet can bring together individuals who share the same experiences. This encounter helps them to provide important support to each other.

Support for individuals with autism

Community support

People with autism have difficulties in creating social connections with others. One of the main difficulties of individuals with autism is “social imagination or social instinct i.e. ability to understand one's own role and pre-empt other's responses in social situations” (Davidson, O’Hare, Mactaggart, Green, Young, Gillberg & Minnis, 2015, p. 63). Despite these difficulties, the data of this thesis indicates that parents of autistic children perceive social support as vital for their children well-being.

The writer of the blog *Squidalicious* describes how the disabled community can be supportive to other persons with disabilities: “We were among Leo's community. We were with the people who would never think of him as less-than, or his life as less worthy, or his stimming as a nuisance rather than a need, and who would raise hell if anyone else treated him badly. He was home, he was with his people” (Des Roches Rosa, March, 2, 2015).

In this quote, the writer discusses her experience at an event for persons with disabilities that she and her son attended. In this quote, she describes how the disability

community gave them a feeling that they belong. She mentions that she and her son encountered supportive, non-judgmental attitudes.

In addition, the writer described an outing with her son and her friends that are also on the spectrum:

We then went out for coffee and chocolate with two autistic friends. And everything about that excursion was comfortable. They talked with Leo without talking down to him, included him in the conversations, and one told Leo she was autistic too and he said "Cool." And I did not get the sour, crampy stomach I sometimes get after extended socializing and long outings because there was nothing stressful about this socializing or those outings. Leo was with his people, with his mother as his very grateful Plus One (Des Roches Rosa, March 2, 2015).

In this quote, the writer says that her friends who have autism made her autistic son feel comfortable and treated him as an equal. The mother mentioned that she usually gets stressed when her son is in social situations with other people. It can be assumed that the attitude of other people in society toward her son is not always as positive as the attitude of her autistic friends.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Confession of an Asperger's Mom* describes how her son receives support through group therapy:

He had no outbursts of his own while he was there. The biggest issue was his anxiety and asking questions over and over again. He was trying desperately to process the therapy and worries about his life and his future. He was social with

the more kind-hearted among the group. He attended group therapy sessions and learned that lots of other people's lives suck way more than his does. He now seems to have a greater appreciation for what he has here at home ...at least for now. I realize that we are probably in a honeymoon period, but I'll take it and hope that it lasts (AspergersMom, July 19, 2015).

The writer talks about the ability of a group therapy to provide her son with emotional support. She describes the way it made him to change his perspective on life and to understand that other people might experience similar or even worse difficulties than him.

Support of parents

Some of the parents' attitude toward their children was positive and supportive while other parents revealed negative approach:

The writer of the blog *We go with him on the road with our son Charlie in autismland* writes about the support that she provides for her autistic son:

It is a process in which his being developmentally delayed and having intellectual disabilities becomes more and more, and more starkly, sometimes achingly, apparent. There are gains but they can seem fragmented, and so fragile. It is why I've ceased anymore to think too much about milestones Charlie has or has not reached. Another good day; a steady bike ride (the first for 2015 was in Richmond, where he and Jim had some of their first adventures out here in the Bay Area last January); the fact that we've stuck together to the point that, a decade after Jim and Charlie started riding together, I just could not but join in --

Charlie keeps learning and trying to learn and we, buffeted about by winds and waves and forces wild, do too (Chew, 2015, January, 1, 2015).

In this quote, the mother of an autistic child and an intellectual disability as well declares that she stopped measuring her son's progress and instead she supports the positive aspects of her son's life such as is bike riding.

Furthermore, the writer of the blog Squidalicious describes how parents of autistic children should support their children: "It's really important for autistic people to learn to cope with a world that is generally not set up for them, and not friendly to them — but we should not be doing that by trying to force them to be *non*-autistic. We should be helping them learn, and cope, and adapt" (Des Roches Rosa, May 22, 2015).

For example, this is how the writer claims that parents should support the difficulty of their autistic children in maintaining eye contact: "I talked with Mr. Cheung about the idea of not forcing eye contact, about learning to look at eyebrows or noses instead — because as you may or may not know, for many autistic people eye contact is painful. It's an aversive. And they can either give you eye contact, or they can function, but they can't do both" (Des Roches Rosa, May, 22 2015).

The writer claims that parents should understand and accept the difference of their autistic children instead of forcing them to do something that might be painful for them just in order to encourage mainstream behavior.

Furthermore, the blog *Confession of an Asperger's mom* describes the writer's supportive approach toward one of her autistic children:

With his new goal of being more positive, one of his teachers who attended the meeting observed that Blue is not very positive about himself. He can't really accept a compliment. He doesn't believe that he's smart, handsome, funny or a good friend. He tends to focus on the negative. "Everyone hates me," he says, which is far from the truth. The kid has his own social club for people who are different! How brave and forward thinking is that? (AspergersMom, January 6, 2015).

In this quote, we can see that although the autistic child who has a low self-esteem does not believe in himself, his mother believes in him and supports him.

However, her attitude towards her other son who has autism but has severe behavior difficulties, is significantly more negative:

It's me, the mom. My lack of ability to make the hard choices. It's my level of stress and lack of time to take care of myself. It's my fear of making wrong choices and how that will impact his life. It's my not being able to put the ball entirely in his court because I don't think he really has what it takes to make the best plays for himself. It's me making excuses for him at every turn. He's not balanced on meds. He needs hospitalization. He needs behavior therapy. Yeah. Whatever (AspergersMom, March 16, 2015).

In this quote, the mother says that she does not believe in the ability of her son to make his own future decisions. It is clear from the post that she is frustrated by her son's behavior. The negative attitude of the mother toward her autistic son is mostly consistent throughout the whole blog.

Obstacles in the way of getting services

Some of the writers mentioned the complicated bureaucracy as a barrier for receiving quality services for their autistic children. One of the writers described her experience:

We seem to be heralding Charlie's turning 18 next week by familiarizing ourselves (working through voice mail trees, sitting in beige-themed agency waiting rooms, realizing we need to go back to the previous place we'd dealt with to get something to move on to the next) with SSA, SSI, and Medi-Cal, with interludes with the Regional Center, a California agency that assists in coordinating services for individuals with developmental disabilities -- which is something that we, being parents, do but there's so many regulations and policies, all serving their purpose but making things complicated and taking time (I noted the absence of such as the two mothers in the April 12 NBC Dateline "On the Brink" threw themselves into figuring out their son's programming and care after both turned 21). My general feeling is, you generally have to go to any office a minimum of two (/three) times to get that document or whatever you need and then you still have to follow up with a phone call and wait *awhile* to talk to a live person at the end of the multipart phone message (Chew, May, 8 ,2015).

In this quote, the writer describes the bureaucracy that she faced when she was gathering documents from multiple offices. She described a long process that consisted of long waiting and several phone calls and face to face conversations with different clerks. Furthermore, the writer mentions that there were so many rules that made the process even harder.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Looking for Blue Sky* also describes how bureaucracy makes it hard for parents to receive services for their children:

Special needs children have the same basic needs for love and attention as every other child. Some are easy to parent and delightful and rewarding, and some are more difficult, just like other children. It's their additional needs that can be hard to meet. Their needs for therapy, equipment, medication, and everything else that helps them to fulfill their potential. That's where parents need help. That's where the nightmares lurk. In the piles of paperwork, the uncaring bureaucracy, the endless battles to get help, support and respite (Looking for Blue Sky, June 26, 2015).

In this quote, the writer emphasizes the importance of different services for individuals with autism. The writer claims that although the importance of these services, parents who try to achieve them face strict bureaucracy. Unfortunately, there is insufficient research in the literature about the access of individuals with autism to services in Canada. "This population uses a wide variety of services but specific data about service access, cost and effectiveness are sparse. The data on use of services by youth and adults with ASDs is virtually non-existent although models are now being presented" (Stoddart, 2013, p.35).

Furthermore, the writer discusses the requirements of services as a barrier: “Apart from RDI, all of the advice, strategies and interventions have failed or made things worse here. And we can't progress any further with RDI as I would need to video our sessions and my son objects to that idea, understandable as he is a teenager!” (Looking for Blue Sky, June 8, 2015).

In this quote, the writer describes how she could not go forward with one of the services that was provided for her autistic son because it required that the meeting will be recorded and her son objected to the idea. We can assume by this quote that the service providers are not always flexible and the services are not always suited to the needs of the individuals with autism.

Transition from childhood to adulthood

The transition from childhood to adulthood has a great impact on the life of individuals with autism and requires appropriate preparation. From being dependent in an educational setting they are expected to perform a more mature role in their social environment. This role may involve enrollment in a higher education institute, being a contributing member of the community, living in an independent setting and developing meaningful relationships with others (Turcotte, Côté, Coulombe, Richard, Larivière, & Couture, 2015).

Some of the writers discuss factors that affect the transition process of individuals with autism and the preparation for this process.

Factors that affects the transition process:

The writer of the blog Confession of an Asperger's mom discusses the impact of the high school culture on the amount of success in transition of people with autism to college:

I read a great article about preparing our kids for college yesterday on VOX.com titled, High School Sets Up Autistic Kids to Fail In College -How to Fix It. The article clearly states that our kids need to be a part of their I.E.P. process and they must learn self-advocacy. Colleges won't even allow parents to have a say (AspergersMom, November 3, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how she uses resources that are available online in order to educate herself about the necessary steps for preparation for college. The writer brings an important issue to the discussion- the need to change the high school system to be more suitable for the preparation of autistic children for college. The writer mentions that in order to prepare children for success they have to be more independent, speak for themselves and to be more involved in their educational plan.

In addition, the writer who lives in the USA, identifies financial restrictions as a factor that has a great impact on the transition process to adulthood:

My dream for my son was for him to move out into an apartment or a dormitory. At the very least, a Transitional Living program for adults on the spectrum. I don't know who it is that can afford these astronomically, expensive programs like the ones that I found, but good Lord, they must be very well off to be able to afford costs anywhere from forty to one hundred thousand dollars per year! We still have a few kinks to work out with the agency that runs the home. I am not all that

impressed with the staff so far, but I know my standards are high. I'm sure they aren't used to parents who are involved and knowledgeable about what they are supposed to provide. I am not the one to try skimping on (AspergersMom, October 23, 2015).

In this quote, the writer indicates her desire that her son will enter one of the special residence programs that are adjusted specifically for people with autism. However, the mother is aware that these programs are expensive and she cannot afford them. Therefore, she is forced to settle on a program that she does not think will best suit her son's needs.

Preparation for the transition progress:

Some of the bloggers discussed the preparation that they made in order to ensure a successful transition.

That stands for Individual Transition Plan. Charlie being about to turn 18 in less than months, it is time to talk about that *terra incognita*, When School Ends. Pragmatically, this meant that, as Jim and I and Charlie's principal, teacher, therapists, behaviorist and his case manager sat around the table, the talk about last year's progress (some nice solid gains in counting and counting money, in particular, telling time, turn-taking with peers, writing his first and last names) and the upcoming year's goals also featured consideration about whether or not some of these (learning to self-manage distress and stress, measuring objects and liquids, initiating greetings) apply to employment and independent living (Chew, February 26, 2015).

In this quote the writer described the collaboration of all the people in the life of her autistic son in order to ensure that he will experience a successful transition to adulthood. The individuals shared valuable information about the progress of the son and set goals for the future. Grant, Rodger and Hoffmann discuss the way parents with autism find information about autism. "Parents obtain information from many different sources including the internet, books and other print materials, as well as from health and health and education professionals (Grant, Rodger & Hoffmann, 2016, p.126). In contrast to the idea that parents go to group support to obtain information. Parents who participate in group support for people with disabilities "looking for emotional support and resources, but not necessarily information" (Clifford & Minnes, 2012, p. 180).

The writer of the blog *Confession of an Asperger's Mom* describes how her son participated in classes that were meant to prepare him for adult life:

He finished all of his credits by December and by that January, he would be starting Transition classes. We were invited to attend Open House for the Adult Transition program to get an idea of what his new adventure would look like. The Open House took place at the community college campus. This is where he would have class a couple of times per week. I remember being excited about that aspect. My son ...on a college campus, before he even graduated from high school. As I sat through the presentation, observing the various students and listening to the information being presented, I wondered to myself, "Is this right for him? Is this what he really needs?" He's so intelligent. I wanted him to take an actual college class or two. Was he ready for college classes? Not really. He

needed so much support in the high school setting (AspergersMom, October 23, 2015).

In this quote the writer shares her concerns about the preparation program, the writer mentions that she wonders if the program suits the intellectual capabilities of her son. We can see that the writer feels frustrated because she has greater expectations from her son's adult life than his actual abilities.

Her autistic son also expresses his concerns about the transition to adulthood. For example, the writer described how she deals with her son's concerns in order to prepare him for transition to independent living:

Him: At that group home, the house is closed during the day. What if I need to go back to work on a video project?

Me: You haven't worked on a video project in months. Even when you have one, you don't work on it during the day. You come home from school or work and follow me around the house talking most of the day or you're watching Sponge Bob (AspergersMom, March 15, 2015).

In this conversation, the son who has autism expresses his concern that the regulation in the new residence will have an effect on his activities. The son was very worried that he could no longer work on his video business when he will move out because he will not have access to the house during the day. The mother explained to him that he need not worry because he usually works on video assignments when the house is open.

Employment:

Employment is vital to the quality of people with autism. "Employment plays a critical role in social, emotional, and financial well-being for people with autism spectrum disorder" (Nord, Stancliffe, Nye-Lengerman, & Hewitt, 2016, P. 11). In order to successfully integrate into the labor market, individuals with autism often require support in order to obtain and maintain employment (Nord, Stancliffe, Nye-Lengerman, & Hewitt, 2016).

Some writers discuss the issue of employment and autism. The writer of the blog: *We go with him: On the road with our son Charlie in autismland* discusses the employment opportunities of her son during school:

With Charlie working one hour a week at a work assignment cleaning the Richmond Auditorium (lots of windows and tabletops have been washed) and awaiting a new one, and handling himself very well on field trips to movies and the California Academy of Sciences, and pushing the shopping cart for school expeditions to Walmart after he's counted out money into envelopes for each student to use, we have been getting a glimpse about what awaits Charlie and he has too (Chew, February26, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes how her son fulfills different work tasks in order to prepare himself for the future. The son performs volunteer and employment duties in order to build valuable skills.

In addition, the writer of the blog *Squidalicieuse* discusses the employment opportunities of her son who is on the autistic spectrum after graduation:

Leo will get to stay at his school until the age of 22. But then he needs to have a job or at least some place to spend his days so he's not stuck at home with his boring mother. While the NEA provides plenty of practical advice and strategies for becoming a self-advocate, cultivating useful job skills, and supporting young adults through their transition out of school, the actual real-world local opportunities for Leo and people like him are frustratingly elusive, and (again) any advice would be appreciated. (My denial in this area also needs to come to an abrupt end. I know, I know (Des Roches Rosa, April, 27, 2015).

The writer claims that individuals with autism receive vocational support during the graduation process from high school. However, the mom is concerned about the future of her son due to limited opportunities for individuals with autism. The mother's concerns are documented in the literature around autism. For example, a study that was conducted in the USA and examined the situation of individuals with autism two years after the graduation from high school found that more than fifty percent of the participant were unemployed. (Strickland, Coles & Southern, 2013).

Furthermore, the writer of the blog *Confessions of an Asperger's Mom* shares what happened to her son during his employment: "Well in my last post, "A Brilliant Mind," Red found out that his hours at work had been reduced from 20 to 10 hours per week. I was not happy because that would give him too much time on his hands to sit around the house, idle, bored, inevitably bugging the crap out of me" (AspergersMom, June 5, 2015).

The writer describes how her autistic son dealt with this situation:

He spoke to his Adult Transition teacher about it. She suggested the same thing I did. That he open up his availability at work so they would give him more hours. He had his availability pretty limited to what would be convenient for him because, after all, he needs time to his self ...so that he can be bored and bug the shit out of everyone in this house. He was livid when he came home from the meeting with his teacher! "She made me put down that I want to work on Saturdays! She made me do it! If I didn't do it, she was going to yell at me! I'm afraid of her, so I just did it!" This went on all day long! Later that evening, he spoke on the phone with another adult mentor who gave him the same story and advice that his teacher did. He listened but was not happy. The following day he met with his Occupational Therapist. She is a very soft-spoken, lovely woman who has lots of experience with teenagers and young adults with various abilities (AspergersMom, June 5, 2015).

In this quote the writer describes the intensive employment support that her son who has autism had to receive in order to deal with an unexpected event at work. The child had to speak with three professionals in order to solve the unexpected issue.

Addressing issues that concern individuals with autism

Some of the parents suggested ways to address issues that concern people on the autistic spectrum. The parents addressed two main issues: education, and violence.

Education

The writer of the blog *Squidalicouse* suggests the measures that parents of children with autism should take in order to ensure a successful education plan for their children:

While we might all know what his goals are, and how they should be approached, what if we moved to a new school district? The IEP would move with us, and the new district would need to be able to make sense of Leo's goals. Knowing how to create a useful IEP is a critical skill for parents in my position, so if I did need IEP support, or if I anticipated problems, I'd make the most of online resources like Wrightslaw, or the IEP Wizard from the NEA (National Education Association) Teacher Toolkit (Des Roches Rosa, April, 27, 2015).

In this quote, the writer suggests that in order to provide the best education for individuals with autism, parents need to take an active role in the creation of a personal educational plan of their children. Furthermore, the writer claims that this plan should be effective and clear in order that various professionals could use it. The writer refers parents to useful websites that could assist them to build a plan for their children. Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010) discuss individual educational plans for children with autism in the USA. During the individual plans meetings the educational staff along with the autistic child set written future goals together. The meetings' goal is to involve the autistic child as much as possible. The study found that large proportion of the goals that were set during the individual educational plan focused on social skills. The other ones were academic goals. "For all students with autism in this sample, communication goals constituted the largest percentage of IEP goals, at approximately 40.7% of all goals for those students who are included and 37.3% for students who are not included, as seen in Table 3. Self-help goals were the second most frequent goals for both groups, followed by social goals for students who were included and motor/sensory goals for students who were not included" (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010, p.44).

Violence

The writer of the blog *Looking for Blue Sky* addresses the issue of violence and suggests ways to overcome violence toward children:

Well, there are gentle ways to parent children who are violent or have other difficulties, outlined in books such as Connected Parenting and The Explosive Child. But the parenting advice in them is not easy to follow, especially when parents feel hurt and resentful of the way that their children behave: parents do not suddenly become perfect human beings after giving birth, despite society's expectations. What this issue needs is more awareness, more discussion, and a champion to support it. Putting in the resources now to help these children will benefit society in the long term. I am glad that parents can no longer smack children. Now I want to see a future where children no longer feel the need to smack their parents (Looking for Blue Sky, December, 13, 2015).

In this quote, the writer suggests that parents should educate themselves on alternative ways to discipline their children instead of acting in violence. Moreover, the writer claims that in order to reduce violence toward children, the issue of violence should be publicly discussed.

Montes and Halterman (2007) discuss the way that mothers dealing with having an autistic child. The study found that "Having a child with autism was not associated with lower social support for parenting, an altered manner in which serious disagreements were discussed in the household, or increased violence in the household" (Montes & Halterman, 2007, p. 1040). On the other hand, Guido (2007) presents a case study of

an autistic child who is acting with “aggression” (Guido, 2007, p.963). The case study clearly indicates on expression of violence in different aspects of the boy’s life including expression of violence toward his parents. For example, the researcher describes the child behavior at home when he was at the second grade “At home, he would take knives from kitchen drawers and threaten family members” (Guido, 2007, p.963). In addition, Sabapathy, Vanderbilt, Zamora and Augustyn (2016) discuss a case study of a girl with autism who expressed aggressive behavior toward her parents. The girls behavior became severe and therefore the parents tried to control the behavior by medication. The daughter’s violent behavior toward her father is so severe that he considered leaving the household. “The parents report that Juanita pinches them, pulls their hair, and hits her head with her fists. Her aggression toward them is usually triggered by feelings of frustrations, leaving her parents feeling like they have to walk on eggshells around her and have led to differing parenting styles. Her father reports that he tries to avoid getting her upset and prefers to watch TV with her, whereas her mother takes on the day-to-day caretaking” (Sabapathy, Vanderbilt, Zamora & Augustyn, 2016, p.685).

In conclusion, this section identifies issues that concern people on the autistic spectrum. Some of the issues approach autism from the social model perspective because they recognize the obstacles that society puts in the way of individuals with autism. For example, some of the writers recognize the significant amount of bureaucracy involved in getting valuable services for individuals with autism. In addition, another barrier that was discussed in the study is the high cost of some residential programs in the USA for autistic children.

One of the important issues that was discussed is support. Some of the writers discuss their important role in the lives of their autistic children. They recognize that they are a significant part of the child's support system, and have a tremendous influence on their life's experiences.

Some of the writers recognized the necessary support that they need as parents of children with autism. Some of the parents admitted that they face difficult times as a result of parenting a child with autism.

Although, most of the posts were written from the social model perspective, some of the writers demonstrated the medical model of disability point of view. "The overall framework underpinning the medical model predisposes practitioners to think of a "condition" within an abnormal body, which needs appropriate "treatment". The main focus is thus upon normalisation and adaptation to society. As a person is disabled as the result of his/her individual bodily limitations" (Nicolaisen, Blichfeldt & Sonnenschein, 2012, p.203). For example, the writer of the blog Confessions of an Asperger's Mom describes how she does not expect her son to attend college classes in the near future, because she does not think that he is ready for it, although his intellectual abilities are sufficient for college. The mother claims that her son required a lot of support in high school and therefore he is not ready for college. The writer ignores society's role in his educational experience. She does not recognize that her son might experience difficulties in school because he did not receive effective supports that are adapted to his needs and not because of his disability (AspergersMom, October, 23 ,2015).

In addition, this section examined how parents of children with autism address issues that concern individuals on the autistic spectrum. The writer address two main issues: education and violence. In these issues, the writer recognizes that changes need to take place in order to ensure a better quality of life for individuals with autism.

Chapter 4

Comparison between blogs that were written by individuals with autism to blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism

Themes that were identified in both groups:

Individuals with autism	Parents of individuals with autism
<p>Relationships with others</p> <p>Romantic relationships</p> <p>Social relationships</p> <p>Communication</p>	<p>Technology</p>
<p>Psychological difficulties</p> <p>Employment</p> <p>Employment rates</p> <p>Reasons for unemployment</p>	<p>Leisure activities</p> <p>Education</p> <p>Relationship with peers</p> <p>Autistic Children attitude toward school</p> <p>Academic performance</p>

Benefits of employment	
Cognitive difficulties Concentration Sensory Special interests	Mental health
	Support for parents Professional Support Community Support for parents
	Support for individuals with autism Community support Support of parents
	Obstacles in the way of getting services

	<p>Transition from childhood to adulthood</p> <p>Factors that affects the transition process:</p> <p>Preparation for the transition progress</p>
	<p>Employment</p>

One of the goals of this thesis project was to identify issues that concern individuals with autism. This section examines the differences and similarities between the issues that writers with autism address in their blogs to the issues that parents of individuals with autism found important.

Significantly more themes were identified in blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism. Possible reason for this difference is the tendency of individuals with autism to have narrow topics of interest and repetitive conversations (Carter, Common, Sreckovic, Huber, Bottema-Beutel, Gustafson, Dykstra, & Hume, 2013).

Both sections identified employment as an issue that concerns individuals with autism. This result is not surprising due to the significant impact of employment on a person’s quality of life (Hammer, 1993) and the high rates of unemployment among individuals with autism (.Chiang, H. M., Cheung, Y. K., Li, H., & Tsai, L. Y. 2013). In

both sections, writers recognize the importance of employment for individuals with autism and the difficulties of these individuals to enter the workforce. However, there is a difference in the way that the writers identified the causes for unemployment. While the writer of the blog Life with Aspersers, who is on the autistic spectrum suggests that characteristic of individuals with autism such as the following of a strict routine can prevent them from entering the workforce (Bollard, May, 13, 2015), the writer of the blog Squidalicious who is a mother of an autistic child, recognizes that the employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities are very limited (Des Roches Rosa, April, 27, 2015).

Most of the issues that were identified as issues that concern individuals with autism were different from blogs that were written by individuals with autism and blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism. For example, blogs that were written by individuals with autism put more focus on romantic relationships of individuals with autism and blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism discuss issues such as the transition to adulthood. Possible cause for the difference is that the individuals with disabilities write about themselves and they are young adults while the parents write about their children who are at school age.

Although writers from both sections promoted advocacy and discussed issues that are important for individuals with autism, I found that blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism approach more often autism from the social model point of view. Parents of children with autism more often looked in a positive way at their children on the autistic spectrum and acknowledged more the influence of society on the well-being of their children, for example, the support of professionals and

community. On the other hand, writers on the autistic spectrum demonstrated a more negative approach toward their disability and self-blame for their poor outcomes.

It was interesting to notice that parents of children with autism focused more on their own mental health rather than their autistic children's mental situation. In contrast, blogs that were written by individuals with autism put a significant focus on their mental and cognitive difficulties.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrated the way that blogs serve as vehicles for the integration of people with autism in society. The study explored posts from eight blogs that were written by individuals with autism or by their parents. The study showed that blogs provide a platform that allows people with autism to share experiences with others and to create discussions about their experiences. The social interaction and the sharing of similar experiences between individuals with autism encourages the creation of autism identity and culture. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that blogs enable the creation of autism advocacy.

This study provided a glimpse into the world of individuals with autism, by identifying issues that concern them. The study found different issues such as the relationship with others, technology and leisure activities. As predicted, some of the issues focused on barriers that people with autism experience in society such as difficulties in gaining employment. This study's base assumption is that identification of issues that concern people with autism contributes to the integration of people with autism in society. The

recognition of these issues provides a voice for people with autism. Individuals with autism have difficulties with social interactions (Thunberg, Ahlsen, Dahlgren, 2011). They most likely will find it easier to communicate in the virtual world (Davidson, 2008) Hence, this study, used blogs, to bring to public attention issues that are important for people with autism and therefore to express their desires and needs to society. Professionals, caregivers, parents and other people who interact with people with autism can use this study to have a better understanding of individuals with autism and issues that concern them.

The identification of issues that concern people with autism may improve the way that they are presented to the world. For example, one of the issues that was identified in this study is romantic relationships of individuals with autism. The identification of this issue helps to recognize people with autism as sexual human beings who are capable of being part of a romantic relationship. These findings contradict the approach of society that individuals with disabilities are “unattractive” (Liddiard, 2014, p.116) and deserve pity (Liddiard, 2014). “Society is likely to view sexuality of these individuals solely as a problem” (Leutar & Mihokovic, 2007, p.94). Moreover, people often do not address to sexuality of people with disabilities or discuss it uncomfortably (Leutar & Mihokovic, 2007).

The study showed the way that people with autism and parents of people with autism address issues that concern them. This study provides the opportunity to understand how to improve different aspects of the life of individuals with autism from first- hand sources, individuals with autism or the people who are the closest to them, their parents. From my literature review, I noticed that a lot of studies in the academy

rely on opinions of experts and professionals regarding ways to handle different issues in the lives of individuals with disabilities. However, this study provides power to individuals with autism and recognizes that they are the experts about their own life and should be involved in any decision that concerns them.

In addition, the study compared the findings of blogs that were written by individuals with autism to the findings of blogs that were written by parents of individuals with autism. The study found that the majority of issues that were presented in the blogs that were written by people with autism were different from the issues that were presented in blogs that were written by parents of people with autism. The study suggested that these differences can be explained by the different age groups of the individuals that the blogs discuss. Individuals with autism who write the blogs are more mature than the autistic children of parents who write blogs about autism. In addition, parents might have a different role in the life of their children. They have the role of discipliners and therefore they are more interested in issues that affect the progress of their children such as education.

This research project is significant to the area of disability studies. First, it adds to the existing knowledge about autism and therefore promotes the understanding of people with autism in society. Secondly, this study is written from the social model of disability point of view and therefore, it helps to reinforce the approach of the social model around disability .Finally, this study empowers people with autism, by identifying issues that are important for them. The study acknowledges the importance of their opinions and point of view.

Limitations of the study and future research

This study is conducted on the web and therefore, it is limited to the information that was provided by the writers of the blogs online. In this method, the researcher cannot ask additional questions. Individuals with autism might find it difficult to be interviewed face to face by a researcher, due to communication barriers. However, a future study that will conduct depth interviews with parents of people with autism about issues that concern their children might add to the results of this study. It is important to interview individuals with autism as well, however going back to the problem of face to face communication of individuals with autism, in person interviews might be an unsuitable research tool for participants with autism. Therefore, surveys that participants have to fill in writing might be a better option.

Furthermore, one of the limitation of conducting a research using the web is that sometimes there is not complete information about the writers. Some of the writers keep their anonymity and therefore use nicknames and do not reveal details about themselves. Therefore, I could not know important details about some blogs such as in which places the blog were written.

In addition, there is a possibility that some issues that were found in the study are not relevant to some individuals with autism. For example, it is likely that issues that concern individuals with a very low functioning autism are different from issues that concern individuals with autism that are very high functioning. This research could provide more wide perspective about autism if blogs that were written by individuals with a low functioning autism were included. Unfortunately it is difficult to find these kinds of

blogs and the research for these blogs is impossible in the limited time frame of a Master student

Furthermore, Parents who write about their children on blogs can use blogs has a platform to write any information about their children even if it is privet. The parents have the power to expose their children without their awareness. Sometimes this exposure can even present the children in a negative light. Therefore, raises the question, if in the future an ethical discussion about the use of blogs as a research tool needs to take place?

In addition, this study examined blogs that were written by individuals with autism or their parents. It will be interesting to explore in a future study blogs of other people who are related to people with autism, for example, caregivers and to compare them to the results of the current study. In addition, it will be interesting to compare the results of this study with the findings of other blogs that were written by individuals with autism. Future studies of this kind might provide a glimpse into the perspective of different people about autism.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated the way that blogs provide rich information about the world of individuals with disabilities. The disability Studies department and other departments in the academia can use blogs as a tool to educate their students about the needs and desires of individuals with disability. In contrast to many academic papers and websites on the web which present the opinions of professionals about disability, blogs will provide students with points of views of individuals with disabilities.

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