

# A Qualitative Study of College Students with Autism: *Resilience and Spirituality*

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# Review of the Literature

- **Autism**

- (American Psychiatric Association, 2022)

- **Resilience**

- (Muller et al., 2017; Szatmari, 2018; Waldron et al., 2022)

- **Spirituality**

- (Budak et al., 2019; Burlaka et al., 2020; Ekwonye et al., 2020; Upenieks, 2021)

- **Coping**

- **Sense of Belonging**

- (Gaventa, 2021; Myles et al., 2019)

- **Hope**

- (Martin et al., 2019; Moody et al., 2022)



# Gap and Research Questions

Lack of research examining individuals with autism as opposed to parents or guardians.

**RQ1:** How do college students with autism strengthen their hope, resilience, and sense of belonging?

**RQ2:** Are spiritual coping mechanisms common to college students with autism?



# Method – Participants

- Gathered 15 individuals to conduct interviews
- Participants must be:
  - Previously diagnosed with ASD
  - Current students at Liberty University
- Participants were gathered via snowball sampling through:
  - Office of Disability Accommodation Support (ODAS)
  - Autism Advocates Club
  - Flyers strategically placed throughout campus
- Participants directed to an online form for demographic and availability information

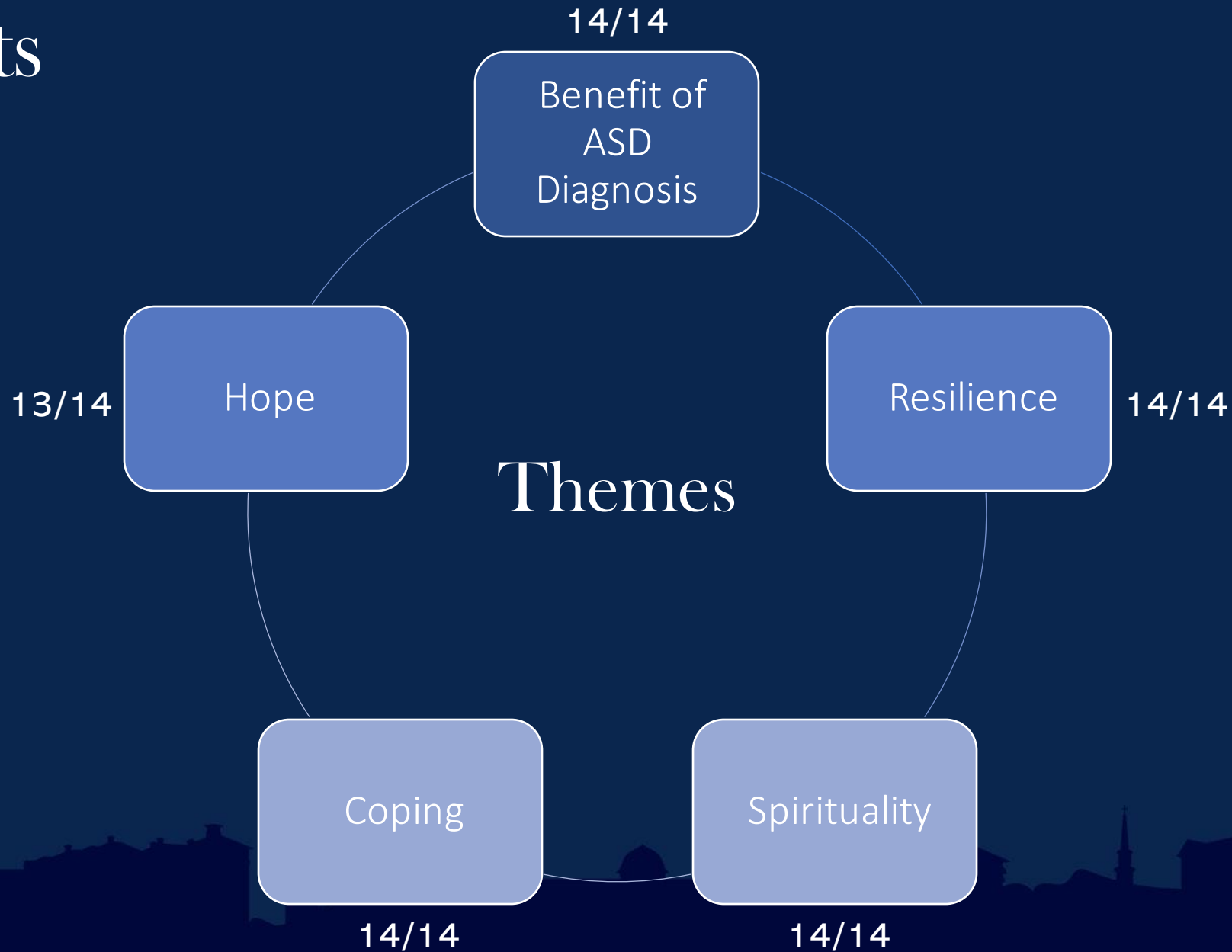


# Method – Design

- Based on recorded availability, participants were assigned an interview time slot
- Interviews conducted were:
  - Long-form, semi-structured, qualitative
  - Lasted between 15 minutes and an hour
  - Focused on personal experience related to our topics of interest
- Participants then asked to complete the 25-item Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1988)
  - 7-point Likert scale
  - Indicates feelings of agreement with different statements
  - Most efficient method of measuring resilience



# Results



# Results – Demographics

	Pseudonym	Sex	Comorbid Diagnoses	Age/Year or Degree	Age When Aware of Diagnosis	Residential/ Online	Resilience Scale Score
1	Anne	F	**	20s, Masters	15	**	94
2	Sasha	F	ADHD, OCD, CPTSD	35, PhD	23	Online	123
3	Tom	M	**	Bachelors	3	Residential	149
4	Helen	F	Depression	Bachelors	Early childhood	Residential	115
5	Kendall	F	PTSD	29, Masters	**	Residential	135
6*	Chloe	F	**	20, Bachelors	14	Online	137
7	Brad	M	**	24, Masters	Mid-childhood	Residential	145
8	Joseph	M	“math disorder”, ADHD, OCD, GAD, Social Anxiety	20, Masters	7	Online	113
9	Renee	F	**	51, PhD	~50	Online	149
10	Judy	F	Anxiety	Bachelors	10-12	Residential	116
11	Rose	F	Bipolar- incorrectly diagnosed	40, Bachelors	36	Online	133
12	Zane	M	ADHD, Anxiety, Depression	Bachelors	Last year	Residential	119
13	Harper	F	Social Anxiety	40s, PhD	30s	Online	132
14	Jessica	F	**	18, Bachelors	18	Residential	124
15	Sarah	F	ADHD, SPD, GAD	Bachelors	18	Residential	120

\*\*not mentioned in the interview



# Results - Benefit of ASD Diagnosis

“When I was diagnosed, it was a huge relief to me.”

- Diagnosis helped them to understand how their brain works differently.
- Diagnosis reassured them in giving themselves permission to utilize accommodations.





# Results – Resilience

"I don't have a quit in me."

- Individuals with autism often expressed a "just do it" mindset.
- Resilience in self-efficacy
- Resilience came from the sheer will to succeed
- Resilience scale:
  - Max. score on scale: 175, Min. score on scale: 25
  - Max. score from participants: 149, Min. score from participants: 94
  - Mean: 126.93
  - Median: 124



# Results – Spirituality

"[God's] definitely been a major part of my life, and I think honestly had I not grown up knowing about Him, I don't know how I would cope with being on the spectrum."

- Faith and trust in God's consistency
- Confidence in God's will
- Relying on God for every little thing



# Results – Coping

- Coping to deal with daily stressors
- **Spiritual Coping**
  - Prayer, reading the Bible, faith in God
- **Other Forms of Coping**
  - Listening to music, body checks, recognizing triggers
  - Utilizing accommodations
- **Sense of Belonging**
  - "I knew I was different. People knew I was different, but finding that belonging, it was like...OK, there's other people out there who are different too."



# Results - Hope

"I've always had hope about stuff, so it's not certain, but I know things work out in the end."

- Practical outlook
- **Confident** but not **optimistic**
- Hope comes from trusting in God
- Lots of people interested in helping professions
  - Education
  - Healthcare
  - Ministry



# Discussion - Implications

- *Benefits of ASD Diagnosis:* Not a negative label, but a helpful tool for success that allows individuals with autism to access accommodations and better accept their own differences
- *Resilience:* Equips therapists to better help their clients with autism to further develop their own resilience
- *Spirituality:* Emphasizes spirituality as an effective coping mechanism and linked to hope in the future and purpose in their diagnosis
- *Coping:* Could give other individuals within the community ideas of effective coping mechanisms that might work for them
- *Hope:* May inspire others to go into a helping profession due to increased awareness of the experiences of individuals with autism, whether positive or negative



# Discussion - Limitations

- Qualitative data is subject to observer bias
- Participants were recruited through snowball sampling
- Study conducted on a Mid-Atlantic Christian college campus which affects the study's ability to generalize to other college students
- Some individuals with autism may not want to self-identify



# Discussion - Future Research

- Comparing individuals with autism and individuals not diagnosed with autism
- Including scales for belonging, spirituality, and hope as were included for resilience
- Examining the influence of family background and circumstances surrounding diagnosis on spirituality and resilience



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Questions?

