

Ruling Passions: A Research Informed Handbook

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Ruling Passions

a research informed handbook



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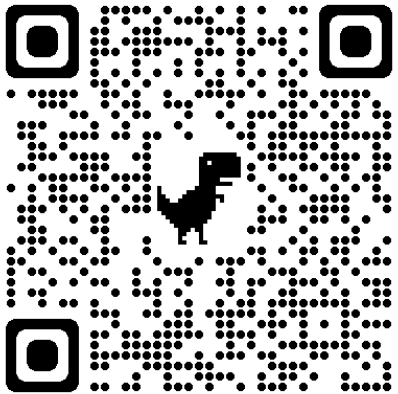


Ruling Passions

A 'research informed handbook' made for
the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences in
November 2023



Dr. Chris Bailey, Sheffield Hallam University



www.rulingpassions.wordpress.com

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Introduction



Take a moment to think about what really interests you. Do you have a particular interest or hobby that enriches your life?

This fascination might have its origins in your childhood, or it could be a recent development. It may be something you mainly engage in during your leisure time, or perhaps it has evolved into a career or route into study.

For instance, many of us are passionate about music, reading books, watching films, or playing a sport. Having the time and freedom to pursue these interests is often closely tied to our wellbeing, and helps us to form a positive self-identity, shaping who we are.

At least, this tends to be the case if you are considered to be **neurotypical**. Historically, however, for those of us who are autistic, or otherwise **neurodivergent**, such interests are talked about using negative, medicalized terminology which describes them as *‘special’* interests and as ‘repetitive and restrictive’.

To push back against these pathologising takes, the **Ruling Passions** project takes a more positive approach. Reframing these interests as **‘ruling passions’**, the project has worked with the understanding that these interests can take on additional significance for neurodivergent people due to the depth of involvement or amount of time and thought invested into a particular topic or activity.

The project was led by an autistic researcher and sought to expand our understanding of what are often called ‘special interests’ – showing them as more meaningful and complex than ‘medicalised’ understandings may suggest.

The project also had a particular focus on **literacy** (reading and writing) and used an understanding of literacy (from New Literacy Studies) that sees the creation and consumption of texts as involving more than (just) words. Related ideas around **multimodality** help us to think about how we make meaning and communicate using more than written or spoken language – we use ‘modes’ such as gesture, expression, images, sound, movement, colour etc.

The term ‘ruling passions’ has been borrowed from literacy researchers David Barton and Mary Hamilton who used it in 1998 in their work around ‘Local Literacies’. I am interested in extending the use of the term here to apply to the interests of autistic (and other neurodivergent) people.

About the term 'Special Interest'

The first mention of 'special interests' was made in a document published in October 1954 by Medical Doctors J. Franklin Robinson and Louis J. Vitale, called 'Children with Circumscribed Interest Patterns'. They wrote about children who 'develop special interests and sometime special abilities'. The three children they described were said to show a 'withholding of interest or endeavour in other types of activity or areas of thought' with 'a restriction of social interest and limited establishment of interpersonal relationships'. Throughout the text, the focused interests are written about as undesirable problems for the children and their families.

The document currently most widely used in autism diagnosis is the DSM-5. This talks about such interests as 'restrictive and repetitive'. Such negative framings demonstrate how the term 'special interests' has its origins in medicalised understanding of autism - what Nick Walker calls the **pathology paradigm**.

Much academic literature has followed suit, repeatedly framing these interests in reductive and stigmatising ways. There are exceptions, however. Andy McDonnell and Damian Milton have written about autistic people's interests in relation to 'a flow state... where a person is so immersed in an activity that nothing else seems to matter'. Rebecca Wood has written about the value of incorporating intense interests into educational contexts.

This project aims to add to the literature around these interests by reconsidering them as 'ruling passions', and building on work around what Nick Walker describes as the **neurodiversity paradigm**.

Note: many autistic people – including participants in this project – are happy to use the term special interests. Language changes over time and, for this reason, I am not suggesting that the term necessarily needs replacing. However, by highlighting the medicalised origins and using alternative descriptions – such as 'ruling passions' – I am hoping that we can consciously move further away from these negative framings towards a more complex understanding of what have historically been called 'special interests'.

The Project

The Ruling Passions Project included **13 autistic adults as participants**, each of whom was invited to share their perspectives on their own interests. They were provided with a variety of communication options tailored to their individual needs and preferences. These options included face-to-face interviews, online video calls, telephone conversations, and text-based methods like email exchanges or social media interactions.

All participants responded to a common set of questions related to their life experiences and the significance of their interests. They discussed how their interests had developed during their earlier years, their experiences in school, and the roles these interests currently play in their lives. They were also asked about the ways in which their interests may have related to literacy.

The participants: in their own words

On the following pages, you will find insights from the project's participants as they discuss their individual interests and the roles these play in their lives.

These excerpts are condensed from more extensive transcripts, chosen to provide a glimpse into the subjects each person covered. I hope they begin to give some idea of the depth and variety of interests covered by the participants.

Participants did not have to have a medical autism diagnosis – but in the event 12 / 13 of the participants did have a formal diagnosis. One participant considered themselves to be neurodivergent – via several other medical diagnoses - and strongly associated their experiences with the concept of ‘special interest’.

Participants used a range of terms to describe their ruling passions – this included ‘special interests’ (also shortened to SPIN), specialised interests, focussed interests, obsessions, fascinations etc

Participant names are pseudonyms.

I did not provide participants with a definition of 'special interests', but they were asked to consider what the term meant for them. Here are a few of their responses...

Ian suggested that autistic people's interests are characterised by their ***'breadth and depth'***.

For Avery they are ***'an area of intense focus'***.

MEJ described how autistic people ***'like to pull at threads and pull at them until we get to the end. And sometimes that can take us on a journey into a direction where we suddenly learn a lot about a subject that perhaps other people may not understand why would want to know that much about it, but for us it brings a sense of satisfaction'***.

Graham saw a 'special interest' as one that would ***'serve more purposes and to be more significant than the hobby or the pastime of the non-autistic person'***.

P understood them as an interests that ***'really sort of transport you'***.

They were framed by Ben as an interest that ***'has a special place in [the autistic person's] life and in their heart that they derive a lot of joy out of, they derive quite often some peace from it as well.'***

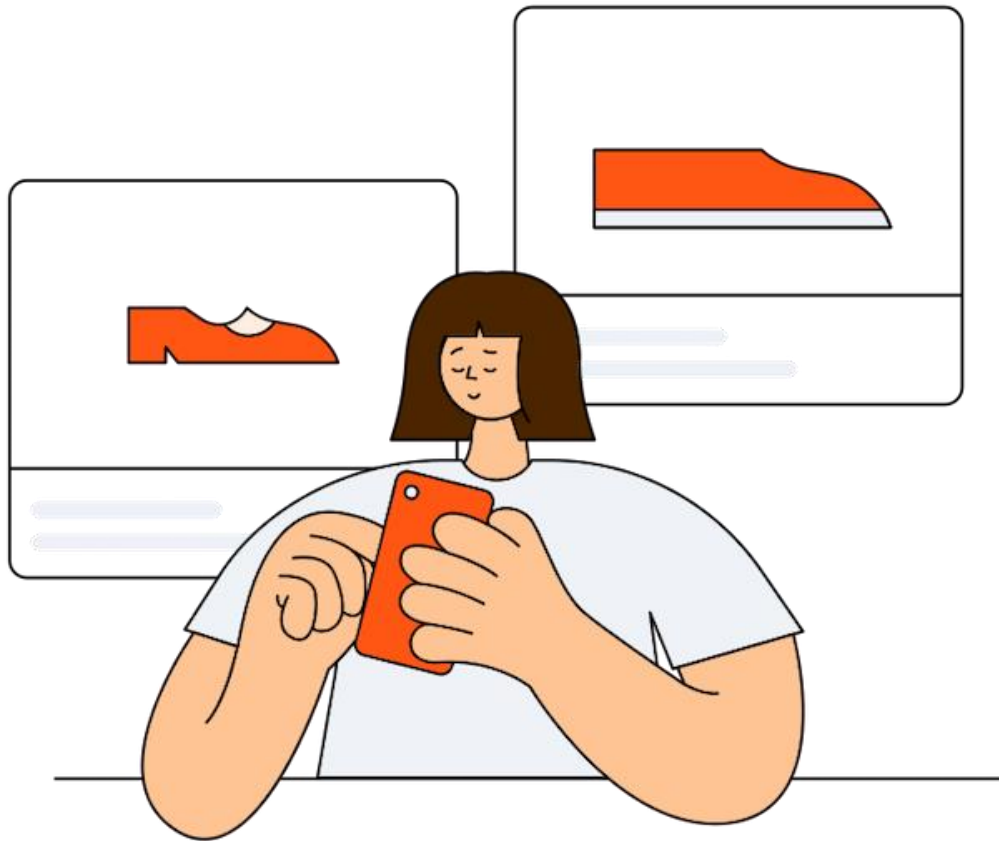
Laura in her own words

“So the first one, and I think this is quite a common one: dinosaurs! And that's still something that members of my family will just always bring up about me, like memories of just having loads of facts about dinosaurs and collecting toys, correcting the teachers about dinosaur facts! So that's probably my earliest one, or one of the earliest ones. There was a video, a David Attenborough video about moles that I... had a special interest for quite a long period of time...

If I get a free moment, it will be spent looking at different trainers, different trainer designs, bookmarking trainers that I would like but I'm actually not going to buy, or just trainers that I just find interesting.. I've got a few pairs but I'm not someone who - the term hype boost where people will go out on the first day and get the box and I don't keep them in the boxes... It's more about - I think it's almost like a dream, like one day I'll have those trainers. It just makes me happy just looking at a nice, designed pair of trainers.”

... If I get a free moment, it will be spent looking at different trainers, different trainer designs, bookmarking trainers that I would like but I'm actually not going to buy...

Laura (she/her)
age 33



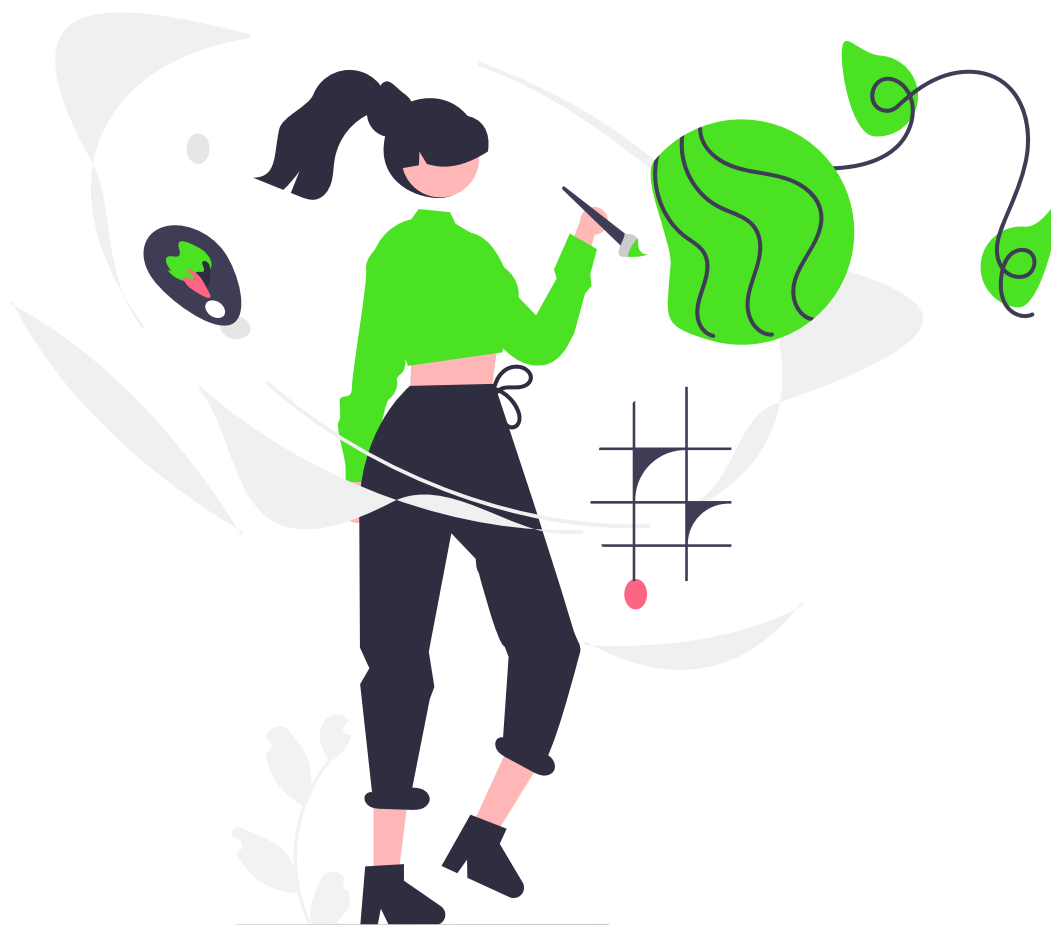
Kate in her own words

“When I was a child, my mum has said that I used to want to play the same board game over and over again and I used to love reading those 'big book of questions and answers' books, especially the science sections... as a teenager I loved biology (I wanted to be a vet and would memorise anatomy diagrams!) and then went on to study biomedical science at university. I think I have a brain that just really easily visualises structures in the body and remembers facts, regardless of whether they are useful or not!

Knitting is a dual purpose thing, I guess. I'm really interested in the history of knitting and traditional styles of knitting so things like fair isle hats and Shetland lace... and learning those really old techniques ... also knitting is an almost socially acceptable stim, so I can do it on public transport or if I'm in a pub with friends and keeping my hands busy helps me to cope with waiting for things as I feel like I'm being productive... I think it's also a visual stim as I like looking at patterns and yarn online and find this really relaxing which I think is partly to do with liking bright colours and rainbows!”

... Knitting is an almost socially acceptable stim, so I can do it on public transport or if I'm in a pub with friends and keeping my hands busy helps me to cope with waiting for things...

Kate (she/her)
age 40



MEJ in his own words

“... It’s about the detail. It’s about creating and having power over those details. I was into painting toy soldiers, but I always painted really small ones. It was about the detail. I’ve always been detail focused. It was about the buttons on the uniform. It’s about the watches people wear. It’s about what jewellery they’ve got on....

... Some of my interests in childhood were perhaps to do with escapism due to a highly transitional childhood... I’ve always been into bikes one way or another and wheeled objects that have given me a sense of peace, mountain bikes, then skateboards, then BMXs, then back to mountain bikes because it gives me a sense of control and a sense of rhythm I think with the pedalling and also the natural flow of the environment...

... Fluidity I think is a key word there. That’s sort of been my safe place, a situation of cohesive fluidity where I am in control of the fluidity, but it is fluid. As a physically awkward person who’s fallen over his own feet for years, to be in a situation where suddenly everything just rolls naturally is important...”

MEJ (he/him)
age 42

... It gives me a sense
of control and a
sense of rhythm...



[Image from unDraw]

Robert in his own words

“... it's the breadth and depth of how much you engage in that interest that turns it from an interest... to a passionate interest in my view. So say for example one of mine is reading, always has been, from the minute I could read that was it, I would stay up with a torch under my covers and I would set my alarm for half past five so I could start reading earlier on in the day and I would read a book and then I would read the next book in the series and the next book and then I'd go back and start again. To this day I will read books literally hundreds of times, the same book over and over again...

... If you've got a passion you always know what to do, you always know what to think about, you've got something so motivating to engage you, by definition you can never get bored. It's amazing....

... I'm quite sporty. I'm not in the slightest bit interested in winning anything. I've played rugby.... My team were lovely... Squash was another one. I used to get absolutely fixated on squash and practicing in my head the same shot over and over again or whatever it might be...

... I don't see how you can have an interest without it being passionate... I think it is pretty much all or nothing...”

Robert (he/him)
age 51

... If you've got a passion you
always know what to do,
you always know what to
think about...



[Image from unDraw]

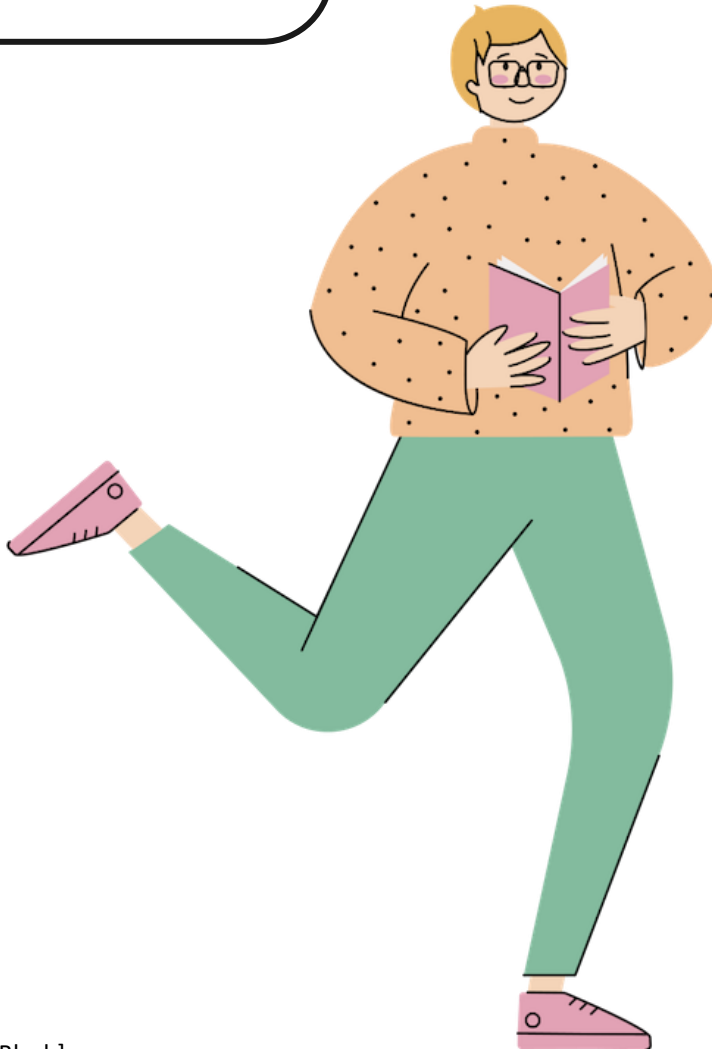
Ashley in their own words

“I think reading really as a child was probably my main interest. I was a stereotypical bookworm and I would get six library books out in a week and read them all and now as a tired 42 year old I could never manage to read that many in a week! Life changes you like that.

... And then as a teenager I think it moved more into music, so I was a huge fan of The Cure and I collected all of their albums, often through borrowing the CD from the library and recording it on to tape! Then in my 20s it was often a series of hobbies really. So I went to life drawing classes for quite a while and dabbled with that and then there was the knitting which I did learn to knit as a child but didn't quite get the hang of it and then early 2000s I taught myself to do it properly and, yeah, that became just a really nice way to relax. Browsing patterns and things I want to make. There's a big crossover between knitting and general nerd things and geek things so, you know, you've always got your Star Trek knitting...”

... I think reading really as a child was probably my main interest. I was a stereotypical bookworm and I would get six library books out in a week and read them all...

Ashley
(they/them)
age 42



Graham in his own words

“... by the time I went to university I’d probably read about half of the books in [small town] Library because they didn’t have that many...

... They had about 150 science-fiction books and so once I’d read all of those I had to branch out a bit...

... I remember getting a very strange book about *musique concrète* but it was basically about how to do it yourself, you know, for the interested schoolboy, like can you borrow a tape recorder? If you can then the world is your oyster...

... Record an alarm clock, then you can slow it down like this and maybe try and put it with, you know, get a dog to bark and then try playing that backwards. Yeah, so I was doing all that and I suppose I started trying to do some of that with my bass guitar. Some of that was on my own and then some of it was then playing in bands...

... I suppose you could start it at about age 13 or something, 13, 14 and seeing The Stranglers on Top of the Pops and thinking this is fantastic! That incredibly growling sound made by that very handsome guy at the back, you know, I would like to be that man. I wanted to be Jean-Jacques Burnel and I still do I think if that was an option!”

Graham

(he/him)
age 56

... I suppose you could start it
at about age 13 or something,
13, 14 and seeing The
Stranglers on Top of the Pops
and thinking this is fantastic! I
wanted to be Jean-Jacques
Burnel...



Ben in his own words

“I’ve got two main special interests at the moment, which are lifeboats and Dungeons & Dragons...

... with the lifeboats I really enjoy just how they look, the bright orange, the smoothness of them, but I also especially love the different classifications of them, the types...

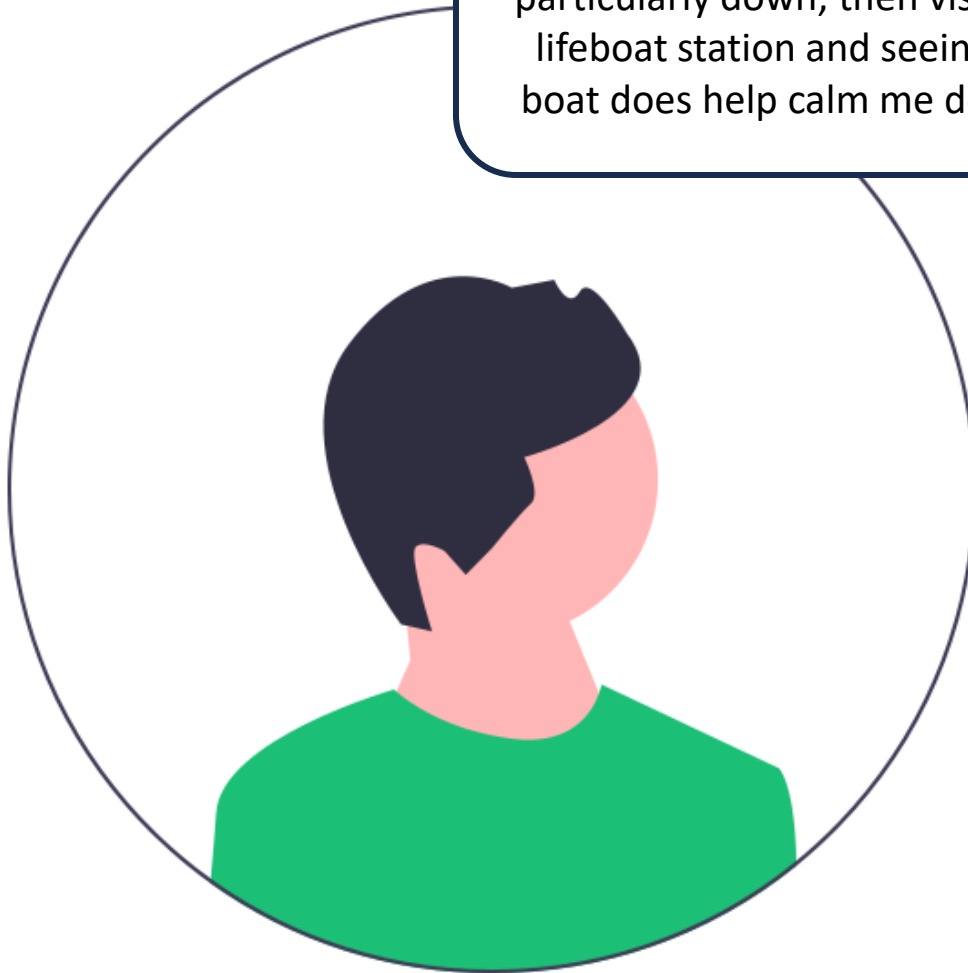
... if I’m feeling particularly stressed or anxious or if I’m feeling particularly down, then visiting a lifeboat station and seeing the boat does help calm me down, and help cheer me up because, I can focus on it, I can put all my brain power into just admiring it, admiring the colour, what class of lifeboat it is... mum, my brother and me.... they’re happy to go around and rush around the country to find them!

... in terms of Dungeons & Dragons, [this] has impacted [me] socially and has been really good because it’s meant I can make friends that have similar interests to me... and [I] talk to them about that...”

Ben (he/him)

age 20

... if I'm feeling particularly stressed or anxious or if I'm feeling particularly down, then visiting a lifeboat station and seeing the boat does help calm me down...



Ian in his own words

“I've played guitar all my life, well, since I was about 14 or so. Never been any good but I've always owned a guitar and I've got one in the lounge now... so I discovered Debussy and Chopin and thought, wow, this stuff is amazing and I like a spectrum of classical music now. Not all of it, you know, the likes of Shostakovich and the big ponderous Russians are a bit much for me and I definitely don't like the marching music, or dance music...

... I found things to fill my life and they have given me great pleasure. In another universe it might be that if I could have been more socially acceptable then possibly I might not have developed these interests or they might not have been as deep or whatever, I don't know that. You know, 'what if's' are fun to think about but you can't actually come to any conclusions because it's quite impossible...

... the only hero I had was the Lone Ranger... have you seen the Johnny Depp film of the Lone Ranger? ...right at the end when he gallops in on Silver and they start playing the William Tell Overture, god. *I was four again.* Tears came to my eyes.”

Ian (he/him)
age 66

...the only hero I
had was the Lone
Ranger...



[Image from unDraw]

P in their own words

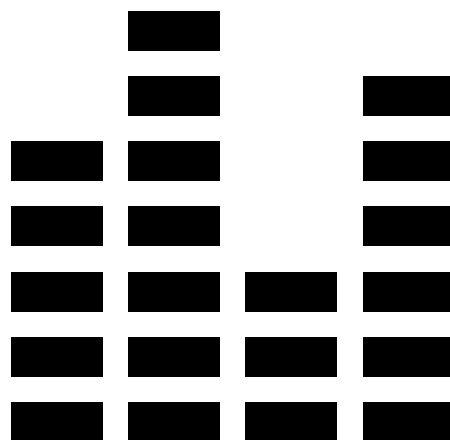
“I've never been someone that's had one special interest, I've always maintained about six or seven so I was sort of really interested at various points in LGBT history and scepticism and philosophy and that kind of thing.

... I never thought to myself that I hear music in a different way to other people and then it transpired that I did so hearing it in a more analytical way than other people... hearing all the individual parts, being able with my general sound landscape to strip everything down and work out, you know, these layers and landscapes of sound... I didn't learn that not everyone had such a strong emotional reaction to harmony. I would watch people listening to music and think how are you not literally exploding right now? I don't understand how....

... Yeah, so that can be quite difficult, not understanding why other people aren't as interested because it can come across in a very intense way and not everyone wants to engage in that all the time and that's fair... I've sort of built my life around various obsessions...”

P (they/them)
age 25

... I never thought to myself that I hear music in a different way to other people and then it transpired that I did so hearing it in a more analytical way than other people...



[Image from unDraw]

Catharine in her own words

“So my all-encompassing obsession which has been probably since I was a teenager is vintage and old stuff but not - when I tell people I like vintage things they get it totally wrong and think I mean 1940s florals but really it's like mid-century, 60s, 70s, some 80s, even 90s is vintage now which is really scary.

... My house looks very 70s! Yeah. I'm selling a bit of vintage myself now. I've got a little unit in an antiques centre. I've sold on eBay since the early 2000s...

...I've always been interested in reading. When I was young I used to love reading about animals and I suppose animals were a special interest for me as a child, cats and dogs particularly, wildlife.... I had lots of soft toys; I was obsessed with animals but as I've got older - I went through a period of never reading any fiction. I thought I don't like fiction, it's boring, what's the point in reading about fiction when you should be reading about fact and, you know, things that have actually happened but then suddenly in probably the last four years I've actually managed to sit down and read some fiction and enjoy it for what it is. So I've always loved reading. I do always tend to go for either things to do with nature and the world or things that are a bit darker...”

... my all-encompassing obsession which has been probably since I was a teenager is vintage and old stuff... I'm selling a bit of vintage myself now.... I've sold on eBay since the early 2000s...

Catharine (she/her)
age 38



[Image from unDraw]

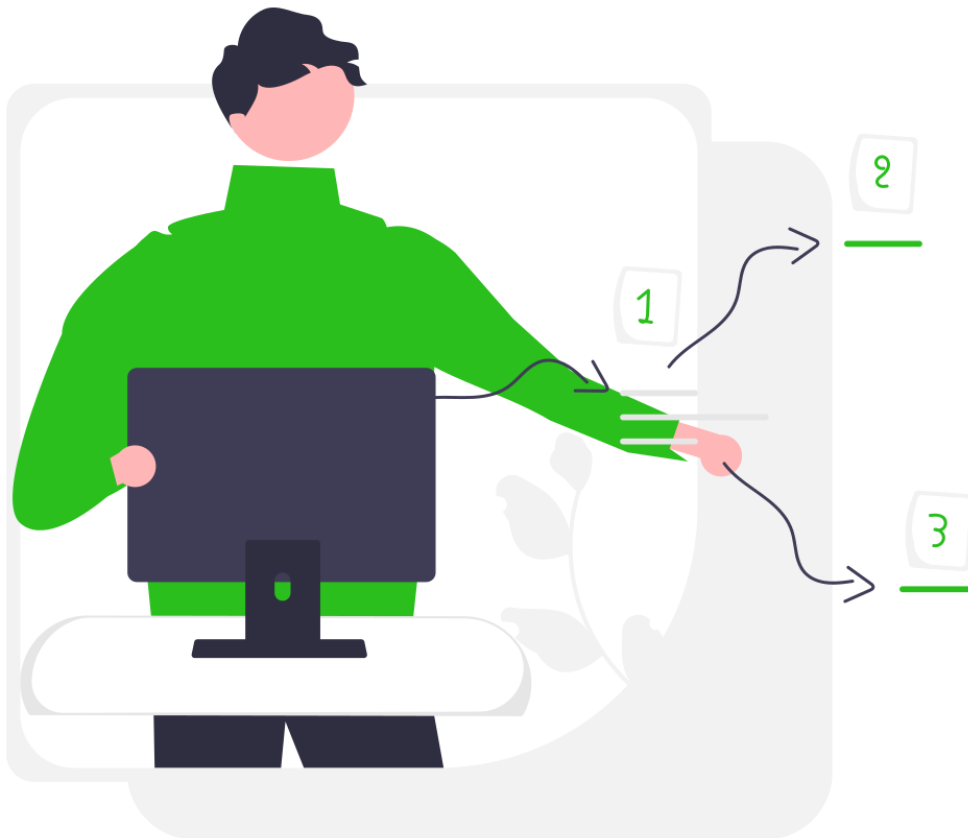
Avery in their own words

“One of my current spins is figuring out the language to express my thoughts on my experience of autism and gender. Both of these are minority experiences compared to the general population. Language is evolved to meet the needs of the people who speak it, so it's natural that we have words and phrases to express neurotypical cisgendered ideas clearly. But when it comes to expressing the thoughts and feelings and experiences of GSRM or autistic individuals, the language is lacking. How does it feel to have a gender that isn't within the binary? How does it feel to have an autistic meltdown?”

... One of my early childhood spins was computers. I was fascinated by the small computer that my parents bought to do word processing back in the 80s. I opened up the cover to see all the components, and explored the interface to see all of the functions it was capable of. My mother bought me my first textbook on computer programming when I was 7, and it's been a lifelong spin since then that I've leveraged into a career.”

Avery (they/them)
age 39

... One of my early childhood spins was computers. I was fascinated by the small computer that my parents bought to do word processing back in the 80s...



[Image from unDraw]

Emma in their own words

“Fish, I had a massive obsession with for years and I was obsessed with tabletop wargames and RPGs for a lot of my teenage years...

... Special interests to me are when a particular series of thoughts are clearer than others - it is comforting to think of my special interests cause thinking about them and understanding how I'm thinking is simple when I enjoy the subject. I generally refer to them as my obsessions just cause that's how they get. They are my way of thinking and can become exclusively what I think about.

... Monster Hunter is a franchise I'm obsessed with over the past two years and when I'm playing it it drowns all else out and allows me to think over ideas and equipment even after being done for the day so I can have clear thoughts... I love video games in general as well... getting lost in a fantasy or another world...”

Emma (they/them) age 18

... I love video games in general as well... getting lost in a fantasy or another world...



[Image by Leni Kauffman / Blush]

Solange in her own words

“I have always struggled to fit in and called myself weirdo and just loved being by myself most of the time, even though I was born and raised in Africa with a very different cultural setting. I have never liked noise and loud music... I now have a name for my being different and celebrate and advocate for this identity within the Black and Minority Ethnic communities both here in the UK and in some parts of Africa. I went to a mainstream school back in Africa but struggled with socialising and keeping friends. My mum thought it was wrong for me not to make and keep my friends.

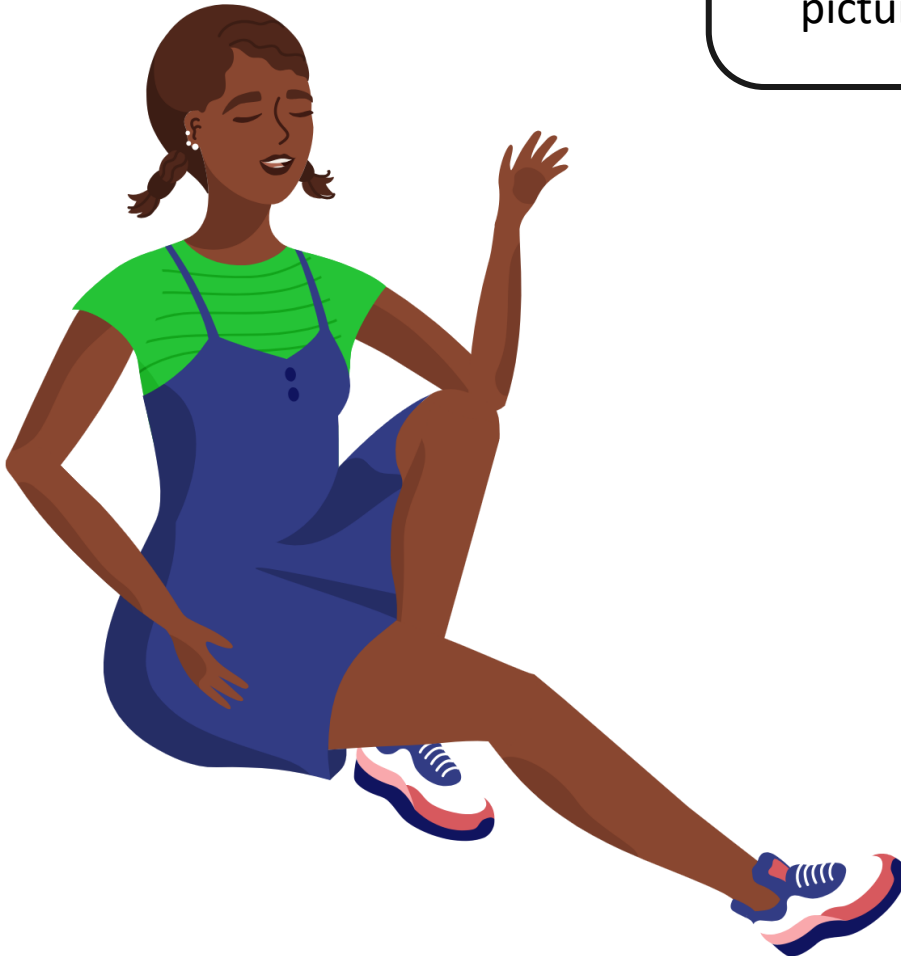
... Specialist interests have helped me a lot in terms of my professional development. It gives me sanity as I have specialized in the industry I work. I like talking about autism and bringing awareness to the condition within our community. My other obsession is God and everything liberally Godly. I liked singing in the past; I still do love singing. I also like taking pictures of nature. My Godliness gives me sanity and something to concentrate on and be myself without a care in the world...”

Solange

(she/her)

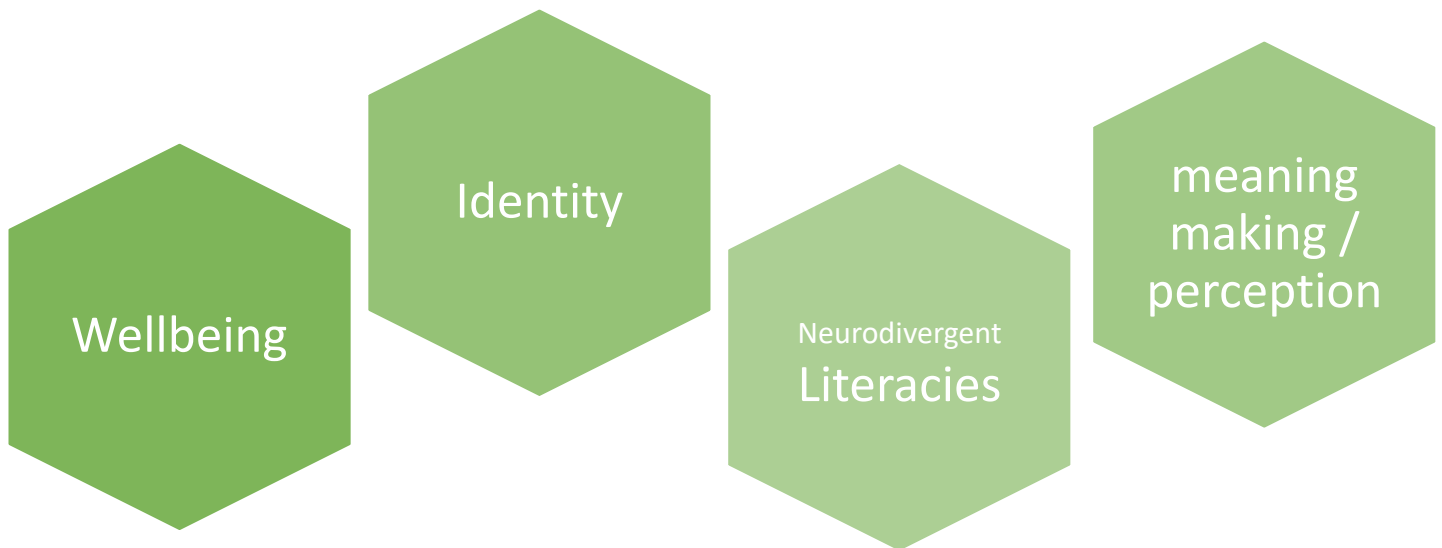
age 50

I liked singing in the past; I still do love singing. I also like taking pictures of nature.



Themes and Findings

Here I address four themes drawn directly from participants accounts of their engagement with their interests.



Some of these findings form the basis of an academic paper: *Neurodivergent literacies': exploring autistic adults' 'ruling passions' and embracing neurodiversity through classroom literacies*

Wellbeing

Several participants described how spending time with their ruling passions is a key component to ensure their positive wellbeing.

For Avery, for instance, their ruling passions are ‘a necessary part of being healthy’, offering ‘an opportunity to flex my mental and physical muscles, to escape from the pressures of allistic society, to engage in a mode of thinking that is highly compatible with my neurotype’. Similarly, Emma described how they liked ‘getting lost in a fantasy or another world’ through video games which enabled them to have ‘clear thoughts.’

In many cases, ruling passions also had a sensory component which the participants talked about positively in terms of ‘stimming’ - the process self-regulation achieved through sensory means. For some this came through music, for others via knitting or bike riding. P talked about the ‘stimmy side’ of music, suggesting that ‘the unintentional movement of music is really important to me and is just a regulating kind of mechanism.’

Like autistic people’s interests, stimming has also been framed negatively by medicalising literature. However, the crossover between sensory regulation and ruling passions here was one of the factors that made these interests so vital for positive wellbeing.

Many participants talked about prior experiences of challenge in relation to their mental health, particularly in the context of the social aspects of school. When reflecting on earlier life, positive experiences at school tended to be related to chances to pursue personal interests. Kate remembered that she 'just loved learning ... school allowed me to pursue subjects like History, Science'.

The most positive accounts of educational experience came from Avery, who was home-schooled: 'My mother met me where I was ... she was able to adapt lessons to my way of thinking ... That included special interests. She'd often give me the opportunity to write essays on some of my spins, which was a stroke of genius on her part.'

Others recalled occasions when teachers acknowledged their interests in classroom contexts. 'P' 'had a couple of really good teachers who noticed my interest in things'. Laura remembered a drama teacher who would 'bring in familiar reference points to help me with whatever it was we were learning'.

However, Ben, a recent school-leaver, reflected: 'If I was allowed in the social context to express my interest ... and really share it, then I would have absolutely loved that. I don't think I did it for school'. This suggests several missed opportunities for drawing on interests in educational contexts.

Identity

For many participants, ruling passions were entangled with aspects of their identities.

As 'P' articulated, 'the autistic identity comes with special interest for me ... because I've sort of built my life around various obsessions'. Some participants had a focused interest in autism as a subject and described engaging with this interest through reading and writing. As a result of this focus, and their own lived experience, several had jobs where they supported other autistic people or taught about autism. Solange talked about reading 'all the latest research in Autism', explaining that she has published work with others' about autism in the BME community', while Ian blogged about his experience of being autistic.

Robert described autism as one of his 'biggest interests' since the age of 14. Working most of his life in jobs around autism involved 'reading about autism, thinking about autism, engaging with autistic people, watching YouTube, you know, just everything'. As well as using writing to challenge 'the nonsense that most people think about autism', he talked eagerly about setting up new platforms to promote visibility of autistic perspectives. For Ashley, diagnosed later in life, realising that they were autistic involved 'finding an identity and reaching some self-acceptance'. This led them to 'reading articles in newspapers and magazines ... listening to podcasts' to learn more, eventually re-entering academia to study autism.

For some individuals, their experiences of gender and sexuality were intertwined with their experiences of being autistic. 'P', for example, had a strong appetite for reading about LGBTQIA+ history. Avery identified 'linguistic evolution in minority spaces' as one of their ruling passions, which involved 'developing the language to articulate my thoughts on my experiences of autism and gender.' They recognized that 'both of these are minority experiences compared to the general population' and, as a result, 'the language is lacking.' Avery described how 'participating in discussions in online forums ... repeating those same interactions over and over, I get to try out different ways to express my thoughts on the topic of gender, how I experience it, how I relate to a society that doesn't really "get it"...'.

For some, the ruling passion itself served as a marker of their identity. Several participants explained how they established meaningful connections with others due to their specific interests. This, in turn, facilitated their integration into a community of like-minded individuals who shared the same topics or focus. In essence, their passion became a means of forging friendships and relationships with others who harboured similar enthusiasms and motivations, ultimately becoming an expression of collective identity.

Neurodivergent Literacies

A key aspect of the project involved investigating ruling passions in connection with literacies, and this exploration unveiled a variety of literacy related ruling passions, with a notable emphasis on reading.

Several participants expressed a passion for the act of reading itself, regardless of the subject matter. They described their deep love for reading and how it consumed a significant portion of their time. Ashley reflected that ‘reading really, as a child, was probably my main interest. I was a stereotypical bookworm and I would get six library books out in a week and read them all’. As a child, Catharine would ‘just take myself away with my books and sit and read for ages’. Some participants also explained how they had exhibited untypically early reading skills.

Participants mentioned their enjoyment of both non-fiction and fiction, a fact that challenges claims that autistic individuals tend to gravitate toward non-fiction and may struggle with understanding characters (as suggested in the Autistic Quotient test, for instance). Graham recalled that ‘by the time I went to university I'd probably read about half of the books in [small town] Library because they didn't have that many ... They had about 150 science-fiction books and so once I'd read all of those I had to branch out a bit’. For several participants, reading did involve a profound engagement with stories and characters.

Kate recalled 'reading novels in lessons because I was bored ... and I would take myself off at break times to read'. Ben described his passion for narrative and story via the 'tabletop role-playing game' 'Dungeons and Dragons'. He explained 'I really enjoy it because I enjoy the narrative, the telling the story both as a player and then also running games myself ... I am regularly either thinking about a new character concept, thinking about where I want to take the campaign story ...'. He talked about assigning characters 'personality' and 'motive', linking with his earlier love of Lego, which often involved 'imagining, in my head, the story' associated with his play.

Many participants referred to literacies linked to their other interests. This often involved a desire to know as much as possible about a topic. Catharine and Kate talked about reading books about their interests 'from cover to cover'. MEJ remembered 'when I started learning the guitar, I read all the books, not just about how to play guitars, but who made guitars, where they were made, what the types of materials were ...'. Talking about her love of the band Manic Street Preachers, Catharine recalled 'collect[ing] as many magazines like NME and Melody Maker ... to learn more and gain details from interviews ...'. Kate's interest in cooking meant she 'read cookbooks for enjoyment'. Robert shared this love of cookbooks – he would 'read a cookbook beginning to end' but had never followed a recipe!

Meaning making / perception

Several participants demonstrated how their ruling passions were directly related to their sense making processes. It was through their interests that they understood the world, as their interests contributed strongly to their understanding of the wider world, often beyond the interest itself.

For instance, Laura described how she would ‘always relate things to certain films’. Similarly, ‘P’ recalled ‘very early on, before I developed the tools of observation and analysis ... I was using people in literature ... so I was thinking, oh this person is like this book that I've read, so I was sort of parsing meaning in terms of these fictional worlds that I was experiencing’. For MEJ, reading stories was how he ‘learnt to recognise different registers early on and the details in people's speech’. He cited this as a foundation for understanding social relationships, enabling him to ‘work with people’.

The process of 'thinking with' their ruling passions doesn't just pertain to stories but extends to other types of interests. Ruling passions were sometimes regarded as a lens through which to experience the world. For example, Ben discussed his significant preoccupation with symmetry, explaining how it influenced his worldview. He described how his initial fascination with symmetrical objects and landscapes evolved as he "made a conscious decision to shift my focus towards asymmetry, developing an appreciation for it, and using it to balance my perspective." MEJ identified 'detail' as a ruling passion, and this emphasis on detail was how he processed his experience of the world. Robert meanwhile observed how his experiences were often shaped by patterns – particularly those involving patterns of three.

Some of these ideas may diverge considerably from the conventional understanding of autistic people's interests, typically framed as 'special interests.' However, since these ideas have emerged from autistic individuals' own self-perceptions and understanding of their interests, it seems appropriate to give them further attention.

Summary

I suggest that we need to revisit the concept of 'special interests' and embrace a more expansive understanding of what such interests represent in the lives of autistic people. The data presented by participants as part of this project suggests that:

- Engaging with Ruling Passions is strongly associated with positive well-being.
- Ruling Passions are intertwined with various literacies, particularly encompassing a range of reading genres that challenge commonly held stereotypes about autistic people.
- Ruling passions play a role in shaping positive identity formation in multiple ways.
- Ruling passions assist autistic individuals in deriving meaning from, within, and about the world.

Instead of viewing interests as limited or confining, it would be beneficial to approach them in terms of their depth and diversity. This shift in perspective can help to move away from potentially harmful and constrictive stereotypes surrounding autistic identity and experience. By transitioning towards an understanding of the value of these interests - co-constructed with the community, rather than stemming from medicalisation - we can reduce stigma and potentially enhance the wellbeing of autistic children and adults.

Of course, much of this will not be 'new knowledge' to autistic people themselves. However, the more we can share this kind of 'community knowledge' the more likely we are to change perceptions for the better.

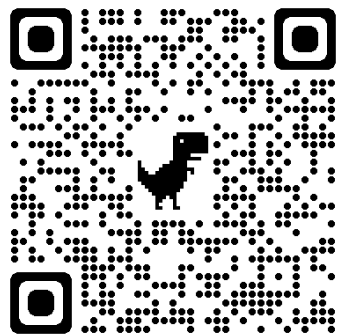
Ruling Passions Gallery

Several autistic adults have contributed visual material for about their interests. These have been compiled in an online gallery.



The gallery features drawings and photographs in relation to ruling passions, alongside the words of those who contributed them.

You can access the gallery online in 2D or 3D by following the link or using the QR code.



<https://rulingpassions.wordpress.com/ruling-passions-gallery/>

Gallery Extract 1: Pip Brown



'self portraits / study of facial expressions'

“One of my special interests is portraiture... My process sort of illustrates the local versus global bias that is common to lots of autistic sensory processing (moving from pockets of detail to pockets of detail etc...). ”

Gallery Extract 2: Catharine



'photographs of vintage items'

"So my all-encompassing obsession which has been probably since I was a teenager is vintage and old stuff but not – when I tell people I like vintage things they get it totally wrong and think I mean 1940s florals but really it's like mid-century, 60s, 70s, some 80s, even 90s is vintage now which is really scary.... Anything over 20 years old."

Ruling Passions Podcast

There is a podcast linked to this project, called the Ruling Passions Podcast.

Each episode includes an interview with an autistic person discussing their own ruling passion – as well as explaining a little about their own individual context. You can find the podcast on most podcast hosting platforms by searching for ‘ruling passions’. It is also available here:

<https://rulingpassions.wordpress.com/podcast-subscribe>



Podcast Episode Guide



Episode 1 - Pip Brown on portraiture, music, sensory experience, alexithymia, embodiment, LGBTQ+ heroes, visualisation, parallel play, flow and burnout

Episode 2 - Jason Arday talks about race, autistic masking, vulnerability, intrinsic / extrinsic motivation, expectations of academia and the importance of music

Episode 3 - Katie Twomey on language, Chernobyl, pattern, alternative futures, aphantasia, synaesthesia, maths, reading, collecting conkers, masking, gendered conditioning and... being a magical unicorn

Episode 4 – Billie Jo Gibson talks about an autistic childhood, gender identity, childhood special interests, politics, class, trauma and mental health assessment, Grand Theft Auto and Liverpool / Scouse Culture

Episode 5 – Nick Walker on aikido, world building, story and character creation, collaboration, comics, autism and trans experience

Episode 6 – Becky Stothard talks about patterns of behaviour, detail, anatomy, science, history, recipes and knitting

Next Steps – beyond this project

I am now seeking funding to extend this work to explore the ideas further in a special school setting with neurodivergent children, using arts-based methods. This will involve other researchers who are interested in childhood and neurodiversity.

I hope to pursue the idea of ‘ruling passions’ in relation to neurodivergence more widely (e.g. not just using it as a term that replaces ‘autistic special interests’ but exploring the ruling passions of other neurodivergent populations).

I am developing the use of the concept of ‘neurodivergent literacies’ to look at the experiences of neurodivergent people more widely in relation to reading and writing (e.g. starting with a project exploring the experiences of ADHD students).

I will continue to share this work with different audiences – academic and non-academic. You can find out about future work on the Ruling Passions Wordpress site. Please share this work with anyone you think would be interested.

Glossary

- **Neurodiversity** – the understanding that populations are naturally neurologically diverse e.g. that people's minds differ in multiple ways. (Because our minds are located in our bodies, it is also useful to think of this relating to 'bodyminds' rather than just 'brains')
- **Neurodivergent** – a term used for people whose neurology differs from what society expects or considers 'typical'. This includes people who are autistic, ADHD, dyslexic etc and is a broad and inclusive term. This was originally coined by Kassiane Asaumasu
- **Neurotypical** – the term used for people – or sections of society - who are not considered to be neurodivergent
- **Ruling Passion** – a reframing of the idea of 'special interests', borrowed from the work of Barton and Hamilton around literacy and used in this project to look more positively on people's experiences around 'special interests'
- **Special interest** – a term often used to describe autistic people's interests, but which has its origins in medical literature
- **Neurodivergent Literacies** – a term arising from this project to describe the the literacies (reading and writing etc) engaged in by neurodivergent people, and an encouragement that we should focus more on these practices as they are often misunderstood or lack prior research

Note: I recommend Dr. Nick Walker's webpage on terms and definitions for a more expansive description of words relating to autism and neurodiversity – particularly the '**neurodiversity paradigm**':
<https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>

References

A short list of academic work referred to in this handbook...

Bailey – ‘Neurodivergent Literacies’: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12320>

Barton and Hamilton - ‘Local Literacies’:
<https://www.routledge.com/Local-Literacies-Reading-and-Writing-in-One-Community/Barton-Hamilton/p/book/9780415691741>

McDonnell and Milton - ‘Going with the flow: Reconsidering ‘repetitive behaviour’ through the concept of ‘flow states’’:
<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/62647/>

Robinson and Vitale - ‘Children with Circumscribed interest patterns’
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1954.tb06145.x>

Walker- ‘Neuroqueer Heresies’: <https://neuroqueer.com/neuroqueer-heresies/>

Wood – ‘Autism, intense interests and support in school: from wasted efforts to shared understandings’:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1566213>

I also wrote a little about my own ruling passions in a recent book chapter – the preprint is available to read here for free:
<https://drchrisjbailey.wordpress.com/2022/03/08/preprint-chapter-connected-to-the-soul-autoethnography-neurodiversity-and-literacies-in-times-of-ongoing-change/>

About the researcher

Dr. Chris Bailey is an autistic academic working in the Education Department at Sheffield Hallam University

Their current (and fairly long running) ruling passions are film photography, running and music

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Photos used on the front cover and elsewhere were provided by participants and / or those who submitted to the gallery:

Portrait by Pip Brown

Owl Tapestry photo by Catharine

London Eye photo by Solange

Socks by Kate

Sonic drawing photo by Laura

Camera photo and author photo both by the author

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The Ruling Passions Handbook is an overview of the Ruling Passions Project, produced for a public audience as part of the Festival of Social Sciences in 2023.

It is one output from the Ruling Passions Project. This project involved 13 autistic adults reflecting on the meanings they made around what are often called their 'special interests'.

This book was made for anyone interested in finding out more about this project, and this topic in general.

