

# Challenging Behaviour? Autism, Sexuality, and the Mythical Norm

David Jackson-Perry, School of Social Sciences, Education, and  
Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast

@intersectQUB

djacksonperry01@qub.ac.uk



Queen's University  
Belfast

'...the one voice  
that has been  
traditionally  
silenced within the  
field is that of  
autistic people  
themselves'

*(Milton 2014: 800).*



**‘ Research on sexuality and autism is dominated by a sexually deficit view of autism’**

(Rosqvist 2014: 351)

## Assumption of deficit

- ‘...impede scientific and philosophical progress in our understanding of the phenomena themselves.’

*(Dinishak 2016: 1)*

**What becomes possible if we consider autistic experiences of sexuality not through an assumption of deficit, but as a valid position from which knowledge can be created?**

# Over the next 15 minutes:

1

- What does the research say?
  - How do researchers explain the disparity?
-

# Over the next 15 minutes:

1

- What does the research say?
- How do researchers explain the disparity?

2

- Shifting perspectives

# Over the next 15 minutes:

1

- What does the research say?
- How do researchers explain the disparity?

2

- Shifting perspectives

3

- Whose deficit is it anyway?



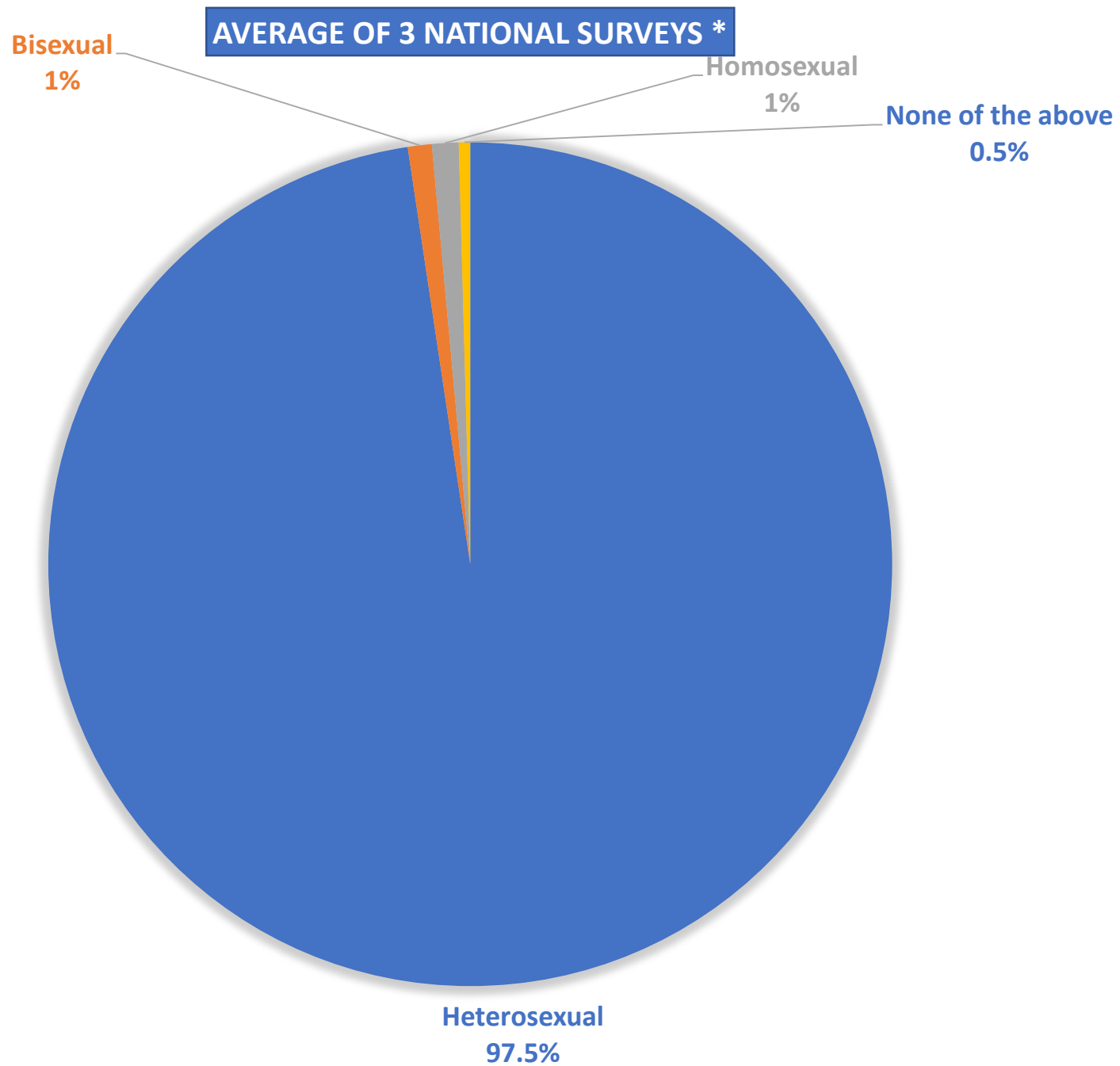


- What does the research say?
- How do researchers explain the disparity?

# The Question:

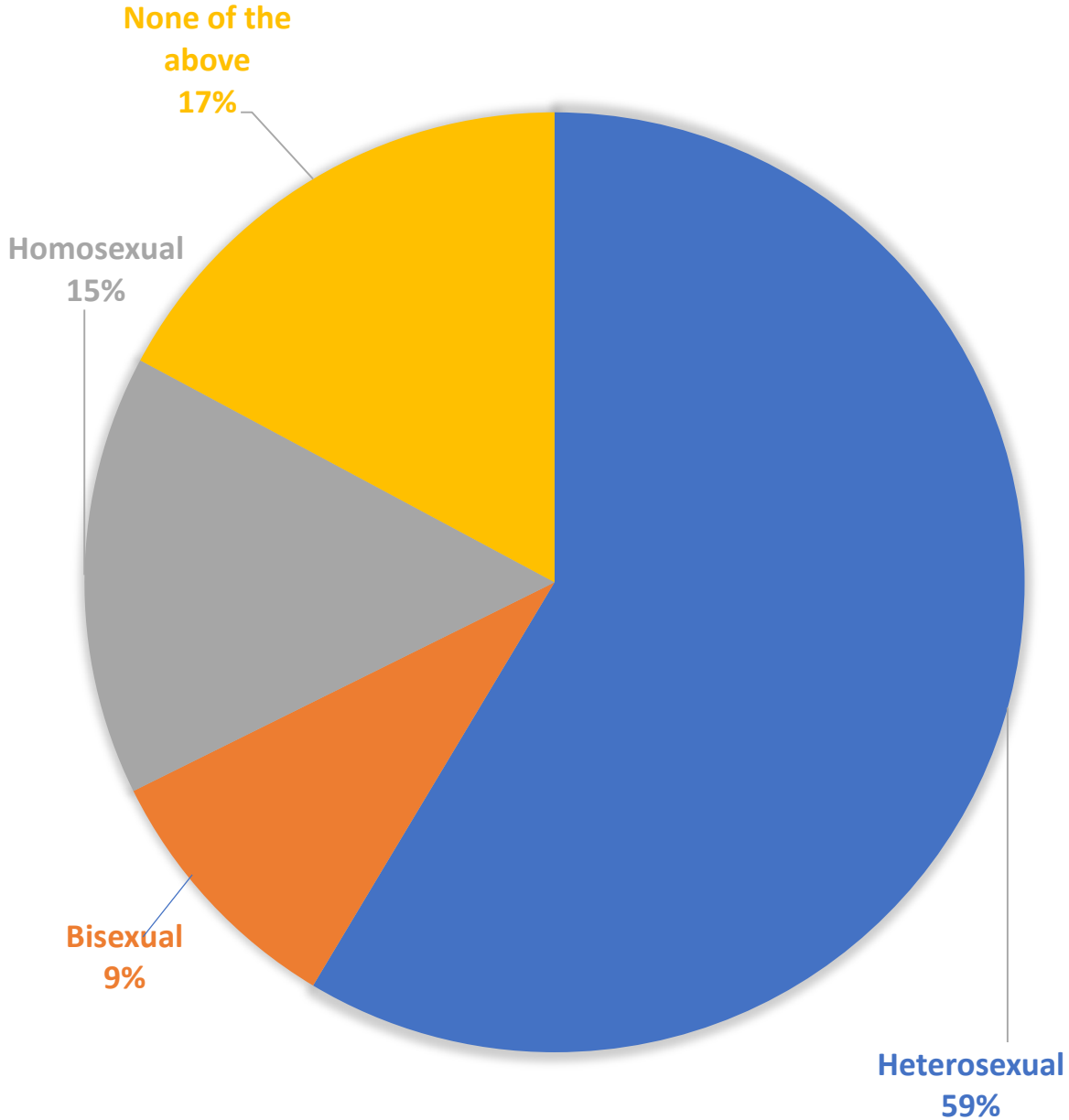
Are you:

- Heterosexual
- Bisexual
- Homosexual
- None of the above

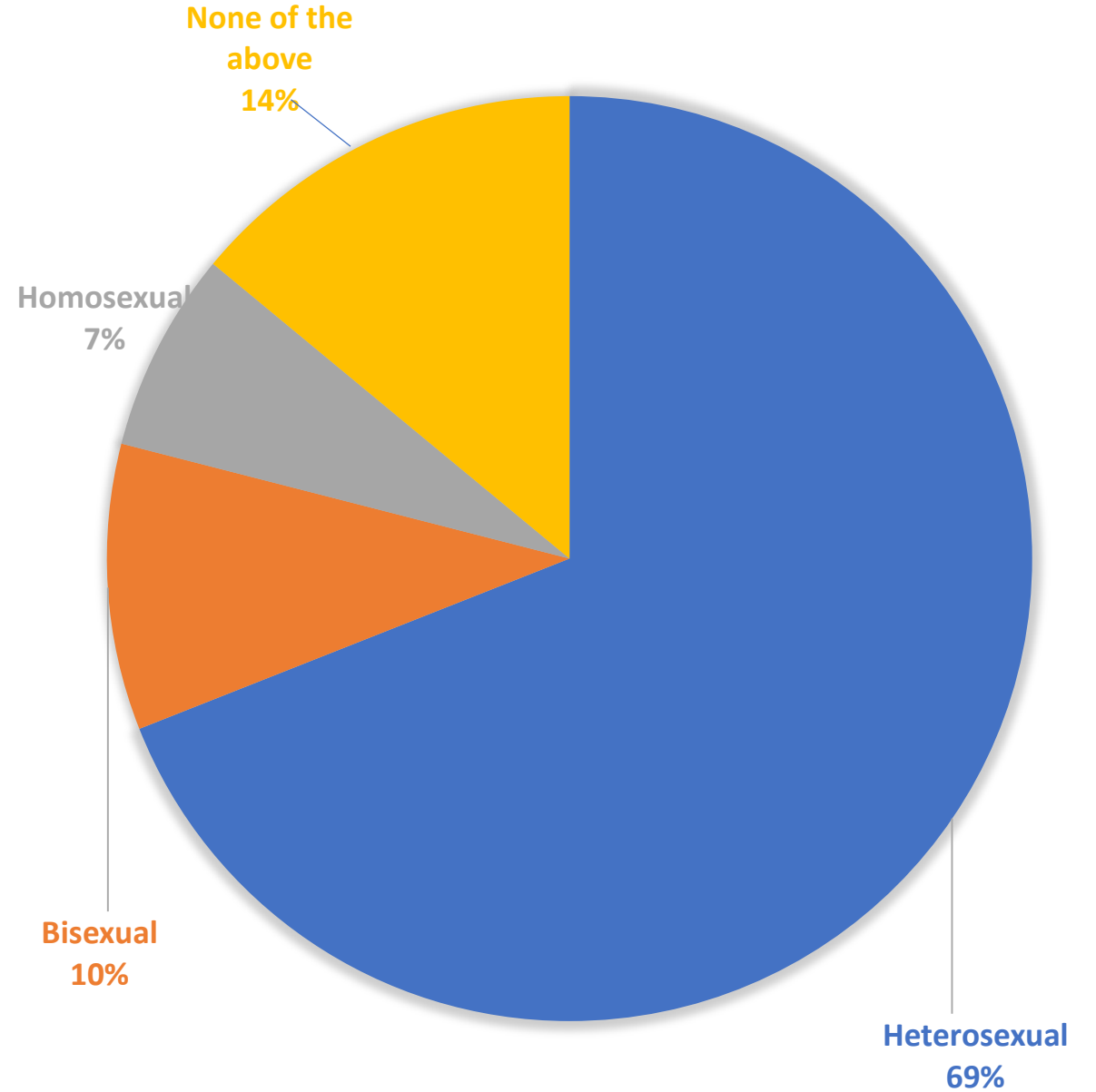


- *Lhomond et al. 2014* (France)
- *Smith et al. 2013* (Australia)
- *Ward et al. 2014* (USA)

**BYERS ET AL. 2013**



**STRUNZ ET AL. 2016**



# 3 Main Hypotheses:

1. Prenatal androgen
2. 'Situational homosexuality'/opportunity
3. Deficit

## The starting point of these hypotheses:

- The 'natural nature' of a heterosexual identity...
- ...deviated from by autistic individuals...
- ...zoom in on autistic deviance from the norm



- Shifting perspectives

## Aculturality

- **‘Individuals with ASD have a specific deficit in taking into account their reputation in the eyes of others.’**  
*(Izuma et al. 2011: 17305)*



# Aculturality

- **'...are not naturally inclined to engaging with the norms of our culture...'**  
*(Theindigo06 2016)*
- **'We often find it difficult to identify the norms we're expected to live up to, and even when we have, if we can't see the point then most of us can't bring ourselves to try very hard...So autists are natural non-conformists.'**  
*(Oolong 2016)*
- **'...sort of definitionally less susceptible to societal rules about gender and sexuality'** *(Ali cited by Davidson & Tamas 2015: 63)*

# Social Desirability Bias

- **‘...distortion of data that is caused by respondents’ attempts to construct an account that conforms to a socially acceptable model of belief or behaviour.’**  
*(Bryman 2015: 716)*

**People may lie when you ask them about sex**

**‘ Individuals with ASD scored significantly higher than all other groups on...Straightforwardness (frankness in expression). Honesty, therefore, seems to be a primary strength in individuals with ASD’**

(Strunz et al. 2015: 4035)



- Whose deficit is it anyway?



# The Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical

# The Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical

‘Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity.’

*(AngryAutie 2013)*

## Non-autistic people

- Inclined to be concerned with their social reputations – and so may not act on sexual desire for fear of social consequences;



## Non-autistic people

- Inclined to be concerned with their social reputations – and so may not act on sexual desire for fear of social consequences;
- Inclined to social desirability bias – perhaps less likely to respond truthfully when asked about their sexual desire compared to autistic people.

**‘I believe that it is none of the above. I personally believe that there is no such thing as 100% hetero or 100% gay, but that it is a continuous spectrum between the two...’**

*(TTRSage)*

# The Question:

Are you:

- Heterosexual
- Bisexual
- Homosexual
- None of the above

**‘...a monogamous genderqueer bisexual happily living in a straight marriage who generally feels like a gay man in a woman's body.’**

*( Williams cited by Davidson et al. 2016: 63).*

**'I feel almost like I'm in a homosexual relationship with my husband sometimes with me just being a slightly effeminate man inside of a female body.'**

*(Mrs potatohead)*

**'I'm bi-gendered, in that I sometimes feel female and sometimes feel male. No matter how I'm feeling, though, I am attracted to men. It's just that, when I'm feeling male, I am attracted to GAY men, and when I'm feeling female, I'm attracted to STRAIGHT men.'**

*(fragileclover)*

**‘I have been all sorts of things growing up and just picking  
one is pointless’**

**(MONKEY)**

**'...is beyond current typical recognition and understanding.'**

*(Walton et al. 2016: 1596)*



**‘...a vantage point from within which the range of humanity  
can be viewed.’**

*(Murray 2012: 36)*

# Challenging Behaviour? Autism, Sexuality, and the Mythical Norm

David Jackson-Perry, School of Social Sciences, Education, and  
Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast

@intersectQUB

djacksonperry01@qub.ac.uk



Queen's University  
Belfast