**2024 Gatlinburg Conference Poster Abstract**

**Title:** Longitudinal Associations Between Autistic Identity, Well-being, and Mental Health: Initial Validation of the Autistic Identity Scale

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**Introduction:** Autism has traditionally been understood through a medical model that often pathologizes autistic traits as deficiencies (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Evans, 2013). However, advocacy from the neurodiversity movement emphasizes that autism is an integral part of individual identity and should be recognized as a natural human variation deserving of support and inclusion (Botha et al., 2024; Kapp et al., 2013). Positive autistic identity may serve as a protective factor, potentially buffering against mental health challenges commonly faced by autistic individuals, such as anxiety and depression (Cage et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2021). However, few studies have examined how autistic identity develops over time and potential associations with mental health outcomes for autistic adults. In this study, we introduce and validate a new short Autistic Identity Scale (AIS) and examine the initial psychometrics of the AIS (e.g., internal consistency, sex- and gender-based differences, etc.) in a large sample of autistic adults, and test associations between AIS scores and indices of mental health and well-being over three timepoints.

**Method:** Participants were recruited from the SPARK registry, an online US-based cohort of autistic individuals. The present study included 303 independent autistic adults aged 18-60 with a self-reported clinical diagnosis of autism without intellectual disability, affiliated with one of the SPARK clinical sites, and able to complete surveys in English. Participants completed online surveys at three timepoints, each 4-6 weeks apart. Surveys included measures of autistic identity (AIS), depressive symptoms (Patient Health Questionnaire-9, PHQ-9), anxiety symptoms (Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7, GAD-7), life satisfaction (Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale, RLSS), and meaning in life (PROMIS Meaning 4A). Data analysis involved assessing AIS's internal consistency and stability [Cronbach's alpha, ICCs (A,1)] as well as group invariance across sex and gender using multi-group analyses.

**Results:** The AIS showed high internal consistency (α=0.86) and stability across timepoints (Total score ICC=0.87-0.91), supporting its reliability. Multi-group analysis indicated that AIS scores were consistent across sex and gender groups. Positive correlations were found between AIS scores and RLSS (*r*=0.181, p=0.002) and PROMIS Meaning 4A (*r*=0.230, p<0.001), indicating higher autistic identity scores were associated with greater life satisfaction and sense of meaning. Results from t-tests demonstrated that autistic adults with higher AIS scores also reported significantly greater life satisfaction and meaning at each timepoint (e.g., Time 1 PROMIS Meaning: t(298)=5.32, p<0.001; RLSS: t(298)=4.88, p<0.001). Notably, AIS scores did not significantly correlate with depression (PHQ-9; r=-0.065, p=0.251) or anxiety symptoms (GAD-7; r=-0.021, p=0.955). Furthermore, t-tests comparing high and low AIS score groups showed no significant differences in PHQ-9 or GAD-7 scores at any timepoint, suggesting autistic identity was not directly related to depression or anxiety symptoms in this sample. Mixed model analyses confirmed these relationships were stable across time and independent of sex or gender.

**Discussion:** Findings underscore the importance of autistic identity as a stable and protective factor that is positively associated with life satisfaction and meaning in autistic adults. Results support autistic identity as a potential target for therapeutic interventions aimed at enhancing well-being in this population. Although AIS scores were not significantly associated with depression or anxiety, the strong link between positive identity and life satisfaction suggests identity-focused support could improve quality of life for autistic adults. Future research should examine whether strengthening autistic identity can alleviate minority stress and camouflaging behaviors, offering a route to better mental health outcomes.

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