Navigating the Real World: A Grounded Theory-Based Exploration of Autistic Adolescents' Identity Formation in *Marcelo in the Real World*

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Abstract—This study analyses the depiction of autism in *Marcelo in the Real World*, a young adult fiction novel, to critically explore the identity formation of the character Marcelo who navigates the challenges and complexities of the real world. By using the grounded theory and drawing on ideas from disability studies and social identity theory, the research demonstrates that parental guidance, encouragement and normal treatment of friends, and exposure to conflicts and contradictions are the most significant factors and can help autistic adolescents understand social life, improve social competence, and obtain power and control in social relations, promoting positive identity formation. The use of grounded theory methodology enables a full examination of Marcelo's experiences and the fundamental mechanisms guiding the development of his identity. This research deepens our comprehension of identity construction under the setting of autism, advancing both theoretical understanding and useful interventions for autistic adolescents.

Index Terms—grounded theory, autism, social identity, disability studies, adolescents

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorders, characterized by repetitive behavior and deficits in social interaction and communication, are chronic neurodevelopmental disorders (WHO Team, 1992). Though an ASD typically emerges in childhood, it has lifelong implications that extend into adulthood and old age (Howlin, 2000). Autistic teenagers often experience social anxiety, and promoting their positive identity formation can help them overcome some of the related challenges. The social identity approach emphasizes the motivation to form social groups, exhibit in-group favoritism, identify with the group, and derive self-worth from group memberships (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Bagatell (2007) investigated the effect of identity and discourse in youngsters with autism and concluded that creativity and originality are required for effective identity construction in this population. This task is challenging, which in turn renders reconciling conflicting discourses for molding a mindset and the construction of multiple identities difficult. Cooper et al. (2017) examined the self-esteem and social identity of people diagnosed with autism and indicated that despite the inferior mental health of autistic individuals compared with average people, the positive autistic social identity can provide a protective mechanism. Existing studies have been conducted from medical, neurological, and philological perspectives, but only a few studies have used literature review to analyze how the identity of people with autism is formed. Literature provides realistic depictions, including physical, behavioral, and linguistic characteristics, for investigating the development of identity in autistic individuals. Furthermore, studying texts avoids the inconvenience and ethical constraints imposed on the study of people with autism in real life. *Marcelo in the Real World* depicts the story of the journey of Marcelo, a teenager with autism who navigates the challenges and complexities of the real world outside his familiar and structured environment, ultimately finding his unique identity. In this study, grounded theory and textual analysis are used to understand the path of identity formation for Marcelo. The findings contribute to the area of autism research and improve support and therapies for this population by fostering a deeper knowledge of the particular difficulties, growth, and experiences faced by autistic adolescents as they pursue self-identity.

The novel *Marcelo in the Real World* portrays the journey of Marcelo, a 17-year-old autistic teenager who embarks on a life-changing summer journey away from his comfortable and familiar surroundings to navigate the difficulties and challenges of life in the law firm. Marcelo encounters significant challenges as he transitions from the comfort zone of school for special students to the complex settings of the law firm. He also faces social dynamics and moral

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conundrums. The book describes the psychological challenges, worries, and successes encountered by him as he discovers how to deal with social situations and cultural norms, ultimately leading to self-discovery and a better knowledge of others and himself.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature summarizes the pertinent literature in two key areas: studies on identity development in autistic adolescents, and studies on the book *Marcelo in the Real World.*

A. Studies on Identity Formation in Adolescents With Autism

Studies on the formation of identity among adolescents with autism have mainly focused on two perspectives, namely social influence and family. First, from the perspective of social influence, Myers et al. (2011) argued that autistic adolescents and young adults achieve psychological well-being if they are advised to live in the dominant world with acceptance of their autistic identity. The author emphasized that the sense of belonging to the dominant culture and an autistic individual's minority culture tend to influence their self-esteem, subsequently affecting their psychology. Cooper investigated the social identity and mental health of autistic individuals (Cooper et al., 2017) and revealed that in addition to social and communication difficulties, autistic individuals experience social stigma, which negatively affects the formation of positive social identities. Rocque (2010) studied the identity formation of autistic adolescents and asserted that mothers can play important roles in the construction and maintenance of a positive identity of children through explaining and reshaping their children's behavior to influence the interpretation and reaction of strangers. During these interactions, mothers play the role of the child's surrogate because they influence how other people perceive the child; thus, mothers shape the social identity of the child. Riccio et al. (2021) analyzed whether the perceptions of adolescents on autism and identity are affected by parents' decisions to disclose/conceal their children's autism diagnosis. Parents can guide their children to perceive autism positively by communicating with them during the early development phase of autism. Studies have used various methods, including interview, questionnaire (Cooper et al., 2017; Riccio et al., 2021), literature review (Myers et al., 2011) and participant observation for data collection (Rocque, 2010). Furthermore, a collaborative and participatory study was conducted (Mogensen & Mason, 2015). However, limited studies have focused on the combined influences of school, society family, friends, strangers on the psychology, and discourse of autistic adolescents, leading to potentially biased conclusions. Therefore, this study uses the grounded theory to comprehensively investigate how people around autistic adolescents in the fiction influenced the discourse and behavior of autistic adolescents. Specifically, the grounded theory was used to extract text, refine category, and investigate the influence of people around the autistic teenager in the text. Thus, the path of their identity formation could be identified, which is crucial for studying identity formation among autistic adolescents.

B. Researches on Marcelo in the Real World

This section explores the critical analysis of the novel, highlighting its significance as a literary work that addresses autism and identity formation. It discusses the themes, characters, and narrative elements within the book that contribute to the understanding of autistic identity development. By examining the specific context of Marcelo's journey in the novel, this section enriches the overall understanding of identity formation among autistic adolescents.

Studies on the novel *Marcelo in the Real World* are mainly based on textual plot and theme analysis. Curwood (2013) used literary and critical discourse analyses to investigate how the plots and themes of novels are shaped by identity, agency, and power. Orlando (2018) compared Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Late Night Dog* with Francisco X. Stoker's *Marcelo in the Real World* to investigate the identities and upbringings of young protagonists with different neural systems in the two novels. The argument that the neurodiversity represented by Marcelo's character is subtle suggests that neurodiverse people can not only be protected by society but also contribute to society without changing themselves.

In conclusion, while existing studies have examined identity formation in autistic adolescents, only a few have utilized literary texts as a source of analysis. Typically, novels describe complex, concrete, and emotional experiences that cannot be depicted in purely scientific studies due to abstraction, objectification, and generalization of observations (de Monthoux & Czarniawska-Joerges, 2005). Moreover, even though previous research has looked at the factors that influence the identity development of autistic adolescents, there is a need for a more thorough investigation of the influences of parental guidance, peer relationships, exposure to conflicts and contradictions, as well as the influence of societal expectations and cultural norms on identity formation among autistic adolescents. Marcelo's experiences, problems, and successes in negotiating the complexities of social relationships and cultural norms outside of his comfort zone need to be further examined. The present study aims to bridge the gaps in the literature by using a grounded theory approach and insights from disability studies and social identity theory, which will help us understand the influences, processes, and difficulties that affect how autistic adolescents develop their identities.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN, CATEGORY REFINEMENT, AND MODEL CONSTRUCTION

A. Research Methodology

For this examination, the ground theory research methodology was utilized. With this approach, researchers essentially conduct an inductive investigation process in which they create a theory about a phenomenon by methodically gathering and assessing relevant facts. To present the formation process of autistic adolescents' identity, texts are extracted for analysis and logical demonstration to construct and perfect the corresponding theory, which is consistent with the qualitative research theory construction of "starting from the original data, gradually generating theory through the inductive analysis of the data." The grounded theory proposed by Glaser et al. (1968) is a qualitative research method that provides a rigorous analytical approach for theoretical development, promotes the research and critical exploration of social justice issues, and recognizes the necessity for continuous reflection in the research (Charmaz, 2014). In the theory, retrospective iterative and reasoning analysis are applied to create abstract categories based on qualitative data and finally develop and construct theories (Charmaz, 2014). Based on the grounded theory, key factors contributing to Marcelo's identity formation are extracted to examine his discourse and psychological performance throughout his identity formation process. By refining and summarizing the discourse and psychological aspects portrayed in the book, the study systematically codes, compares, and analyzes the content of these categories. Social identity theory offers a theoretical framework for investigating how people get their sense of self from their affiliations with groups and social categories (Turner et al., 1987). By looking at how autistic persons create their social identities, deal with social categorizations, and comprehend the effects of society perceptions, stigma, and acceptance on their self-concept and identity formation, it can be used to investigate identity formation in people with autism. The study offers a theoretical framework that pinpoints Marcelo's identity formation process.

B. Sample Selection and Data Collection

Marcelo in the Real World won the Schneider Family Book Award and provides a complex, realistic portrayal of Marcelo from the mental, physical and emotional perspectives. In this book, the protagonist, Marcelo, enters society from a school for the disabled, experiences frustrations, makes friends in a new social environment, and finally finds a sense of identity. Therefore, the novel *Marcelo in the Real World* was used to obtain data in the present study.

I began by reading *Marcelo in the Real World* in its entirety. Segments of particular interest were chosen for subsequent analysis, focusing on their potential impact on Marcelo's identity development. The selection process prioritized segments that offered insights into Marcelo's inner thoughts, emotions, reflections on their interactions and, contemplation of others' attitudes, and how they think and speak about their self-identity. During the early twentieth century, Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis proposed that an individual's mind is a defining feature of his/her identity (Benwell, 2006).

The sample size was determined by the factors for Marcelo's identity formation. Furthermore, multiple rounds of sampling were conducted according to the principle of theoretical saturation until the saturation was achieved. Data were simultaneously collected and analyzed and continuously compared, and the saturation of the database was continuously tested during the analysis. Four rounds of data extraction were performed, with the third round of coding close to saturation as suggested by the coding status.

C. Open Coding to Distill Concepts and Categories

Open coding refers to the process of coding, labeling, and grouping the source material word by word. We employed a line-by-line coding approach to ensure a thorough examination of each individual line and its significance, avoiding premature generalizations (Charmaz, 1996). This process yielded 210 provisional codes closely tied to the original text (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Concurrently, I began drafting memos to document initial comparisons and unexpected patterns (Charmaz, 2006). These memos served as an initial basis for comparing distinct instances and facilitated cautious abstraction from the grounded material (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lempert, 2008). Following the constant comparative method, the data collected by the initial coding were continuously compared, analyzed, summarized, merged, and organized (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), resulting in the derivation of 26 initial concepts. For example, "denial of disability" was derived from the original statement that "I remember once I asked Arturo if I could take Naim to the mall, and he replied, 'You don't have a disability.'" The original texts were then labelled, and similar concepts were grouped together and assigned the same category. For example, "denial of disability," "stress on normalcy" were grouped into the same category of "Parents' encouragement." Finally, 10 initial categories were obtained (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
OPEN CODING OF MARCELO'S IDENTITY FORMATION.

Category	Concept	Original Text
F1 Parents' encouragement	F11 Denial of disability	I still remember the answer Arturo gave me once when I asked if I could take Namu with me to the mall: "You're not disabled," he said.
	F12 Normal treatment	"You look like any other young man. Better. You're better-looking than most. You're tall and handsome and strong."
F2 Parents' guidance to normal world	F21 Explanation of joining normal world	"At Paterson you contribute by just being yourself. It is easy for you to be around.... The job at the law firm will require new skills from you, and you'll be around people who are not always nice."
	F22 Encouragement to leave comfort zone	"but because you have not been in an environment that challenges you to do them. Jasmine, the girl who runs the mailroom, will show you the ropes. ... But going slow doesn't mean you won't need to expand beyond your comfort zone."
F3 Sense of belonging in disability group	F31 Unwillingness to leave disability group	"It should be Marcelo's decision." I gather up all my strength... Dr. Malone. "I should be allowed to finish the last year of high school at Paterson, where I've always been."
	F32 Trust in disability group	Arturo needs to be convinced that the best way for me to be like everyone else is to continue at Paterson, where I can learn at my own pace, where I am learning to make decisions and becoming responsible and independent,...
F4 Fear of exposure to new group	F41 Fear of change	"Marcelo is afraid."
	F42 Fear of difficulties	"There are so many things I still have difficulties with. I cannot walk by myself in a strange place without a map. I get flustered when I am asked to ... They expect responses from me I cannot give."
F5 Friend's positive influence	F51 Friend's encouragement	"You're Marcelo," she says, reminding me of who I am.
	F52 Friend's normal treatment	"It's okay, you can look at me, I don't mind."
F6 Social group's complex influence	F61 People's satire	"Sit down, Gump, I'll be right with you."
	F62 People's unintentional hurt	"I meant what's wrong with you, with the way you think. Your father said you had some kind of cognitive disorder."
	F63 People's stare	Immediately, I feel her gaze scan me from head to feet and back again just like the light of the copying machine.
	F64 Verbal abuse	She looks at me. "Aren't you supposed to be re…I mean, slow or something?"
F7 Fight for justice	F71 Pursuit of justice	"I have not." I am at a loss to explain why. I am doing something that Arturo would disapprove of, I know. ... persuade him that helping Ixtel is something he should do, we should all do.
	F72 Opposition to hegemony	I feel an obligation to right my father's wrong. But why? Shouldn't my father's welfare come first? His welfare is my welfare. How does one weigh love for a parent against the urge to help someone in need?
	F73 Adherence to right action	I feel like what is right should be done no matter what. .... Maybe the right action is a lake like this one, green and quiet and deep.
F8 Improved social competence	F81 Acknowledgement of benefits	"Aurora was right when she told me that working at the law firm would help me be strong... Oak Ridge will help me as well."
	F82 Improvement in communication	"I have been trained. It is training and concentration. Years of learning how to communicate.".
	F83 Courage to accept challenge	All I can think of now is that it is not right for me to be unaware of that pain, including the pain that I inflict on others.
F9 More empowered identity	F91 Improved resilience	"I know," I say. "I knew what could happen to all of us. Marcelo did not succeed in following the rules of the real world. He knows.... And still, he would do it again."
	F92 Improved self-awareness	For all the pain I saw at Paterson, it is nothing compared to the pain that people inflict upon each other in the real world.
F10 A self-advocate	F101 Self-identification	I stand up and walk to the corner. I think: Now I look normal like everyone else, walking and talking on the cell phone. I read the street sign to Jasmine. "It says 'Ping On.'"
	F102 Self-acceptance	Then it comes to me. It cannot be that this is the first time I realized this, but it is. We all have ugly parts. ...We see our ugly parts, and then we are able to forgive, love kindness, walk humbly.
	F103 Positive plan for future study	There is so much to be done. Plans. Preparations. Oak Ridge High will be hard. ... I will need to learn the way they learn... Going to Oak Ridge High will help me.
	F104 Confidence in ability to adapt to society	That the way she is strong and gentle on behalf of children will be my way as well. The road seems so long. Another year of high school, then college,...

D. Main Axial Coding to Establish the Main Categories

Main axial coding is used to develop the nature and dimensions of main categories and discover potential logical relationships between main categories, thereby forming the main categories and subcategories. In this stage, to ensure the relevance of emerging categories and analytical rigor, we conducted a comparative analysis of the initial codes and integrated them into broader categories, consistently examining both the commonalities among codes within a category and the distinctions between codes across different categories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In addition, we reviewed the source material and modified our categories a few times to reduce the number of specific codes, and then condensed them into five main categories that effectively express the essence of the data. The implication of the category provided meaningful explanations (see Table 2) (Charmaz, 1996).

TABLE 2
MAIN CATEGORIES CREATED BY AXIAL CODING

Main category	Category	The implication of the category
Parental influence	Parents' encouragement	By encouraging their autistic adolescents to express their needs, preferences, and opinions, parents empower them to become self-advocates. This process allows autistic individuals to develop a sense of agency, assertiveness, and self-determination, which are vital for shaping a positive identity.
	Parents' guidance to normal world	Parents' guidance plays a crucial role in helping autistic adolescents acquire practical life skills necessary for independence and integration into the normal world.
Membership in disability group	Sense of belonging in disability group	Joining a disability group provides autistic adolescents with a sense of belonging and connection to a community of individuals who share similar experiences, challenges, and perspectives.
	Fear of exposure to normal world	The fear of facing social difficulties and not fitting into societal norms can lead to anxiety and a desire to avoid situations where they may feel exposed or different.
Real world's dynamic and complex influence	Friend's positive influence	Friends can provide emotional support, empathy, and understanding, which are vital for autistic adolescents' positive identity formation.
	Social group's complex influence	Autistic adolescents may face social exclusion or rejection from certain social groups due to their differences in communication and social behavior.
Having power and control	Fight for justice	Engaging in social interactions aimed at fighting for justice or advocating for important causes can provide autistic adolescents with a sense of purpose and empowerment and enhance their self-esteem and self-worth, contributing to a positive identity formation.
	Improved social competence	Through these experiences, autistic adolescents can develop and refine their social and communication abilities, leading to improved self-confidence and social competence.
Positive identity formation	More empowered identity	Autistic adolescents need to navigate societal expectations, disclosure of their neurodiversity, and self-advocacy in the workplace, which can contribute to the development of a more empowered identity.
	A self-advocate	Autistic adolescents reflect on what accommodations, support, or resources would enhance their ability to succeed and thrive in various settings, such as school, work, or social environments.

E. Selective Coding and Model Building

Selective coding is the systematic analysis of all identified categories to determine a core category as well as the integration of all other categories to cover most findings theoretically. During this phase, we synthesized these components into a comprehensive preliminary analysis, aiming to construct a coherent narrative that aligned with the coding while substantiating the connections between categories. The inclusion of memos and figures served as a bridge between the detailed coding process and the development of theoretical insights. While the research approach was primarily inductive, the emerging theory was also compared to and influenced by existing theories, incorporating elements of abductive reasoning into the study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2008). The identity formation pathway of autistic people was the core category for structuring the "story line" around the core category. The factors, mental processes, discourse performance, and results of the identity formation pathway extracted from *Marcelo in the Real world* were coded to develop the "story line" of Marcelo's identity formation pathway. Finally, a model of Marcelo's path of identity formation was established (see Figure 1).

Parents who provide encouragement play a crucial role in creating a safe and supportive environment for their autistic adolescents. This emotional support promotes a good self-image while also promoting a sense of belonging, which is crucial for the development of an individual's identity. Parents can open diverse experiences and opportunities for their teenage child with autism by helping them integrate into society. This exposure enables them to broaden their horizons, discover their passions, and develop a more comprehensive sense of self. Although autistic teenagers can benefit from joining disability groups specifically designed for individuals with similar experiences, challenges, and perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that autistic adolescents may encounter difficulties in social relationships and communication, which can contribute to their fear of engaging with the mainstream world. To become part of a professional social group provides them with valuable opportunities to develop essential skills for navigating professional settings. They can learn about professional etiquette, effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management. By dealing with complicated issues such as pursuing justice, autistic teens can enhance their self-esteem and self-worth, ultimately forming a positive identity. Finally, with self-advocacy, autistic individuals can cultivate self-awareness, understand their strengths and interests, authentically express themselves, and advocate for their rights and promote their unique perspectives.

F. Theoretical Saturation Test

To assess saturation, the coding results and the model were presented to experts and scholars in the field who provided positive feedback. Furthermore, some remaining original statements collected for this study were used to conduct the theoretical saturation test. The same open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were performed according to the grounded theory for comparing concepts, categories, and relational paths as obtained during the theory construction process. Whether any new concepts, categories, main categories, and relational paths emerged was then investigated through data coding and analysis, which revealed that no new concepts and categories emerged. Thus, the theoretical saturation test was passed, and theory convergence was achieved.
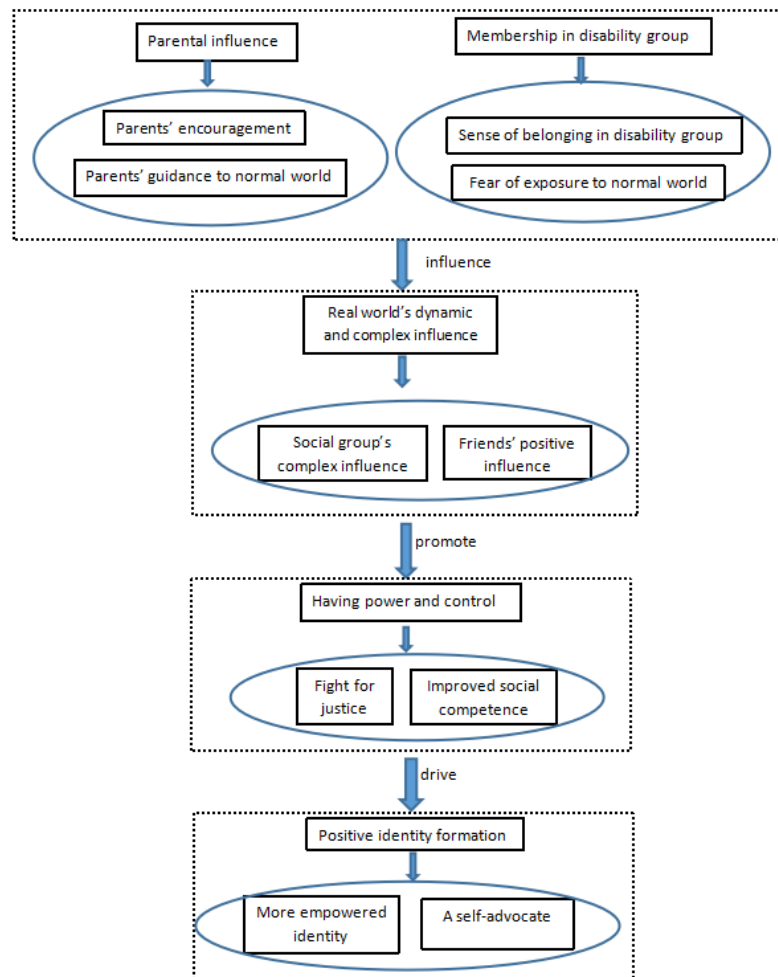
Figure 1. Model of Marcelo's Identity Formation

IV. FINDINGS

A. Parental Influence

Parents' encouragement plays a crucial role in shaping autistic adolescents' positive identity formation. Parents who provide encouragement create a safe and supportive environment for their autistic adolescents. This emotional support helps them develop a positive self-image and a sense of belonging, which are essential for identity formation. The most telling example is that Marcelo's mother complimented Marcelo every morning, and his father always smiled at him and treated him as a normal person. "You're better-looking than most. You're tall and handsome and strong"(Stork, 2010, p.32). Parents who treat autistic adolescents as normal individuals can enhance their independence and autonomy. Parents' encouragement also allows them to develop and practice essential life skills, make decisions, and take responsibility for their actions. Although Marcelo believed he should be accompanied by an adult to the mall, his father denied he had a disability. For instance, Stork wrote, "I still remember the answer Arturo gave me once when I asked if I could take Namu with me to the mall: "You're not disabled," he said." (p.40) Likewise, his mother often said that he looked no different but rather better than many other children. These actions of parents may positively reinforce autistic adolescents' belief that they are not different from other people. Therefore, when parents treat autistic adolescents as normal individuals, it helps foster a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. It sends the message that their condition does not define their value as a person. By emphasizing their strengths, talents, and abilities, parents can instill confidence in their children and help them develop a positive self-identity.

Apart from parents' encouragement, parents' guidance can also expose autistic adolescents to a variety of experiences and opportunities in the normal world. This can include skills such as communication, problem-solving, and self-care. By equipping them with these skills, parents empower autistic adolescents to navigate everyday challenges and build confidence in their abilities, thereby contributing to a positive sense of identity. In *Marcelo in the Real World*, to help Marcelo leave his former group and come out of his comfort zone, his parents patiently persuaded him to contact more people in the real world. Parents of autistic adolescents "inherit a moral responsibility," acting as interpreters and

advocates for their children in a world that lacks resources required for them to succeed (Hart, 2014). During persuasion, Marcelo repeatedly refused to believe his parents, arguing that he would not leave, as he had spent all his life in the school for disabled and the disability group was most suitable for him. Collective identities considerably affect how people behave (Tajfel et al., 1979). An individual can feel satisfied when identifying with particular groups (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). They often face challenges in social interactions and understanding social norms; hence, parents' guidance can help bridge the gap between their autistic child and the normal world by providing them with essential social skills and teaching them appropriate social behaviors. This guidance enables autistic adolescents to navigate social situations more effectively and enhances their sense of belonging in the broader society.

B. Membership in Disability Group

Being part of a disability group can provide a sense of belonging and community for autistic adolescents. They may feel understood and accepted by peers who share similar experiences and challenges. Marcelo attended a school for students with disabilities where he did not consider himself disabled, despite being diagnosed with autism, due to his ability to effectively communicate with other students. "Arturo needs to be convinced that the best way for me to be like everyone else is to continue at Paterson, where I can learn at my own pace, where I am learning to make decisions and becoming responsible and independent, all the things he wants me to be" (Stock, 2010, p.11). Marcelo believed that continuing to study at Paterson was the best choice for him as the group satisfaction enabled him to think that he was not disabled. Research findings indicate the significance of social identification processes in autistic adults. For example, a study by Cooper et al. (2017) revealed a positive relationship between psychological well-being and autistic social identity and self-esteem. This association is influenced by collective self-esteem, which reflects individuals' positive evaluation of their autistic identity. Additionally, acceptance of one's autistic identity and perceived acceptance from family and friends have been linked to well-being among autistic adults (Cage et al., 2018).

However, continuously associating with a disability group may reinforce a primary identity focused on disability rather than emphasizing the diverse abilities and strengths of autistic individuals. This could potentially hinder their overall self-perception and hinder positive identity formation. Determination of a group membership by a label or classification, such as having a spinal injury or cognitive impairment, can adversely affect many facets of a person's social life (Hutchinson et al., 2018). In *Marcelo in the Real World*, Marcelo was uneasy after learning that his parents were going to transfer him from his current school for the disabled to a completely unfamiliar environment. He resisted and argued with his parents and denounced his parents' actions as unjustifiable. Autistic individuals not only exhibit deficits in social communication but also exhibit repetitive and restricted patterns of behavior, interests, and activities (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) (Roehr, 2013), due to which they may face difficulties in expressing themselves and understanding others, particularly in social settings. This can lead to a fear of exposure as they worry about not being able to effectively communicate their thoughts, feelings, or needs. They may fear being misunderstood or being unable to navigate social expectations, which can increase their anxiety in unfamiliar or challenging situations. As Marcelo said, "There are so many things I still have difficulties with. I cannot walk by myself in a strange place without a map. I get flustered when I am asked to do more than one thing at once. ... They expect responses from me I cannot give" (Stock, 2010, p.23). According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, when a body or mind functions in a manner that contravenes social norms, a maladjustment hinders the disabled individual from functioning according to the expected norms (Garland-Thomson, 2011). However, belonging to a stigmatized social group might have a negative impact on one's well-being. Autistic people face substantial prejudice, which is known as autistic minority stress (Botha & Frost, 2020). This discrimination impairs autistic young people's well-being and self-esteem, and people with autism are more likely to encounter mental health challenges compared with the individuals having normal development (Lai et al., 2019). Therefore, if autistic adolescents are not guided to leave the disabled environment and their comfort zone, their social life in adulthood may be affected.

C. Real World's Dynamic and Complex Influence

Friends play a crucial role in facilitating the development of social skills in autistic adolescents. Engaging in social interactions with peers allows them to practice and refine their communication, socialization, and emotional regulation skills. Positive friendships may provide a platform for learning and growth, where autistic adolescents can observe and emulate their friends' social behaviors, expanding their social repertoire. At the law firm, Marcelo's best friend Jasmine not only treated Marcelo as a normal person but also encouraged him to express himself, as inferred from "'You're Marcelo,' she says, reminding me of who I am"(Stock, 2010, p.295). Jasmine considered Marcelo to be a normal person, encouraged him to express himself bravely, and helped him manage daily tasks. Jasmine' daily encouragement enabled Marcelo to gain a clear perception of the real world and he became increasingly confident. Socializing with people supporting this identity transformation may act as an enabler and strengthen the renegotiation process for individuals to be more confident and gain freedom to be their true self (Hutchinson et al., 2018).

Besides friends' positive influence, autistic individuals may face social exclusion or rejection from certain social groups due to differences in their ability to communicate and social behavior. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder face greater stigma because of their diagnosis, which may result in high-level bullying (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015). This phenomenon is particularly obvious in a law firm, wherein a social group's complex influence includes friends'

unintentional hurt, nicknames given to him, taunts from strangers, injustice issues, and malicious stares from other people. For example, Marcelo's coworkers referred to him as dumb and an idiot, and labeled him "Gump."

Positive and complex effects help individuals embrace challenges as a significant part of life. As social identity theory suggests, examining social self, intergroup relations, and intragroup processes can create a sense of belonging and provide a definition, that is, the relationship between people and the social category to which they belong (Harris et al., 2014; Hogg et al., 1995). Jenkins (2014) related identity with "the map of the world and our position in it, as individuals and collective members" and that the self is both an individual and a society. Therefore, dynamic and complex social influences on autistic people, especially the constant encouragement of friends around them, promote their sense of belonging, which helps them establish a positive identity.

D. Having Power and Control

Participating in social interactions related to justice and advocacy would help autistic adolescents develop a deeper understanding of their own strengths, challenges, and rights. This increased self-awareness empowers them to become self-advocates, speaking up for themselves and others, which can positively shape their identity. In *Marcelo in the Real World*, the protagonist Marcelo demonstrates not only self-advocacy but also a commitment to advocating for others, including Ixtel, a young immigrant who is financially disadvantaged and orphaned, who relies on a lawyer to protect her legal rights. When Marcelo decides to provide essential evidence to Ixtel's lawyer, even at the risk of jeopardizing his father's case as the defendant's attorney, it becomes evident that he has embraced the role of a disability rights activist. He must choose whether to help the girl or consider how his family and coworkers are affected. However, with Jasmine's encouragement, Marcelo finally chooses justice and helps the girl, which promotes Marcelo's sense of control and increases his awareness of the world.

Transitioning to a social group like a law firm exposes autistic adolescents to new challenges and expectations. Professional settings have higher demands in terms of performance, deadlines, and interpersonal skills. Navigating these challenges can promote personal growth, resilience, and the development of adaptive strategies. The most telling example of this is Marcelo's courage to accept challenge and improvement in communication. "I have been trained. It is training and concentration. Years of learning how to communicate."(Stock, 2010, p.239). Self-esteem is positively linked with the number of social groups to which a person belongs, as social groups contribute to the development of collective self-esteem to some extent, suggesting that social identity enhances individual self-esteem as people take pride in their (positive) group membership (Jetten et al., 2015). People can belong to various social categories, each with its own level of significance and impact on their sense of self. These memberships contribute to their social identities (Hogg et al., 1995). Therefore, the challenges and obstacles faced in social interactions focused on fighting for justice can contribute to personal growth and resilience in autistic adolescents. Overcoming hurdles, standing up for what they believe in, and advocating for change can foster a strong sense of resilience, determination, and personal development.

E. Positive Identity Formation

The journey of autistic adolescents from the disabled world to the normal world is a transformative process that leads to the development of an empowered identity. Through increased awareness, acceptance, and access to support, these individuals gain the confidence to navigate challenges of the normal world and embrace their unique abilities. As they navigate through the challenges and triumphs of this transition, they undergo a process of self-discovery and empowerment. The positive societal opportunities in recognizing autistic people's capabilities and positive guidance and encouragement from people close to autistic people contribute to positive identity transformation. In the social environment, people gradually learn the strategies for identity management such as shaping positive group distinctiveness or focusing on methods by which group members gain advantages over group members (Blanz et al., 1998). As the book comes to a close, Marcelo and Jasmine are preparing to relocate to the country and establish a pony farm for children with disabilities. In the meantime, they have fallen in love.

An autistic person's path towards recognizing their own strengths, problems, and particular needs related to autism is greatly aided by self-advocacy. They are better able to communicate their experiences and stand up for themselves with their enhanced self-awareness. For teenagers with autism, the process of self-advocacy includes self-discovery, empowerment, and assertiveness, empowering them to create their own narratives, advance acceptance, and work toward constructing a more inclusive society. For instance, according to study by Jetten et al. (2012), people who are a part of several social support networks have more opportunities to offer and receive assistance, which promotes their well-being. In case of Marcelo, interactions with his coworker Jasmine in the traditional workplace gave him valuable learning opportunities and regular reinforcement, gradually allowing him to create a sense of positive identity. Having a second social identity gave Marcelo the chance to improve his social communication abilities in everyday situations. According to Jetten et al. (2012), having several social identities acts as a safeguard against a variety of mental and physical health problems and broadens one's range of personal identities. This is best illustrated by Marcelo's journey, who gained self-advocacy, made plans for his future studies and job, and developed willpower to attend a regular school, high school, and college. Despite falling behind at first, Marcelo's commitment and tenacity motivated him to put in a lot of effort to catch up. He even planned for his personal and professional lives after graduation and identified his life's

purpose. This phenomenon demonstrates the positive effects of exposing autistic people to the outside world, since it promotes their integration into society and helps them recover from autism.

V. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH PROSPECTS

A. Research Conclusion

This work investigated the process of identity construction in autistic teens through a grounded theory-based investigation centered on Marcelo's experiences in the real world. The study highlights the advantageous facets of Marcelo's identity development by incorporating ideas from disability studies and social identity theory. According to the study's findings, it can be concluded that Marcelo's identity was significantly shaped by his parents, encouraging friendships, exposure to disputes and inconsistencies, and negotiating social expectations. These elements helped him to develop awareness of social dynamics as well as the ability to read nonverbal clues, understand the viewpoints of others, and exercise social agency. Marcelo was able to change and develop a good identity by actively engaging in these events. A theoretical framework for analyzing the process of positive identity formation in adolescents with autism has been developed through the integration of disability studies and social identity theory. Disability studies have made it possible to explore the effects of social and cultural factors on people's identity construction, and social identity theory has shed light on the causes of social group formation, the formation of group identity, and the sources of self-worth derived from group memberships. Grounded theory has been used in this study to provide a thorough examination of Marcelo's experiences and the fundamental elements of his identity construction. Themes that illustrate the transformative journey Marcelo takes as he negotiates the complexity of the outside world and creates his distinct personality have been developed through a meticulous examination of the textual data.

B. Contributions

This study is the first to use grounded theory to analyze the discourse and psychological performance of the development process and outcomes of autistic characters in novels. Unlike earlier studies of autistic adolescents, this study does not impose ethical limitations as a guide for future research on the psychologically aided treatment of autistic individuals.

A model of identity formation was constructed in this study. Currently, research on identity formation in autism is based on medical and psychological analyses. This study pioneered analyses of the discourse and psychological performance of autistic characters in literature and abstracting the path model of identity formation, providing a theoretical framework for further analysis of identity formation in individuals with autism through literature. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of the psychology and surroundings of autistic individuals in this study provides insights for the psychological interventions for individuals with autism.

C. Research Limitations

Data used in this study were collected from the book *Marcelo in the Real World*. However, although the collection process was as comprehensive and complete as possible and the principle of theoretical saturation was followed, a certain subjectivity exists, as the data were extracted from a single book. Therefore, in-depth interviews with autistic individuals and their families can be conducted in the future to collect supplemental data and validate the identity formation of autistic individuals. Comprehensive research is yet to be conducted on autistic individuals. Given the rise in the prevalence of autism in adolescents, more research is required to develop a comprehensive and effective approach to the complementary psychotherapy intended for autistic individuals.

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