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An Occupational Perspective on The Lived Experience of Menstruation for Autistic Adults

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Introduction

It would be uncontroversial to observe that menstruation impacts upon individuals' ability to engage in everyday occupations, not least those around self-care, productivity and leisure (Brown and Lalor, 2020). Limited research has, however, explored the occupational consequences of menstruation for autistic persons, despite extant medical literature indicating that autism poses unique challenges in this respect (Jeffery, Kayani and Garden, 2013). Given this, the research reported herein qualitatively explores detailed verbal accounts provided by autistic individuals relating to their long-wave experiences of menstruation, and further investigates whether the Occupational Perspective of Health Framework (OPHF) can aid in understanding the influence of menstruation on the lives of autistic individuals from an occupational perspective.

Method

With full ethical approval from the first author's institutional agency at the time of request, a purposive sample of autistic adults with experience of menstruation (N=6) was recruited to sit for detailed semi-structured interviews online via the medium of MS Teams. All interviews were transcribed in full, with key redactions made at the point of transcription to protect participant identity (i.e., proper names, places and exact dates). Transcripts were then scrutinised and analysed using the formal approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Pseudonyms in direct quotes below are used to protect individual identities.

Thematic Analysis and Key Evidence

Elle: "Obviously not every single neurotypical, but as a general rule they haven't got a clue. They do not understand how much more intense and how much more of an impact [menstruation] has, more on autistics because they don't live it, they don't get it at all. We are often just dismissed as exaggerating. And attention seeking and pity seeking, but no, this is actually this bad."

Fran: "When I have sort of sensory overload I get quite anxious. So then I start breathing really fast. My heart goes fast, my hands feel all sweaty and clammy. Yeah, so it sounds like quite a sort of severe reaction to like having to change a pad but for me that's just the reality."

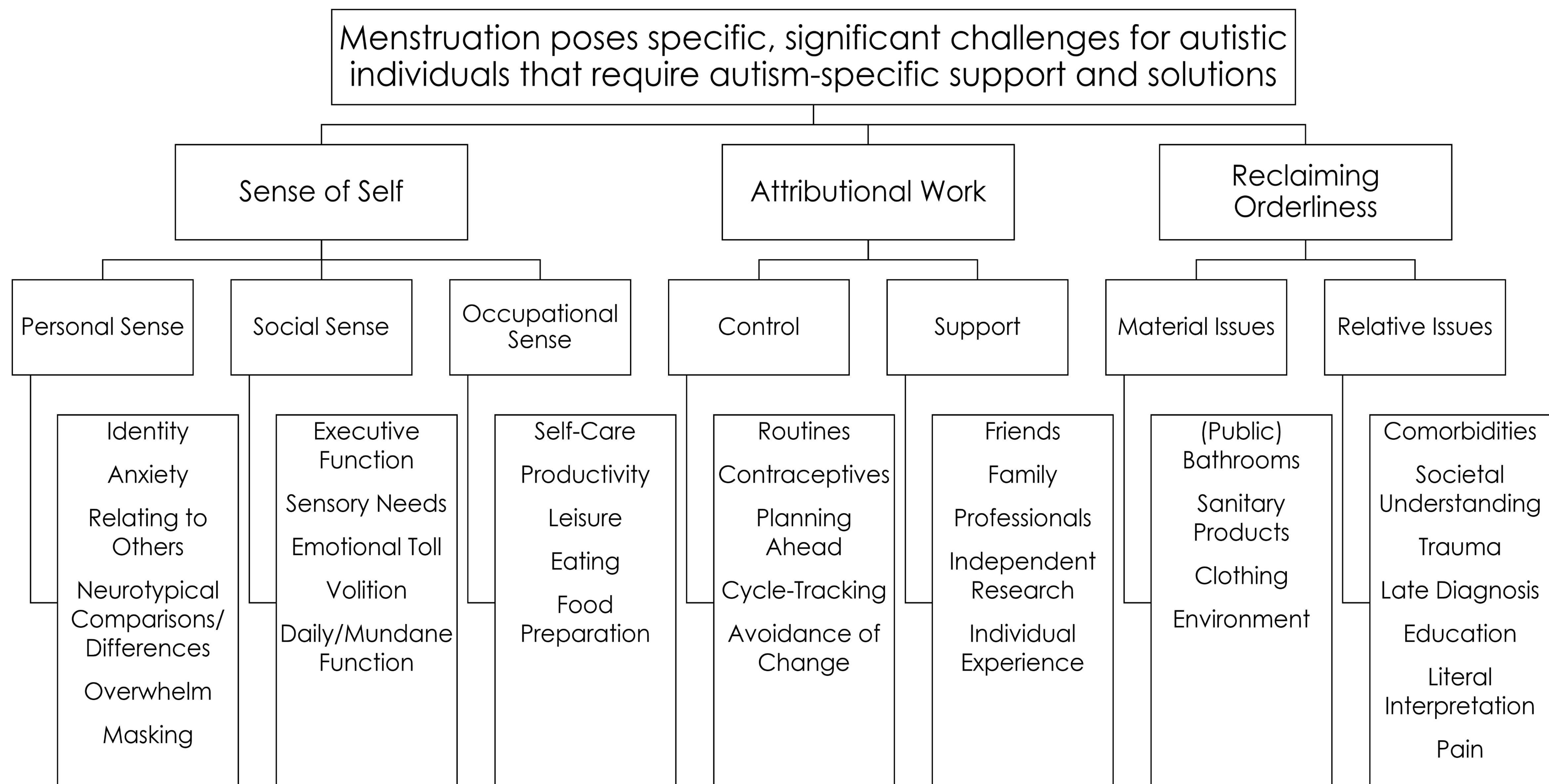


Figure 1: Thematic Analysis

Emergent Issues

To Do	Occupations of self-care, productivity and leisure
To Be	True selves when masking symptoms
To Become	Occupational beings due to long-term medication and need to plan
To Belong	In a predominantly inaccessible and anxiety inducing society

Commentary: There are unmet needs and a lack of understanding about an experience directly relevant to occupational therapy and occupational science. To be an effective profession, the impact of this need on occupational engagement, participation and deprivation must be considered.

Conclusions

Menstruation poses significant barriers to participating in occupations of self-care, productivity and leisure for autistic adults, and the OPHF provides a lens through which the implications of menstruation on occupational participation can be understood.

References

- Braun, V, Clarke, V (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2) pp.77–101.
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