the way his surroundings interact with and react towards him. Retrospectively labelling a character (or historical figure) will attribute them deviance but it cannot possibly affect them, their self-understanding, or their interaction with others. There are several aspects to be considered, such as whether the nature of deviance affects their social standing, however, for my study, I will simply retain that such retrospectively applied labels, which were not, in fact, part of their normalities, cannot possibly explain a character's intentions, self-understanding, and freely made choices.

Deviance and Mental Health

Although society creates its own normality (normalities), which is subsequently reflected in literature, there is not much flexibility involved. Indeed, the undertow of normality can be considered quite strong, given that it also manifests itself within institutions such as the judicial system. In reality, deviance can have devastating effects on an individual.

Put simply, there are two main factors that put autists at a higher risk of developing mental health issues: not fitting in and trying to fit in. Studies on autism stigmatisation differentiate between perceived, anticipated, experienced, and internalised stigma. Here, the label 'autistic' has become a defining ontological fact about the individual, thus not allowing the autist to renegotiate their status but leading to them being categorised by prejudice and stereotypical assumptions. The *perceived* stigma is "thought to be present against autistic people generally" (Han et al. 16), and decidedly negative, with the stereotypical assumption "of autistic people as [being] male, minimally verbal, infantile, or violent" (16). Interestingly, apart from Christopher (*Curious Incident*), this stigma does not fit any of the characters examined. It also does not coincide with the stereotypes Loftis mentioned, nor the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes(see Chapter 3). This could be explained by two things; either the perceived stigma is not actually as negative as described, or fictional portrayals of autism are based on a very different stereotype. Either way,

the perceived stigma will nevertheless have detrimental effects on the mental health of autists.

Based on the perceived stigma, autists formed expectations on how they would be stigmatised (*anticipated* stigma):

> Both autistic adolescents and adults expressed fears that having an ASD label meant that others would make prejudgments about them and treat them differently, even if they had not yet experienced such stigma directly. (Han et al. 16)

When it came to actual experiences with stigmatisation, participants "reported being misunderstood, teased, insulted, bullied, excluded, or rejected by peers, at different levels of severity and regularity" (Han et al. 16). They would frequently face prejudice and discrimination (16), or, vice versa, "receive unwanted help, [causing them to] feel patronized and be singled out as 'different'" (16). Even well-intended actions missed their mark because people were blinded by their stereotypes and thus unable to perceive the actual person behind them. In other words, stigmata will trigger certain unfavourable stereotypes. Unfortunately, it is true that

> [o]n a regular basis, people with autism are subject to individual harassment, expulsion from public schools, restrictions on using public space (including restaurants, stores, parks, and recreation centers), and surveillance and arrest by criminal justice authorities. (Bumiller 979)

All of these are forms of sanctioning deviance, thus pressuring the individual towards 'being normal'. Except for Christopher, all characters expressed the desire to somewhat fit in. This could be attributed to the fact that they all experienced instances of harassment, albeit some less than others. In many cases, difficulties in social interaction led to deviant behaviour and subsequent harassment. Usually, the opponents remained unaware of the protagonist's diagnosis, reasoning that they were, in fact, 'weird', 'stupid', or trying to be difficult (cf. Chapter 4.5).

If such a stigma is internalised, subjects even apply these negative assumptions to themselves. Autistic participants from several studies described "themselves as 'weird' or a 'misfit' …, 'not normal', a 'freak' or having a 'bad brain' …, [being] 'wrong', 'broken' or 'defective' …, a 'wimp', 'bad' or 'disgusting' …" (Han et al. 17). Unsurprisingly, stigmatisation and subsequent harassment will have adverse effects on the mental health of autists and may cause these individuals to develop techniques to 'hide' their autism stigma.

Several of the characters in the novels discussed make remarks that hint towards an internalised stigma, albeit with a positive twist. For example, in *Marcelo in the Real World*, Marcelo's internalised stigma is implied in the following sequence:

> Arturo is basically asking me to pretend that I am normal, according to his definition, for three months. This is an impossible task, as far as I can tell, especially since it is very difficult for me to feel that I am *not* normal. Why can't others think and see the world the way I see it? (*Marcelo* 23, original highlighting)

Marcelo states, ex negativo, that he is, in fact, normal, but proceeds to say that others do not think and see the world as he does. Thus, although he considers himself normal, he is aware that others do not. Interestingly, the phrasing 'according to his definition' refers to the fact that there are different normalities, in this case, the rules and norms of the law firm. Arguably, in the context of his school, Marcelo would be considered normal, yet because it is a special needs school, it has an inherently deviant status. It does demonstrate, however, that communities and institutions create their own normalities.

In *The London Eye Mystery*, Ted remembers one of his doctors using the word 'skewed' but chooses not to tell Salim about it, because he feels that it implies criminal tendencies (37). David (*What to Say Next*), on the other hand, calls himself 'good-weird' "when being just plain weird was too much of a burden to carry" (62), implying that he, too, has internalised the stigma but, in order to preserve his self-esteem, reframed it as 'good', i.e. possibly not harmful, beneficial to others, etc. Consequently, inter-

nalising a stigma can fundamentally affect a person's identity. In reality, individuals will quite often resort to 'hiding' their autism by pretending to be normal, learning to cover up any deviance and consequently wearing a mask. This effect is referred to as camouflaging or masking, a topic I will return to in Chapter 6.4. However, hiding one's autism is usually linked to anxiety over being found out as well as a feeling of not being true to one's own identity. Generally speaking, "higher levels of concealment of autism were associated with higher levels of internalized stigma and lower levels of social wellbeing in autistic adults" (Han et al. 18). Upon being asked,

> [m]any autistic individuals expressed a desire to show their true selves and recognized some benefits of disclosing, but feared that disclosure would attract more stigma, causing others to associate them with negative stereotypes and treat them differently. (Han et al. 18)

Disclosure can be a high-risk gamble for autists.

> Among autistic individuals who disclosed, some experienced positive relationship changes and improved understanding and acceptance, while others experienced unhelpful, dismissive, and patronizing reactions … . (Han et al. 19)

Participants of the study reported that reactions tended to be more negative than positive:

> … many interviewees described an unequal power dynamic between themselves and neurotypical individuals when they disclosed, including being told "you are not really autistic" … or "everyone's a bit like that" … . Participants expressed concern that such responses detract from their identity, erase their experience, and remove their need for support. (Han et al. 19)

In these instances, the individuals disclosed their deviant status but were met with dismissal, possibly caused by either incredulity ('you are not really autistic') or a well-meant but poorly executed application

of flexible normalism ('everyone's a bit like that'). Unfortunately, even well-meant flexible normalism becomes oppressing and disparaging if applied to an internalised stigma, since the latter has already become part of the individual's identity. Consequently, dismissing deviance had the opposite effect intended, with the individual being denied their deviance and the label on which they carefully crafted their identity. Thus, neither disclosure nor flexible normalism are easy fixes for harassment and marginalisation since a stigma needs to be acknowledged once internalised. It further demonstrates how a label can be reframed, consequently changing the stigma, but it cannot simply be abandoned.

Autistic adolescents in particular tend to report more positive self-perception the stronger they feel aligned with the non-autistic culture, which may be because they are particularly prone to encountering discrimination or marginalisation (Han et al. 21). For example, autistic adolescents are more likely to be "made fun of by other pupils compared to adolescents with intellectual disability" (16), albeit less so by "teachers, the public, and family members" (17). Thus, classmates and peers in particular reinforce the desire to 'be normal' in order to avoid harassment. Quite often, these participants also had bleak visions for their lives, expecting continued "autism-related stigma … [to] negatively affect them in the future" (16). However,

> [i]t is notable that many autistic adults who participated in the included studies described autism as a positive part of their identity, while many autistic adolescents did not. This may be due to the fact that adolescence is the stage at which individuals are just starting to explore their identity and may face more pressure to fit into their peer groups … , while the transition to adulthood is a time when autistic individuals may be more likely to develop self-acceptance and self-advocacy skills … . (Han et al. 21)

It seems, as if adolescence and young adulthood were particularly sensitive stages in which individuals would not only benefit from role models but also from general autism awareness. On the other hand, adults who were able to reconcile their identity with their autistic traits in a posi-

tive way were found to have "higher collective self-esteem and improved mental health" (Han et al. 21). In essence, positive representation is of key importance if it helps empower autistic adolescents to reframe their internalised stigma, in addition to educating non-autistic readers to prevent further discrimination. Moreover, representation should in theory generate application templates for life curves, thus helping adolescents and young adults envision a future for themselves, as well as embracing their autistic identity.

The evaluation of stereotypes in Chapter 3.4 also showed that all characters examined experienced instances of othering and harassment. Unfortunately, this seems to be part of a realistic portrayal. On a positive note, many characters received support, love, and acceptance from their families, and encountered instances of inclusion. Considering that these novels have an educational claim, such portrayals demonstrate how harassment and bullying are wrong but can also be overcome. However, we cannot simply escape society's pressure to be 'normal' and there are institutionalised as well as social instances that (re-) enforce normality. Labels, especially, are quick to produce normative realities, usually at the cost of free choice. Therefore, whenever a person is labelled deviant, their behaviour will subsequently be perceived as deviant, as well. Although labels may be anchored in space and time, they can easily lead to ostracization as well as fundamentally change the individual's self-understanding. The interplay of normality and deviance is also portrayed in literature, including situations in which the deviance of a character is (re-) negotiated. Here, literature can engage in protonormality and flexible normalism, either reinforcing norms or advocating for acceptance. Young adult fiction in particular focuses on the subject in relation to normality and deviance and thus offers application templates for its readers. I will explore the implications of this for autism narratives in the next chapter.