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Who Decides What Counts?

Autistic Women,
Trauma and the
Politics of
Recognition

“9 out of 10 autistic women report having experienced sexual assault”

(Cazalis *et al.*, 2022)

GENERAL



99.6%

of autistic participants experienced at least one type of violence.

NON-PHYSICAL VIOLENCE



90%

or more of autistic people were subjected to harassment, psychological and emotional, or verbal violence.

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE



72.6%

of autistic people had at least one incident of physical violence, with 51% reporting several incidents.

CHILD MALTREATMENT



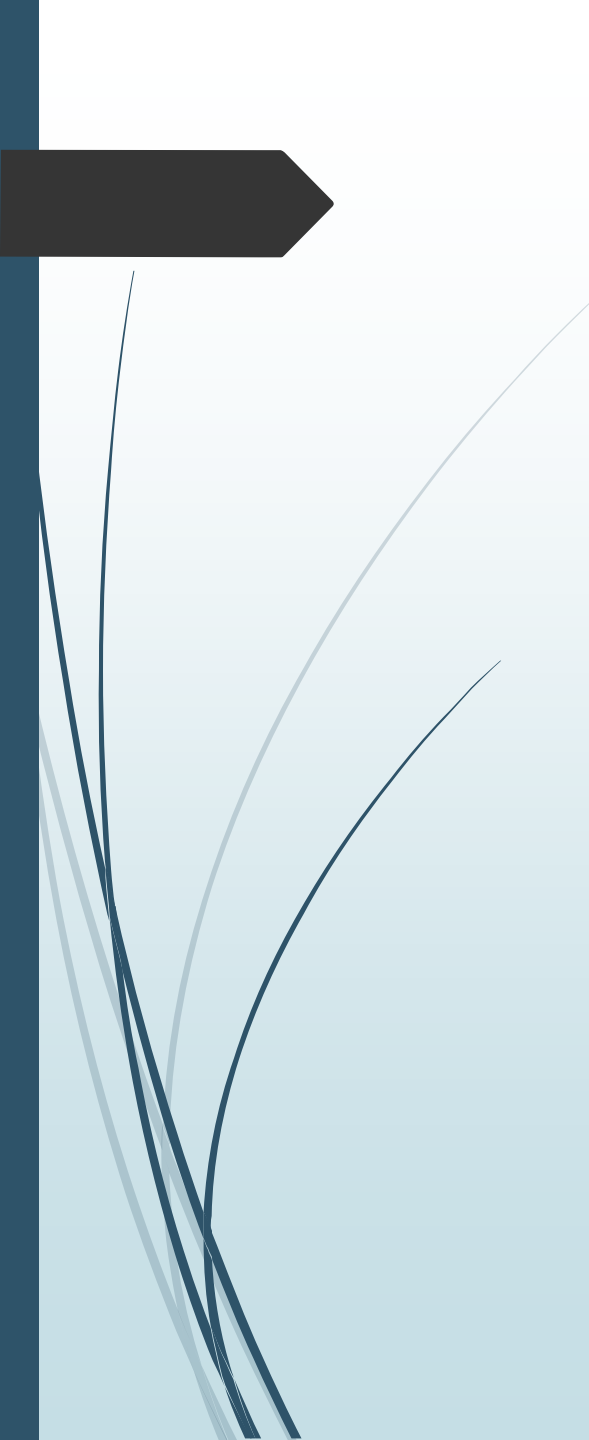
78.4%

of autistic people had at least one type of violence perpetrated against them during childhood, with 47.5% of these instances being physical or sexual violence.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

86%

of autistic women and non-binary people, and 72.5% of men, experienced domestic violence from family or a partner.



**What if trauma is not only about
what happens.....**

**....but about whether what
happens is recognised as harm?**

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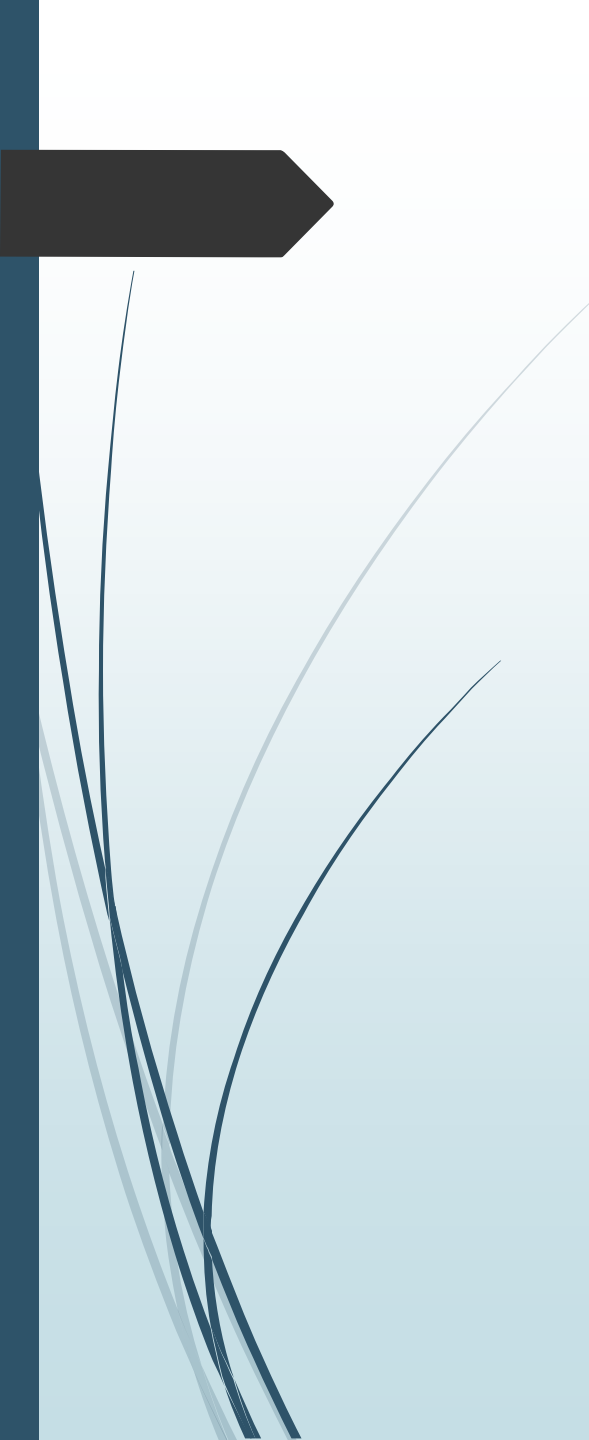
Uncertainty across sites

- ▶ 'What counts' operates across multiple sites:
 - ▶ Schools
 - ▶ Diagnostic systems
 - ▶ Mental health frameworks
 - ▶ Safeguarding
 - ▶ Police reporting
- ▶ Patterns accumulate

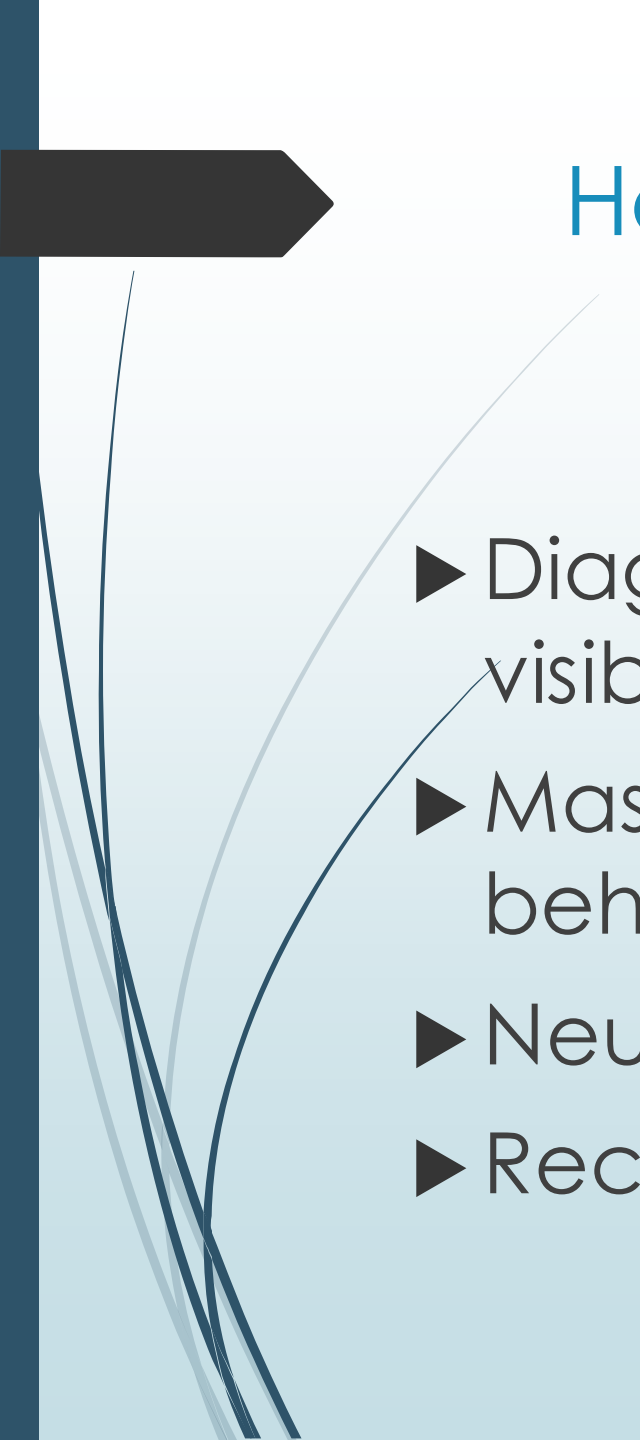
An illustration in the top-left corner shows two hands reaching towards each other. One hand is light blue, and the other is a darker blue. They are positioned as if about to clasp or support each other. The background of the slide is a light blue gradient with some faint, abstract line art on the left side.

Trauma as mediated by systems of recognition

- ▶ Distress must align with expectations to count
- ▶ Recognition is structured and institutional
- ▶ Three stages:
 - ▶ Structure
 - ▶ Formalised and lived
 - ▶ epistemic justice



PART I: HOW RECOGNITION IS STRUCTURED



How Autism Is Made Recognisable

- ▶ Diagnostic frameworks shape what becomes visible
- ▶ Masculinised norms foregrounded externalised behaviours
- ▶ Neurodiversity movements expanding the frame
- ▶ Recognition is already filtered

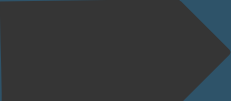


Gendered Recognisability and Epistemic Harm

- ▶ Recognition is gendered
- ▶ Credibility is socially distributed
- ▶ Distress must look 'right' to count
- ▶ Misrecognition is patterned, not accidental

(Butler, 2004; Fricker, 2007; Milton, 2012)

Trauma, Legibility and Authorisation



- Trauma is interpreted through institutional templates
- Distress must align with recognised scripts
- Harm is reframed, individualised or psychologised
- Recognition shapes what becomes recordable

(Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014; Pearson et al., 2023)

Misrecognition as a Trajectory

Misrecognition as Cumulative

Begins early

Repeats across domains

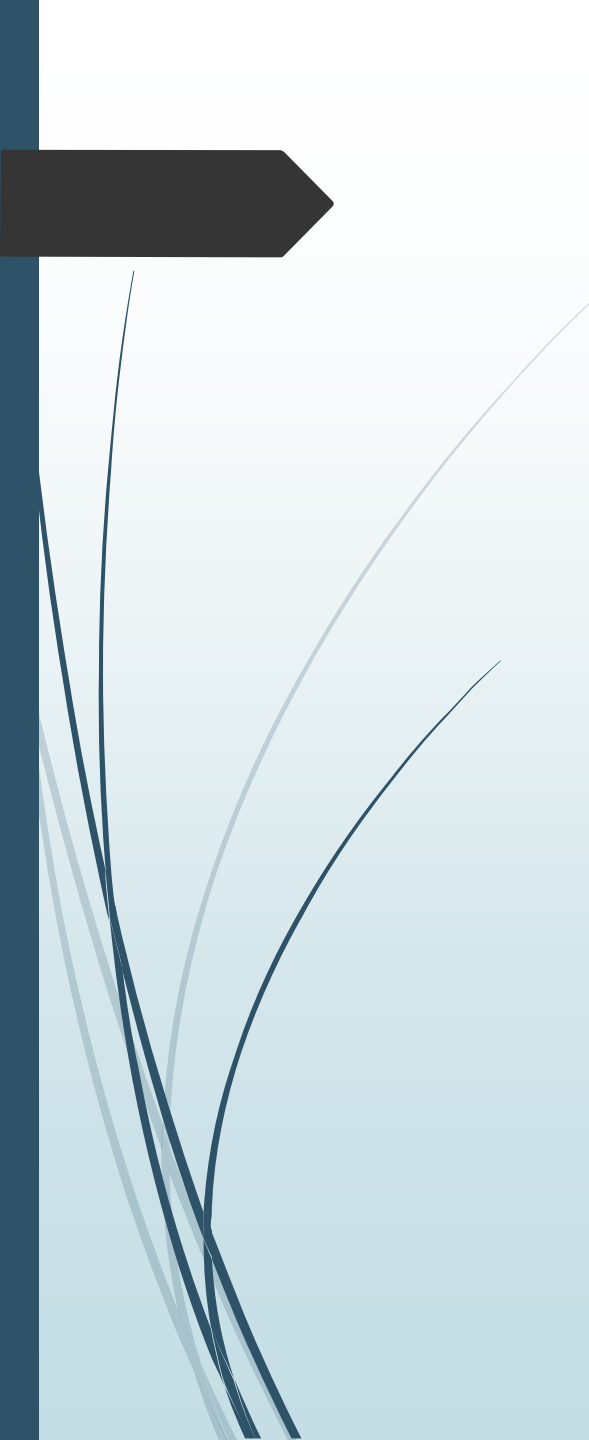
Becomes normalised

Shapes expectations of harm

Misrecognition is not episodic. It is cumulative.

“The cumulative kind of slow feeding of not being believed... it just goes on the backbone and becomes something that you start to believe.” - Juniper

(Bourdieu, 1977; Butler, 2009; Rumball et al., 2020)



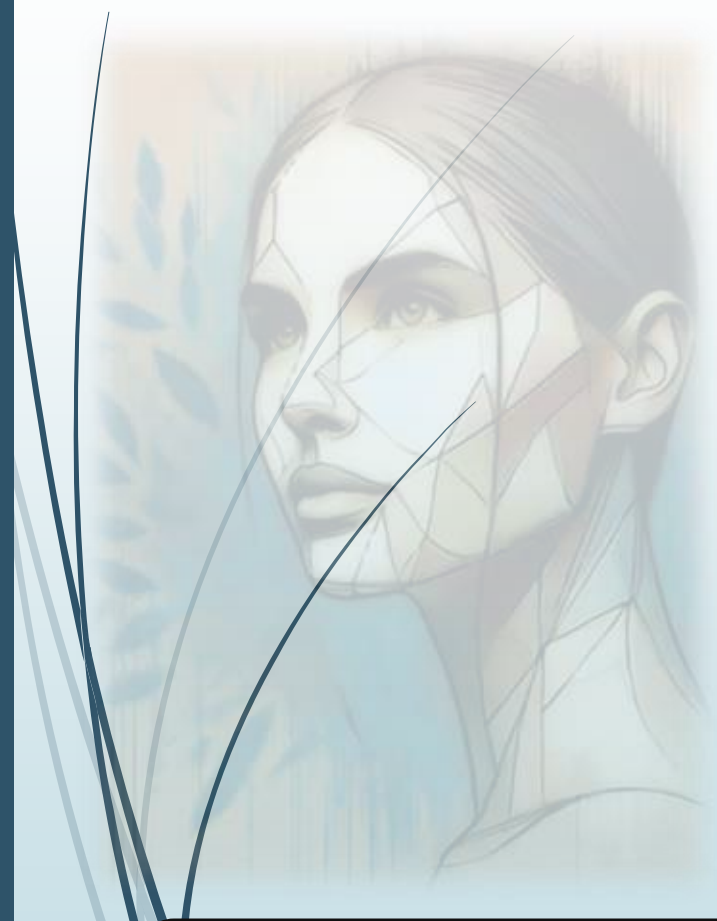
PART II: WHEN MISRECOGNITION IS REPRODUCED

Performing “Recognisable” Trauma

- Credibility depends on how distress appears
- Recognisability functions as gatekeeping
- Translation requires capacity

“I was presenting in a seemingly ‘emotionless’ way and found it hard to express myself... I was often heavily masking.” Clara

Misdiagnosis as Codified Misrecognition

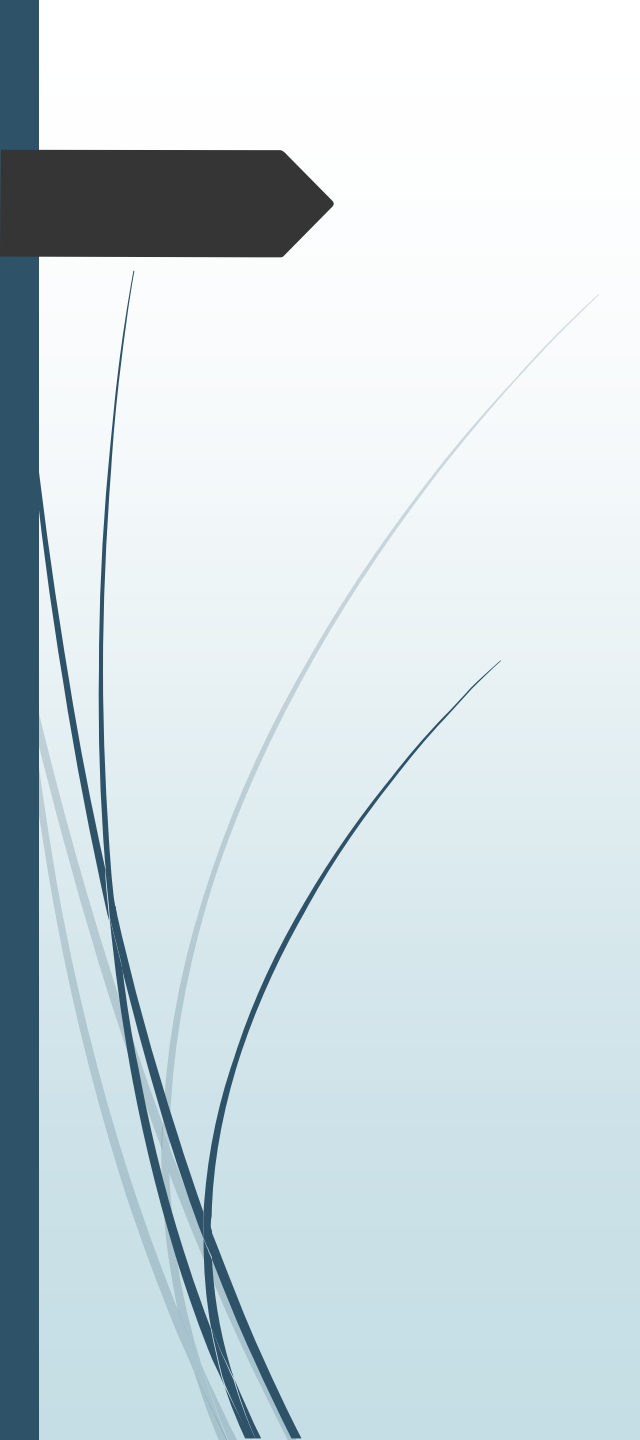
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- Autism absent from the interpretation
 - Distress reclassified through serial diagnoses
 - Doubt becomes documentation
 - Documentation shapes future encounters

“It was kind of like one mental condition going on to the other...a cascade effect and my life really, really fell into disrepair.” - Nina

The Social Construction of Inevitability

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- Repeated misrecognition shapes expectations of harm
 - Abuse becomes normalised
 - Self-trust erodes
 - Vulnerability framed as inherent

“A lot of us just end up accepting abuse because we learn that’s just how the world is” - Diana
“I find it hard to understand and assert my own boundaries, or even trust myself” - Clara



PART III: WHAT THIS MEANS

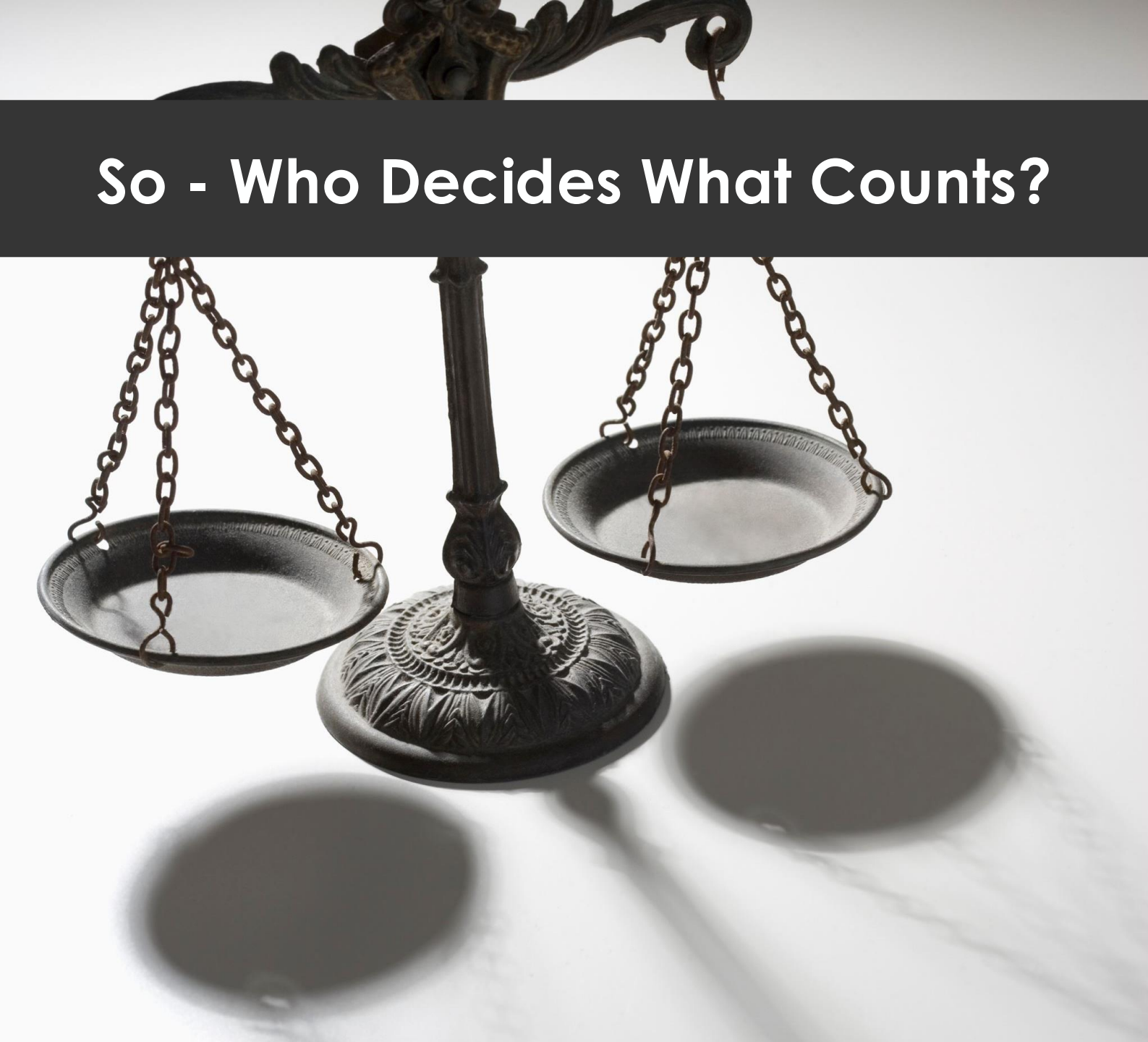
Recognition, Authority and Responsibility

“You’re very much a case, an item, a unit in a process, rather than a human being.”
- Sienna

- Recognition carries authority
- Authority carries responsibility
- Justice requires redistribution

- Redistributing interpretive authority
- Autistic narratives are knowledge
- Recognition must be shared
- Diagnostic frameworks remain open to revision
- Cumulative and relational harms are named as trauma

Participatory Futures



So - Who Decides What Counts?

- What counts as harm?
- Who gets to name it?
- Whose suffering becomes legitimate?
- What would recognition as justice require?



Thank you!

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