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Neuroqueer Intimacies in Online Dating Apps

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ABSTRACT

What can we learn from the intimacies bypassing neurotypical understanding of relationships? Drawing from neurodiversity studies (Yergeau, 2018, 2020; Egner, 2019; Kapp, 2020), I question the widespread notion of intimacy connected to neurotypical familial sexual relationships. This paper includes a bibliographic review of neuroqueer intimacies, followed by autoethnographic journal entries that recall the experiences of a neurodivergent, autistic person seeking intimate connections on dating apps. I comment on Remi Yergeau's critique of the 'Cassandra Affective Deprivation Disorder.' CADD is allegedly a condition that would affect neurotypical partners of autistics. CADD's tropes stigmatise neurodivergent traits as being male-based and a societal burden. It erases the neurodivergent folks who are neither heterosexual nor cis-gender identified (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020). Cassandra's bias reinforces a normative view of how some bodies should perform (Yergeau, 2020), and the traits of a normative performance are scrutinised in intimate platforms. In dating apps, there is a constant requirement to prove the ability to perform neurotypical traits, like constant eye contact and linguistic and gestural displays of affectivity.

Keywords: Neuroqueerness, intimacy, autoethnography, online dating, stigmatisation.
JEL Classifications: I00, I12, I19, J16.

1. Introduction

This article discusses the stigmatisation of neurodiversity in online dating, particularly looking at romantic relationships between persons on the spectrum of neuroqueerness—autistics, persons with ADHD and anxiety disorder—and neurotypicals—non-autistic individuals whose behaviour traits tend to the established norm. I also discuss how these intimacies are discursively stigmatised in intimate platforms, which encompasses mobile dating apps in this context. The methodology of this article is qualitative, and it is supported by autoethnography, as defined by the scholar Heewon Chang (2008). This initial exploration of the topic aims to propel the scarce discussion of the neuroqueer intimacies in academic literature. While the findings of the article are based on autoethnographic texts by the author, both them and the short bibliographic review point to the necessity of developing further research on the topic, as they indicate that the mechanisms of exclusion of neurodivergent persons in online dating

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platforms potentially generate and intensify affective inequalities; but these are not sufficiently discussed in scholarship.

In the first section, I introduce the reader to the background of the topic within the field of neurodiversity studies (Yergeau, 2018; Egner, 2019; Rosqvist, Chown & Stenning, 2020; Kapp, 2020; Milton, Murray, Martin et al., 2020) and conduct a literature review on neuroqueer intimacies. Then, I examine the discursive rejection strategies used against neuroqueer people in online dating apps, particularly Tinder. I propose a concept of neuroqueer intimacy that encompasses modes of togetherness that are not recognised in neuronormative Western cultures, as defined by their insistence on eye contact as a sign of respect and attention (Bascom, 2011 apud; Hillary, 2020). While there is a plethora of research on the ableist constraints of neuronormative society on mental wellbeing and the depathologising of neuroqueerness, there is little on romantic intimacy in the lives of neuroqueer people. One theory is that this scarcity is caused by the erasure of autistic people's sexuality by (often) able-bodied researchers in the field.

I present autoethnographic tales of neuroqueer intimacy in the second part of the article, navigating my experiences on online dating platforms. Each narrative responds to a phrase I encountered while dating. These are the requirements that a love-seeker writes in their online profiles—the information is public and anonymous. I contend that the required "perfect social and communication skills" limit the concept of intimacy to neurotypical gestures and verbal modalities of communication. 'Proofs' of normalcy related to linguistic communication must be displayed during the online flirting process, as they will be required later in the relationship when the public display (Finch, 2007) of a successful love life is required. I draw on Yergeau's (2018) understanding of neuroqueer demi-rhetoric to engage with this issue critically. I talk about more-than-human intimacies by considering our entanglement with objects and bringing them into the realm of intimacy. Neurodivergent people are often labelled as a-relational because they may prefer intimate modalities involving non-human entities (Manning, 2012).

2. Terminology and author's positionality

In this article, I use the term neuroqueer as a synonym for neurodivergent and neuroqueerness as a synonym for neurodiversity. In disability advocacy communities, 'neurodiversity' refers to the spectrum of cognitive atypicality, and the word 'neurodivergent' points to a particular person on the spectrum. Activists reappropriated the term neurodivergence as a stance against normalcy. The author is a neuroqueer activist-scholar who fights to disrupt academic and societal ableism.

3. Neurodiversity studies beyond critical disability studies

The Neurodiversity Studies field emerged in the 2010s and 2020s (Rosqvist, Chown & Stenning, 2020; Kapp, 2020; Milton, Murray, Martin et al., 2020). Neurodiversity, as a concept, activist movement, and paradigm, has been circulating in the past three decades and online message boards about autism (Walker & Raymaker, 2021). The neurodiversity movement defines some mental health conditions—the ASD spectrum, ADHD and others—not as deficits but as expressions of human variability (Egner, 2019; Yergeau, 2018; 2020; Manning, 2012). Neurodiversity fits the social model of disability. In this model (Shakespeare, 2010), disability is a social issue of impaired persons, not an individual issue (Douglas et al., 2020). This model aims to undo the ableism (Campbell, 2017) in society by adapting it to differently-abled persons, not labelling disabled bodies as defective. The neurodiversity movement is intersectional: many neurodivergent folks are queer and do not identify with binary genders (Egner, 2019), contrary to the fringe theories that define autism as a male-brain condition (Yergeau, 2018).

One crucial work within neurodiversity studies is Remi Yergeau's (2018) *Authoring Autism: On Neurological Queerness*, where they investigated neuroqueer socialities through the rhetoric studies by conceptualising neurodiversity as a queer, ever-moving positionality displaced by the discourses that consider one eventually too autistic or not enough autistic (Yergeau, 2018). In the book, the author criticises how the mainstream notion of rhetoric is too narrow because it recognises spoken and written language as the sole mode of human communication. This narrowness excludes neurodivergent traits like stimming, stuttering and non-linguistic communication.

4. Neurodiversity and neuroqueerness: A brief literature review

Before analysing the discursive tropes towards neuroqueer intimacies in online dating apps, it is necessary to explore the growing scholarship on the intersection between neurodiversity and queerness. Neuroqueerness refers to the queer positionality of being neurodivergent and the intersection between gender, sexual queerness and non-neurotypical conditions such as the ASD spectrum, ADHD, and Bipolar Personality Disorder (Johnson, 2021). Autism, the condition prominently discussed by neurodiversity advocates, is defined in the DSM-5, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, as a "neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by restricted interests and repetitive behaviours or activities along with disabilities in social communication and interaction, namely stereotyped and restricted language, inability to understand abstract, equivocal, and picturesque language, or figures of speech like metaphor and irony" (Ferrara et al., 2021, p. 38).

Authors that use the term 'neuroqueerness' as Yergeau (2018) and Egner (2019) do, affirm that neurodivergent bodies are re-evaluated and re-categorised continuously by normative society, as they are eventually seen as too neurodivergent to perform the tasks of daily and work life, but at the same time, not neurodivergent enough to qualify for welfare health benefits. However, "while the "neuroqueer" community embraces the deconstruction of normative definitions of gender, sexuality, and disability, many in the community also "disidentify" with the LGBTQ, feminist, and disabled activist communities, and instead embrace a "fluid" sense of "intersectional selves." (Callen, 2020, p. 12). In a nutshell, these authors highlight that a neurodivergent body's sexual identity may not fit into the binary pairs of heteronormativity. Therefore, neuroqueerness employs an anti-identitarian ever-shifting stance (Johnson, 2021) while recognising that identity as a political category is important for under-recognised minorities.

Neurodiversity, and particularly the autism spectrum, is not habitually connected to gender and sexual queerness. The feminist disability studies scholar Merri Lisa Johnson (2021) asserts that eight of the nine tenets of neuroqueerness are connected to cognitive atypicality. As she wrote, the neuroqueer is "intentionally emphasising "one's divergence from dominant neurological, cognitive, and behavioural norms," giving "full expression to one's… uniquely weird personal potentials and inclinations;" making art or theory "that foreground[s] neurodivergent experience" (Walker, 2005 as quoted by Johnson, 2021, p. 641). When it comes to stranger intimate encounters, the last two tenets may be discursively framed as problematic in relationships between individuals from different neurotypes—neurotypical and neurodivergent, for instance.

5. Neuroqueer intimacies

In this article, I am focusing on the intimate events that precede a romantic encounter in person, like flirting in online dating apps, but which are potentially present in in-person settings if a relationship shifts to that modality of togetherness. Neurodivergent folks are lonely due to stigmatisation (Umagami et al., 2022; Hull et al., 2017; Tarviainen et al., 2020). Often, even when a neurodivergent person is engaged in romantic relationships, they face loneliness due to the incessant masking they perform to be tolerated by their neurotypical partners (Hull et al., 2017). Masking, camouflaging or passing "can include conscious and unconscious attempts to hide autistic behaviours and the use of techniques to appear socially competent, such as rehearsing facial expressions, eye contact and social scripts" (Bargiela et al., 2016 apud Perry, Hull, Mandy & Cage, 2020, p. 02).

A comprehensive discussion on neuroqueer intimacies is developed in the article *Cassandra Isn't Doing the Robot: On Risky Rhetorics and Contagious Autism,* written by the autistic researcher and activist Remi Yergeau (2020). The author examines the discourses that describe Cassandra's Affective Deprivation Disorder, a non-existent condition discussed in online trans-exclusionary radical feminist groups. Although proved nonexistent, CADD is embraced by activist groups that vouch for eliminating neurodivergent socialities and their body-minds. In a few words, CADD is "a relational condition in which an autistic person purportedly deprives their nonautistic partner of love and affection" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 212). CADD refers to the suffering the partner of somebody on the spectrum of autism may engage with due to the *supposed* 'coldness' and 'egoism' these individuals possess. According to CADD advocates, if one engages in a neuroqueer relationship, one will eventually be subject to CADD's effects.

CADD is an ableist discursive device that justifies itself by affirming that women's oppression is intensified when in contact with the presumed intensive masculinity of neurodivergent subjects.

There are behavioural traditions, notably Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), that recognise autism as an extreme-male brain disorder and consider conditions, such as psychosis, to be extreme female brain disorders (Yergeau, 2018). Despite being scientifically outdated and neurosexist (Yergeau, 2018), ABA is the most used therapy for the 'elimination' and 'correction' of neurodivergent traits. Because "this extreme maleness transcends gender: autistic women and autistic nonbinary folk are all presumed neurologically male under this theory," this understanding promotes the underrepresentation of neurodivergent queer subjectivities and their modes of intimacy. Yergeau (Yergeau, 2020, p. 219).

According to Remi Yergeau, in the discursive formulations of CADD, autism is depicted as "a destroyer of neurotypical and heteronormative futurities" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 212). The author refers to heterofuturism, a concept crafted by Lee Edelman and later discussed by the queer studies theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Heterofuturism expresses the teleological quality of the white heterosexual familial organisation, composed of a cis-male and a cis-female individual. The familial organisation of queer relationships *sometimes* does not encompass the centrality and the possibility of the biological child. In the intimacy-seeking dating scene, the possibility of engaging in a romantic relationship is subject to the conditions of the possibility of generating a 'successful' family, through evaluation processes that checklist traces of able-bodiedness.

This evaluation process is ubiquitous in the daily life of a neurodivergent person, as it is present in the most intimate interpersonal relationships, where one's communicational skills and gestures are continuously surveyed to trace and punish any sign of 'weirdness.' Remi Yergeau (2020, p. 220) states that "CADD is a rhetoric that *quantifies* relationships". Neuroqueer traits include stimming—repetitive movements used for perceptive self-regulation, discomfort in face-to-face conversations, and sensory overload. Neuroqueer folks also "develop strategies like wearing headphones and listening to music while working or avoiding the perceived superabundance of social interaction by taking breaks alone, behaviours that seem weird to many neurotypical people, thus increasing the social difficulties in regular office settings" (Lorenz, Reznik & Heinitz, 2017, p. 06). These traits are often read as dangerous or signs of a lack of trustfulness and empathy in relationships between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. According to the stigmatising bias of an ableist society, to be accepted by neuroconventional standards, one may camouflage or mask these traits of neurodiversity or 'weirdness' as much as possible.

Concerning the rejection of 'weirdness' propagated by CADD advocates, Remi Yergeau affirms that "an invisible destruction, one set into motion by the figuration of autistics as inherently asexual, loveless, and unteachable, as abusers who present 'no affection or tactile expression whatsoever' and thus deprive neurotypicals of intimacy and sanity" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 212). This image is reinforced by the representation of neurodivergent subjects as asexual white males in mainstream television and film (see Matthews, 2019). While some neuroqueer individuals are asexual, a generalisation does not contemplate the diversity of sexual identities on the spectrum.

Autistics and other neurodivergent subjects may also perform ways of looking or not looking into each other's eyes deviating from neurotypical standards of rhetoric and the common-sense knowledge regarding eye contact and intimacy building. As the psychology scholar Chris L. Kleinke has stated, eye contact is commonly understood as a highly functional bodily sign that aims to "(a) provide information, (b) reregulate interaction, (c) express intimacy, (d) exercise social control, and (e) facilitating service or taskgoals" (Kleinke, 1986, p. 80). The lack of eye contact would make these neurodivergent subjects dangerous to a romantic relationship, as if they were potentially hazardous. Moreover, it mirrors the prejudice towards queerness, where "queer intimacies are represented as torture, deviance, and emotional impoverishment?" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 214). By doing so, "affectivity arguably takes as its subject a normative (and sometimes sensationalistic) preconception of how certain bodies are supposed to effectively (and pre-consciously) act" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 215).

The critical autism studies scholar Damian E.M. Milton discussed the issue of the 'double empathy problem', connected to assumptions that autistics do not experience empathy and put themselves in the position of another. For Milton (2012), the normative definitions of social relationality are built on a problematic assumption that there is a unique set of "definable social norms and rules that exist for people to follow" (p. 884). Milton turns to the work of the social ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel,

who coined the term 'double empathy problem' to define a moment of strangeness in which two or more persons with different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings perceive a breach in communication. Milton highlights the aspect of doubleness because the 'issue' is not situated in one person or another, but in the event of their meeting. Therefore, the so-called incapability of reading each other's intentionality is not tied to the autistic or neurodivergent positionality but to the assumption that only neurotypical communication is worth the effort for understanding. It is a cultural and discursive bias that values one mode of being to the detriment of another, as it happens to other under-recognised groups.

In the context of the relationships between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals, the problem of the 'lack of empathy' emerges as a trope unidirectionally pointed toward the non-typical node of a romantic relationship—assuming that romantic relationships are not/shall not only be defined through coupledom between two individuals. The discourses around CADD imply that the falsely oppressed neurotypical bodies could lose their ability to intimately engage in romantic relationships since CABB advocates "describe autism's arhetorical infection as contagious asexuality" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 213). Attuning to a neoliberal discursive regime that favours individuality disguised as self and mutual care, stimulating other peers to avoid sharing moments of intimacy with crip-bodies fosters a project of standardisation of human interpersonal relationships, as if this alleged contagiousness would affect the productivity of a desired intimate relationship.

Remi Yergeau (2020, p. 215) states that "autistic people are claimed to be emotionally impaired because ours is a sensory condition that scrambles signals, configures our embodied experience as High Overwhelm™, and prevents us from distinguishing background noises, sights, and smells from our immediate frames of reference.". This 'High Overwhelm ™' is often categorised by neurotypical CADD advocates as a sign of high maintenance. Mirroring the illusive neoliberal trope of individuality and personal empowerment, neurotypical individuals looking to engage in a sexual and romantic relationship express that they 'want to engage with people properly 'treated' and psychoanalytically 'analysed,' who, in other words, have left their neuroqueer traits in the psychotherapist or psychiatric clinic.

The concept of risk is another element in the ableist neurotypical discourse related to the emergence of a romantic, intimate connection (Yergeau, 2020). Risk is associated with the stereotypical portrayal of a neurodivergent person who cannot be touched, exhibits unpredictable behaviour, and feels the emotions of others when they should not. Normative modalities of touching and looking are at the heart of neurotypical intimacy, whereas neurodivergent perception may engage in sensuous experiences with human and non-human materials that differ from neurotypical ones, such as sensory regulation using stim toys. The issue is a lack of openness to sensual modes of variance from the norm.

When one avoids modalities of touching each other that do not comply with the neuroconventional frameworks of love and desire (McDermott, 2021), one participates in a fascistic gesture disguised as the affirmation of auto and mutual care. More explicitly, "CADD supporters fashion their cause as a feminist issue, appealing to a feminist rhetoric that embraces cisgender female sexual desire as it simultaneously represents autistic sexuality as neurologically male and deviant" (Yergeau, 2020, p. 218). By doing so, its supporters engage in harmful neurotypical feminism (Johnson, 2021). They are connected to a discourse that is biologising and scientifically outdated. It erases queer bodies, cis and trans women, and racialised minorities, and it lacks intersectionality with other human variations such as race, gender, social class, and ethnicity. The act of restricting intimacy with sane-typical bodies is, at a minimum, racist and sexist. To avoid the proliferation of discourses that marginalise individuals who do not behave and look like the standard neurotypical subject, one must elaborate upon a critique of the foundational pieces of neurotypicality.

6. The limitations of a neurotypical notion of intimacy

This section offers arguments that contest the widely used notions of intimacy by exposing their narrowness, as they fail to include the sensorial and interpersonal traits of neuroqueer people. To do so, I bring the feminist scholar Angela Willey's study of the discourses that support the binary pair 'monogamy' and 'non-monogamy. Her book *Undoing Monogamy* (2016) is vital because it touches on the supposed "asociality' of autistic individuals and how it is understood as dangerous to a healthy romantic and sexual relationship.

A widespread understanding of intimacy connects it to standardised familial relationships, such as coupledom. Willey (2016) discusses the limits of this perspective. According to her, the discourses that posit monogamy and non-monogamy as natural to human sociality connect these processes to reductional biology. Willey challenges the discursive biases of scientific discourses that frame the act of mating as the only indicator of a relationship in scientific research on the mating partnerships of voles. Some advocates of non-monogamy assert that the natural status of the human as a biological entity would be based on the spreadability of their genes, based on a superficial understanding of evolutionary biology. On the other side, many religious belief systems—especially in the Global North—postulate God's desire for men to maintain the same partner(s) for as long as they wish to live. Contra these discursivities, Willey proposes that against monogamy and non-monogamy, one must become anti-monogamous and embrace modes of togetherness that diverge from this pair.

Willey comments on Alison Bechdel's comic series *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008). The comic strips narrate the life of a community of lesbian characters. Their relationships shift from monogamic relationships to all sorts of interactions. In the series, these modes of togetherness are not hierarchised. No fixed priority is attached to one method or another, as they collectively care about the community in different ways: with sexual engagement, taking care of the kids and the pets, and becoming friends with past lovers, as the past friends become new lovers. Even hetero-cis-male men enter the queer community's relationships, for identity and sexual orientation are seen as fluid. There is no superiority of sexual intimacy. However, how does this digression connect to neurodivergent intimacies? Willey (2016) investigated the research conducted in a laboratory that solely defined partnership as sexual mating. The core of the study was to identify possible correlations between monogamy, autism, sexuality and fidelity.

Autism is still discursively related to asexuality through the processes of stereotyping (McKenzie, 2018) and media portrayal. However, "in online forums, people wrote that it was difficult to determine whether they are asexual or, rather, so overwhelmed by the social and sensory challenges associated with sexual experiences that they became disinterested in partnered sexual activity" (Gray et al., 2021, p. 06). Mainly, asexuality is "the targeted deficit associated with autism, is at the heart of the reproduction of monogamy's nature in contemporary genetics. Asociality is also emerging in science and popular culture in ways that are marked by both masculinity and whiteness" (Willey, 2016, p. 54). Wiley describes the "new autistic subject," currently represented in popular culture, as somebody "who can be reclaimed as quirky and lovable through the lens of sexed brain theories of autism" (Willey, 2016, p. 54). Moreover,

> *The lovability of this asocial character depends on its domestication within a framework that normalises it as an extreme form of a sort of masculinity associated with being unemotional and often remarkably gifted in math or science. He is figured not as someone for whom social bonding is not rewarding but as someone less successful at achieving those bonds because he is less empathising (feminine) and more systematising (masculine). This formulation renaturalises strong associations between love and femininity. It also naturalises the idea that men, although they need it, too, are naturally incompetent at love. Still, it does more than naturalise (white) gender stereotypes of nurturing women and hyperrational men. It also recoups autism from a history as a disorder of affect that situated its subjects as incapable of love, by making an idealised autistic subject a figure of bonding potential. (Willey, 2016, p. 54-55).*

These processes that naturalise only specific modes of relationship are connected to neuroqueer intimacies as many non-neurotypical subjects engage in more-than-human relationships—these are sensuous and soothing, as the gestures I perform when I repeatedly touch my stim toy in my pocket.

7. The more-than-human in neuroqueer intimacies

The approaches that exclude interactions with non-human materials from the realm of acceptable gestures also tend to restrict intimacy and sexuality to genital contact and genitality to a penis, a vulva or other body parts, generating a hyper-sexualisation of some gestures. In contrast, other gestures are de-sexualised. As the queer theory scholar Paul Preciado (2008) discusses, the issue does not lie in a phallus' existence as a symbolic entity but in portraying the genital areas as the only ones suitable for sex. For Preciado, all body parts are potentially erotic. The neurodivergent community is

diverse and queer, often vouching for modes of intimacy that defy the monogamic-heterosexual standards. Lastly, many neurodivergent individuals are involved with what is conventionally understood as 'relationship anarchy' and non-dyadic relationships.

Suppose rhetoric is assumed to be the perfect expression of one's intentionality through linguistic signs. When one fails to express their intentions or fails to interpret the signs another individual has given, problems arise. The trope of the autistic individual incapable of reading others' expressions is built upon this notion of rhetorics. Demi-rhetoricity refers to how the modes of communication of neurodivergent individuals tend to be seen as incomplete. They will never reach a perfect level of rhetoricity as required by (the) ableist societal institutions. As much as one individual on the spectrum tries to pass as expected, there will always be some shaking hands, stuttering, missed words, and eyes not crossing other eyes. A neurotypical love-seeker profoundly evaluates these gestures not as facets of human communication but as deficits in achieving the desired behaviour. In romantic relationships, where consent is needed, but one may get stuck in language, non-linguistic modalities should be developed instead of categorising a neuroqueer expression of consent as problematic and dangerous. As Yergeau (2018) says, neurodivergent subjects are often categorised as human beings who are always not-yet-there. However, in other situations, they are deemed to be fully functional individuals—"but you look normal!"

This deminess, the quality of being in between, "functions as a queer attachment to remnants, as a nonbinary disorientation" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 186), as deminess rejects the binary pairs of gender and the able-disabled divide. Other authors (Manning, 2012) problematise how neurodivergent subjects are said to withdraw from relationality, living in "their world", more connected with their toys or animals than with other human beings. The multimodality of human communication is traditionally backgrounded in favour of the so-called perfectly spoken language. On the other hand, "demi-rhetors who transmit multi-modal signifiers that might or might not hold symbolic ties to their originating transmissions" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 198). While demi-rhetoricity is not recognised by medicalising psychiatric discourse, it can be resignified towards a positive discourse. Echomimia—which is the reproduction and repetition of facial expressions (Yergeau, 2018)—, for instance, "even when nonfunctional, invents demi-rhetorical situations that might culminate in the exchange of meanings, moods, or moments." (Yergeau, 2018, p. 197)

8. "Proper communication skills." Typicality in intimate platforms

To exemplify the hidden aspects of stereotyping of neuroqueer traits in the courtship rituals of online dating, I draw on some autoethnographic exploration as a neuroqueer Tinder user. In an autoethnographic record, one must "search for recurring topics, themes and patterns; look for cultural themes; (…) analyse relationships between self and others; compare yourself with other people's cases; contextualise broadly; compare with social science constructs and ideas, and frame with theories". (Chang, 2008, p. 131). This section connects with the previous bibliographic review as it presents illustrative tales regarding the stigmatisation of neuroqueer intimacy in intimate platforms that (Hutson, Taft, Barocas & Levy, 2018) facilitate stranger intimacy: "a potentially generative form of encounter involving conditional relations of openness among the unacquainted, through which affective structures of knowing, providing, befriending or even loving are built" (Koch & Miles, 2020).

The data from my personal experiences with dating apps spans eight years. Data consists of anonymised screenshots of user profiles in dating apps, text messages, and journals where I wrote about my dating and flirting experiences. These records are not public; I only keep them to systematise a practice of identifying dangerousness. Being a neuroqueer and non-binary individual, I experience ghosting and rejection when users notice my non-typical traits. I felt it is essential to identify dangerous neurotypical behaviours that may inflict harm. The event of meeting somebody mediated by an app is rarely spontaneous, as "they have more likely resulted from searching, screening, selecting and engaging in online dialogue" (Koch & Miles, 2020, p. 05).

Location-based dating apps popularised in the 2010s (Koch & Miles, 2020). Dating platforms fetch several data layers, such as the user's age and the profile's bio. Tinder, one of the most popular dating applications, required users to log in using Facebook to build a profile, which collected information such

as photos, employment and academic education, name, age, and Instagram account (Carman & Choo, 2017). When logged in, users can "like" or "dislike" adjacent profiles.

Users who "like" each other "match" and converse privately. US-based Hiki was the first autistic dating app (Hiki, n.d.). Media scholars have investigated dating apps (Broeker, 2021; Degim et al., 2015; Duguay et al., 2017), but neurodiversity research is limited (Newett et al., 2017).

9. Autoethnographic titbits

As Heewon Chang (2008, p. 54) asserts, an autoethnography uses data from one's living experience as research data but avoids "excessive focus on self in isolation from others" by focusing on "the interconnectivity of self and others", while "searching for recurring topics, themes and patterns; analysing relationships between self and others; comparing yourself with other people's cases; broadly contextualising; and framing with theories" (Change, 2008, p. 131; modified). In the framework of analytic autoethnography, as proposed by Anderson (2006), there are five key features, namely the complete member researcher status (CMR), which refers to the belonging of the researcher to the world or environment which they are investigating; analytic reflexivity, which is the awareness of the "reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants" (Anderson, 2006, p. 382); making the researcher's positionality visible in the research's narrative; dialogue with other members of a community, and a commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006).

As a neurodivergent individual seeking intimate, sexual connections, I am actively engaged with the world I investigate as a complete member researcher and reflexively aware of the ethical issues raised in investigating an environment that can ease my access to sexual pleasure and intimacy. Through my extensive experience in online dating, I developed techniques to identify signs that the possible match is interested in a functional, neurotypical body. I have had an account on Tinder since 2014. I do not restrict my matching preferences to any gender. The strategies I developed to navigate safely through the app are personal and not universal. In a notebook, I catalogued expressions that made me avoid a profile like *I want somebody with proper communication skills.* As a long-time user of intimacy platforms, I learned how to decode profiles where users describe themselves as 'socially awkward, 'crazy', or 'weird' but retreat from the conversation at first sight of a neuroqueer trait. One usually understands communication and rhetoric as perfect and prompt English proficiency. Speaking from my embodied positionality as a neurodivergent subject, I often fail with language, even my mother tongue. As I pointed out, intimacy should not be limited to human interpersonal relationships purely based on conversational skills.

> *The intimate realm represents one of the remaining domains in which individuals may feel entitled to express explicit preferences along race and disability lines. Even describing such preferences as biased or discriminatory can be challenging. As a matter of personal preference, sexual attraction might seem definitionally discriminatory: to have any preference is to favour some people and disfavour others as potential partners. But describing desire as discriminatory is a way to capture more than the mere fact of sexual preference; it is a way to recognise and name intimate affinities that emerge from histories of subjugation and segregation. (Hutson; Taft: Barocas & Levy, 2018, p. 734).*

For many users, the aim of intimate platforms is the materialisation of a meeting or the development of a romantic relationship—here understood regardless of its duration, from a one-night hook-up to a life-long partnership— the date-to-be is imagined in the flirty online conversation. With that, there is the emergence of preoccupations about the performance of the sociability of the possible partner—including their ability to perform display (Finch, 2007).

The sociologist Janet Finch has developed the display concept to discuss this 'mandatory' feature of current familial relationships. In sum, display refers to "the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and relevant others that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships." (Finch, 2007, p. 73). My understanding of intimacy is not strictly connected to sexual and familial relationships—the potential for developing a familial relationship is often an objective in online flirting. The constitution of a familial relationship typically involves its structures and the roles between its members and visibly performing as a family in public spaces. As Finch (2007, p. 73) also underlines, "families need to be 'displayed' as well as

'done' because their contours and character are not obvious in an environment where relationships and living arrangements are both diverse and are subject to significant fluctuations over time".

Awkward moments of silence occur during in-person dates when communication is expressed non-linguistically, especially in a public space where individuals are subject to the scrutiny of passers-by. The effort to appear normal also has an impact on the dating situation. One must actively demonstrate their involvement in a potential romantic or sexual relationship. Erving Goffman, a sociologist, examined the dilemma of expression versus action. Goffman's background in dramaturgical analysis is not by chance. Like Finch, he is interested in the display-ability of familiar and romantic relationships. In his words, "those who have time and talent to perform a task well may not, because of this, have the time or talent to make it apparent that they are performing well" (Goffman, 1990, p. 43). The same author posits that when a performance of sociability occurs, "unmeant gestures" may foster the audience's distrust. He classified these gestures of suspicion into three categories. First, he refers to the loss of muscular control oneself: "he may trip, stumble, fall; he may belch, yawn, make a slip of the tongue, scratch himself, or be flatulent; he may accidentally impinge upon the body of another participant" (Goffman, 1990, p. 60). In the second category of 'slips', the performer may give the impression that "he is too much or too little concerned with the interaction (…). He may stutter, forget the lines, appear nervous, or guilty, or self-conscious; he may give way to inappropriate outbursts of laughter, anger or other kinds of affect which momentarily incapacitate him as an interactant" (Goffman, 1990, p. 60). Thirdly, the performance may head in the wrong dramaturgical direction due to failures in the setting. These "performance disruptions" affect the effectiveness of the "display" (Finch, 2007), as others decode them as a sign of the inability to attach to normative societal values, and a disruption of ordinary life, as I mention in the following journey entry.

> *March 23, 2019. "Socially awkward girl. Weirdo looking for a partner in crime. No creepy dudes, please", I read on her profile. Why does the measure of all things need to be normalcy, and why does weirdness seem to be the same as neurotypicality for these privileged abled bodies? To many, neurodiversity equals creepiness, as they feel scared or nauseated when they meet somebody who does not look into other people's eyes, somebody who is continuously knocking on the table, or communicates through channels that most institutions do not accept. I feel as if their bodies continually ask, 'what is wrong with you? Maybe there is no 'as if at all. In my journal of conduct, I marked these profiles as harmful, as their expectancy of a desired level of weirdness does not match with my neurodivergent traits. I always keep a stim-toy in the pocket of my shorts, and when I feel I am about to start panicking, I keep pressing it to feel I am grounded. The last time I did that in a meeting, a girl asked if I was masturbating in public. While I do not have any concerns regarding public demonstrations of one's sexual desires, that was not the case. But, as always, any gesture of 'creepiness' is categorised and stored in the box of sexual deviance.*

Several scholars have researched the resignification of hateful terms by the queer (Butler, 2011) and crip communities. The mad studies (McWade, Milton & Beresford, 2015) aim to destigmatise madness and its compulsory medicalisation. However, there is a long way to go to destigmatise terms depicting neurodivergent persons. Words like 'weird', 'creepy' or 'crazy' are still connected to a devaluation of one's existence when referring to people with invisible disabilities. However, in colloquial language by neurotypicals, they may refer to courage or the ability to be in social situations where one performs as 'crazy for being drunk at a party'.

In my online dating practice, when engaging in a conversation. I start speaking about my obsessions or hyper-focuses, and promptly users tend to practice ghosting—"commonly described as unilaterally cutting off contact with a partner and ignoring their attempts to reach out" (Timmermans, Hermans & Opre, 2020, p. 02) as hyper-focuses are deemed as problematic. Other autistic traits may leak into online environments, such as echolalia, "the repetition of words and phrases; perseveration encompasses obsession with certain (often those deemed antisocial) topics" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 98).

> *May 10, 2021. Conversational skills are required. My body shakes again when I read the word 'skills' preceded by any attribute. I feel I am in a job interview requiring some special permit or training, aka the mastering of typicality. I speak many languages, but I do not speak your language; I do not want to learn it or perform as if I learned it. I do not communicate to 'improve' with time because this improvement equals my emotional effort to pass as normal.*

> *It is just a beginning of a newly interrupted conversation, as humans eaten by the neoliberal organisational scale of time do not realise some individuals need some narrative continuity in a potentially romantic or sexual interchange. I am tired, exhausted from being required to pass as a typical storyteller, and constantly ghosted at first sight of non-typical behaviour. Routine is so important for folks like me, but there is no care for routine.*

If the conversation in a dating app evolves into face-to-face dates, one's performativity will encompass display (Finch, 2007). Many people believe that a romantic relationship is deemed worthwhile only if it can be correctly displayed to third parties. The proper display is translated into public demonstrations of affect that respect only neurotypical parameters. In that case, it is safe to assume that many neurotypical individuals seeking romantic and sexual intimacy will deprioritise neurodivergent relationships, as they may not deliver good performative and instagrammable displays to societal networks. In these scenarios, 'proper communicational skills' mimic the neurotypical understanding of rhetoric, already scrutinised and criticised by Yergeau (2018, 2020). In the realm of proper communication skills, which are preferentially 'weird but not too weird', obsessions, repetitive topics and echolalia are discarded, as they may 'shatter' the display of a happily engaged couple.

In my case, my obsessions include the interspecies sociality of urban animals such as capybaras and raccoons. I frequently refuse to send introductory text messages to my dating app matches because I feel uncomfortable engaging in a linguistic conversation based on self-presentation. Many neurodivergent people are bothered by self-presentation. It is required in everyday situations, such as the first course class when the teacher asks everyone to introduce themselves and say a few words about their academic and personal backgrounds. Self-presentation and a specific performativity mode become imperative in dating app environments, and they later reinforce the behavioural parameters of neuroconventional love and desire in face-to-face dates. Users of dating apps typically request that their matches present themselves, work, and interests. Performativity includes display in future face-to-face dates. The role of eye gaze is also included in Finch's display concept. Nonetheless, it is not entirely reliant on it: "the concept of performance implies face-to-face interaction, whereas what I am calling 'display' is broader than that." Finch (2007, p. 77). On a date in a public place, such as a pub, the scrutiny is intense:

> *However, it is significant that the meal was in a restaurant not in the home of one of the participants. Thus, the parties were not just confirming to each other that they were acting in a family-like way, but they were also opening up their behaviour to public scrutiny. In other words, they were showing that they were capable of acting like a family in a public setting, in a way which provides reinforcement even if no-one external to the group gave specific feedback. (Finch, 2007, p. 75)*

McDermott (2021) examined the portrayal of Saga's love life in the Danish-Swedish TV series *Bron/Broen* (SVT; DR, 2011-2018). Saga, an autistic detective, was patronised by her former work partner, who vouched for her 'savantism' but never treated her equally in the workplace hierarchy, according to the author (2021). When she met a new partner, Henrik, who has some atypical tendencies and frequently hallucinates, they quickly fell in love. "The onus is no longer on Saga to change, but on her peers to meet her halfway," the author says. This marks a discursive shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm" (McDermott, 2021, p. 06). According to Milton (2012), misunderstandings in neurologically mixed relationships occur naturally when subjects have different cultural-ideological backgrounds. "Empathy is defined less by an ability to cognitively or affectively read the intentions and perspectives of others and has more to do with shared social and cultural conventions," according to this framework (McDermott, 2021, p. 05; see Danielson & Kemani, 2021). This ' gap of empathy ' becomes more apparent when people with different neurotypes meet in person after engaging in intimate platforms. I learned to refuse the act of passing or masking their invisible disabilities because it is complex and energy-consuming:

> *July 21, 2017. "From now on, I will unload all my trucks of strangeness and weirdness as much as I can in text messages with candidates for romantic and sexual engagement. I am tired of have been asked why I check so much my clock and my phone, why I am constantly biting my lips, why I bite my lips when I am having sex, why do I shake my hands constantly if I am feeling uncomfortable, and it goes on… ".*

10. Final remarks; future research

It is crucial to highlight how the analysed discourses reveal how seemingly inoffensive practices hide layers of ableism and lay the groundwork for more extensive research on neuroqueer intimacies. As previously stated, neurotypical people romantically involved with neuroqueer people do not have Cassandra. While the short autoethnographic pieces do not explicitly mention CADD in the dating apps used by neurotypical people to foster conventional relationships, the fear of Cassandra thrives through discourses that support avoiding neurodiversity in intimate relationships because it is dangerous and unpredictable. The adjectives or preferences one publicly may disclose in an online dating app often make clear that any sign of deviance from neurotypicality may become a red alert for the future building of a relationship. Autistic and other invisibly disabled people are subject to the neurotypical gaze when they fail to conform to neuroconventional modalities of love and desire. Neuroqueer studies are multiplying. Angela Willey's writings on anti-monogamy and autism show how critical disability studies, queer, and feminist theories are intertwined. However, romantic, intimate relationships between different neurotypes need more quantitative and qualitative research. This research must avoid pathologising neurodiversity. More tools to destigmatise neuroqueerness are needed to avoid misinformation about neurodivergent subjects, which can seriously affect their sociability.

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