

I SEE YOU: INSIDER ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN A NEURODIVERSE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss how the insider status of a researcher conducting an ethnographic study into a neurodivergent community both addressed some of the common issues encountered by ethnographers, and proved valuable in its own right. During this emergent study, the lead author's unexpected discovery of her own neurodivergence triggered a shift from observation to insider observation plus lived experience. The trust afforded to insiders is not a new discovery, however, in a community such as this where the members have experienced varying levels of othering, ostracising, and marginalisation, recognising the lead author as one who belonged facilitated the co-creation of an account rich in insight. Not only did the resulting openness of participants contribute to more meaningful interactions, but the ability of the lead researcher to relate to the experiences which were being discussed enabled us to see beyond what was explicitly said, and to use the lead researcher's own experience as an example to illustrate the liminal journey towards self-acceptance.

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Track: *Research Methodology*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper provides account of an ethnographic study, conducted within a neurodiverse community from a methodological perspective. The lead author is an insider in this community, while the other author is not; this provided an opportunity for assessing the value of the insiderness for the study. Furthermore, the study coincided with the lead author personal journey of discovering her own neurodiversity, meaning, that the “insiderness” was both the means and the product of the study. The value of insider studies has been emphasized in the literature for professions (e.g. a banker conducting research involving bankers as participants) and corporations (the researcher working in the same organization as the research participants) and there is ample evidence of the value of belonging to the same village or ethnic group in anthropology. However, the value of insider ethnography in a neurodiverse community has not been explored before. Building on the literature we argue that insider ethnography in a neurodiverse community reaps the benefits insider ethnography already understood in the literature and we identify additional value of this particular case of ethnography. We use the underlying study on threshold concepts to illustrate how the insights from the findings are likely to have value beyond the specific study context, although we do not advocate for a simple generalization.

This study stemmed from an interest in threshold concepts, as the lead author experienced some in a class delivered by the second-named author many years ago. We have teamed up and decided to dig deeper in this concept, as the explanation we found in the literature felt incomplete. Threshold concepts have been studied in various formal education and professional contexts, starting with the seminal paper from Meyer and Land (2003), and expanding into economics (Shanahan, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2006), engineering (Baillie and Johnson, 2008) accounting (Weil and McGuigan, 2010), and responsible management practice (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015) amongst others. However, our interest was piqued by the ‘transformation of the self’ (Meyer and Land, 2003) aspect of threshold concepts, and we wanted to delve further into this, beyond the sense of self that might be associated with a profession or discipline-related identity.. We chose the autistic community as the lead author had access and because we thought that we may be able to observe some aspects that are less easy to observe in a neurotypical community (although at the time we were not fully familiar with the right vocabulary). As we were interested in the lived experience of the threshold concepts, and had a broadly interpretivist philosophical approach, we took phenomenology on board and decided on an ethnographic research design. The lead author started to realise, as the study progressed, that she was autistic, and this opened the opportunity for insider ethnography and autoethnography. Thus from a methodological perspective, we ended up in the intersection of ethnography, emergent case study (Lee and Saunders, 2017), autoethnography, and social network analysis areas.

To introduce the methodological insights obtained from this study, we structure the rest of the paper the following way. The knowledge background outlines the origins of ethnography, including a brief introduction to ethnography in management and organisation studies, before moving on to discuss the use of ethnography as part of an emergent research design, and how insider status counteracts some of the challenges of conducting ethnography. We then discuss in more detail how the various methods and the lived experience of the lead author intertwined, and the richness this unique perspective added to the research. Readers will note that the terms “we” and “I” are both used throughout the paper. Due to the personal level of the

autoethnography, some elements must be presented from the lead author's perspective only, whereas we worked together to draw out the meaning of what was observed and experienced.

KNOWLEDGE BACKGROUND

Ethnography was brought into the domain of management and organization studies (MOS) from anthropology. In this section we explore the origins of ethnography, including the philosophical underpinnings, explore the alternative approaches to conducting ethnographic studies in MOS, and we look into the notion of insiderness.

The Origins of Ethnography

The anthropological field of ethnography is primarily concerned with participant observation, with Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 2) describing an ethnographer as being one who "...participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives... collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned", going on to say that the practice of ethnography "also bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life." Notable ethnographic studies include Margaret Mead's (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Jane Goodall's (1968) study of chimpanzees in their natural habit, and Bronisław Malinowski's (1922) research into the Trobriand people of New Guinea, which is widely accepted as foundational to in-depth field research. Although focusing on, and therefore immersing themselves in, different fields, these studies have one core aspect in common – the participation in, and observation of, the everyday lives of tribes, chimpanzees, or other groups in their natural context. To draw upon the Sherlock-analogy used by van Maanen (1979: 539), an ethnographer works as a detective, piecing together the details, clues, and insights that can only be accessed through living the field of study.

Ethnography in Management and Organization Studies

While the traditional approach of ethnography appears to, at least to some extent, revolve around the othering of the people involved – "there has been a notable tendency to exoticize the unfortunate" (Westbrook, 2008: 88) – in this paper we will discuss how ethnography in a neurodiverse community countered the common othering of neurodivergent people by uncovering unexpected findings. Where van Maanen (1979: 539) mentions "separating the extraordinary from the common", here it is the commonalities that may seem extraordinary.

Ethnography is not unusual nor new in MOS, with immersive research into various organisations and their everyday operations including those conducted by Mayo (1933) into factory work in the 1930s, and Whyte's (1948) study on restaurant management. More recently, ethnographic studies into Harvard Business School (Anteby, 2013), forensic scientists in crime labs (Bechky, 2021), surgical residents in hospitals (Kellogg, 2011), craft occupations in the modern economy (Ocejo, 2017), and a radical rethinking of bureaucracy and hierarchy in the time of social media (Turco, 2016) have added to our knowledge on how people act (and why they act in this way) in organisational settings.

More generally, much has been published in support of ethnography in management and organisation studies, for example, Watson (2011) and Van Maanen (2011) point-counterpoint on what ethnography is, what it brings to MOS, and why we need more of it. In this paper, we

add to the voices of support of ethnographic studies, highlighting the value of insider and auto-ethnography in a study into a neurodivergent community. Ethnography is, by its very nature, messy, and the concurrent autoethnography made it even messier. The research which we discuss here was not a linear process, instead involving a continual series of back and forth but the strengths lay in embracing and working with how things happened.

The View from Within

The challenges facing ethnographers on how to identify what is important or significant about what they are observing: “often one only sees (and, hence, understands) what is happening after having been first told what to look for. A wink, a blink, or a nod is not merely a fleck of behaviour to be described without ambiguity, but is rather a potential sign that must be read as to what is signified” (van Maanen, 1979: 543). These challenges are greatly reduced when the ethnographer is an insider; that is, rather than having specifically chosen to live within and observe a tribe, group, or community, the researcher already belongs, and is recognised as one of their own. Although we did not know it at the outset of this study, the lead author’s status as an insider in the neurodiverse community in question was soon recognised, both by the research team and members of the community. This undoubtedly facilitated far richer insights than would otherwise have been possible.

Insider research is conducted by one who is a member of an organisation or community where the research takes place (cf. Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), enables greater insight and understanding than that which is available to a researcher without this positioning. Some of the benefits of being an insider are perhaps more obvious than others, for example, being able to relate to the participants, and understand what was *not* being said as much as what was, and also being treated with less suspicion than an outsider, however well-intentioned, may have been (Bryman, 2015). This is particularly relevant in the community in which this research was conducted, where research has historically proven to be more problematic in amplifying the othering of neurodivergent individuals than it has been in promoting understanding and acceptance. The natural understanding of those winks, blinks, and nods is also perhaps not surprising, but the extent to which this added to the research was more unexpected.

A reflexive approach was adopted throughout this research which utilised the space between the lead author’s *otherness* as a researcher (where I am interviewing the participants about their experiences), and the *insiderness* of myself as a member of the community (where I am a person with whom the participants can draw on shared qualia), with similar lived experience, (Haynes, 2017; Stierand and Dörfler, 2014) facilitating the use of my own tacit knowledge (Cunliffe, 2003) to co-create with the research participants through engaging in dialogue (Hibbert et al., 2014; Munkejord, 2009). As such, the terms “insider” and “autoethnography” are intertwined.

In brief, my positioning as an insider afforded me a level of trust amongst participants which I may not have had otherwise, while the autoethnographic accounts which I have provided enable me to explain the phenomenon in question to those who have not experienced, using myself as an example to avoid compromising the identity of other participants (cf. Olekanma et al., 2022; Stierand and Dörfler, 2014).

ETHNOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is philosophically loosely located within a variant of interpretivism that is designated Critical Interpretivism (Dörfler, 2023). This philosophical position uses subjectivity as its starting point, but it is pluralist rather than relativist (Berlin, 1969; Ortega y Gasset, 1932), leaving scope for an interpersonal (and therefore intersubjective) consensus, although this consensus is not necessarily a proxy for objectivity, as Popper (1979) suggested.

Within this paradigm, a phenomenological approach has been adopted, focusing on the lived experience of the studied phenomena, in our case, of threshold concepts. The approach we adopt combines descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009, 2014; Giorgi et al., 2017), with the interpretive phenomenology (Finlay, 2011, 2013), in a way that the first part of the analysis, the first-order codes, correspond to descriptive while the second order themes correspond to the interpretive phenomenological approach (Olekanma et al., 2022). It is worth noting here that although Heidegger (1927, 1975) is primarily credited with the interpretive approach, and for us this is very important because of the notion of *Dasein*, we believe that Husserl's approach, particularly in his later work, was also interpretive (Husserl, 1956, 1965). Due to the social aspect of the study, we also take on board Schütz's (Schütz, 1967; Schütz and Luckmann, 1974) social phenomenology. The phenomenological concept of bracketing is particularly important for this study, in which bracketing was practiced through transpersonal reflexivity (Dörfler and Stierand, 2021).

We did not adopt a theoretical lens for the current study, instead we chose a phenomenon-driven approach (Fisher et al., 2021; von Krogh et al., 2012; Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019). We find this approach particularly suitable for an exploratory study, as any theoretical lens would limit what can be seen, even if it offers great advantages in helping the interpretation. Beside the wide scope of the study, it is also important to acknowledge its emergent nature. Although what we were interested in was clear from the outset, how we should study this topic and even how to approach the study, kept changing throughout the research process. We took on board the principle of research indirection (Dörfler et al., 2018) and based on that our research design, besides the ethnographic nature is also characterised as wayfinding (Bas and Dörfler, 2021, 2023).

[This methodological study could be considered an autoethnography of the underlying study of threshold concepts, which comprised an auto-ethnographical element, in which sense this is a meta-auto-ethnography.]

As ethnography is not a method but a research design, it formed part of the overall emergent research design which was adopted during this study. A brief overview of the research design is provided in Figure 1, although the reality was considerably more complex (coming back to that messiness of ethnography). Some methods proved useful for limited purposes only, while others unexpectedly formed the foundations of the research, although all had their value in this multi-modal approach.

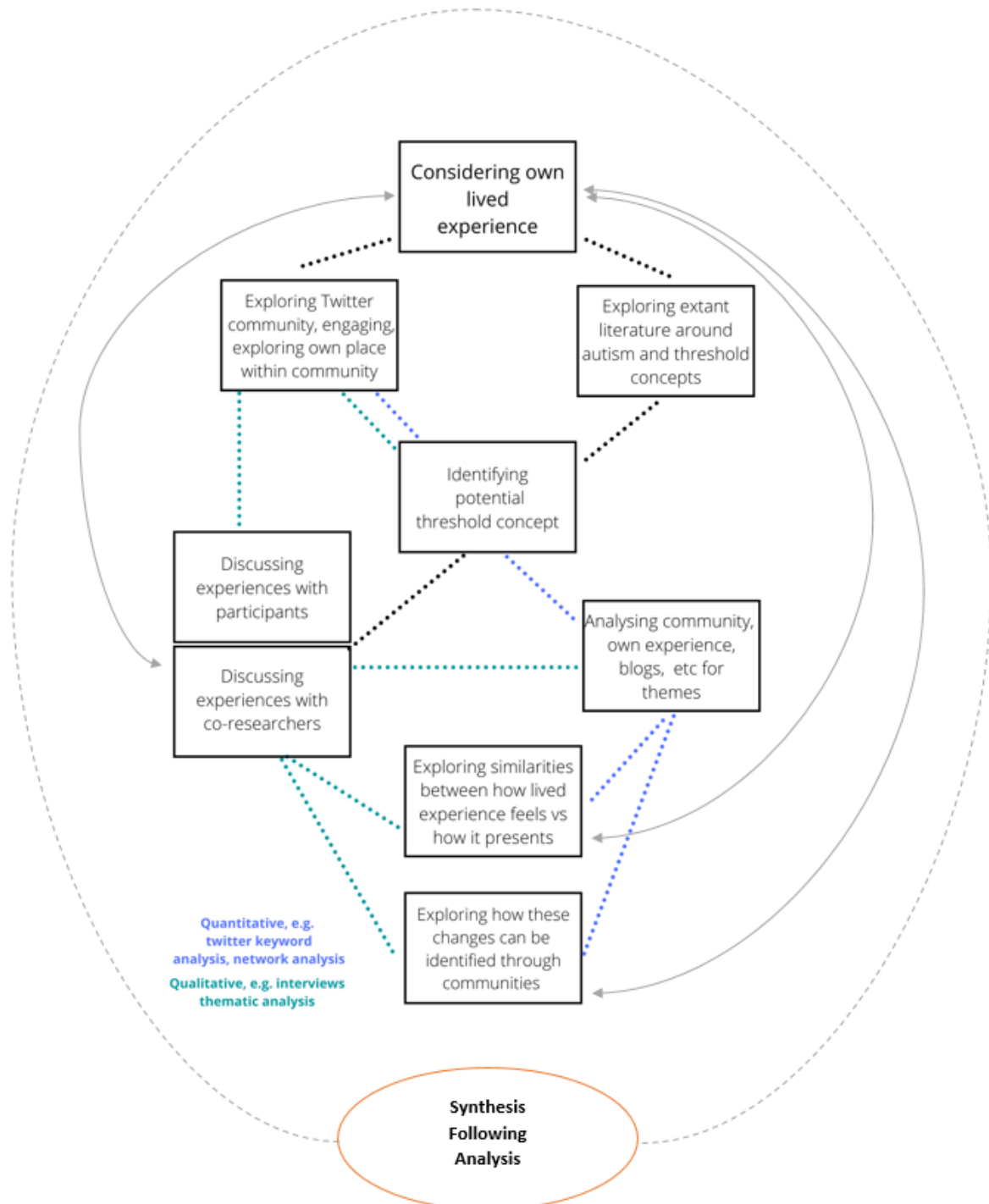


Figure 1 - Research Design

Methods of the Study

We refer to this study as multi-modal rather than mixed methods in order to emphasise that different theoretical and philosophical frameworks have been used in pursuit of the meaning behind the various interactions, conversations, observations, and experiences, which combine to form the empirical element of this research. Neither mixed methods nor multi methods

capture the essence sufficiently, nor reflect the multiple perspectives as a theoretical and/or philosophical level (Saunders et al., 2019). Conversely, multi-modal research has been used to combine different perspectives on complex issues, such as far-right anti-immigration activism (Doerr, 2017), culturally-themed selective web archiving (Huc-Hepher, 2015), and the use of audio and infographics to better disseminate participant responses in qualitative research (Chandler et al., 2015). Given the complexity, and sensitivity, of the topic being explored here, the ability to reflect multiple perspectives was of paramount importance (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Methods

Method	Intended Purpose	What Was Gained
Unstructured interviews	Understand first-hand accounts of lived experience	Insight into reality of liminal journey. Indication of more to be seen beyond what was explicitly communicated
Twitter keyword analysis	Identify threshold concept through use of common language	Appeared to be a failure at first, although contributed to realisation that this could not be reduced to keywords alone
Social network analysis	View Twitter from perspective other than keywords. Emphasis on communities and networks	Insight into differences between levels of Twitter community. Confirmation of what was inferred from interviews about belonging
Autoethnography	Provide a richer account of liminal journey than could be provided without compromising participants' anonymity	Richer insight as intended. Also served as tool for analysis and increasing my own understanding. Autoethnography and interviews informed each other in terms of analysing and making sense of findings

As the primary purpose of this paper is to highlight the benefits of insider ethnography, much of the detail of the emergent research design and the methods which were used is beyond the scope. In brief, the approach which we took followed that of emergent case study research (Lee and Saunders, 2017), where we accepted that “we cannot control what we know and when we know it. What we can do is systematise what we do know to seek to identify relationships, and we can detail how we found out those things so that others can understand the value of that knowledge” (Lee et al., 2021: 13). This approach enabled what we learned along that way to be taken into account (Dörfler et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022), as we embraced the unique opportunity offered by conducting this research into a particular phenomenon while experiencing the phenomenon myself. This opportunity is discussed in this paper.

Table 2 - Emergence in this research

Date	Milestone	Activities	Challenges
June 2018	Research into threshold concepts in autistic adults begins with literature review	Literature review into autism. Informal interactions with autistic people on Twitter Pursuit of own diagnosis began in September 2018	Literature review into autism and threshold concepts continued. My perspective on autism had begun to evolve, and a realisation that the planned approach to the research was unsuitable became evident.
Autumn 2018	Focus turns primarily onto autism	Initial literature review impacts on perspective Recognised own lack of knowledge Immersion into contemporary participatory autism research	Currently uncertain about how to approach research. The planned approach was wrong, my previous knowledge about autism was wrong, but how to work out what was right? Focus shifted onto arriving at a definition of autism from which to explore threshold concepts.
October 2019	Diagnostic appointment with Scottish Autism	Own experience of diagnostic process reinforces how problematic it is	Clinical experts state cannot be autistic because have children and working on PhD - reinforces fundamental misunderstandings contributing to missed and misdiagnoses. Autistic community on Twitter – clearly had much in common, beyond just feeling like outsiders or having a particular diagnosis. Self-diagnosis/self-identification is accepted amongst the autistic community in general – why is this?
November 2019	Attended Scottish Autism conference in Glasgow	Recognised by autistic academic as “well, we know you’re one of us”	Recognised sense of belonging with finding people you fit with through an autism diagnosis, (key part of threshold concept framework). Idea of self-acceptance as potential threshold concept had come to mind before, but this particular interaction solidified it. How could this be researched? Keywords and sentiment analysis on Twitter attempted

Date	Milestone	Activities	Challenges
July 2020	Interviews with participants	Sense that something was missing after reflecting upon interviews	Participants speak about finding belonging in community, but no agreement around where this community was. Each implied that autism was not it, but was a part of the process. Own experience and earlier research meant more aware of nuances in various comments. Although it could have been said at this point that self-acceptance led to belonging in a community and therefore qualified as a threshold concept, strong intuition that there was more to be investigated. Again, how to research this?
September 2020	Network analysis	Network analysis confirmed presence of inner “self” network and outer “autistic” network	Closer investigation of individual networks of participants showed that they were related, but there was more. Strong autistic in each network, but not (wholly) in closest contacts. Thoughts turned to what this meant. Clearly, there had been a threshold concept relating to self-acceptance as autistic, but this seemed to facilitate belonging in different community. What does this mean in terms of threshold concepts? Could there be an extra step in liminal journey? Revisited own journey towards self-acceptance to look for similarities, bearing in mind that identifying threshold concepts involves hindsight. Transcripts also revisited.
9 April 2021	Interviewed as participant	Skype call with first supervisor revealed evolution of how I told my own story. Experiences are the same, but language, openness, and willing to discuss more difficult aspects changed significantly Analysis of transcript gave insight into the questions raised by interview analysis	Earlier account of my self-acceptance compared with current account, with several aspects becoming clearer. Firstly, what I said early on did not quite fit with what was happening (as I had seen from the participants), and my own networks and communities had changed along the way, consistent with what I had seen with the participants (discarding previous beliefs as part of liminal journey). The extra step in threshold concept mastery now seems even more apparent. What does this mean going forward?

We acknowledge the potential criticism around seeing what we wanted to see and moulding the research methods to fit, but would counter that it is in fact demonstration of a high level of both self-awareness and awareness of the research environment. As discussed later in this paper, bracketing (Dörfler and Stierand, 2021) was used to ensure that the potential issue of seeing what we wanted to see did not arise.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

As the initial intention of this research was to explore how threshold concepts present in autistic people, it is reasonable to state that we did make an assumption, on some level, that this would be different to how the neurotypical experience is discussed. As the research unfolded, it emerged that there was very little (if any) difference in how the liminal journey presents. This is very positive from the perspective of a neurodivergent person keen to reduce “othering”, although in-depth exploration of the findings is beyond the scope of this paper. As we state the main findings that autistic threshold concepts are just threshold concepts, and that there appears to be an additional stage to the threshold concept framework not yet explored in extant research, our focus is more on how we got there through a journey of meta-auto-ethnography.

In the seminal work on threshold concepts, a threshold concept is described as being “*akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. This transformation may be sudden, or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time, with the transition to understanding proving troublesome. Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people ‘think’ in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline (or more generally)*” (Meyer and Land, 2003: 1). The threshold concept in question here is self-acceptance following late diagnosis as autistic, and I use both the experiences of the participants, and my own lived experience to illustrate the process.

Using the three stages of threshold concept acquisition, this journey to self-acceptance can be illustrated in terms of the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal stages as shown in Figure 2.

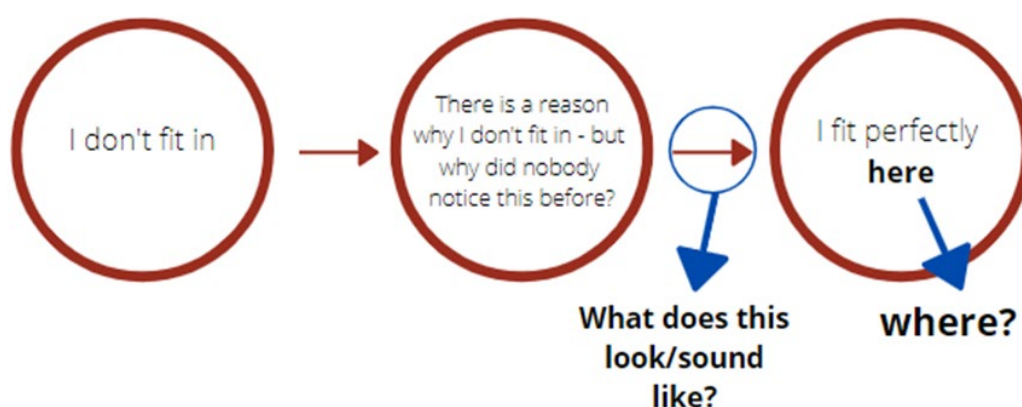


Figure 2 - Liminal Stages

That is, each of the participants started out feeling like they did not belong, before learning that there was a reason why they felt this way (diagnosis of autism and/or other neurodivergence),

battling with this new-found knowledge, and eventually finding a place where they do belong. Also interestingly, and counter to common misconception about neurodivergence, the place where people belonged was not amongst other autistic people, but amongst those who shared hobbies, professional interests, and similar outlooks. Just as for neurotypical people. As an example of how my own insiderness added to this research, had I taken the participants' responses at face value, the findings would have stated that they felt they belonged with other autistic people. There is a big difference between belonging with other autistic people, and belonging amongst like-minded people, some of whom happen to be autistic.

To illustrate the power of the approach which we took, we now move on to discuss in more detail how my own insiderness facilitated richer findings. First, we share some of the key quotes from the participants, and how they illustrated the liminal journey. Next, we discuss how interviewing other people about their perception of my own liminal journey, and being interviewed myself about it, helped capture the essence of what was being studied.

Self-acceptance, as the threshold concept which was being explored, inevitably featured heavily in the accounts given by the participants. In the following quotes, participants describe how discovering their own neurodivergence made them feel that the problem was with society and not with them, how they were different but that is ok, and how the new knowledge made them feel more powerful. It is also important to note that, while I was coming to terms with my own status as neurodivergent, it was already recognised by others that I was an insider, and they shared far more with me than with someone they did not accept as one of their own.

"I think discovering neurodiversity made me feel validated, like my sense of self had more worth, you know? Other people agreed that my life was worth something, and I wasn't on my own anymore. There's a big difference between parents and teachers telling you 'there's nothing wrong with you, you're just different' to reading about other autistic people, and how being different is actually a GOOD thing..." (Participant 1)

"The more I learnt about autism the more knowledge I had, and knowledge is power. I was able to advocate and articulate myself and be proud of my identity." (Participant 6)

I had written a book chapter during the early stages of this research in which I discussed my own self-acceptance as neurodivergent, and, while the participants' stories were each very different, I recognised by own experience in each of them. I could also relate to the mixed feelings about neurodivergence, when participants spoke about the less positive side of discovering their "new" selves.

"It did have an impact people did treat me differently. And I still find that people who should know better. To them, I'm just the autistic person as opposed to someone with a huge a lifetime of qualifications, professional training, professional experience, life experience, and the and..." Participant 8)

While discussing self-acceptance as a threshold concept, the participants also spoke about the impact on their sense of self, or worldview, when the "penny dropped" and they felt they belonged.

"[...] in hindsight it almost may be almost like a rebirth in a way"
(Participant 1)

Without the benefit of being an insider, we may well have come to the conclusion that autistic threshold concepts are the same as neurotypical threshold concepts, as the participants' accounts of their experiences and liminal journeys fit well with the threshold concept framework. What may have happened, however, is that the following comments on belonging within the autistic community may have been mistakenly understood as the entirety of the "story".

"It's not about just the diagnosis. It's about the community and about identity" (Participant 4)

"...my best friend's a 40-year-old man who's clearly autistic and all my other friends I've downloaded off the internet because it's easier" (Participant 3)

"It's about shared language. It's about identity, it's about. It's about community." (Participant 8)

While we are not disputing that the participants had found a sense of belonging in the autistic community, having gone through this same journey while conducting this research meant that I developed a "hunch" that there was more to it. That is, what the participants explicitly said was true, but it was not the whole truth – lived experience is ineffable, it is impossible to put the entirety into words, and my unique positioning as insider and researcher is what enabled me to know there was something more to explore.

Twitter had initially been used as I was aware of a thriving community of autistic people using the platform. It was unlikely that I would get access to such a community elsewhere, particularly during the pandemic, so it was initially viewed as a way to reach potential interview participants. Now that I had interviewed participants, and had transcribed and analysed what they said, the potential value in looking into Twitter to identify networks and communities became apparent. The actual social network analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, but has been briefly outlined in Table 2. What we would like to focus on now is how my insiderness contributed to the findings.

The Meta-Auto-Ethnography

As mentioned earlier, I began this research without having any idea that I would become an insider, never mind that I would experience the same liminal journey as the participants along the way. This was far from being an easy process, as it involved experiencing strong emotions and that troublesome liminal phase as I conducted the research, but ultimately it added significantly to the research. In this section of the paper, I outline how my own insight, and changing perspective as I traversed the liminal space, facilitated more meaningful findings.

In order to keep within the limitations of this paper, it has been necessary to greatly condense the process, but the key stages are outlined and discussed. Once I had become aware that I was potentially seeing elements that the participants themselves did not see, and in keeping with the tendency for threshold concept mastery to be evident to others before it is evident to the learner themselves, I asked other people to provide accounts of how they had seen me change over the previous few years. Two accounts were written by close friends, who had known me

well enough to have seen a change, but had not been directly involved in any of the significant life events. One of these accounts, a letter written to me by a close friend, was then used as a starting point for me to be interviewed as a participant.

Just as there were some clear messages in what was not said during the interviews with the other participants, there was a similar underlying sentiment evident when revisiting my initial autoethnography following the interview. At this point, it is important to be aware that the book chapter I wrote in 2019 was not deliberately kept vague, nor worded in a certain way to be appealing to the audience. When I wrote it, every single one of the 3,855 words was painful. I agonised over writing it and, as far as I was concerned at the time, I laid myself bare in it, giving a brutally honest account of the experience of realising I was neurodivergent. The truth is that I did exactly that, but only in so much as I was able to at that point. Just as I saw interview participants enthusiastically say they were comfortable in their own skin, and saw being diagnosed autistic as a positive experience, whilst also communicating non-verbally that this was not quite accurate, I painted a very positive image of my own realisation, which now appears quite superficial and masking a not-insignificant need for processing and coming to terms with this new sense of myself. Perhaps this is a form of defence, a self-deception that enables the process, as in contrast with the original autoethnography, while I had been slightly apprehensive prior to the interview, it was much easier although also far more honest and detailed.

I now use quotes from both the initial autoethnography (written in 2019) and the interview transcript from early 2021 to illustrate and discuss the changes that took place during that period, and were only noticeable with hindsight. To avoid over-complicated explanations of each, I have included the quotes, alongside a brief comment on how they appeared when being revisited.

The first change which struck me while revisiting the earlier writing was how I described my feeling of being lost. Although it is to some extent understandable that I have attributed a lot of my thoughts to how I felt about parenting – after all, I had spent over a decade parenting him and just a few months considering my own neurodivergence at that point – upon revisiting it, it appears glaringly obvious to me that I was not yet ready to fully explore my own feelings, preferring to “hide” behind glossing over any less positive aspects, and focusing on the parenting side instead of fully expressing myself.

In the following, I highlight certain quotes which stood out to me when revisiting the autoethnography, and the reactions I had when re-reading.

*“I’ve always felt I was a bit of an outsider, that person who’s not quite in a group but also not quite *not* in it, but **that was just me***”*

*“I’ve been diagnosed with, and medicated for, anxiety since I was about 19. I had PND after both births. I’ve always felt like I don’t fit in, like I’m somehow different, and I’m always, ALWAYS, tired. This world is not made for me, or people like me, and it is exhausting. But **this is all ok now****, because **I know why it happens, and I can make sense of it*****. ”*

*** How I wanted to feel, not how I really felt**

**** No, it’s not**

*** True, but it's not everything

"When I first became interested in threshold concepts, I was under the impression that I was neurotypical and, as such, was experiencing life and its various challenges much as everyone else could be expected to. So, although my research topic has remained the same, my perspective on it was virtually turned on its head just a short time into the project. The thing that may seem surprising to anyone who has not had such a realisation about themselves is that this was an entirely positive experience."*

*Again, what I wanted to feel

"Although, in fact, realising that I am autistic myself has been infinitely less challenging than awaiting diagnosis for my son. After almost 8 years of very little sleep, severely delayed speech, various other missed "milestones", and a constant, overwhelming feeling of "why on earth can I not just do what everyone else seems to find so easy?" his actual diagnosis was very much welcomed. [...] Worried about his future, and how his life would turn out. Worried about how people would perceive him and treat him. Worried about how he would cope when I wasn't around anymore to help. Worried about how I could make sure that he, for want of a better phrase, lived his best life.*"*

*Absolutely not (just) about my son

At the time of writing the initial autoethnography, it was not that I was being untruthful or deliberately minimising or masking my experience, it was that I had not yet progressed enough through the liminal journey to be able to express myself fully. I did not have the understanding, nor the language. I remember feeling almost distressed by it, almost as if I was letting myself down by saying anything other than that I was fine, we were fine. This was how difficult it was even to explore these feelings and express them in writing.

When the time came to be interviewed by my co-author about my own experience, which involved a face-to-face conversation over Skype, where there was no opportunity to hide how I felt while talking, or to edit multiple times to make sure I was happy with how I had said something, I was nervous. I naturally tend towards making jokes as a coping mechanism, and rarely talk about anything seriously. Anytime I had tried, I had found it too emotional, and stopped. Despite that, I had a strong sense that this would be a valuable addition to my research, and worth the short-term emotional turmoil involved in having the conversation.

In reality, the conversation was fine. Yes, I did take a few very short breaks to compose myself when topics were particularly tough to talk about, but it was infinitely easier than the earlier writing had been. Here, I include some quotes from the transcript of that conversation, which illustrate how much more open and honest I can now be. There was significantly more to this conversation in reality, as I recounted (and realised) how my own liminal journey had not started from when I recognised my own neurodivergence, but several years earlier. One of my close friends' accounts referenced a time when I shaved my head to raise money for the autism charity supporting our family as a "reverse Samson", or what stuck in her head as the moment she thought of it when considering how I grew stronger. Of course, it was not the head shave that was significant, but its symbolism in the process of becoming my 'real self' just as returning to university as a mature student, getting divorced, and other life events which I do not discuss here to protect the privacy of other people involved. These are the notable events that made the threshold concept evident with hindsight, and which illustrate how and why I could relate to the participants.

“So basically, I never, kind of, had any kind of confidence in myself and always, kind of, thought that there was a way that my life should be and things I should do and could never, kind of, understand why I couldn't do things. Because I would be watching other people and go well, they're doing this, and this seems really easy, and I don't understand why I'm having a problem with this. Or why I feel like something's wrong. Or why I feel like I'm not fitting in. So, when I was about 18... 17-18, that's when I met my ex-husband first. Yeah, and I don't know. I kind of just... I was like well this is what happens in life, you just go with it and it's a kind of... it's hard to describe because it... it... it kind of felt like I was always quite lost and always kind of looking for what should I do next and what should come... like... almost like I was following directions on how to be a person instead of just being myself, if that makes any sense.”

The quotes above and directly below here show quite a contrast between this account and my earlier assertions that, yes, I did not fit in, but this was just me and it was fine...

“Yeah, and then I started not doing so well at school 'cause I got to the point where I had to do exams and I cannot do exams to save my life. Yeah. So, kind of, all the stuff I knew and all the stuff I was good at then, kind of, started to disappear and I was just like well, I don't really know what to do with myself. Maybe I wasn't really that good. Maybe they all just...I don't know, maybe they were all wrong. I, kind of, didn't really know what to do with my life...

...it just always everything felt wrong. And I always kind of thought, well, it's me because everybody else is doing this. This is what everybody wants to do your life. This is what you're supposed to do. What is my problem that I'm not dealing with this?”

Rather than insisting that I am fine and at peace with everything, I am now going so far as to admit that I still have progress to make on this. This is not a regression from my first account, but progress towards being confident and comfortable enough to admit things are not perfect (because what is?). Self-acceptance doesn't mean believing you are flawless; it means being comfortable in your own skin, warts and all.

“[...] and because I kind of think that, like people around me have always thought that I have had it together and that I have been sort... sorted and being confident and knowing how to do things. But inside of me has been totally, totally different.”

Looking back at the initial autoethnography, the disconnect between what is said and what is underlying it is as clear here as it was while reflecting upon the interviews with various participants. Just as they asserted that discovering that they were autistic was an entirely positive experience, while unconsciously expressing something different, I had done the same. This is not to doubt the authenticity of their accounts, nor of my earlier one, it is authentic in the moment. Self-acceptance is a process.

Relating this back to threshold concepts, it is not surprising that this was clear to me while interviewing participants, and to those around me while I was undergoing the same process myself. Somehow, it was still a surprise to me to see it in my own storytelling but, after all, threshold concepts are generally only evident to the learner with hindsight. Interestingly, the same movement towards the autistic community and then move away towards my own community is also visible with hindsight, yet also surprising despite having seen it in the interview participants, and recognised it there to the extent where I embarked upon the social network analysis.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed how we combined several methods while conducting insider research in a neurodivergent community, using an emergent research design which we have referred to as a meta-auto-ethnography. In this, we applied autoethnography to an underlying study of the threshold concept of self-acceptance among autistic adults. We have discussed how each of the methods we used contributed to the richness of the overall research, including those which were used only briefly. While the findings of the research are beyond the scope of this paper, our intention has been to draw attention to the value of an insider perspective in ethnography. While insiders in professional communities can undoubtedly benefit from the trust this affords them, this trust is incredibly powerful in a community where what brings people together is their common “othering” and marginalisation. We do, of course, recognise that this level of insiderness is not always possible, nor is it necessarily the right option for all ethnography, but we strongly believe it is essential that these shared voices and shared experiences are not overlooked.

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