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trans health research by and for neurodivergent people



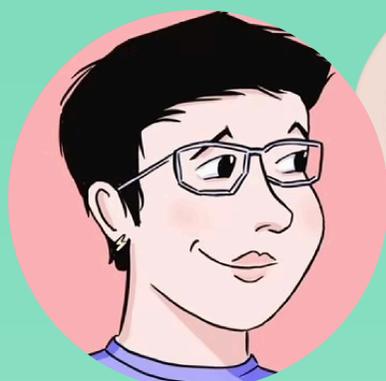
introduction

Neuro-affirming research methods are attracting increasing scholarly interest. Trans and neurodivergent people each have histories of their identities being framed negatively as mental health disorders. Gender-affirming and neuro-affirming approaches share a commitment to strengths-based, inclusive practices that reject stigma and pathologisation and support autonomy and self-advocacy based on informed consent. Trans health research sits at the intersection of these approaches.

project village

Our research investigates what good family support looks like for Māori, Pacific, Asian and Pākehā trans young people in Aotearoa. Our culturally diverse team interviews trans young people aged 16-25 and their most supportive family members, who draw and describe their experiences of receiving and providing family support. Most of the researchers and trans youth interviewed so far identify as neurodivergent. We reflect on how aiming to meet the needs of neurodivergent participants and interviewers strengthens our research.

preparing for neuro-affirming research



"The key thing in training was front-loading accommodation needs and strengths and weaknesses. I was thinking about the wellbeing of interviewers. I wanted them to feel confident. If we made it OK for them, it would be OK for the participants." (Julia)

neuro-affirming research in practice

When interviewing participants, we:

- gave clear guidance about what would happen
- offered flexible ways to participate (in person, on zoom, via email, on Discord chat, alone or with others present)
- provided the choice of participants creating their drawing before, at the beginning, or during the interview, and digitally or by hand
- proposed accommodations or responded to requests (e.g. having a third person present, sitting side by side, not making eye contact)
- adapted to individual interaction styles (leading to interviews that were long and wide-ranging or short and to the point)

'Access intimacy' refers to "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (Mingus 2017). Our team training highlighted common experiences of chronic illness, disability and neurodivergence. We:

- reflected on strengths and weaknesses of our learning and communication styles, reframing these as assets for the project (e.g. discomfort with small talk leading to deep conversations with fellow neurodivergent participants)
- shared past experiences that impacted the present (e.g. interaction anxiety due to criticisms of not communicating in a neurotypical way)
- identified support needs and potential accommodations (e.g. mitigating anxiety by traveling to interviews together and checking in afterwards)
- reflected on the pros and cons of mirroring neurotypical communication styles (at times 'masking' felt necessary but it came at a cost)
- learnt about neurodivergence together (e.g. by sharing memes about autism)
- committed to collaborating in ways that drew on our strengths and needs (e.g. listening to interviews and writing field notes together to process the data).

"All three (Asian) young people showed me items with special meaning to them. Rene held a teddy bear for emotional support. . . Tsuki showed me a friendship bracelet she had made at school. I feel that being 'let in' to their special items was part of being 'let in' to their vulnerable space." (Tara)



benefits of neuro-affirming research

for the research team

"I had a lot of feelings going in that being neurodivergent would be a barrier but that quickly changed and I noticed things about my style that were an advantage. . . that openness, that curiosity, that sort of, I guess, playfulness at times...just how fun that can actually be...The overarching thing that made it feel neurodivergent for me across all interviews was that I didn't feel awkward." (ia)



for participants

Young people and family members described feeling safe and empowered by a neuro-affirming approach.

"Tsuki's dad said to me after Tsuki's interview that I must be a really good interviewer because he could hear that Tsuki was talking a lot and she hardly talks at home. This made me very happy and showed me that I must have done something right in my attempts at being accommodating to Tsuki." (Tara)

for supporting trans young people

Applying a neurodivergent lens from the start, we learnt how young people are supported by family members to be their authentic neurodivergent trans selves. Some forms of family support were linked to neurodivergence, such as 'body doubling', helping with organisational tasks linked to gender-affirming care, experiencing sensory joy together, and validating a young person's strengths to counter rejection sensitivity.

References

- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., & Jackson-Perry, D. (eds.) (2024). *The Palgrave handbook of research methods and ethics in neurodiversity studies*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66127-3>
- Mingus, M. (2017). Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice. 2017 Paul K. Longmore Lecture on Disability Studies at the San Francisco State University, April 11, 2017. <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/>