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Revisiting a walking interview with autistic and neurotypical individuals: A collaborative autoethnography of cross-neurotype communication

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ABSTRACT

We revisited a walking interview from an earlier study to explore how communication unfolds in cross-neurotype settings. Using collaborative autoethnography with photo-elicitation recall, five researchers, including one outsider who had not joined the original interview, reflected on how our identities, relationships, and environments shaped the interaction. The autistic participant described clarity in the interviewers' speech but also difficulty balancing conversation with the sensory intensity of the natural setting. Neurotypical participants responded in different ways, with some hesitating and others finding greater ease. This shows that challenges were not uniform but varied according to roles, knowledge, and power. Reflexive analysis revealed hidden forms of the neurotypical gaze, including silence misread as detachment, protective stances that muted autistic voices, and well-intentioned guidance that risked generalising autistic communication. At the same time, shifts in authority, trust, and openness created a neuro-shared space that enabled more balanced collaboration. Our findings extend the Double Empathy Problem by demonstrating that cross-neurotype communication is co-constructed through both tension and reciprocity. Situated in a Southeast Asian context, the study highlights the importance of making neurotypical perspectives visible and critically adapting methods such as walking interviews in autism research.

1. Introduction

Communication across neurotypes is shaped by stigma, misconceptions, and unequal expectations. Autistic individuals are often expected to conform to neurotypical norms, while the role of neurotypicality remains underexamined. These asymmetries restrict inclusion, reinforce inequality, and affect wellbeing (Turnock et al., 2022). A persistent view locates difficulty solely in autistic traits, promoting conformity over mutual adaptation (McLennan et al., 2025). Inclusion, however, requires effort from both autistic and neurotypical people (Davies et al., 2023; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021). Awareness of autistic perspectives can reduce stigma (Kim et al., 2024; Nah & Tan, 2021), yet little work examines how neurotypicality is sustained within social, cultural, and interactional contexts beyond neuroculture (O'Dell et al., 2016).

Interest in cross neurotype or neuromixed communication is growing, but research remains Western centric and often focuses on White participants (Birnschein et al., 2021; Cresswell et al., 2019; O'Dell et al., 2016). This limits understanding of diverse cultural experiences (Hirota et al., 2024) and scholars call for broader perspectives that situate autism and communication in varied contexts (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020). In Indonesia, perceptions are shaped more by neurotypical interpretations than autistic voices (see Riany et al., 2016). Although the neurodiversity paradigm has traction in community

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spaces, research still frames autism in medical or moral terms and privileges professionals over autistic participants (Taneja-Johansson, 2023).

This study adopts the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), which views misunderstandings as mutual, though autistic people often bear the heavier burden of adaptation in practice (Schneid & Raz, 2020). Using collaborative autoethnography, we bring together one autistic young adult and three neurotypical co researchers to revisit a walking interview. Age and role differences, including a parent, shaped authority, care, and expectations. Our two layered reflections revisit the experience and then analyse our interpretations. By centring reflexivity on neurotypicality, we frame cross neurotype interaction as a shared and situated process (O'Dell et al., 2016) and show how the neurotypical gaze (see McDermott, 2022) can be surfaced, questioned, and reshaped through collaborative reflection.

2. Literature review

2.1. The double empathy theory and cross-neurotype interactions

Autistic and non-autistic communication is often explained through a deficit model that assumes autistic people lack social and cognitive capacities such as Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, 2000). This framing reinforces stigma by placing responsibility for misunderstanding on autistic individuals. The Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012) offers a different view, arguing that difficulties are reciprocal and arise from mismatched perspectives rather than a one-sided communication traits.

Evidence supports this claim. Autistic to autistic interactions are frequently smoother than autistic to neurotypical encounters, highlighting the role of shared norms (Crompton et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Autistic strategies such as direct or private speech are often misread as deficits by neurotypicals (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019). Other studies document alternative modes of communication, including talk centred on shared interests or the use of social media for greater control and processing time (Ochs & Solomon, 2010; van Driel et al., 2023). Together, these findings show that communication is co-constructed and cannot rely on autistic people alone to adapt.

Later work extends this insight. Chown (2014) notes autism's minority position, where autistic people often know more about neurotypical norms than the reverse. Caldwell-Harris and Schwartz (2023) find that many autistic individuals understand practices such as hierarchy and reputation management but may choose not to engage, while others mask to fit in (Schneid & Raz, 2020). These patterns reveal adaptation on the autistic side, with limited adjustment from neurotypicals, and support Milton's critique of neurotypical frameworks themselves.

2.2. Autism in Asian cultures

Much of what is known about autistic–non-autistic communication comes from Western contexts, where assumptions about social norms and reciprocity are shaped by low-context, individualistic cultures (e.g., Birnschein et al., 2021; Cresswell et al., 2019). Yet communication differences are culturally situated. Schuster et al. (2025), for example, found that non-autistic difficulty interpreting autistic stimuli appeared in the United Kingdom but not in Japan, showing that mismatch effects described in the Double Empathy Problem are not universal but mediated by cultural norms. This reinforces Hirota et al.'s (2024) call for research that examines cross-neurotype interactions within specific cultural contexts rather than assuming Western patterns apply broadly. Such work is especially needed in Asian settings where expectations around hierarchy, implicitness, and harmony differ markedly from Western norms (Nishimura et al., 2008).

Existing Asian research often focuses on caregiver perspectives. A scoping review by Shorey et al. (2020) shows that challenges faced by autistic individuals are frequently reflected in caregivers' struggles, such as limited services, peer bullying, stigma, and reliance on self-directed learning, peer support, traditional medicine, and religious coping. Their accounts emphasise isolation, marital strain, and blame from extended family, especially in cultures where mothers are seen as responsible for their children's development.

Indonesian studies illustrate this complexity. Riany et al. (2016) found that autism is often attributed to maternal wrongdoing, bad karma, or having too many children, leading some families to hide autistic children or reduce affection. Yet religious belief in Indonesia can also serve as a significant source of strength: many frame autism as part of God's plan, allowing them to find meaning, resilience, and even a positive view of having an autistic child. This creates an irony: faith offers strength, yet the same cultural norms generate stigma that limits support.

The present study answers Hirota et al.'s call (2024) by examining cultural influences on neurotype interaction during a walking interview involving an autistic and three neurotypical Indonesians.

2.3. Walking interview in autism research: application, challenges, and considerations

Walking interviews are increasingly explored in autism research because they can ease social pressure by reducing eye-contact demands and slowing conversational pace, supporting more comfortable interaction for autistic participants (Marcotte et al., 2022; Shepherd, 2015). Movement can also create natural openings for engagement. In participatory work, for example, van Goidsenhoven and De Schauwer (2020) observed meaningful interaction with a non-speaking autistic participant through rhythmic swinging. Although not a walking interview, their study suggests that activity-based movement can function as an alternative communicative channel.

At the same time, walking interviews have notable limits: responses may be shaped by the setting, familiar locations can heighten sensory distraction (Shepherd, 2015), and researcher-selected routes may reinforce power imbalances (Marcotte et al., 2022). Abstract questioning may also reduce accessibility unless paired with visual or concrete supports. Our walking interview reflected these tensions. Originally part of a mobility study, it is revisited here as shared material for reflexive analysis within a cross-neurotype research team.

2.4. Collaborative autoethnography

Autoethnography has become an important approach in autism studies because it centres lived experience and gives space for autistic voices. It opens reflection for parents, educators, and autistic individual themselves (e.g., Barley & Southcott, 2019; Gouws & Wassermann, 2024; Harper-Nichols, 2023; McMahon et al., 2019), helping them question neurotypical understandings of autism and neurotypical beliefs. These shifts in perspective connect with what autistic-led accounts showing that differences in pace, expression, and behaviour are often misread through the neurotypical gaze. Ceney (2023) tells how a slower rhythm of grief may be misread by neurotypicals as emotional detachment, though it reflects a different processing style. Similarly, Hannam-Swain and Bailey (2021) demonstrate that behaviours take on new meanings in more autistic-friendly contexts, such as pandemic lockdowns, where reduced neurotypical surveillance allowed alternative expressions to emerge. These shifts reveal that earlier interpretations reflected neurotypical norms rather than autistic experience, leading to misreadings framed as emotional absence or diminished humanity (Bergenmar et al., 2015).

Collaborative autoethnography expands this by re-imagining communication in more neuromixed-friendly ways. Approaches such as sensory storytelling and letter writing challenge assumptions of speed, linearity, and formality (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023a, 2023b; Jackson-Perry et al., 2020). They align with autistic preferences for clarity, rhythm, and shared interest, suggesting communication can

be negotiated more inclusively. Participatory studies likewise show how expression takes shape through emojis (Peuravaara, 2021) or embodied practices like touch and swinging (van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020).

Cross-neurotype CAE enables joint reflection on how normativity influences communication and research. When supported by shared protocols, accessible materials, and clear authorship criteria, co-writing and co-analysis can deepen mutual understanding (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2018; Hobson et al., 2023). Neuromixed teams have used dialogic co-writing to trace how sensory and temporal differences shape interaction and to make the gaze visible (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023a, 2023b). Most studies, however, surface the gaze through autistic or mixed reflection, with limited attention to neurotypical reflexivity. This study addresses that gap by showing how reflexive work by neurotypical co-researchers within cross-neurotype CAE can also surface, question, and transform that gaze.

3. Methodology

This study used a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) design with two layers of reflection: revisiting a walking interview between autistic and neurotypical participants, and reflecting together on that encounter through CAE. Ethics approval was obtained from the Ethics Commitee of the National Research and Innovation Agency (Number:112/KE.01/SK/03/2025), with anonymity ensured by coded identifiers. We follow Walker's terminology (Walker & Raymaker, 2021): neurodiversity refers to natural variation in human neurology, neurodivergent describes those who diverge from neurotypical norms, and cross-neurotype refers to autistic–neurotypical interaction. One participant had a childhood autism diagnosis, while the other three identified as neurotypical. Many autistic people (as well as other neurodivergent individuals) receive diagnoses only in adulthood due to unrecognised traits in childhood or misdiagnosed (see Nayyar et al., 2025). None of the self-identified neurotypical participants had sought assessment, and their neurocognitive status may change with future evaluation. Guided by this design, our research questions were.

(1) How do autistic and neurotypical individuals perceive their walking-interview interactions?
(2) How do neurotypical reflections reveal the neurotypical gaze?
(3) What factors support cross-neurotype communication as a co-constructed process?

3.1. Participants

The four authors first joined a walking interview in an earlier study, which had its own ethical approval. R1 and R2 applied to participate in that study, which examined the mobility of autistic adults in Indonesia. The activity was chosen by R2 to fit R1's established routine of hiking. R2 believes that having interview in a familiar and comfortable talk setting could reduce R1's stress (Marcotte et al., 2022). In that study, R1 took part as a young autistic adult, accompanied by her neurotypical mother R2, while R3 and R4—both neurotypical—served as the interviewers.

In the present project, we did not treat that interview as new data, but revisited it as a shared event for reflection. Our collaborative autoethnography was formed when all five of us (R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5) agreed to take part in re-examining the earlier encounter. This reflexive approach highlights how our identities and backgrounds shaped perception, communication, and meaning. Table 1 summarizes each researcher's positionality.

R1, R2, R3, and R4 were initially involved the walking interview. They reflected on their positions as participants (R1 and R2) and researchers (R3 and R4) through CAE in this study, where four of them were co-participants and authors. R5, a neurotypical researcher with a background in social work, did not join the walking interview and therefore came to the current study as an outsider to that encounter. However, as a co-author and co-analyst, R5 contributed to the design of the present study, facilitated the collaborative process, and joined in the reflections.

3.2. Research design and data collection

This study followed CAE procedures outlined by Chang (2021), drawing on memories and archival materials. The earlier walking interview on mobility was a separate project with its own ethics approval; this study received new clearance to support collaborative reflection on that experience. Photographs from the walking interview were used for reflexive discussion among R1–R4, while R5, who had not participated in the walk, contributed outsider reflexivity and joined the analytic process.

R1 and R2 participated as co-researchers from the outset, helping the team secure ethics approval and shape the study design. R1 proposed using written reflection, and R5 suggested incorporating photographs to support recall and flexible pacing. Their contributions reflect how autistic researchers can meaningfully shape research when involved early, consistent with participatory approaches that centre autistic voices (Grant et al., 2024). Whereas the walking interview positioned R3 and R4 as interviewers and R1 and R2 as participants, in this study all five members worked as co-researchers and co-writers. This shift is central to our use of collaborative autoethnography.

To facilitate recall, R1–R4 selected six photographs from the walking interview, and R5 created guiding questions (Appendix A) adapted from

Table 1
Participants' details.

Participant Code	Range age	Neurocognitive and professional profiles	Cross-neurotype communication experiences	Academic Backgrounds	Role in the previous study (walking interview)	Role in the current study (CAE)
R1	Mid-20s	Autistic research assistant (formally diagnosed)	Lived experience; mainstream education	Bachelor's in IT Education	Interviewee (participant); joined hike with R2	Co-researcher; photo reflections, member-checking, analytic validation
R2	Mid-50s	Neurotypical lecturer (self-identified)	Parent of autistic daughter	Doctorate in Gastronomy	Interviewee (participant); suggested format for comfort	Co-researcher; photo reflections, literature discussion
R3	Mid-40s	Neurotypical researcher (self-identified)	No prior autistic experience	Doctorate in Social Science & Humanities	Researcher–interviewer in mobility study	Co-researcher; reflections, open coding, member-checking
R4	Mid-30s	Neurotypical researcher (self-identified)	Experience teaching autistic students	Doctorate in Applied Linguistics	Researcher–interviewer in mobility study	Co-researcher; coding, drafting, revisions
R5	Mid-40s	Neurotypical researcher (self-identified)	Social work and inclusivity research; no direct autistic experience	PhD in Social Science & Humanities	Not involved	Co-designer/facilitator; outsider reflexivity, independent coding, analysis

Note. Neurocognitive profiles refers to the researchers' state of cognitive profiles at the time of the current study was conducted.

the Pragmatic Scale Manual (Dewart & Summers, 1996) to prompt reflection on past communication (Lam et al., 2020). Using a concurrent model, each researcher wrote individual reflections in Google Docs® and shared them via Google Drive®, followed by discussion in a WhatsApp® group to exchange insights and compare interpretations. This process enriched the dataset and enabled cross-analysis of individual experiences and collective reflections.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis had two stages: review and coding, using macro and micro approaches (Chang et al., 2016). The review was led by R3, R4, and R5, who experienced in qualitative research and utilising Nvivo®.

- Macro Review: Researchers first did a broad analysis to see themes, repeated patterns, and unique details. R3, R4, and R5 developed open codes together, while R1 and R2 later reviewed and validated them. This stage produced preliminary themes before moving to detailed coding.
- Micro Review: Data were then divided into smaller units. Detailed coding was carried out by R4, as insider, and R5, as outsider, reducing workload while keeping balance between perspectives. Categories were later reviewed with R1–R4 to check meanings and reach consensus. Fig. 1 shows the coding process, mapping data segments, themes, and research questions.

After coding, R1–R4 discussed categories via WhatsApp®, clarifying meanings, sharing literature, and resolving differences by consensus. R5 coded with the agreed scheme but retained an outsider interpretation for reflexivity. All authors added analytic notes in Google Drive®, enabling cross-commenting and integration of insider and outsider perspectives.

R4 prepared the first manuscript draft, which went through several revisions, first with feedback among R1–R4, and then through comparisons between insider analysis (R1–R4) and outsider interpretation (R5). Final revisions were completed by R4, with all authors giving input via WhatsApp® until consensus was reached. This iterative cycle of writing, coding, checking, and revising ensured inclusion of both insider and outsider perspectives (see Fig. 2).

Echoing Jackson-Perry et al. (2020), our process created space for cross-neurotype voices, such as R1's narrative writing. Our approach also aligns with previous studies by Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2023a, 2023b) and Murray et al. (2023) where autistic and non-autistic researchers collaborated participatorily. We extend their work by foregrounding the neurotypical gaze and showing shifting roles, with R1 and R2 moving from participants in the walking interview to co-researchers here. Through this process, R3–R5 also became more aware of their neurotypical biases, making them visible. In this way, analysis was not only about coding and writing but also about transforming relationships, where collaboration itself became knowledge produced.

3.4. Ensuring trustworthiness

We applied methodological triangulation to support credibility and reliability (Denzin, 2009). Photographs from the walking interview helped surface overlooked details and provided additional insight into communication patterns and context. Although not a photovoice study,

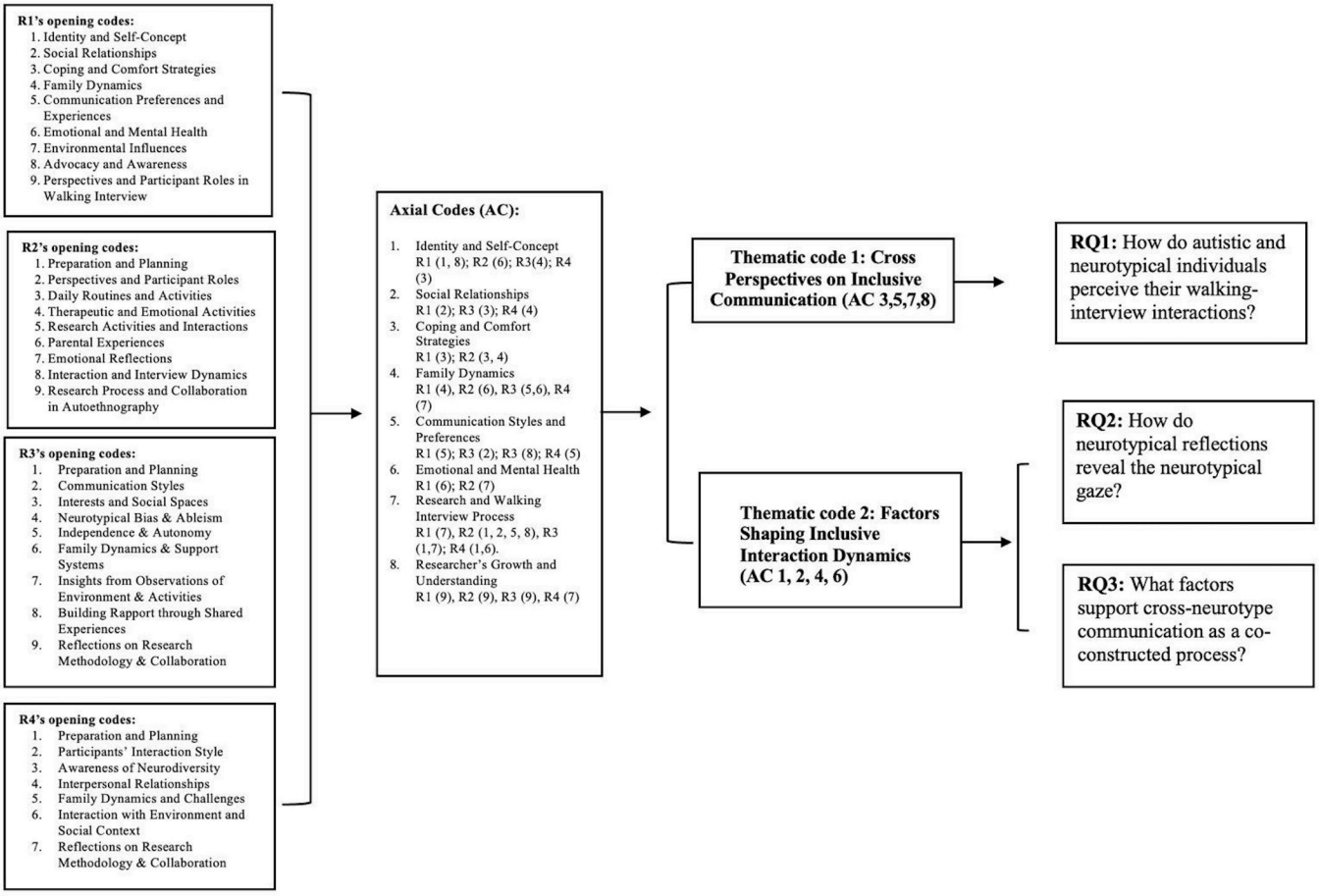

Fig. 1. Thematic coding process.
Note. Inductive coding of participants' reflective notes produced emerging codes, which were refined into two overarching themes aligned with the research questions.

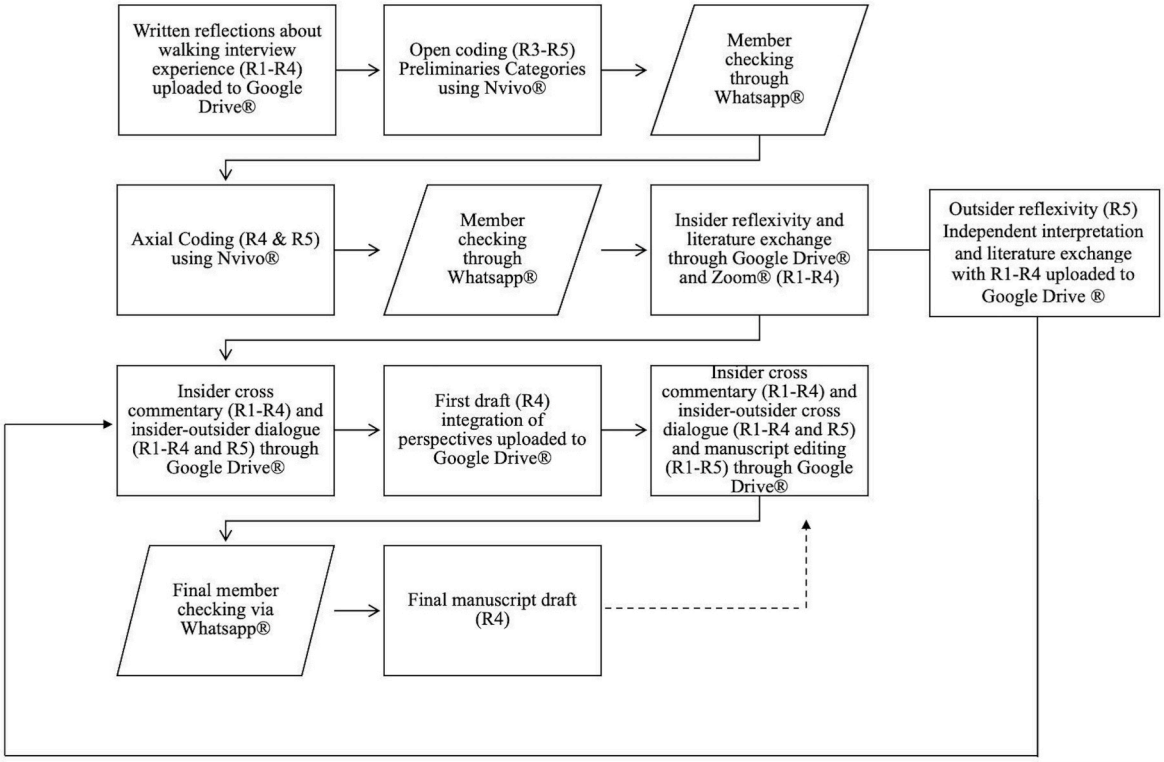

Fig. 2. Iterative process of data analysis.
Note. The earlier walking-interview experience was revisited through collaborative autoethnography. R1–R4 provided insider reflections, R3–R5 conducted coding, and R5 added outsider reflexivity. Cycles of member checking, cross-commentary, and draft revision ensured systematic integration of insider and outsider perspectives.

this use of visual materials aligns with reflective practices described by Lam et al. (2020). Validity was reinforced through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), ongoing review, and self-reflexivity, which made our analytic process more transparent (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Combining multiple perspectives with structured reflection and verification strengthened rigor and demonstrated that CAE can be both inclusive and methodologically robust for examining cross-neurotype communication. Fig. 2 shows how insider and outsider perspectives were integrated across cycles of reflection, coding, and validation.

As shown in Fig. 2, most collaboration happened asynchronously through digital platforms (e.g., Google Drive®, WhatsApp®). Written interaction was more inclusive, allowing time to process and translate perspectives and ensuring neurodiverse voices were expressed and understood (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023a, 2023b; Désormeaux-Moreau & Courcy, 2024). In this way, trustworthiness emerged not only from method but from the collaborative process itself, as neurodivergent and neurotypical researchers jointly shaped the analysis.

4. Findings and discussions

This section reflects on our research journey, focusing on perceptions of others, communication dynamics, and factors influencing interaction during the walking interview. To clarify pronoun use, it is divided into two parts: individual reflections, where "I" denotes each researcher's perspective, and collaborative insights, where "we" expresses understandings developed through collective discussion.

4.1. Cross perspectives on inclusive communication

4.1.1. R1: A labour yet happy experience

Engaging in neurotypical spaces is mentally exhausting. I worry my pauses will be read as disengagement, even though pausing helps me process (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019). In the walking interview, the mist, colours, and crater drew my attention; switching between the scenery and questions was tiring, so this method didn't suit me (Bartlett et al., 2023). I focus better in quieter, more stable settings, and others report similar challenges driven by sensory demands (Marcotte et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2023).

This experience echoed patterns at home: my mother (R2) is present, yet I often feel misunderstood. Online, I feel listened to, and I connect more easily with autistic peers (van Driel et al., 2023). This is consistent with evidence that communication can be smoother within-group (Crompton et al., 2020; Milton, 2012; Williams et al., 2021). I recall little of the dialogue itself, but I valued the encounter and, even more, the restorative pull of nature (Fig. 3 shows the site).

4.1.2. R2: A conversation in motion

Before the session, R1 (my daughter) agreed that I (R2) would accompany her, and she was genuinely interested in the study topic. She enjoys research and is familiar with data collection, though this time she joined as a participant. She connected easily with R3 and R4, treating them as my older colleagues and addressing them with the politeness expected in our culture. R3 and R4 offered alternatives (Zoom or a seated interview) and left the choice to us. I selected a walking interview, assuming movement would keep R1 calm, but found out during this CAE study that she felt overwhelmed. Throughout this CAE, R1's narratives regarding the walking interview challenged my perception as a neurotypical mother (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023b).

R4 and R3's questions were clear, concise, and easy to answer. When R1 did not elaborate, I occasionally added context. In practice, R4 led and spoke succinctly, while R3 was gentle and frequently checked R1's understanding. Their reciprocal dialogue with me transformed the interview into an open exchange, aligning with research on participant-

Fig. 3. Walking interview setting.
Note. R1, R2, and R4 followed the tour guide downhill. During the walk, R1 was more engaged with nature than with conversation (photograph by R3).

Fig. 4. Trust in focus: R1 holding a basket of eggs.
Note. R1 is holding a stick with a basket on its tip consisting of several boiled eggs. As R1 allows R3 to take her photo, R3 considered a level of trust has formed, knowing that R1 usually avoids being photographed (photograph by R3).

led discussions in walking interviews (Bartlett et al., 2023). Speaking with R4 and R3 made me proud of how far R1 and I have come, while R4's insights from teaching autistic students and R3's experience in parenting her two neurotypical boys helped me see my resilience as part of a wider parental experience.

4.1.3. R3: unlearning engagement assumptions

I expected R1 to begin with small talk, yet she chose quiet, attentive listening. With R4's reminder that autistic participation can look different, I worried about making a mess of the interview. Most of Indonesians, including me, tend to feel socially responsible for maintaining peace in interactions, a tendency known as *gak enakan*. Because autistic people often communicate more effectively with one another due to aligned expectations (Crompton et al., 2020) and interpretive practices that differ from neurotypical norms (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019), I felt the need to adapt my communication to theirs. I learned that what many read as disengagement can reflect active cognitive processing (Milton, 2012), which helped me attune to R1's pace and presence.

Conversation with R2, R1's mother, flowed easily, and trust deepened as we moved beyond formal roles. Observing their interaction highlighted a maternal dynamic shaped by cultural norms of protection and respect for elders, which influenced how I engaged with R1 and R2. With R1, I learned to wait rather than reformulate; a delayed reply signalled thinking, not withdrawal, and spoken language may require more processing time for autistic people (Williams et al., 2021). While with R4, collaboration felt intuitive; brief cues sufficed, and her guidance supported an approach that respected R1's preferences. The session became a positive (she even allowed me to take her picture as captured in Fig. 4), shared learning space.

4.1.4. R4: finding the rhythm of conversation

I aimed to facilitate a conversation that was structured yet flexible. Before the interview, I contacted R2 and prepared straightforward, direct questions. R2 was open and expressive, guiding the flow with stories about motherhood, her career, and raising R1. The dialogue felt reciprocal, because she not only answered but also asked questions. This suggests that a walking interview can support a more balanced power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bartlett et al., 2023).

With R1, the dynamic was different but equally productive. She offered short, calm, and precise responses, consistent with evidence that autistic communication often prioritises clarity and function over conventional social reciprocity (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019; Milton, 2012; Nah & Tan, 2021). She did not initiate conversation with me or with R3, but expressed needs to R2, such as asking for snacks or commenting on crafts. I could follow her answers easily; their concision showed a clear grasp of the questions. R3 instinctively adjusted her style, slowing her pace, pausing, checking understanding, and offering gentle confirmations. Such adaptive approaches, rather than imposing neurotypical norms, can enable more meaningful engagement with autistic individuals (Marcotte et al., 2022). A memorable moment was when R3 asked how to improve her communication with R1. I noted that while patterns exist, each autistic person has unique styles and preferences (Budiyanto et al., 2020). She adapted quickly, and R1 engaged more comfortably, underscoring that flexibility is central to cross-neurotype interaction.

4.1.5. R5: Seeing the neurotypical gaze through neurotypical eyes

With a background in social work, I realised my neurotypical outsider lens initially positioned R1 as inferior, shaped by past work with autistic citizens administratively framed as a disadvantaged, powerless group. This perspective influenced how I interpreted the other neurotypical members: R2's protectiveness, R3's hesitance, and R4's structured communication, revealing how my neurotypical gaze centred power dynamics between them and R1.

I began to recognise quiet traces of internalised neurotypical bias in R1's account. Yet I remain cautious: what looks like bias may also be pragmatic. My role is not to deliver certainties but to hold these tensions with humility. After I shared my reflection (in Bahasa Indonesia), R1 replied in English on WhatsApp: "*I understand …* (hugging emoticon). *We'll grow up soon, especially with our point of view about neurodivergence.*" It struck me that reflexivity is a shared journey, and we are learning it together.

4.2. Factors shaping cross-neurotype interaction dynamics

4.2.1. R1: Dark experiences

I feel most understood in online communities, especially my fanfiction group, where I can express myself freely without the pressures of in-person norms (Harper-Nichols, 2023; van Driel et al., 2023). In contrast, school offered little acceptance. Peers misjudged me as 'two-faced' when I was masking, suppressing traits to conform (Schneid & Raz, 2020). Masking left me exhausted and distressed (Milton, 2012; Schneid & Raz, 2020). When R4 asked if these experiences shaped my communication, I admitted they made me distrustful of strangers and hesitant to talk. Peer stigma once pushed me to suicidal thoughts, showing how rejection strongly affects autistic mental health (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024; Turnock et al., 2022).

Communicating with someone close to me, especially my mother, can also be challenging. For example, I have expressed my desire to work in Japan, where the social discipline, orderliness, and technological support feel more compatible with me (see Hirota et al., 2024), yet my mother hopes I will pursue a corporate job in Indonesia. Her expectations have shaped how I understand 'success', often making me feel that success must follow a conventional corporate path. R4 once shared her own experience of living under parental expectations, which I guess is very common in our society and I told her that whatever choice she makes, she should prioritise her happiness. The same thing I told myself.

Some of my decisions differ from my mother's hopes, but I still need to communicate them respectfully. I love and respect her, and I always speak to her politely, even when our perspectives diverge. I recognise that parts of my own neurotypical gaze, such as my inherited idea of success, are influenced by hers. Even so, I hold onto my own view: that success ultimately means being happy.

4.2.2. R2: A life transforming journey

Hardship shaped my voice and sense of self. Within R1's paternal family, her presence was framed through stigmatising cultural beliefs, and I, as her mother, was held responsible for circumstances beyond my control (Shorey et al., 2020). In Indonesia, as in many Asian contexts, autism is often seen as a disruption to family honour and social standing (Riany et al., 2016; Westby et al., 2024), and mothers are frequently blamed for this disruption. There is an Indonesian saying, *"anak adalah cerminan orang tua,"* meaning that a child's success or failure is attributed to the mother. These narratives shaped my sense of responsibility, duty, and my understanding of difference and success.

In seeking support for R1, I relied heavily on academic and clinical literature, which oriented me toward deficit-based frameworks. These views shaped not only how I interpreted autism but also my understanding of motherhood. I believed I needed to reduce difference, prevent misunderstandings, and help R1 meet social expectations, shaping how I interacted with her and with R3 and R4.

Through the CAE process, I recognised moments when I enacted a neurotypical gaze, especially by speaking for R1. This was driven not by control but by cultural assumptions that her communication might be misread in environments privileging speed, elaboration, and conventional expression. My tendency to 'translate' reflected personal experiences of judgement and broader expectations of coherence and conformity. Member checking made these dynamics visible, prompting me to slow interactions, seek R1's consent before speaking, and allow her to lead conversations so that my care supported, rather than constrained, her agency.

4.2.3. R3: Unlearning my neurotypical expectations

This experience reshaped how I view research interviews. My work as a radio broadcaster had trained me to value fluency, quick responses, and constant verbal signals; standards I later recognised as neurotypical biases that can marginalise autistic communication (Milton, 2012;

Williams et al., 2021). Observing R4 with R1 taught me to embrace silence, allow processing time, and pay attention to nonverbal cues rather than misread them as disengagement (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023b; van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020). I learned to let go of expectations of rapid reciprocity and simply follow R1's pace.

My interaction with R2 also evolved. Initially cautious not to disrupt the maternal dynamic, I became more relaxed as trust grew. As a mother of two adolescents, familiar with generational tension and social expectations, I drew on my parenting experience to connect with her. My relationship with R4 showed how smoothly interaction can flow when mutual understanding has developed over years of collaboration. Although I am older, R4 often adopted a mentoring tone, something natural in Indonesia, where professional and intellectual authority can outweigh age. Overall, I found it easy to connect with R2 and R4 because their roles felt familiar to me, making it easier to find harmony, a value deeply embedded in Indonesian culture.

4.2.4. R4: Lessons in listening and connection

My work with autistic students led me to run the walk-along like a class: concise, direct structure and generous processing time. I did it to help myself understood by R1, but our CAE and R5's notes showed how that 'help' slipped in a teacher–student frame, which might unconsciously see R1 as inferior or deficit. It also coloured my talk with others: I spoke to R2 like a pupil's parent, to R3 as if mentoring a junior (though she is my senior), and even with R5 I tended to explain rather than co-inquire. In Indonesia, where teachers are accorded deference, I slid into authority without noticing.

I realised my own experience had been a template; I had not anticipated how strongly R1 would claim her voice in CAE, agreeing or disagreeing plainly and asking for clarification when our views diverged. While R5 read hierarchy in our roles, and R2 and R3 noted that I could appear most authoritative, R1 located authority chiefly in her mother. That makes sense within local neurotypical norms of deference to elders, captured in the Indonesian saying that '*surga di bawah telapak kaki ibu*/ heaven lies under a mother's feet'. In narrative, R1 described feeling misunderstood by R2, yet in person she remained notably polite with her. During CAE, R1 wrote on WhatsApp® that she felt safe in our team which she commented due to the interaction medium which are familiar, conversational, and close to social media. One takeaway from the current study for me is to put off my professional power, attend to communication context, and centre R1's preferences: her pace, chosen channel, and boundaries.

4.2.5. R5: Reframing hierarchy through cross-neurotype dynamics

When I first examined the walking interview, the dynamics appeared hierarchical: R1 as the 'vulnerable' autistic participant, R2 as 'protective', R3 as 'novice', and R4 as 'authoritative'. This mirrored Peuravaara's (2021) account of asymmetries in researcher–participant relations, especially within the vulnerable–protective (R1–R2) and vulnerable–authoritative (R1–R4) dyads. My neurotypical gaze shaped this reading, positioning R1 lower in the social hierarchy due to her age, education, and autism diagnosis. These identities carry less power in many Asian contexts. This gaze also influenced how I interpreted dynamics among neurotypical members: in R3–R4 exchanges, expertise outweighed age-based deference, while in R2–R3 interactions, shared knowledge and motherhood created balance. Unconsciously, I slipped into a "helper–helped" view, where knowledge became power—uncomfortably close to the State–marginalised dynamics I know.

Later reflections complicated this view. R1's hesitancy was not passivity but a search for trust (Murray et al., 2023), as shown in her confident written contributions. R2's advocacy supported R1's independence, R3's reliance on neurotypical norms revealed ongoing unlearning, and R4's authority shifted toward facilitation. These shifts illustrate the "cross-fertilization" described by Désormeaux-Moreau and Courcy (2024), which also reshaped my own assumptions.

Power relations changed further during the CAE process. As co-researchers, R1 and R2 moved beyond interviewer–participant roles into shared decision-making; R1's voice grew through WhatsApp® and Google Docs®, and R2 no longer overshadowed her. What initially seemed hierarchical became negotiated reciprocity, with CAE redistributing voice and agency. Ultimately, the group developed a more balanced dynamic in which members shared knowledge and responsibilities, contributing equally regardless of cognitive status, age, or educational background. This process unsettled my own ableist assumptions about autistic individuals.

4.3. All: collaborative reflection on communication and interaction dynamics

Our collaborative reflections showed the complexity of cross-neurotype interactions. What outsiders read as imbalance or hierarchy was often experienced differently by insiders, whose intentions were shaped by lived experience. Yet insiders also carried subtle biases. Fig. 5 visualises these dynamics, showing how trust and adaptability shaped our exchanges.

Reflexivity around neurotypicality, often missing in earlier research, proved essential. The neurotypical gaze, initially implicit in our reflections, became visible through R5's outsider position. Her questions exposed the power dynamics in the cross-neuro interaction, a process further sharpened by an anonymous reviewer whose comments acted as an additional valuable external gaze. Together, these internal and external interrogations helped us re-work distorted readings into a shared analytic space (Stones, 2023), prompting shifts in group roles: R4 moved from authority to facilitator, R3 from novice to reflexive co-learner, R2 from protective spokesperson to equal partner, and enabling R1 to participate as an active co-researcher.

These shifts extend the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), showing that neurotypical challenges in our interactions were varied, shaped by roles, knowledge, and power. R2's protectiveness reflected both closeness and authority as a mother; R3's novice stance revealed assumptions rooted in limited knowledge; R4's authority needed adjustment to avoid dominance; and R5's outsider lens showed how distance could distort interpretation. Cross-neurotype difficulties, then, are context-specific, emerging from positionality, expertise, and relational power.

CAE reshaped our participatory practice by supporting R1's shift from informant to partner (Hobson et al., 2023). Her suggestions for reflexive methods and preferred media increased safety, reduced overshadowing from R2, and—together with asynchronous, writing-based exchanges—softened knowledge- and age-based hierarchies. These negotiated tools functioned as accessible 'infrastructure', aligning with calls to involve autistic researchers (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2018). Cross-fertilization through member checking, photo recall, and collaborative writing slowed interpretation and eased neurotypical pacing pressures (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023a; Jackson-Perry et al., 2020). Overall, interaction was shaped by neurotype, culture, power, and age. Viewed through an Indonesian lens, the study revealed context-specific dynamics and outsider interpretations. R5's position suggests extending Double Empathy toward a Triple Empathy lens (Josefson, 2025), a direction future work should explore. As Hillary (2020) notes, cross-neurotype encounters flourish with time, patience, and learning each other's 'languages'.

5. Conclusion

This study shows how the neurotypical gaze shapes cross-neurotype interaction and how CAE can redistribute roles through diverse modes and reflexive critique. Extending the Double Empathy Theory, we frame efforts to understand one another as a mutual challenge and emphasise neurotypical reflexivity, especially within Indonesian high-context norms of harmony and deference. Yet such hierarchies may be perceived differently by autistic people (Caldwell-Harris & Schwartz,

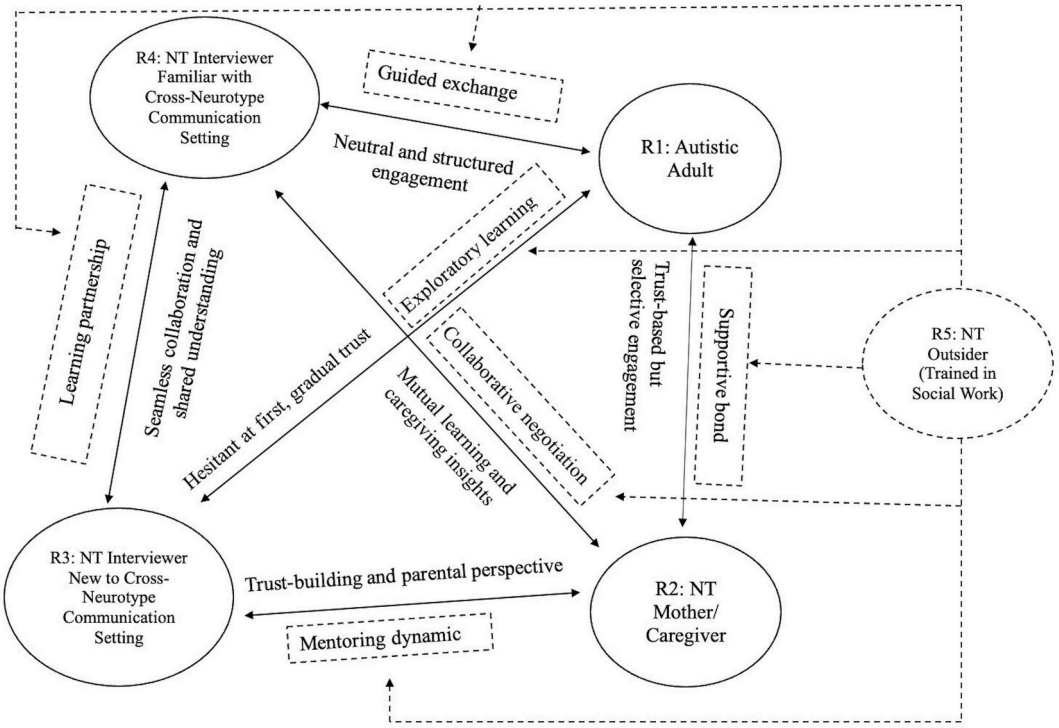

Fig. 5. Interaction dynamics in the walking interview between one autistic and three neurotypical adults.
Note. From the outsider view, dyads appeared as role-based pairings, while insider accounts emphasized reciprocity and co-construction over hierarchy.

2023), reminding us of the limits of neurotypical interpretation. By situating the neurotypical gaze within Indonesian cultural logics and examining cross-neurotype interaction in an Eastern, high-context setting, this study offers a rarely articulated perspective and highlights the need for future autistic-led and autistic-interpreted research grounded in similar contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Afifah Muharikah: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nirma Yossa:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dewi Turgarini:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Abshara Nabilla Hazairin:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Yanuar Farida Wismayanti:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Statement of human and animal rights

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants complied with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly® and ChatGPT® to assist with language clarity and style. All revisions were reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

APPENDIX A

Photo-Elicitation Recall Guide

Instruction: These six photos were taken during a previous study to help you reflect on past interviews and trips. For each photo, describe the moment from your perspective. Use the guiding questions below, adapted from the Pragmatic Scale (Dewart & Summers, 1996), but feel free to skip or comment on anything you don't remember or find irrelevant.

For each photo, consider:

1. What do you remember about that moment?

2. What was being discussed?
3. Did you know everyone there?
4. How did others interact with you?*
5. How did you interact with others?*
6. What do you recall about the researchers' questions and participants' responses?
7. What memories of interacting* with others in your life come to mind when you see this photo?

*To help you reflect on "interaction," you may refer to the examples below. You don't need to cover all points—just the ones that feel relevant to you.

Examples of Interaction

- Getting someone's attention (e.g., calling their name, pointing, touching, clearing your throat)
- Asking for something (e.g., asking, yelling, just waiting)
- Refusing (e.g., saying no, walking away)
- Showing happiness (e.g., smiling, laughing, hugging, staying quiet)
- Showing anxiety (e.g., crying, shutting down, getting angry)
- Refusing help (e.g., saying you can do it yourself, pushing someone away)
- Giving information (e.g., clearly explaining, using body language, forgetting, not trying)
- Expressing discomfort or dislike (e.g., saying it directly, staying silent)
- Telling stories (e.g., with lots of detail, briefly, repeating, not enjoying it)
- Struggling to follow conversations (e.g., asking for repeats, changing the topic, pretending to understand)
- Responding to unfamiliar words (e.g., asking, guessing, getting annoyed)
- Handling disagreements (e.g., following others, debating, walking away)
- Responding to sarcasm (e.g., getting it, feeling confused, disliking it)
- Starting conversations (e.g., eye contact, asking opinions, feeling awkward)
- Keeping conversations going (e.g., talking a lot, short replies, offering new topics)
- Explaining something unknown (e.g., in detail, briefly, assuming they get it)
- Helping others understand (e.g., giving examples, struggling, getting frustrated)
- Seeing others talk without including you (e.g., asking to join, ignoring, assuming it's about you)
- Joining conversations (e.g., waiting for a pause, jumping in, avoiding it)
- Ending conversations (e.g., summarizing, drifting off, walking away)
- Breaking social norms (e.g., interrupting, being too loud, asking personal questions)
- Trying to be understood (e.g., simplifying language, giving examples, focusing on understanding others first)

Fig. A.1. Shared Breakfast Before the Hike
Note. A selection of traditional dishes prepared by R2 and served on a communal table. All participant-researchers shared this breakfast together before commencing the hike (photograph by R4).

Fig. A.2. Street View on the Way to the Hiking Site
Note. A street view en route to the hiking site, taken from the rear window of R1's vehicle (photograph by R4).

Fig. A.3. Participant-Researchers on The Hike
Note. R1, R2, R3, and R4 standing side by side, each holding a hiking stick, during a pause in the hike (photograph by R3).

Fig. A.4. Hot Spring Crater at Kawah Domas
Note. A geothermal crater with a location name board visible in the background. This site is known for a local tradition where people or tourists—like the participant-researchers, could boil eggs in the hot spring (photograph by R3).

Fig. A.5. Visit to R1 and R2's Campuses After the Hike
Note. All research participants visited R1 and R2's campuses after finishing hiking. They also took a picture with one of R2's colleagues (photograph by R4).

Fig. A.6. Post-Hike Meal and Reflection
Note. R3 and R1 were seated across from each other while waiting for their food at a restaurant, wrapping up their hike and finalising research-related details (photograph by R4).

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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