



# Neurodiverse spaces: Exploring the potential for social networking to reconstruct our ideas of 'friendship'

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## INTRODUCTION

Given the strong focus on 'impairments' associated with autism in many of the dominant (NT) literatures, particularly the 'impairment in social interaction', alternative understandings of friendship and social interactions, as well as how social barriers stand in the way for friendships, are important if we are to engage with neurodiverse relationships. In this poster we explore representations of friendship among autistic people. We examine the potential impact that social networking in online-space such as Facebook or concepts of accessible off-line spaces may have in enabling a reconstruction of ideas about friendship and how these alternative notions of 'friendship' may be useful for some autistic people.

## METHODOLOGY

This project draws on three primary sources of information in order to critically explore the concept of 'friendship':

- Data collected through ethnographic research in a Swedish educational off-line setting for adults with autism
- Articles in a Swedish paper (*Empowerment*) aimed at and produced by adults with autism
- The potential of online social networking sites such as Facebook

## FINDINGS

The key findings from the early stages of the project suggest that neurodiverse spaces can be crafted in several arenas, including face to face and online interactions. The effectiveness of neurodiverse spaces however rely on the reconstruction of the NT-dominated understanding of the concept of 'friendship', what it means to be and have 'friends', and the importance of enabling social spaces.

## THE NEXT STEPS

This is an ongoing research project. These early findings indicate that spaces that respect neurodiversity can be created and managed by people with autism in order to facilitate the fostering of friendships and close relationships. The growing body of literature focusing on the internet as a potential tool for empowerment for use by people with AS, means that it is important to explore its potential for creating neurodiverse spaces that recognise and respect difference. Such interactions remove the need for FTF interactions, potentially removing 'impairment' in social interaction. The discussions and images in *Empowerment* and the ethnographic fieldwork illustrates that there exists possibilities for neurodiverse spaces to support friendships in the offline world too. We plan to do further investigations into the concept of the crafting of neurodiverse spaces and the impact that this may have on the need for us to reconstruct the pervasive NT-dominated ideas of 'friendship'.

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## Accessible spaces for friendships

- Friendship is an important theme in the paper *Empowerment*. It is closely linked to concepts of space. Stories about autistic disabling/unaccessible off-line spaces, resulting in a sense of social exclusion and isolation are confronted in the paper with images of friendships in enabling settings: in these spaces, people with autism make friends, have intimate partners, feel belonging/part of a community, live, work and study.
- An important theme during the ethnographic fieldwork was similarly the importance of Asperger friendly spaces and communication for friendships and socializing. A participant said; "I never liked coffee breaks, but here I do"

## Facebook and other social networking sites

- Previous research has demonstrated the importance of online communication for some people with autism
- Online social networking create a neurodiverse space which removes the need for FTF interactions, potentially enabling friendships to develop
- Facebook and other sites have been used by autistic people to talk about their lives and have support from others. The dominant theme is one of 'I am autistic and proud'

*"I'm proud to be known as an 'Aspie', and if someone asks or talks about it I am not ashamed to tell them that I am one! It defines who I am, and even before my diagnosis always new deep down that there was something different about me! Getting my diagnosis was the best thing to happen to me, it has helped with many aspects of my life including relationships with my family!"*

- Very little is known about neurodiverse friendships  
*"most aspies are great, but I have just ended a friendship with a so called friend who is also an aspie, because apparently I am too over the top for her, and that is worthy of breaking our friendship! I'm wondering whether she actually has aspergers or not?"*