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Intensity and Variable Attention: Counter Narrating ADHD, from ADHD Deficits to ADHD Difference

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Abstract

Literature on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has historically come from a cognitive deficit approach and lacked community authorship. In contrast, this article utilises a neurodiversity framework to explore ADHD as a cognitive difference through ADHDers' experiences. Specifically, here we analyse collective autoethnographic writings from neurodivergent academic researchers writing to one other about their experiences of intensity and variable attention or interest-based attention. Through the process of collective writing, we started to rename and restory our experiences, which has enabled us to understand intensity and variable attention as a valuable facet of human diversity, with both strengths and challenges. This project offers an example of how community-based research can elucidate individual experiences as ADHD/AuDHD researchers, facilitate exploration of varied experiences with intensity and attention and increase self-awareness and ability to give and receive neuroaffirmative support.

Keywords: adult ADHD, attention, AuDHD, collective autoethnography, hyperactivity, neuroaffirmative support, neurodiversity

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Introduction

Pellicano and den Houting (2022) note in an annual research review in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, an ongoing shift 'from "normal science" to neurodiversity in autism science'. We suggest a much-needed similar paradigm shift within attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) research and professional practice, moving in line with a neurodiversity approach from cognitive deficit models of ADHD to a neurodiversity perspective of ADHD as a cognitive difference (cf. Taneja-Johansson, 2021a, b; Goetz and Adams, 2022).

Feminist researcher Harding argues that 'strong objectivity' in research requires both democratic inclusivity and reflexivity so that researchers 'recognize realities about nature and social research practice that could not be detected in an earlier era', so 'one must take advantage of the distinctive kinds of knowledge that can be produced from previously disregarded starting points' (1991, p. 184). We stress the importance of epistemic insider positions, a 'nothing about us, without us' approach. This means a move in ADHD research and professional practice from talking about ADHD communities to talking with ADHD communities. Departing from the epistemic standpoint of researchers within academia, differently situated on the neurodivergent spectrum, this article aims to restory, that is change the narrative of two, of what is generally conceptualised as, core symptoms of ADHD; hyperactivity and attention deficits, from our bodyminds (Price, 2015). By this, we want to illustrate the implications of ADHD-led theorising (cf. Murray, 2019; Dieuwertje Huijg, 2021; Meadows, 2021) for research and practice. Rather than hyperactivity, we will refer to a different 'pace/pacing', or the 'intensity'. Rather than attention deficits, we will refer to 'variable attention' (Hallowell and Ratey, 2021) or what has been referred to within autism research as 'interest-based attention' (cf. Murray *et al.*, 2005) including different or varied modes of attention.

Interest-based motivation and attention among people with ADHD have been explored in the context of 'reward sensitivity' or 'motivation deficits', but also in terms of impulsivity. For example, Tymms and Merrell (2011) note that impulsivity as in the case of 'blurting out' in the classroom acts as 'an overt sign of cognitive engagement it seemed to have a positive function' (Tymms and Merrell, 2011). However, further

developments of an Interest-Based Account of ADHD from a neurodiversity approach within research are scarce. Closely associated with interest-based motivation and attention are the challenges of boredom. In another context, ADHD community theorists Hallowell and Ratey (2021) have referred to boredom as the 'kryptonite' for the ADHD brain. Renaming hyperactivity and attention deficits is a way to flip the narrative of deficit-loaded meanings of ADHD.

This article starts with a mapping of different perspectives of ADHD cognition and ADHD symptomatology, foremost in research but also within what can be referred to as ADHD 'community theorising'. Here, we will map out some core aspects of two competing cognitive paradigms of ADHD: the neuropathology paradigm of ADHD, as expressed by the 'Cognitive deficit models of ADHD', versus the neurodiversity paradigm of ADHD, as expressed by the 'Cognitive difference models of ADHD'. The mapping is followed by a description of the method, where we describe the process of collective autoethnographic writing and our results where we present our analyses of our experiences of the intensity and interest-based attention. Finally, we will elaborate on the implications of ADHD-led theorising for research and practice.

Mapping different perspectives of ADHD cognition and ADHD symptomatology

In this overview, we combine research accounts with writings from outside of academia. Like the emergence of autistic autism theorising, which in the beginning took place foremost outside of academia within the autistic self-advocacy movement, alternative perspectives based on a cognitive difference approach to ADHDers are currently foremost being formulated outside of academia within the ADHD self-advocacy movement. This ADHD community theorising (theories developed by ADHDers) is taking place in popular science literature on blogs and social media. This theorising that can be referred to as 'folk theory' (Held, 2020) formations of ADHD, or what autistic community theorist Murray (2019) in the context of autism studies has referred to as 'autistic-led theories', which are theoretical model based upon the lived experience of autism out, or theorising 'drawn at least in part from internal observations'. This includes both theorising developed by neurodivergent scholars within academia as well as scholars borrowing and developing concepts initially developed within neurodivergent communities. We will refer to theorising about ADHD 'drawn at least in part from internal observations' outside of academia as community theorising.

The neuropathology paradigm of ADHD: Cognitive deficit models of ADHD

Within the neuropathology paradigm of ADHD, ADHD cognition is commonly defined through models of cognitive deficits. The 'neurobiology of ADHD' (Mueller and Tomblin, 2012) is described as 'impaired functional connectivity in ADHD brains' (Alexander and Farrelly, 2018), where 'dysfunction in executive function, reward processing, attention networks, and default networks play major roles in the neuropathology of this condition' (Alexander and Farrelly, 2018). Different models have been developed throughout the years on the neuropsychological aetiology of ADHD. The most dominant among those models is the model of executive function deficits (Barkley, 1997). Within this model, ADHD has been stressed as a disorder of impaired executive functions (Brown, 2006; Sibley *et al.*, 2019). The ADHD subtypes, both dimensions of inattention and hyperactivity, serve as the phenotype for ADHD (Mueller and Tomblin, 2012).

Several researchers have explored what can be a 'core' deficit in hyperactivity. Some suggest 'a divided, focused or sustained attention deficit' (Kuntsi and Stevenson, 2000). Others have suggested an association 'between a slow inhibitory process and hyperactivity may reflect a generally slow, variable in speed and inaccurate pattern of responding' (Kuntsi and Stevenson, 2000). Some researchers have noted the impact of context contention, for example how school settings pose a challenge to children with ADHD, whilst 'these environments are often noisy and filled with distractions' (McLaren and Antle, 2017). Similar to autism, ADHD is associated with processing difficulties or 'abnormalities in multimodal processing' (Panagiotidi *et al.*, 2017). From this perspective, distractibility in ADHD 'might arise from increased sensory-driven interference or from inefficient top-down control', which lead Friedman-Hill *et al.* (2010) to suggest that 'attention deficits in ADHD may stem from a failure to efficiently engage top-down control rather than an inability to implement filtering in sensory processing regions' (Friedman-Hill *et al.*, 2010).

Closely connected to sensory processing deficits are time-related deficits, including time processing/estimation (Tobia *et al.*, 2021). These have consequences for time management and planning abilities (Sibley *et al.*, 2014). Nielsen (2017) has described this 'impairment in time' as 'an embodied experience of being out of sync', suggesting that:

> the experience of ADHD is characterized as 1) an inner restlessness and bodily arrhythmia; 2) an intersubjective desynchronization between the individual and its surroundings; and 3) a feeling of lagging behind socially due to difficulties in social skills. (Nielsen, 2017)

Attentional deficits in ADHD are understood in terms of deficits in abilities to sustain attention or the problems of selective attention (Avisar

and Shalev, 2011). Selective attention involves 'focus on the target stimulus, ignoring competing distractions' (Dos Santos Assef *et al.*, 2007). Gallagher and Blader (2001) have stressed a combination, where people 'with ADHD may have a particular profile of slowed performance in tasks of sustained attention and set-shifting, and their use of working memory may be particularly impaired' (Gallagher and Blader, 2001).

The neurodiversity paradigm of ADHD: Cognitive difference model of ADHD

Within the neurodiversity paradigm of ADHD, ADHD cognition is commonly defined through models of cognitive differences. Most commonly this includes the idea of ADHD as 'divergent thinking' (or divergent thinking ability, attention divergent) and 'variable attention'—where the centrality of hyperfocus (or deep flow) and interest-based motivation is stressed.

Within the idea of ADHD as divergent thinking, several researchers have explored an association between ADHD and creativity (Healey and Rucklidge, 2006) or innovative thinking (White and Shah, 2016). Cramond (1994) has suggested a possible overlap in the conditions of high creativity and ADHD, arguing for the presence in both groups of 'more spontaneous ideation, higher levels of sensation-seeking behavior, and higher energy and activity' in contrast to 'normal populations'. It has been suggested a connection between ADHD and creativity and divergent thinking (i.e. fluency, originality and resistance to closure (Taylor *et al.*, 2020)).

Hupfeld *et al.* (2019) notes that 'adults with ADHD often report episodes of long-lasting, highly focused attention'. The term 'hyperfocus' (HF) has been used to characterise this state of heightened, focused attention that individuals with ADHD frequently report (Hupfeld *et al.*, 2019). Summarising previous research, Hupfeld *et al.* (2019) stress the multi-dimensional aspects of HF, that it includes engagement in certain tasks in certain environments, which raises similar questions over the role of environmental cues on ADHD behaviours, where 'only certain situations induce HF' (Hupfeld *et al.*, 2019). Like a deep flow experience, HF is being defined by Hupfeld *et al.* (2019) as:

> a state of heightened, intense focus of any duration, which most likely occurs during activities related to one's school, hobbies, or 'screen time' (i.e., television, computer use, etc.); this state may include the following qualities: timelessness, failure to attend to the world, ignoring personal needs, difficulty stopping and switching tasks, feelings of total engrossment in the task, and feeling 'stuck' on small details. (Hupfeld *et al.*, 2019)

Closely associated with HF is a model proposed by ADHD community theorist Dodson (2022) stressing the association between ADHD and an 'interest-based nervous system'. From this interest-based theory of ADHD, the hallmark of the ADHD nervous system is not attention deficit, but inconsistent attention. From this perspective, ADHD is not a damaged or defective nervous system. It is a 'nervous system that works well using its own set of rules' (Dodson, 2022). Instead of a shortage of attention, Dodson (2022) stresses that people with ADHD 'pay too much attention to everything' and have 'inconsistent attention'. Dodson (2022) further argues that people with ADHD can 'get in the zone' and in the zone, 'they have no impairments', including possible executive function deficits. However, getting in the zone depends on interest:

> People with ADHD primarily get in the zone by being interested in, or intrigued by, what they are doing. I call it an interest-based nervous system. (Dodson, 2022)

Method

We started this project departing from a shared experience of ADHD. Some of us have a formal ADHD diagnose (ADHDer). Some of us are formally diagnosed with ADHD, but also acknowledge their autistic traits (AuDHDer). Some of us are autists but also acknowledge their ADHD traits (AuDHDer). Some are predominantly inattentive, some are mainly hyperactive and some are both. For some of us, ADHD is an integral part of our identity. Some of us are late diagnosed, where following *neuroconventional* norms have left wounds on our physical and mental well-being. McDermott (2022) has referred to 'neuroconventional' norms as 'the norms and conventions of neurotypicality'; and this concept is therefore not associated with certain minds (or neurotypes) but rather a mindset (similar to heteronormativity). Some of us have a history of explicitly targeting structures of power regarding neuroconventionality, dis/ability and the promises of neurodiversity. For others, these experiences have not been as obvious or have remained unreflected.

We came to this project with different identities and positionalities concerning gender, sexuality, race and class backgrounds and different research focuses/interests. We are situated within academia across disciplines and different academic positions (Literary Criticism/Literary Composition, Education, Social work and Sociology) and geographical contexts within Sweden. We all share a commitment to academic activism for social justice. Some of us are well versed in the concepts and theories this article is based on, but to some, the perspectives were new. We are professionally and/or socially connected to different degrees—some

of us know each other well, and some are new acquaintances. It is the first time we work together as a research group.

Throughout this piece, we mingle our collective autoethnographic accounts about research, community accounts and theories, as a way of illustrating the work with the text as thinking about ADHD with each other and with the ADHD community. We have chosen to refer to our autoethnographic voices as a collective 'One of us'. This is a way of stressing the text as written in a collective space, the collective 'I' as 'One of us'. 'One of us' is also used as an expression of a 'joint action', which feminist researchers Francis and Hey (2009) have stressed as 'a core to feminist action over the years' but in particular within 'academia' where 'joint action' counter-narrate the position as 'individual experts'. The use of a collective I, is a way to counter-narrate the image of 'the sole', individualised neurodivergent, and rather stress the presence of a neurodivergent togetherness but also to protect ourselves against structural violence and position us, as a neurological minority.

The project arose out of discussions between three of the authors of their interest in coming together to develop the emerging field of critical ADHD studies, responding to calls for ADHD-led research on ADHD (Dieuwertje Huijg, 2021; Meadows, 2021). The initial discussion around this text and during the ongoing co-working with the text made it visible to us how we all have had different experiences of working not only with concepts and theories within the broader fields of critical autism studies or neurodiversity studies (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist *et al.*, 2020a), but also different experiences of working with our lived experiences, and acknowledge them as a source for creating knowledge and/or as a tool to do research and to generate new knowledge.

We use a collective autoethnographic method, which we refer to as ADHD collective storytelling (cf. Jackson-Perry *et al.*, 2020), or our 'ADHD stories', to restory ADHD. Throughout our collective autoethnographic narratives, we explore ADHD both from an individual and collective point of view and in relation to research accounts and representations of ADHD we have encountered in the Swedish context. Although data include individual autoethnographic narratives, we stress the importance of the context of writing (cf. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist *et al.*, 2020b). During the autoethnographic writing phase, our narratives served the dual purpose of writing to and being read by other persons with lived experiences of ADHD. In addition, the individual narratives were being produced in an iterative writing process (cf. Jackson-Perry *et al.*, 2020) in continuous responses to each other's writing. As an add-on to the individual writing process, we also met up a few times on a secure digital platform (Zoom) and discussed our experiences with ADHD and the writing process. Through this collective storying, we have explored our experiences of the world from our different situated knowledge (Harding, 1991) of ADHD, our different ADHD perspectives,

encountering each other's storying, a gradual restorying of our experiences emerged.

Results

In the following, we explore our own experiences of intensity and variable attention, which entails different aspects and combinations of degrees of intensity and attention in relation to pacing and temporality.

Being intensive in relation to oneself and others

Being intensive can imply both being intensive in relation to oneself or contact with other people. For us as adults being intensive can be experienced as an internal process, as having a continuous stream of thoughts and/or feeling intense emotions. Intensity can be disturbing, tiring and sometimes harmful. However, the harmfulness of intensity is not necessarily perceived as located within us, but rather as a clash with the outside world; the dispositions of society; the expectations of neuroconventional social interaction, and sometimes even adulthood. When outside of those limiting constraints, intensity could be released as helpful, joyful and exciting, for example as a state of flow.

The experience of intensity as a joyful flow-state includes being completely absorbed in a state of mind, for example on your own, writing a text, reading a book, listening to music, doing art, running or performing some other exercise activity. This kind of interaction can become entangled or intertwined due to the playfulness that can occur by associating and building upon the other person's input. The work results, academic and artistic production, do sometimes also mirror the intensity. One of us, working within both academia and as an author, has been recognised for a specific intensity in writing—including both quality and quantity. In the following, they cite two of the meta-text reactions (Swedish literary critics) to one of their latest book and after that reflect upon the reactions:

> [title of the book] is her fourth book this year. But who am I to point out the rampant productivity? Something has controlled the release rate: restlessness? It must be said right away that this is a restlessly written book, where different styles and levels of style cross, a hybrid work that sometimes lends itself to autofiction, sometimes to poetry, sometimes to drama, sometimes to regular prose, sometimes to the diary, sometimes to the essay, and so on. (Bernur, 2022, our translation from Swedish to English)

> It sucks that it's considered ugly to be too productive (...) Never stop being careless with language. Never stop writing. Such unique writers are

> rarely encountered. (Skugge, 2022, our translation from Swedish to English)

> I think about it as both a compliment and a critique, being 'slow' is usually valued within the literary field. Having worked with a poem or a novel for several years sometimes seems to be a guarantee for quality. But here, this review points to restlessness as a unique quality, an interesting quality, and an act of resistance relevant to the art. This feels so good. It feels like I'm being understood. This way, artmaking is also a relational practice. When writing, I am in this highly intensified mode, and being read in a similar mode is like finding a way of communicating that acknowledges restlessness as a way of experiencing the world. (One of us)

One of us writes about them usually falling asleep early in the evening, but then waking up during the night 'gets up to work, or writes a long, intense letter to one of my many pen pals', and how they 'either gets engrossed or remains uninterested'. Closely connected to intensity, is what has been explored in an autistic context as interest-driven motivation (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019), to either be intensively interested or not at all, bored, stressing the challenges of boredom (Hallowell and Ratey, 2021).

Difficulty among people with ADHD to focus their attention on tasks that are not intrinsically rewarding (Hupfeld *et al.*, 2019; Dodson, 2022), can be linked to the theory of Monotropism in an autistic context as an 'Interest Based Account of Autism' (Murray *et al.*, 2005; Murray, 2019). In this setting, 'boredom' does not necessarily mean that one does not care or feel unengaged in the issue. On the contrary, a certain task, such as reading a text, could be considered highly relevant, important and interesting, or at least should feel that way, but the inability to control focus and boredom makes it impossible to understand the text. Some of us experience this inability to choose what to hear or read as highly stressful. Not least because it leaves gaps in general knowledge; one knows everything about one thing, but then almost nothing about the next. In a society that expects even cognitive profiles and general knowledge, spiky profiles or uneven ways of knowing, easily become subjected to stressful attempts of hiding gaps, and the fear of getting caught.

Different strategies of hiding neurodivergent ways of functioning and socialising are what within autism research has been called 'masking' (Pearson and Rose, 2021). As in the case of uneven, monotropic knowledge, some of us experience harmful facets of intensity, as a never-ending balancing the fine line between holding back needs and ways of being to mask one's ADHD.

> I am not hyperactive in a physical sense, but my thoughts can be, my restlessness, my sociality, my joy, my anxiety, and even my depression. I have searched for kicks, travels, parties, and the tickles in my stomach. But it has often gone wrong. I've always wanted too much, been too

> intense, and tiring everyone else out. Always stayed the longest, and always continued the conversation even though the other was tired and just wanted to escape. Always been able to become overstimulated and angry and puzzled others. And then the never-ending struggle of trying to balance, regulate and hide that intensity so that other people would not consider me weird and push me away. (One of us)

Being intensive can imply having energy that alternates between the two polarised positions on or off—where one is either superefficient or completely finished. Finding and recognising the balance becomes a challenge in relation to the degree of engagement, where the interest-based motivation reinforces involvement which easily becomes too much both in relation to oneself and in relation to others in which social norms and expectations implies neither being too engaged nor uninterested in the topic discussed,

> Mostly uninterested, sometimes way too interested. Sometimes I spin off someone else's work as if it were my own. But I can't manage to be sufficiently interested. (One of us)

Intensity could also be experienced as exhausting and disabling, without involving the expectations of others. As in the case above, this could not solely be attributed to intensity per se, but to the lack of possibilities of developing useful and ADHD-affirmative tools to manage intensity, throughout the life course.

> I go from being fully active to collapsing, physically, it can also be because I have completely forgotten to eat. Then I may have prioritized or forgotten about it because I have been so busy with something else, such as writing a text or preparing a lecture, or thinking intensively about something. /. . ./ Relating to what is boring is difficult, in that way I am probably a 'dopamine junkie'. I just want to do what I think is fun, not to have breaks/downtime/'wind down'. I don't know how to take it easy. Even when I'm going to sleep and relax, the brain is constantly working. (One of us)

Hence, the experience of neurounconventional intensity, the fear of being considered weird and incompetent, and becoming rejected for that, and the endless struggles to find balance, have some of us resulted in adopting more or less helpful strategies on our own, to mask the intensity. Experiencing those facets of intensity as disabling to ourselves and sometimes others, disability does not necessarily derive from intensity and ADHD in itself, but as a secondary outcome due to the stress of masking intensity rather than developing tools to regulate intensity in a neurodivergent-affirmative and constructive way. Botha and Frost (2020) have named the mismatch between societal norms and neurodivergence as a 'minority stress', which can have a toll on neurodivergent physical and mental health and well-being.

Being caught up in the 'on–off' dynamics

A facet of intensity is the variable attention, and how to manage (or not manage) what falls outside of monotropic focus—what is subjected to inattention. This relates both to how (in)abilities to regulate focus, and how a different set of perceiving and 'go with the flow' with the same rhythm as the surroundings, impact daily lives and work life. Temporality and pacing evolve around challenges related to time management where the difficulty lies in finding a rhythm that makes it possible to manage tasks without being exhausted and drained of energy. Ways of pacing and managing time that clashes with neuroconventionality, sometimes involve difficulties both getting started with a task and finishing it, if the task draws you into an intensive flow. This could result in such an on-mode that it becomes difficult to stop, even when there is a cognitive awareness that the flow will result in an off-mode, low energy or even an overload, where one gets overwhelmed by emotions and fatigue. Just as in the case of intensity, studying our dynamics of on–off functionality has made us aware of the coping strategies and skills we have developed due to the consequence of living as a cognitive minority within a neuroconventional society.

> Every time I turn on the dishwasher and the washing machine, I think of how easy it would be if you could just press a button and start doing things immediately and according to a predetermined program. A clear beginning and a clear end, all according to plan. (One of us)

Some of us have a different temporality than what is expected within a neuroconventional society. This neurounconventional temporality includes an increased need for sleep, as well as a circadian rhythm with tiredness in the morning and a comparably longer start-up process of the day; it takes time to get to the on-mode, and when started, the challenge becomes how to manage to push the off-button.

> Not until 10 o'clock comes the flow, and it continues until the afternoon. In the evening, I can perk up and get creative. At the same time, I also get quite fuzzy in my head and can't think clearly. At this point, it is important not to start any project, because if I do, it becomes impossible to stop and get in bed on time. And I need a lot more sleep than the average person if my brain is going to last and I'm not going to have to live the next day in a total brain fog and a state of anxiety- 'wired but tired' perception and cognition. So, in the evening, I try to do something boring and not be tempted by anything creative. Still, it always gets much later than I planned, every single night. (One of us)

> After the meeting with you, I am so tired in the head that I feel sick. I go out quickly, take a walk to slow down, and feel how the fatigue, the speed, starts to decrease when I kind of get rid of it bodily. And then the thoughts about cases [illustrative of my ADHD] start to come. What I need to write about. The mismatch in intensity. In pacing. (One of us)

One of us notes how when they get tired, they get the feeling of their head as 'encased-like three layers of cotton- someone shouts from far away and the sound doesn't reach/into me, or just the opposite, all sounds are loud, cutting and absolutely horribly, intrusive'. They further write:

> When I get tired in the evening it feels like my body shuts down, sensory hypersensitivity - quick flare-up eczema inside the palms - I have passed my limit and it flares up quickly. It burns the palm of my hands and the skin turns an angry red. I have difficulty hearing what my children say, they often laugh at me. Sometimes I can't bear to ask what they said, instead I pretend to hear. Motor skills are also affected, it feels like carbonated lemonade in the legs. (One of us)

This points to temporality and pacing that is usually neuroconventional, but that we as neurodivergents need to rethink and remake to fit our neurocognitive functionality. Just like there is a queer temporality (Halberstam, 2005), there is a neuroqueer one (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist *et al.*, 2023). This neurounconventional, neuroqueer temporality affects both the life story—what life events happen to us when—and the everyday working pace. We experience how we cannot follow discussions that are too fast or too slow. For example, one of us appreciates when recorded lectures could be played on speed, which facilitates working memory in not having to wait too long for each fragment of the lecture to fall into place, and thus put together a comprehensible whole. Others need to slow down to process the input.

> I think it's about timing, sometimes things go too slow and sometimes things go too fast. It goes too fast when there is a discussion where everyone in the Zoom room in particular has to think fast or give an opinion on something that hasn't 'landed'. To think from a new structure whose architect has had time to prepare and those seeing it for the first time have not. It becomes a bit like the Gestalt Therapy energy cycle, that people are in different mental places, where participation becomes chimerical because there is no room for reflection (implementation research- doing fast= adaptation). In such situations I usually feel 'off-time'- by the time I have had time to orient myself, it has usually gone several steps past what is to be discussed/have an opinion on, especially if my thought path contains a stick track, which I need to get to the main track. Then, if I do decide to say something, there is usually a lot that comes out and maybe sometimes there are no clear links between the stick trail and the main trail -although, sometimes not... Sometimes these unspoken connections remain in my brain. I can also get very excited and speed up what I'm saying, so it can certainly be hard to follow, which can also give an unstable impression- not saying things with emphasis- the heaviness that comes from a calm voice, not someone who is up to 180 because it feels urgent and important. (One of us)

Closely associated with the intense internal flow time and externally generated overload, is the downtime. One of us, writing from the position of being an AuDHDer, notes how they turn their focus toward their special interest (miniatures), to move symbolic and literary into one of their imaginary and controllable worlds of dollhouses, when in need of recovery.

> When the world is too incomprehensible, too fragmentary, and too intense, I need to move into such a dollhouse for a while. It feels like my autistic special interest catches me up when ADHD gives me overloads, albeit diving into a special interest, is intense in itself. (One of us)

Others among us turn to our bodies.

> When I'm exhausted, I always want to stretch my body. I need to be in my body then. I feel if I'm not in a stretching context (i.e., where I feel it would be a bit socially awkward if I suddenly put my feet behind my head as if I became a freak show or a show-off and demanded attention) that my body starts to fall apart. I can feel the pain coming and how it's knotting itself into tight knots. I need my body. I need to rest it by stretching it to the max. In the eating disorder ward, they tried to get me to stop. Told me to learn to be in my body without pushing it. But I don't see it as pressure. I experience the neurotypical relaxed pose as pressure. I always must take my shoes off as soon as I'm indoors. So, I can curl up and stretch. I sometimes wonder if my colleagues see me as a wacky kid. (One of us)

Hence, what is within a medical paradigm called a 'disorder' or 'impairment' in terms of ADHD and autism, have valuable functions in our ways of handling stress and mental overload. In the former quote, ADHD and autism work simultaneously to save and help each other, rather than two added-on deficits that should be mitigated and eased according to neuroconventional standards. In the later quote, neurodivergence offers ways of using sensory abilities to ease stress, but it is not approved as a healthy way of stress management, according to neuroconventional standards of relaxation.

Thus, pacing and temporality have different meanings in our lives, reminding us of the diversity of neurodivergent ways of being and functioning. Yet, what brings us together is the challenges of relating to, and managing, the neuroconventional paces of society.

Conclusion

In line with a cognitive difference model of ADHD, we want to rename and restory our experiences of attention and hyperactivity as 'intensity' as well as 'variable attention or interest-based attention' (cf. Hallowell and Ratey, 2021; Dodson, 2022). Renaming and restorying our

experiences of intensity and attention through the process of our collective autoethnographic writing, that is within the context of an ADHD/AuDHD community of researchers, has enabled us to understand intensity and variable attention in line with a neurodiversity approach to ADHD as a valuable facet of human diversity, with both strengths and challenges. Our findings reveal intensity and variable attention as sources of happiness, playfulness, creativity and recreation, as well as exhausting, limiting and subjected to feelings of shame and guilt, and even fear.

Reframing hyperactivity (restlessness), as one aspect of hyperfocus or variable attention, as an academic and/or artistic advantage, might be a way to de-pathologise ADHD traits within an individual and a field of practice. This does not mean that we align ourselves with discourses of ADHD as a 'superpower'. The superpower discourse is common, at least since 2017, in Swedish popular media (see e.g. Frisk and Gahne, 2017; Karpathakis, 2017) and therefore something we have experiences of encountering in our everyday lives. The superpower-discourse risks hiding disabling barriers ADHDers face in a neuroconventional society. Nevertheless, acknowledging the artistic and academic possibilities in which intensity and variable attention can flourish, also opens up for a new way of phenomenologically understanding ADHD bodyminds and the disabling barriers we encounter. It is not to say that 'all ADHDers must be productive/must produce', but it may show how it is possible to question what is productivity; what part of a work is relevant, when a work task is finished, how the process works, and how different modes of working may give different results and a broader understanding of both ADHD and neuroconventional societies.

In relation to self-management and strategies for being in control, it could be important to identify when and under what circumstances patterns of intensity occurs. Becoming aware of individual processes means having a choice, to enable exploring individual meanings of intensity, that is the purpose it serves in one's life, and the consequences it has on everyday life. Identifying under which circumstances intensity becomes an asset and under which situations and contexts it becomes disabling enable ADHDers to gain increased self-awareness and ability for self-support, as well as to give and receive neuroaffirmative ADHD peer support from others. Even when situations cannot be avoided, recognising one's behavioural patterns can facilitate time management, and increased awareness of one's temporal pacing can eventually lead to self- and other-acceptance.

Nevertheless, it is important for health and social care professionals to not expect that awareness of behaviours is enough to change them, particularly if the change is experienced as an adaptation to others' needs. However, restorying ADHD from ADHDers own perspectives, connecting ADHD-led theorising developed within and outside of academia,

provides a better chance to explore meanings that could provide a better starting point for change processes initiated by ADHDers themselves.

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