Features of a NeuroQueer existential-phenomenology.

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a phenomenological description of what is being experienced, and encountered, at the intersections between queer and neurodivergent existence. The description includes an exploration of our emergent pluralities, non-linearity and immersion in existence. It further delves into our existing-being-worlds, and provides a more detailed articulation of the movements, positions and paradoxes that we encounter there. Finally, we offer implications for existential-phenomenological (critical) psychopathology and psychotherapeutic practice.

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1. Introduction:

There is a welcome phenomenological revisiting of personhoods, identities and experiences deemed to be psychopathological (c.f. Fuchs, 2013; Ritunnano & Bortolotti, 2022). Historically, phenomenological accounts have somewhat attempted to find ways of disrupting and moving beyond contextual psychopathological norms and constructions of psychopathology (i.e.the work of Jaspers, 1997 [1959]; Messas, Tamelini, Mancini & Stanghellini, 2018). Even so, queer and neurodivergent (c.f. Yergeau, 2018) subjectivities were regarded within psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy as pathological and pathogenic. In many Westernised societies we became seen as legitimate sites for intrusive compulsion to psychiatric, psychological and psychotherapeutic treatment (see King and Bartlett, 1999; King, 2019).

Whilst renewals of phenomenological psychopathology do not subject queer and neurodivergent people to automatic categorisations of psychopathology, some contemporary frameworks can explicitly and implicitly recreate cis-heteronormativity, and the neuronormativity of the professions and societies they are situated in (Barker, 2018; 2019; 2022). Doing so, renders queer and neurodivergent people intelligible only in relation to personal and professional unexamined imaginal and contextual referents within psychiatric and psychological practice and inquiry (following Boaz, 2022). This creates epistemic injustices, and can reify ideas of, and practices around, what constitutes 'psychopathological', from a social, psychiatric and psychopathological perspective (Fricker, 2007; Knox, 2022; Chapman & Carel, 2022).

The rise of queer and neurodivergent politics has provided generative changes in what is meant by diversity in genders and sexualities, and within human experiencing (c.f. Barker & Iantaffi, 2019; Walker, 2021; Totton, 2023; Yergeau, 2018). Along with contextual socio-legal and cultural changes, queer and neurodivergent people have remade the 'kinds' of minds and personhoods described historically in psychopathological accounts of their existence and experiencing (following Hacking, 1999; 2007). The remaking of NeuroQueer (NQ) kinds has disrupted much of the linearity of accounts and possibilities of queerness and neurodivergence within psychopathology (e.g. see the genesis in Baron-Cohen, from 2004, to 2012, and 2017).

Building on the work of Nick Walker (2021), Kassiane Asasumasu and M. Remi Yergeau (2018) we define NeuroQueer as the intersection of diverging from social, cultural and professional ideals, and descriptions, of neuronormativity (neurological, cognitive, perceptive, sensorial emotional, behavioural, and interpersonal norms), and cis-heteronormativity (sexuality, gender, relational and familial norms). Further, we define NeuroQueering as the rituals, practices, enactments and relationships we engage in that orientate, reorientate and

disorientate neuro/cis/hetero-normative lived practices and understandings of temporality, spatiality, positionality, embodiment, selfhood(s), sociality, and relationality.

Paradoxically the reclaiming and remaking of neuro-referential terms (i.e. neurodiversity, neurodivergence, NeuroQueer, NeuroQueering) also creates additional epistemic complexities for queer and neurodivergent phenomenologists - namely what the neuro-alterity being describes is, where it emerges from, and how it might be meaningfully understood and experienced. More recently, we (the authors) have begun to explore ways of reconciling contextual and epistemic injustice with new existential-phenomenological descriptions. We suggest that endeavours to renew phenomenological psychopathology require a return to foundational phenomena to ask: what is being experienced, or encountered, at the intersections between queer and neurodivergent existence (building on Ahmed, 2006a; Boaz, 2022).

2. Context:

The authors were awarded a small grant by the Renewing Phenomenological Psychopathology (RPP) team at the University of Birmingham to explore NeuroQueer experiences through an existential-phenomenological lens, and consider the implications for phenomenological inquiry into psychopathology.

To this end, we ran a workshop and subsequent series of correspondence between Autumn 2023 and Winter 2024. The workshop took the form of a collective inquiry and explored emerging ideas in phenomenological psychopathology from an intersectional (queer and neurodivergent) perspective across the fields of existential philosophy, sociology, mad studies, psychology, psychotherapy and coaching. Before the workshop we identified existing themes and descriptions within the phenomenological and existential literature-base relating to the intersections of queerness and neurodivergence. We drew on both Westernised and non-Westernised descriptions of neurodivergent experiencing to elaborate our collective formulations (e.g. Māori descriptions in the recently compiled Te Reo Hāpai[2]). The methodological aim of the workshop was to develop an initial framework for approaching phenomenological inquiry from a queer and neurodivergent perspective.

During the workshop we bracketed pre-identified themes and descriptions to use our own collective insight and lived experience to generate new ones. We then synthesised the ideas generated from the workshop and literature-base, using an experiential equivalence of a hermeneutic circle and fusing of horizons (building on Gadamer, 2004 [1975]). We all took notes and recordings of the workshop. Marc Boaz wrote these up as a propositional synthesis, and this was then refined through collective discussions online. Given the restricted level of funding, we primarily took a dialogical and explorative approach, rather than a systematically methodological and analytical one.

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[2] For further information see the lexicon and resources at Te Reo Hāpai, which is a Māori language glossary for use in the mental health, addiction and disability sectors: www.tereohapai.nz

3. Philosophical foundations:

From our collective inquiry, we have tentatively identified a number of philosophical and practical foundations, which may provide a basis for a NeuroQueer (NQ) existential-phenomenological approach to psychopathology. We would encourage others to critique and build upon these emerging suggestions, seeing them as an offering, rather than a definitive framework.

In this section, we start with a description of the existential-phenomenological features (see Spandler & Thomas, 2023) of NQ experiences we have identified. The language we have used emerges from our own explorations, and we acknowledge that at times it may position us outside of other contemporary attempts to renew phenomenological psychopathology within the wider RPP programme of activity, and even within our own neurodivergent and/or queer communities.

Further, we want to recognise here the limitations in focusing primarily on written language as a means for communicating about the embodied, sensorial and visceral foundations of NQ experiencing. We can not reproduce here how we incorporated somatic, non-verbal and alternative forms of communication in our explorations, but hope to build on this current output in future with the creation of a multimedia ezine (*see next steps*) which uses creative methods to exemplify lived experiences of all the elements we describe here.

The **philosophical foundations** we have identified include:

a. **emergent plurality**: existence is emergent, and we emerge through becoming. Emergence and becoming are experiences of the plurality of human existence, and through synthesis we make sense and meaning of our self(ves), our lives, others, and the world around us. Whilst Western philosophy of mind traditionally approaches the mind-body as a single fixed or emergent self, some Eastern and Indigenous philosophies emphasise the self as emerging within: a personalised self containing a plurality of everchanging energies or modalities, a plural self, a non-self, and collectivised 'I-we' pluralities in relation to community or relationships between selves.

b. **non-linear and multiple experiential states:** our experience of our self(ves), other(s) and the world(s) around us emerge out of the synthesis of simultaneous, and multiple, modes of experiencing; including perceptive, sensorial, visceral, relational, and systemic. In many contexts the institutional, social and relational world around us requires experiential states to be singularised into one 'cognitive mode', 'emotional state', 'sensorial state', or 'behavioural pattern'. As NQ peoples we are sensitive to the multiplicity of experiential and self states, and this leads to us to encounter non-linear experiences of; time (past-present-future), space (proximity-distance-entanglements), causality (personal-interpersonal-structural-systemic-environmental-cosmic), self(ves) (mono-poly), and experiential locality (interiority-exteriority) in the present moment.

c. **plurality of the experiential self:** we experience the self through its multiple potentialities as they emerge in the present. These potentialities interweave and have their own histories and complexities. As NQ peoples, we experience this multiplicity of the self in many different ways, through plural senses of self(ves), parts, forms, modes, and experiential states. In this way the multiple or plural potentialities of the self(ves) may have their own dimensions of existence - *umwelts, eigenwelts, mitwelts and uberwelts* - meaning that we live a plurality of lifeworlds within our experiences of the present.

d. **becoming-outsider:** we have sustained experiences of being or feeling like an outsider to personal and social groups and networks (including family, friends, workplaces, communities and societies) because of differences in the way we experience and understand our existence. This outsiderness is not simply a position or status of outsider, but rather emerges dynamically as an experiential state of becoming an outsider - even amongst people who resonate and with whom we are kin. In this sense we continually confront the edges of relationality, sociality and the social world (*mitwelt*), and so are thrown back on our existential aloneness and uniqueness.

e. **existing-between-worlds:** our human existence is liminal and spectral. When we move between worlds of experiencing (be they personal, relational, cultural, social, or spiritual), we encounter, and are faced with, the liminality of our existence. Liminality is incorporated into our lives and ways of understanding and relating to ourselves, others and the world around us. There is simultaneous paradoxical pain and disorientations, and liberation and reorientations bound up in our experiences of the liminality of our existence. We incorporate our exposures to the liminality of existence into the ways in which we embody and present ourselves in the world. At the same time we may mask our liminality to survive in our social and relational environments, and to make ourselves legible and acceptable to others.

f. **immersion in existence:** the plurality and liminality of existing-between-worlds results in frequent immersions in the foundations of human existence. It exposes us to the horrors, terrors, awe and wonderment of our existential givens (i.e. death, meaninglessness, isolation), concerns (i.e. alienation, freedom, ethics), and situates us viscerally in the flow of lived time. For us, immersion is a state of encountering the incomprehensibility, unknowability and incoherence of existence and the limited expansiveness of human possibilities, and struggling with how to hold and make sense of these encounters. These encounters can arise through sensorial stimulations in the world or in connections with other human, non-human animals and entities and the constructed or natural world around us. Sometimes these encounters, and our experiences of immersion, are problematised and/or pathologised into descriptions of 'overwhelm', 'burnout' and 'meltdown'. Sometimes we find immersion and movement-between-worlds (*see section below*) to be distressing, unwanted and painful, other times we embrace it as a way of understanding ourselves, our existence, and the world around us.

g. **masking and unmasking:** though our emergent plurality and existing-between-worlds we learn - or are forced by coercion, harm and endangerment - to mask the liminality of our

existence and what we have encountered in our movements-between-worlds (*see section below*) and existing-at-the-edge (*see section below*). Sometimes we do this to render ourselves knowable, comprehensible, understandable or tolerable to other people or social systems (and even ourselves). We do this by taking on or incorporating the normativities in the worlds in which we exist, even when there is no personal resonance or connection to them. Other times we understand our NQ liminality to be private. Our masking enables us to have a sense of agency, freedom and choice over the disclosure of our NQ identities and experiences, although sometimes our embodiment (or the sociality of our embodiment) results in unplanned for, and unwanted disclosures to others. To mask we engage in ritualisations of becoming and emerging as presentations of a self. These involve personal rituals (that can be sacred) to mask, unmask, de-mask and re-mask ourselves. Ritualisation is a visible/invisible preparation of the ground for becoming ourselves as a mask of liminality. The masking of liminality can involve folding, unfolding or refolding our embodied, visceral, sensorial and interpersonal experiences to cover the immensity or plurality of our experiences. Masking is not a false self or inauthenticity, rather a disclosure of a particular constellation of our plurality, non-linearity and multiplicity of experiential states to ourselves and others.

4. detailed description of existing-between-worlds

Having described the seven philosophical foundations above, we delve below into more detail to consider what we encounter within our existing-between-worlds. This further exploration is required to set out the philosophical qualities and textures that are present in our existing-between-worlds. These include:

I. **moving-between-worlds:** emerging in the present between-worlds means that we experience the immensity of the existential movements between-worlds of experiencing. These movements are liminal. Some are pre-conscious needs, yearnings and desires for new ways of existing, and others are conscious embracements of experimenting and expanding on previous ways of existing within constrictive environments and contexts. Sometimes we are called to wander/wonder-between-worlds - not lost (though this is a possibility), but meandering between worlds - and so notice, become attuned to (and sometimes preoccupied by) the ways in which people and worlds are (dis/dys)organised, (re)(de)constructed, (re)(de)systematised, (re)(de)produced, (re)(de)generated. Through our movements-between-worlds we undergo transformations, and these transformations are the relational embodiments of expansive and transformative potentialities offered through the experiencing of liminality, and the ambiguity, liberation and (re)(dis)orientations that emerge from them.

II. **the existing-at-the-edge position:** becoming an outsider and existing-between-worlds gives rise to our positions of existing-at-the-edge of different worlds. We become sensitive to, aware of, and being confronted with thresholds and boundaries of societal, systemic, cultural and relational normativities and are called to reproduce and/or disrupt and/or subvert them (standing-at-the-edge). Standing-at-the-edge is

where we are filled with the horror, terror, joy and liberation of embracing new possibilities of existing within and outside of accepted and idealised forms of normativity in the social worlds we inhabit.

III. **edge-movements:** spending time moving-at-the-edge or remaining in positions-at-the-edges can seem to ourselves and others to be disconcerting, uncanny, ambiguous, unsettling, exotic, aspirational, and inspiring. This can draw unwanted reverence, fetishisation, and attention to our movements, as well as leading to violence, victimisation, and ostracisation.

IV. **kinship-on-the-edge:** we frequently find ourselves having to navigate dehumanisation and cruelty in our own lives, and witness our kin being subject to this too. NQ peoples and communities have a kinship that emerges from existing-between-worlds and moving-at-the-edge. Kinship-on-the-edge is liminal and impermanent, and incorporates an embodied knowing/unknowing of what is encountered at the edge and moving-between-worlds. Kinship can be both a political identification for us, and a felt sense of connection, belonging and/or shared knowing/unknowing.

V. **(re)(dis)orientations:** existing- and moving-between-world results in disorientations, reorientations and new emergent orientations in relation to the dimensions of our existence(s) (some existentialists describe these as *umwelts*, *eigenwelts*, *mitwelts* and *uberwelts*). This (re)(dis)orientation can lead to nausea, fatigue and euphoria in exploring and embracing the spectrality, liminality and ambiguity of our existence. Finding and re-finding (or folding, unfolding and refolding) our orientations sometimes enables us to take up new positions in the world - including creating new ways of describing and defining ourselves and our experiences (these include interactive kinds of categories like neurodivergence and queer).

5. paradoxes arising from (re)(dis)orientations

We discovered that (re)(dis)orientations can give rise to four paradoxical positions. We have described these emerging paradoxes below. As you will read, one is both a paradox and also a position we can take up in relation within our existing-between-worlds.

● **the (un)becoming invalid position/paradox:** many of us have been rendered in-valids within the systems in which we live. Invalid here has the double meaning of both a. being in-valid through the denial of our lived experiences, perceptions and realities, and b. being rendered an 'invalid' through the systemic misrepresentation of our lived experiences, perceptions and realities as being signs or symptoms of psychopathology. In our (re)(dis)orientations we have the potential to both become and (un)become invalid. To (un)become in-valid might mean we; a. (un)make the pathologisation of our lived experiences, perceptions and realities, or to take up the pathologisation in order to become seen as valid in our contexts, and b. become an (un)becoming invalid who transcends, or relates, or acts in ways that continue to be seen as undesirable (*unbecoming*) to our contexts, and yet is also an expression of our liberation, and so a validation of who we are. In the later form, (un)becoming is a mode of becoming unlike

the ways of existing that were deemed valid by people in another world (for example a family or culture of origin), and therefore becoming valid by moving through invalidity.

- **the monstrous liberation paradox:** in our movement-between-worlds we (and others) are confronted by existential horror and terror; the horror in seeing our liminality and the ambiguity of our existence, and the terror of the possibility, liberation and futurity of our deviation from normativity and/or imaginal norms. The horror and terror is monstrous (sometimes to ourselves and sometimes to others), and so we and others move towards or away from our monstrousness (or monstrosity) as our/their courage rises or wanes, or contexts enable or constrict proximity to, or distance from us. Our appearance as monstrous within this paradox might also describe our intentional and unintentional shattering (or disillusioning or disenchanting) of societal, cultural, systemic, familial and personal illusions.

- **the (un)(re)(de)construction paradox:** our ways of moving through existence frequently result in difficult encounters with the social, cultural, collective, and personal constructions and organisations of the worlds we live in. Many of us experience suffering and pain in being confronted by these constructed ideas, ideals, and normativities, and struggle with knowing what do with the visibility of the construction to us. Sometimes we find it disorientating, confusing, and painful not notice, acknowledge and/or express the dissonance between the constructions of our worlds and the ways in which people deny, mystify, marginalise and pathologise what we have encountered. Other times we find it liberating to encounter these constructions, and find ways of un-constructing, de-constructing and re-constructing these ideas, ideals and normativities to uncover and make more visible the foundations and 'perplexities' (here using the double meaning of incomprehensibility and entanglement) of human existence and experience. For some of us, our embodied Being is like a naturalistic breaching experiment (or *a NeuroQueering of contexts*), disclosing the constructions and contradictions contained within them - be this the colour of our skin, the ways we express our gender, the movements we make in the world, or the forms of relating that resonate for us. In this way, some of us embody the paradoxical features of (un)(re)(de)construction through liberation (expanding new possibilities and horizons of human experiencing) and suffering (closing down of worlds and ostracisation).

- **the interdependency paradox:** as humans we are all interdependent and relational beings, and yet we find that our forms of interdependency (emerging through our existence-between-worlds) is pathologised, and deemed by cis/het/neuronormativity as being a weakness, fragility, burden, over-dependence, under-dependence, or over-demand on others.

6. implications for critical psychopathology and psychotherapeutic practice

Having described the philosophical foundations of NQ experiencing, we now turn to tentatively reflect on the implications for an NQ existential-phenomenological approach within the fields of critical psychopathology and psychotherapy. These implications are:

a. **forming and re-forming[3] the therapeutic spaces, communities, relationships. edges and thresholds**: rather than focusing on preserving psychotherapeutic power imbalances and epistemic injustices of 'holding the frame', exploring ways of radically equalising therapeutic communities, relationships and spaces in order for us to encounter and explore movements-between-worlds of experiencing. Within this confronting the edges, thresholds and horizons of possibility contained within human systems, encounters and relationships. This requires humility on the part of the therapist(s), and an openness to the ways in which the alterity of NQ lives and experiences might form and reform the ways in which they practise, and relate to the people.

b. **embracing non-linearity:** enabling NQ peoples to explore, communicate and understand their experiences without a psychotherapeutic requirement or pressure for linearity or retro-causality. In doing so, honouring the liminal qualities of moving-between-worlds and the ways in which NQ people weave, wander-between-worlds, and wonder-between-worlds. We note that some indigenous, spiritual, queer, mad and political cultures share intergenerational and kinship wisdom through non-linear storytelling and/or through the non-linear ritualisations.

c. **navigating queer time-space:** remaining open to a queer orientations in time and space within phenomenological inquiry, psychotherapeutic spaces and relationships. Understanding that NQ temporalities will not follow a normative, chronological framework of biological, personal, social and spiritual development. Likewise, that NQ spatialities may disorientate (or re-orientate) us as psychotherapists as to what we consider to be normative descriptions and/or distinctions of self/other, human/non-human, public/private, healthy/ill, able/disabled, embodied/disembodied, and familial/kinship/community.

d. **inquiring into personal and collective ontographies:** existence and experience unfold through a multitude of interweaving lifeworlds, autobiographical narratives, collective and personal ontographies. An NQ existential-phenomenology would need to explore the (re)(un)development of the person's world-making and world-sustaining ideas and practices in relation to existing-between-worlds, and how they have come to understand existence in relation to these. This would require holding multiple ontographies allowing for emergent pluralities and the plurality of the self, and may include ancestral heritages, collective and kinship ontographies.

e. **situating NQ experiences within the ontology of existing-between-worlds:** this might include finding non-pathologising ways of describing and making sense of encountering liminality. For example, moving from the use of 'meltdowns' and 'overwhelm' to ways of communicating person experiences with being confronted by the immensity of existence, the visceral, sensorial and relational dimensions of being

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[3] We considered using the more existential, phenomenological and queer descriptions of therapeutic spaces - *folding, unfolding, and refolding*. If these resonate more with the reader we would encourage you to use these as an alternative to forming and re-forming.

immersed in a world with human systems, peoples and non-human entities. Drawing upon indigenous and non-pathologising framings of NQ experiences. For example, using the descriptive Māori words for autism (*Takiwātanga* - in our own space and time) and ADHD (*Aroreretini* - we attend to many things), or adapting the Japanese *Oubaitori* (we all grow and bloom at our own pace, and in our own unique ways) to describe so-called neurodevelopmental disorders or learning disabilities.

f. **being open to NQ attunements:** understanding NQ peoples' embodied, visceral and sensorial orientations and experiences to be alternative descriptions of forms, shapes, movements and sounds in the plurality of human existence, rather than regarding them as being misperceptions, malattunements or misunderstandings of normative models of understanding or description.

g. **embracing human entanglement and plurality:** allowing ourselves to be pluralistic in our models of human consciousness, and using these to explore the uncertainties, ambiguities and unpredictabilities that arise from our experiences of human existence and liminality. This may mean staying with multiple and collectivised understandings of human experience and making sense of the entanglements that emerge from our interactions and interdependencies with others. This may also serve to introduce subtly, ambiguity, unknowing and nuance in a world where increasingly NQ subjectivities are polarised, rendered overly-complex or overly-simple, or where fixation, fetishisation and dogma prevail (even where this manifests within our own communities and kinships).

h. **embracing paradoxes:** ensuring we stay with the paradoxical nature of existence (including those named in the descriptions above) and cultivating therapeutic spaces and practices that can safely hold paradoxes and enable people to explore these meaningfully. This will include recognising that NQ-focused psychopathology and psychotherapy is in itself a paradoxical form of inquiry and healing.

i. **honouring the paradoxical value or diagnosis/non-diagnosis:** understanding the solace that can be found in diagnosis or non-diagnosis, and that diagnostic categorisations and identities operate as interactive kinds in that they can be made and remade through the meaningful generation and elaboration of the peoples who are being described. The tensions that arise in diagnosis and non-diagnosis should be understood contextually as ways of making meaning, and finding descriptions of modes of existing that are legible and orientated 'enough' to be understood and comprehended within the constructs of neuronormativity, neurotypicality and cis/heteronormativity.

j. **practising the art of dwelling:** committing to discover and embrace ways of sitting with or alongside, and grounding within the immensity of our existence. Witnessing NQ experiences, lives and personhood as they unfold in the moment. And staying with liminality, plurality, edge-experiences, and the movements-between-worlds to make sense of our interdependencies and human connectedness.

k. **avoiding fixative and curative models of psychotherapy:** ensuring that our practice does not consider NQ experiences or identities to be problematic subjectivities that need to be fixed or cured, or rendered compliant with the social norms, ideas or ideals of the given society, culture, institutional or human system in which we are working. This would include an explicit commitment to end and eliminate inhumane, degrading and torturous treatment through psychiatric, psychology and psychotherapy practice; i.e. in the endorsement or practice of so-called 'conversion' therapies and coercive treatments (i.e. Applied Behavioural Analysis). Recognising that this is an ethical commitment we can make to both end social injustice and systemic prejudice, discrimination, and dehumanisation of NQ peoples and communities.

7. Next steps

We hope that these descriptions and explorations will be of use to those focusing on renewing phenomenological psychopathology, and more broadly working in the queer and neurodivergent communities. By way of reminder, this is a tentative offering and the first full synthesis of our collective work, so we welcome any reflections, comments and suggestions readers may have (*see correspondence above*). Our hope is that we will be able to continue to develop the descriptions and ideas in this paper, with the possibility of creating an ezine, which would include more creative content and lived experience.

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