

# Disrupting norms of time and talk: Email interviews as a neurodivergent-affirming method for ethical and rich qualitative research

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## Abstract

This article challenges the marginal status of email interviews in qualitative research. It argues that neuro-normative assumptions underpin prevailing ideals of ‘good’ research, privileging qualities aligned with neurotypical modes of interaction. Such qualities include verbal, real-time communication and bodily co-presence. Drawing on an interpretative phenomenological analysis study with women diagnosed in adulthood with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), this article challenges these neuro-conventions of research. It argues that email interviews enabled embodied engagement and disrupted normative temporalities by allowing participants to regulate sensory environments and engage on their own terms, in their own time. The asynchronous and written format of email interviews facilitated participant agency, supported their well-being, and enabled reflexivity for both participant and researcher. This produced rich, authentic data and enabled ethical research practices grounded in autonomy, beneficence, and justice. Reframing email interviews as a neurodivergent-affirming method, this article highlights their potential as a robust, inclusive and theoretically generative approach within qualitative research.

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## Keywords

qualitative research, email interviews, online methods, rigour, neurodiversity, inclusive methods

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked renewed interest in online data collection methods due to their adaptability and accessibility. Yet, email interviews, although utilised in qualitative research for over two decades, are often viewed as a supplementary or second-choice method compared to verbal interviews. A common critique of email interviews is that the method negatively impacts on the quality of data produced, with the lack of bodily and verbal cues increasing the risks of misinterpretation and inauthenticity (Benford and Standen, 2011; Bowker and Tuffin, 2004; Gibson, 2017; Meho, 2006). I argue that this perspective is underpinned by neuro-normative assumptions about what constitutes ‘good’ research, privileging neurotypical ways of communicating and closing down possibilities for inclusive research.

In their discussion of email interviews and social media analysis, Lynch and Mah (2018: 749) note the need for ‘a conceptual shift away from the view that only certain research methodologies can be rigorous or authentic’. In this article, I demonstrate how using email interviews in an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study exploring women’s experiences of adulthood autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (‘AuDHD’) diagnoses enhanced research quality. Drawing on my reflections as a neurodivergent researcher and participants’ words throughout the research process, I reveal how email interviews produced rich, authentic data. Furthermore, the method created the conditions necessary to enact the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice that are foundational in healthcare research and practice (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001). The method invoked *crip time* (Kafer, 2013), disrupting normative temporalities by supporting participation at a pace aligned with individual needs. It also enabled embodied engagement through allowing participants to regulate their sensory environment. Email interviews had a positive impact on participants and the researcher. Therefore, I argue that email interviews are a neurodivergent-affirming method that is not only inclusive but also emancipatory in opening up possibilities for research that embodies and celebrates neurodivergent ways of thinking and being.

To begin with, I provide a brief definition of neurodiversity. I then provide an overview of email interviews’ strengths and limitations, before discussing the limited literature about using email interviews with autistic participants, to which this article contributes. The methods section details the wider research project this article draws on, outlining the processes I carried out with a focus on conducting email interviews. Findings and discussion explore how email interviews were a neurodivergent-affirming method of data collection that produced trustworthy and authentic data while enabling ethical practices that enacted principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice. Analysis is organised around three overarching themes made possible by the method: *Slow thinking, deep meaning: Reflexivity and*

*temporality in written responses; Freedom to engage: Autonomy and participant well-being; and Rethinking rapport: Co-creating comfort in asynchronous interaction.*

This article makes an original contribution to emerging literature that seeks to dismantle neuro-normative research conventions and provide innovative, inclusive methods for research by and with neurodivergent populations (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson Perry, 2024; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023). It also contributes to feminist disability studies by showing how *crip time* (Kafer, 2013) can be operationalised through methodological practice to support more inclusive and accessible research. Finally, this analysis contributes to posthumanist and materialist accounts of embodiment by showing how online methods can generate grounded, sensory, and situated forms of engagement, challenging the assumption that presence requires physical co-location.

## **Neurodiversity**

Neurodiversity is a social and cultural movement that views neurological differences, such as autism and ADHD, as natural variations of human diversity rather than disorders (Milton, 2020). It advocates for acceptance, inclusion, and the rights of neurodivergent individuals, emphasising unique perspectives while challenging medicalised and pathologising narratives. From the neurodiversity perspective, 'neurotypical' refers to individuals whose neurological development and functioning align with societal norms and expectations. While neurotypicality is not the default or superior standard, our social structures and institutions have been organised by and for neurotypical individuals, leading to the exclusion and disablement of neurodivergent individuals (Chapman, 2023).

Neurodivergent individuals have a unique way of processing information and interacting with the world. Autism can be understood as a natural variation in neurological functioning characterised by differences in sensory processing, social communication, and ways of thinking. Autistic individuals may experience heightened sensitivity to their environment, strong focus on specific interests, and unique patterns of learning and problem-solving. Importantly, autism is a 'spectrum' condition; individuals have varying strengths and challenges. ADHD involves variations in attention regulation, impulsivity, and activity levels often associated with non-linear thinking. It is important to note that adopting a neurodiversity framework does not prevent the recognition of individual impairment or challenges associated with these conditions.

## **Email interviews**

An email interview occurs asynchronously, with the researcher and participant exchanging written communications online (Gibson, 2017; James and Busher, 2006). Interview questions can be sent all together or one at a time, with participants responding in their own time (Gibson, 2017). Despite an increase in the use of email interviewing within qualitative research (Meho, 2006), it is still a relatively under-utilised form of data collection.

Strengths of email interviews include their ability to remove barriers of time, cost and travel that are associated with in-person interviews (Benford and Standen, 2011; Dahlin, 2021; Fritz and Vandermause, 2018; Gibson, 2017; Hawkins, 2018; Meho, 2006). This

widens participation for groups and individuals who may otherwise be excluded from research including disabled people (Benford and Standen, 2011; Bowker and Tuffin, 2004; Hawkins, 2018; Meho, 2006).

Research suggests that many autistic individuals prefer written communication to verbal in-person or telephone communication (Davidson, 2008; Howard and Sedgewick, 2021). Howard and Sedgewick's (2021) survey of 245 autistic adults found communicating in writing reduced anxiety, provided time to think, structure and predictability and enabled control over sensory environment (Howard and Sedgewick, 2021). Therefore, email interviews would seem to be an appropriate data collection method for research with autistic people. Yet, there is limited literature that explores the use of this method with this population; Benford and Standen (2011) and Chapman (2024) are notable exceptions.

### *Using email interviews with autistic participants*

Benford and Standen (2011) used email interviews in their grounded theory study with 19 higher functioning autistic people to explore experiences of the Internet as a communication medium (note, the terminology 'higher functioning' is no longer used). They argue that the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), in this instance, email interviews, has a potentially facilitative role for including autistic people in research by removing aspects of the social environment that could negatively impact interview interactions face-to-face and in-person. Participants widely felt that the Internet helped reduce the social, emotional, and time-related demands of face-to-face communication, as well as its cognitive complexity. This gave them more control over how they communicated and enabled more equal interactions.

The medium of internet communication provided greater space and time for reflection and self-exploration, which was enjoyed by participants and valuable for the research data (Benford and Standen, 2011). The time afforded by email interviews supports introspective thinking (Gibson, 2017; Meho, 2006). The longitudinal aspect of email interviewing enabled both researchers and participants to plan their responses and respond with careful consideration, contributing to richer data. Therefore, email interviews can result in deeper reflective accounts because of the anonymity, comfort and control they afford participants. At the same time, a limitation of the method for researchers was the lengthy timescale involved, with email interviews taking place over a 14-month period, each taking from 6 to 38 weeks to conclude.

Contrary to concerns about the potential negative impact of asynchronous communication, Benford and Standen reported 'the great insights shown by participants in the course of being interviewed, which were often articulated with eloquence, and also showed warmth and humour' (2011: 363). This not only created rich data but also served to challenge the researchers' pre-conceptions about autistic people, although they problematically suggest that in showing such characteristics, participants 'seemed to move away from their autistic identity' (364).

Chapman (2024) conducted 11 email interviews over 6 months to explore autistic women's experiences of victimhood and support. Alongside providing a comprehensive overview of the strengths of email interviews for working with autistic populations,

Chapman (2024) identifies the benefit of email interviews for researching sensitive topics, although ethical considerations need to be made about ensuring the safety of participants from a distance (Chapman, 2024; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). Like Benford and Standen (2011), Chapman (2024) found that the additional time, space, and agency afforded to participants by using email interviews resulted in an enjoyable experience and rich data. They note how ‘written accounts take away the pressure of the neurotypical ping-pong and faster-paced conversations’ (370). With this additional time, space and reduced pressure, participants were able to authentically represent themselves and express their personalities through writing. As Chapman (2024: 370) remarks, ‘written communication may be less natural to neurotypical people but could be fitting for many autistic people’. Despite experiencing similar limitations regarding the additional time required and need to attend to ethical issues regarding data security online, Chapman asserts that the method holds possibilities for making qualitative research more inclusive. They conclude that email interviews were:

an extremely worthwhile method for capturing reflective and vivid personal experiences as written from an individual’s point of view. Flexible in time and space, it passed more control to participants and gave in depth and rich responses about their life experiences.

Email interviews are therefore suited not only to autistic participants but also to in-depth qualitative research focused on individuals’ lived experiences.

Notably, the focus in both studies is autistic people, raising questions about the possibilities of email interviews for other neurodivergent groups. Chapman’s research did include participants with co-occurring dyslexia or ADHD and briefly notes the need for additional reminders for these groups. The current article adds to this small body of literature, by demonstrating the benefits of email interviews for AuDHD participants and researchers. It specifically aims to counter the critiques that email interviews are a lesser method of data collection by demonstrating how the method produced rich, authentic data and enabled ethical research practices that were neurodivergent-affirming. Like Chapman (2024), I am also an ‘insider’ researcher who belongs to the group I am researching: women diagnosed in adulthood with autism and ADHD. Our interventions in this area reflect a shift away from research *on* neurodivergent individuals towards research *with* and *by* neurodivergent individuals (Bertilsson Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry, 2024; Milton, 2020; Pellicano et al., 2022).

## Methods

The following outlines the methodology for the research project that this article uses as a case study of using email interviews. More detail is therefore given about this method, and the article is focused on the researcher and participants’ experiences of using email interviews rather than the findings of the research. For discussion of the main findings, please see Craddock (2024), and Craddock (2025).

### *Research aim*

The research aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of women's lived experiences of receiving a combined diagnosis of autism and ADHD in adulthood.

### *Research questions*

What is it like to be a late-diagnosed woman with autism and ADHD?

How do late-diagnosed women with autism and ADHD make sense of their diagnoses and experiences of both conditions?

### *Approach*

IPA was chosen to deeply explore subjective experiences and understand how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). It has been successfully applied to studies about autistic experiences (Howard et al., 2019; MacLeod, 2019), amplifying underrepresented voices.

Phenomenology, initially developed as a philosophical method for studying consciousness and the essence of experiences, was advanced by Heidegger to emphasise interpretation. Heidegger introduced an intersubjective lens, acknowledging the situated and interpretive nature of knowledge (Smith et al., 2022). Building on Heidegger, Smith developed IPA in the 1990s to explore experiences in the context of individuals' relationships with the world and their efforts to make meaning. IPA is idiographic, focusing on each participant's unique perspective and interpretative, recognising the 'double hermeneutic' process where researchers interpret participants' interpretations of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Though rooted in psychology, IPA's focus on the interaction between participants and their sociopolitical contexts makes it applicable to sociological inquiries, like this one.

### *Sampling*

The study used a purposive sample of six participants, aged 34–55, recruited through online platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and mailing lists. Eligibility required participants to be female, UK-based, and diagnosed with both autism and ADHD in adulthood. The small sample size aligns with IPA's focus on obtaining rich data for in-depth analysis rather than generalisability (Smith et al., 2022).

### *Data collection*

Semi-structured email interviews were conducted, providing participants with flexibility and time for reflection while eliminating social and verbal communication barriers. Participants could choose to receive all questions at once or one at a time. One participant chose to receive all of the questions at once, while the other five received them in batches. The interview guide was co-created and piloted with non-participant autistic ADHD

women. Questions explored their experiences of living with ADHD and autism, the diagnostic process, post-diagnosis reflections, and identity.

I sent participants an email containing the participant information sheet, consent form, and an introduction to myself. These were created following guidelines for researching with autistic populations (Autistica, n.d.). The introduction was two pages with large text and images. On the first page, I included a picture of myself, smiling, with a goat, one of my favourite animals. I chose this picture because I wanted to convey a personable image of myself which I recognised as being especially important given the lack of face-to-face contact. The document opened with the words ‘Hello, my name is Emma’ and proceeded to state ‘I want to give you some information about myself as I know it can be strange speaking to a faceless name behind a screen’. I wanted to address, up front, any possible hesitation and make it clear that I understood the potential unfamiliarity of the situation, which can be especially daunting for autistic individuals. I then provided some brief information about my professional role before explaining that I was diagnosed with autism, ADHD and dyspraxia at the age of 33. I explained how the research emerged from not being able to source any information on this topic when I was diagnosed and wanting to change this.

The second page had images of my pet dog and cat, Taylor Swift, and a purple flower (my favourite colour) with bullet points summarising some personal information about me, such as the characters of my pets, being a ‘Swiftie’ (Taylor Swift fan) and what I do in my spare time – reading, listening to music, watching ‘bad’ reality TV, and cross stitching. I hoped that this would humanise me to the participants and make me more of a tangible person on the other side of the screen, as well as encouraging them to feel comfortable opening up to me. I have used similar techniques at the beginning of teaching classes, albeit face-to-face, and it has helped warm the class to me by ‘breaking the ice’. The inclusion of my pets was a serendipitous strength as it prompted nearly all of the participants to speak about their pets, share pictures, and immediately forged a bond between us over a shared interest and love of animals.

I also sent participants a document titled ‘How does an email interview work’ to provide information about the method and hopefully ease any concerns. This used bullet points and bold text to highlight important information, such as ‘please provide as much detail as you can in your response email’. I reassured participants not to worry about spelling or grammar and to feel free to use emojis and type how they usually would. I gave an expectation of how many main questions would be asked (approximately 8) so that participants knew what to expect and stated that I would make it clear when the final question was asked so they would know their participation in the study had concluded. The provision of this detailed information is a strength as previous research using email interviews with autistic women recommended that future studies set expectations and provide timelines to avoid participant anxieties (Chapman, 2024: 369).

I requested that participants respond within 3 days of receiving an email, even if it was to say they needed extra time, to try and mitigate against the risk of attrition. I also stated that I would respond within 2 days of receiving their emails. Additionally, I said that I would send a reminder e-mail if I did not hear from them within 3 days, a follow-up e-mail reminder 2 days after that, and a final reminder another 2 days later. This was

particularly important given that participants were ADHD as well as autistic, and I was aware from my own experiences that remembering to reply could be challenging. This is reinforced by Chapman (2024) who found that participants with ADHD and/or dyslexia needed more reminders throughout the process. The document also reminded participants of their right to withdraw and that their data would be strictly confidential and anonymised. I ended the document by asking for any questions and thanking them for participation, with a smiling emoji, to again reiterate the relaxed and informal nature of communication allowed.

At the conclusion of the study, I thanked participants for their contributions and shared a resource list I had created of useful information relating to autism, ADHD, and specifically being a woman with these conditions. This was intended to mark the ending of the research and to provide participants with further support, demonstrating an ethics of reciprocity by giving something back to participants, however, small. Participants commented that this was very helpful and gratefully received. Since publishing from and speaking on my research, I have received multiple emails from women reaching out to share their stories, find connection, and seek answers. I now send this resource list to those who contact me.

### *Data analysis*

Transcript lengths varied widely (11–135 pages), which required significant follow-up and researcher effort, a limitation of the method also recognised by Chapman (2024). IPA analysis was conducted one transcript at a time using a five-step process (Smith et al., 2022):

1. **Familiarisation:** I repeatedly read the transcript to immerse myself in the participant's perspective.
2. **Exploratory Notes:** I generated detailed notes on content, language, and semantic meaning. For example, a participant referring to 'my ADHD brain' was noted as suggesting a perception of ADHD as separate from their core self.
3. **Experiential Statements:** I synthesised exploratory notes into concise interpretations, capturing both the participant's meaning and my reflections.
4. **Clustering Statements:** I identified patterns across experiential statements to form personal experiential themes (PETs), which are descriptive titles reflecting key insights ('Life in all honesty has been a bit of a roller coaster').
5. **Cross-Case Analysis:** Finally, I compared PETs across participants to develop group experiential themes (GETs) and subthemes. For instance, 'Being a woman is 100% significant to my experiences of ADHD and autism'.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained from Birmingham City University's Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences Ethics Committee. Participants provided written informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity. A feminist ethic of care guided the researcher-participant relationship, and a reflexive journal supported transparency.

Reflexivity helped navigate the balance between shared experiences and maintaining an open focus on participants' perspectives. Emotional impacts of the research were managed through intentional pacing of the research process.

Using email interviews requires paying careful attention to data security and participant confidentiality, as written communication creates a persistent digital trace. In this study, ethical standards were upheld by anonymising transcripts, using an encrypted, password-protected OneDrive email account for correspondence, and securely storing data on an institutionally approved encrypted platform. Emails were deleted upon completion of data collection. Participants could also be encouraged to use non-identifiable email addresses where possible, reducing the likelihood of linking responses to personal accounts. These practices align with established guidance on digital data management and confidentiality in online research (British Psychological Society, 2021).

### *Limitations*

Socio-economic factors shape the accessibility of methods like email interviews, which excludes those with limited internet access. I intended to mitigate against this by using WhatsApp for data collection, as people might have access to a phone with data if not an email account or computer. However, my institution's data governance policies did not allow this. To ensure inclusivity in future research, researchers might want to consider combining email interviews with other data collection methods, although this needs to be carefully planned.

The research underpinning this article aimed to develop a rich and detailed understanding of women's experiences of receiving an autism and ADHD diagnosis in adulthood. As such, the study did not include specific questions about the use of email interviews; instead, the data presented here emerged organically as part of the broader research process. This provides authentic and naturally occurring insights, although it also results in some participants' voices being represented more prominently than others.

Additional limitations include the homogeneity of the all-white sample and the UK-specific focus. A rising sphere of literature challenges the colonial and Western-centric foundations of research traditions by centring decolonial and Indigenous knowledge systems (Smith, 1999). These perspectives critique methodologies like IPA, which are rooted in Western and individualist paradigms, for perpetuating cultural violence and ignoring communal and relational forms of knowledge (Adams et al., 2020). While IPA's emphasis on the individual aligns with its psychological origins, applying a sociological lens helps to address some of these critiques by situating participants' experiences within their broader cultural and social contexts. Future research should consider more diverse perspectives, include self-diagnosed individuals, and explore experiences outside the UK context.

### **How email interviews provide a neurodivergent-affirming method for producing rich and ethically grounded data**

The following analysis weaves together participant words and my own researcher reflections to explore how email interviews created space for slow, reflective thinking;

supported participant autonomy and emotional well-being; and fostered comfort and connection in the absence of physical co-presence. These interrelated dynamics not only generated rich, authentic data, but also constituted a neurodivergent-affirming approach to qualitative research. Alongside these strengths, I reflect critically on the challenges and limitations of the method, offering a nuanced and grounded account of its potential.

### *Slow thinking, deep meaning: reflexivity and temporality in written responses*

Email interviews encouraged in-depth responses by providing participants with time to process and refine their thoughts. This additional time to think and using written text helps autistic people to avoid neurotypical conventions of communication that can be stressful and confusing (Chapman, 2024; Davidson, 2008). This is especially important for neurodivergent individuals who experience different processing styles and speeds. Having a written record of what has been said helped to overcome challenges with executive functioning and memory. April notes 'I have gone back previously to see what I said' and then builds on this, providing additional layers of meaning, as opposed to repeating what was previously said. This iterative process – reflecting on the question, formulating a response, and then reflecting on that response before addressing subsequent questions – generated rich, layered data characteristic of trustworthy and rigorous qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2022; Tracy, 2010).

Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of email interviews led to a level of introspection that would be difficult to achieve in real-time, in-person interviews, reinforcing Benford and Standen's (2011) and Chapman's (2024) findings. Participants were able to revisit their responses and add details, resulting in a fuller, more complex picture of their experiences and challenges. For example, Juliette noted:

I missed something important off that list! Which is, of course, that ADHD can be treated with medication whereas autism can't.

Email interviews captured the complexities of participants' experiences and enabled a detailed exploration of each participant's unique and contextualised experience.

The method fostered participant agency and challenged the conventional hierarchical divide between researcher/analyst and participant, enabling participants to move from passive subjects to active co-constructors of meaning. Participants engaged in a double hermeneutic process of interpreting their own experiences while also reflecting on my interpretations, becoming co-analysts alongside the researcher. The written format produced a text that was simultaneously separate from, produced by, and connected to both reader and author, allowing for a more dialogic and relational form of meaning-making.

As a neurodivergent researcher, I found email interviews offered a more collaborative and accessible approach to interpretation and data (co)construction than verbal interviews. I had time to engage more iteratively with the data during the collection process and to involve participants in shaping the direction and depth of analysis, rather than interpreting a transcript once the participant was no longer present. Likewise, Chapman (2024: 367) describes 'thinking deeply about what the data was saying, whilst using this to help shape

ongoing interviews; something which would not be as easily implemented in more traditional, face-to-face interviewing', embracing the flexible, responsive potential of qualitative research. This approach aligns with feminist and neurodivergent-affirming research principles that value reflexivity, relational ethics, and the redistribution of power in knowledge production. Email interviews enhanced the quality of the research by allowing me to stay close to participants' lived experiences during interpretation, and by actively inviting participant feedback and collaboration (Smith, 2022).

The opportunity to engage in ongoing dialogue with participants enhanced the credibility and authenticity of the data, as I was able to reflect my interpretations back to them to check if they resonated. For example, 'This is really interesting. It also suggests there is a burden on you to educate others; do you feel that way or have I got that wrong?' (Researcher). In this way, the method allowed for integrated member-checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This avoided misinterpretation of participants' narratives as seeing their thoughts written down enabled participants to reflect on the impression that they were giving and to ensure that it accurately reflected their experiences, as April demonstrates:

Wow – this is all so negative isn't it. Surprisingly, I am for once in my life not depressed, not demotivated / down. I have to put a lot of this down to being able to have an explanation for all of the above which allows me to be a little more self-accepting.

It was important for April to be able to emphasise that despite the challenges she discussed, her diagnoses had had a positive impact on her life, and she was now experiencing self-compassion and acceptance. Without this clarification, it could have been possible to interpret April's narrative as solely negative. This reinforces existing research about the strengths of email interviews for allowing both parties to seek clarification of meaning in follow-up communications, if required (Benford and Standen, 2011; Gibson, 2017; Meho, 2006). It can often be difficult to assess the resonance of findings until after the research is completed and disseminated. Using email interviews enabled me to check my findings were on the right lines and to engage more fully with the co-interpretative nature of IPA, producing authentic and credible findings that represent participants' realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

An unexpected benefit of the added layer of reflection and processing time afforded by email interviews was that it enabled the research to capture the complexities of negotiating one's identity, thoughts and feelings post-diagnosis in adulthood. By revealing changing views over time, the data provided a fuller picture of participants' lived, temporal, experiences. April reflects this:

Apologies [researcher], this time it's not just been memory but really trying to think this through as I feel my mind is often changing at the moment!

As April's response suggests, a potential drawback of this method, and the longitudinal reflection it encourages, is that some participants may disengage from the process if they find it overwhelming. This may stem from becoming more aware of contradictions

in their thinking or feeling unable to articulate a clear response, which could lead to a perception that their contribution lacks value. This occurred with one individual. I ensured they received appropriate follow-up information and were signposted to support. Nonetheless, it raises the possibility that those who were struggling more with their diagnoses may be underrepresented in the research.

Furthermore, the volume of written content may be overwhelming for some participants which could result in non-participation or superficial responses. To mitigate against this, I followed participants' lead in managing the conversations, like Chapman (2024). Some responses, such as Juliette's, were very detailed, lengthy and conversational. Others, such as Amelia's, were more concise. Amelia structured her written narrative by focusing on key life moments – her childhood, the birth of her grandchild, and her diagnosis – using terms like 'fast forward' and paragraphing to indicate shifts in time. Unlike others, she opted to receive all questions at once. This may have reduced conversational back-and-forth but still enabled her to craft a comprehensive narrative. Therefore, length of response was not necessarily an indicator of quality of response. Moreover, the written format created space for participants to create a structured narrative reflecting the key points of their journeys.

Providing multiple ways of conducting the email interview and encouraging participants to take ownership over the process perhaps reduced the likelihood of overwhelm. Moreover, verbal interviews are not immune to superficial responses, and it is possible that the artificial nature and added pressure of the face-to-face interview setting could hinder participants' ability to speak openly, increasing the risk of limited responses. It is likely that those who volunteered to participate in the project were comfortable with written communication and less likely to be overwhelmed. Sharing detailed information with potential participants and engaging in initial conversation over email helped to include participants who were comfortable with the method.

Indeed, participants appeared comfortable and confident in using email interviews, which enabled them to actively seek further information when needed. For example, April says 'the question feels a bit broad and I'm not sure really, more narrow questions would help'. While it is positive that April felt comfortable to communicate her needs, this type of clarification would arguably be better in synchronous face-to-face interviews where any misunderstandings can be clarified immediately. This potential drawback of the asynchronicity of email interviews was also highlighted by Meredith who stated 'I'm not entirely sure how to answer this question; whether it refers to my whole life or just since diagnosis'. The time lag of emails does mean that this checking can be delayed which could risk stunting the natural conversational tone and progression of the process (Chapman, 2024).

However, it could also be argued that individuals would not feel as comfortable to challenge the researcher in person, nor have the required processing and reflection time to recognise possible misinterpretations. Therefore, it is likely that, contrary to popular critique, email interviews are less likely to cause misinterpretation than face-to-face interviews. Overall, the benefits of additional time for processing and reflecting were evident, reinforcing Benford and Standen's (2011) and Chapman's (2024) experiences of using email interviews with autistic participants.

### *Freedom to engage: autonomy and participant well-being*

Email interviews enhanced ethical research practices by challenging the hierarchical power imbalance between the researcher and researched, in line with feminist research principles. While it would be naïve to suggest that the method entirely removed such imbalances as the researcher has ultimate control over what is produced, it did enable participants to take control over pacing, structure, and the depth of their responses. Margaret makes a request of the researcher: ‘I need to think about this, please could you put it in the next batch of questions?’ Similarly, April suggested that ‘I can add more later if you give me a nudge and resend later please’. This ability to take ownership over the pace of the research process was one way email interviews supported participant autonomy. This autonomy allowed them to reflect deeply and articulate their needs, creating a respectful, collaborative research environment.

The method allowed participants to participate on their own terms without the constraints of in-person interaction. Barriers such as verbal demands, sensory overload, travel, planning, and time pressures were removed, increasing accessibility (Benford and Standen, 2011; Chapman, 2024). A particular benefit for neurodivergent individuals was the ability to control their sensory environment, which can otherwise contribute to discomfort and depleted energy levels. Participants managed their energy and pace, deciding when to pause or end an exchange:

hmm I am running out of steam now ... could you possible send these latter ones again later?  
(April)

I am going to sign off now. (Margaret)

Although breaks can be offered during in-person interviews, individuals may feel uncomfortable asking for them, and they also might not be in a location where they can rest and replenish. Asynchronous communication reduces pressure to meet the researcher’s time-scale and instead allows participants to direct the rhythm and depth of their responses according to their needs, actively shaping the interview process. In this respect, the method invokes the concept of ‘crip time’ (Kafer, 2013), where time is flexed to meet the needs, rhythms, and capacities of disabled and neurodivergent individuals, rather than expecting them to conform to normative temporal frameworks. Instead of placing the burden on participants to adapt, this approach reconfigures time itself as responsive and relational. It both exposes and resists the often-unquestioned expectation that disabled and neurodivergent people should mould themselves to neurotypical standards of communication, productivity, and presence.

Of course, there are practical constraints to consider as data collection cannot go on indefinitely; however, the researcher provided clear guidance at the start of the process of when check-ins and reminders for responses would be sent. Participants also communicated openly with the researcher about any challenges or time demands. Similarly, Chapman (2024) found that using email interviews with autistic women improved participant experiences by encouraging agency and providing a supportive environment for

meaningful participation. The autonomy afforded by email interviews enhanced the trustworthiness of the research findings by enabling the researcher to remain deeply attuned to participants' needs and perspectives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Smith, 2022).

Additionally, the method opened up the possibility for reflective insights or 'aha' moments by providing participants with space and time to express and reflect on their thoughts and emotions. April demonstrates:

I am only just now thinking about this in an aha moment but it hasn't always been so much I'm not as good as X or Y, it is more I seem to hold this underlying belief that the person I am talking to will at least know as much as me. And the aha is this lack of theory of mind lol.

Here, writing sparked further realisations for April. The use of 'lol' perhaps signifies the vulnerability she feels in this realisation and an attempt to minimise this.

These reflective insights often had a meaningful impact, with some participants reporting new self-understandings or even taking actions as a result, such as seeking additional support, like Juliette:

Just after writing this, I decided to be proactive and searched for this form of support online! I've just filled out an application form for career coaching sessions.

I took a break from writing this response and have just discussed the issue of disability with my psychologist. She thought it might be a good idea to see what additional support I can get when I'm out and about, so I've actually just ordered a sunflower lanyard and personalised card! [markers of invisible disabilities to signal to others that an individual has accessibility needs]

Therefore, participants experienced the interview process as more than data collection; it became a form of personal exploration and growth. As such, email interviews created the conditions necessary for a more ethical research process that goes beyond the principle of 'do no harm' to actively do good, or 'beneficence' (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001). Participating in the research encouraged participants to advocate for their neurodiversity-related needs. Specific to email interviews, this was enabled by the longitudinal process and by the action of writing thoughts and feelings down, seeing them, and reflecting on their responses. Similarly, the autistic women who participated in Chapman's (2024) research compared the email interview process to journalling and noted its therapeutic benefits.

### *Rethinking rapport: co-creating comfort in asynchronous interaction*

The medium of written online communication provided opportunities for participants to harness emojis, punctuation, and humour as stylistic devices to convey their perspectives and experiences. April explained her use of punctuation to communicate her thoughts more clearly:

Sorry, I use a lot of inverted commas ... to try and convey I am not fully advocating some of these terms ... i.e., 'ADHD is a medical condition and can be treated with medicine' – (meaning

this very loosely) whereas ‘I am autistic – hmm, people will think I am weird’. Hope this does not offend you – this is my thought processes I have been experiencing!

April also displays an awareness here of the intersubjectivity between herself and the researcher and a concern that her response might be offensive. This is possibly a drawback of email interviews in that the participant lacks nonverbal cues from the researcher to indicate how they are feeling. However, non-verbal social cues tend to not be conveyed or read in the same way by autistic people as by neurotypical people. Therefore, while a lack of such cues might be a limitation for neurotypical researchers and participants, this might not be the case here (Chapman, 2024). In fact, April expressed a preference for written communication because it allowed her to speak more freely.

In combination with the removal of social, physical and verbal barriers, a shared online language produced a neurodivergent-affirming atmosphere and built rapport between participants and the researcher. For Chloe, this enabled her to be more explicit about negative experiences without needing to explore them in depth, potentially preventing harm:

but suffice it to say that what I first thought was depression, then later depression + anxiety, actually turned out to be complex-PTSD, from multiple long-running traumas. Yay.

Like Chloe, April used humour to call attention to the interview situation – breaking the ‘fourth wall’ and signalling her initial unease with a question about whether she considered herself to have a disability or be disabled: ‘That’s a bit deep! What is this, some kind of research interview?! Lol’. This functioned as an icebreaker that allowed her to explore her complex thoughts and feelings around the topic of disability.

The rapport built between the researcher and participants within this online space is further revealed by the care and generosity that participants showed towards the researcher. This was reflective of a more equal relationship than the traditional hierarchical researcher/researched binary. For example, when recounting a traumatic event in her life, April asserted that ‘I am absolutely fine and it does not trigger me to relay this’. April’s reassurance about her mental state reveals an implicit awareness of and compensation for the lack of bodily cues. Participants’ generosity was also demonstrated by Meredith thanking the researcher ‘for such interesting and thought-provoking questions’. Aside from being a marker of rapport, this comment illustrates how these interactions contributed to a positive participant experience.

Email interviews provided the conditions not only for fuller participation but also for me as a neurodivergent researcher to harness my skills and communicate in a mutually preferred way. Milton’s (2012) ‘double empathy’ problem identifies how autistic people have been blamed for communication challenges with neurotypical people. In response, he highlights that autistic people communicate well with each other and that the issue is cross-neurotype communication rather than autistic people’s communication ‘deficits’. The use of email interviews reinforced this, reflecting how neurodivergent people have different styles and strengths in communication that, when matched, can be extremely fruitful. By communicating in a medium that I and the participants were more

comfortable with, rapport was built, and I was able to create a safe and respectful environment for participants to discuss sensitive topics. This, in turn, resulted in authentic, rich data and an ethical research process that minimised risk to participants.

## **Implications for neurodivergent research**

This article contributes to the growing body of work that challenges neuro-normative research conventions and develops neurodivergent-affirming approaches (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry, 2024). By moving away from dominant, neurotypical modes of communication, email interviews enact the ethical principle of justice – treating participants equitably by recognising and accommodating difference. The method also aligns with the principle of beneficence, not only yielding rich, meaningful data but also positively impacting participants' well-being. By removing sensory, verbal, and social barriers to participation, email interviews enabled participants to share their experiences on their own terms. The flexibility and autonomy embedded in the method supported participants to express themselves freely, explore complex emotions, and reflect deeply, illustrating a neurodivergent-affirming approach that is both ethically grounded and methodologically robust.

Written and asynchronous methods are often critiqued as disembodied, lacking the immediacy, affective cues, and physical co-presence typically valorised in qualitative research. These critiques reflect normative, neurotypical and ableist assumptions about what counts as 'authentic' or 'rich' interaction. Yet, the experiences of participants in this study highlighted how email interviews were materially and sensorily grounded. They enabled participants to regulate sensory input, manage energy, and engage with the research process in ways that honoured their embodied needs. This challenges critiques of written methods and expands current understandings of embodiment, building on feminist materialist perspectives.

Concerns have been raised about authenticity in online methods due to the risk of imposter participants (Pellicano et al., 2023). While this is a serious issue that demands attention, I suspect that the vulnerability, depth, and self-reflection shown in these email interviews would not have emerged in face-to-face settings, where verbal, sensory, and social demands can act as barriers. Email interviews encourage autistic participants to unmask by creating space for them to express their authentic selves, reflecting a truer representation of their reality (Chapman, 2024). While written methods may feel less intuitive for neurotypical researchers or participants, they may be well-suited to neurodivergent individuals. Therefore, we must find ways of minimising the risk of fraudulent participants without excluding accessible, asynchronous methods.

This method was also beneficial for me as a neurodivergent researcher. Although email interviews required more time and labour, an issue also raised by Chapman (2024), they allowed me to engage more reflectively and relationally. Based on my previous experiences of conducting interviews across formats, this approach enabled me to harness my interpretive strengths, demonstrate care and empathy, and build rapport. As an autistic person who finds verbal communication challenging, email created a space where both I and the participants could communicate more

comfortably. It is possible that greater rapport was built than would have been possible via in-person verbal interactions. The medium seemed to support reciprocity and care, resulting in more equal relationships than the conventional researcher/researched dynamic.

Although there were limitations, including time lags and the labour-intensive nature of the method for the researcher, these were far outweighed by the benefits. The longitudinal nature of email interviews not only generated authentic, nuanced data but also allowed insight into how participants' understandings of their diagnoses evolved over time. This provided a fuller picture of the ongoing process of making sense of adulthood diagnoses, producing findings that resonated deeply with participants and are potentially transferable to similar contexts.

By embracing 'crip time' (Kafer, 2013) – bending the clock to fit the bodymind – email interviews disrupt conventional research temporalities, enacting a neurodivergent-affirming approach. As Kafer (2013) argues, accessibility is not a neutral or technical fix but a relational and political practice that reconfigures whose bodies, rhythms, and modes of knowing are centred and valued. A commitment to neurodivergent-affirming research demands that we challenge whose ways of engaging are centred, and whose are overlooked.

Research is always shaped by its cultural and contextual boundaries, and it is crucial not to universalise Eurocentric frameworks. Future research should explore the applicability of email interviews across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, particularly in non-Western settings where cultural perceptions of neurodivergence may differ significantly. Calls to decolonise research methods emphasise creating flexible and participant-driven processes. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) highlights, decolonial research prioritises participant autonomy and non-linear narratives, both of which are facilitated by asynchronous communication. Interdisciplinary collaboration that integrates decolonial and Indigenous research perspectives could further challenge the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks, creating more inclusive and relational ways of conducting neurodivergent research.


Researchers should also explore alternative neurodivergent-affirming methods, including visual, creative, and arts-based approaches, to capture the experiences of neurodivergent individuals who may not prefer written communication. Finally, it must be remembered that neurodivergent individuals are diverse, and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach should be avoided. Therefore, researchers must carefully work with participants to consider whether email interviews are a suitable method of data collection for their purposes.

In conclusion, email interviews challenge dominant assumptions about embodiment, communication, and temporality in qualitative research. In doing so, they reveal the implicit neuro-conventions that underpin ideals of 'good' research. In response, email interviews offer a neurodivergent-affirming approach that is ethically grounded, methodologically rigorous, and epistemologically expansive. By centring participant needs and rethinking the norms of qualitative engagement, this method opens up more inclusive futures for qualitative inquiry.

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## Informed consent

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