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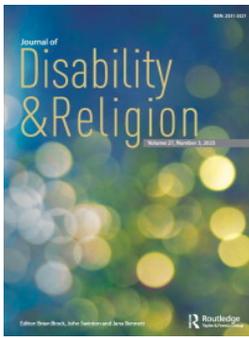
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The Impossible Subject: Belonging as a Neurodivergent in Congregations

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ABSTRACT

Neurodivergent people have been reported in academic literature to not always feel a sense of belonging within church congregations. Previous scholarship has highlighted that some neurodivergent people may be stigmatized and/or excluded within congregational settings. However little attention has been paid to how neurodivergent people belong within congregations, especially from a neurodivergent perspective. Using an autoethnographic methodology, I interrogate my own personal narrative of belonging within congregational spaces. I blended Goffman's social stigma theory and Scambler's theorization of social stigma to examine a neurodivergent experience within church congregations, and to explore the interface between being neurodivergent and feeling a sense of belonging in a church congregation. This autoethnography highlights how impression management (particularly passing and masking) are central to the feelings of belonging, and lack of belonging, I experienced. How church is "done" also appears to influence feelings of belonging, with norms in the churches mentioned in the narrative often shaped by normalcy.

KEYWORDS

Belonging; church; congregation; neurodiversity; normalcy; stigma

Introduction

I wasn't gently placed on the margins, I questioned and struggled being placed there. (Waldock, 2021)

Scholars have argued that both theological reflection (van Ommen, 2022a; van Ommen & Endress, 2022) and social scientific inquiry (Waldock & Sango, 2023) focusing on autism and church is a recent phenomenon. There is also a lack of papers in this field informed by the neurodiversity paradigm. The central aim of this paper is to present an autoethnographic account of belonging in church congregations from a neurodivergent perspective. As an openly Autistic and disabled scholar, I firmly believe that marginalized voices within discourses can unveil both further directions

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for research and inquiry, but also present us with theological ponderings to further deepen our understanding of the disabled God (Eiesland, 1994). The research question framing this study is: What is the interface between being neurodivergent and feeling a sense of belonging in a Church congregation?

The means in which I present my narrative is inspired by both Javaid (2020) and Spies (2021). I used both pieces as seminar texts for my first-year undergraduate students in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics to introduce the concept of social stigma within religious contexts and cultures for people with marginalized and oppressed identities. To date, a lack of work has been undertaken on the interface of neurodivergent identity and belonging within religious contexts, and the impact of a religious context upon how neurodivergent people perceive themselves. Past work has emphasized the importance of neurodivergent identity as a lens to understand church contexts (Jacobs, 2022; Waldock, 2021). The social and cultural experience of being neurodivergent within congregational contexts is unique from other social groups (such as sports groups) due to the theology that underpins the purpose of gathering and in some ways, unites congregants. Insider knowledge of this cultural landscape through a neurodivergent lived experience lens can shed more light on the lived reality of being neurodivergent within congregations, and how belonging is experienced.

I will use both Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory and Scambler's (2004) reframing of stigma through differentiation between felt and enacted stigma as lenses to observe and understand how my neurodivergent body, brain and identity interact with other congregants. Despite churchgoers all being one in Christ (Romans 12:5), prejudicial attitudes have been discovered within churches in relation to autism, with Autistic bodies and brains being stigmatized (Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020). How disabled people (including neurodivergent people) have been viewed and understood by the church has changed over time, ranging from witchcraft (Kramer & Sprenger, 1928/1971, p. 45), a blessing (Frith, 2003, p. 22), the devil (Miles, 2001) or a gift (Moltmann, 1998, p. 120). Goffman further supports the theoretical framing of prejudicial attitudes by arguing that individuals without a stigma¹ perceive individuals with a stigma as "not quite human" (1963, p. 15). In this manner, neurodivergent bodies and brains are problematized through stigma being an ontological deficit (Scambler, 2009). Social stigma theory is an appropriate lens through which to further explore belonging, as Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 13) and disqualifies the individual from full social acceptance (p. 19). Social acceptance has been reported by some neurodivergent people as central to feelings of belonging using focus groups (Waldock et al., 2021), but also more broadly in the wider

neurodiverse population (Leary, 2010; Pardede et al., 2020). Specifically within a congregational context, Carter and colleagues (2016) outline acceptance as one of their ten dimensions to belonging for Autistic people and people with an intellectual disability under the broader field of “relational depth.”

One further aspect that strengthens social stigma theory as a framework to understand neurodivergent belonging in congregations is the importance placed on interaction and relationships. Goffman (1963, p. 24) himself focuses on what he calls “mixed contacts” (contact and interaction between someone who is not stigmatized and someone who is stigmatized). Compensation strategies employed by those who are stigmatized, such as passing and masking, occur within social environments and relationships (Miller et al., 2021; Radulski, 2022). A variety of studies have focused on how neurodivergent people (in particular Autistic people; Sedgewick et al., 2021) may utilize masking and passing to navigate having a “discreditable”² identity and gain social acceptance. Church congregations are composed of people and therefore inherently based upon a social setting, and interpersonal contact and relationships. In addition, Scambler (2004) differentiates between felt and enacted stigma. Scambler (2009) defines felt stigma as the sense of shame and fear of experiencing enacted stigma, whilst enacted stigma refers to overt discrimination based on recognition of a stigmatized identity. Felt and enacted stigma are of particular importance in understanding both my own account of belonging as a neurodivergent person, and more broadly, as belonging is not necessarily externally visible.

Belonging in churches

Language in relation to belonging in congregations, alike within the academic literature, can be imprecise and nebulous. Particular focus in this case is given to the frequent usage of “welcome” within congregations by church leadership to refer to aspects of belonging and inclusion. I notably differentiate between belonging and welcome, without proper interrogation of exactly how similar, or dissimilar they are, further imprecision of terms can occur. Ann Memmott argues for a differentiation of the two terms, with belong seen as somewhat stronger than welcome as she states:

Notice the word I used.

Belong.

Not ‘welcome’.

Belong. (Memmott, 2019)

Memcott's (2019) assertion identifies belonging as bidirectional and intersubjective (echoing Mahar et al., 2013) rather than a performance of welcome, which could be interpreted in some contexts. Carter and colleagues (2016) also differentiate between "welcome" and "belonging" with "welcome" as one subdomain within the broader concept of belonging and other elements such as befriending and acceptance necessary for belonging to occur. Carter and colleagues (2016) also differentiate between being present and having a presence (i.e., interactional depth, friendship) within a congregation for Autistic people and people with an intellectual disability. In spaces where I have been able to come as I am and valued within, not merely welcomed, placated and expected to meet norms, authentic feelings of belonging have developed.

Biblical exploration of belonging emphasizes the bidirectional and intersubjective nature of belonging, going beyond notions of "welcome." A relational dynamic with humans belonging to God is present (Isaiah 44:5; Psalm 100:3; Romans 14:8) and more specifically the body of Christ (Galatians 3:28; Romans 12:5). Furthermore humankind has been described as being made "all in God's image" (Genesis 1:27), illustrating the relational dynamic between humanity and God, and this is furthered with "for where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). In this light, some may perhaps argue belonging to be at the center of Christian teachings, both in relation to how humankind is one with God, and however we may gather, God is described to be with us. These ideas demonstrate conflict between Biblical discussion and the language churches use, and therefore how we "do church."

Methods

Autoethnographers have argued that writing helps us make sense of the world and the events that happen to us (Ellis et al., 2011). Therefore a sensemaking exercise is deeply entangled with who I am as a researcher, who I am as a person and the lenses through which I see things. By using my own story as an Autistic person who used to attend church, I hope to be able to illuminate an experience of being neurodivergent within a congregation. I will pay particular attention to the "coming out" of my neurodivergent identity within a congregational space when I attended churches in person. It also impacts and shapes the social research I do, and the research questions I ask (Holman Jones, 2016).

Data generation and analysis

After refining my research question and theoretical framework in November 2021, I started collecting memories of my own experiences within churches

throughout my life. As someone who attended church regularly until a few years ago, this meant capturing as much as I could remember throughout my churchgoing experiences. It is understood that memories are perhaps viewed with suspicion in regards to their objectivity and reality, however this paper is interested in how I make sense of my lived experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Through capturing memories, I allowed all memories to be noted so I could be intentional with what to highlight within my analysis (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022) and compose my story, given storymaking has been described as composition (Bochner, 2017, p. 74).

During March and April 2023, I familiarized myself with my story, then ‘smoothed’ it by placing it in chronological order and removing repetitions where they existed. Next I considered the overall plot and any mini stories and plots within the main story, notably the story that occurred within each church. I sought the critical incidents within the larger story and within each mini story, and compared them. This allowed me to see if there were indeed any similarities or differences within the turning points of my story. I then focused on these critical incidents and considered them in light of both Goffman’s and Scambler’s theoretical frameworks. I “zoomed in and out” (as described by Anderson, 2020) to explore and recognize links between my story and the broader cultural context, both within churches, and of neurodivergent people (Chang, 2008).

Ethical considerations

Being an Autistic and disabled scholar, these are experiences I use to help me make sense of the world around me. Being Autistic is a lens I see the world through—it is inextricable from who I am. As being Autistic is a “developmental phenomenon” (Walker, 2021), I have never known any other perspective or existence, even if I was not aware of exactly “what” this perspective is. My theological standpoint is also a significant consideration both within my positionality and my ongoing reflexivity. I hold beliefs in line with liberation theology (Gutiérrez, 1973). I view all of humanity as made in God’s own image (Genesis, 1:27) and diversity as necessary (Galatians, 3:28). Being reflexive allows the lenses and perspectives my data filtered through to be made clear. Being Autistic for me is not a negative thing, however I do not subscribe to the “Autism as superpower” narrative, nor that being Autistic is a gift. It just is—a neutral identifier with connotations embroiled in stigma and othering due to societal attitudes and structures. The beliefs I hold frame how I understand and view other people within and outside of congregations, seeing everyone as having inherent value. Bringing these lenses to redescribe my story means the story I tell is not the same perhaps as it happened (Bochner, 2017), or as others would tell it. As Bochner (2017) argues, ‘my memory

of events is my memory now; it is what I remember now, not what I knew then' (p. 73).

Throughout the writing of this paper, I confronted many times feelings of unease and discomfort. Am I disclosing too much? Am I comfortable sharing what I am sharing? Is this a story that should be told? As Ellis (2007) states, this question is often one that underpins personal narratives. Questions in previous autoethnographic studies have raised this possibility, including harm to career trajectory (Rambo, 2016). I made the decision that this is a story to share, given its topicality. I am in a position of privilege and power within academia that I can access means of disseminating scholarly works, and that my voice could be taken more seriously than my practitioner and nonacademic colleagues. Although I could risk being a “self-narrating zoo exhibit” in the words of Jim Sinclair (Waltz, 2013), I believe through the power I hold that the neurodivergent voice needs to be added to conversations on belonging in congregations, which is seldom sought. I am acutely aware that not all disabled and neurodivergent people in churches may have had the same experience as me (for example, Spies, 2021; van Ommen & Endress, 2022). There appears to be no grand narrative in relation to how neurodivergent people navigate church congregations.

I am additionally aware that others are embroiled into my narrative through having been in my life during the times I am narrating. Their views and opinions are presented from my own positionality as a marginalized Autistic and disabled person, and their views and opinions may have changed since their place within my story. Even though within a congregational space (and many other non-autistic majority spaces) I am disempowered, within a research space I am perceived as having power through the titles I hold (PhD Candidate, Research Assistant) and the that I am in control of how the narrative is presented in this paper. This “fragmented self” (Ellis, 2007) is to be navigated carefully. As part of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), it is important to consider how others are presented as their own experience or narrative may differ (see Edwards, 2021) and notably to stay aware of individuals' views who may well be different due to cultural or gender difference (Etherington, 2007). Therefore the following steps have been taken to take account for relational ethics: (1) the congregations I refer to, and individuals have been anonymised; (2) composite characters (blending the characteristics of individuals together) have been used where an interaction is the focus within the plot of my narrative; and (3) a fellow congregant read the story to ensure that “the dust and clutter is shown without saying *they're dirty*” (Ellis, 2007, p. 25). These three steps assist navigating the ethical dilemmas in how I represent other actors in my story.

My story

When I did not know, nor accept, I was neurodivergent

My story starts in Church A³. I attended this church for many years throughout my childhood and teenage years, noticing I was “different” before I knew what being neurodivergent meant. The world was loud, bright and busy, but I believed everyone was just better at managing this than I was. I grew up in this church from a young age. My memory is more fragmented in my younger years, but I do have certain distinct and clear memories, one being singing in church with my dad aged 3 in the middle front rows using the small A6 blue hymn books. The books had that distinct hymn book smell, and not necessarily singing all the words in the book, rather my own words about my puppy in my pocket collection, which was the intense interest of the moment.

At the age 6 was the first time that I remember being upset within church. I was in Sunday School with other children I had grown up with. It was in a small room with wooden flooring, yellow walls and the tables that can be collapsed and stored. There were about five other children in the room with two adults. I was wearing a dress and the rather large round 90s-style glasses with a pink and white mottled frame. I saw one of the other children do something—I cannot remember quite what—and I did this too. The older of the two adults screaming at me. Being on the receiving end of what felt in my body as screaming resulted in a strong feeling of shame. Why had I got screamed at and not the other child? I did not know what I had done was wrong, or not allowed. The shame flushes through me in strong waves and immobilizes me. I burst into tears. I could not keep it all in. I cried and cried, my eyes red and sore and looking even redder with my pink and white mottled lenses and my bright auburn hair. “I hate her,” I thought. The rest of what happened next is a haze, but every time I saw this woman afterwards I felt a distinct lack of trust and unease. “You’re not nice.” “I can’t trust you won’t burst into a screaming rage at me again.” It was not only the thoughts I experienced, but a feeling came over me of shame of wrongdoing (even though I did not know what I had done wrong). I put my guard up—I did not want to be in a similar situation again. I kept a watch out for what could be deemed as “right” and “good,” and censored myself in light of this. I had to protect myself from this sort of outburst from happening again.

I continued to protect myself. As I reached the end of primary school, I felt increasingly ‘not a part’ of the core group of children I had grown up with. I was different, but I did not know why. Sunday school was loud and busy, and without a peer for me to hide behind, I felt ever more exposed. I felt awkward and out of place, and not quite at ease with the adults in the room not because they were bad, but because I questioned how to interact. I did not know what to say or how to be a part of

conversations. This came to a head one Sunday, when I would not go into Sunday School. Having left the pew, I was unable to enter the hall Sunday school was in. It was in an extension to the main church, and you left the conversation area to your left and passed the big open space, and went down a flight of very 1970s looking stairs with a metal handrail and a red plastic covering on this handrail. I froze and cried, I could not physically go in. I was overwhelmed with anxiety, my body would not let me walk into the hall where they met. It was loud. It was busy. It was an assault on my senses. Seeing that I was frozen, one of my parents suggested we went to the McDonalds round the corner as a space to go and calm down in. McDonalds was not far from the church, it was along the road and a right turn. I do not remember much from the walk, but I do remember being sat in McDonalds and how bright the sunshine was that day. It was bursting through the front—where I was sat on the high tables and stools that I enjoyed sitting at. I remember the relief from pressures and demands, the freedom to “be me.” I also remember a bit of shame that I felt in relation to the fact I had pulled one of my parents out of church—somewhere they enjoyed and felt liked they belonged—to sit in McDonalds with me in a place of safety, away from the jumble of the Sunday School hall.

I did not cope with starting secondary school and became increasingly aware that something was different about me. I struggled to make deep friendships and to be seen as anything other than “quiet and smart.” I did not know how to navigate the social world, which was becoming more and more complicated. I was also withdrawing from more and more, including from Sunday School which I stopped attending regularly. I received my second diagnosis of autism in the midst of this turmoil. Two young people (one who I had known through church for years but not really spoken to, one who I went to primary school with and knew through a children’s club) tried to persuade me to go. I felt like I was being pushed into going. I was so scared of physically getting up and going and sitting in a room full of teenagers who I felt “outsiders” from. I did not feel comfortable at being in such a space as my anxiety was so high, I wanted to stay safe with my parents. The new assistant minister’s wife was another person who tried to encourage me. I still felt out of place when I went. I saw cliques and groups like little fences of young people, with no gate to let me in. I controlled what others saw when I did make it in—I felt unable to take part in the discussions in Sunday School for fear of saying something that would expose me as even more different.

Analytical considerations

Even before I knew I was different, I was managing the impressions others had of me to be more palatable and acceptable. I felt marked as an outsider (Becker, 2008). Occasions where the environment was too much for me,

for example the hustle and bustle of Sunday School with the sensory assault of complex noise and light, I felt I had to not show the overwhelm and distress I felt. The sensory experiences I had were in line with those of other neurodivergent people, in particular Autistic people, who experience sensory differences (O'Neill & Jones, 1997). I did this through either removing myself from the situation, so as not to discredit myself (Goffman, 1963), or through passing by copying other children to play down discreditable aspects of my identity (Goffman, 1963) to expose me as “deviant.” During these critical incidents in my story, one commonality across them all is how I managed others’ impressions of me (Goffman, 1959). Even though I did not know I was Autistic, I did recognize how I needed to be acutely aware that how I appeared to others in social contexts impacted what attitudes were held of me. I knew that if I let the mask “slip,” that there would be repercussions. This fear of being exposed encapsulates Scambler’s (2004) felt stigma; I was fearful of being exposed as “lesser,” which is in keeping with Goffman’s (1963) definition of what a stigma is.

On the occasions I did not meet others’ expectations, such as the time in Sunday School where I was told off, I felt exposed as “deviant.” In that moment, I had moved from being a person without a stigma to someone who was not meeting standards and expectations set for me (Misztal, 2001). Whereas some children could have shaken this off, this felt like a dagger to my heart, and that my veneered impression of being a “good girl” had broken. Although this did not expose me as Autistic, it did expose me as “maskless.” My reaction to being “caught out” is of particular analytical interest. I had been exposed as unable to deal with the unexpected, raised voices and being “wrong.” I now acted with suspicion and with a guard up, disrupting the bidirectional and intersubjective bond of belonging within that one context.

Felt stigma and the fear of being exposed could be said to drive the passing I did within Church contexts. Employing impression management to increase my acceptability and gain a sense of perceived belonging complicates some theological stances, whereby belonging and welcome are center piece to Church. Perhaps this is indicative of the values and attitudes churchgoers may bring into a Church context (Webb-Mitchell, 1994, p. 79), which have been found previously to influence attitudes toward autism in church contexts (Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020). Furthermore, the use of impression management to maximize inclusion and feelings of belonging further demonstrates the socially situated nature of feelings of belonging for many individuals, and echoes belonging as intersubjective (Mahar et al., 2013). Through feeling I did not fit the norms within the church, both with ideas that were biblically based and “secular” attitudes, I felt belonging was contingent on meeting the norms of the church and presenting myself as a person without a stigma.

When I did know and accepted that I was neurodivergent

That moment I knew. I had recently left a job where I was trying to be someone who I was not. I had spent years at this point, trying to present a version of myself that was palatable for others to try to fit in. Often results worked in the short term, but the impact on me meant I could not keep it up in the long term. Parts of me would leak out and others would pick up on this, leading to me leaving places including workplaces and friendship groups. I could not keep forcing myself into situations that were making me sick and overwhelmed, and where I felt broken. It was a true penny-drop moment being stood in my bedroom opposite the wheely stacker next to my bed. “I am not just anxious, I have not only got social anxiety; I am Autistic.” It was at that moment I started to own being Autistic. I had to stop forcing myself to be someone who I am not. I did not know as much as I do now, I did not know that much. But it was at that moment some of my boundaries were redrawn and a new understanding of myself began. I started exploring through Facebook about autism and Autistic people, and found a whole new language to express what I was experiencing.

I started being more vocal about my needs, I remember writing on a Facebook post something about being Autistic and finding the noise in church difficult. By now we were attending Church B. One member of church leadership wanted to know more, and we started discussions about accessibility in the foyer of Church B. We were sitting in the corner on those typical church chairs—pine wood with red cushions. The light in the room was bright. I felt seen. I felt validated. We met and planned actions and she took my experiences seriously. I remember leaving the conversations we had feeling full of energy and hope. I uncovered some of the layers of hiding I had built over the years, which felt exposed and uncomfortable.

One frustration I did experience was lack of interest from others in church leadership. I felt like a portcullis had been dropped: not here, not us. I continued to talk and share, I continued to ask how we can do things differently. When I got my hands dirty, such as helping with the tech desk, I felt as if the responsibility to make everything more accessible landed on my shoulders. I was sitting in the corner of the church behind this tech desk—which could be seen as a powerful spot—but felt unable to advocate for the changes needed. I was scared. Even though I had started to “out” myself, I still was lacking the words and confidence to say what I needed and the more I outed myself and stated my needs, the more out of place I felt. When I said I was in pain with the volume and complexity of the noise, I remained unheard. Silence. When church leadership changed, I felt even more unheard. I ended up sitting inside the main church very uncomfortable, in pain and overwhelmed, suppressing my autistic overwhelm and distress with a carefully constructed “mask”

of nothingness. Or I sat outside and felt physically excluded and unable to join in, signaling my “autistic-ness” with headphones and being sat apart.

It was also a similar time that I spoke to church leadership about how excluded I felt within the church, and the difficulties and distress I was feeling. I went to speak to them one afternoon—thinking perhaps we can move forward. This meeting was in a side room of the church: However I was faced with this statement: “it’s a journey.” A journey to make a space that works for everyone, and time to consider. I walked away feeling unease, which then turned into anger. “How could they dismiss my feelings?” “Why could they not see the problem?” They had not taken how I experience the world seriously and emphasized the need for patience on my part. This felt like my distress was seen as a slight inconvenience. Because my access needs were not visible to the obvious eye, they were played down in that moment. I saw them as not real enough, and not real enough of pain to qualify for something to be done.

Analytical considerations

When I did have positive interactions, I started to feel the strongest sense of belonging I had ever experienced within a church congregation. I was not managing the impressions I left on others as much and being accepted for who I was, rather than what was expected of me. Individuals were proactive in listening to me and taking me seriously, rather than discrediting my words due to my “stigmatized identity.” I was valued for how wonderfully made I am whilst also respecting that I did not wish to be a “self-narrating zoo exhibit.”

However after a change in leadership, my “stigmatized identity” caused further issues, and I became the “impossible subject” (as described by Abraham, 2009). I was marked out as different. I felt “discredited,” because I wore headphones and sat apart from others in church. I did not meet the norms set by the church. I could not manage the complexity and volume of the sound, physically setting me apart through the visual cues I wore (headphones) and the places I sat (outside). I was reminded I needed to conform to belong, echoed in Rafferty’s (2022, p. 118) analysis of Spies’ (2021) experience within churches. In these cases, I experienced enacted stigma (Scambler, 2004) rather than felt stigma. I was excluded by the clash of my own needs with the desires of church leadership. I was a “problem to be managed” (Rafferty, 2022, p. 23). Church leadership knew about the support needs I had; I was not fearful of being ‘outed’ as Autistic or others finding out I about me. . I did not meet the norms of being able to worship in such a space, or at least not without physically removing myself and not advocating for my needs. The anger and the frustration I experienced at the denial of action was epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Silencing in this

manner, though stating “it’s a journey” and plaction minimized my distress, and further excluded me. Cults of “normalcy” (as theorized by Davis, 1995 and van Ommen & Endress, 2022) shaped how church was “done,” including how we worship and what we subject our bodies to in church. Normalcy excluded me, and I was an outsider. For those who did not know me in the church, nor really understood the way I experienced the world, I continued to experience felt stigma (Scambler, 2004). Although I was “out,” not everyone in the church knew each other, nor understood neurodivergent lived experience. Through experiencing both felt and enacted stigma, along with the lack of meeting norms through passing and other impression strategies, I felt increasingly as if I did belong. Acceptance appeared contingent on meeting the norms of the church and being able to compartmentalize and suppress overwhelm, whilst passing as a person without a stigma. Through asking questions of the leadership team regarding access requirements and needs, I was placed in the position of “impossible subject.” Neurodivergent people as impossible subjects can also be seen in the stories Raffety (2022, p. 65) collects in her ethnography, where Autistic people’s needs are seen as “too difficult” or “untenable” by church leadership or volunteers. I understood that through disclosure and advocacy, challenging how the way church was “done” excluded me; perhaps through a lack of provision, but ultimately through me not being heard or listened to.

Conclusion

Belonging for neurodivergent people in congregations, and how neurodivergent people are perceived and interact in majority neuro-normative cultures, are important focal points for discussion when considering welcome or inclusion. In relation to my research question, being neurodivergent did appear to impact how I experienced belonging within congregational settings. Firstly through impression management prior to me realizing my neurodivergent identity, and then after I “came out,” being perceived as discredited due to being neurodivergent. Both these experiences complicated my experience of belonging within congregational settings, echoing findings from Jacobs and Richardson (2022). As my Autistic identity became more and more central to how I understood and processed the world, I found myself challenging whether I should pass to fit in, and outing myself as “discredited.” Neurodivergent bodies and brains mediate how we belong through challenging norms and others’ standards, leading to some of us becoming “impossible subjects.” Neurodivergent people as ‘impossible subjects’ sits in opposition to all, including neurodivergent people, being made in God’s image (van Ommen, 2022a).

Managing stigma in order to feel a sense of belonging also sits in conflict with theological underpinnings of the importance of belonging within Christianity and churches. It places churches as socially situated contexts

with influence from the secular world (Webb-Mitchell, 1994, p. 79). Furthermore, it poses questions on the level of theological interrogation belonging for marginalized groups has received to date. This conflict also highlights the theological obligation to take Autistic, and other neurodivergent experiences seriously (van Ommen, 2022a) and how this aligns with how we “do church.” Excluding people intentionally or inadvertently from worship services is problematic (van Ommen 2022b; Waldock, 2022), therefore highlighting the urgent need for churches to consider how we ‘do church’, and how much ‘cults of normalcy’ (see van Ommen & Endress, 2022) are operationalized within churches. Expectations of neurodivergent people need to move away from meeting majority-set norms in order to belong, as argued also by van Ommen (2022a), and should move away from meeting these norms. Acceptance should be intersubjective and not merely based on those with a stigma meeting the norms of those who do not have a stigma (van Ommen, 2022a; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020).

In terms of how this autoethnographic account further complicates biblical understandings of belonging, it challenges leaders and congregants to consider how power dynamics and perceptions shape experiences of belonging. It poses the question of how we should frame belonging, and if normative belonging should in fact be a goal in theological discourse, sociological and theological research, and practice. Perhaps a better goal is the facilitation of spaces where neurodiverse relationships can thrive, and power relationships are examined.

Notes

1. Goffman (1963) refers to individuals without a stigma as “normals”. Given the main tenet of the neurodiversity paradigm is the inherent value of all brains and cognition (Walker, 2021), and how “normal” can be value laden to mean neurotypical by some scientists and researchers within autism studies, “individuals without a stigma” or “individuals who are not stigmatised” will be used in lieu.
2. Discreditable identity: an identity that is socially devalued and concealable from, or made invisible to others
3. Sociologists may argue that they are less interested in stigma when the stigmatised individual is not aware of it (Goffman, 1963, p. 93). However in relation to my story, I would argue I was always stigmatised – not necessarily as Autistic – but as “weird”, “odd”, “shy” or “strange”. I would therefore posit that in the case of people who are neurodivergent from birth, the stories pre-identification remain relevant to social stigma theory.

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