



Special Issue — Neurodivergent and Queer Identities 2026

(Volume 2 Issue 1 | pages 20–29)

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1.1874>

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## **Neuroqueering Masculinity: An Analytic Autoethnography of Masking, Gender Expression and Fluid Sexual Identity**

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### **Abstract**

This paper adopts an analytic autoethnographic approach to explore how a neurodivergent, queer man’s shifting gender expression and experiences of sexual identity illuminate the limits of binary understandings of masculinity and femininity (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Drawing on queer theory, neuroqueer theory and Jungian analytical psychology, it examines how social pressure, masking, diagnosis, crisis and psychedelic experience shaped my movement between more masculine and more feminine forms of self-presentation. The paper argues that gendered expression is better understood, in Jungian terms, as a dynamic interplay of psychic energies rather than as a fixed binary, and that neurodivergent and queer lives may make this instability especially visible. In tracing my own experiences from childhood to the present, I suggest that unmasking and individuation can be read as parallel processes of becoming more integrated, less performative and more internally coherent.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, neuroqueer, queer theory, neurodivergence, masking, gender expression, Jung, anima

**Date of Submission:** 8 April 2026

**Date of Acceptance:** 19 May 2026

## ***Introduction***

This paper explores how my experiences as a queer man, and later ADHD and autism diagnoses, have shaped shifting forms of gender expression and sexual identity across childhood, adolescence and subsequent years. It asks why the categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ never fully captured my experience, and why my sense of self became more fluid following diagnosis, unmasking, psychological distress and psychedelic exploration. The argument is not that binary categories are meaningless, but that they are too narrow to describe the complexity of lived experience.

I use the terms ‘masculine’, ‘feminine,’ ‘gay’, ‘straight’ and ‘bisexual’ here in a deliberately stereotypical and historically contingent sense, not as fixed or universally valid truths. The paper is therefore not trying to naturalise those categories, but to show how they were used, felt, resisted and reworked in my own life. This analytic autoethnography draws on memory, reflective writing and personal experience while preserving confidentiality through omitted or altered identifying details. By combining personal narrative with theoretical interpretation, this paper aims to critically examine how neurodivergence, sexuality and gendered self-expression are shaped through lived experience (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Unlike purely evocative autoethnography, analytic autoethnography seeks not only to describe experience, but also to connect personal experience to wider social and theoretical structures.

The term neuroqueer is used here in Nick Walker’s sense of a practice and perspective that actively subverts both neuronormativity and heteronormativity. Walker describes neuroqueer as both an identity and a verb: a way of queering neurocognitive norms, and of refusing or undoing pressure to conform to dominant scripts of behaviour, embodiment and identity (Walker and Raymaker, 2021). Jungian psychology is used alongside this, particularly the concepts of the anima and individuation, to interpret the integration of gendered opposites not as pathology, but as part of psychological development.

## ***Theoretical Framework***

Neuroqueer theory offers a useful way to understand how neurodivergence and queerness are not simply parallel identities, but intertwined experiences shaped by shared pressures to appear ‘normal’. Walker’s account of neuroqueering explicitly links the queering of neurotypicality with the queering of gender and sexuality, arguing that dominant norms of cognition and embodiment are socially enforced in ways that resemble the enforcement of heteronormativity. In this framework, a neurodivergent person may find it harder, or less worthwhile, to maintain the performances demanded

by social life, which can make identity feel more fluid, fragmented, or context-dependent. Walker's later work further develops neuroqueer theory as a challenge to the compulsory performance of neuronormativity, arguing that neurodivergence and queerness often intersect through shared experiences of masking, social regulation and identity performance (Walker, 2021).

Queer theory strengthens this reading by showing that sexual and gender identities are socially produced and maintained rather than simply discovered as stable inner facts. Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality names the cultural force that makes heterosexuality seem default and other orientations seem deviant, while Judith Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender is socially enacted through repeated behaviours and norms rather than emerging as a purely natural essence. At the same time, contemporary discussions of transgender experience complicate any interpretation that gender is therefore entirely arbitrary or exclusively socially produced (Rich, 1980; Butler, 2024, 1990). Together, these ideas suggest that identities such as 'gay', 'straight' and 'bi' are not just internal truths but legible positions shaped by power, repetition and social sanction.

Jungian psychology offers a different but compatible vocabulary for thinking about integration. Jung's anima describes the unconscious feminine dimension in a man, while individuation refers to the process of becoming more whole through the integration of unconscious and conscious aspects of the self (Jung, 1968). Read cautiously, this framework allows experiences of feminine feeling, masculine presentation, or sudden gendered insight to be interpreted not as literal misrecognition, but as encounters with inner psychological material that resists simple binaries.

Masking and unmasking sit across these frameworks. In neurodivergent and queer lives alike, masking often functions as self-protection: a way of hiding traits that provoke ridicule, exclusion, or discomfort in others (Walker, 2021; Walker and Raymaker, 2021; Price, 2022; Hull et al., 2017). Late diagnosis, crisis, therapy and introspection can destabilise the effort of masking and make room for more authentic expression, though that process may be painful as well as liberating.

### ***Early Ambiguities***

For most of childhood I appeared fairly neutral in gender expression. I was not especially masculine or feminine by conventional standards. I was independent, intellectually competitive, aesthetically minded and often socially sensitive. Frequently, I felt left out, wandered alone, or cried when excluded.

I had close friends of all genders and early attractions that do not fit neatly into a simple ‘gay from the start’ narrative. Some experiences with boys occurred in secrecy, including with a socially popular boy who bullied others seen as different. Looking back, these experiences sit awkwardly within any neat later label.

### ***Coming Out and Social Reorganisation***

At 13, a conversation in the park gave me a definition of ‘gay’ that suddenly made sense of experiences and feelings I had not previously had language for. I immediately came out as bisexual to my best friend and girlfriend. The social response from boys was often hostile, and PE changing rooms became a place of dread.

What followed was not just homophobia but social reorganisation. Male friendships became harder to sustain, and I increasingly found belonging with female friends and other queer people. I identified briefly as bisexual before settling into a gay identity.

One interpretation is that heterosexual desire became psychologically less available because it was not the part of me that could be safely lived. Under homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality, it is plausible that the mind narrows what can be felt, admitted, or socially defended in order to reduce conflict (Rich, 1980). That does not mean those attractions were never there. It means that what becomes conscious can be shaped by what is survivable.

### ***Masking and Masculine Performance***

By my second year of college, I was tired of having almost exclusively female and gay male friends. I wanted male friendship and some sense of belonging with straight men, so I made a deliberate decision to present more ‘straight’. That meant dressing more masculinely, suppressing feminine mannerisms and voice patterns around men, and delaying coming out when I moved to university.

This was my first major conscious round of masking. For a neurodivergent person already consciously monitoring tone, behaviour and social acceptability, this additional layer of gendered

performance became exhausting over time (Price, 2022). I performed straightness through kissing and flirting with women, partly for safety and partly to access male friendship and status. The performance delayed suspicion but did not prevent later exclusion. I found myself once again pushed out of male belonging and recast as ‘one of the girls’.

That period taught me that gender expression was highly responsive to environment. Masculine presentation felt useful around men because it reduced risk, while feminine expression felt easier around women because it felt socially safer. From a neuroqueer perspective, this is not just style choice but adaptation under pressure: a bodymind learning how to survive in a social world that polices both masculinity and femininity (Walker and Raymaker, 2021).

### ***Crisis, Diagnosis and Loosening***

By 22, during my fourth year at university, I received an ADHD diagnosis and was sliding into a severe mental health crisis. My friends struggled with my mental state and gradually distanced themselves, leaving my partner as my only real social connection.

During and after that period I began therapy, explored psychedelic experiences, and developed a more consistent yoga and meditation practice. Although painful, this isolation also reduced pressure to perform normality. With fewer people to impress, some of my masking around neurodivergence, emotion and sexuality began to loosen, alongside growing exhaustion from the constant monitoring and performance involved in appearing socially acceptable (Price, 2022; Hull et al., 2017).

This stage can be read as neuroqueer in Walker’s sense because the loosening was not simply personal growth in a vacuum, it emerged through a changing relationship to norms and expectations. It also resembles the beginnings of individuation, in which a person is forced to face what has been split off or suppressed rather than continuing to maintain a socially acceptable surface (Jung, 1968).

### ***Psychedelic Disruption and Integration***

A significant psychedelic experience undertaken during a period of psychological exploration came after my relationship ended and felt like the culmination of years of meditation, therapy and psychological self-exploration. After a period of inward withdrawal, I experienced a profound disruption of ordinary selfhood and a detached observer perspective.

Research on psychedelic states has suggested that such experiences can temporarily loosen habitual patterns of selfhood, identity and social cognition (Carhart-Harris et al., 2014), which may help contextualise the intensity of the experience described here.

From there, I experienced a bright ball of light as my core self. Then, for about a minute, I felt entirely feminine and believed I had been a woman all along and would need to transition in order to live authentically. Soon after, my sense of masculinity returned and I crashed into confusion, followed by about two weeks of shutdown, during which I had little language, no clear personality, and a very unstable sense of identity. In psychological terms, this resembled a prolonged dissociative or freeze-like response following overwhelming emotional destabilisation, in which ordinary self-organisation temporarily became difficult to maintain (Van der Kolk, 2015). I retreated into meditation, journaling and reading.

I do not now interpret that experience as proof that I am literally a woman. Nor is this paper intended to deny the validity or stability of binary transgender identities. Rather, it focuses specifically on my own experiences of shifting gender expression as a neurodivergent queer man, while recognising that many transgender and nonbinary people describe experiences of gender that differ substantially from those explored here.

Instead, I understand the experience as a powerful encounter with feminine energy, or in Jungian terms with the anima, that made it impossible to keep treating masculinity and femininity as sealed-off opposites (Jung, 1968). What changed was not that one category replaced another, but that the binary itself ceased to feel adequate for describing my own experience. The experience seems closer to integration than conversion: a confrontation with something previously disowned that needed to be held rather than eliminated.

### ***Gender, Unmasking and Individuation***

After that experience, shame around my sexuality and feminine expression largely fell away. I became more confident moving fluidly between masculine and feminine expression, shifting depending on context but from a place that felt intentional rather than forced. My sense of self now feels more able to hold both energies without needing to collapse into rigid boxes.

Around the same period, an autism diagnosis and further unmasking coincided with the re-emergence of attractions to women and earlier memories that did not fit neatly into 'gay'. This does not mean that the diagnosis caused the attractions, rather, the process of learning more about my neurodivergence coincided with a loosening of the identities I had been using to survive. Walker's account of neuroqueering helps name this: the more a person resists dominant norms of cognition and embodiment, the more they may become open to forms of selfhood that are less stable but more truthful.

Jungian language is useful here because it frames the movement not as confusion but as development. If individuation involves integrating split-off material and becoming more whole, then the post-trip, post-diagnosis period can be read as a movement toward greater psychic coherence (Jung, 1968). The point is not to replace one label with another, but to allow the self to become less organised around fear and more organised around integration.

A possible way to conceptualise this is through a 'dynamic energy model' of gendered selfhood. In such a model, masculinity and femininity are not fixed traits assigned by sex or orientation, but flexible psychic energies that can be expressed in different proportions across contexts and over time. Neuroqueer lives may make this especially visible because neurodivergent people often cannot, or do not want to, keep performing the same social script everywhere.

### ***Sexuality and Social Legibility***

My sexuality also seems to have been shaped by social pressure rather than simply expressed as a stable inner essence. Looking back, I can see early attraction to both boys and girls, but only the heterosexual side was publicly legible and socially allowed. Under heteronormativity, it is easy to see how a person might settle into a simpler label that reduces friction, even if that label does not capture the full range of desire (Rich, 1980).

This helps explain why my gay identity became so dominant after coming out at 13. It was not necessarily false, but it may have become overdetermined by safety, belonging and social readability. In a homophobic environment, a stable label can function as shelter, even if it also

obscures complexity. That is especially plausible for bisexuality, which is often pressured toward one pole or the other because ambiguity is socially difficult to hold.

This framework also shapes how I interpret the men I have known. I have seen gay men who are bullied and pushed out by straight male groups and men whose public identities and private experiences did not align neatly, suggesting how shame, secrecy and social pressure shape what can be publicly acknowledged.

That is why it often feels as if the ‘evidence’ of sexuality is locked behind subjective experience. Queer theory already tells us that categories are socially produced and policed, while neuroqueer theory adds that some people may be less able to maintain those policed performances over time. Together, my experiences suggest that sexuality may be less like a fixed fact waiting to be discovered and more like a lived negotiation between desire, fear and social legibility.

### ***Discussion***

My experiences suggest that the masculinity/femininity binary felt too blunt to adequately describe my own lived experience of gendered expression. What I experienced was not a simple move from one side to the other, but repeated shifts in presentation, attraction, shame, confidence and integration. The more pressure I felt to be legible to others, the more my gender expression hardened into performance; the more pressure eased, the more fluid and internally guided it became.

The same pattern appears in sexuality. Under strong heteronormative pressure, desire can be organised around what is safest or most socially sustainable rather than what is most open or complex. This does not make identity fake. It means identity can be adaptive, context-dependent and reorganised by survival (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980).

Neuroqueer theory helps explain why the loosening of one set of norms can destabilise another. Once I began to unmask neurodivergence and reduce the constant cognitive monitoring involved in social masking, the demand to maintain a single, coherent social persona weakened. Once that happened, gender and sexuality became less like fixed destinations and more like dynamic processes. This fluidity also resonates with queer theoretical work that frames identity as temporally unstable, socially negotiated and resistant to fixed developmental narratives (Halberstam, 2005). Jungian individuation gives a complementary account: aspects of the self that had previously felt divided or suppressed began to feel more integrated.

## ***Conclusion***

This autoethnographic account suggests that under strong heteronormative and neuronormative pressure, sexual identity and gender expression can reorganise around social survival. In my case, ‘gay’, ‘straight’ and ‘bi’ were not simply transparent descriptors but adaptive scripts that shifted with context, fear, belonging and self-understanding.

Neuroqueer theory and Jungian psychology offer a language for what the binary could not explain: not confusion, but integration through instability (Jung, 1968; Walker and Raymaker, 2021). My experiences lead me to think that some people may live with more fluidity in attraction and gendered feeling than current categories acknowledge, but that they do so unevenly depending on the social cost of disclosure.

I am deeply grateful for what these experiences have taught me. I no longer feel compelled to confine myself within boxes that never fully held the reality of my experience. Rather than seeking certainty through definitive labels, I have become more comfortable living with ambiguity, fluidity and change. I am not concerned with proving myself straight, gay, or bisexual; I simply find myself drawn to people.

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