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"What's the point of having friends?": Reformulating Notions of the Meaning of Friends and Friendship Among Autistic People

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the notion of ‘autistic friendship’. Drawing on articles published in the Swedish advocacy magazine Empowerment, written for and by autistic people, a thematic analysis explores two interrelated themes: the meaning and performance of friendship in non-autistic (NT) and autistic (AS) worlds and the meaning of space in social interaction and community. Articles published in the magazine frequently discuss autistic only spaces as safe places in which to make friends with other autistic people and also in which to perhaps learn how to manage social interactions with the dominant non-autistic (NT) culture.

"What's the point of having friends?", "Why do you need friends?", "Do you have to have friends?" (Stina Andersson) 1

In this paper, we focus attention on dominant and alternative ideas about friendships, and how these impact autistic people as they negotiate social conventions about what constitutes friendship. In our work, we seek to highlight and de-naturalize the dominant construction of autism as a deficit characterized by disordered emotional state and lack of sociality (Sinclair 2010). We draw on the
concept of neurodiversity to understand and frame autism as a form of neurological difference rather than deficit. From this position, the paper initially reviews dominant understandings of friendships and ways in which autistic people are seen to be deficient in the abilities needed to make friends. Later, we explore what autistic friendships could look like within autistic spaces (spaces dominated by autistic people) or neurodiverse spaces (spaces inclusive of autistic people). This exploration empirically draws on contributions to the Swedish magazine Empowerment, which is produced by and aimed at adults with autism. We specifically focus on the articles reflecting on autistic people’s experiences of friendships. The principle aim of this paper therefore is to explore notions of friendship among autistic people in relation to dominant conceptualizations of friendship and the spaces within which friendship is assumed to be produced and performed. We argue that there is a need to create and sustain both autistic separate as well as neurodiverse spaces through which friendships and close relationships can develop and foster, rather than 'enable' people on the autistic spectrum to be better equipped to manage relationships in a social world dominated by non-autistic people (Neurologically Typicals, NTs - people who do not identify with, or have a diagnosis of, autism), further referred to as NT-world, or NT-contexts.

Dominant understandings of friendship

The ability to make friends and feel part of a social group is seen to be a key feature of human interaction. Research from within psychology and other disciplines have argued that the ability to make and maintain friends is important in a range of developmental areas including educational attainment (Berndt, 2002), psychosocial adjustment (Bagwell et al, 2005), as well as offering the potential for negative experiences such as 'peer pressure' and antisocial behavior (see McLeod et al, 2008 for a discussion of this).

The notion of 'friendship' is complex to define, but one that individuals typically enact within specific situations, in accordance with a variety of implicit social rules. It would therefore seem 'obvious' to the casual observer what behaviors are enacted in what situation, and what the role of 'friends' and the rules of friendship are. Hartup (1996) notes that definitions of friendship are sometimes constructed in a simplistic way that focuses on the differences between friend and non-friend. However, Hartup argues that relationships are far more complex than this, and a whole spectrum of relationships are possible on a more continuous scale from best friend to good friend to occasional friend to non-friend for example. Therefore the social individual must be skilled in negotiating not only different ideas concerning what a friend is, but also manage behavior in accordance with implicit social rules governing what is 'appropriate' behavior when interacting with friends and acquaintances. Defining 'friendship' can therefore be challenging. However, Bukowski et al (1996) note that researchers generally agree on three elements that are important in friendships. Firstly, each person in the friendship should have equal benefits from the relationship. The relationship therefore draws on the importance of cooperation and the satisfactory resolution of potential conflicts. Secondly, both parties will display a liking for each other and a desire to spend time with each other; and finally the relationship will be characterised as an affectionate relationship and one within which people have fun.

Ideas about appropriate behavior when interacting with others have been widely
studied within developmental psychology and allied disciplines. Whilst there are some differences noted, for example at different chronological ages (Berk, 2010); cross culturally (Gonzalez, Moreno & Schneider, 2004) and for girls and boys (Monsour 2002), the expectations of social behavior are all defined by NT researchers assuming NT functioning of the people they are studying. The experiences of autistic people are largely absent or rendered 'abnormal' through such research.

**Neurotypical understandings of autistic friendship**

There is a limited pool of research that has examined autistic people and their experiences of friendship, possibly due to the expectation that individuals may not form such relationships. Where attention has been paid it is to understand whether friendships are possible for autistic individuals. For example, Howard, Cohn and Orsmond (2006) and Locke, Ishijima, Kasari and London (2010) call for more research in order to understand how social 'deficits' may affect the formation and development of close relationships for autistic people. The lack of research focusing on friendship for autistic people is both surprising and concerning given that researchers have also found that a desire to form close friendships and other relationships is a common theme running through personal accounts of autistic people (see for example Jones & Meldal 2001).

In relation to the development of friendships the dominant research field assumes that autistic people 'fail' to form 'developmentally appropriate' relationships with their peers. Indeed Baumringer, Solomon and Rogers (2010) propose that a "Theory of Mind deficit" may "...prevent children from establishing reciprocal friendship with peers." (p.752). Such discussions draw on the narratives of an impairment in social interaction and communication, and point towards a lack of the establishment of relationships that engage in social and emotional reciprocity (see for example APA 2013). Indeed Grinker (2010) argues that contemporary discourses of autism draw heavily on that of the 'damaged' child who has several impairments due to their 'disease'. This approach is also evident for example, in Orsmond et al's (2004) conclusion that their data "...indicate that the impairments associated with autism are impediments to the development of peer relationships: the more severe the impairments in social skills, the less likely it is for an individual to form peer relationships." (p.253).

Similarly much of the research on peer friendships by autistic people has the goal of studying friendship as a means to improve the social skills training of autistic people, and therefore enable them to develop more neurotypical relationships, (see for example, Bauminger et al 2008; Frankel & Whitham 2011). However, many autistic people are opposed to the use of social skills training to make them act in more neurotypical ways (see for example Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2012; Brownlow 2010). How we measure friendship also has important implications for our understandings of autistic friendship. Research by Locke et al (2010) for example, highlight that adolescents who are labeled as being on the autistic spectrum tend to interact and choose friends who share a diagnosis. In light of this, we argue that there is a need to interrogate dominant understanding of the concept of 'friendship', and neurotypical understandings accorded to it. One of the issues therefore for research that seeks to explore autistic friendship is to critically examine neuronormativity (i.e. expectations and norms of neuro-typicalness).
Alternative understandings of autistic friendship

A new body of research has begun to emerge that seeks to question previously held beliefs about the abilities of autistic people to form meaningful friendships with their peers. Indeed, Grinker (2010) argues that psychology and related disciplines have characterized autism erroneously as an impairment that does not allow for the development of meaningful social behavior. Grinker notes that the growing body of autistic writers such as Grandin and Prince-Hughes pose challenges to medical and other ‘deficit’ understandings of autism, and also the popular expectations that are held about the abilities of autistic people.

Writings by autistic people such as Grandin, Prince-Hughes and Lawson provide us with a rich and insightful picture of the ways in which autistic people make and maintain friendships. Wendy Lawson (2006) highlights that whilst much of the dominant literature on autism suggests that autistic people do not seek to engage in friendships, she (and others) demonstrate that many people on the autistic spectrum do have and want to have friends. Jim Sinclair points to the fact that this is particularly striking considering that many autistic people will have experienced hostile responses from NTs when trying to initiate friendships with them (Sinclair 2011).

Throughout her reflections on friendship, Lawson highlights that we may need to rethink our understandings of friendship if we are to acknowledge the lived experiences of autistic people who have friends and feel part of a social group. Indeed throughout her text, Lawson provides several examples of good tips for ‘dealing with’ NTs and for autistic people managing friendships with them, and several examples of experiential evidence of autistic people managing relationships in NT spaces.

The contexts of social relationships

We argue that the environment and context play a key role in the development and management of friendships for autistic people. Reflecting on their ‘Ethnography of Autism’ project, which comprises of a series of studies since 1997 to investigate how children on the autistic spectrum participate in home, school and other community settings, Ochs and Solomon (2010) highlight the complexities involved in understanding the social relationships of children and adults with autism. Ochs and Solomon propose that in order to understand the social engagements of autistic people, we first need to conceptualize sociality as a range of possibilities. Ochs and Solomon argue that the management of social exchanges is shaped not only by the skills of the individual in terms of social communication and understanding, but also by the socio-cultural environment that such exchanges are being performed in. We therefore need to be alert to the socio-cultural conditions that may enable and foster what Ochs and Solomon term ‘autistic sociality’.

Drawing on Ochs and Solomon’s work, we argue that it is important to consider the context in which people make friends and operate within a community. In previous work (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Brownlow & O’Dell, 2013) we have argued that it is possible for spaces to be experienced as either neuro-separate or neuro-shared spaces. Neuro-shared spaces are mixed spaces, or spaces made socially and physically accessible for both NTs and autistic people. While public spaces are shared social spaces, it is in essence neuro-separate space, dominated by NTs.
and is often experienced as hostile by autistic people. There are many instances where autistic people have worked to produce their own separate spaces away from the NT world and hence assumed to be 'safe' spaces (see for example Hall 2005; Kruse 2002; Ryan & Räisänen 2008). There is a growing body of research that has addressed the role of the internet and on-line spaces which provide safe spaces for autistic people to meet and interact with each other (refs). There is less work that has addressed face-to-face environments that may provide a similar resource and opportunities.

**Materials**

The magazine *Empowerment* was published with two issues in 2002, thereafter with four issues every year until 2009 as a part of Projekt Empowerment by The National Society of Autism and Asperger in Sweden (RFA). It was sent to all members with autism in the RFA. Projekt Empowerment and the magazine *Empowerment* is part of an emerging self-advocacy movement in Sweden among adults with autism. The aim of Projekt Empowerment, translated into English here, was to develop a strategy to enable adults with autism to meet and discuss issues of importance for them and to explore what an adapted support may look like in order to gain more influence and participation within the organization and more widely in society.

Our analysis and commentary draws on contributions to the magazine, including interviews with adults with autism, reportage on events and issues directed to or relevant for adults with autism, letters to the editor and pictures of adults with autism. 47 autistic adults contributed a named article at least once during the publication period. Contributions ranged from autistic people discussing their lives to collective writing about broad issues facing a social movement to improve the lives of autistic people. Among the topics presented in the magazine, the meaning of friendship and social interaction was a frequent topic of reports and other contributions.

The analysis offered here is a form of thematic analysis that draws on conventions within critical discourse analysis (particularly the work of Edley, 2001). This involved collecting all articles that addressed friendship, community and social interaction. The texts were then read and reread to identify key themes arising from the texts linked to social interaction and friendships very broadly. The analysis presented in this paper focuses on themes concerning friendships and the development of a sense of community.

**Findings**

In the first part of the findings section we examine the meaning of social interaction and sense of community in autistic and NT spaces. In the latter part we explore expressions of an alternative discourse of an 'autistic friendship' or a friendship on autistic people’s own terms.

**Social Interaction And Sense Of Community**

A central and recurrent theme in articles in the magazine *Empowerment* is social interaction and community. Discussion focuses mostly on social interaction and community among autistic people themselves rather than in interaction with NTS. The sense of community within this group is often
contrasted to experiences of alienation when autistic people interact with NTs.

The RFA and Projekt Empowerment offered various face-to-face camps, courses, and conferences aimed at adults with autism, and these social events are written about in the magazine. Writers describe the camps in strongly positive emotional terms. 4 They are seen as spaces where autistic people can make new acquaintances and friends. 5 One contributor, Eva Berqvist, defines community in itself as: "a completely voluntary intercourse or joint activity that all participants have sufficient balance and thus not a sacrifice for someone." She draws on her experiences at a summer camp to define a sense of community through her engagement with others on her own terms:

During dinner, I had common interests (which moved me to the depths of my soul) to discuss with my table companions. Then it was dance, which for once was accepted to dance each one individually. It was wonderful to not be dependent on a dance partner approval to join the community and experience the joy of dance and also avoid it in the interior, too high frequency occurrence of the meat market. (Eva Berqvist) 6

Contributors to Empowerment reported that a conducive environment is important to help foster social interaction and friendship. This is reflected in reports from a summer camp in which participants at the camp describe autistic people as "the nicest people in the world! They are open, broad-minded, tolerant, and unprejudiced." 7 In another statement, the other participants are described as people who have "made my week FABULOUS!" 8 Writers state that socializing with other autistic people makes the individual grow, 9 "feel more inner strength" 10 and "feel loved." 11 One writer describes it as a relief to "meet people of my own kind." 12

Contributors to the magazine discuss how the camps are seen as an expression of an actual autistic community as well as a symbolic representation of a community among autistic people. In these narratives, autistic people referred to as "we with AS" or "Aspergers" are contrasted to NTs "non-aspergers," "those with no AS," or "NTs." 13 In many of the reports the sense of community is emphasized in relation to "they" — the NTs —who are represented as alien, or are "othered." This is seen for example, in a report (below) of a karaoke evening that took place in a summer camp:

When Roger sings "We're not gonna take it", I think the roof is going to blow off. ... And his interpretation of the Twisted Sister's song adds an extra dimension to [Projekt] Empowerment's concept, "Power over your own life". "We're not gonna take it anymore!" Roger wails into the mike, and I don't think I am wrong in saying that his message reaches every single person in the audience....My spontaneous reaction is that the overall quality was much higher than the times I've seen and heard neurotypicals sing karaoke. And they usually have to drink like fish to get the guts to go on stage. This evening at Almåsa, everyone took the stage like it was the most natural thing in the world. (Lena Henrikson) 14

The narratives about community are regularly contrasted, as in the extract above, with the reported inferior behavior of NTs and social interaction with
The need for an autistic only or autistic dominated space is strongly articulated in articles in the magazine. For example, reflecting on their experiences at the 2002 camp, a writer proposes: "We should create a separate society for people with AS." This society should be named "Aspergiana," where "neurotypicals would have to come to camp once a year and take a course!" Another writer notes: "All that about how you're supposed to dress doesn't matter, because that's just something for neurotypicals. This is a camp for people with AS."  

In the magazine the meaning of an autistic community is discussed and defined in relation to experiences of alienation and exclusion in NT-contexts. Experiences of alienation are illustrated by one author through drawing on two examples of personal experience. The first, is a story of "teamwork" at university in which the other team members had refused to include the writer in the group or its work (by refusing to speak with her, treating her as though she did not exist, and setting meeting times for teamwork without informing her). In the second account, she describes her experience at a student party at which she was excluded, none of the boys wanted to dance with her, but when she chose to dance by herself she was criticized, and when she tried to make contact with one of the boys, he was physically abusive to her.  

**Learning How To Have Friends And Manage NT Spaces**

The magazine published several articles that provided concrete tips and self-help strategies based on the experience of others concerning how autistic people can learn to cope and interact in NT-contexts. This accords with the overall ideology of the *Empowerment* magazine to support autistic people to integrate in (NT) society. Unspoken signals and unwritten rules are discussed as something NTs learn automatically, while autistic people often have actively to practice. Concrete examples of unwritten rules and wordless signals are provided in articles, but they also provided concrete tips on how to make contacts with others, described useful conversation strategies, discussed relationships (how to find new friends and keep old ones), and offered advice on where to learn more about communication. In order for readers to understand friendship formations, the magazine offered advice on friendship, including articles written by contributors with autism that provided narratives of personal experiences of friendship and provided tips and strategies for making autistic friendships possible. This narrative included both how "we with autism/AS" socialize with other people and factors involved for this interaction to work. The advice stressed the importance of rhythm and moderation in both friendship and conversation: the importance of listening, of showing interest in the other person by asking her how she is, of talking about what you think and feel while not saying everything you think, of not talking too long about things that interest just yourself, of not making contact too often while remembering to maintain the relationship by regularly calling or writing, of taking turns with your friend when it comes to making contact.

The theme of the 2007 summer course was interaction and this was represented in a number of articles published in the magazine at that time. In addition to advice and self-help tips there were articles about the summer course in which autistic people described their experiences of social
interaction in NT-contexts, particularly their experiences managing difficulties with social interaction.  

The dominant narrative in these reports is one in which the person has experienced barriers in NT social interaction, learnt to identify difficulties in the interactions and then discussed ways to interact socially more on their own terms as someone with autism.  

A contributor to the magazine illustrates this in their article:

I have such a hard time feeling a sense of belonging when I am expected to do something, and maybe even in a certain way. Those are the times I compensate, when I use the "intellectual emotion". Strategies, imitations, and other tricks are useful on special occasions, but you can't live with them 24 hours a day. These days, I think I've got better at what we usually call social interaction, as long as it happens in an environment I have chosen and where I know what I can talk about. (Gunilla Hultgren)

In addition to the self help tips for understanding and engaging in NT social interaction, the magazine also contains articles that stress the importance of individual responsibility in making and maintaining friendships, primarily through showing interest in and adapting to other people. However, the importance of shared responsibility is also stressed. For example, one author writes that, "both you and the people in your life have to make adjustments and try to communicate so that others understand."  

The suggestions also emphasize that you should only try to become friends with "people who are nice and respect you; there's no point trying to kiss up to people who don't want anything to do with you."  

Resisting Neuronormative Assumptions Of Friendships

In discussions about quality of life in Empowerment friendships were often cited as an important aspect of good quality of life. However, in some reports there is also a questioning of the expectation to have friends and to be sociable. For example, in a discussion reported from the 2003 summer camp, one reporter, Stina Andersson, writes: "What's the point of having friends?", "Why do you need friends?", and "Do you have to have friends?" Answers given in the report (quoted from summer camp participants) to the questions include: "You can share your interests and have fun with your friends," "It's good to have friends when you have a problem and need to talk," and "Having friends gives you positive reinforcement and self-esteem."  

However, an alternative view of friendship and sociability is also evident in reports. The importance of being able to be alone is also stressed. A writer stresses the importance of striking a balance between "alone time" and "social time." She finds that she cannot rest when she is in social situations, so she needs "alone time" in which to recover:

Now I know that the most important thing is not being like everybody else. What is most important is that I have social interaction with others to the extent and in the setting I feel comfortable with. It's just a shame it took so many years before I understood that how I live my life is up to me. (Gunilla Hultgren)

In line with Gunilla's quote above, another contributor emphasizes the
importance of being silent with friends and the ability to experience the 
community of friendship through shared silence. 33

When I get to know people, I’m usually hesitant at first. I need time 
to understand how another human is being and thinking. I know 
that if I meet a human, usually it starts with superficial matters such 
as what your name is, what do you do, how old you are, etc. For 
me it is not the important questions anymore. I would really like to 
ask the person to tell me about his/her life. Do you know one when 
you know everything about that person? First impressions are often 
mostly confusing for me and shows nothing about the person or 
about myself really. I show more of who I am when I calmly sit 
down and talk for a few hours with another person. Relationships 
are difficult to get to work. I find it hard to accept that it shall work 
from someone else’s perspective. Am I being too different from 
another person it does not work at all. Maybe I have too narrow a 
field of view of current people, but I know I work best with people 
who are quite similar to me. It’s not just people with autism / AS I 
find affinity with. Sometimes I meet people that I can have 
confidence in one go. If you dare to let go of ones inhibitions and 
just be, it becomes much easier to get a relationship to work. When 
you can sit silent together without having to say a single word and 
the other person still understands how you feel, when one can 
experience what the others appreciate in life together … Well, then 
you have really gotten in touch! 34

Talk about friendship as something desirable and contributing to quality of life, 
is also challenged by several reports in the magazine. For example, there 
were reports in which relationships are said to take rather than provide energy 
for autistic people 35 and the need to be able to choose one’s friends is also 
emphasized. 36 Contributors described experiences of “coerced socialization,” 
such as social interaction with NTs (e.g., colleagues, parents, and relatives). 
37 In one report, a writer described ambivalence between being oneself as a 
person with autism and adapting to an NT world. 38 On one hand, s/he 
stresses the importance of being able to adapt to become more able to handle 
certain (NT) practices and environments, to become, in effect, more NT. 
However, at the same time, the writer warns the autistic reader against 
choosing an NT environment where the person with autism is regarded as a 
“remodeling project” for NTs rather than a person in her/his own right.

Empowerment also presents personal stories about friendship where the 
interaction does not bring an enhanced quality of life, but is a negative and 
stressful experience. Reports talk about self-destruction or being unable to like 
one’self, 39 and of bullying as a consequence of difficulties in social interaction. 
40 In addition, contributors questioned the importance of friendship to autistic 
people and questioned expectations about friendships: how do you start 
friendships? How many friends you are supposed to have? And how do you 
interact with friends? 41 In one statement, the writer notes that the first 
meeting with a person always “starts with surface questions — what’s your 
name, what do you do, how old are you, etc.,” which she sees as unimportant:

Those questions just don’t seem important to me anymore. I’d 
actually like to just ask the person to tell me about their life. (Lena
Conclusions

The data presented in this paper illustrates the important, but potentially ambiguous, role of friendships in the lives of autistic people. The contributions to Empowerment magazine provide advice on how to manage an NT world and ways in which social interaction and friendships can be enacted. However, there is strongly felt ambivalence about performing NT style friendships and the separate autistic space of Empowerment summer camps are reported as enabling participants to develop and enjoy friendships without the surveillance of an NT world. Some reports in the magazine demonstrate a skepticism of the NT world (particularly of claims that NTs are it is superior to autistic people) and to mechanisms by which they can be made more NT. In seeking to understand the role of friendships for autistic people, we need therefore to be mindful of the dominant NT understandings of the notion of friendship that is frequently used as a benchmark. We need to explore alternative possibilities for understanding friendships, ones that do not necessarily include the dominant NT ideals of researchers who seek to understand friendship. For example, the data reported in this paper suggest a need for conceptualizing silence and ‘alone time’ as aspects of friendships for some autistic people, a factor not examined by NT research. Friendships may take many forms, and a lack of compliance with NT ideals should therefore not necessarily be taken as a lack of commitment to friendship relationships.

The empirical data reported in this paper outline that neuroseparate spaces, such as those produced by Projekt Empowerment, may provide autistic people with a sense of community and a place to have fun, develop, and maintain friendships. However, we must always be mindful of the potential implications of such neuroseparate spaces. Such separatist ideals may give power for movements to segregate rather than challenge and integrate an equal neurodiverse space. It is important to stress that the authors of articles in the magazine Empowerment discuss ways in which NT spaces are experienced as hostile and excluding. We therefore need to explore if there are ways in which the separate space of the Empowerment project can provide us with ideas about how to support more neurodiverse spaces.

References


**Endnotes**

1. Andersson, S. (2003). Vad ska man ha vänner till? *Empowerment*, 3,(2), 18. This is a contributor to the *Empowerment* magazine. Permission is given by the editor, for their work to be used in this paper.

2. In this paper we have consciously chosen to use the term 'autistic people' and 'autistic', rather than people first language (i.e. 'people with autism'). This in line with voices raised within autistic self-advocacy movements (see ex Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al, 2015; Kapp et al, 2012)

3. In Swedish: "utveckla en modell där vuxna som själva har autism/Asperger..."
syndrom kan träffas och diskuterar frågor som är viktiga för dem. Vi ska undersöka hur ett anpassat stöd kan se ut för att dessa personer ska få ökat inflytande och delaktighet inom föreningen och i dess verksamhet utåt."

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7. Empowerment, 2002:1, Vol 1, p.16-17, "Insändarsidor"
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11. Empowerment, 2002:1, Vol 1, p.16-17, "Insändarsidor"
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12. Empowerment, 2002:2, Vol 1, p. 16-17, "Insändarsidor"
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13. Empowerment, 2002:2, Vol 1, p. 16-17, "Insändarsidor"
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16. Empowerment, 2002:1, Vol 1, p.16-17, "Insändarsidor"
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    Empowerment, 2002:2, årgång 1, s.12, "Paneldebatt om fritid"
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19. Empowerment, 2008:2, Vol 7, s.24-25, "Tips och strategier"
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    Empowerment, 2007:3, Vol 6, p.8, "Kommunikation med KAT-kittet"
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    Maria Hellström, Empowerment, 2008:1, Vol 7, p.15, "Krönika";
    Hanna Danmo, Empowerment, 2007:3, Vol 6, p.3, "Ledare"
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    livskvalitet"; Empowerment, 2007:2, Vol 6, p.4-5, "Livskvalitet för mig är…";


  

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