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## The Future of Critical Autism Studies (CAS): Thinking through Critical Discourse Studies and Postcolonial Feminism

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# The Future of Critical Autism Studies (CAS): Thinking through Critical Discourse Studies and Postcolonial Feminism

Cansu Elmadagli

For any emerging scholarly tradition, it is essential to define and situate the specific approaches that are adopted by practitioners of the field. Critical Autism Studies (CAS) has been defined and redefined by various scholars since Davidson and Orsini's conception of the term in 2010 (O'Dell et al., 2016; Milton & Ryan, 2022). As a part of this discussion, I situate myself as an autistic scholar who is in alignment with the overall tenets and aims of CAS; however, it is not my intention to explore it in great detail.

The main aim of CAS is to challenge how autism is constructed based on medical and social deficit-based models (O'Dell et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2018). It also challenges the existence of a non-autistic/neurotypical norm that is "unquestioned and naturalised" (O'Dell et al., 2016, p. 168). Similarly expressed by other scholars, Waltz's (2014) interpretation of criticality regarding CAS is a useful way to orient our critical scholarship and practice (Woods et al., 2018). According to Waltz (2014),

the 'criticality' comes from investigating power dynamics that operate in Discourses around autism, questioning deficit-based definitions of autism, and being willing to consider the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce 'disability' (p. 1337).

From this perspective, CAS specifically focuses on investigation of "the power dynamics in the discourses and questioning medical understandings of autism" (Woods et al., 2018, p. 978). However, to supplement this 'questioning of medical understandings', I would like to emphasize that social deficiency models "exacerbate the medical model" (Kapp, 2019, p.3). It is important to specify and overtly highlight this aspect in CAS and not to gloss over the importance of challenging discourses that deem autistic people as socially deficient in addition to medical understandings. Against this backdrop, the 'critical' in CAS is tied to challenging normative assumptions that are configured through and within power dynamics in society. In this vein,

CAS aims to question and challenge the “unquestioned and naturalised” assumptions of neurotypical as the norm (O’Dell et al., 2016, p. 168) and as the universal subject.

What I intend to do in this paper is open up different ways of thinking and bringing about potential discussion points within CAS. I suggest thinking about CAS in relation to critical discourse studies (CDS) and thinking about autism through postcolonial feminism. From this perspective, opening up new ways of thinking does not entail addressing the most original ideas or thoughts. Instead, it acts as mobilizing readily existent approaches, concepts and tools from other traditions that could be useful for enriching CAS as a field. Accordingly, this paper discusses what ‘critical’ entails in CAS and CDS scholarly fields. It also discusses autistic emancipation from a perspective of decolonization. Last but not least, it proposes what roles autistic and neurotypical scholars should play within CAS. Since my aim is to ‘merely’ suggest and ‘open up’ different ways of thinking, I do not touch upon how specific concepts and tools within CDS, and postcolonial feminism can be thoroughly applied in context.

Although CDS has its own short-comings and points of contention, I believe that it can help us CAS scholars when attending to autism discourses. This is due to CDS’ theoretical and methodological approaches that enable micro-analysis of discourses by paying attention to linguistic and visual details in communicative events. Furthermore, combining CDS and CAS perspectives can be seen as an opportunity on behalf of both strands of scholarship as they can mutually benefit each other in terms of creating new understandings, approaches and repertoires. My suggestion of thinking about autism through postcolonial feminism might seem somehow unorthodox, however, I believe that CAS can benefit from the wisdom accumulated by feminist scholars, especially concerning emancipation. Such an approach is also essential as CAS needs more engagement with feminist and postcolonial perspectives. Both CDS and postcolonial feminism take an overt sociopolitical stance when dealing with oppression, marginalization, and liberation. Thus, both approaches are compatible with CAS’ emancipatory goals.

## Critical Discourse Studies and Critical Autism Studies

An essential aspect of CAS scholarship is its interest in challenging the dominant constructions of autism as neurological deficit (O'Dell et al., 2016). Additionally, this interrogation of how autism is constructed entails “focusing on autism as an identity that is materially and discursively produced within specific socio-cultural contexts” (O'Dell et al., 2016, p. 167). If autism can be seen as an identity that is discursively produced, attending to dominant autism discourses is a significant part of engaging with CAS.

According to van Dijk (1993), Critical Discourse Studies is “admittedly and ultimately” political, aiming to promote social change through a critical understanding of social issues (p. 252). Therefore, CDS scholars adopt the perspectives of those who are most affected by dominance and inequality, directing their critique towards the power elites who overlook, perpetuate, or maintain social problems and inequalities (ibid). As van Dijk (1993) emphasizes, critical discourse analysts should not only be social scientists but also activists, reflecting the transformative nature of their work. To achieve this, CDS specifically examines the dynamics of social power, which heavily relies on “privileged access to socially valued resources such as wealth, income, position, status, force, group membership, education, or knowledge” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). In short, due to its sociopolitical stance and subjects of interest, CDS is concerned with Foucauldian understandings of power, ideology, discourse, and knowledge.

CDS sees discourses as social practices that “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Therefore, discourse is not only seen as text such as speech or writing but as context specific frameworks that enables one to make sense of things (van Leeuwen, 2008). Consequently, discourses shape and are shaped by the social context in which they are embedded (Foucault, 1972). As social practices that constitute objects of knowledge and are in “active relation to reality” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 41), in CDS discourses are seen as inherently ideological. From this perspective, it is possible to understand autism discourses as ideologically coded depending on the contexts in which they are constructed.

Therefore, discourses enable us to make sense of what autism is and what being autistic means. As social practices, they draw the boundaries

of how to act 'autistically' and how to be autistic. Seeing autism from a critical discourse perspective, allows us to understand "the production and legitimation of different knowledges" concerning autism and which ones are "prioritised and accorded legitimacy" (O'Dell et al., 2016, p. 170) due to the ideologies they aim to serve.

Additionally, for my suggestion to be viable, establishing what 'critical' entails in CDS is essential. If we are to take Waltz's definition of critical, CAS and CDS possess enough commonalities that make them compatible approaches in understanding autism discourses. According to Fairclough (2010), one of the founders of CDS as a scholarly tradition, critique in CDS entails evaluating "what exists, what might exist and what should exist on the basis of a coherent set of values" (p.7). From this perspective, CDS sees a critical approach to certain discourses as denaturalizing ideologies that "the orderliness of interactions" rely on (ibid). In this context, naturalization refers to the attribution of common sense to specific ideological representations, enabling them to remain unnoticed and unquestioned or in other words remain hidden in plain sight. If certain representations are not seen as ideological, then we cannot overtly identify their effects either. Thus, what is meant by critique as denaturalization is revealing these specific naturalizations and rendering "social determinations and effects of discourse" visible (Fairclough, 2010, p.31).

For this critique to be successfully achieved, an approach that bridges the micro events and macro structures is needed. In this context, what is meant by 'micro' is specific texts, discursive events and practices and by 'macro' is wider political, social, economic and cultural structures as well as processes (Fairclough, 2010). The critical discourse approach sees the macro structures as "both the conditions for and the products" of micro events and thus sees the micro and macro as interconnected (Fairclough, 2010, p.44). From this perspective, CDS is especially compatible with CAS's previously mentioned aim of challenging the existence of a non-autistic/neurotypical norm that is "unquestioned and naturalised" (O'Dell et al., 2016, p.168).

As Brownlow and colleagues (2022) suggested, "a much wider consideration of socio-cultural influences needs to be engaged with and the powerful way that language and practice shape identity constructions and experiences" (p.30). In other words, a much wider consideration of how micro events

and macro structures define autism and autistic experiences is needed. Coming from CDS' approach of discourse as social practice can help CAS scholars to do so systematically. In one study, Milton (2016) pointed out that how autistic people's interpretations of themselves are "undermined by the expert knowledge being projected upon the autistic person, who by default is positioned in a relatively powerless social position of medical patient" (p. 1405). CDS is known to be and especially suited to analyze micro events (such as therapy or diagnosis sessions) that can problematize and scrutinize such expert knowledge and what Milton (2016) termed as "psychsplaining" (ibid.) by looking into how autistic people and the so-called experts interact.

Although it methodologically employs discursive psychology, an example of a similar approach can be exemplified by Lester's (2012) work on how "the meanings that surround autism are negotiated, resisted, contested, and/or taken up" by parents as observed on a micro-level (interview talk) (para. 36). By bringing concepts and tools from CDS and bridging the micro-macro gap, a more holistic critique of autistic subjection and oppression can be created.

From both CDS and CAS perspectives, to uphold and reinforce a so-called neurotypical norm and neuroprivilege, an autistic 'Other' needs to be discursively constructed and sustained. The Other here refers to individuals and groups that are "treated and marked as different and inferior" in relation to dominant and socially accepted groups (Griffin, 2017). From a CDS perspective, the neurotypical, universal subject can be seen and overtly named as the 'elite'. This allows one to highlight the power dynamics and inequalities between autistic and non-autistic people. In alignment with this, the normalized and neutralized oppression of autistic people can be critically examined. Furthermore, this also allows the critical investigation of all normalized and neutralized neurotypical dysfunctions as dominant mode of living, being and doing.

## **From Discourse to Emancipation: Thinking about Autism Through Colonization**

It is important to think about emancipatory goals of CAS more specifically. As Milton (2016) points out, "autistic people are some of the most marginalized in society" (p.1405). Historically, autistic people have been represented as less-than-human or non-human and as "incapable of full socialisation and

personhood” (ibid.). Within scholarship, we have more than enough evidence to suggest that autistic people are economically, socially, culturally, and politically marginalized and oppressed (O’Dell et al., 2016; Milton, 2016).

Most of the time, autistic people’s boundaries are disrespected and transgressed, their bodily, psychic, and social autonomy disregarded. All these injustices are justified and reinforced by the so-called expert knowledges created by the neurotypical elite that works to discipline and govern (Foucault, 1977) autistic people. Considering that autistic people are being grossly mistreated and face unspeakable injustices to this day, I believe that thinking about autistic emancipation from a perspective of colonization can be a useful approach for achieving our goals. Thus, I suggest that autistic people, bodies, identities, spaces, and cultures can be seen as colonized by the neurotypical counterparts. Additionally, efforts of CAS and the autistic community can be understood as counter-discourse creation and resistant knowledge production. From this perspective, autistic and neurotypical people are seen as situated in continual power struggles over discourses and knowledges. This formulation does not seek to reproduce and reinforce the autistic/non-autistic binary, however, a thorough understanding of the power struggles and co-existence of autistic and neurotypical discourses calls for us to acknowledge the relationality of these two categories.

Lorde (2003) pointed out that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” and it can only “allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 26). Instead, she advocated for learning how to take one’s differences and turning them into strengths (ibid.). In my following arguments, I will try to adopt Lorde’s (2003) wisdom to reformulate how autistic people, as colonized subjects, can in fact see their differences as strengths that will allow autistic people to dismantle the master’s house and if necessary, also to dismantle the master’s tools. From this perspective, it is essential to ask how knowledges and discourses created by the neurotypical elite can be used as tools for emancipation if autistic people’s suffering and oppression is rooted in them? Is it even possible for these tools to be used for autistic emancipation at all?

From a critical discourse perspective, the master’s house is seen as built upon neuronormativity as an oppressive ideology and the scaffolding is seen as the autism discourses that reproduce and reinforce neuronormativity

and neuroprivilege. To fully engage in this type of emancipatory work, CAS scholars need to be comfortable with a certain amount of radicalism and an overt sociopolitical stance in our knowledge making practices. For this reason, I argue that CAS needs to question, destabilize and if necessary, entirely deconstruct everything that is mobilized against us and used in our oppression.

In their seminal presentation at the 1993 International Conference on Autism in Toronto, Sinclair (2012) emphasized that autism is seen as the sole problem that does not allow non-autistic and autistic people to properly relate and understand each other.

Each of us who does learn to talk to you, each of us who manages to function at all in your society, each of us who manages to reach out and make a connection with you, is operating in alien territory, making contact with alien beings. We spend our entire lives doing this. And then you tell us that we can't relate (p. 2).

Sinclair's words and entire speech can be referred to as a testament of "double consciousness". The term double consciousness was originally termed by DuBois (1903/1996) in relation to race and the experiences of simultaneously occupying two modes of thinking as a racial minority. However, this term has been mobilized by other scholars in relation to variety of marginalized groups as a useful concept. Double consciousness speaks to the colonized and oppressed groups' ability "to entertain two perspectives, two ways of thinking, and two ways of looking at the world (Medina, 2012, p. 192).

As expected, double consciousness has its own negative impacts on one's well-being. For example, looking at ourselves through neurotypical standards and expectations most of the time impacts our well-being negatively, especially if we internalize judgments and ableism enacted by the neurotypical gaze. As our agency and our capability to understand ourselves and others are continuously undermined, this causes what Media (2012) calls "epistemic insecurity or lack of self-confidence on cognitive matters" (p. 40). However, as Medina (2012) points out, this double consciousness also frequently forces oppressed groups "to acquire deep familiarity with certain domains, developing forms of expertise than no one else has", especially



about their oppressors (p. 44). When talking about the double-empathy problem, Milton (2012) points out that “many autistic people have indeed gained a greater level of insight into non-AS society, and more than vice versa, perhaps due to the need to survive and potentially thrive in a non-AS culture” (p. 886). The conception of ‘double-empathy’ problem (Milton 2012), the studies that have built upon it and to a certain extent proved the existence of the phenomena has become a scientific demonstration of the double-consciousness Sinclair’s speech manifests.

Since some of our power struggles with neurotypical groups can be seen on an epistemic level, our emancipation can also be formulated through this lens. Milton’s (2012) conception of the double-empathy problem can be seen as an example of epistemic resistance and how we can make use of CAS to engage in counter-discourse and resistant knowledge production. The double-empathy problem gave autistic people explanatory powers, a new vocabulary to talk about autism, and a new perspective to think about the so-called autistic deficiencies. In alignment of Lorde’s (2003) ideas, I propose that to dismantle the master’s house, we build upon the double-empathy problem by making use of Medina’s (2012) ideas on epistemic resistance. This is an essential step if discourses of empathy are to be understood as the master’s tools that reproduce and reinforce neuronormativity. In fact, scholars such as Catala and colleagues (2022; 2021) successfully make use of Medina’s ideas of meta-ignorance in relation to autism and intellectual disabilities.

According to Medina (2012) oppressors and the oppressed tend to mirror important epistemic vices and virtues. This mirroring can be seen as reflecting the power struggle between these two groups since epistemic vices and virtues are cognitive attitudes people are socialized into. I do not intend to go into detail regarding how these vices and virtues function as a part of discussion. To put briefly, Medina (2012) identifies three epistemic vices as epistemic arrogance, laziness, and close-mindedness. On the flip side, he identifies epistemic virtues as epistemic humility, curiosity, and open-mindedness. From this perspective, Medina (2012) points out that epistemic vices of privileged groups create a specific “epistemic character: that of the actively ignorant subject” (p. 39). These vices work as self-defense mechanisms to sustain and reproduce one’s privileged position through active ignorance of and insensitivity to oppressed groups.

The collection of epistemic virtues cultivated due to experiences of oppression creates a specific epistemic character of its own that Medina (2012) calls “subversive lucidity” (p. 44). Medina’s (2012) conception of subversive lucidity is directly tied to the double consciousness oppressed groups might possess. From this perspective, subversive lucidity creates “the potential to question widely held assumptions and prejudices” (p. 45) since oppressed people are “better positioned and better equipped for a particular kind of epistemic subversion” (p. 46). As Medina (2012) points out, subversive lucidity requires:

a redrawing of conceptual boundaries, for a rearticulation of epistemic norms; and this is not simply a mere adjusting of our perspective, but a radical questioning of assumptions and taken-for-granted descriptions, a challenging in fundamental ways of available frameworks—in short, an inversion of perspectives (p. 46).

Perhaps, in the spirit of dismantling the master’s house and of subversive lucidity as decolonization, our epistemic resistance should include reformulating neurotypical subjects as actively ignorant subjects. As Medina (2012) points out, belonging to a privileged group does not automatically create the actively ignorant subject and people from all social groups can possess epistemic vices. Thus, not all neurotypical subjects can be generalized as actively ignorant. However, this formulation speaks to the possibility of seeing most members of privileged groups as a part of this category since their privileges and power are literally dependent on their active ignorance and insensitivity. This insensitivity is observed in studies that document neurotypical people’s negative perceptions and reactions towards autistic people (Alkhaldi et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2020).

In some cases, these occur within only few seconds based on “thin slice judgments” (Sasson et al., 2017, p. 2). Based on the results of these studies, it is possible to take things further and argue that as actively ignorant subjects, neurotypical people do not seem to demonstrate sufficient ‘empathy’ based on the standards of their own making because of their epistemic vices. That being said, I would like to leave you with a question: “As actively ignorant subjects, are neurotypical people possibly deficient in understanding themselves and others, yet, project their own incapacities on autistic people?”

## Concluding Remarks

Decolonization and emancipatory practice that takes an overt sociopolitical stance entails creating discomfort in our oppressors who dehumanize autistic people. In alignment with what Lorde (2003) said, I encourage CAS scholars and the autistic community to learn “how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (p. 26). It is true that as scholars, it is our responsibility to uphold coexisting and competing perspectives. As O’Dell and colleagues (2016) point out, it would be “insulting and harmful” to autistic people if treated as a homogeneous group an essentialized category and as speaking in “one voice” (p. 168). As human beings, we have our own limitations and weaknesses, especially when we are personally involved in a cause rooted in our communities. Therefore, it is also our responsibility to be able to direct that same critical lens not only to others but also to ourselves since “our meta-cognitions are also always limited and must be constantly checked and expanded” (Medina, 2012, p.202).

That being said, it is of utmost importance that as autistic people, we are first and foremost the ones to steer the conversation and determine our emancipatory steps. As Waltz (2014) expressed, there is still “tokenism and occasionally exploitation” regarding autistic people as research subjects in terms of “how their words and actions are chosen, interpreted, and bracketed within research” (p.1338). Additionally, CAS is faced with concerns of “cultural imperialism” (Woods et.al., 2018, p. 975) which also speaks to the formulation of autism in relation to colonization. For the said reasons and since it is “undesirable to surrender CAS to purely non-autistic perspectives” (Woods et.al., 2018, p. 976), limiting the influence of non-autistic scholars within CAS might have to be considered. This is not to create a sense of us and them or create “unfruitful barriers between different kinds of advocates” (O’Dell et.al., 2016, p. 173). However, it is equally important for non-autistic scholars to remember what allyship entails to make sure autistic boundaries are not transgressed and autistic people are not spoken over. If non-autistic scholars do not attend to these with the sensitivity and consideration required, this only results in limiting autistic freedom and creating yet another level of autistic oppression and colonization.

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