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## Proud to be Autistic: Metaphorical Construction and Salience of Cultural and Personal Identity in #StopCombatingMe

Jessica Benham  
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Proud to be Autistic

Metaphorical Construction and Salience of Cultural and Personal Identity in #StopCombatingMe

By

Jessica L. Benham

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

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Mankato, Minnesota

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Proud to be Autistic: Metaphorical Construction and Salience of Cultural and Personal Identity  
in #StopCombatingMe

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's  
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## ABSTRACT

Like many other autistic individuals, I struggle to find language to appropriately describe my experiences. Furthermore, within the Autistic community, debates over appropriate language use are frequent, including discussions on person-first language versus identity-first language, *functioning* language, and medical terminology. Through this research, I examine how rhetorical constructions of Autism gain power, focused on the role of language choice with regard to personal identity and self-advocacy and conduct a discourse analysis of the #StopCombatingMe movement on Twitter. Spearheaded by ASAN, a grassroots organization which seeks to challenge public dialogue on Autism, #StopCombatingMe sought to argue against the reauthorization of the Combating Autism Act. Namely, ASAN's proponents claimed that the title of the act was offensive and that the act's funding of research for a cause and cure of Autism was misguided. I collected data from tweets and blog posts associated with the campaign, with the purpose of exploring how Autistic individuals articulate their identities in response to hegemonic narratives of Autism.

Through my research, I found three ideological themes: disability pride, self-determination, and the genetic origin of Autism. In the discourse, disability pride provided the reasoning behind the pervasive use of identity-first language, a refusal to use *functioning* language, and a rejection of the need to pass or conform to neurotypical expectations. Additionally, disability pride provided a foundation for a rejection or redirection of many of the metaphors frequently used to describe Autistic people, including AUTISM AS ILLNESS, AUTISM AS WAR, and AUTISTICS AS LOST. Within #StopCombatingMe, Autistic individuals made strong arguments for self-determination, self-advocacy, and Autistic agency, emphasizing the validity and importance of Autistic perspective within decision-making. Though

research has yet to find a cause for Autism, within #StopCombatingMe, the overwhelming opinion was that Autism is genetic. My analysis led to intriguing conclusions about the salience of identity labels, reappropriation in a “safe” space, the applicability of *functionality* in determining human worth, and entailment relationships of Autism metaphors.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A traumatic end to a relationship at the age of nineteen led me a psychologist's office, where instead of merely helping me to process my teenage angst, the shrink suggested that I should be tested for Autism Spectrum Disorder. While I had certainly noticed that I struggled with social interaction, among other difficulties, I had never considered that there might have been a neurological reason behind those problems. Eventually, I was labeled: Autism Spectrum Disorder, a diagnosis that would define my identity from that moment, explaining so clearly how and why I felt the way I did. When I tell people that I have Autism, most don't believe me. I don't "look" or "act" like I am Autistic; whatever that means. It's a spectrum disorder for a reason! High functioning, I was told. Functioning labels only serve one purpose, posing only two questions – how well do you pass? How neurotypical can you act?

When the choice to learn to pass was made for me as a child, when "proper" behavior was taught, there was no sense of indignation because I had not yet developed an identity that could be infringed upon. Since I wasn't diagnosed with Autism until my early twenties, my parents only knew me as the problem child, the one who always needed supervision, to whom social interaction came as anything but natural. When my mother told me to stop wringing my hands like that, that it made me look Autistic, I began to compulsively chew and lick my lips. A smaller, less noticeable stim, a repetitive compulsive behavior, was okay. Even without an official diagnosis, the "A-word" remained a whispered mention, and I learned that looking Autistic is bad. But everything my parents did, they did with love. It was never their fault; to this day, no one knows how to talk about Autism, or to Autistic people. If I had been diagnosed as a child, I would have been given a label that, at the time, was primarily viewed negatively; whereas, today, I have access to literature that allows me to have a more positive outlook. Even



so, as Fassett and Morella (2008), noted, little literature exists on the topic of passing and coming out as related to disability. Regarding my relationship with my parents, I relate to what Rousso (2013) wrote:

I misconstrued her efforts to minimize my disability-related characteristics as confirmation that there was a freakish creature living within me that needed to be contained and tamed...in my mind, something that couldn't be spoken about had to be really bad. (p. 45)

As a teen, my brain was on overload; trying to fit in is even more difficult for someone with a neurological difference than for the average teenager. Constantly trying to remember to make and maintain eye contact, as the eyes of others seared mine with glances that made it so painfully obvious that they knew I was different. My strong preference for structure and order meant that I was not only rarely invited, but also rarely felt comfortable participating in spontaneous social events.

I used to believe that passing was a privilege. Someone once told me that my ability to learn how to act “normal” was like learning how to speak a second language; most “kids like me” weren't able to do that, she said. Yet, I maintain it's not a second language; in learning it, I lost my first. I can act “normal,” but I will never be. While I have gained much through my ability to pass, I begin to worry that I have lost myself. I don't necessarily believe in the notion of a true, single self, but I do know that all of my identities feel forced and unnatural.

Yet, I feel guilty complaining when I consider those who have not been so “lucky” as to be able to give passing a try. Would it be easier to be nonverbal, compulsively rocking back and forth, and stuck inside my own Autistic head? That's not my experience, that's not for me to say. I've been told that it's selfish of me to wish that I could remember my natural, Autistic identity

better and that some people would give anything to not be Autistic. It's a spectrum disorder for a reason; everyone's experiences are different. This one is mine, this is my voice. I experience constant pressure to fit in, unable to relax, because I don't know who I am. Passing became so second nature that I don't remember what the first nature was.

Forced eye contact is now subconscious; despite the literal headaches it causes, I couldn't stop if I wanted. Years of practice have led to a crisp, academic style of verbal communication that appears to have come naturally. I feel like someone's dancing monkey; this has got to be someone's sick, cruel joke. I am not angry, just confused. I lack the words to describe who I am, because existing language always forces me to view myself, negatively, by comparison to others. This is not a new struggle; debates about appropriate language existed long before I was born. Autistic is the new "Retarded," often used as an insult (Jurecic, 2007). Yet, where there was nothing good about being a "Retard," some, like me, attempt to reclaim the term *Autistic* for positive meaning. I am Autistic. If being Autistic were an insult, I would be forced to be permanently insulted by my own identity. As Jack (2012) stated, some individuals argue that, "Autism is better understood as difference, rather than disability: as an alternative way of thinking, communicating, and interacting with the world" (p. 4). In so doing, such individuals participate in what Russell and Norwich (2012) called, "a process of repositioning" in which being Autistic is viewed as both different and valuable, a similar process of re-appropriation to that used in the reclamation of labels such as "queer" and "[nigga]" (p. 11).

### **Purpose of the Study**

I am not the only Autistic individual who struggles to find language to appropriately describe their experiences. As a spectrum disorder, Autism manifests in different ways, making language choice preferences personal and difficult to generalize. Thus, much debate occurs

within and outside of the Autistic community over the words that are appropriate, specifically *person-first language* versus *identity-first language* (or, person with Autism versus Autistic person), the use of high or low-functioning labels, and ongoing discussions about a potential cure.

Jim Sinclair (1999), founder of Autism Network International, described person-first language by stating:

Saying ‘person with Autism’ suggests that Autism is something bad – so bad that it isn’t even consistent with being a person. Nobody objects to using adjectives to refer to characteristics of a person that are considered positive or neutral. (para 3)

In contrast, Mary Tobin (2011), an early childhood specialist at Virginia Commonwealth University, wrote:

Person-first language is a philosophy of putting individuals before their disability. As you will see, this is about more than just language; it goes deeper into our attitudes toward others and how those attitudes translate into action...[a label] doesn’t speak to a person’s value or abilities...when we start by focusing our attention on what people cannot do, we never make room for what they might do. By putting the person last, this is what is being done. (para 3-5)

These two perspectives illustrate what has become a divide within the Autistic community over language choices, with parents, relatives, and advocates of Autistic children generally preferring person-first language while Autistic individuals generally choose identity-first (Moran, 2014a; Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2013; Owren & Stenhammer, 2013). Throughout this paper, I have chosen to use identity-first language because that is my personal preference, not because I believe that Autistic individuals who choose to do otherwise are choosing

incorrectly. Because being Autistic is so closely tied to my identity, I believe identifying as an Autistic person more fully reflects who I am.

While this debate over language use has been examined on social media, blogs, and through other forms of public discourse, it has yet to be the subject of much academic research. Certainly, research has been conducted about the rhetorical constructions of disability in general (see Fassett & Morella, 2008; Lewiecki-Wilson, 2003; Miller & Johnson, 2014; Morse, 2003; Kerschbaum, 2014; Sremlau, 2003), but research about the rhetoric of Autism within the communication discipline is essentially non-existent, existing primarily in English, Gender and Women's Studies, and Psychology. As Morse (2003) noted, "disability studies is an underrepresented area in the discourse of rhetoric" (p. 154). There exists, as Lunford (2005) termed it, "a disability of the rhetoric of disabilities" (p. 330). In this research, a critical discourse analysis approach is used to examine how Autistic individuals articulate their identities within dialogues about disability. Ultimately, I argue that the use of identity-first language represents an increased salience of Autism to personal identity and assists in the co-construction of a cultural identifier, that a rejection of *functioning* labels allows for new conceptions of human worth, and that a re-conceptualizing of Autism apart from medicalized calls for a cure allows for new understandings of Autism as culture.

### **Objective of the Study**

While I argue that each Autistic person has the right to decide what language should be used to define their identity, the spectrum nature of the disorder makes it difficult to come to a consensus as a community. Moran (2014a), a desk assistant at ABC News who identifies as Autistic, emphasized:

The general consensus [among Autistic people] is that person-first language is not preferable...there are, however, a few Autistics who prefer person-first language, so when interviewing an Autistic person, always ask how they refer to themselves. In cases where you cannot ask, “Autistic person” is preferred (p. 1)

Thus, despite my personal preferences, I do not concern myself with making judgments about what is right or wrong with regard to language use on Autism, but rather with where rhetorical constructions of Autism gain power. This is not to say that the debate over which terminology to use is trivial, as word choices do matter. As Fassett and Morella (2008) wrote:

We wake to language because it meets our bodies in ways that are empowering or painful, enabling or disenfranchising. These choices, whether to refer to someone as dyslexic or normal, as able or disabled, are consequential; by placing ability and disability in contention or contrast with one another rather than tension or paradox, we unreflectively encourage all people to think of ability as presence or absence. (p. 140)

However, the focus of my research is on *how* language choices function as rhetorical constructs, not whether the choice is wrong or right. After all, as Lunford (2005) so aptly noted, we will always disagree about the appropriateness of language use, stating: “Who gets to choose – the advocate, the person with the disability, or the community of people with disabilities as a whole? What authority does anyone have over owning language that others can’t use” (p. 332)? Lindblom and Dunn (2003) emphasized that our responsibility as scholars is to create rhetorical analyses of the ways in which language functions to “perpetuate problematic constructions of disability” (p. 171).

Specifically focused on the role of language choice with regard to self-advocacy, I seek to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How does the intentional choice to use identity-first language by a marginalized individual reflect the disability ideology of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)?
- (2) What role do metaphors play in changing the direction of a conversation and in reinforcing ideological constructions?
- (3) What role does social media advocacy play in the legislative process?
- (4) In what way does the uncertain origin of a disability influence metaphorical comparisons?

To answer to these questions, my research presents a discourse analysis of the #stopcombatingme movement on Twitter. Spearheaded by ASAN, the #stopcombatingme movement was a grassroots movement which sought to challenge certain portions of the Combating Autism Act. ASAN was founded in 2006 by Autistic adults who “were unhappy with the prevailing public dialogue on Autism” (ASAN, para. 2). Because of concerns about public dialogue, ASAN is intentional about language choices, making them a perfect organization to examine with regard to rhetorical decisions. ASAN is a non-profit organization that seeks to empower and organize the Autistic community into a grassroots rights movement. ASAN’s most recognized protest was a letter-writing campaign which led to the removal of the NYC Ransom Note billboards, which compared Autism to a kidnapper. Currently, ASAN is involved in projects to promote Autism activism on college campuses and is partnered with several organizations to develop practical resources for self-advocates.

To facilitate my examination of the #stopcombatingme dialogue, I employ Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis. Frequently used by feminist researchers, critical discourse analysis provides a vehicle to deconstruct the function of language (Frost & Elichaoff,

2014). Specifically, I collect data from tweets and blog posts, with the purpose of exploring how Autistic individuals articulate their identities in response to hegemonic narratives of Autism. Using Fairclough's (1992) model, I deconstruct the function of text and discursive and social practice with regard to the #stopcombatingme discourse.

### **Precis of Chapters**

In chapter 2, I discuss existing models of disability, including the comparatively new neurodiversity model. I also examine the existing literature on the debate between person-first and identity-first language. In chapter 3, I discuss Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, the method I employ in my study, looking at the function of the text, social practice, constraints, and resistance. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I examine three ideological themes which emerge from the analysis: disability pride, self-determination, and the genetic origin of autism. In chapter 7, I discuss critical implications regarding the salience of identity labels, reappropriation in a "safe" space, conceptions of functionality, and entailment relationships between metaphors of Autism.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will, first, examine discuss the rhetorical association between Autism and disability; second, I examine attempts to reclaim disability identity; third, I examine notions of Autistic pride. Because existing literature emphasizes the constructive relationship between identity, knowledge, and discourse, my literature review provides the foundation for a critical discourse analysis approach to my research.

Disability Studies is a relatively new field of analysis; in fact, the shift toward using the terminology *intellectual disability* is fairly recent; until 2006, *mental retardation* remained in standard usage, having been preceded by terms such as *idiot*, *lunatic*, *imbecile*, *moron*, and the like, all of which became viewed as derogatory (Keith & Keith, 2013). The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (n.d.) defines *intellectual disability*, a type of developmental disability, as “a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills” (para. 1). While the move from more derogatory language to the notion of *intellectual disability* may seem positive, both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, measured by standardized tests, are problematic measures of ability. Certainly, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests measure a type of intelligence, but even the American Psychological Association notes many problems with standardized intelligence tests, most notably, according to Benson (2003):

Unfairly stratifying test-takers by race, gender, class, and culture; of minimizing the importance of creativity, character, and practical know-how; and of propagating the idea that people are born with an unchangeable endowment of intellectual potential that determines their success in life. (para. 3)



Because the idea of *disability* is based on potentially problematic markers of ability, *disability* is a complex cultural construct when applied to Autism, with some arguing that Autism is not a disability and others attempting to reclaim the notion of *disability*. Barton (2001) emphasized that disability is a “complex social construct, one which reflects...a dynamic set of representations that are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts” (p.169). While attempts to define *disability* have been made both medically and culturally, *disability* remains yet a less than concrete concept. As Linton (1998) wrote, “it is an arbitrary designation, used erratically both by professionals who lay claim to naming such phenomena and by confused citizens” (p. 10). Linton further suggested that disability is better understood as an identity marker, noting *disabled* can become an emphasized identity.

### **Are Autistic People Disabled?**

When Autism is conceptualized as a disability, the very notion of disability becomes a theoretical framework which undergirds all discussion of Autism. Because of the spectrum nature of the disorder, individuals on the spectrum have a variety of disabling and abling experiences. As a result, uniformly referring to Autistic individuals as disabled may not reflect the full spectrum of Autistic experience. Furthermore, like the concept of *disability* itself, Autism is defined both by the medical field and by cultural constructions, yet a full conception of what Autism truly *is* does not exist. Is it genetic? Maybe. A lack of empathy or overwhelming amounts of it? As of yet, who knows. A difference in brain structure or of brain chemistry? Researchers have theorized many options with regard to the nature of Autism.

Nevertheless, because professional diagnosis of Autism is the key to receiving accommodations, disability cannot be divorced from Autistic experience. Davis (2013) wrote:

To be disabled, you don't get to choose. You have to be diagnosed, and in many cases you will have an ongoing and very defining relationship with a medical profession. In such a context, disability is not seen as a lifestyle or an identity, but as a fixed category. (p. 8)

However, many Autistic self-advocates proudly claim *disability*, choosing to name it as an aspect of their identity, and self-diagnoses are often affirmed by the Autistic community, given that obstacles to professional diagnosis, such as cost and lack of trained medical professionals, abound (“Autism and adult diagnosis,” 2012, para. 4). Therefore, the connection between the *disability* label and medical institutions tends to be complicated for Autistic individuals.

The disability label can create problematic stigma, yet nevertheless generates access to needed resources. As Keith and Keith (2013) note, “labels...connote generalizations...and labeling has typically suggested deviance and stigma” (p. 10). Modern rhetorical research notes the existence of medical metaphors when discussing disability, metaphors that rely on the medicalization of labels and remains common in societal discourse about Autism through the use of terms like “cure” or “Autism epidemic.” Jack (2012) noted that Autism is “sometimes portrayed stereotypically as a devastating disorder of communication and social interaction” (p. 1). Nevertheless, most rhetorical research does not justify the use of the medical model when discussing disability, since, as Vidall (2009) aptly stated, “disability is not a medical tragedy or taboo topic” (p. 188). Disability scholars frequently use perspectives gleaned from Goffman (1968) and Foucault (1977) to critique a medicalized disability label as having potentially problematic implications for personal identity. As Hughes (2010) noted:

From a Foucauldian perspective, disability and impairment neither refer to, nor represent, essences of particular individuals or of a certain population at large. On the contrary,

these terms refer to a decentered subject position that is the product of the movement of power. (81-82)

Construction of disability through the medical model erases the perspectives and experiences of individuals with disabilities (Barton, 2001; Linton, 1998). Goggin and Newell (2003) argue, “through its assumption that impairment implies loss, medical discourse implies a deficit that lies within an individual” (p. 23). The notion of disability as deviance suggests that Autistic individuals ought to be viewed not merely as different, but as different with a negative connotation. As McRuer (2006) wrote, “able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largest masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things” (p. 1). While a Foucauldian perspectives suggests disability can create a label which ultimately marginalizes the subject, reality is much more complex, as disability cannot be separated from cultural context. Furthermore, defining ability and thus, in turn, disability, is a nearly impossible task (McRuer, 2006).

Lindblom & Dunn (2003) wrote, “Disability stems not from physical defect in particular human bodies, but rather from social constructions of ableness that inform categories such as ‘normal’ and ‘disabled’” (p. 169). Disability, then, becomes a “discursive construct” created and reinforced by dialogue within society (Prendergast, 2001, p. 47). Certain traits (*abilities*) are considered to be valuable by a given culture; a lack of such traits, therefore, is constructed as *disability*. Martin (2012) wrote, “Disability occurs as a result of disabling environmental factors...cerebral palsy may limit a person’s ability to use stairs but it is the stairs themselves which constitute a disabling barrier to access” (p. 15). *Disability* then becomes relative to environment; “environmental factors can create disability if the person with the impairment is subject to attitudinal and structural barriers” (Martin, p. 15). Autism is an excellent example, as,

for instance, an Autistic person might have an impairment which prevents her from understanding certain social cues, but it is the societal expectation for certain types of social interaction that has the potential to create a disabling experience. Furthermore, depending on historical context, Autism has been socially constructed in several different ways (Fitch, 2002). Jack (2012) stated that:

[Autism] has been constructed in different time periods and by different interest groups as a childhood psychosis, as vaccine injury, as a disorder of empathy or theory of mind, and as ‘Silicon Valley syndrome’ (or an effect of geek inbreeding). (p. 4)

If a simple change in context can impact how a characteristic is viewed, even to the point of what was formerly perceived as a lack of ability being perceived as ability, then to categorically assign the disabled label to the Autistic experience seems presumptuous. Nevertheless, the existence of disability pride movements within the Autistic community suggests that the label can be effectively used as a positive identity moniker.

### **Disability Pride**

While not all Autistic individuals consider themselves disabled, there are, nevertheless, many Autistic individuals who claim disabled identity and proclaim pride in that identity. For instance, Amy Sequenzia, a member of ASAN’s board of trustees and well-known Autistic self-advocate, claims both Autistic and disabled identity (“Leadership”). Crip theory is strongly associated with the disability pride movements. Lofgren-Martenson (2013) wrote, “‘crip’ is short for cripple, generally regard as a strongly derogatory word. Instead of being addressed as someone different...the choice is there to call oneself crip and experience pride” (p. 414). Linton (1998) furthered, “*Cripple* has also been revived by some in the disability community who refer to each other as ‘crips’ or ‘cripples’” (p. 17). Sandahl (2003) explained, “the term crip has

expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well” (p. 27). McRuer (2006) argued that conscious adoption of a crip identity provides a place from which to examine what Garland-Thompson (1996) termed the *normate*, or the identity unmarked by stigma. Thus, crip theory functions to critique the boundaries which define the *normate* (Lofgren-Martenson, 2013). While many Autistic individuals do claim disability pride, I could not find any research linking claiming crip identity and Autistic experience. Nevertheless, crip theory provides a foundation for critique of the *normate* from Autistic perspectives, as many Autistic self-advocates operate from a neurodiversity perspective, which functions to critique the *normate* with regard to neurology.

Advocates of neurodiversity pride call for a recognition of different neurologies, not as negative, but as normal human variation. The neurodiversity movement, widely embraced by Autistic individuals, is characterized by a recognition and celebration of Autism “as a part of the spectrum of human neurological conditions” (Jack, 2012, p. 1) and “as inseparable from identity” (Kapp et al., 2013, p. 59). Bumiller (2009) defined the neurodiversity movement, stating:

Neurodiversity spokespersons promote a positive understanding of Autism, oppose those who advocate for a cure, resist appropriation of their voices by sympathizers and nonAutistics, and struggle for a collective sense of identity. (p. 968)

Therefore, neurodiversity advocates position Autism not as negative, deviant, or problematic, but rather as a part of the natural spectrum of human neurological variation. To be Autistic, from the neurodiverse perspective, is to have a mind that functions differently from neurotypical people, or those whose minds function according to what has been socially established as the norm, but such a mind is considered no better or worse than a neurotypical mind. Though the neurodiversity model is widely supported within academic discourse, some note that it is perhaps

only more appropriate for those who would be termed high-functioning (Bumiller, 2008).

Nevertheless, determining the applicability of a model based on what society views as functional is problematic, as is discussed later. The neurodiversity movement is characterized by a view of neurological difference as an aspect of identity, an emphasis on personal agency, and Autistic pride.

### **Autism as Identity**

Many Autistic self-advocates view Autism as an identity category, arguing, “apart from differences such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, people are also born with different minds” (Orwen & Stenhammer, 2013, p. 32). Frequently associated with a view of Autism as essentially biological or genetic, the neurodiversity model provides context for a view of Autism as identity and tends to appeal to those “who likely already think of Autism as a natural part of themselves” (Kapp, et al., p. 66). I conceptualize Autistic identity similarly to how Darling (2013) defined disability identity: “that part of the self-concept that emerges from the disability-related self-definitions that exist within an individual” (p. 7). Siebers (2008) further explains: “To call disability an identity is to recognize that it is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change” (p. 4). In viewing Autism as identity, Autistic individuals claim Autism as an essential part of who they are. In so doing, Autistic individuals make varying degrees of performance choices with regard to how they portray their Autistic selves to society at large.

Because Autism functions as an aspect of identity, performance choices are central to personal agency, but are also subject to social pressures (Asch, 2004; Carey, 2013; Lester & Paulus, 2012). Autistic individuals are pressured by society to conceal Autism, which has problematic practical consequences. Some manifestations of Autism may be readily visually

apparent, but many others are hidden unless the individual chooses to disclose (Darling, 2013; Lester & Paulus, 2012). Because the intensity of societal stigma increases when Autism is made obvious, Autistic individuals experience pressure to conceal Autistic behavior. Matthews and Harrington (2000) further argued that the desire to escape labeling motivates Autistic individuals to avoid disclosure. Jack (2012) wrote, “performing a stereotyped gender role may be very much an act of resistance and survival,” allowing the Autistic individual to blend into society (p. 15). Yet, if individuals chose to blend in, they may propagate a culture that continues to marginalize Autistic people (Vidall, 2009).

This idea of blending in is related to the concept of passing, typically used with regard to racial passing, wherein someone successfully represents themselves as being part of a different group (Dawkins, 2012). Dawkins (2005) wrote:

Passing is a practice of unifying a fragmented self-identity, a practice in which risk is high and trust is fragile. It is a fundamental crisis of the self which underscores the point that a secure individual life cannot be detached from larger social systems and institutions. (p. 4)

Robinson (1994) argued members of the in-group, or people sharing the identity which the individual is trying to hide, may more easily see through the attempt to pass, positing the existence of two groups of observers: the in-group clairvoyant and the *dupe*, or the person who is deceived by the pass. Similar to Jack’s (2012) claim related to Autism and gender roles, Dawkins (2005) argued that passing was very much an act of survival. Kroeger (2004) furthers that, while passing may seem deceitful, those who pass do so in order to live within an unjust system. In describing his experience, Moran (2014b), an Autistic individual, wrote, “In order to survive in this world we Autistics are expected to pass for neurotypical. In other words, hide who we are”

(para. 3). Though initially applied to race, the concept of passing has been extended to incorporate other aspects of identity, such as gender, sexuality, and disability status (Dawkins, 2012; Hillyer, 1996; Kroeger, 2004; Robinson, 1994). Linton (1998) described the experience of passing for disabled individuals, writing:

Disabled people, if they are able to conceal their impairment or confine their activities to those that do not reveal their disability, have been known to pass. For a member of any of these groups, passing may be a deliberate effort to avoid discrimination or ostracism, or it may be an almost unconscious, Herculean effort to deny to oneself the reality of one's racial history, sexual feelings, or bodily state. (p. 19)

Robinson (1994) emphasized that, while similarities between passing for straight and passing for white exist, the experiences are not equivalent, arguing that passing is normative for gay and lesbian individuals, but the exception for African Americans. Similarly, while *passing* has been used to describe the experiences of disabled individuals who are able to conceal disability, that experience is different from those of queer and African American individuals as well. Cramer and Gilson (1999) noted some significant differences between the experiences of LGB individuals and disabled people, "disabled persons are a 'protected' class under federal and state laws...whereas, LGB persons are not a protected class under federal law...non-disabled persons often feel pity toward disabled persons; heterosexual persons often disapprove of LGB persons" (p. 25).

Carey (2013) used the word *passing* to describe tensions faced by disabled individuals, writing: "Individuals with disabilities face an environment fraught with contradictions regarding whether one should try to pass as non-disabled, develop disability pride and resist passing, or



deconstruct and disregard the binary construction of disability-ability altogether” (142). Samuels (2003) furthered:

Like racial, gender, and queer passing, the option of passing as nondisabled provides both a certain level of privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance...this dilemma can be even more complicated for those with a disability whose symptoms and severity fluctuate widely. (p. 239)

Autistic individuals have long used *pass* and *passing* to describe their experiences living lives camouflaged as neurotypical. Bascom (2011) wrote, “Passing as non-Autistic, passing as neurotypical, means that you never get to actually *be* human. Be a person. You just learn how to get really good at faking it” (para. 1). Bascom continued, “Passing means repressing, memorizing rules, sublimating, jumping through hoops, and turning tricks so we can get the human treatment. It means making it so that when you reveal your diagnosis to someone they ‘never would have guessed it’” (para. 19). Taylor-Parker (2012) wrote, “learning to pass took me years of practice with a special method; every time my family went out in public when I was a child, the ride home was a lecture on my failings” (para. 3). The Autistic Passing Project, curated by Amanda Vivian (2011), collected experiences of Autistic people with regard to passing.

While, similar to what Robinson (1994) described, I have found it fairly easy to spot other Autistic individuals, those not on the spectrum may be unaware of what characteristics for which to look. Furthermore, because Autism manifests so differently across the spectrum, some individuals may find passing as neurotypical to be impossible. Rosa (2012) wrote:

Passing for neurotypical and being in any sort of social situation requires enormous effort, so I appreciate your recognition of this fact. But next time, instead of telling

people that they don't seem Autistic, why not acknowledge that Autism is different for everyone? (para. 11)

Thus, Autistic individuals, especially those in whom the manifestation of Autism may not be visually apparent, may succumb to societal pressure to conceal Autism and attempt to pass as neurotypical (Darling, 2013; Fitch, 2002; Jack, 2012; Matthews & Harrington, 2000). Therefore, some Autistic individuals, like myself, make careful performance choices depending on personal comfort levels with disclosure of neurological status and do so within a cultural context. Fitch (2002) argued that disclosure of neurological status is a “process of resistance and renaming is sometimes referred to as ‘claiming disability,’ or ‘coming out’ and ought to be recognized as one of the primary ways of signifying relations of power” (p. 475).

The use of the phrase “coming out” to describe the experiences of a member of a marginalized group, other than a queer individual, is a form of lateral appropriation, which Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow (2007) defined as, “the process whereby the discursive capital of one marginalized group is usurped by another similarly marginalized group” (p. 95). The necessity of “coming out,” or disclosure of identity, for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals is the subject of much debate. Cass (1979, 1984) created a stage model for gay and lesbian identity development, arguing that disclosure of identity, part of stage 5, had several positive impacts including external support for identity and congruence between private and public identities. Cass (1984) argued that, “anger about society’s stigmatization of homosexuals leads to disclosure and purposeful confrontation with non-homosexuals in order to promote validity and equality of homosexuals” (p. 152). Coleman (1982) noted “coming-out” is not simply a single event, but rather heralds a movement into a new stage of development; Coleman also developed a five-stage model of identity development for homosexual individuals with a particular focus on

the concept of “coming out”. Coleman further notes that individuals may progress through the stages non-linearly or not fully.

Other scholars, however, disagree with such an emphasis on the importance of disclosure. Sophie (1986), for instance, found that linear models are problematic and do not accurately reflect the experiences of most women. Room for fluidity of identity is also lacking in stage models (Savin-Williams, 2011). Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) argued the Cass model is still applicable today because most youth experience the “coming-out” process similarly to the description created by Cass, but emphasized the need to consider intersections of multiple identities with regard to “coming out”. Adams and Philips (2009) furthered the need to consider ethnicity when examining models of sexual orientation identity development, finding that Native Americans, for instance, might not experience a “coming out” process, but may have always known and disclosed their identity. Despite disagreements about the particulars of the experience, “coming out” remains an important part of the identity development of many, though not all, queer individuals.

Furthermore, “coming out” has been applied as a descriptor for the experiences of other marginalized groups, such as atheists, disabled individuals, and women who have had abortions (Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007; Corrigan, Kosyluk, & Rusch, 2013; Cramer & Gilson, 1999; Gill, 1997; Hillyer, 1996; Linton, 1998; McRuer, 2006; Samuels, 2003; Stack, 2012). Linton (1998) wrote, “It is not surprising that disabled people also speak of ‘coming out’ in the same way that members of the lesbian and gay community do” (p. 21). While the experiences of these marginalized individuals in “coming out” are different from those of queer individuals, significant similarities exist (Cramer & Gilson, 1999). Swain and Cameron (1999) also make the comparison between “coming out” as gay or lesbian and “coming out” as disabled. Hillyer

(1996) noted that queer coming out stories have served as models of disabled coming-out narratives. Cramer and Gilson (1999) suggested that identity development of those with nonvisible disabilities closely paralleled that of LGB individuals. Furthermore, Gill (1997) suggested a model of disability identity in which, “coming out” was the final step. McRuer (2006) uses the phrase, “come out crip” (p. 36). Yet, Samuels (2003) emphasized the use of “coming out” to describe disclosure of disability is not so simplistic, writing, “When we look at narratives of disabled people about their own coming-out processes, we see the language of coming out is used liberally but often carries very different meanings” (p. 238). For some, coming out as disabled involves mere disclosure to others, while for others, it involves a recognition and acceptance of self (Samuels, 2003). Thus, when talking about the “coming out” process as related to disability, clarification as to meaning is necessary.

While, for queer individuals, the process of “coming out” involves recognition of the heteronormativity that exists throughout society, Autistic individuals must also recognize that ableism is embedded throughout society (Chirrey, 2003). Chirrey argued that coming out is not only a political action, but is also a means of constructing identity for queer individuals; likewise, Autistic individuals may also find that the coming out process reinforces their conceptions of identity. Swain and Cameron (1999) wrote, “Having come out, the disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust, or something denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive category to be challenged and broken down” (p. 76). While no academic research exists examining the coming out experiences of Autistic individuals, Autistic individuals may not only disclose their identity label but may also make performance changes. When I decided to be open about my Autistic identity, I not only told people that I was Autistic, I also tried less to control my Autistic behaviors in public. Cramer and Gilson (1999)

wrote, “Although some persons with nonvisible disabilities and LGB persons may be able to pass in some situations, therefore being viewed as members of the privileged group, there is usually a cost” (p. 24). Depending on their ability to pass as non-Autistic to begin with, other Autistic individuals may engage in varying levels of performance change.

### **Agency**

Claiming pride in Autistic identity may help Autistic individuals claim agency while resisting objectification and othering. An understanding of communicative agency is vital when discussing Autism because, frequently, the communication of Autistic people is unfairly delegitimized and because ASAN encourages Autistic advocates to work for societal change and to resist objectification. Claiming pride in Autistic identity may allow individuals to resist objectification and othering in two ways: rejecting the victim narrative and challenging stereotypes. The first resistance strategy is reactive, allowing the individual to respond when rhetoric attempts to position them as the victim, while the second is proactive, allowing the individual to engage in behavior that runs counter to established societal expectations. The combination of reactive and proactive strategies allows the individual to resist objectification by others.

First, a view of the Autistic mind as merely a target of oppressive power tends toward research that internalizes a savior-like mentality. Autistic pride resists viewing Autistic people as victims who need to be saved, but instead, presents Autistic individuals as providing valuable contributions. Autistic individuals are not viewed as a problem or as having a disease that must be cured. As Kapp et al. (2013) noted, advocates of the neurodiversity model “challenge efforts to find a cause and a cure for [Autism]” (p. 59).

Second, Autistic pride challenges stereotypes. Expectations based on stereotypes paint individuals with disabilities as the Other (Barton, 2001). Specifically with regard to labeling Autistic individuals, Erevelles (2010) noted that the category of Autism, due to its spectrum nature, lacked “coherency...in fact, the only connective strand that holds the incoherencies of the category together has been the consistent association of Autism with abnormality and deviant difference” (52). By breaking the association with abnormality and deviance, Autistic pride rejects stereotyped portrayals of Autistic people and resists othering.

Goffman (1968) utilized the phrase *challenging behavior* to describe acts of resistance to stereotypes by individuals labeled by society, recognizing the agency of these individuals. In modern theorizing, the notion of *identity politics* communicates a similar idea. The notion of *identity politics*, that identities are consciously negotiated within culture and throughout history, was popularized by Foucault’s (1980) *History of Sexuality*. Butler (1990) challenges the assumptions contained with Foucault’s work, arguing that the very existence of identity ought to be critiqued. While I agree with Butler that identities are only socially-constructed, I nevertheless argue that the social construction of Autistic identity has practical, currently negative implications. Darling (2013) defined *identity politics* as, “challeng[ing] prevailing negative self-views and replac[ing] them with more positive ones” (71). In many ways, such a definition reflects Goffman’s understanding of the *challenging behaviors* in which Autistic individuals may engage in order to combat existing negative stigma. Specifically with regard to language choice, an *identity politics* or *challenging behavior* strategy used by Autistic individuals is reappropriation.

## **Reappropriation of *Autistic***

Autistic pride legitimizes attempts to reappropriate language connected to Autistic identity by arguing that, when a label has been internalized as part of a personal identity, an attempt to reappropriate, rather than discard the label, is warranted. Galinsky, Wang, Whitson, Anichich, Hugenberg, and Bodenhausen (2013) described reappropriation as, “taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce another group’s lesser status” (p. 2020). Croon (2013) defined slurs as, “expressions that are often used to derogate certain group members and are considered among the most offensive of all linguistic expressions” (p. 228). For example, the reclamation of the words *queer* by the LGB movement and *nigga* by the Black Power movement are clear illustrations of reappropriation. Because the word “Autistic” has been used as an insult and has been the subject of attempts to reclaim the word for positive in-group meaning, a discussion of the process of reappropriation is relevant. Therefore, in order to understand reappropriation with regard to Autism, first, I define the nature of slurs; second, examine the function of reappropriation and, third, provide context to the controversy over labels associated with Autism.

**Nature of slurs.** As a category of language, slurs have been the subject of some research and much debate, specifically over the function that slurs serve within discourse. Because the meaning of a particular slur can change depending on context, slurs themselves are a site of contested meaning (Dean-Olmsted, 2011). Thus, language is adapted to meet the needs of individuals (Bucholtz, 1999). Jeshion (2013) noted that slurs tend to function as stereotypical, external descriptors typically used derogatorily. However, Croon (2010/2013) emphasized that slurs are not always used in a derogatory way, but rather are sometimes reclaimed by groups originally targeted by the slurs (2010). Croon (2013) argued that slurs perform both descriptive

functions, “representing the world a certain way,” and expressive functions, “display[ing] an attitude of the speaker” (229). Thus, when slurs are reappropriated, this reappropriated terminology reflects and influences a change both attitudinally and in the representation of reality.

**Function of reappropriation.** Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, and Bodenhausen (2003) further explained that reappropriation refers to a “phenomenon whereby a stigmatized group revalues an externally imposed negative label by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label” (p. 222). Because of the conscious decision to revalue a label as positive, rather than negative, reappropriation of a slur functions to empower a minority, disenfranchised group. Crinnion (2013) wrote, “empowerment can be gained through the reappropriation of language and representing behavior that goes against dominant, normative ideals” (para. 61). Slurs can be reappropriated in such a way as to express pride in an identity or to promote a view of difference as positive (Dean-Olmsted, 2011; Galinsky et al., 2003; Russell & Norwich, 2012).

The agency of the minority speaker in using the slur is important and oft-ignored (Dean-Olmsted, 2011). Unfortunately, researchers often fail to recognize the reappropriative use of slurs by minority groups as legitimate, “brushing them off to the side as atypical, tangential, or not in accord with ‘common sense’...assum[ing] a priori that slurs are offensive in every use and across all contexts” (Croom, 2013, 235). Because of the societal taboo associated with the use of slurs, the violation of norms inherent in reappropriative use of slurs emphasizes the process is one which allows the disenfranchised individual to regain agency and feel empowered (Jeshion, 2013). Because slurs are applied on the basis of group-linked characteristics, those who self-label can be seen as acting representatively of their group (Croon, 2010; Galinsky, et al., 2013). While potentially constructive in allowing the slur to be recast in a positive light for the entire group,



viewing the minority speaker as representative comes dangerously close to tokenism. One individual's language use should never be considered representative of an entire group, especially considering the spectrum nature of Autism.

While recognizing fears that self-labeling with a slur may reinforce stigma, Galinsky et al. (2013) argued that self-labeling with a slur decreases the rhetorical power of the slur, viewing self-labeling as “a defiant action against a stigmatizing constraint” (p. 2021). Reappropriation is a strategy to reclaim a positive social identity, thus decreasing the stigma associated with both the slur and the identity (Dean-Olmstead, 2011; Galinsky et al. 2003). The offensiveness of the word impacts the likelihood of reappropriation and the effectiveness of de-stigmatization. As Jeshion (2013) emphasized, some slurs are certainly perceived as more offensive than others. Dean-Olmstead (2011) observed, “the trajectories of words like ‘queer’ and ‘nigg[a]’ would indicate that the more inflammatory a word, the better a candidate it is for reappropriation” (138). Arguably, the greater the original offense, the more stigma will be eliminated when the word is positively reclaimed.

**Labeling of Autism.** The neurodiversity model advocates for the reappropriation of slurs associated with Autistic identity, specifically the word *Autistic*. Since the neurodiversity model is espoused by ASAN, the context it provides is vital for my analysis (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). Nevertheless, not all Autistic individuals agree with these reappropriative efforts, with some maintaining that, rather than using the term *Autistic*, person-first language (i.e. person with Autism) should be used. Since little academic research on the debate over person-first versus identity-first language exists, an examination of the debate as it exists within the cultural dialogue is warranted. Jaeger (2012) emphasized that the Internet has provided a space for individuals with disabilities to, “paint a realistic portrait of disability that is often not otherwise

available<sup>1</sup>”(p. 149). Within discourse regarding proper terminology when referring to Autistic individuals, there are three categories of opinion: (1) person-first exclusively, (2) identity-first exclusively, and (3) personal preference. In order to avoid viewing Autistic individuals as mere objects of study, preference is given to the thoughts and feelings of Autistic people, though the thoughts of neurotypical people are also acknowledged.

### **Person-first Exclusively**

Person-first language is generally accepted as politically correct, as emphasized by the 2014 Associated Press Stylebook (e.g. person with disability, person with Autism). Nevertheless, as Keith and Keith (2013) argued, language considered to be politically correct ought to be the subject both of critique and justification, as politically correct language can still hurt marginalized populations. Furthermore, Darling (2013) noted the existence of courtesy stigma, in which individuals attempt to use politically-correct language, but do so in a way that still creates stigma toward the Autistic individual. Those who argue that discourse of Autism should always use person-first language generally focus their arguments on recognizing the humanity of the Autistic person. Katie Nelson (n.d.), the parent of an Autistic child, emphasized on her blog:

It takes a little longer to write or say, but it shows that the person truly comes first. It’s a small thing that makes a big difference. It’s why you will never hear me say that Alex is Autistic. It is not the defining adjective for him. (para 1)

Snow (2013) further argued, “when we see the diagnosis as the most important characteristic of a person, we devalue her as an individual” (p. 1). Olmsted (2008) concurred, writing, “You don’t want to confuse the disability...with the person” (para. 3). Olmsted continued, noting that many

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<sup>1</sup> The lack of academic research in of itself justifies the use of non-academic sources. Additionally, the lack of access to academic resources by Autistic individuals further justifies the use of accessible sources, such as blogs.

Autistic people prefer identity-first, “I can’t help but say I wish they would rethink the matter” (para. 5). Such a statement by Olmsted reinforces an ideology that views Autistic individuals as the Other, since Olmsted completely discounts their opinions. Furthermore, Olmsted contributes to the objectification of Autistic individuals by positioning them as victims in need of a savior, someone, like him, to tell them how to identify. Such a perspective ignores the agency of Autistic individuals, who should be allowed to choose how they self-identify.

### **Identity-first Exclusively**

Advocates of identity-first language argue that being an Autistic person does not detract from one’s humanity and that Autism is an inseparable aspect of one’s identity. Brown (2011) wrote:

When we say “person with Autism,” we say that it is unfortunate and an accident that a person is Autistic. We affirm that the person has value and worth, and that Autism is entirely separate from what gives him or her value and worth...yet, when we say, “Autistic person,” we recognize, affirm, and validate an individual’s identity as an Autistic person. We recognize the value and worth of that individual *as* an Autistic person – that being Autistic is not a condition absolutely irreconcilable with regarding people as inherently valuable and worth something. (para.17-18)

Essentially, in an attempt to recognize the humanity of Autistic individuals, the use of person-first language argues that being Autistic makes someone less human, that in order to recognize their humanity, we must separate them from their Autism. The use of identity-first language, according to Brown, counteracts such a view, arguing that being Autistic and being human are not mutually exclusive.

Darroch (2011) references grammatical rules when affirming his decision to use identity-first language, writing, “the phrase ‘Autistic person’ reflects a number of things, among them the quirk of English grammar that adjectives precede nouns regardless of which word is deemed more significant” (para. 3). He further stated that person-first language “implies that Autism is an attachment... which can be isolated and removed without otherwise affecting the individual” (Darroch, para. 4). Gitchel (2011) emphasizes the role of Autistic pride in his decision, stating, “when I say I am an Autistic, I am declaring my difference as a major aspect of me... when you use person-first language, you create and then highlight a failing, a disappointment, a limitation” (para. 8). Such connections between label and identity seem warranted, as Keith and Keith (2013) noted that labels related to disability are more pervasive, dominating other identity markers. Identity-first language, thus, more fully recognizes the identity of the individual, while person-first language strives to recognize the individual’s humanity before all else.

### **Personal Preference**

Those who argue that the individual Autistic person has the right to a personal preference and that either preference, identity-first or person-first, is an acceptable base for their arguments in the right of the individual to self-define. While Winegardner’s (2010) personal preference is to generally refer to her son using identity-first language, she writes, “I do understand many people don’t care to hear their children referred to as Autistic. I respect that” (para. 9). Similarly, Duncan (2011) wrote, “When and if my son is able to tell me he prefers one label or the other, you can bet I’ll stick to that term. With him. I’ll still use another term with another person, if that’s what that person prefers” (para. 12).

Scott (2012) argued, in her research with physically disabled individuals, that individuals self-define their own identities through the performance choices they make, including what they

choose to call themselves. As a philosophy based on individualism has become more prevalent in American youth culture, arguments for the right to define one's own identity have grown stronger (Ellis, 2010). Respecting someone's personal preference with regard to identity monikers validates the existence and identity of that person (Swann, 2005). Because personal identities are constructed in relation to others, the verification of one's self-definition by others is essential to effective participation within society (Luckmann, 2008). Control over one's identity, including the choice of descriptive language for oneself, is key to social interactions (Luckmann). Symbols, such as language, allow individuals to define how they fit into society as a whole (Gregg, 2011). Ellis (2010) further argues that social validation of our identity becomes a part of our personal identity, in which "the self emerges through perception, meaning, and *language*" [emphasis added] (p. 4). Thus, the ability of an individual to self-define, to choose the words by which to be called, is paramount to their ability to actively engage with society.

### **Summary**

Existing literature related to my research recognizes the complexity of language with regard to disability, namely that disability may not fully represent Autistic experience but is, nevertheless, impossible to disconnect from Autistic experience. A focus on personal agency, specifically the ability of the Autistic mind to engage in dialogue, to challenge stigma, and to reclaim negative labels, is paramount. Autistic individuals have the right to not only participate in, but also to structure and control the dialogues about their experiences, choosing whatever labels they feel adequately reflect their personal experiences. Because critical discourse analysis recognizes the structural nature of language, acknowledges social context, emphasizes the ideological foundations of language, and calls for social change, such a method functions well to

examine the complex function of language with regard to Autistic experience. (Frost & Elichao, 2014; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

In this research, a critical discourse analysis approach is used to examine the function of identity-first language within dialogue about disability. Norman Fairclough (as cited in Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) has constructed the most widely-used critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis provides an ideal vehicle through which to deconstruct discriminatory discourses, as the method seeks to examine social construction of reality in media (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014). The feminist perspective is key to discourse analysis as, without it, “repressive structures could be understood only within the context that created them...without the option for radical change” (Frost & Elichaooff, p. 51). Fairclough views discourse as performing a constructive function with regard to identity, relationships, and knowledge systems (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Conceptualizing Autism as a discourse situated within culture operates not in opposition to understanding Autism as identity, but rather as a result of the function Autism plays in individual and communal identities. In other words, Autism as discourse is founded on enacted and co-constructed Autistic identity.

### **Description of Text**

Fairclough (2001) argued that the researcher must develop an explanatory critique, or an understanding of the problem which the research seeks to understand, and then develop research questions accordingly. The researcher must then select the specific texts for analysis. Specifically, I collected data from tweets on the hashtag #stopcombating me.

The ASAN website (Autisticadvocacy.org) contains press releases and information on current projects, with links encouraging supporters to get involved or donate, including the call to become involved in social media advocacy via #stopcombatingme. The purpose of the website is to keep supporters of the organization informed about issues related to Autism and progress

made by ASAN. ASAN provides an ideal case study for the use of identity-first language because the organization's policy is to intentionally use such language, which allows for consistency within the examined discourse. ASAN's website contains more of the official business of the organization and, as such, is a good indicator of the ideals and philosophies of the organization.

Through the #stopcombatingme campaign, ASAN asked Autistic individuals to post to social media with suggestions for changes to the Combating Autism Act, arguing, "We deserve a bill that's about supporting Autistic Americans, not combating us" ("#stopcombatingme," para. 2). Ultimately, pressure from Autistic self-advocates resulted in the bill being renamed to the Autism CARES Act, though little changed about the contents of the legislation (Diament, 2014). The Combating Autism Act was originally signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2006 and came up for reauthorization in early 2014. ASAN had a variety of complaints about the bill, including that less than 2% of its funding went to services for Autistic people and that the bill supported research for an Autism cure ("#stopcombatingme").

Autism Speaks, the largest lobbyist for the bill and best known Autism advocacy organization, was the major proponent of the bill, and thus, also came under fire from ASAN. Specifically, ASAN expressed frustration with Autism Speaks for how they manage their finances and for their lack of respect for Autistic voices (ASAN, 2014, January 6). Autism Speaks has no Autistic individuals on their board (ASAN). Because Autism Speaks is the most recognizable name in Autism discourse, their perspective represents the hegemonic discourse against which ASAN works.



## Process of Analysis

The process of analysis within critical discourse analysis is structured per Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, though researchers frequently present the analysis as combined. Fairclough (1992) created a three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis, arguing that researchers should understand the function of the *text*, the production and consumption of the text (which he termed *discursive practice*), and the *social practice* surrounding the text. Within Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach, *discourse* is used in three different ways: "language use as social practice...the kind of language used within a specific field...a way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 66-67). For Fairclough, discourse is limited to semiotics rather than to larger social practices (Jorgensen & Phillips).

### Function of the Text

Fairclough (1995) argued that, when examining discursive practices, researchers should seek to understand how the text is produced and under what context it is consumed. With regard to text, Fairclough presented several tools for understanding the function of the text: "interactional control...ethos...metaphors...wording...grammar" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 83). With regard to discourses of Autism, considering the focus of existing literature, examining metaphors and grammatical structure are likely to be the most significant forms of textual analysis.

For Fairclough (2003), texts must always be understood within their social context. Fairclough also emphasized the concepts of *interdiscursivity*, when different discourses work together, and *intertextuality*, when a discourse refers to a past discourse either explicitly or implicitly. Understanding how the text fits into its social context means understanding how it

relates to other texts about the same issue, whether in referencing past discourses or in interacting with concurrent discourse. Thus, tweets from the #stopcombatingme campaign must be understood within the context of legislative and social discourse about the Combating Autism Act.

### **Social Practice**

In exploring social practice, Fairclough (1992) calls for the researcher to explore the network of discourse to which the discursive practice belongs and to understand context created by the related non-discursive structures such as the existing legislation, cultural norms, and daily experiences related to Autism. For Fairclough, social practice is contextualized by ideology. Fairclough (1992) understood ideology as, “it has material existence in the practices of institutions...ideology ‘interpellates subjects’ ... ‘ideological state apparatuses’ are both sites of and stakes in class struggles” (87). Fairclough departs from Althusser’s perspective on ideology in that he more fully recognizes the ability of people to take action against oppressive systems and in arguing that people can be influenced by competing ideologies, rather than positioned entirely within one (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, examining the ideologies which underpin ASAN’s rhetoric and how they influences the language choices used to describe identity is vital for this analysis.

### **Constraints and Resistance**

For Fairclough (1992), the final step of research is to provide insight into the constraints revealed by the research and possibilities for resistance. Fairclough draws on the concept of *hegemony*, which he views as the dominant narrative created through engaging in negotiation, and therefore, argues that the hegemonic discourse is always changing (Jorgensen & Phillips). Examining how the rhetoric of ASAN, which is arguably not the dominant narrative, influences

and interacts with the narrative on Autism contained within society at-large will be important. Without understanding how the non-dominant narrative impacts the hegemonic narrative, I cannot understand the significance of the counter-hegemonic narrative created by ASAN. Furthermore, investigating the possibility for further resistance to the norm by ASAN's supporters is imperative for understanding how Autistic individuals might chose to engage in discourse in the future.

### **Procedures**

Through Twitter's search engine, I searched for tweets containing "#stopcombatingme" posted during 2014. This date range was appropriate because the hashtag was created on March 3, 2014 by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network and had fallen out of use with all but a few accounts by the end of the year. In fact, it seems like the two accounts still using the hashtag in 2015 were set to automatically post the same tweets every day starting in March and that the scheduled posts have simply not been turned off. A PDF copy of the tweets is retained by the researcher. I also collected all references to the #stopcombatingme campaign and the Combating Autism Act from the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network website. I also collected all blog posts from the #stopcombatingme wordpress blog, which were frequently linked to from the #stopcombatingme tweets.

Once the data was collected, I examined the tweets, website, and blog posts for repeated themes, then named, organized, and categorized the themes. I then revisited the data to further understand and revise the themes, also seeking for connections between themes that were established by the data. I then revised the themes and sorted the data by theme. I then determined the overarching ideologies, which provided the categories for the themes. My examination of the #stopcombatingme campaign illuminates three foundational themes, which undergird the

discourse: expressions of disability pride, an emphasis on self-determination, and a strong belief in the genetic origins of Autism. Each theme provides the foundation for ideological understandings through specific grammatical and metaphorical choices, as well as calls to resist both the social norms that encourage Autistic people to pass and the dominant political dialogue that threatens to silence Autistic voices

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISABILITY PRIDE

Disability pride reflects an attitude of not only acceptance, but also celebration of disabled identity. For ASAN's followers, disability pride is reflected in celebration of neurodiversity, or the natural variation of neurology. Skylar (2014, March 19) wrote for the #stopcombatingme blog, "As previously mentioned, I have Asperger's. I am proud of it, god dammit it" (para. 1). Throughout the #stopcombatingme discourse, Autistic self-advocates proudly claimed their Autistic identity and experiences as impetus for legislative change. For instance, @Autismunpuzzled (2014, April 17) tweeted, "I am #Autistic. I need opportunities NOT cures." Disability pride provides the reasoning behind the use of identity-first language within the discourse, a refusal to use *functioning* language, and a rejection of the need to pass or conform to neurotypical expectations.

### Identity-First Language as Disability Pride

Within the #stopcombatingme discourse, identity-first language is the norm; in fact, in over 400 pages of tweets, person-first language is only used twice. Some variation existed in the way in which identity-first language was used, whether through the use of "Autistic" as an adjective or noun and whether "Autistic" was capitalized or not. Since the pervasive debate in the Autistic community is between using "person with Autism" or "Autistic person," the use of "Autistic" as a noun ("an Autistic" or "Autistics") was unexpected. In a blog post, Duncan (2013, July 12), an Autistic person, commented on his Twitter interaction, not part of the #stopcombatingme campaign, with a mother of an Autistic child who opposed his use of "Autistic" as a noun, writing, "in this seemingly middle ground area, it's ok to use as an adjective but not as a noun" (para. 3). Duncan responded by claiming his right to self-identify, sarcastically writing, "Because the last thing I'd ever want is to offend YOU by referring to ME"

(para. 8). In the #stopcombatingme campaign, “Autistic” is interchangeably used as both adjective and noun, often by the same users.

The choice to use identity-first language by the majority of Twitter participants in #stopcombatingme reflects what Brown (2011) called an understanding of “autism as an inherent part of an individual’s identity” (para. 3). Brown (2011) further argued that the use of identity-first language “affirm[s] the value and worth of an Autistic person” (para. 15). Such notions of *value*, *worth*, and *inherent part* reflect a similar sense of pride as that described by crip theory (McRuer, 2006). The majority of Twitter participants in #stopcombatingme clearly follow ASAN’s lead in using identity-first language (Brown, 2011). While no absolute conclusion can be drawn that the use of identity-first language within the #stopcombatingme discourse was intentional rather than habitual or unconscious, the use reflects what ASAN has intentionally established as appropriate language use. The use of identity-first language, especially capitalized identity-first language, reflects an understanding of Autism as not only foundational to identity, but also as a point of pride, and invokes a definition of Autism that is not based in medical diagnosis but rather in shared experience and culture.

The majority of times “Autistic” is used within the #stopcombatingme discourse, the word is left un-capitalized. However, a significant minority did capitalize the word, and it is possible that the informality of the Twitter platform may have led to less capitalization than if the discourse occurred elsewhere, though it bears noting that the #stopcombatingme blog posts also demonstrated similar inconsistency in capitalization. Capitalization matters to the Autistic community in the same way that capitalization of identity terminology matters to other disabled and marginalized communities. Brown (n.d.) wrote:

I capitalize the word “Autistic” as if it were a proper adjective, for the same reason the Deaf and Blind communities capitalize the respective adjectives “Deaf and “Blind.” We do it for the same reason Black people often capitalize that word. We capitalize it as a proper adjective or noun to represent our community and our identity. (para. 47)

In their research on the Deaf community, Anderson, Leigh, and Samar (2011) wrote, “For members of this community, to be Deaf is not considered a disability – rather, it is considered to be a cultural identity, and is indicated by the capitalization of the letter ‘d’ in the term ‘Deaf’” (p. 201). Berbrier (2002) furthered, capitalization “symboliz[es] the demarcation of a distinct cultural entity (the Deaf), as opposed to a condition of humans (being deaf)” (p. 563).

Thus, when “Autistic” is capitalized in the #stopcombatingme discourse, the likely motivation is to demonstrate an awareness and respect for Autistic culture and identity; like with Deafness, “Autistic” does not refer only to a medical condition, but also to a wider cultural identity. Therefore, capitalizing “Autistic” also indirectly combats the medicalization of the label and in so doing, further rejects the AUTISM AS ILLNESS metaphor, as will be discussed later. Brown (2011), in her argument against person-first language, argued:

One argument...expostulates that because cancer patients are referred to as ‘people with cancer’ or ‘people who have cancer,’ as opposed to ‘cancerous people,’ the same principle should be used with autism...Autism, however, is not a disease...it is an edifying and meaningful component of a person’s identity. (para. 9-11)

For Brown, delinking Autism from “illness,” a metaphor discussed below, is part of the reason identity-first language should be preferred.

## Rejection of *Functioning* Labels as Disability Pride

By rejecting a normative notion of functionality, the rejection of categories like *high-functioning* and *low-functioning* creates a space for pride in Autistic identity, no matter where on the spectrum. Tate (2014, October 19) explained why language that implies certain standards for functionality is problematic: “My child is Autistic...I am disgusted by those who would force me to put her in a category and determine how worthy she is based on what she can or cannot do” (para. 28). When Tate refers to categorization, she specifically rejects the categories *high-functioning* and *low-functioning*. Tate furthered that functioning labels involve ableist assumptions about what it means to function and are arbitrary, with no clear lines between functioning/not functioning. As Tate states, “if they can pass sometimes, they must be able to get over themselves and pass all the time,” (para. 35). Within the #stopcombatingme discourse, this rejection of “functioning” labels is represented in two ways: through the use of quotation marks around the words “high functioning” (Creager, 2014; Tate, 2014), as if to say, *this is how I am labeled, this is not who I am*, (Gibbs, 1994) and through a rejection of the dichotomy of pass/not pass.

While “functioning” language is rarely used within the #stopcombatingme dialogue, quotation marks are used within each occurrence. Such use of quotation marks seems to be as shudder quotes, or quotation marks which serve the same function as a “so-called” prefix (Gibbs, 1994). Gibbs argued that such use of quotation marks indicates a non-acceptance of the terminology within the marks. Further support for this interpretation is found when the context of the phrase is examined. When “high functioning” is placed in quotation marks, the context is such that the use of the phrase clearly disrupts the very notion of “functioning” as a label at all. For instance, Creager (2014, March 19) wrote, “some days you might go nonverbal – even us



‘high functioning’ autists have those days” (para. 4). The rhetorical linking of “nonverbal,” typically associated with a “low-functioning” label, to so-called “high functioning” individuals challenges the notion that Autistic individuals can be so easily categorized by their abilities by showing that certain abilities or lack of abilities cannot be consistently linked to individuals. Someone who might be labeled as “low-functioning” for consistently being non-verbal might have other ways to communicate via technology or behavior, which the use of “functioning” labels does not fully encapsulate. On occasion, the word “function” is used to describe sets of skills, but not as an identity category; for instance, Morson (2014, March 19) wrote, “we all want autistic people to have the skills to function in the world” (para. 23). While Autistic individuals may disagree about which skills they feel are necessary to function in a world that is less-than-accommodating, the above use of the word “function” does not attempt to categorize or label, and is, thus, less problematic.

Often, the “high-functioning” label is assigned to individuals who are able to generally pass as non-Autistic, as noted by Tate (2014, October 19). Thus, tied to the rejection of “functioning” labels is a deconstruction of the dichotomy of passing versus not passing as neurotypical. For Autistic people, passing is not a permanent state of being, but rather a struggle to fulfill an expectation of normalcy, and for many who participated in #stopcombatingme, a struggle in which they would rather not engage. Linton (1998) compared passing as non-disabled to passing as white, noting that while the personal toll passing takes may be a similar experience between the two groups, the impact on the family may be very different. Linton wrote that a decision to pass as white may cause one’s family anguish, but that passing as non-disabled “may, in fact, be behaviors that the family insists upon, reinforces, or otherwise shames the individual into” (p. 20). Throughout the #stopcombatingme discourse, Autistic individuals

recounted experiences where they were expected or forced to try to pass by their families. As @CarlaScHolloway (2014, March 6) tweeted, “Intervention often translates to ‘forced normalization’ or ‘normalization’ taught from a young age.” An anonymous Autistic blogger (2014, March 19) wrote a post entitled, “Stop Combating 744” for the #stopcombatingme blog and stated, “People strongly discouraged me from talking about numbers in public. My mother constantly reminded me that the other girls at school were going to think I was *weird* if I mentioned how much I adored 64” (para. 2). Being discouraged from talking about certain interests, such as numbers, in public constitutes pressure to pass as not *weird*, or not *autistic*. While a person of color may have a space with their family to comfortably resist passing, autistic individuals often have no such space.

Morson (2014, March 19) discussed ways in which therapists also force children to meet expectations of passing:

No one asks what purpose autistic behaviors serve or whether indistinguishability is a worthwhile goal. So therapists order children to look them in the eye, even though it makes them feel uncomfortable and when they’re looking, they can no longer understand what the therapist is saying. Therapists call for “quiet hands,” preventing autistic children from communicating and denying them the attention they need to focus on learning.

(para. 6-8)

Erenah (2014, March 19) recounted her experience as a mother who initially tried to make her Autistic children “be/act/appear as normal as possible,” but ultimately realized, “I need to stop trying to fix my children” (para. 3-5). In a tweet, Tay (2014, March 6) flipped the ILLNESS metaphor to claim, “normalcy is an epidemic that needs to be cured.”

In critiquing labels like “high-functioning,” the language of the #stopcombatingme campaign attempts to reconstruct Autistic identity. Because a rejection of functioning labels involved rejecting the idea that the ability or lack of ability to pass is a constant, the discourse deconstructs the categorization of people as *able to pass* (high-functioning) or *not able to pass* (low-functioning). Furthermore, in rejecting the conception of measuring human worth through functionality, the discourse provides a space for Autistic individuals to experience pride along the entire spectrum.

### **Rejection and Redirection of Metaphors as Autistic Pride**

Disability pride provides a foundation for a rejection or reclamation of many of the metaphors frequently used to describe Autistic people, including AUTISM AS ILLNESS and AUTISTICS AS LOST. Because of the inclusion of the word “combating” in the Combating Autism Act, the AUTISM AS WAR metaphor is prevalent in the discourse in #stopcombatingme campaign as well. Disability pride allows Autistic individuals to reject a purely medical understanding of their identity label, to understand themselves as a fully-present human being, and to reposition themselves not as enemy, but as advocate.

### **Autism as Illness Metaphor**

Because Autism is diagnosed by medical professionals, Autism is often metaphorically constructed as an illness or disease (Jack, 2012). Garcia (2010) argued that ILLNESS metaphors are powerfully persuasive, as illness is frequently associated with “repulsiveness, calamity, scourge, and evilness” (p. 56). Sontag (1989) further emphasized the link between illness and evil as rhetorically powerful, especially within political discourse. Thus, we start with the concept AUTISM and the conceptual metaphor AUTISM AS ILLNESS. Entailments like “cure,” “epidemic,” “diagnosis,” and “treatment” all underscore this metaphor linking Autism to

illness. De Leonardis (2009) explained that the words *cure*, *therapy*, *treatment*, and *disease* are all linked to the ILLNESS metaphor. Marshall (2006) also notes the entailment of *disease*, and adds *health* and *drug* as linked to ILLNESS metaphor. Semino, Deignan, and Littlemore (2013) linked *vaccine* and *epidemic* to ILLNESS metaphor. Because pride in Autistic identity positions Autism not as a medical diagnosis or illness, but as a cultural indicator, participants in the #stopcombatingme discourse tended to reject association with medical terminology or reverse the ILLNESS metaphor to medicalize what they perceived to be a negative aspect of society such as ableism or prejudice. Warwick (2014, March 19) wrote, “The Combating Autism Act [(CAA)]...has given government legitimacy to the idea that I am a part of an Autism Epidemic” (para. 2). @Mustangmods (2014, March 28) tweeted, “New CDC report 1 of 68 have autism. Some say epidemic. I say no, just more ‘normal’ than once thought” (sic). @Allison\_Peacock (2014, April 1) furthered, “Pathology paradigm intrinsically contributes to the oppression of Autistics.”

@alex91091 (2014, March 13) critiqued the CAA, tweeting, “97% of the CAA [Combating Autism Act] money goes toward curing autistic people. We need no cure.” Similarly, @BiolArtist (2014, March 13) tweeted, “I don’t want a cure—it would just make me a different person.” These sentiments were echoed by @KKPANDA (2014, March 13); “Curing would be like giving me a lobotomy. On the surface I’d seem happier, but what’s left would not be me.” Frustrated with a senator’s response<sup>2</sup> to an email which completely ignored the concerns of the constituent, @Privetine (2014, April 12) wrote, “So apparently when you write your senator to #StopCombatingMe, you get a reply saying your concern about this childhood

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<sup>2</sup> @Privetine had written an email to her senator (unknown) asking that the senator vote against the reauthorization of the Combating Autism Act. The senator had responded to the email by thanking @Privetine for her *support* of the Combating Autism Act, when @Privetine had clearly written *against* the Act.

epidemic is noted.” In critiquing the association of Autism with medical language like “epidemic” or “diseased” and rejecting the need for a cure, participants in the discourse engage in identity construction by resisting the link between ILLNESS and Autistic experience, thus providing space for Autistic individuals to construct their own identities apart from a medical diagnosis. Furthermore, some participants in the discourse redirect the metaphor by applying ILLNESS to aspects of society in such a way as to reverse the metaphor to critique those aspects, rather than to label Autism, thus changing the direction of the conversation. The tweet quoted earlier which talked about “curing normalcy” is a clear example, as is a picture created by Kim (2014, March 19) which stated, “Cure Ableism.” By rejecting the conception of Autism as ILLNESS, ASAN’s followers argue against the use of medical language to describe Autistic experience.

### **Autistics as Lost Metaphor**

Though less prevalent than references to the AUTISM AS ILLNESS or AUTISM AS WAR metaphors, responses to the idea that Autistic people are metaphorically lost or missing do occur within the #stopcombatingme discourse. Creager (2014, March 19) wrote, “Autism Speaks has no autistic board members – the last resigned in disgust following Suzanne Wright’s Nov. 11 op-ed that described us as ‘lost’. We are not lost.” (para. 5). Rejection of AUTISTICS AS LOST generally involved a rejection of the influence of Autism Speaks, an organization which frequently employs that metaphor by referring to Autistic children as “missing puzzle pieces” or comparing Autism to a “kidnapper” (“Mission,” n.d.; “Our history,” n.d.). Rejecting AUTISTICS AS LOST means that Autistic adults claim to be fully present and request that their voices be heard in dialogues about Autism, which is related to a theme of self-advocacy and agency discussed later.

## Autism as War Metaphor

Because the Combating Autism Act includes metaphorical language invoking images of war, the #stopcombatingme discourse is filled with war metaphors, using entailments like “enemy,” “combat,” “war,” and “victorious”. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) note the power of war metaphors when they examine the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, arguing that though our culture conceptualizes argument as structured by war, other metaphors would be possible, such as ARGUMENT AS DANCE. Lakoff and Johnson argue that when ARGUMENT is conceptualized through an alternative metaphor, ARGUMENT itself takes on a different form. Thus, AUTISM AS WAR functions as a dominant metaphor, which the #stopcombatingme discourse rejects.

AUTISM AS WAR is understood through the use of words like “combat,” “fight,” “enemy,” and “war.” As an ASAN press release (2014, May 27) noted, “H.R. 4631 [Combating Autism Act] continues to use language offensive to Autistic people and our allies. We don’t want to be ‘combated’ – we want to be supported and respected” (para. 3). Ne’eman and Crane (2014, January 26) called the use of the word “combating” in the act’s title “stigmatizing” (para. 14). Skylar (2014, March 19) wrote, “I am not something that needs to be combated” (para. 3). Interesting here is the rhetorical association between the individual and Autism; rather than simply being Autistic, here the individual *is* Autism in a striking example of the pathos of identity-first language when arguing for social change. Ryan (2014, March 19) furthered:

Using violent language to describe the legislation allegedly designed to enhance the lives of Autistic people and their families is reprehensible. It is, in effect, sanctioning the dehumanization and discrimination that Autistic people, including my child, face every day. Enough combating human beings. (para. 6-7).

Similarly, critiques of the use of “fight,” “enemy,” and “war” abound. @rsocialskills (2014, April 4) tweeted, “fighting autism means fighting autistic people.” Ibbey (2014, March 19) wrote, “Some people think ‘Combating Autism’ is the wrong name for this act, because it is helping us instead of fighting us. But I think it is being pretty honest about what it is” (para. 10). Nattily (2014, March 19) claimed, “My identity is not your enemy” (para. 1). Sequenzia (2014, March 19) wrote, “They want to combat autism by eliminating Autistics, by preventing Autistics, as if we are the enemy” (para. 14). @aspergersinside (2014, June 10) tweeted, “The #CombatingAutismReauthorizationAct implies that the govt is reloading for a war on autistic people.”

Many of the tweets redirect the war metaphors away from Autism onto other concepts, creating the conceptual metaphors CAA AS WAR, STIGMA AS WAR, PREJUDICE AS WAR, and IGNORANCE AS WAR. For instance, @HeadofPlanetoid (2014, May 16) tweeted, “The Combat Autism act must be fought, for the sake of all present and future autistics.” @NJDC07 (2014, March 26) echoed, “Join fight w/ @autselfadvocacy let Combating Autism Act (CAA) expire!” In these tweets, the war metaphor is redirected back onto the act itself, an intriguing metaphorical shift. Similarly, @jadamsrn (2014, April 24) redirected the metaphor, “let’s stop combating autism and instead: combat stigma; combat fear; combat prejudice and ignorance.”

In rejecting the idea that Autism ought to be combated and redirecting the war metaphor to “fight” against the CAA, Autistic self-advocates channel pride in Autistic identity into arguments against the Combating Autism Act, thus redirecting the conversation. In so doing, Autistic individuals inspire pathos and reinforce their ethos by sharing their experiences. As @AutismInspired (2014, May 26) tweeted, “if you fight against autism, autism will fight back.”

Ultimately, the “fight” against the Combating Autism Act results in attempts to reclaim agency and calls to action, significant themes from the discourse that will be discussed later.

### **Metaphors as Conversation Redirection and Ideology Construction**

In #stopcombatingme, participants used metaphors typically used to describe Autism to critique elements of society like Ableism and reinforced the ideological construction of disability pride by divorcing Autistic experience from ILLNESS, LOSS, and WAR. Many of the tweets and blog posts critiqued metaphors typically used to describe Autistic experience. Additionally, however, discourse participants frequently redirected the metaphors to critique societal perceptions, rather than to label Autism. In so doing, the tweets and blog posts changed the direction of the conversation: rather than “curing” or “combating” Autism, the “fight” and the “cure” were redirected toward concepts like ableism, stigma, and prejudice, as well as toward the Combating Autism Act itself. Within the #stopcombatingme discourse, metaphors are used to change the focus of the conversation.

Because of the establishment or rejection of metaphorical associations between Autism and other concepts, ideologies of disability pride, self-determination, and autism as natural are strengthened. The rejection of metaphorical associations of Autism with medical language, war references, and metaphors of loss reinforces the ideological construction of disability pride. Likewise, the association between eugenics and a “cure” for Autism further strengthens this ideology. Initially, the rejection of using medical terminology to describe the Autistic experience delinks Autism from concepts like “disease” and “cure,” creating a space for Autism to become a cultural identifier and a source of pride. Linking the concept of “cure” with “eugenics” further strengthens this metaphor. Additionally, spurning comparisons of war to Autism allows for Autism to no longer be “fought,” “combated,” or “the enemy,” but rather accepted and



appreciated. Furthermore, countering the metaphor of being lost or missing by emphasizing Autistic presence in the discourse allows Autistic advocates to be both present and proud. Furthermore, the use of the word “Autistic” in association with identity pride is a clear reclamation of a term, often used as a slur, for positive meaning and positive construction of identity.

### **Summary**

Disability pride is the foundation for the use of identity-first language within the discourse, a rejection of *functioning* language, and a refusal to pass within the #stopcombatingme discourse. Additionally, disability pride creates a space for rejection of AUTISM AS WAR, AUTISM AS ILLNESS, and AUTISTICS AS LOST, allowing ASAN’s followers to reject dominant metaphorical constructions of Autism. As a result, ASAN’s followers are able to use metaphors to redirect the conversation and to reinforce the ideological construction of disability pride.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SELF-DETERMINATION

The concept of self-determination comes from the work of Mortimer Adler, who was strongly influenced by Aristotle and Aquinas. Adler (1958) argued that self-determination is based on the idea of free will, that the individual has the ability to control their own future. But, Adler's ideas call into question the fundamental nature of human existence: do we actually have choices or do we simply fulfill as destiny already set before us? When talking about advocacy, I take the concept of self-determination to mean the ability of an individual or group to control and participate in discourse and decision-making that directly impacts their lives. Thus, for ASAN's followers, self-determination means the ability to participate in discourse about policy-making on Autism and to have their voices heard in such a way that their perspectives influence policy decisions.

Strong arguments for self-determination, self-advocacy, and Autistic agency pervade the #stopcombatingme dialogue. In a response to the CAA, ASAN executives Ne'eman and Crane (2014) wrote, "Autistic people are uniquely suited to assessing which research and services programs are most needed in order to improve their lives" (para. 11). ASAN (2014, June 10) further argued for "a requirement that Autistic people make up at least four of the public members of the Inter-Agency Autism Coordinating Committee or one-third of the public membership, whichever number is higher" (para. 6). Skylar (2014, March 19), who has Aspergers, wrote, "I do not need to be spoken for" (para. 3). Because the Combating Autism Act was passed without the initial input of Autistic individuals, the reauthorization of the CAA represents an additional loss of agency. Calls for recognition of Autistic agency result in recognition of the value of Autistic voices, a rejection of the rhetoric of Autism Speaks, and clear calls to action.

## Autistic Voices as Central to Autism Discourse

Amy Sequenzia (2014, March 19), also an Autistic adult, declared, “I am also an activist, with great plans for my future and with a lot to say” (para. 8). This emphasis on Autistic voices is evidenced by tweeted claims of agency and reinforced through numerous references to other self-advocates. Though participants in the #stopcombatingme discourse could not force others to listen, through their tweets, they reclaim both their own voices and agency while demonstrating respect for the voices of others.

@SwanMothers (2014, March 19) tweeted, “Wondering what #autistic people want? Ask. Read their books, blogs. Don’t assume.” @2ndThoughtsCT (2014, April 3) wrote, “Listen to autistic self-advocates.” Jenny McCarthy is infamous within ASAN’s discourse for arguing that vaccines cause autism; in a critique of Jenny McCarthy’s stance on vaccines and autism, @RuubyDawnhead (2014, April 28) tweeted, “Don’t speak for autistic people and get informed about #autism.” In a very common tweet to representatives that was created by ASAN, many wrote on May 21, 2014, “#StopCombatingMe and listen to Autistic adults.” In emphasizing the validity of their perspectives, these Autistic Twitter-users reclaimed agency and framed the issues in terms of personal experience. For instance, Ryan (2014, March 19), Erenah (2014, March 19), Creager (2014, March 19), Sequenzia (2014, March 19), and Mead (2014, March 19) all shared personal experiences as a mechanism through which to argue against the CAA; specifically, each of these bloggers shared experiences that emphasized their humanity as well as their Autistic uniqueness, and therefore, argued that the CAA’s provisions for *cure* research were unfounded and that funding should be redirected toward employment and educational support.

A significant majority of the tweets included links to blog posts by other Autistic individuals, quoted tweets by other advocates, or referenced material from the Autistic Self-

Advocacy Network. For instance, @leah\_kelley (2014, March 19) tweeted, “Beth Ryan <3 for #stopcombatingme flashblog presented by #boycottautismspeaks. A powerful post! Fb.me/3JDkpwPu.” @Aspiemusings (2014, March 24) tweeted, “How about y’all #stopcombatingme?” @Aut\_Love\_Accept (2014, March 19) tweeted, “Nataliah Erenah for #stopcombatingme flashblog presented by #boycottautismspeaks. Ow.ly/uKdak” All of the links in the above tweets redirect to the work of other self-advocates. Such a trend indicates respect for the voices of other advocates. Despite the controversy over the legislation itself, these references were overwhelmingly positive, generally accompanied by a call to read the work of the other advocates and an expression of solidarity or agreement.

### **Rejection of Autism Speaks**

This emphasis on expanding the reach of Autistic voices is furthered by a rejection of the rhetoric of Autism Speaks. Within the #stopcombatingme discourse, the vitriol toward Autism Speaks is universal, ranging from vicious critiques of their money-handling to complete rejection of their right to speak on issues of Autism. For instance, within the #stopcombatingme discourse, the “S” in “Speaks” is frequently replaced by a dollar sign, as in the following example. Cara Creager (2014, March 19), an Autistic adult, lamented:

Some days you want to get involved, but can’t – because the leading organization in this country that purports to speak for us doesn’t want us involved. Autism \$peaks has no Autistic board members. (para. 5)

Warwick (2014, March 19) furthered criticized the organization, writing:

They are the largest Autism related organization in the world. They spend 44% of their budget on research in causes, “cures,” and genetic signature (for pre-natal

testing/selective abortion) of Autism. They spend another 43% on fundraising and advertising. (para. 4)

Ironic references to the name of the organization abound, seen especially in tweets like @CarlaSchmidtHolloway (2014, March 13): “Autism Speaks does not speak for me.” @BiolArtist (2014, March 13) called the rhetoric of the organization “fearmongering, not facts.” Sequenzia (2014, March 19) questioned, “Why are the hateful words of groups like Autism Speaks, which completely ignore the voices of Autistic people, more important than my right to exist” (para. 16)? Ryan (2014, March 19) accused Autism Speaks of “completely excluding [Autistic people] from meaningful participation” (para. 4). ASAN referred to Autism Speaks as “the usual suspects” in a press release on the Combating Autism Act (“#stopcombatingme,” n.d.). @TheItereatedTri0 (2014, April 23) called Autism Speaks a “hate group.” The clear connection between the rejection of Autism Speaks and reclaiming Autistic agency and voices is seen in a tweet by @HannahLaFrenz (2014, March 20): “Listen to Autistics because AS does not speak for them!!!” Using words like “listen,” “speak,” and “voices” allow Autistic individuals to reclaim space for their own agency in Autism discourse. The rejection of the narrative of Autism Speaks represents an attempt to resist the hegemonic narrative on Autism. However, the #stopcombatingme discourse is constrained both by the limitations of Twitter itself, but also by the pervasiveness of the hegemonic narrative.

### **Calls to Action**

An emphasis on Autistic agency is also indicated through the variety of calls to action and tweets to politicians contained in the discourse. Many of the calls to action involved requests to sign petitions, to contact representatives, or to amplify the voices of Autistic self-advocates. Many of the same tweets, crafted by ASAN, were tweeted by hundreds of participants. For

instance, “Let Combating Autism Act (CAA) expire! Use #StopCombatingMe to tell All!” or “Here’s how YOU can HELP! SIGN to REFORM the Combating #Autism Act.” While the use of Twitter as a vehicle to petition for legislative change is itself intriguing, the existence of pages upon pages of identical tweets, all originally disseminated by ASAN, is a strong demonstration of the power of that organization within self-advocacy discourse. These calls to action represent substantive ways in which Autistic individuals can engage in practical self-determinism.

The role social media advocacy plays in the legislative process remains unclear, as little response to #stopcombatingme came from outside the Autistic community. While the illusion is maintained through the use of personal names and signatures that politicians are the fingers behind social media accounts, the reality is that tweets and emails are read and responded to by public relations staff, many of whom are unpaid, fairly inexperienced interns. This factor may explain why some who emailed or tweeted their representatives complaining about the bill received responses thanking them for their support of the legislation. Nevertheless, the #stopcombatingme campaign does demonstrate that social media advocacy can at least play a role in raising awareness of a marginalized group’s frustration with the legislative process. The complaints about the name of the legislation resulted in a name change to the Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education and Support (CARES) Act, which is arguably less offensive.

However, the contents of the bill were essentially the same as the CAA. In response, @Libyral (2014, August 11) tweeted, “Looks like another few years of the government combating me – they just don’t call it that anymore!” In a press release on the Autism CARES Act, ASAN (2014, June 10) wrote:

We applaud the bill sponsors for hearing the concerns of autistic people and our families with respect to the title of the legislation. Unfortunately, the content of the new Autism CARES Act does not include critical provisions necessary to advancing quality of life for autistic people and our families. (para. 2)

Some representatives were listening to these complaints, as evidenced by a proposed amendment sponsored by Representatives Schakowsky, Castor, Duckworth, Speier, and Tonko who wrote:

We urge you to implement the act in a manner that would address the concerns that we've heard and incorporate the recommendations of the self-advocacy community. Autistic individuals should have a voice in federal policy deliberations impacting their lives. (as cited in Diament, 2014, October 21, para. 4)

While it is heartening that some politicians heard the voices of self-advocates, the amendment, which incorporated many of ASAN's suggested alterations, did not come to a vote as it was withdrawn from consideration (ASAN, 2014, June 10). Furthermore, the degree to which social media advocacy influenced the introduction of the amendment is impossible to measure because of the lobbyist groups who were also involved. These politicians may have heard about the issue through venues other than Twitter, as ASAN (2014, June 10) noted that lobbying and dialogue had occurred through other mechanisms as well. Therefore, it remains difficult to define the impact of the Twitter discourse on the legislative process and, the opportunity for resistance via Twitter to the dominant legislative narrative appears to be limited.

### **Summary**

An emphasis on self-determination results in recognition of the value of Autistic voices, a rejection of the rhetoric of Autism Speaks, and clear calls to action. Furthermore, identity-first language emphasizes the importance of self-advocacy and self-determination, while the way in

which metaphors are used within the discourse creates a space for such advocacy. The use of identity-first language emphasizes the importance of personal experience within the discourse, reflecting an essential belief in self-determination and self-advocacy, or the importance of autistic voices and agency. By placing Autistic identity first, ASAN's followers stress the significance of their identity to their viewpoint and, thus, to their input in the dialogue.

In discarding many of the traditional metaphors of Autism, the #stopcombatingme discourse created a space for self-determination and self-advocacy, allowing Autistic self-advocates to reclaim personal agency and a legitimate place in the dialogue. By rejecting the medicalization of Autism, Autistic self-advocates reclaim control of the discourse from the medical arena. Morson (2014, March 19) wrote:

We could consider it ridiculous for cancer patients to collaborate with doctors on designing their treatment plan. Because we view autism from a similar mindset, we ignore the insights autistic people have and miss the opportunity to work with them to design and implement services and educational programs. (para. 37)

By delinking Autism from a disease like cancer, rejection of the AUTISM AS ILLNESS metaphor creates a space where Autistic individuals can determine for themselves what is in their best interests and engage in self-advocacy. Abandoning AUTISM AS WAR repositions Autistic individuals from “enemy” to self-advocate. If Autism no longer “under attack,” Autistic people have the ability to engage in more proactive, rather than defensive, advocacy. Additionally, refusing to be conceptualized via AUTISTICS AS LOST allows Autistic individuals to emphasize their presence in the discourse.



## CHAPTER SIX: AUTISM AS GENETIC

Much of the #stopcombatingme discourse is based on the notion that any cure of Autism would involve either eugenics or euthanasia, stemming from an ultimate belief that Autism is biological or genetic, a natural variation of the mind. Such a belief supports those expressed by advocates of neurodiversity, but is in opposition to the beliefs of others, such as those who might argue that vaccines cause Autism, like Jenny McCarthy, or that an alternative cause simply has yet to be found, like Autism Speaks. While science has yet to prove any specific cause for Autism, genetic or otherwise, the strongly-held belief of these Autistic self-advocates, that Autism is a natural genetic variation, provide an important context for the rejection of AUTISM AS ILLNESS, arguments against a cure of any sort, and anti-eugenics and anti-euthanasia rhetoric that emerge from the #stopcombatingme discourse.

If Autism is a natural genetic variation with pros and cons just like neurotypical brains, then rejecting medicalization of the label makes sense; there is no need to medicalize something no more problematic than “normal” brains. Additionally, if Autism is genetic, then a cure would involve pre-natal testing and selective abortion, “mercy-killings” of autistic people, or genetic manipulation, thus the association of a “cure” with eugenics and euthanasia throughout the #Stopcombatingme discourse. Because, as Warwick (2014, March 19) noted, much of the money appropriated by the CAA would fund research for “a genetic trace-marker for pre-natal testing and selective abortion, find a way to make Autistic people be non-Autistic-a ‘cure,’” the discourse against the CAA is based on anti-eugenics and anti-euthanasia arguments (para. 1). For instance, in response to the CAA, Skylar (2014, March 19) wrote:

Let’s say there were no moral implications with curing Autism on its own. There’s still moral implications with altering genes! Yeah, from the research one, there are *multiple*

genes that *might* be responsible for Autism. To prevent/cure Autism, there'd have to be intensive gene alteration. (para. 6)

Words like “preventing,” “eliminating,” and “assimilation” in arguing against the CAA reinforce the association between an Autism “cure” and eugenics. @anonymousaspie (2014, March 13) tweeted, “the combating autism act has its priorities wrong. It should be helping people not preventing a neurology.” Similarly, @tinygracenotes (2014, March 14) noted, “CAA funds mostly prevention research. I’m glad I wasn’t prevented; so’s my family.” @Privetine (2014, March 13) wrote, “Eugenics isn’t support.” @BiolArtist tweeted, “Autism is a natural variation and you should be ashamed to promote eugenics.” @Cinnamaldehyde (2014, June 10) wrote, “Dear congress: how’s about instead of eliminationism, you focus on real problems like enviro & homelessness.” @IrreletheDemon (2014, June 12) complained, “Tired of being viewed as something to assimilate or eradicate.” @riotheatherrr (2014, March 7) questioned, “When people say they want to cure their child’s Autism, I always wonder, what child do they envision post-‘cure’?”

The use of identity-first language within #stopcombatingme emphasizes an ideology that generates an understanding of Autism as natural and genetic. If Autism is merely a difference in brain function, then the use of identity-first language reflects typical identity language use. In other words, we say, “Black person,” not “Person with black skin,” but we don’t say, “Cancerous person,” we say “Person with cancer.” The use of identity-first language reflects a belief that associates Autism with other identity and cultural categories, rather than with medical languages and diseases.

Furthermore, abandoning the hegemonic metaphors of Autism provides support for an understanding of Autism as genetic and natural. Additionally, critiquing the use of war

references in Autism humanizes Autistic people, positioning them as equal human beings rather than an “enemy” to be “combated.” When Autistic people are seen as equally human to those who are neurotypical, an understanding of autism as natural genetic variation makes sense.

Because the medical language we use to discuss eugenics share entailments like “prevent” and “eliminate,” the metaphorical association between an Autism “cure” and eugenics is strong. Because eugenics brings up questions of ethical treatment of others, directing the discourse toward that concept increases the pathos of the Autistic self-advocate. While words like “genetic” may seem to speak to AUTISM AS ILLNESS, combining “genetic” with the word “natural” divorces the understanding of Autism from traditional medical discourse, in the same way proponents of homeopathic remedies may use the word “natural” to separate their practice from traditional medicine. Thus, rejection and modification of medical language supports a view of Autism as a natural genetic variation. By changing the topic of conversation from *finding a cure for sick people* to *eugenics*, ASAN’s followers are able to call into question the ethics of existing research about Autism.

The uncertain origin of Autism lends itself to the use of metaphorical comparisons as a means through which to understand Autism and the experiences of Autistic people. Despite being the subject of much research, the nature of Autism is undetermined. While the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV has a list of diagnostic criteria, a list of characteristics cannot tell us what a condition actually is. Because of the role that Autism plays in identity construction and creating a shared culture, Autism is more than the sum of its diagnostic parts. Yet, without a clear understanding of the origin or cause of Autism, the essence remains unknown. Autism, within the #stopcombatingme discourse, is understood through a variety of metaphorical comparisons, many of which are an attempt to counter societal

misunderstandings and stereotyping. In moving from understanding Autism as ILLNESS to viewing Autism as identity and culture, the #stopcombatingme discourse rejects a popular conception of Autism as illness or disease. In redirecting WAR metaphors away from Autism toward societal misperceptions, #stopcombatingme attempts to correct systemic problems like ableism. #Stopcombatingme creates the metaphors ABLEISM AS WAR and ABLEISM AS ILLNESS; in so doing, ableism is positioned as a societal problem to be eliminated. In replacing the idea of being lost with a strong presence in Autism discourse, #stopcombatingme restores the concept of Autistic agency. Though the uncertain nature of Autism certainly creates space for problematic metaphorical comparisons, it also provides an opportunity for Autistic self-advocates to self-define.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This analysis led to intriguing conclusions about the salience of identity labels, reappropriation in a “safe” space, the applicability of *functionality* in determining human worth, and entailment relationships of Autism metaphors. Additionally, this analysis provides important contributions to Disability Studies and to Communication Studies, though it has some limitations.

### The Salience of Identity Labels

The emphasis on identity claims through self-identified labels within #stopcombatingme leads to an intriguing idea: That certain ways in which identity is claimed or labeled imply that the aspect is more salient to identity. While further research needs to be conducted, existing research on other identity groups suggests that when an identity label, such as Autistic, is used as a noun, rather than as an adjective, that label is more salient to the identity. For instance, Graf, Bilewicz, Finell, and Geschke (2012), when evaluating in-group labels used for nationality, concluded that the use of the labels as nouns indicated in-group favoritism and a preference for that identity. In a study of perception of people’s expressed preferences, Walton and Banaji (2004) found that noun labels were seen as stronger than descriptive words by both outside observers and in-group speakers, writing:

We found that when people described their preferences using abstract noun labels – which imply that a preference is central to one’s identity – they judged those preferences as stronger and more stable than when they described them using descriptive action verbs. (p. 205)

Thus, while further study specific to Autism and noun versus descriptive labeling is necessary, it seems reasonable to conclude that the use of Autistic as noun, rather than adjective,

indicates a central, strong, and stable aspect of identity such as is noted by Walton and Banaji (2004). By identifying as an Autistic rather than as an Autistic person, Autism becomes not just a significant part of identity (listed first), but the only noteworthy identity. In following ASAN's focus on identity-first language, participants in the #stopcombatingme discourse construct the self as primarily Autistic.

### **Reappropriation in a “Safe” Space**

In using *Autistic* as a salient identity label with positive in-group connotations, the #stopcombatingme self-advocates reclaimed what has become a slur in wider society. As Jurecic (2007) noted, *Autistic* is often used as an insult, similar to *retarded*, applied to someone who is perceived as unintelligent. Proponents of person-first language, the purpose of which is to emphasize humanity over Autism diagnosis, view the use of *Autistic* as politically-incorrect, further stigmatizing this language choice (2014 AP Stylebook). Darling (2013) called this phenomenon *courtesy stigma*, arguing that the attempt to be politically-correct nevertheless creates stigma toward the Autistic individual.

As noted earlier, the use of identity-first language indicates increased identity salience and pride in Autistic identity, an attitudinal change from viewing Autism as a medically-imposed label. *Autistic* is, therefore, an identity label, similar to other words that have been reappropriated by marginalized groups (Dean-Olmsted, 2011). Croon (2013) argued that the reappropriation of a slur reflects a change not only in the attitude of the individual, but also in the representation of reality. Thus, the reappropriation of *Autistic* serves to structure a counter-representation of Autistic reality, in which difference is construed as a positive descriptor, rather than a condition that detracts from humanity.

Typically, when reappropriation of a slur occurs, outsider observers of the marginalized community tend to reject or critique the legitimacy of slur-reappropriation by the in-group (Croom, 2013; Jeshion, 2013), as has often been the case with Autism discourse (Duncan, 2013; Olmsted, 2008). However, very little of commentary critiquing the use of identity-first language occurred in #stopcombatingme. Despite the Twitter hashtag occurring in the open forum of the Internet where anyone could participate, outsiders to the Autistic community were very much absent in the discourse. There were some outside responses to #stopcombatingme tweets, but those were limited to either issue-based discussion or obvious trolling. I observed very little discussion on language use, which is surprising because of the wider debate on Autism discourse. Thus, in terms of reappropriation of *Autistic*, the #stopcombatingme hashtag represented a relatively safe space to use identity-first language. As noted in the analysis of identity-first language, reappropriation of *Autistic* allowed ASAN's followers to not only express pride in Autistic identity, but also to view Autism as a salient aspect of their identity.

### **Functionality**

The critique of “functioning” language within the #stopcombatingme discourse forces the question: What does it even mean to be functional? The word evokes a sense of general usefulness or measurable contribution; who benefits from the use is unclear, but seems to be society as a whole. As such, this concept of *function* seems strikingly dystopian; if human worth is measured by contribution to society, the images brought to mind include *The Matrix* or *50 Million Merits* (an episode of the TV series *Black Mirror*), where humans are used to provide measurable energy. In other words, conceptualizing the worth of a person in light of their measurable contributions to society is problematic as, aside from the metaphor of physical energy output, it is difficult to precisely measure human contributions to society. Nevertheless,

society places value on certain traits, views a lack of those traits as a lack of ability, and rewards those humans who possess such traits, naming them as *functional*. The concept of *functionality* is entrenched in disability discourse. For instance, the World Health Organization maintains an *International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health*, a mechanism for measuring health and disability. Similarly, the Social Security Administration utilizes a *Function Report* in order to determine eligibility for benefits. While I understand that such organizations need to somehow quantify the limitations of individuals and, thus, their need for support, the use of *functioning* by such influential organizations sustains that language use throughout dominant discourse on disability. Davis (2005) argued, “having a body that appears to conform to able-bodied standards is no guarantee of health or functionality” (p. 181). Despite Aristotle’s argument that “all things have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function,” not all *functions* are equally valued by society (p. 10). Aristotle further argued that the unique function of humans is rationality. If virtue, as Aristotle argued, is found in discovering one’s function, then to be a *good* or *worthwhile* human, one must develop rationality.

Within the #stopcombatingme discourse, *functionality* is conceptualized in terms of one’s ability to pass; thus, arguably, one’s perceived usefulness to society as an Autistic person is directly tied to one’s ability to appear non-Autistic. Because Autistic strengths are not valued by society and Autistic weaknesses are not naturally accommodated while typical neurotypical weaknesses are, an obviously-Autistic person is not viewed as a *functional* human being. Furthermore, if we return to Aristotle’s emphasis on *rationality*, the connection between being viewed as *functional* and being able to *pass* becomes even clearer: the disabled mind, the Autistic mind, is not conceptualized as a *rational* mind by society. Thus, to be considered



*functional*, the Autistic individual must successfully perform neurotypicality, or that which is perceived as *rationality*. Thus, *rationality* is rhetorically associated with neurotypicality, separating anyone who is not neurotypical from being perceived as rational. As frequently noted in the #stopcombatingme discourse, no Autistic person is always able to pass, even to those who may be completely unaware of what to notice; thus, aspiring to pass as *rational* is problematic. The refusals to pass contained within the #stopcombatingme discourse represent, then, a rejection of the normative notion of *rationality* and, thus, a rejection of the idea that human beings must be valued through the lens of *functionality* as currently defined by society.

In opposition to *functionality*, the #stopcombatingme discourse offers the notion of *inherent value* as the lens through which to view human worth. The dismissal of the validity of euthanasia, eugenics, or mercy killings for Autistic people within the discourse strongly suggests that all people, and all lives are valuable and that all humans contribute to society. The emphasis on being present, rather than being lost or missing, provides a further alternative to *functionality*, arguing that merely by existing, each individual provides something worthy to society.

### **Entailment Relationships of Autism Metaphors**

Autism is conceptualized through metaphors precisely because its essential nature is unknown. In examining the entailments of Autism metaphors, the most intriguing are the reinforcement of a lack of voice and between medical and war metaphors.

#### **“Lost” Autistics = Lost Voices**

The entailment link between *lacking agency* and *lost people* is the concept of *absence*. The relationship between these two concepts is a fairly simple coherence, but becomes interesting because of its function within the #stopcombatingme discourse. By positioning Autistic people as *lost*, Autism Speaks, whether intentionally or not, excuses itself from the

moral dilemma of ignoring the voices of Autistic people, since, *missing* people have no voices to hear. In declaring their presence and contributions to this world, Autistic people reintroduce the ethical dilemma. ASAN's followers, therefore, reject the metaphorical construction of AUTISTICS AS LOST and emphasize their own voice in the discourse.

### **AUTISM AS ILLNESS and AUTISM AS WAR Metaphors**

The coherence between AUTISM AS ILLNESS and AUTISM AS WAR is a bit more complex. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) noted, “metaphorical entailments also play an essential role in linking *two different* metaphorical structurings of a single concept” (p. 96). The shared entailments, like *death*, *bodily autonomy*, and *elimination*, between AUTISM AS ILLNESS and AUTISM AS WAR link the metaphors together in the discourse. De Leonardis (2008) noted that ILLNESS and WAR metaphors tend to share many entailments, including the ones noted above. We “fight” or “battle” cancer, for instance. The difference, of course, is that, though it is conceptualized in popular culture as an illness, unlike cancer, Autism is not a disease, or as Sequenzia (2014, March 19) stated, “Autism is not an illness, but it is for life” (para. 15). Nevertheless, ILLNESS and WAR metaphors have been inextricably linked for centuries, often so deeply engrained that we don't necessarily realize we're using them together. Khuller (2014, August 7) wrote:

Military metaphors are among the oldest in medicine and they remain among the most common. Long before Louis Pasteur deployed imagery of invaders to explain germ theory in the 1980, John Donne ruminated on the “miserable condition of man,” describing illness as a “siege”...Thomas Sydenham, the most famous physician of the 17<sup>th</sup> century...is often credited with introducing military language into Western medical parlance. (para. 12-13)

In a way, this reinforces the connection between AUTISM AS WAR and AUTISM AS ILLNESS, as the #stopcombatingme campaign disconnects Autism from both metaphors, but at a cost. While the #stopcombatingme discourse clearly argues that Autism should not be viewed as ILLNESS and thus, is not to be combated, the redirection of the metaphors is done in such a way that the rhetorical violence and the linking of ILLNESS and WAR metaphors continues in other areas. In a statement which clearly demonstrates how the ILLNESS and WAR metaphors operate jointly, Mead (2014, March 19) wrote:

Battlegrounds against autism are sometimes fought by people who believe it is a disease and a travesty, either because they want to be saviors or because they want to rid the world of disease. Battlegrounds should not even exist....To be autistic is not to be diseased. (para. 6)

The statement above, like many others also present in the discourse, appears to argue that, because Autism is *not* ILLNESS, it should not be battled, thus implying that *real* ILLNESS IS WAR. Yet, the linking of ILLNESS and WAR metaphors is dehumanizing; not only are patients viewed as battlegrounds, but positioning them as fighters makes emotional vulnerability rhetorically distant.

### **Contribution of Research to Disability Studies**

Research about Autism and neurodiversity discourses as well as other disability research appears primarily in English, history, and gender/women's studies with focus on five areas: Autistic perspective, coming out, neurodiversity, disability as culture, and metaphors.

#### **The Autistic Perspective**

Goggin and Newell (2003) emphasized most research about *disability* has been conducted by those who do not consider themselves *disabled*. Snyder and Mitchell (2006) argued

that research on disability within academia has been problematic, “invest[ing] itself with the promise of solving the riddle of human differences while undermining the humanity of its object of study with a chivalric story of rescue” (p. 188). As Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2012) noted, Autism especially has been fetishized and commoditized within research, arguing that knowledge about Autism has become detached from those who are actually Autistic. Thus, while social media may provide space for the perspectives of Autistic people, academia certainly has not, especially because of the limited nature and normative expectations of academic writing. Because hegemonic cultural constructs limit the language and metaphors with which to describe Autistic experiences, Autistic people who struggle to articulate their worldview are not inarticulate, but rather, subject to the limited nature of the dominant narrative (Sprague, 2005). Thus, by examining the perspectives of other Autistic people, and providing my own Autistic perspective, my research creates a space within Disability Studies for research by Autistic people to consider how their own perspectives influence Autistic discourse.

### **Coming Out**

Applying the concept of *coming out* to the experience of claiming disability is certainly not a new idea, with Linton’s (1998) foundational *Claiming Disability* attesting to its use to describe disabled experiences. Gill (1997) also explains that *coming out* as the final step of disabled identity development. Nevertheless, no research specific to the *coming out* as related to Autism existed before this research. While future research should certainly examine the *coming out* experiences of Autistic adults, my research does make an important contribution to Autism research: specifically, that coming out publically as Autistic can function as a significant part of a political discourse.

## **Neurodiversity**

Jurecic (2007) noted the demand of the neurodiversity movement, that Autism be accepted within society, but also looked specifically at the experience of Autistic students from her perspective as an English instructor, acknowledging that the educational expectations in college may make acceptance difficult. Owren and Stenhammer (2013) provide a good overview of the perspectives of the neurodiversity movement based on public statements and include a case study in order to make practical implications for care of Autistic individuals. Kapp et al. (2013) conducted a survey of Autistic adults, relatives of Autistic individuals, and some individuals with no connection to Autism; their findings highlighted the differences between the medical model and the neurodiversity perspectives. In general, the view of Autism as more central to identity and oppose research for a cure than adherents to the medical model. While some of my conclusions are similar to those found by Kapp et al. (2013), my research extends the analysis to show how adherence to a neurodiversity perspective can be politicized. Furthermore, my research departs from understanding Autistic experience as seen within academia or in assisted living facilities.

## **Disability as Culture**

Snyder and Mitchell (2006) provide an excellent historical overview of cultural locations of disability, with a focus on how the disabled body is culturally disciplined and policed as well as identifying opportunities for individual resistance. Though my research is less historical in focus, the implications with regard to *passing* reflect the notions of discipline and policing contained with Snyder and Mitchell's work and provide a specific examination of Autism as culture, rather than disability as a whole. Though my research looks at Autism as identity in much the same way that Jack (2012) did, my research extends beyond Autism as it relates to

gender identity to focus on Autism as identity itself and as a cultural link. Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2012) look at Autism within the cultural context of the academia, looking at how Autism has become a research commodity and how the Autistic experience has been fetishized. I agree with Mallett and Runswick-Cole in that the Autistic perspective is frequently *used* rather than *respected* and hope that, through the inclusion of my own story, my research represents a departure from that norm.

### **Metaphors of Autism**

Broderick and Ne'eman's (2008) article is the primary examination of Autism as metaphor. While I refrained from references to the article within my analysis due to concern that Ne'eman's involvement as a leader of ASAN might potentially influence my perspective, Broderick and Ne'eman provide an intriguing analysis of metaphors used to describe Autistic experience. Broderick and Ne'eman examine the existence of two metaphors within Autism discourse: Autism as Foreign Space and Autism as Disease. Similarly, my research finds both of these metaphors prevalent within Autism research, though Autism as Foreign Space is conceptualized within my research as AUSTISTICS AS LOST. Furthermore, my research documents and analyzes the existence of the AUTISM AS WAR metaphor, a hitherto unexamined metaphor of Autism.

### **Contribution of Research to Communication Studies**

Little research about Autism identity discourse exists, with existing research about Autism focusing mostly on media portrayals. Lester and Paulus (2012) is the exception; in their study, they look at performance of Autism as defined by the parents and therapists of Autistic children. While I draw similar conclusions to Lester and Paulus, this research extends their conclusions on performance by examining a discourse involving Autistic adults.

Research about the rhetorical constructions of disability in general has been conducted within Communication Studies with slightly more frequency, such as Lunsford (2008) and Fassett and Morella (2008), along with anthologies edited by Braithwaite and Thompson (2000) and Goggin and Newell (2003). With Lester and Paulus (2012) being the exception, research in communication has not examined discourses of disability, instead focused on personal identity and media portrayals. Research on metaphors and disability within communication has only looked at tendencies of Autistic individuals to find metaphors difficult to understand, not on metaphorical constructions of disability (De Villiers et al., 2013; Giora, 2012; Gold & Faust, 2012; Hobson, 2012; Melogno et al., 2012; Wearing, 2010). Thus, this research contributes an analysis of disability discourse, especially providing an examination of how Autistic identity is metaphorically constructed to the field.

Though the #stopcombatingme discourse provides a powerful example of a community coming together to reclaim a cultural identifier and redirect problematic metaphors to change the focus of conversation, problematic elements exist as well. In relying on social media advocacy and continuing the association between medical and military metaphors, Autistic self-advocates in the #stopcombatingme campaign perhaps made less of a difference in society outside their community than they may have hoped or believed. Nevertheless, as ASAN and its affiliates continue to engage in advocacy, both online through social media and in the physical world with its lobbying arm, they work within the constraint of opposing a dominant, well-known advocacy organization. While this certainly limits the ability of ASAN to influence opinion, their online advocacy has increasingly garnered the public eye. For instance, when ASAN's proponents hijacked #AutismSpeaks10, which was meant to celebrate the 10 year anniversary of Autism Speaks in April 2015, to complain about the organization, major news organizations took note

(Hughes, 2015, February 23; Kanagaraj, 2015, April 7). While one might argue that BuzzFeed (Hughes, 2015, February 23) is not a major news source, the popularity and reach of the source are what is relevant here. Thus, as ASAN's influence grows, their supporters should continue to interject their thoughts and values into the discourse, including discourse moderated by Autism Speaks.

### **Limitations of Research**

This research is limited by its focus on only a single discourse on Autism that occurred online. Because my research only examined #stopcombatingme, the conclusions drawn reflect only that particular discourse, not Autism discourse as a whole. Also, because #stopcombatingme was spearheaded by ASAN, my analysis reflects only the communication of ASAN's affiliates. Additionally, this research is limited in its ability to draw conclusions regarding the attitudes of those who tweeted and blogged on the hashtag. Though the research makes arguments regarding the ideology of the participants in the discourse, only the written discourse was examined. Future research should conduct interviews or surveys of the participants to further develop understandings of attitudinal shifts and the impact of certain language use on the avowed identity of the participant. Furthermore, though every effort was made to determine and note whether the participants self-identified as Autistic, were the parents of Autistic children, or were otherwise involved with Autistic individuals, it is possible that some of those who participated in #stopcombatingme may not have had any direct ties to the Autistic community. Lastly, my own opinions regarding the validity of ASAN's point of view likely have influenced my analysis, as I certainly agree with the organization on most points especially with regard to the Combating Autism Act.



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