Weighing In
Academic Writers on Neurodiversity

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ABSTRACT
Neurodiversity as a concept, identity, and movement has radically challenged pre-existing ideas of human difference and value. First proposed by Judy Singer (1998) and largely developed through the work of community activists, neurodiversity posits an alternative to pathologizing and medicalized understandings of human differences. This article explores the ways neurodiversity is being used, defined, and deployed based on a corpus of 94 academic texts published across social science disciplines (2006–2021). Using discourse analysis methods derived primarily from Fairclough (2001, 2003), we examine how neurodiversity has been claimed and refashioned within academia. Neurodiversity was often seen as an embodied difference, and was variously portrayed as dichotomous, universal, or existing on a spectrum. Many authors followed an “Autism Plus” strategy, keeping autism at the center of discussions. Academic writers of the texts on neurodiversity overwhelmingly launched their own claims to authority, even as they simultaneously positioned themselves as out of the fray.

KEYWORDS
neurodiversity, disability, autism, discourse analysis, expertise, language, social movements

1. Introduction
Neurodiversity as a concept, identity, and movement has radically challenged pre-existing ideas of human difference and value. Neurodiversity advocates argue that Autistic\(^1\) and other ways of being that have been diagnosed as “pathologies” instead represent valuable and valid forms of human diversity (Chapman, 2019; Kapp et al., 2013). Neurodiversity has been posited as an alternative to pathologizing and medicalized understandings of human difference and proposes disability justice as an alternative to “cures” and normalizing interventions (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013). Often promoted by people who have been diagnosed or labeled themselves (Broderick and Ne’eman, 2008; den Houting, 2019), neurodiversity is sometimes referred to as a political movement, building on other movements for social justice, such as queer and trans liberation, consumer-survivor movements, or Mad pride (Graby, 2015; Runswick-Cole, 2014; McWade, Milton, and Beresford, 2015).

This article steps back from specific debates and disciplinary silos to ask how neurodiversity is being used, defined, and responded to in the contemporary context of academic, English-language publications. It examines an archive of texts we

\(^1\) The use of identity-first and capitalized descriptions of “Autistic people” come from stated community preferences, with the acknowledgment that this preference is not universal.
systematically compiled and analyzed, using critical questions and strategies derived primarily from Fairclough (2001, 2003). From their different disciplines and positionalities, the contributors to this collection of texts have come together to use neurodiversity to further their larger arguments about how people’s experiences should be valued and how expertise should be allocated. These texts reveal common elements of how neurodiversity, as a term, is circulating across a range of disciplines and geographical regions, but also show differences that connect to who authors are and how they are positioned, particularly in relation to Autistic and neurodivergent communities.

We argue that these texts on neurodiversity offer a compelling example for discourse scholars of how academic authors recapture and reconfigure language, ideas, and practices that have been largely theorized outside the academy. Indeed, academic texts about neurodiversity show authors grappling with ideas and claims that, at their core, challenge notions of scholarly expertise and academic practice-as-usual, both i) in their content, which asserts that research concepts and practices have been flawed and damaging for many, and ii) in their means, as their primary theoretical development and transmission has occurred outside of academically validated domains. This project is of broader importance for scholars committed to social justice and equity as part of a practice of studying up (Nader, 1969) and thinking critically about epistemologically exclusionary norms in academia.

Our analysis reveals that academic authors have situated themselves as arbiters in discussions of neurodiversity. While academics who have written about neurodiversity come from a diverse range of disciplines, they have all needed to situate themselves and their writing in relation to a term and a cultural movement that have largely developed and circulated in non-academic spaces, that are certainly not beholden to any academic field. The work of academic contributors to this larger landscape can, our research suggests, be best understood when analyzed in terms of how authority and expertise are claimed and contested by these authors, often in ways that are cloaked by deployments of academic/scientific terminology and assertions of objectivity and rigor. Discourse analysis offers an effective means to map the multiple ways in which academic writers navigate existing social relations, and assert their own agendas, in a larger socio-political context where “neurodiversity” is deployed by many, for diverse ends, and with uneven consequences. This article aims to turn a critical focus toward academic and research practices related to neurodiversity which produce and reproduce the rhetorical and epistemological exclusion of neurodivergent and disabled individuals.

This article starts by outlining how our work is situated in the existing literature on neurodiversity, and what theoretical resources contributed to our methods and interpretation. We then present a methodological overview, describing how we assembled and analyzed our sources of academic writing about neurodiversity, and characterizing the corpus we examined. Next, we highlight key aspects of how neurodiversity is being defined and understood, paying particular attention to the ways in which the definition itself illuminates groupings, tensions, and confluences across
and within these texts. Finally, we investigate the ways in which neurodiversity has been claimed and refashioned within academia and the discursive strategies academics have employed to launch their own claims to authority, often while simultaneously portraying themselves as objective and outside of the fray.2

1.1 Background

Ever since the term “neurodiversity” was coined by Judy Singer (1998) and Harvey Blume (1998), discussions of neurodiversity’s meaning and application have primarily circulated through online communities (including blogs and social media) and in activist spaces (Bumiller, 2008; Chapman, 2019). Autistic-led organizations, such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), have from their inception presented neurodiversity language and ideas as needed alternatives to pathologizing frameworks, and to the actions and ideas about cure perpetuated by parent advocacy organizations such as Autism Speaks (McGuire, 2016). More recently, the widespread success of Steve Silberman’s 2015 bestseller, *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, coincided with a rapid expansion in the audiences for and contributors to discussions of neurodiversity. Writing on neurodiversity can now be found in texts such as self-help books and related resources, materials about “neurodiverse learners” for teachers and educators (e.g., Rentenbach, Prislovsky, and Gabriel, 2017), or new hiring guidelines and policies intended to help employers access a pool of “untapped” “neurodiverse talent” (e.g., Austin and Pisano, 2017; Dunn, Wittevrongel, and Zwicker, 2018).

Academic writers have arrived late to this conversation (Chapman, 2019). While Singer first proposed “neurodiversity” through her master’s thesis (1998), the concept was initially taken up primarily by Autistic self-advocates and disability justice activists as opposed to academics. Academics who have much more recently worked to define, respond to, and elaborate on Singer’s concept of neurodiversity have been engaging with a form of discourse that originated largely outside of, apart from, and in contrast to academic disciplines and institutions. Indeed, the last few years have witnessed a proliferation in academic attention to how neurodiversity is understood and enacted. Scholars across various disciplines have begun to write about neurodiversity at a fevered pace, with often conflicting and contrasting approaches and understandings.

Our own analytical approach vis-a-vis this discursive explosion of neurodiversity is indebted to a wide body of academic and activist theoretical literatures. Critical disability studies and critical autism studies have effectively advocated for a pivot in scholarly focus, away from the “other” of the disabled, labeled, or diagnosed, and toward the investments and costs of knowledge systems and institutional practices that divide the “other” from the “norm” (Goodley et al., 2019; O’Dell et al., 2016; 2. This project received ethical clearance from the University of Waterloo and was funded by an Insight Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, a University of Waterloo SSHRC Exchange Grant, and a Renison University College Research Grant.)
Roscigno, 2021). We are particularly indebted to the theoretical work of Autistic and disabled scholars/writers/activists such as Remi Yergeau (2017), Nick Walker (neuroqueer.com), Lydia X. Z. Brown (autistichoya.com), Steven Kapp (Kapp et al, 2013; Kapp, 2020), Robert Chapman (2019, 2020), and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018). These theoretical resources are indeed difficult to attribute to individual theorists because of the ways in which they have been collectively created and circulated.

This collective discussion and development of neurodiversity discourse has also occurred through organizations such as ASAN, the Autistic Women’s and NonBinary Network, Autistics United Canada, and Autistics 4 Autistics Ontario. Collected endeavors also include edited book collections by and for the Autistic and neurodivergent community, such as *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* (Bascom, 2012) or *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism* (Brown, Ashkenazy, and Onaiwu, 2017). Collective online development and circulation of theoretical resources can also be found on blogs/social media such as “The Thinking Person’s Guide to Autism” and through the social media of self-advocacy organizations and many of the individuals listed above. Our analysis is indebted to the ideas and commitments that have been circulating across these spaces.

By investigating academic texts as objects through which to examine the complexities of how social power is produced, shifted, and challenged, rather than as neutral or authoritative accounts (Fairclough, 2001, 2003), we build on critiques that identify researchers as primary instigators in the marginalization, institutionalization, and pathologization of disabled, Autistic, and psychiatrized/Mad individuals and communities (Brown, 2017; Foucault, 2006; Rosqvist et al., 2019; Yergeau, 2017). We also see academic writing as a domain in which everyday practices of violence and harm can be produced and justified, particularly along the lines of colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist hierarchies (Betasmosake Simpson, 2017; Harney and Moten, 2013; Maracle, 2015; Smith, 1999; Snorton, 2017). As academic researchers, such an examination of academic research as a domain of critical investigation offers one way to examine and challenge our own privilege and complicity.

2. Methods

Discourse analysis methods approach language activity as a part of social processes and practices as opposed to a reflection or expression of them (Fairclough, 2001). In other words, discourse analyses are based on the notion that language is constitutive, or a site where meaning is created and contested; language is not simply a vehicle for communicating meaning (Taylor, 2001). Further, whenever people engage with language, “they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects” (Fairclough, 2001, 19). This understanding of language activity means that an analysis of language needs to consider its situated use (Taylor, 2001). Specifically, discourse analysis focuses on texts as socially, culturally, and politically situated, and considers texts’ causal functions in terms of social practice, involvement in meaning-making, and ideological effects (Fairclough, 2003).
Discourse analysis can be grounded in a wide variety of theoretical and methodological traditions. Some of these approaches focus closely on linguistic features or sequences of interaction while others focus more on the patterned use of language and the ways that language enables and constrains action, figures in social processes, and functions in terms of power (Fairclough, 2001; Taylor, 2001). Our analysis falls into the latter category and draws primarily on Fairclough’s work (2001, 2003) as a scaffolding to critically analyze a total of 94 academic texts related to neurodiversity.

As we are interested in the ways that social power operates through language (and through academic language in particular), we feel it is important to situate ourselves as authors. As a group, we have differing relationships to neurodivergence and disability. Some of us locate our lived experience within the realm of neurodivergence or disability; some of us are parents, primary carers, or family members of Autistic/neurodivergent folks; our group includes researchers who are also activists and former, current, or aspiring service providers and educators; and many of us fall into more than one of these categories. We come from various disciplinary backgrounds, including sociology, social work, science and technology studies, disability studies, and education. Our other social identities, including gender, race, class, and sexual identity, afford us privilege in certain ways and mean we also share in certain experiences of marginalization. We are a diverse group united by a disability justice perspective and critical orientation toward oppressive and exclusionary institutional practices.

Data for this analysis were collected through systematic searches of 18 databases spanning the fields of social work, sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, disability studies, education, and the health professions. Additional sources were added to the data corpus based on reviews of initial articles’ reference lists, locating other publications from key authors, and targeted searches to find additional literature related to emergent themes (e.g., looking for discussions of settler colonialism and neurodiversity). Items were retrieved primarily through the University of Waterloo library system in Waterloo Ontario, Canada, and restricted to items for which we could find full, English-language texts. There are thus geographical and language-specific limitations to the resulting corpus.

Database searches were first conducted in 2019 as part of a preliminary project, and then repeated in 2020 as part of the principal investigator’s larger funded project, Neurodiversity Matters, which combines ethnographic interviews and observations with textual and media analysis to explore the meaning of neurodiversity in people’s lives and its operation in academic texts. Both sets of searches were completed and documented by the first author of this article. The final data corpus for this discourse analysis included 71 academic articles, nine academic editorials, ten academic book chapters, and five books. We are aware that there are more texts on neurodiversity emerging all the time and approached this analysis as a snapshot of the academic landscape related to neurodiversity at a particular moment in time.

Information about the texts included in this analysis was organized with the assistance of two qualitative data analysis software: Dedoose and NVivo. The full list
of all references in the corpus can be found on the project website. Key features of our data corpus can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Of note is the prevalence of writing within several key disciplines: disability studies, bioethics, education, and psychiatry/psychology. The geographic scope of the articles is also worth noting. Most of the articles were published by academic writers who work in North America or Europe, and most of the articles focused on experiences and communities in these same regions. Some of this trend was likely influenced by the restriction to texts in English, and to the search engines used, but the absence of texts from other national contexts was so dominant as to suggest that recent explosions in the academic discussion of neurodiversity are geographically limited to the Global North.

Table 1  Corpus Summary by Discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disability studies</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bioethics</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Humanities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatry</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfiction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech language pathology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political science</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender studies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public policy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural sciences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The project website is https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/neurodiversity-matters. The full corpus of texts and list of critical analysis questions can be accessed here.
The first and second authors developed a list of critical questions to apply to each of the texts, which formed the basis of our analysis. The full list of critical questions can also be found on the project website. Questions were developed from our readings of the work of Fairclough (2001, 2003) but were not directly taken from any source and were instead created for this analysis. Because the larger project uses an institutional ethnography framework, some specific questions were added that focus on the actions or practices that texts promulgated or precluded (Smith, 2005). Bringing together these two approaches, critical questions encouraged the person analyzing the texts to focus on linguistic features and style, practices and values promoted or foreclosed, representations of agency and authority, and intertextual links.

The questions were revisited and revised in an interactive process as different team members used the framework to analyze various texts. Team members, including all the authors, two student trainees, and one other research assistant, were assigned particular texts based on training/interests and wrote analytical research memos in response to the guiding questions. These memos also included the reader’s notes and narrative reflections on what they noticed in the reading process, emerging themes or questions, and any intertextual links or points of contrast. The first author read the most texts for the project and completed the majority of the memos, sharing the supervision of trainees doing discourse analysis work with the project’s principal investigator, the second author. The first and second authors met consistently to discuss emerging questions and themes as the team read through the texts, regularly communicating with other co-authors and trainees who were involved.

Table 2 Corpus by Country Published

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in discourse analysis memo-writing. The first author continued to read through all of the initial textual analyses and develop reflective memos, before writing emerging themes in collaboration and consultations with the co-authors.

3. Academic Writing on Neurodiversity: Key Findings

One of our first findings was that the number of published academic texts engaging with the language of neurodiversity have increased markedly even within the span of this project, with our search results nearly doubling between 2019 and 2020. This points to an increase in the uptake of the language of neurodiversity across a variety of academic disciplines. Since then, further publications (and particularly edited book collections) were published in late 2020 and early 2021 that focused even more centrally on neurodiversity as an area of scholarly activity (e.g., Rosqvist, Chown, & Stenning, 2020). Within this increasing quantity of writing, we could see a diversification in the types of people who were writing about neurodiversity, and the kinds of arguments made. What may have once been a “specialist” topic of particular interest to writers who were connected to neurodiversity activism and/or disability studies (and their central commitments and critiques) was quickly becoming a concept through which different authors were engaging with their own academic disciplines and domains of study – often without identity-based connections or activist interests.

In this section, we present our key findings from this ballooning corpus. The sheer scope and number of texts considered means that we can only highlight examples from a limited number of documents, and only as they shed light on the overall landscape of academic writing related to neurodiversity. Our particular interest in how language produces social relations and practices led us to orient our analysis toward areas of social agreement, disagreement, tension, and hierarchy. Throughout, we examine language not simply as a reflection of how ideas circulate, but as productive of particular power relations and actions (Fairclough, 2001, 2003).

3.1 What is Neurodiversity?

The concept of neurodiversity is defined and invoked in diverse ways to varying material and political effects across online, academic, and activist spaces. For some academic writers, neurodiversity is a cultural identity or a descriptor for non-normative ways of being, thinking, sensing, communicating, and learning (e.g., Chapman, 2019). For others, it’s a scientific or ecological concept that points to the genetic and phenotypical diversity of the human species (e.g., Masataka, 2017). For still others, neurodiversity is a pedagogy (e.g., Fitzwater, 2017), a theory (e.g., Tomlinson and Newman, 2017), a paradigm (e.g., Kapp, 2020), an analytical lens (e.g., Bakan, 2014), a portmanteau (Fitzwater, 2017), a framework for disability (Lambert et al., 2020), or even a therapeutic modality (Barnhart, 2017).

Neurodiversity is promoted as a possible means to widely different ends. Some individuals and groups appeal to neurodiversity as a basis for liberation and neuro-equity (e.g., Graby, 2015), while others have repurposed the concept to serve neoliberal capitalist markets as a way for employers to identify and recruit particular
forms of “talent” (e.g., Dunn, Wittevrongel, and Zwicker, 2018). Community-engaged critiques have identified concerns about apparently depoliticized forms of neurodiversity, dubbed “neurodiversity lite”, that can support or accompany exclusionary and harmful practices (Neumeier, 2018). In other arguments, neurodiversity is used as a theoretical scaffolding for the development of participatory or emancipatory research methods (e.g., Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020).

Autistic philosophy scholar Robert Chapman, who has analyzed the concept of neurodiversity as both a political idea and a scientific concept, highlights the considerable heterogeneity in usages of neurodiversity in their short chapter “Defining neurodiversity for research and practice” (2020). Chapman writes that while they believe that there are “better and worse definitions of neurodiversity, and that it is the kind of idea that can be used or abused” (2020, 221), neurodiversity is best approached as an epistemically useful moving target with contextually variable meanings. Such a diversity of meanings and usages, some more or less aligned with the neurodiversity movement’s foundational aims, are evident in the texts included in this study. The following findings illustrate the multiplicity of ways that academic authors are engaging with the language and ideas of neurodiversity.

### 3.1.1 Neurodiversity as Difference, not Deficit

While Chapman (2020) and others (e.g., Hughes, 2020) are certainly correct in pointing to the many different meanings assigned to the concept of neurodiversity, strands of definitional commonality can be found throughout this body of texts with otherwise competing purposes and contexts. The texts we analyzed seemed to agree upon a handful of defining features of neurodiversity as a concept and a movement.

The first area of consensus we found is in the re-framing of cognitive and embodied difference. All authors described neurodiversity as a concept that shifts from seeing people’s embodied experiences and identities as a pathology or deficit to seeing them as a form of diversity. Authors from various disciplines described neurodiversity as an approach that frames various conditions or “disorders” as natural human variations as opposed to pathologies. Most authors contrasted a neurodiversity perspective with biomedical approaches to difference or disability, wherein various conditions are categorized as disorders in need of treatment or cure. Many authors described neurodiversity as instead taking a “difference not deficit” perspective and advocating for neurological variations to be accepted and valued alongside other forms of difference, such as race, gender, or sexuality. While there is ample disagreement about the exact meaning of neurodiversity as a concept, paradigm, and movement, our analysis suggests that this represents one area of consensus.

However, there are nuanced variations in the value authors ascribed to this “difference”. Some authors described neurodiversity as essentially value-neutral, attributing neither positive nor negative connotations to the term. For example, independent scholar Kirkham describes members of the neurodiversity movement as seeing autism – one kind of neurodiversity – as a “harmless neurological difference” (2017, 107) or a “neutral, nuanced difference” (2017, 115).
A number of authors employed modifiers to this value-neutral assessment of neuro-involved differences, creating a kind of qualified neutrality. For example, many used the word “necessarily” to subtly call into question whether a depathologizing framework truly applies to all Autistic or neurodiverse-identified people, regardless of support needs. Ethics scholars Fenton and Krahn claim that Autistic and other neurodiverse-identified people seek the recognition that “though they are neurologically, cognitively, and behaviourally different, they do not necessarily suffer from being neurodiverse nor do they need to be cured” (2007, 1, emphasis added). The inclusion of “necessarily” in this sentence contradicts, or at least complicates, the authors’ apparent support for the depathologization of Autistic people across the entire spectrum of ability. There are a number of other examples of a similar use of “necessarily” across the corpus:

- Primate researcher Masataka wrote that neurodiversity “refers to the notion that seemingly ‘impaired’ cognitive as well as emotional properties characteristic of developmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are not necessarily deficits, but fall into normal behavioural variations exhibited by humans [. . .]” (2017, 86, emphasis added).
- Rhetoric scholars Tomlinson and Newman describe the neurodiversity perspective as a social approach to disability which “views autism as a naturally occurring human variation representing difference, not necessarily deficit” (2017, 92, emphasis added).
- Psychologists Lewin and Akhtar write that autism “viewed through a neurodiversity lens, is a way of being consisting of behaviors, cognitive processes, motor skills, and sensory experiences that differ from what is considered ‘typical’ but that are not necessarily deficient” (2020, 2, emphasis added).
- Psychiatry researchers Gyawali and Patra write that the neurodiversity movement “portrays autism as a form of human diversity associated with strengths and weaknesses, with different ways of socializing, communicating and sensing, that may not necessarily be disadvantageous” (2019, 93, emphasis added).

These kinds of qualified descriptions suggest that being Autistic or neurodivergent does cause suffering or confer disadvantage, with some exceptions; difference is disadvantageous, except when it isn’t, necessarily.

Some of the academic texts on neurodiversity focused on the benefits, strengths, or gifts associated with non-normative ways of being (e.g., Bakan, 2015; Rentenbach, Prislovsky, and Gabriel, 2017) or highlighted autism as a celebrated part of identity and minority culture which should be affirmed and valued in the same way as other forms of diversity (e.g., Fitzwater, 2017; Kreck, 213). For example, creative arts and critical theory scholar Fitzwater describes neurodiversity as “an approach to neurological differences that goes far beyond mere toleration, [which] respects and indeed highly values difference” (2017, 128; see also Griffin and Pollak, 2009; Kapp et al., 2013). Many authors also cited empirical evidence of the different “strengths” associated with non-normative cognitive styles, such as creative thinking, novelty-seeking, hyper-attention to detail, or specific forms of reasoning (e.g., Armstrong, 2012; Masataka, 2017).
While these authors still acknowledged that difference confers challenges as well as strengths, they framed the challenges associated with difference as arising from social barriers or marginalization as opposed to suggesting that elements of difference are inherently disadvantageous. Similarly, many academic authors who identify themselves as part of the neurodiversity movement argue that the movement is attentive to the very real challenges that necessitate accommodation and support for many individuals (e.g., Kapp et al., 2013; den Houting, 2019). These authors make it clear that while the neurodiversity movement is categorically opposed to the search for a cure for autism or other forms of neurodivergence, proponents of neurodiversity are supportive of ameliorative interventions that improve quality of life and support self-determination for neurodivergent people. From this perspective, difference is a fundamentally positive thing, and any associated challenges or disadvantages do not limit or qualify the value of that difference.

Interestingly, a number of authors who described neurodiversity as a valued difference made reference to the evolutionary benefits of diversity in cognitive functioning. For example, primate researcher Masataka references scientific studies and argues that:

> the characteristics of ASD are not an error of nature but an invaluable part of human genetic variability from “our deep past, passed down through millions of years of evolution” that provide some positive effects for survival advantage (2017, 104; secondary quotation from Silberman, 2015, 470).

Even authors who did not entirely support the “difference not deficit” position made similar references to “evolutionary advantages” or “highly adaptive” abilities associated with cognitive differences which explain why they are still in the human “gene pool” (e.g., Jaarsma and Welin, 2012; Armstrong, 2015). Though outside the scope of this article, we encourage further consideration of the ways in which these ideas of evolution and science are mobilized to frame neurodiversity as an objectively valid and valuable form of difference.

While most authors across various disciplines agreed that neurodiversity challenged the designation of difference as a pathology or deficit, authors did not readily agree on the relationship between neurodiversity and disability. The question many authors seemed to be grappling with, either explicitly or implicitly, was whether or not autism and other marginalized forms of neurodiversity are or should be considered disabilities. Overall, the authors of the texts we analyzed discussed neurodiversity and disability in inconsistent or contradictory ways. It is also worth noting that tensions and distinctions around the relationships of neurodiversity to disability can be found in Judy Singer’s initial discussion of the term in *NeuroDiversity: The Birth of an Idea*:

> The word “disability” itself is problematic. It just doesn’t fit [...] The word “disability” comes [...] with its discrete boundaried polar opposition between “able” and “disabled”, and fails to encapsulate the situation of people on the [autism] spectrum. It has too many connotations of physical and intellectual impairment, and conversely, no association to impairments of social communication for people
who are neither physically nor intellectually disabled. The word has too much stigma attached despite the efforts of the disability rights movement to reclaim it ([1998] 2016, 44–45).

Singer’s foundational work suggested that the neurodiversity paradigm is primarily concerned with Autistic people who do not have intellectual disabilities or other forms of impairment, and that a disability framework was inadequate in its application to neurodiversity. Since Singer’s original formulation, however, others who identify as speaking for or with the neurodiversity movement have embraced disability rights as a core tenet of ensuring that all community members are supported.

In the corpus of texts we analyzed, two distinctive interpretations emerged of the relationship between neurodiversity and disability. One common approach used the term disability as synonymous with deficit, and therefore argued that neurodiversity advocates did not see people who had diagnoses and identities such as autism or learning disabilities as “disabled”. For example, special education scholars Tincani, Travers, and Boutot summarize neurodiversity as a “recent movement to recognize individuals with ASD as neurologically diverse as opposed to disabled” (2009, 81). Similarly, ethics scholar Perry also separates out neurodiversity politics from disability:

There are two pervasive movements in autism, the recovery movement (RM), which is a movement developed specifically around autism and views it as a disability, and the neurodiversity movement (NM), which is a growing movement that views itself as the newest frontier of civil rights (2014, 1).

In contrast, other authors explicitly positioned neurodiversity as actively embracing and including many people who identify as disabled and experience disability as a part of their everyday lives. These authors took great pains to situate their understanding of “disability” as social, often referencing the social model of disability which distinguishes between impairment, which can be a property of an individual body, and disability, which is produced by social conditions that include oppression and the lack of accommodations. This clear application of a social model is seen in the following passage by Autistic research psychologist, Jac den Houting, in their editorial in the journal *Autism*:

[. . .] a common criticism is the claim that the neurodiversity paradigm frames autism as a difference and a cultural identity, but not a disability (e.g., Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). This is seen by critics as a weakness of neurodiversity, as they assert that (for at least some autistic people), autism is clearly a disability. Critics may be pleasantly surprised to learn that I agree with them – autistic people are, very often, disabled. This statement, though, is not inconsistent with the assumptions of the neurodiversity paradigm. Within the neurodiversity movement, autism is conceptualised using the social model of disability [. . .] A person is disabled not by their impairment, but by the failure of their environment to accommodate their needs [. . .] (2019, 271).

As exemplified in this passage, many authors who connected neurodiversity with disability did so through the political movements associated with both terms, presenting the neurodiversity movement as aligned and often overlapping with disability rights movements (e.g., Hughes, 2020; Lewin and Akhtar, 2020). For example, social work scholar Krcek writes that the neurodiversity movement is the “latest generation of
the disability movement” (2013, 11). Other Autistic authors also explicitly argued that overlaps between neurodiversity and disability could co-exist with seeing neurodiversity in neutral or positive terms:

While being on the autism spectrum may come with many disabilities, it also includes many benefits and neutral differences, as is the case with any neurological type (Broderick and Ne’eman, 2008, 473).

Thus, authors who had a politicized understanding of disability saw it as compatible with the claims and goals of a neurodiversity perspective, while those who saw disability as an indication of ailment or deficit saw neurodiversity advocates as dismissing or ignoring disability and, arguably, neglecting those who needed supports.

3.1.2 Neurodiversity as Located in the Body

This idea of neurodiversity as indicating “difference” between individuals was talked about on both conceptual and material levels, but across many texts, the difference of neurodiversity was located firmly in the body, as a biological phenomenon (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 2017; Guest, 2020). Almost all of the authors whose texts were included in this analysis physicalized neurodiversity in their descriptions of what neurodiversity is, on a conceptual level. Whether authors were focused on neurodiversity as a scientific concept or a political one, there was agreement that it is based on biological differences across people. The physical embodiment of neurodiversity began with the concept’s inception, with both Singer (1998) and Blume (1998) referring to neurodiversity in terms of differences in “wiring” across Autistic and non-Autistic people. In the texts we analyzed, this biologized understanding mostly mapped across three specific areas: wiring, brains, and genetics.

First, a significant number of authors referenced the “wiring” metaphor of cognitive or neurological difference in their explanations. The exact meaning of “wiring” was sometimes vague and used metaphorically as a short-hand way of gesturing toward fundamental traits or intrinsic differences between people. For example, authors noted that many neurodiversity activists believe conditions are “built into the wiring” (Pantazakos, 2019, n.p.), or personally referred to themselves as “autistically wired” (Rentenbacht, Prislovsky, and Gabriel, 2017, 61). In other cases, the “wiring” argument was connected more closely to the brain and was used to point literally toward physical differences in neurology. For example, prominent autism researcher Simon Baron-Cohen discusses a fundamental “difference in neuronal connectivity – the brain is differently wired” (2017, 745). Other authors similarly referred specifically to “differently” wired brains in their descriptions of neurodiversity as a concept or in their characterizations of the neurodiversity movement (e.g., Glannon, 2007; Orsini, 2012).

Many of these texts rooted their explanation of neurodiversity in genetics. For example, Fitzwater describes neurodiversity as an attitude to disability which aims to “establish the normalcy of variations in neurology resulting from genetic differences” (2017, 128). Psychology scholars Lewin and Akhtar define the neurodiversity
movement as “a social movement that promotes the view that neurological character-
istics associated with certain disabilities represent natural genetic variations” (2020, 2). Discussions of genetics abound in publications related to autism specifically, a fact that reflects both the historical preoccupation with determining autism’s etiology and the more recent framing of autism as conferring an evolutionary advan-
tage (e.g., Krcék, 2013; Silberman, 2015). Overall, these biologized descriptions
featuring brains or genes of neurodiversity dominated the corpus we examined.
While a complete discussion is outside the scope of this paper, the prevalence of
genetic and brain-based definitions of neurodiversity brings up a number of impor-
tant questions. As medical humanities scholar Ortega succinctly points out:
“metaphors are never innocent and brain metaphors even less so” (2013, 89).

3.1.3 Neurodiversity as Binary, Spectrum, or Universal

When neurodiversity was discussed as a biological fact or a feature of brains or minds
(as opposed to a social movement or paradigm), it was consistently framed in one of
three ways across the various texts we analyzed. Specifically, authors tended to
describe neurodiversity as either a binary, a spectrum, or a universal feature. Some
authors made these claims explicitly while others implied their understanding of
neurodiversity’s scope through the language they used to describe the concept and
the individuals it encompasses.

Neurodiversity was most commonly discussed or constructed as a binary concept.
Many authors either explicitly or rhetorically drew divisions between neurodiversity
and typicality, most often by referring to “neurodiverse” or “neurodivergent” indi-
viduals and contrasting them with their “neurotypical” counterparts. While the
details of exactly who counts as “neurodiverse” (and on the basis of what criteria)
varied across texts, authors who took a binary perspective on neurodiversity coalesced
around the idea that individuals can be categorized as either neurodiverse or not.

One of the central critics of a binary application of neurodiversity, critical dis-
ability studies scholar Katherine Runswick-Cole, nevertheless offers a very clear
articulation of the most common framing of neurodiversity as:

*a biopolitical category concerned with promoting the rights of, and preventing discrimination against,
people who are neurologically different from the “neurotypical” (or the non-autistic) population
(2014, 1120).*

The term “biopolitical” references the assertion that “the neurodiverse” represents
a political category based on brain-based or cerebral accounts of personhood which
serve as the basis for shared identity and political organizing (Brownlow and O’Dell,
2013; Ortega, 2009; Ortega, 2013; Sarrett, 2016). This perceived biological differ-
ence between neurodiverse or Autistic and neurotypical individuals can be seen as at
the crux of what makes a binary framing of neurodiversity relatively taken for
granted. The dominant narrative of “hard-wired” differences between neurodiverse
and neurotypical brains makes it seem commonsensical to see the two groups as
fundamentally distinct and mutually exclusive.
One of the ways a binary is produced through language is the establishment of a category of “neurodivergent” to describe those who are labeled as outside the perceived norm of their social context due to neurodiversity, but reserving “neurodiverse” for population-level descriptions of variation rather than individual descriptions of identity or exclusion. For example, a number of online publications identify the term “neurodivergent” as the accurate descriptor for an individual whose mind “functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2014, n.p.). Coined in 2000 by multiply neurodivergent activist Kassiane Asasumasu, the term is attentive to the fact that diversity is a property of groups; a single person cannot be “diverse”, neuro- or otherwise (Walker, 2014). Despite “neurodivergence” being the preferred term in many online activist spaces (e.g., “The Thinking Person’s Guide to Autism”), it was less universally accepted within the academic texts we analyzed than “autism” or “neurodiversity”.

Authors who used the language of neurodivergence were also more likely to discuss the communities and activist connections behind neurodiversity and to situate their work in relation to the author’s lived experience or within disability critiques and related critical theory (e.g., anti-oppressive practice, feminist research) (e.g., Morrison, 2019; Roscigno, 2019; Strand, 2017; Yergeau, 2017). “Neurodivergent” language and framing is more closely linked to a social or political model of disability since it attends closely to the socio-political or cultural context. Gender and disability studies scholar Lauren Strand’s work contributes important nuance by troubling the idea that those labeled as neurodivergent are a homogenous group and framing the standard by which they are so labeled as social as opposed to biological. She argues:

There is no singular way of being neurodivergent, despite the overarching “group label”. Instead, those within the broader community commonly identify in some neurological way other than “neurotypical”, or the style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within a particular culture’s dominant social standards (2017, n.p.).

The question of homogeneity in reference to both neurodiverse and neurotypical populations was rarely considered by the authors whose work is discussed here. Those who did raise this critique of homogenizing groups (e.g., Ortega, 2009; Runswick-Cole, 2014) were often concerned with ways in which neurodiversity could ignore or flatten other intersecting forms of marginalization such as race or gender.

Other authors instead discussed neurodiversity as a spectrum. Building on ideas of the “autism spectrum”, this perspective blurs the neat categories of strictly neurodiverse/neurodivergent or strictly neurotypical. Neurodiversity exists as a matter of degree and is a spectrum on which everyone falls; instead of belonging to one of two mutually exclusive groups, people can fall “on the neurodiversity spectrum” (Griffin and Pollak, 2009). These discussions work to promote the idea that the “difference” that neurodiversity describes can be found throughout many “subclinical” traits and experiences across people – possibly everyone – and can be measured and documented
as such (e.g., Brownlow and O’Dell, 2013; Haney, 2018; Happé and Frith, 2020). This idea of spectrum exists in tension with other authors and texts that seek to distinguish the neurotypical from the neurodiverse, neurodivergent, or Autistic, or which discuss various discrete “neurotypes” such as bipolarity, dyslexia, dyspraxia, or ADHD (e.g., Fitzwater, 2017; Graby, 2015).

The use of a spectrum is, unsurprisingly, most commonly linked to discussions of autism, with Brownlow and O’Dell’s (2013) reference to a “neurodiverse spectrum” as an exception. Authors who did invoke the concept of a spectrum in relation to autism sometimes expanded the spectrum they saw beyond the diagnostic criteria. For example, psychiatry and neuroscience scholars Happé and Frith write that traits of autism exist on a “smooth continuum between diagnosed autism and subclinical individual differences [. . .] it does appear that, at the behavioural level at least, one can be ‘a bit autistic’” (2020, 223). Social work scholar Haney (2018) makes a similar claim and identifies some of the potentially significant implications of understanding conditions like autism as existing on a spectrum as opposed to a binary. Specifically, she argues that identifying “subclinical” traits of autism in the general population could “lead to greater support for neurodiversity, eliminate the divide between autistic and non-autistic persons (i.e., us versus them) and, thereby, broaden the definition of normality” (2018, 70).

Put another way, if traits of conditions like autism exist in most people to varying degrees, there is no longer an identifiable “normal” from which certain individuals can be said to deviate. It should be noted that this concept is not without critique, however; other authors argued that spectral classifications actually work to normalize neurodiverse individuals by “removing the exceptionality of their experience” (Attias, 2020, 82).

Finally, a comparatively small number of authors understood neurodiversity to be a universal feature of all human minds. This framing was usually predicated on the notion that all brains are unique. For example, drawing on the work of prominent neurodiversity advocate and theorist Nick Walker, Gillespie-Lynch et al. argue that neurodiversity “refers to the simple fact that all brains are different” (2020, 11, emphasis in original). They further describe the neurodiversity paradigm as asserting that “the fact that all people are neurodiverse (i.e., have unique brains) is essentially positive for society” (2020, 11, emphasis in original). Kornblau and Robertson make a similar argument in the context of their work on occupational therapy, writing that “The neurodiversity framework recognizes that variations among all humans in thinking, learning, perceiving, and processing information are natural because all brains and peripheral nervous systems differ. No ‘average’ brain exists in human society” (2021, 2).

This universal understanding of neurodiversity echoes the care with which many activists and online commentators differentiate “neurodiverse” from “neurodivergent”, with the former offering a statement of universal variety, and the latter positioning some people as a neuro-political group. The scope of neurodiversity thus leads to the question of how people are – or are not – accounted for.
3.2 Who Counts in Neurodiversity?

This lack of agreement about whether neurodiversity is a universal, a spectrum, or a binary leads to the question: who counts when people are talking about neurodiversity? Though neurodiversity may, in theory, be a conceptual framework rather than a group of people, most academic texts containing this term moved rapidly from defining neurodiversity to examining how and whether people should be grouped together. “Neurodiverse” then became, in this corpus, a moniker for particular people, experiences, or diagnoses, as opposed to a theoretical concept or conceptual framework.

3.2.1 “Autism Plus”

With few exceptions, the key group of people discursively aligned with neurodiversity were Autistic people. Across the academic texts we analyzed, this movement from frameworks to groupings to Autistic people/autism followed a common discursive structure that facilitated an often-uninterrupted shift from a broad definition of neurodiversity as a framework for understanding various forms of difference to a discussion of autism specifically. Some texts did include a direct acknowledgment that neurodiversity is not just about autism. These texts tended to mention ADHD, bipolar, and dyslexia as other forms of neurodiversity, but such acknowledgments were then followed by either a) an unremarked upon shift to a discussion of autism, or, less commonly, b) an explicit limiting of the subsequent discussion to autism (e.g., Hughes, 2020).

In the texts that make an unremarked shift from “neurodiversity” to “autism”, this linguistic twinning often occurred through the discussion of rights-seeking movements, flowing between “autism rights” and “neurodiversity movement” as apparent synonyms (e.g., Kirkham, 2017; Orsini, 2012; Owren and Stenhammer, 2013). Some texts also showed a conflation of autism and neurodiversity through their definitions of those who are not counted within these categories, using the term “neurotypical” to mean both “non-autistic” and “not neurodivergent” without further distinction (e.g., Happé and Frith, 2020; Lim, 2015; Masataka, 2017). Throughout many texts, the conflation was implied simply by the fact that the only identity/diagnostic category that was mentioned throughout the discussion of neurodiversity was autism. The centrality of autism in discussions of neurodiversity emerged as a central finding in this analysis.

In other texts, authors explicitly addressed neurodiversity and its relationship to Autistic people and Autistic rights. For example, Strand writes:

> From the beginning, conceptions of neurodiversity and neurodivergent identities have been intimately intertwined with autistic identities, though never conflated to be one-and-the-same [...] the broader neurodiversity movement and autistic self-advocacy communities and rights movement developed alongside one another (2017, n.p.).

Ethics scholar Hughes also takes an explicit approach, refocusing the discussion from the breadth of neurodiversity to the specificity of autism:
[... ] in order to keep the arguments manageable, and reflecting the origins and preoccupations of the neurodiversity movement, the arguments of this paper will mainly focus on the application of the neurodiversity paradigm to autism (2020, 2).

Thus even those texts that explicitly defined the parameters of neurodiversity as “more than autism” frequently continued to center on autism, in a strategy we summarize as Autism Plus. The Autism Plus strategy then allowed the authors to cast autism as the foundational category upon which the strengths – and weaknesses – of neurodiversity rest. This approach also leaves the impression that “neurodiversity” is primarily a terminological substitution rather than a substantive shift in definition or approach, an updated but otherwise largely equivalent word for autism and Autistic identity. Autism Plus rhetoric also downplays the possibility and importance of solidarity and connection across groups of people who might share common experiences of labeling or exclusion but not share a diagnosis.

3.2.2 Beyond Autism

Only a handful of the academic texts we examined applied the concept of neurodiversity to identities or experiences beyond autism: Constantino (2018) and Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2020) incorporate discussions of stuttering; Fisher and First (2011) applied a neurodiversity framework in their discussion of body integrity identity disorder; Fitzwater (2017) and Rahman and Woolard (2018) discussed a neurodiverse pedagogy as related to dyslexia; and Rentenbach, Prislovsky, and Gabriel (2017) discussed dyslexia and ADHD as forms of neurodiversity present in classrooms.

3.2.3 Functioning Labels

Another way in which academic writers in our corpus addressed the question of who neurodiversity applies to was through the application of functioning labels – that is, the designation of some people as “high-functioning” and others as “low-functioning”. The authors who used functioning labels were diverse in their overall arguments. Some authors specifically argued that neurodiversity as a concept might do a disservice to “low-functioning” people even as neurodiversity arguments can benefit “high-functioning” people (e.g., Fenton and Krahn, 2007). Others demarcated harsher lines, and suggested that neurodiversity should exclude certain disorders or “severe” manifestations of autism that the authors deemed inherently harmful or disadvantageous, and therefore justifiably categorized as disorders or disabilities (e.g., Hughes, 2020; Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). For other authors, the use of functioning labels was fundamentally incompatible with the concept of neurodiversity, and these authors argued against the idea that neurodiversity only applied to or worked for a subset of individuals (e.g., Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Yergeau, 2017).

3.2.4 Neuroqueer

One subset of texts that took a subversive approach to challenging the narrowing or conflation of “neurodiversity” and “autism” focused on “neuroqueer” ideas, experiences, and strategies. The authors that used “neuroqueer” overtly questioned the
processes and benefits of categorization. Neuroqueer as an identity is built upon a more radical anti-normative stance, is clearly connected to queer movements, and promotes anti-normative practices/verbs over settled and essentialized identities/nouns (Attias, 2020; Egner, 2019; Kleekamp, 2020; Roscigno, 2019). The most prominent writer to talk about “neuroqueer” in academic writing is Autistic rhetoric scholar Remi Yergeau (2017), who writes of “neuroqueering” in relation to non-normative gender and sexual identities/practices/labels as well as Autistic and disabled ones. At the same time, Yergeau centers their analysis of neuroqueer rhetoric on writing by and about Autistic people – including themselves.

4. Discussion: Authorities, Claims, and Conflicts

In mapping the ways in which academic writers defined, discussed, and deployed “neurodiversity”, this analysis examined a rapidly expanding set of texts at a moment where this topic was being translated from largely activist and online conversations into academic spaces. This analysis has also shown that the “academic space” of these texts was itself replete with a diversity of perspectives and positionings. While there are domains of relative agreement across these texts in the definition and application of neurodiversity, there are also significant realms of disagreement around the scope, value, and importance of neurodiversity. Despite these conflicting perspectives and claims, however, the discursive strategies academic authors employed in articulating their claims and situating themselves were often remarkably similar. Specifically, academic writers of the texts on neurodiversity overwhelmingly launched their own claims to authority, even as they simultaneously positioned themselves as objective and out of the fray. In this final section, we will examine selected examples of these discursive strategies.

One technique academics used to position themselves authoritatively can be seen in the way many characterized neurodiversity as a site of significant controversy in need of resolution. In describing debates about who neurodiversity should or should not include, who benefits from or is disadvantaged by a neurodiversity framework, and the compatibility of “disability” and “interventions” with the concept of neurodiversity, authors were doing more than commenting on the activities of others – they were positioning their own work as a needed contribution and asserting their own status as interlocutors. By framing neurodiversity as contentious and highlighting the ways that disagreements within the neurodiversity movement can cause problems between Autistic activists, service providers, and parents, academic writers elevated the stakes of their own contributions – a strategy which also functioned to distract from their relative tardiness to the conversation and, in most cases, distance from the communities and concerns involved.

A particularly high-profile example of the explicit depiction of neurodiversity itself as an unresolved controversy can be seen in autism researcher Simon Baron-Cohen’s *Scientific American* article, “The concept of neurodiversity is dividing the autism community” (2019). In this article, Baron-Cohen writes about neurodiversity itself as a potential problem, implying that in its absence, there might be a more
united “autism community” – an assertion underscored by the article title. Baron-Cohen (2019) ultimately argues for the potential benefits of a neurodiversity perspective, and as such offers a clear example of an academic writer describing the controversy in order to assert their authority in laying it to rest – settling the matter. Implied in these framings is the need for an academic arbiter, such as these authors, who can weigh in, settle the controversy, and save the divided autism community from itself.

In a similar fashion, many academics weighed in on the utility of neurodiversity as a concept, how it should be defined, and who should be included in its framework. The degree of assumed expertise evident in some of the authors’ writing is striking, as is their lack of attention to the fact that the questions they so readily engage as theoretical debates are in fact central to many neurodivergent people’s identities and material realities. For instance, in describing the study she conducted with clinicians to assess the hypothetical utility of using a neurodiversity framework as a “therapeutic modality” in clinician-led support groups, psychology scholar Barnhart claims that she “approached this research question as the first step in making direct, positive change in the lives of adults with HFA [high-functioning autism]” (2017, 2) – as if Autistic self-advocates are not decades into fighting for their own civil rights and require help from (presumably neurotypical) researchers and clinicians. Further underscoring this point, Barnhart (2017) goes on to claim that clinician group facilitators are in a position to “introduce” Autistic people to a “new” concept – neurodiversity – the embracing of which can also “lead to more research opportunities, and thus more publications and presentations as research on the topic increases” (2017, 6). What, other than institutional power, grants academics with limited or no personal connection to neurodiversity the right to insert themselves into decades-old, activist-led conversations and position themselves as experts?

Writing with a similar sense of authority, and in an article replete with adjectives such as “mistaken”, “exaggerated”, “indefensible”, and “unwarranted”, Hughes asserts that the neurodiversity movement’s broad claim that autism is not a disorder is “both theoretically unwarranted and potentially damaging” to Autistic people with greater support needs (2020, 13). This preoccupation with which subsets of the Autistic community should rightfully be included in neurodiversity was common among bioethicist authors, in particular, most of whom made some kind of authoritative final claim on the topic.

An additional strategy we observed was the way many authors contrasted academics’ supposed objectivity with the emotional subjectivity of neurodiversity’s advocates. For example, Perry characterizes neurodiversity advocates as overly passionate:

NM has constituents who are often wholly committed to the cause as activists or “diehards”. The movement values this level of commitment over what critics might call a more sustainable strategy that focuses on winning over the mainstream or managing public relations (2014, 5).

Perry further asserts that the “highly political” nature of advocates’ narratives means these narratives are not viewed as objective, and “trustworthy information about the
nature of autistic experience is difficult to come by” (2014, 3). This framing seems
to suggest that a dispassionate academic who is at a remove will offer “trustworthy
information”.

Autistic English and disability studies scholar Sonya Freeman Loftis (2018)
makes similar arguments about the importance of smoothing the more radical and
passionate edges of the neurodiversity movement in her chapter, “Dear neurodiver-
sity movement: Put your shoes on”. Loftis summarizes her argument:

I’m encouraging the neurodiversity movement to find middle ground where and when we can, to be
assimilated into neurotypical culture where and when we can, to be polite, presentable and profes-
sional where and when we can. Embracing your authentic Autistic self need not require the total

This clear appeal to respectability politics (Brooks Higginbotham, 1993) implicitly
suggests that advocates’ inability or unwillingness to embody neuronormativity is the
problem; if they were a little more “normal”, perhaps the movement would fare bet-
ter. In a similar vein to Loftis, one bioethicist whose article is included in our corpus
goes so far as to argue that Autistic people’s claim that their community constitutes
a unique culture “does not lend credibility to the autistics’ claims” (Lim, 2015, 570).
Lim argues that since most people in the broader culture do not consider the claims
of the neurodiversity movement to be “acceptable”, basing the movement around
minority culture simply poses “another issue to quarrel about” (2015, 570). Perhaps
most disturbingly, Lim (2015) draws an analogy to pedophilia to illustrate his point;
like Autistic people, pedophiles are a distinct group, but no one would consider the
latter a culture, he argues.

Other means of asserting authorial objectivity were implied by the presence and,
more commonly, the absence of personal attributions. Few authors explicitly posi-
tioned themselves in relation to these debates unless they were one of the minority
who were writing to offer an Autistic or neurodivergent person’s perspective, and
thus a corrective or alternative to the unmarked, presumed neurotypical norm of
academic writing (e.g., Broderick and Ne’man, 2008; den Houting, 2019; Guest,
2020; Yergeau, 2017). Several authors did not specifically position themselves as
Autistic or neurodivergent in these academic texts but did so in other academic
profiles (e.g., institutional or personal websites). The identity of the author was gen-
erally assumed to be irrelevant, although as readers we learned to examine how
some articles clearly used “they” when speaking about members of neurodiverse
communities and movements, and only a few used “we” to indicate their personal
affiliation with these communities. Additionally, the use of pronouns often served to
rhetorically exclude or objectify Autistic or neurodivergent subjects. The neurodi-
vergent “they” were often only present in articles as voiceless objects whose identities,
needs, and experiences were up for debate by the academic majority. Many, if not
most academic authors used the passive voice and deployed academic citations to
back up their claims rather than referencing everyday examples or personal experi-
ences. In some cases, authors did not any offer any citations at all for sweeping
claims about the neurodiversity movement (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 2017; Grinker, 2020). These citational practices are a further example of rhetorical exclusion, wherein many academics exclusively referenced one another (or cited their own previous publications) in a kind of echo chamber devoid of any Autistic or neurodivergent voices.

The dominant convention, form, and tone of this academic corpus place academic contributors who also identify as neurodivergent and/or Autistic in a difficult position. Since so many academic contributors have laid claim to their role in this topic through a dismissal or critique of the non-academic “neurodiversity movement” and asserted the need for objective and distanced academic arbitration, the layered identities of neurodivergent and/or Autistic academics are transformed from potential assets to potential liabilities. Many academic writers also continue to use and promote hierarchical descriptions of neurodiversity such that academic contributors who disclose that they are “neurodiverse” may also be read and responded to in ways that assess their own “functioning”, including in their contributions to academic discourse. Thus while the knowledge that neurodiversity advocates and community members bring could provide much-needed insight to academic writing on neurodiversity, the dominant relations of power within academic discourse continue to relegate the work of these contributors to a lower status. Neurodiversity-identified academics work across a range of scholarly fields and many also assert the value of their layered identities, however, this investigation has shown the array of discursive barriers that they continue to face.

We have entered this investigation with a different aim from most of the writers in this corpus. As a team with varying relationships with neurodiversity, autism, psychology/psychiatry, and disability, our intention is not to stake our own claim or make definitive statements about what neurodiversity is or should be. Our aim has been to map the existing landscape and turn a critical eye toward our own institutions. We view this work as consistent with calls to “study up” (Nader, 1969), examining power relations, including how these appear across academic writing. In our detailed analysis of how academic writers have engaged with neurodiversity, we have had the opportunity to see how academic writing, itself, can incubate and reproduce the inequities that many of us claim to be, neutrally, commenting on. Academic writing cannot be seen as operating outside of social relations, and in the case of writing on neurodiversity discourse, academic texts are a primary means of asserting and extending expertise, even across topics and experiences that have largely originated elsewhere.

5. Conclusion
Since neurodiversity’s emergence over 20 years ago (Singer, 1998), advocates have argued that ways of being that have been diagnosed as intellectual, developmental, psychiatric, and/or learning pathologies instead represent valid forms of human diversity. While neurodiversity discussions initially circulated primarily within online networks of activists and scholars, neurodiversity has since entered the
mainstream and been taken up by academics as a topic of increasing interest. This article explored the ways neurodiversity is being used, defined, and deployed based on a discourse analysis of 94 academic texts published across social science disciplines (2006–2021). We outlined areas of consensus and mapped a number of tensions and contradictions in the ways neurodiversity is defined and delineated across these texts. While neurodiversity was almost universally discussed as a “difference, not deficit” perspective, and seen as an embodied form of difference in particular, authors diverged in their approach to neurodiversity and disability and their understandings of who counts in neurodiversity. In outlining these various arguments, we have demonstrated the ways in which academic writers have launched their own claims to authority, relying on academic notions of objectivity and rigor.

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