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Progressing Positive Discourse Analysis and/in Critical Discourse Studies: reconstructing resistance through progressive discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for an increased emphasis on resistance in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), thereby joining calls for more Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA), a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focused on progressive—rather than oppressive—discourse that has been slowly gaining traction in international circles but remains largely unknown within U.S. communication studies. While CDS brings oppression and resistance together in theory, in practice it is overwhelmingly focused on deconstructing oppression, not reconstructing resistance. In spite of calls for more generative analyses focused on progressive discourses, PDA has not yet been established as a necessary complement to CDA. Thus, CDS's potential as a lens for understanding resistance is underdeveloped. In an effort to push CDS in a more progressive direction, this article considers the role of design in CDS and outlines the aims, contributions, and challenges of PDA as a tool for emancipatory CDS research. A critical action implicative discourse analysis of neurodiversity discourse is provided as a model of PDA that may be useful for scholars interested in analyzing progressive discourse as well as disability rights activists interested in challenging cognitive ableism.

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CDS in the service of progressive social change

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) "produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection."[1] While CDS is often defined in terms of its focus on power abuse, as an emancipatory project, CDS is also concerned with resistance. However, although CDS explicitly theorizes both oppression and opposition, the overwhelming majority of published CDS scholarship focuses on the former. Most CDS scholars attend primarily to semiotic mechanisms of oppression in an effort to expose hegemonic discourses and their negative impact on society.

While this focus is vitally needed to understand the complex constellation of forces that lead to social inequity, there is also an urgent need for more concerted attention to resistance in CDS. As James R. Martin puts it in an analysis of "grace personified" in a text by Nelson Mandela:

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> If discourse analysts are serious about wanting to use their work to enact social change, then they will have to broaden their coverage to include discourse of this kind—discourse that inspires, encourages, heartens; discourse we like, that cheers us along. We need, in other words, more positive discourse analysis (PDA?) alongside our critique; and this means dealing with texts we admire, alongside those we dislike and try to expose.[2]

To take this call a step further, I argue that if analysts are serious about enabling human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination, then we must work to amplify progressive discourses and better understand semiotic mechanisms of resistance and empowerment in order to increase their positive impact on society.

Though Martin first proposed Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) as a complement to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) nearly two decades ago, this heartening branch of CDS remains marginal and—judging by the dearth of citations in U.S. journals, of positive discourse analysts based in the U.S.A., and of PDA studies on graduate syllabi from U.S. universities—currently largely unknown within communication studies in the U.S.A.

This essay argues for an increased focus on resistance in CDS. I start by reviewing the emancipatory aims of CDS and highlighting conceptions of resistance in foundational CDS theory. Here, I expose linguistic representations that have helped to marginalize PDA. In an effort to push CDS in a more progressive direction and help to "get [more] constructive PDA off the ground," I then move to a discussion of PDA in which I outline the aims and challenges of the approach and put forward ideas for developing PDA as a branch of CDA.[3] Finally, I describe an exemplar study that offers a model of discourse analysis aimed at progressive social change. In this brief sketch, I use a novel, hybrid approach—critical action implicative discourse analysis—to examine resistance and oppression enacted in autism acceptance discourse within the contemporary U.S. neurodiversity movement. To conclude, I reiterate the need to integrate "positive" and "negative" impulses in CDS.

Before I begin, let me clarify some terms and introduce some concerns regarding terminology. When I use the term CDS, I am generally referring to a community of scholars and/or a field of study. When I refer to CDA, I am referencing the act of doing analysis within this field of study. I follow other PDA scholars when I use *positive critique* to refer to analyses of progressive discourse and *negative critique* to reference analyses of oppressive discourse. Ultimately, however, I see these terms as problematic in that the simplified delineation between *positive* and *negative* does not adequately account for the interrelationship between negative and positive critique. The terms *positive* and *negative* are also inadequate in that—being defined as they are against each other—these terms convey an either/or, dichotomous relationship that contradicts the dialectical, yin/yang relationship between positive and negative impulses. And the similar dichotomy between *progressive* and *oppressive* conceals the difficulty of defining *progress* and underlies the tendency to ignore the ways progressive discourse also often relies on oppressive semiotic mechanisms. I will return to these concerns below.

Theorizing and enacting resistance in CDS

As Felicitas Macgilchrist points out, "'critique' in CDS is not (and was never) limited to 'negative critique' alone."[4] Foundational definitions of CDA—like Teun A. van Dijk's quoted below—focus attention on both oppression and resistance:

> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality.[5]

Critique in CDS encompasses negative critique of social wrongs like discrimination as well as positive critique, "which is analysis of how people seek to remedy or mitigate [social wrongs], and the identification of further possibilities for righting or mitigating them."[6] At its heart, whether applied in positive or negative projects, CDA is itself a form of dissent, scholarly resistance to the social and discursive mechanisms that constitute systems of injustice that impede human flourishing.[7]

Though CDS has never been limited to negative critique alone, CDS methodologies often position resistance as secondary to oppression, if they mention resistance at all. While many foundational texts define CDA as encompassing both positive and negative critique, others leave resistant counterdiscourses off the analytic table, so to speak. Definitions often fail to explicitly mention resistance as an object of analysis, thereby representing the practice of doing CDA in a way that legitimizes negative critique and casts positive critique outside the scope of mainstream CDS. Consider, for instance, Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer's assertion that

> CDA can be defined as being fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse).[8]

In theory, this definition leaves room for resistance. As the authors point out in the same chapter introducing CDA in their edited volume, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, dominance entails contestation, and texts are often sites of struggle wherein discourses and ideologies vie for control. In the definition above, "and so on" may be read as "resisted, reimagined, countered, or dismantled," and several methodologies in Wodak and Meyer's volume outline a progressive agenda. These include the sociocognitive approach that "specifically takes into account the interests, the expertise and the resistance of those groups that are the victims of discursive injustice and its consequences"; the discourse-historical approach, whose three-pronged concept of critique includes "[f]uture-related *prospective critique* [that] seeks to contribute to the improvement of communication"; and the dialectical–relational approach, which "has both a 'negative' and a 'positive' character."[9] Still, the omission of positive critique from the expressed aims of CDA in Wodak and Meyer's definition and the positioning of resistance as a final concern in van Dijk's definition are telling of the marginal status of positive approaches within CDS.

Given the focus on oppression alongside the exclusion and subordination of resistance in CDS, it is unsurprising that most CDS scholars work to expose dominant discourses in an effort to undermine oppressive social mechanisms. While this focus on power abuse is certainly valuable for understanding mechanisms of social inequity, the relative lack of attention to resistance in CDS ultimately hampers the emancipatory aims of the field. Struggle between dominant and counterdiscourses is intrinsic to discursive transformation, the processes by which "the reality of discourse and the discourse of reality … [is] changed."[10] In order to understand discourse as a site of struggle, analysts must come

at discursive transformation from both sides. This requires not only attending to oppressive discourses, but also working to "reclaim, valorize, and empower" resistant discourses.[11] Understanding discourse in resistant social practices is also a key component of critical self-reflection within CDS research. Analyzing resistant discourses informs our ability to "reflect on [our] own position and role in knowledge-based struggles over discourse."[12] By studying resistance in context, we can better theorize our resistant projects within the context of CDS and our roles as researchers in solidarity with oppressed communities in contexts of struggle.

Focusing on oppression in CDS calls our attention to existing discourses that impede human flourishing, while focusing on resistance calls our attention to the agency of individuals engaged in reshaping structural constraints. In other words, analyzing resistant discourse entails design. In "Design and Transformation," Gunther Kress offers a useful perspective on critique and design that upends the hierarchy of negative over positive critique described earlier. This "new theory of representation" conceptualizes meaning as a product of "transformation and remaking" as opposed to stable systems of signs-in-use.[13] Here, Kress argues that, in a world of constant, increasing, and increasingly rapid change, design should take primacy over critique in analysis.

> In a situation of intense social change, the rules of constitution both of texts and of social arrangements are in crisis: they are not settled, but in process of change. In the new theory of representation, in the context of the multimodal, multimedia modes of textual production in the era of electronic technologies, the task of text-makers is that of complex orchestration. Further, individuals are now seen as the remakers, transformers, of sets of representational resources—rather than as users of stable systems, in a situation where a multiplicity of representational modes are brought into textual compositions. All these circumstances call for a new goal in textual (and perhaps other) practice: not of critique but of Design. … While critique looks at the present through the means of past production, Design shapes the future through deliberate deployment of representational resources in the designer's interest. Design is the essential textual principle and pedagogic/political goal for periods characterized by intense and far-reaching change.[14]

Kress's concept of design is part of the theoretical foundation of PDA, and I join Martin and others in calling for increased attention to design in CDS.[15] In our everchanging, quickly, and dramatically morphing social world, we need scholarship that centers change and that "proactively and creatively participate[s] in changing" unjust social relations.[16] While deconstructing the discursive dimensions of oppressive social structures is necessary for understanding where we have been and what we are fighting against, reconstructing resistant discourse is a more useful approach for imagining progressive social change. I move now to an overview of one approach aimed at progressive reconstruction: PDA.

Progressive (Positive) Discourse Analysis

As a branch of CDA aimed at "studying the subversion of power and developing understandings which can energize social change," PDA privileges design in the service of CDS.[17] PDA focuses on "positive" discourses that make the world a better place and that counter oppressive social structures, but it does not "assume that the social problems e.g., 'racism' or gender inequalities are somehow solved and we need to 'cool it down.'"[18] PDA is not an alternative to CDA but a necessary complement to "negative" studies aimed

at progressive social change. Although PDA provides a valuable model for "positive" critique, this relatively small branch of CDS faces significant challenges. First, as suggested by my earlier comments on terminology and my adoption of scare quotes here, I see the terms *positive* and *negative* as ultimately undermining the aims of PDA and misrepresenting critique in CDS. Further, as Tom Bartlett points out, PDA studies often lack a detailed analysis of context, fail to account for the ways in which the social positioning of communicators affects the meaning of texts, neglect the potential for the uptake of resistant texts, and rely too much on the analyst's evaluation rather than community members' assessments.[19] Before sketching a method of analysis that I hope addresses these critiques, I turn now to an overview of PDA and a more detailed account of its challenges.

Martin describes the relationship between CDA and PDA as "yin/yang," stressing that "deconstructive *and* constructive activity are *both* required" in CDS.[20] Bartlett echoes this sentiment, arguing that CDS "must encompass and interrelate" instances of top-down domination and "bottom-up change."[21] These discussions suggest to me the need to explore the dialectical relationship between "positive" and "negative" approaches in CDS. Understanding deconstructive and constructive analyses as both separate yet inextricably interrelated may offer a useful starting point for methodological theorizing.

The interrelationship between "positive" and "negative" CDS methodologies is evident in the resistant nature of both approaches, the interpenetration of "negative" impulses in "positive" projects, and PDA's and CDA's common emancipatory goal. As mentioned, CDS is a form of dissent. As such, both PDA and traditional CDA are by nature resistant themselves, starting from the assumption that inequity exists and must be mitigated, either by amplifying "discourses we like" in the case of PDA, or exposing and undermining discourses we do not like in the case of CDA. Further, as Kress notes, "negative" critique is integral to "positive" design.[22] In order to have some idea of what progress entails, we must first understand what problems exist. Also, as highlighted at the start of this essay, the goal of CDS is to "produce and convey critical knowledge that enables … emancipat[ion]."[23] As such, both PDA and traditional CDA are aimed at progressive social change. Understanding this "positive" impulse in CDS helps us to understand PDA "not as a positive appendix to CDS but as integral to the overall project of critically analyzing discourse."[24]

While a dialectical understanding helps analysts to challenge the *positive/negative* dichotomy, I believe that PDA scholars may ultimately need to employ alternative terms to describe their progressive project. *Positive* and *negative* call up contrastive, normative mental models that set these interrelated forms of critique in opposition to one another and rely on "the common sense meaning of 'being negative'"—a misperception that contemporary PDA scholars often work to counter but that many early PDA scholars reinforced by defining "positive" discourse as necessarily "heartening," and describing "negative" critique as "discouraging," and characterizing PDA as attending to "the discourse we like *rather than* the discourse we wish to criticize."[25] The interpretive weight of this connotative baggage has led some scholars to reject PDA altogether. For instance, although she offers what I see as an example of "positive" critique in the service of CDS, Melani Schröter explicitly resists using the term *Positive Discourse Analysis* to label her examination of counterhegemonic discourse in German punk songs.[26] The commonsense notions of *positive* as concerned solely with what we see as good and *negative* as focused only on the bad also lead to mischaracterizations that suggest "positive" discourses are beyond reproach. On the contrary, as I have shown through critique of foundational

definitions of CDA above, in the present move to problematize terms in PDA, and in the analysis that follows, researchers can—and should—interrogate and expose mechanisms of oppression even in "discourses we like." In short, the *positive/negative* dichotomy is a semiotic mechanism that impedes research design in CDS. As Ruth Wodak points out, "being critical" in CDS is better understood as being skeptical toward objects of study and one's own assumptions.[27]

> "Critical" means not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism and dichotomies, being self-reflective in … research, and through these processes, making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest. … Proposing alternatives is also part of being "critical."[28]

In my experience, teaching critical analysis often requires critiquing and dismantling commonsense notions of "being critical" because these narrow definitions restrict students' abilities to see analytical possibilities apart from "being negative." We must challenge—not reinforce—this kind of reductionism in PDA and CDS.

"Positive" discourse is, I think, better understood as *progressive*, that is, in some way concerned with progress toward a better world. Such discourse may be hopeful or healing, to be sure. It may also be blunt, prone to violence, potentially abrasive, or disruptive, as in the case of German punk.[29] However, while I wish to propose *progressive discourse analysis* as an alternative to *PDA*, I do not wish to imply that there are no challenges with the term *progressive*. The meaning of *progress* can change drastically according to who is defining it. And defining *progress* is fundamentally a question of design, a complex process that

> takes the results of past production as the resource for new shaping, and for remaking. Design sets aside past agendas, and treats them and their products as resources in setting an agenda of future aims, and in assembling means and resources for implementing that.[30]

As a forward-looking, (re)constructive process, *progress* is fraught with unknowns. Mark Aakhus and Sally Jackson define design as hypothesis, that is, an enactment based on a designer's suppositions about the way things work now and should work in the future.[31] While designers may have some ideas about how to make things better, we cannot know exactly how changes will play out once set in motion. And, as the analysis below demonstrates, just because one holds the intention to work toward a better world does not mean that a communicator will never do the work of oppression. Nevertheless, progress is a worthy goal, and *progressive* is a label that may enable researchers to grapple more critically with the question of what constitutes "positive" social change. Defining progress as design also forefronts the need for analysts to interrogate the hypotheses that underlie our own scholarship and the discourses we study. By taking this stance, analysts recognize any design as a starting point for redesign, not as an immutable agenda but as one possibility among a range of alternatives.

Additionally, Kress's conceptions of *critique* and *design* may be useful for theorizing "negative" and "positive" *critique* within PDA. Kress understands any form of analysis as *critique* and "the constant remaking of [semiotic] resources in the process of their use, in action and interaction" as *design*.[32] Theorizing an overarching notion of *critique* may help PDA researchers avoid the misperception that doing critical analysis means "being negative" and make a more effective case for seeing this work as involving both

"positive" and "negative" impulses. And theorizing *design* as opposed to "positive" *critique* has the advantage of spotlighting the design orientation of PDA, thus providing an explicit focus that may help researchers better attend to the complexity of design and questions of applicability and viability of resistant discourses in particular contexts (a need in PDA to which I will return).

As mentioned, PDA privileges resistance as its object of analysis. While all CDS is resistant in the sense of opposing injustice, PDA is doubly resistant in that it serves this emancipatory aim by amplifying and investigating discourses that look to redress injustices like exclusion and discrimination. For this reason, Joanna Chojnicka proposes that PDA's project be defined as "targeting marginal, non-hegemonic discourses."[33] While this worthy focus might help to address criticisms against the lack of non-Western, disabled, and other marginalized perspectives in CDS, PDA is not necessarily a "bottom-up" approach. Progressive discourse analysis can also be used to examine dominant discourses or—should it ever come to pass—progressive hegemony.[34] Within PDA, resistance is not simply a response to injustice, it is social action that opens up possibilities for progressive social change. Analyzing resistant discourse is a generative project, one that treats objects of analysis as resources for imagining and implementing emancipatory agendas.[35] As such, PDA answers calls to theorize "unrealized alternative directions" and "possibilities for transformations" capable of enhancing human flourishing and mitigating social ills.[36]

By reconstructing progressive discourse in use, PDA studies can help researchers and readers develop normative frameworks about what progressive discourse ought to look like and do. For instance, Martin shows how amplifying oppressed voices, eliciting empathy, and telling stories of successful resistance fosters community and solidarity in Australian reconciliation discourse.[37] Óscar García Agustín examines how Spanish and Danish nongovernment organizations employ different national frameworks to promote understanding and empathy with refugees.[38] In a PDA study of dominant discourse, Ting Su shows how President Xi Jinping utilizes expressions of emotion, heteroglossia, and intensifying stance indicators to promote Chinese cooperation with Singapore.[39] Several authors have recognized the potential of PDA to inform design in education. Carlos A. M. Gouveia analyzes the ways the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages utilizes a plurilingual approach to advance recommendations for language learning, teaching, and assessment that empower teachers.[40] Felicitas Macgilchrist and Ellen Van Praet explore how history textbook publishers in Germany implicitly contest dominant historical narratives and thus tentatively legitimize more radical notions of democracy alongside hegemonic democratic ideals.[41] Rebecca Rogers and Melissa Mosley Wetzel use PDA to demonstrate how a teacher presenting at a U.S. American curriculum fair utilizes invitation, highlights problems, and tells multiple and competing stories to claim agency for herself and other educators.[42] While none of these situated examples provides a blueprint for progressive social change, they do help us to imagine possibilities and anticipate challenges in designing progressive discourse.

One shortfall shared by many of the studies outlined above is insufficient contextualization. Perhaps due in part to the limited space available to authors of journal articles, many PDA studies exhibit the tendency toward reactive analysis that "focus[es] on texts simply because they 'resist' the hegemonic social structure and its associated discourses

rather than analyzing how the counterdiscourses celebrated can gain a foothold within those institutional contexts in which they will be expected to operate."[43] In order for PDA to achieve its generative potential to imagine and design yet unrealized alternatives, it must work to understand the social structures that enable and constrain resistance. Bartlett offers a useful overview of steps analysts might take to contextualize progressive discourse analyses more thoroughly, arguing that scholars must identify "the social factors that created the conditions" for resistant texts and aspects of "context that might make it possible for … positive change to take hold and spread."[44] This includes evaluating the potential for counterdiscourses to be taken up, seen as legitimate, and become assimilated into existing discourse practices. Bartlett also argues that contextualizing PDA requires closer attention to sociocultural backgrounds and responses from community members, because their positionality influences their interpretation of meaning and their evaluation of resistant texts impacts whether texts are taken up.[45] For Bartlett,

> the goal [of PDA is] to focus on the ways in which underlying social changes in society and the local discourses associated with them bring to light the contradictions and tensions within the hegemonic order and so provide the *wiggle room* for naturalizing alternative representations that challenge this order.[46]

Bartlett refers to a context's degree of wiggle room as perturbation potential, a capacity for change that is directly related to participants' positioning, social capital, and ability to be heard and understood, and to act given the social constraints they face and their own level of skill. The ultimate task of PDA is to expose and invigorate this perturbation potential.

In short, PDA must combine critique and design and situate resistant discourses within wider sociohistorical contexts. While this may be addressed only partially in individual journal articles, identifying and exploiting perturbation potential is a project that might be served successfully by putting PDA studies in conversation with "traditional" CDA approaches—for example, in a series of articles examining hegemonic discourses and counterdiscourses in the same context. This aim is also well served by longer studies informed by ethnographic methods, such as Bartlett's study of strategies of collaboration and appropriation used by indigenous community members working in a local development board in Guyana.[47]

I turn now to a description of another ethnographically informed study that combines critique and design in order to identify wiggle room for challenging stigma around autism. The exemplar below is a critical action implicative discourse analysis of neurodiversity discourse in the U.S.A.—part of a much larger study of contemporary U.S. neurodiversity advocacy online, which combined analysis of digital discourse with participant observation in the disability rights groups ADAPT and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network.[48] The text at hand is "non-speaking Autistic, multiply disabled activist and writer" Amy Sequenzia's essay "More Problems with Functioning Labels."[49] While length constraints prevent me from delving deeply into any one aspect of context, the sketch below models an approach that accounts for underlying social factors, community members' positionality, and the perturbation potential of neurodiversity discourse. It also offers a method for doing PDA that combines "positive" and "negative" critique to examine both the good and the bad in a piece of progressive discourse.

Resistance and oppression in autism acceptance advocacy

In this section, I outline a model for doing progressive discourse analysis that integrates CDA and action implicative discourse analysis (AIDA), a method for grounded practical theorizing.[50] Before demonstrating this novel, hybrid approach, I offer a brief description of grounded practical theory (GPT) and AIDA, followed by a concise account of how CDA can be used to extend AIDA for the purposes of PDA.[51] After this introduction, I present an analysis of Sequenzia's essay primarily focused on one problem addressed in this progressive text: presuming incompetence.

GPT is a particularly useful framework for PDA that offers a problem-centered perspective aimed at building normative models that highlight a broad set of rational and moral principles that are action implicative, that is, useful for normative reflection about how one ought to act in similar situations.[52] It is a design orientation that enables analysts to examine the hypotheses actors implement in practice. GPT studies rationally reconstruct communicative practices by attending to three levels of practice: (1) the technical level, made up of the communicative strategies and discursive resources that actors employ in attending to problems in practice; (2) the problem level, made up of the practical dilemmas that actors address by communicating in particular ways; and (3) the philosophical level, made up of the normative principles and ideals that actors use to rationalize actions and weigh trade-offs in practice.[53] Within this three-dimensional model of practice, problems are pivotal. They are the catalysts that bring about strategic action and elicit normative reflection. By reconstructing the communicative strategies and situated ideals that actors use to address practical problems, GPT studies contribute to progressive design by offering up possibilities for similar communicative contexts.

AIDA is a method for building the rational reconstructions described above. Before reconstructing practices according to GPT's three-dimensional heuristic, AIDA scholars must first work to understand the situated practice at hand by taking an ethnographic perspective. AIDA researchers use observation, field notes, interviews, and analysis of documents to gain "extensive knowledge" of communicative practices in context.[54] Such knowledge is particularly important for analyzing the normative stances that participants use when reflecting on problems.

Next, AIDA studies attend to problems in practice from participants' points of view, working to understand how different participants frame problems from different perspectives. To do this, researchers focus on moments of conflict in transcripts and texts, and pay particular attention to the ways in which participants name problems.[55] Because problems are so pivotal, identifying and naming problems is a consequential analytical move, one that impacts choices about what should be analyzed and affects where analysts direct blame and attention.[56] Once problems are identified, AIDA studies reconstruct the various discursive strategies people use to address these problems in practice.

Developing normative claims grounded in practice requires that analysts also explore participants' situated ideals, that is, their "beliefs about good conduct."[57] From a design perspective, situated ideals can be understood as hypotheses according to which communication is designed in practice. In any practice, multiple and often conflicting situated ideals may come into play. Drawing normative conclusions about future action depends on understanding how participants prioritize different ideals and rationalize acting in ways that may go against explicitly stated beliefs.

I have dubbed the method I employ below "critical action implicative discourse analysis" because it integrates critical discourse analytic methods with the AIDA methods outlined above. The present study's critical orientation is evident in critical discourse analyses that inform my knowledge of U.S. neurodiversity advocacy, in the critical stance I take defining problems from a social theory perspective, and in my critique of stigmatizing situated ideals evident in the text.

Sequenzia's essay is an example of progressive neurodiversity discourse. The neurodiversity (ND) movement is a contemporary disability rights movement in which advocates fight for "civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent," that is, people who are neurologically different, whose "brain[s] … [function] in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal.'"[58] The terms *neurotypical* and *NT* are used by ND advocates to refer to those who generally follow "normal" societal standards of thinking and communicating. According to a neurodiversity perspective, all ways of thinking and being and experiencing the world are equally valid and worthy of acceptance and support.[59] From this point of view, autism is simply a natural neurological variation, a way of being "differently wired."[60] ND advocates argue that because most discourse about autism defines autism from a nonautistic perspective—that is, as a deficit in "typical" communication and neurological functioning—it spreads misconceptions about what autism is and what we should do about it. ND discourse counters dominant autism discourse by centering autistic perspectives and challenging stigma around autism. In a nutshell, ND advocacy aims to shift conversations away from a medical model of autism that says "autism is a problem that needs to be cured" toward a social model of autism that says "the problem isn't autism, the problem is that society is made for nonautistic people and therefore does not accommodate autistic differences."[61]

One key discursive strategy that many ND advocates employ to normalize autism as natural, neurological variation and shift conversations away from medical models is the use of identity-first language (IFL), that is, person-referencing that forefronts identity, as in the term "autistic person." In disability rights discourse, IFL is a resistant discursive strategy, a formulation used to challenge the conventions of person-first language (PFL), that is, person referencing that forefronts personhood and positions disability as something someone has, as in "person with autism."[62] Though PFL is written into the Americans with Disabilities Act and is held up as best practice in many disability organizations and most educational settings in the U.S.A., many autistic advocates "dislike 'person first' language" because they see PFL as communicating the idea that autism is not an intrinsic nor important part of the person who "has" it, and "suggest[ing] that autism is something bad—so bad that it isn't even consistent with being a person."[63] ND advocates use IFL to communicate the idea that autism is a pervasive aspect of identity akin to race or gender and to challenge the idea that prominently acknowledging disability impedes one's ability to be seen as a person first.[64]

IFL is one resistant discursive strategy Sequenzia uses in her essay published on *Ollibean*, a website focused on "disability rights, inclusion, and neurodiversity" that describes itself as "a dynamic community of parents, families and advocates in the disability community working together for a more socially just, accessible and inclusive world."[65] A prolific writer on autism rights and acceptance, Sequenzia is a frequent contributor to the site and an influential ND activist. As mentioned, she is also a nonspeaking, multiply disabled, Autistic person.[66] In "More Problems with Functioning Labels," Sequenzia voices

opposition to functioning labels, terms that position autistic people on the autism spectrum according to whether they are seen as "low-" or "high-functioning."

Sequenzia's essay is one text in a large and growing online corpus of autistic opposition to functioning labels, which are ubiquitous in dominant autism discourse. As key descriptors in diagnoses, these labels are typically assigned to autistic individuals by doctors and frequently referenced in medical discourses. There is also "a significant emphasis on functioning labels in the autism parenting world."[67] This emphasis is seen online in essays, comments, and discussion forums where parents typically offer their children's functioning designations early on as important pieces of information. For many autism parents, functioning labels reflect the realities of impairment and help them in "determining questions of autonomy and quality of independent life … [on] behalf of their young children and in the tricky transition to adult life."[68] Parents—particularly those of autistics labeled "low-functioning"—often rely on functioning labels to categorize their children's differences and determine what supports they need.

Sequenzia conducts a kind of practical CDA—a situated critique of dominant "functioning" discourse that works to expose how this dominant discourse contributes to the stigmatization of autistic people. This is a common strategy in oppositional discourse aimed at eliminating functioning labels. For instance, many ND advocates expressly critique the ways in which functioning labels are used to silence autistic perspectives. Perhaps because autistic impairments are often invisible online, many parents dismiss self-advocates on the Web by arguing that "if you can write on the internet/keep a blog/respond to these comments, you are very high-functioning and Not Like My Child."[69]

> [T]he term "low-functioning" [is also used] to discredit the voices of non-verbal autistic people [when] communication through AAC [augmentative and alternative communication] or pointing to a letterboard or text-to-speech [is viewed as not] as valid as speaking with [one's] mouthparts.[70]

Some parents are particularly quick to dismiss nonspeaking autistics who communicate via facilitated communication (FC)—a method of communication involving typing or pointing in which aides provide physical support or verbal prompts to the communicator—arguing that FC messages come from facilitators, not self-advocates.[71] Self-advocates also accuse parents and professionals of presuming that those labeled "low-functioning" are incompetent or incapable of self-determination, arguing that "in many NT folks' mind[s], 'low-functioning' equals 'non-thinking' or 'incapable'" or having "no voice"—presumptions that preclude "low-functioning" people from participating in public debate.[72]

In her *Ollibean* essay on functioning labels—which, as the title suggests, is one of several she's written on the subject—Sequenzia joins other self-advocates in addressing the problem of presuming incompetence. Presuming competence is a guiding principle in special education for students with significant intellectual and communicative disabilities. It entails treating those who "[have] a label of severe mental retardation" "as if [they are] smart" and maintaining skepticism regarding the validity of evaluations of intelligence based on a student's ability to meet neurotypical measures.[73] This is also referred to as operating under "the least dangerous assumption" because "[p]resuming incompetence could result in harm to … students … [whereas even] if we are wrong about students'

capacities to learn … , the consequences to that student of that incorrect presumption are not as dangerous as the alternative."[74] As ND advocates point out, presuming incompetence is a damaging self-fulfilling prophesy. If a parent views their child as incommunicative, they are likely to ignore communicative behaviors or simply regard them as symptoms. If an educator believes a child is incapable of learning beyond a certain level, they will not give students opportunities to advance. "The instant someone is presumed incapable of self-advocacy is the instant that the person is unable to self-advocate."[75] This sets up a "vicious cycle" wherein "because we presume [disabled people] are incompetent, we don't give them opportunities to demonstrate their competence, and this, in turn, is taken as 'proof' that they are, indeed, incompetent."[76]

Although Sequenzia does not explicitly refer to "presuming incompetence" in her essay, she does address this problem in her critique of the term "low-functioning." First, she calls attention to the disabling pity evoked by "low-functioning" labels that precludes any recognition of ability and casts autistic life as tragic suffering. She writes:

> If we [Autistic people] have any hidden abilities, they will remain hidden. Or we might show some special talent but if we still look weird or too different from our peers, we are still pitied, as if we are under constant suffering.

She goes on to critique the hierarchy of impairment that functioning labels reinforce and the ways this hierarchy casts those on the "low-functioning" end as less than. She points out that

> there are some autistics who were told, as children, that they are much better than every other autistic because they are "so high-functioning." Some of them grew up to become "Aspie/Autie supremacists," which is as bad as the term implies.

Finally, Sequenzia addresses the problem of presuming incompetence by referencing a fairly common trope found in autism discourse: that of the "brilliant brain" residing in a body labeled "low-functioning." She does this first by using an analogy about Stephen Hawking to challenge the idea that not being able to care for oneself is an indication that one cannot think.

> I can hear some parents saying: "but some adults ARE low-functioning. They still cannot care for themselves." (they are talking about autistics like me). My answer: neither can Stephen Hawking.
>
> Yes, I know he is not autistic and I know not all autistics are geniuses. I am not a genius, but I am pretty smart. And if I weren't "smart" at all, I should still be valued. …
>
> The point is, by saying that some autistic adults are labeled "low-functioning" because we still cannot care for ourselves is denying that we can think. Or should we stop listening to Stephen Hawking's brilliance and start pitying him?[77]

She ends the essay with an appeal that is repeated in three different modes: (1) the final sentence of the essay, (2) a meme graphic immediately following the end of the essay showing this last statement attributed to Amy Sequenzia on *Ollibean* written in white typewriter font on top of a square pink background peppered with *Ollibean* logos, and (3) the caption of the meme, which appears directly under the graphic and reproduces the quote and attribution again

> "Who knows in which body the next brilliant brain resides, if opportunities are not equal?" Amy Sequenzia. on Ollibean.[78]

By employing these strategies to counter "functioning" discourse and address the problem of presuming incompetence, Sequenzia reveals two sets of situated ideals that are extremely useful for progressive disability advocacy design: ideals around presuming competence and ideals about good disability activism. By exposing the oppressive mechanics of "low-functioning" labels, Sequenzia underscores the need to presume competence. This is a vital ideal, "nothing less than a Hippocratic oath for educators."[79] Presuming competence is a foundation for inclusion and an orientation toward disabled others that facilitates self-empowerment and self-determination. It is the starting point for interactions that honor "another human being … as a true equal."[80] Her critique also provides a model for effective opposition against "functioning" discourse. Sequenzia's arguments against "low-functioning" labels reveal a helpful belief about good disability activism that can be summed up in the disability rights slogan, "piss on pity." Sequenzia spotlights the damaging role that pity plays in presuming incompetence, a useful strategy given the common representation and apprehension of disability as "constant suffering."[81] By doing so, she suggests that activists should find ways of calling out people for pitying disabled others, particularly when it causes them to "stop listening to [the other's] brilliance."[82] She also provides an example of calling out done right. Sequenzia successfully exposes discourse that supports the oppression of the autistic community in a way that I think elicits reflection rather than defensiveness on the part of people being called out. The final statement, repeated in text, in image, and then in caption invites readers to engage in a provocative thought experiment. "Who knows in which body the next brilliant brain resides?" is a question that reinforces a presumption of brilliance. Who knows how many autistics seen "as lesser people" are in fact intellectually superior? Who knows how many are "pretty smart?" Who knows how many abilities, talents, and minds remain "hidden?"[83] For readers who have an autistic person in their life—as many readers of *Ollibean* do—the question follows: Who knows how many times I've underestimated and thereby inhibited this person?

While it offers these "positive" strategies and ideals, "More Problems with Functioning Labels" also inadvertently reinforces cognitive ableism. Cognitive ableism is a stance that values particular cognitive abilities and those who are perceived to have them (or able to cultivate them) and devalues those with an actual or perceived lack of cognitive abilities.[84] Sequenzia's comments about brilliance and her story about Stephen Hawking reinforce cognitive ableism by setting up a hierarchy of intelligence and inviting NT others to take the perspective of someone who is intelligent but assumed to have an intellectual disability. Readers who take this role are often led to

> think that the problem was that [people] treated [the autistic person] like they were intellectually disabled, and they weren't. But that's not the problem. The problem is that [people] thought that [the autistic person] was intellectually disabled, *and so they didn't treat them like a person.*[85]

According to cognitive ableist assumptions, intelligence is a marker of personhood. By asserting autistic individuals' rights to be viewed as persons by emphasizing their intelligence—even potential brilliance—Sequenzia inadvertently reinforces the link between personhood and intellectual functioning. She does mention that even "if [she] weren't

'smart' at all, [she] should still be valued," but the spectrum of intelligence presented—ranging from those who are "not smart at all" through those who are "pretty smart" to those who are "brilliant"—reinforces a scale of intellectual functioning and references intellectual prowess in order to elicit empathy, that is, to evoke a recognition of and connection to autistic others as persons, not objects of pity. Using the final quote and the Stephen Hawking story enables Sequenzia to disrupt people's tendencies to "judg[e] intelligence by smooth movements and the ability to speak," but these discursive strategies also support ingrained conceptions of personhood that cast intelligent people as recognizably human and dehumanize those with intellectual impairments.[86] In this way, the ideal of presuming competence is undermined by the rest of the essay. As autism rights activist Julia Bascom stresses, presuming competence must ultimately rest on a recognition of personhood independent of cognitive functioning in order to apply to all neurodivergent individuals.

> These revelations about presuming competence, human dignity, and the least dangerous assumption—they don't apply only to [people] who are secret geniuses. They apply to everyone. They are *the most important* for the [people] who really do have intellectual disabilities, who really *can't* read or use full sentences and who really do need extensive support. … These terms don't mean *assume they aren't actually disabled*. These terms mean *assume they are a person, and remember what you don't know*.[87]

Though it may not be a conscious normative stance, Sequenzia's essay reveals a situated ideal about ND activism that designers of progressive disability rights discourse would do well to identify and avoid reinforcing. By employing cognitive ableist mechanisms in the service of autism acceptance advocacy, Sequenzia suggests a normative belief that strategic use of ableist semiotic mechanisms is useful for countering stigma and asserting personhood. While she also works to challenge stigma and assert the personhood of all autistics regardless of "functioning," this effort is ultimately undermined by discursive strategies that reinforce stigma around intellectual disability. In a recent essay entitled "Intelligence Is an Ableist Concept," Sequenzia draws this conclusion herself, describing how her own experience as "a disabled person who needs many supports, and who had been physically and verbally abused because [she] was so 'retarded'" may have played a part in her reinforcing the link between personhood and intelligence.[88] In the years since publishing "More Problems with Functioning Labels," she has come to question intelligence as "a social construct," to confront her own internalized cognitive ableism, and to conclude that "intelligence, used as a way to justify our right to accessibility, and our value as people, is an ableist concept."[89]

Conclusions

As illustrated above, critical action implicative discourse analysis is a method for PDA that combines both design and critique, both "positive" and "negative" impulses. Oriented toward design, AIDA is a method for rationally reconstructing layers of practice in order to gain a better understanding of problems, possible solutions, and communicative ideals. Oriented toward critique, CDA is a method for uncovering discursive mechanisms that reinforce social injustice. In the example above, I use AIDA to identify the problem of presuming incompetence, map Sequenzia's strategies for confronting this problem, and expose the situated ideals that guide her advocacy. I use CDA to expose discursive

strategies in the essay that ultimately undermine her progressive aim. All together, the analysis is progressive in that it looks to inform normative reflection about what positive ND advocacy could look like and achieve, and to spur redesign in future advocacy practices. Similarly, in my preceding discussion of PDA and CDS, I have worked to combine critique and design by reconstructing theoretical practices and exposing discursive mechanisms that undermine the fields' emancipatory aims. My goal has been to create some wiggle room, to make space for PDA in CDS and to help move both fields in a progressive direction.

Michał Krzyżanowski and Bernhard Forchtner point to the need for CDS scholars to revisit and revise foundational concepts in order to address the challenges of late neoliberalism.[90] Revising the concept of *critique* to include both "positive" and "negative" impulses and expanding the notion of *analysis* to include PDA alongside traditional CDA will, I believe, better enable CDS scholars to intervene in social injustice and reflect on the perturbation potential of their own scholarship and the movements to which they are aligned. There is a social need for CDS that addresses the question of how to empower individuals and movements as agents of progressive social change. We face a world in which progressive societal gains are being questioned, dismantled, and attacked. We also live in a world in which activists have helped to move the term "privilege" into the realm of everyday talk, and in which dominant, oppressive discourse is regularly deconstructed by neurodiversity activists and others. While scholarly deconstructive critique is certainly helpful for understanding the nuances of oppression and documenting its effects, there is already a widespread and growing awareness among progressives of discursive manifestations and material consequences of oppression. What is urgently needed is a better understanding of what to do about it.

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