

Redefining critical autism studies: A more inclusive interpretation

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Redefining Critical Autism Studies: A more Inclusive Interpretation.

Abstract.

This essay explores the definition of Critical Autism Studies and its inclusion of autistic scholarship. There has been critique of recent non-autistic literature for lacking autistic authorship, leading to doubts to its epistemological integrity due to misrepresentations of autistic culture and the neurodiversity movement. This article utilises the work of Arnold, Milton and O'Dell et al to introduce an emancipatory definition to ensure the discipline is autistic-led. In the process, we discuss the nature of autism studies and what constitutes critical literature. We propose that Waltz's interpretation of Critical Autism Studies as a working definition.

Keywords: autism, critical autism studies, neurodiversity, emancipation, inclusion, re-thinking autism.

What are critical autism studies?

Critical Autism Studies (CAS) have come a long way since Jim Sinclair's (2012 [1993]) seminal speech with autistic activist-academics critiquing the deficit laden, pathologising autism discourses favoured by the medical community. Autistic activists and academics Luke Aylward, Steve Graby, Damian Milton and Lyte Moon were present at the initial UK CAS seminar day (2011) held in Sheffield. The autistic voice has been a crucial factor in the growth and acceptance of CAS within Disability Studies, especially with the success of the autistic-led journal *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies*. Supporting the next generation of neurodivergent activist-academics adding to CAS literature are often masters and doctorate students. The sharp rise in interest in CAS among Disability Studies scholars has helped to create multiple interpretations of CAS proposed by various academic groupings, producing three main definitions. For instance, Arnold defines CAS as:

“It is however about critical thinking, new perspectives and a channel for further debate in future.” (Arnold, 2013, p 2).

The definition put forward by Davidson and Orsini (2013) in the book *Worlds of Autism* is similar to the one Arnold proposed. Davidson and Orsini's (2013) definition is composed of 3 parts: exploring power relationships that construct autism, enabling narratives that challenge the dominant negative medical autism discourses and creation of theoretical and methodological approaches that are emancipatory and valuing the highly individual nature of autism and its nascent culture. The book is a production of the work done at the inaugural CAS conference in Ottawa; it is plausible that the similarities between these two definitions are due to

epistemological reasons of utilising the lived autistic experience (Arnold 2013; Davidson and Orsini 2013). However, the latest CAS definition in the Re-Thinking Autism book (Runswick-Cole, Mallett and Timimi 2016), by the Re-Thinking Autism Network suggests a constricted CAS definition of two main components: questioning whether the diagnosis is scientifically valid and whether it is meaningful to those labelled as such. The limited CAS definition and other factors has spurred us to write this article. Subsequently this article will now critically explore the inclusivity of CAS.

Re-interpreting different stakeholders' contributions to critical autism studies.

Recently the Re-Thinking Autism book claimed to be the first CAS book, ignoring previous work in the field and importantly airbrushing out the autistic voice in their work, contributing towards negative reviews from autistic authors (Arnold 2016; Arnold 2017; Milton 2016). This article does not wish to reiterate those critiques, but to use the debates to develop more clearly what we mean by Critical Autism Studies. Specifically the Re-Thinking Autism Network's narrower definition and claim that their book is the first CAS anthology would have merit if they were formally dissociating from prior works in CAS, such as *Worlds of Autism and Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies*; however, there is no evidence of this occurring. Compellingly, various academic groupings attended the recent CAS conference, including the Re-Thinking Autism Network and autistic scholars. At the conference autistic academics challenged CAS scholars who are only interested in talking about autism, in contrast to others (including autistic scholars) who are pursuing the emancipation of the autistic population. Hannah Ebben addressed the atmosphere of a shared pursuit to 'outsmart' the autistic community, expressing itself through straw men arguments and affirmative noises from the audience. Autistic academics have expressed strong interpretations of these actions (Arnold 2016; Arnold 2017; Milton 2017), with calls of "cultural imperialism" possibly due to the attempt of the Re-Thinking Autism Network to usurp autistic influence over CAS.

The autistic rights movement and the neurodiversity movement are not the same entity; both are separate yet co-operative heterogeneous entities. Criticism of the neurodiversity movement is common to CAS and is explored by research groups other than the RAN such as O'Dell et al (2016). O'Dell et al (2016) follow Davidson and Orsini's (2013) definition and recognise autism as a diagnostic label and the autistic voice as a lived experience, which contrasts to the Re-Thinking Autism Network who envision autism and consequently the autistic voice as a non-entity (Arnold 2016). Despite following an inclusive definition, O'Dell et al (2016) also ignore autistic scholarship when critiquing the neurodiversity movement, which can lead to hollow arguments against it that have little validity (Milton 2016). Particularly as the

neurodiversity movement applies to many varying labels (Graby 2015; Strand 2017); spurious critique of it will affect many other labelled persons.

This could be the result of an inherent contradiction within CAS of analysing the neurodiversity movement and the possibly weak theory contained within it, while simultaneously respecting the autistic voice that supports that movement. There is a view that autistic academics should acknowledge critique of the neurodiversity movement by non-autistic academics; however, the counter argument is that non-autistic academics are not respectfully or accurately critiquing the neurodiversity movement due to the lack of use of autistic scholarship in their work (Arnold 2016; Arnold 2017; Milton 2016). Autistic input into CAS is crucial for its epistemological validity, to avoid “silo mentality” creeping into CAS (Milton 2014b) and to recognise autistic persons as CAS experts (Gillespie-Lynch et al 2017). Nonetheless, the epistemological arguments ignore the historic fact of autistic leadership of CAS.

With the previously explored issues, we have vigorously debated our appropriate response, as autistic authors, to the RAN. **Options considered** included splitting from CAS to form another discipline, such as 'Transformative' or 'Emancipatory Autism Studies', or insisting that autistic authors be counted as key authors in CAS. Either of these options could theoretically lead to inclusive academic practices as part of the Disability Studies literature, the latter in particular meaning that CAS articles would need to be inclusive of the autistic voice and to filter out non-emancipatory CAS scholarship. However, we discarded the former option because it is undesirable to surrender CAS to purely non-autistic perspectives. Subsequently, we agreed that, in addition to positioning autistic authors firmly within CAS, a more emancipatory definition of CAS is required, as is a citation survey to explore who is using autistic scholarship and whether different subcultures are emerging within CAS.

How to define critical autism studies?

In order to define something you need to know its ontological status; CAS is within Autism Studies, the interdisciplinary study of autism (Arnold 2013; Davidson and Orsini 2013). The ontological status of autism is contested. It is many varying things to each individual stakeholder; it is argued that autism is not a thing, but a debate about a thing. The Re-Thinking Autism Network suggests autism is purely a cultural construct lacking the qualities to be a 'natural kind' (Arnold 2016; Milton 2016). This ignores how autism runs in families, the flourishing distinctive autistic culture and the importance of self-diagnosis to autistic persons' sense of wellbeing. Autism is a diagnostic category (Milton 2016) distinguishing certain human behaviours similar to how maps signposts to specific geographical variations. Autism Studies is intrinsically interdisciplinary, as autism is contextualised, particularly in the dynamics of

autistic persons, who often have other diagnostic labels, impairments and other myriad forms of human diversity. Hence, CAS has to be interdisciplinary focusing on the intersectionality such as how culture contributes to certain interpretations of autism (O'Dell et al 2016). We have discussed the nature of autism and Autism Studies; however are yet to explore what makes CAS *Critical Autism Studies*.

There are many interpretations and academic uses of the word 'critical'. Merriam-Webster defines 'critical' as:

“exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation” or “of, relating to, or being a turning point or especially important juncture” (Anon 2017).

CAS, it is suggested, draws upon Critical Disability Studies and complements its critique of the nature of disability by exploring the manufacture of autism (O'Dell et al 2016). It is critical of prior Disability Studies scholarship; in contrast, however Disability Studies has always been critical since *A Critical Condition* edited by Paul Hunt (1966), regarded as one of the foundational texts of Disability Studies. Vitally, it continues to do this through the social model of disability, which acts as a turning point, shifting the focus away from individuals' perceived faults onto how an impaired person is oppressed by society. The term 'Critical Theory' can similarly be traced back to the work of the Frankfurt School. The varying traditions that have influenced critical theory and its applications within wider critical disability studies, such as Marxism, Feminism, Postmodernism, and Critical Realism, can also be found amongst autistic scholarship and activism.

Some argue CAS is critical as it unsettles conceptions of autism, potentially due to the fact that autistic persons have been reviewing medical interpretations of autism (Arnold 2016; Milton 2016; Sinclair 2012 [1993]). Positive experiences with autistic persons can trouble and lead to critical challenging of autistic stereotypes (Gillespie-Lynch et al 2017). Through such processes, CAS is literally critical, as it is a turning point, the pivotal juncture when autistic persons reclaim autism narratives for ourselves. For CAS to continue to be a transformative moment, it must allow new avenues of inquiries (Arnold 2013; O'Dell et al 2016).

The points raised in this article highlight the many requirements that are essential for a CAS definition to be credible. A CAS definition must be inclusive, be critical, allow new lines of inquiry and have epistemological integrity; the latter is important for the discipline's external

acceptance. We can only gain new knowledge within CAS by scholarship which takes into account the emancipatory nature of the discipline. While these characteristics are separate entities, they join together on many levels of intersectionality contributing to a positive feedback loop, for instance, explaining the growth of *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* within and externally of CAS. CAS must continue to explore the intersectionality of autism, situating it within local contexts (O'Dell et al 2016). This section has explored what CAS is and consequently what a definition needs for it to be successful; next, we will provide a more inclusive definition.

Our proposed definition for critical autism studies.

We put forward Waltz's definition as the working definition of CAS:

“The ‘criticality’ comes from investigating power dynamics that operate in Discourses around autism, questioning deficit-based definitions of autism, and being willing to consider the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce ‘disability’” (Waltz 2014, p 1337).

Waltz's definition is derived from Davidson and Orsini's (2013) interpretation, and can be assumed to share its inclusive property. Specifically building on autistic scholarship to further investigate the power dynamics in the discourses and questioning medical understandings of autism, this definition avoids the current contradiction in CAS. Thus it acknowledges key work by Milton (2014a) that autistic persons are integral for autism studies scholarship to have epistemological integrity, in the process ensuring there is no sustainable dichotomy between autistic and non-autistic authorship (O'Dell et al 2016). Pressingly, Waltz (2014) argues for autistic persons to be allowed to take a more active paid role in the production of autism knowledge. These critical explorations of power dynamics and autism perceptions allow new lines of inquiry while maintaining epistemological integrity. Potential future articles should explore the terminology used to discuss autism, autistic advocacy and the neurodiversity movement and how they are all portrayed in CAS literature. Additionally, a wider debate is vital to decide on what counts as key literature in CAS, both autistic and not.

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