

# Getting Close to Discourse

Tracing Neurodiversity Across Social Space

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## **An ethnographic investigation into discourse, practice, and identity.**

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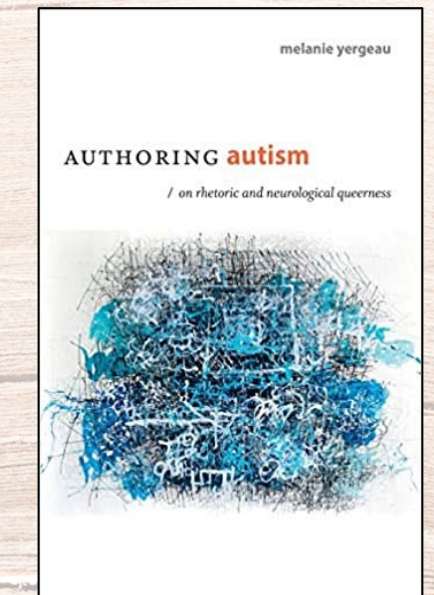
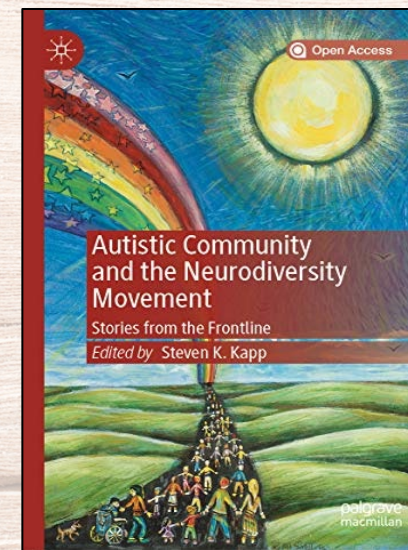
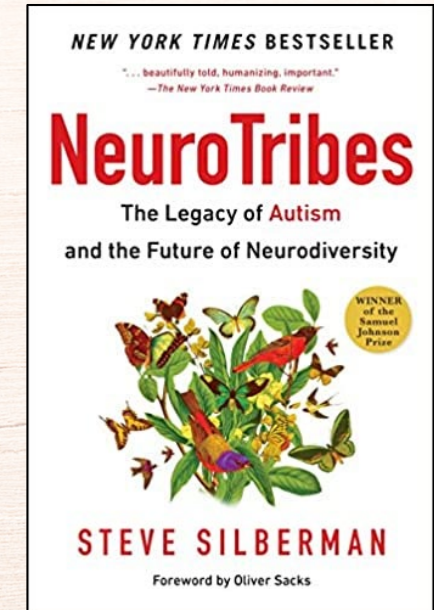
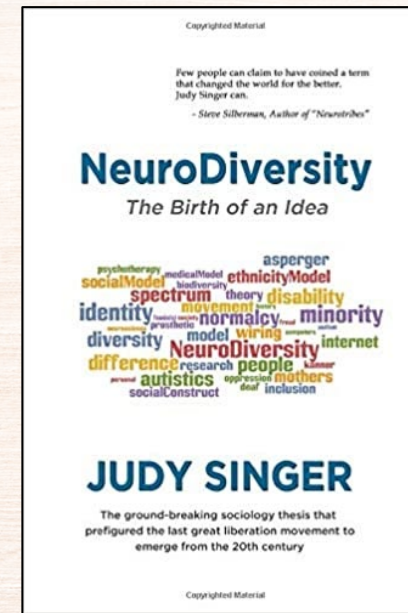
### **How are people and documents using the term and concept of neurodiversity?**

- **Ethnography**
  - 60 interviews (January 2019 – January 2021)
  - Observation of online public events
- **Discourse analysis**
  - Systematic search and analysis of 96 academic publications



# The concept of neurodiversity

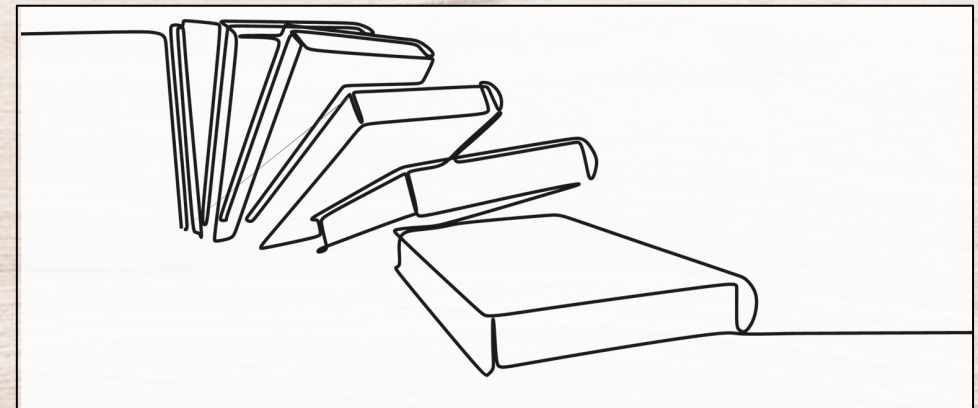
- Coined by Judy Singer and Harvey Blume (1998) and further developed by activists and self-advocates
- Approaches non-normative ways of thinking and being as differences, not deficits
- Opposition to “cures” and dominant interventions that seek to normalize
- Associated with disability justice movements and calls for greater decision-making from ND-identified people and communities
- Does **not** negate the experience of disability based on neuro-involved differences or the importance of supports





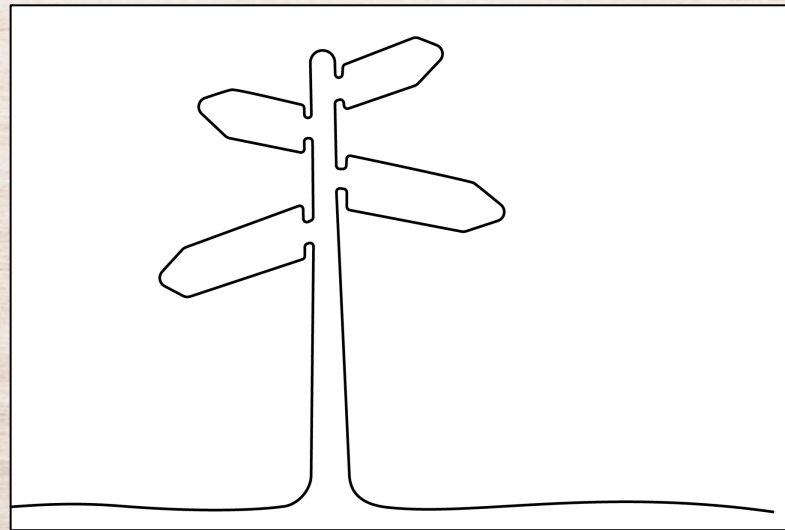
# Discourse analysis of academic texts

- Language activity as a part of social processes
- Language is constitutive, a site where meaning is created and contested
- Academic writing operates within social relations and power dynamics





# Our data corpus



**Analysis of 96 academic texts, drawing on Norman Fairclough's work (2001; 2003)**

- Number of publications doubled between 2019 and 2020: our first finding
- Majority of texts published in disability studies, bioethics, education, and psychiatry/psychology
- Geographically quite limited to the Global North
- A small minority of authors were openly neurodiverse/ neurodivergent

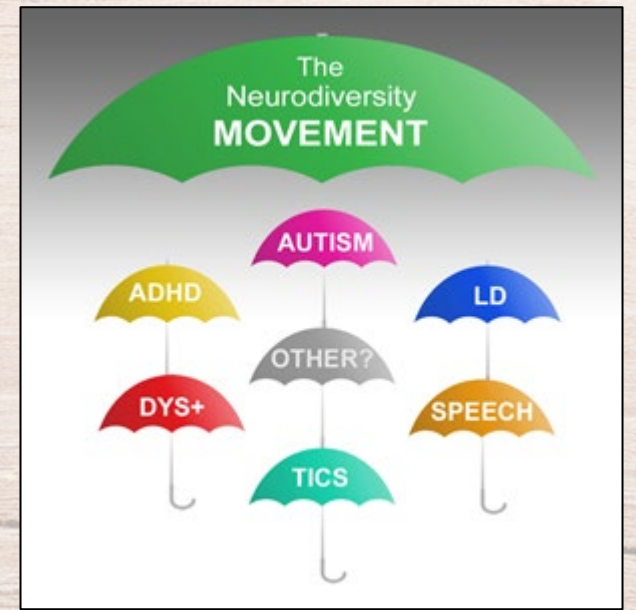


# Findings: Who counts in neurodiversity

Is “neurodiversity” just another word for “autism”?

**Common discursive strategies that aligned neurodiversity with autism:**

- Using “autism rights movement” and “neurodiversity movement” interchangeably
- Collapsing the categories of “non-autistic” and “neurotypical”
- Gives the impression that neurodiversity is a terminological substitution

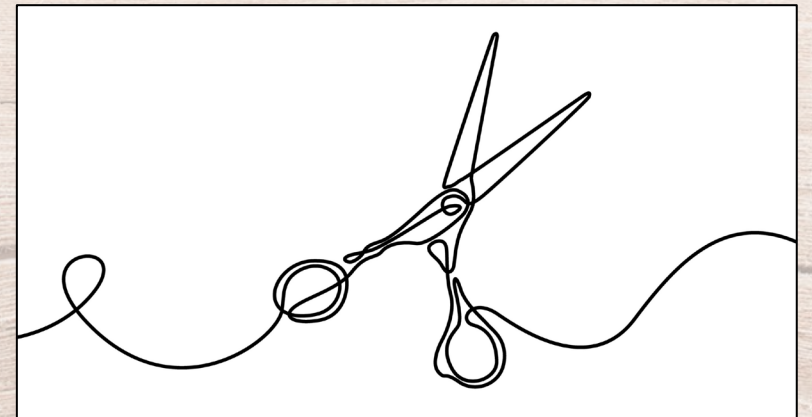




# Findings: Who counts in neurodiversity

**Should only certain people with certain abilities be included in neurodiversity?**

- Some authors argued that a broad application of neurodiversity damaging to Autistic and other ND-identified people with greater support needs (“high functioning”)
- They argued that certain disorders or ‘severe’ manifestations of autism are justifiably categorized as disorders and should be excluded from neurodiversity
- **Neurodiversity advocates are opposed to these kinds of arguments and see the movement as inclusive of and beneficial to people of varying abilities and support needs**





# Findings: Drawing on science

Authors consistently used science-based metaphors to make sense of neurodiversity

## Wiring

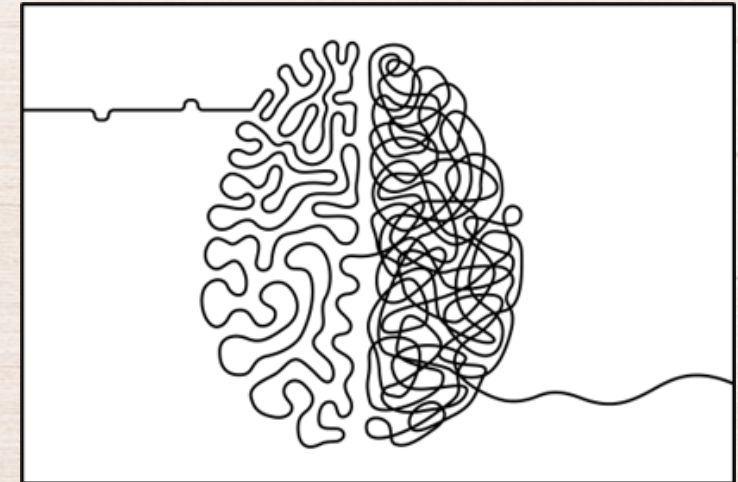
- Conditions such as autism are “built into the wiring”

## Evolution

- The traits of conditions are from “*our deep past, passed down through millions of years of evolution* (Silberman, 2015) and offer certain survival advantages

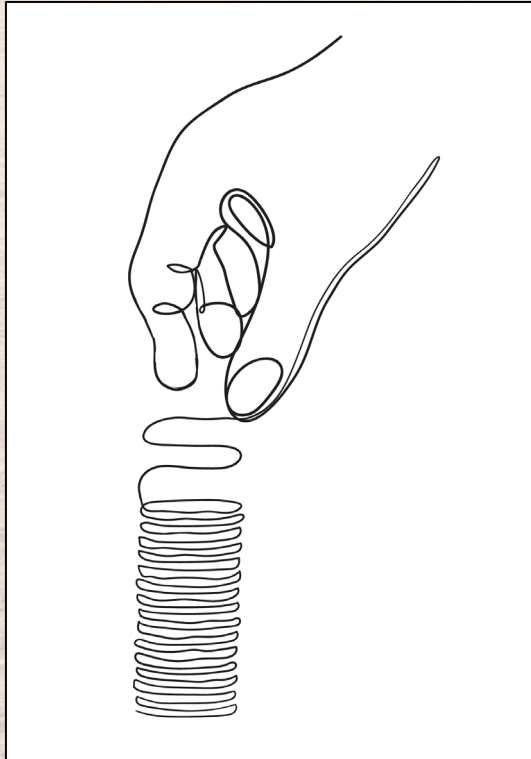
## Biodiversity

- “Neurodiversity may be every bit as critical for the human race as biodiversity for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?” (Blume, 1998)





# Findings: Weighing in



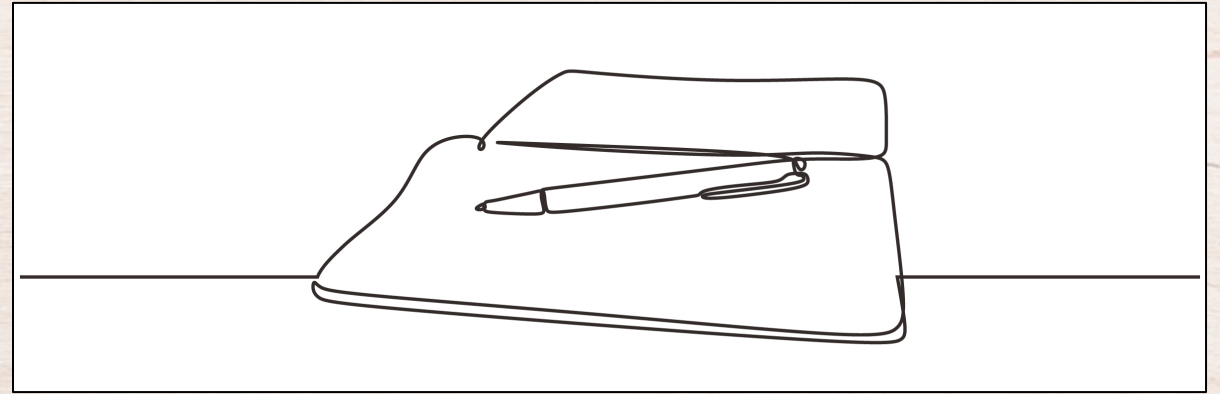
## Recapturing and reconfiguring neurodiversity in academia

- Academic authors have situated themselves as arbiters in discussions of neurodiversity
- Many positioned themselves as experts even though this topic was theorized largely outside the academy
- Academic practice-as-usual can reproduce rhetorical and epistemological exclusion



# Discourse analysis alongside other methods

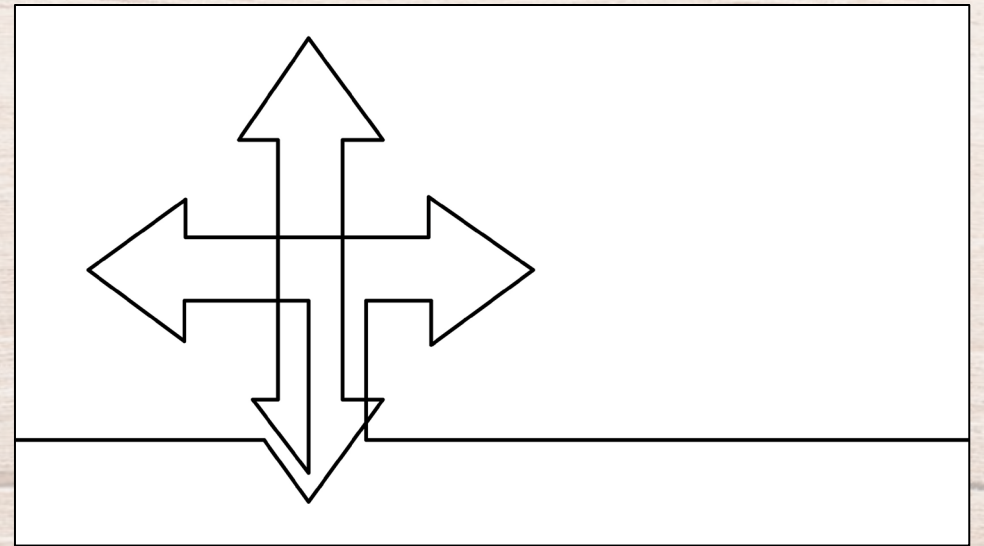
- Our approach involved thinking about texts as part of the world people live in
- Our interviews intentionally incorporated texts
- Critically examining academic texts alongside the interviews allowed us to explore how ideas, terms, and practices move across and through different social spaces





# Conclusion: Neurodiversity across social space

- Academics have claimed the concept of neurodiversity, often in ways that are at odds with the concept's associated politics and critiques
- Academic writing itself can reproduce inequities
- Neurodiversity is being deployed by many, for diverse ends, and with uneven consequences





# Thank you!



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# Selected References



# What is neurodiversity?

As a feature of brains or minds, neurodiversity was consistently framed as either a binary, a spectrum, or a universal fact.

## Binary

- Neurodiverse and neurotypical as mutually exclusive groups

## Spectrum

- Neurodiversity exists by degree
- Avoids an 'us/them' construction

## Universal fact

- All brains are different and unique
- No such thing as an average brain