



Representations of Autism in *Ontario* Newsroom: A Critical Content Analysis of Online Government Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Bulletins

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ABSTRACT *In Ontario, Canada, autism has become widely politicized. In the last 20 years, instances of personal and organizational advocacy developed into wider-scale policy and programs. Government press releases indicate Ontario's developing response to autism as a social policy issue, while reflecting societal perceptions and priorities surrounding autism. Informed by Critical Disability Studies and Critical Autism Studies, this article uses a content analysis to explore the manifest and latent priorities of Ontario's provincial government displayed in press releases between 2001-2019 accessed through the Ontario Newsroom, an online repository of press releases and media advisories that features different initiatives published by the government of Ontario. Press releases were selected based on the search term "autism" and analyzed in two steps. First, this article presents the most frequently used words in press release headlines. Second, key themes within press releases are explored. Press releases emphasize the stories of non-autistic people, altruists, positivists, treatment-seekers, autistic children, and normative families. What is left out is a social representation of autism. Prominent themes display ableist perceptions of autism, reproducing power imbalances and inequity based on disability and family status. These findings reveal government objectives and priorities, reflecting broader societal perceptions of autism.*

KEYWORDS autism; social justice; autism policy

Autism has been widely discussed in Ontario, Canada. Increases in rates of diagnosis, advocacy activity, and autism professionalization have all made autism a public issue. This has led to several provincial government initiatives in Ontario (CASADA, 2019; Motiwala et al., 2006; Perry, 2002; Shepherd & Waddell, 2015). Ontario began to develop an ongoing policy response to autism beginning in 1999 with the Intensive Early Intervention

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Program for autistic children aged two to five years old. This program evolved into the Autism Intervention Program (AIP) in 2006, which focused on behavioural services for autistic children under age six. In 2017 the AIP was replaced by the Ontario Autism Program (OAP), which was subsequently revised in 2018 (Perry, 2002; Turan, 2014; Weir, 2006). In 2019, announcements were made regarding the reformation of the OAP into a new program which decentralized the government's role in the delivery. A common thread in Ontario's response to autism has been the provision of behavioural-based services for those with autism diagnoses under the age of 18 (Janse van Rensburg, 2020).¹

Recent scholarship in Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and Critical Autism Studies (CAS) has drawn attention to the role of representation (i.e., how disabled and autistic people are portrayed within public spaces) in promoting inequity (Milton, 2014; O'Dell et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2018). Within academic literature and Critical Disability Studies more broadly, disabled persons are seeking to challenge the idea of disability being used as a vehicle to inspire the non-disabled (Young, 2014; Zames & Fleisher, 2011), and autistic persons are writing against pathologizing and medicalized perspectives of autism (McGuire, 2011a; Milton, 2014). Advertisements in the media have been shown to influence societal perceptions of disability (Barnett & Hammond, 1999) and autism-centered advertisements have been critiqued for their perpetuation of ableism (McGuire, 2011a). These discourses of disability and autism are largely organized by "limited cultural scripts" (McGuire, 2011a, p. 18), which encourage aggressive and misguided approaches to "curing" autism or waging a "war on autism" (McGuire, 2011a, p. 19).

Media studies related to autism range from those that focus on the use of the internet by the autism and autistic communities (Chowdhury et al., 2002; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Jordan, 2010), representation of autistic people in the media (Belcher & Maich, 2014; Dowdy, 2013), the use of media in aiding differing advocacy efforts surrounding autism (Hersinta, 2021; Leadbitter et al., 2021; McKeever, 2013; Ne'eman, 2010), and investigating the framing of autism by news sources (Pesonen, et al., 2020; Wendorf Muhamad & Yang, 2017). While previous research identifies the role of media in promoting disability as a personal loss in need of change, fixing, or cure to adapt to societal expectations (Hanes, 2016), research is needed to dissect how government discourse around autism determines how autism is societally perceived, questioning whether government and societal framings of autism are congruent with a social understanding of autism.

¹ Behavioural-based services refer to psychologically-based behaviour change therapies, most notably, but not limited to, Applied Behaviour Analysis and Intensive Behaviour Intervention. However, behavioural-based approaches may include other forms of behaviour therapy, including cognitive-based approaches.

Informed by CDS and CAS, I use a content analysis to analyze press releases created by the government from 2001-2019 and archived in the *Ontario Newsroom*. Borrowing a social model of disability (Crow, 1996; Oliver, 1990, 1996; Thomas, 1999, 2007), which identifies disability as constructed by environments and attitudes that fail to meet the needs of people with disabilities, I frame autism using a social lens. A social understanding of autism recognizes autistic people as a unique social group who would benefit from broader social, political, and economic changes, rather than individual change requiring conforming to societal norms (Hanes, 2016). Therefore, the goals of this article are (a) to understand the priorities of the government with respect to autism as reflected in government press releases, and (b) to critically investigate whether government and societal framings of autism are congruent with a social understanding of autism.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) frames disability as a structural and social issue. As a conceptual framework it questions power relations, socio-economic environments, social oppression, and discrimination (Mollow, 2017). As a response to medicalized discourses surrounding disability which utilize a deficit approach to disability, a social model of disability was promoted by disability advocates to understand disability as socially and culturally constructed (Krcek, 2013; Oliver, 1990). The social model distinguishes between the terms “impairment” and “disability” (Krcek, 2013, p. 5), and as Haney (2018, p. 67) states, “while impairment is a physical characteristic, [it is] societies’ lack of accommodations for impaired persons that creates disability.” A criticism of this model is that it does not adequately represent the lived experiences of disabled people (Hanes, 2016). Therefore, the incorporation of other ways of knowing has been essential in adequately capturing the diversity of experiences, environments, and impairments that disabled people live with.

Critical Disability Studies builds on the social model of disability, incorporating feminist, critical race, and other contemporary critical scholarship (Goodly et al., 2019). It offers an intersectional critique of ableism, which is described as “a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that cast disability as a diminished state of being human” (Hodge, 2013, p. 108).

Stemming from shifting understandings of diversity, and inspired through other disability movements, an autistic rights movement began in the 1990s. The birth of this movement is credited to Jim Sinclair who wrote *Don’t Mourn for Us* (Sinclair, 1993), advocating for acceptance of autistic people, and portraying autism as identity (Krcek, 2013). Critical Autism Studies (CAS) is a scholarly perspective which progressed from this movement. CAS identifies autism as a socially constructed phenomenon (O’Dell et al., 2016),

and centers autistic persons as experts in autism (Milton, 2014). Davidson & Orsini (2013, cited in Woods et al., 2018) identify that CAS (a) explores power relationships in the construction of autism; (b) produces narratives that push back against negative medical autism representations; and (c) uses theoretical and methodological techniques that emancipate and value the heterogeneity of autism and its culture. Autism is thus being re-storied (Douglas et al., 2019).

The content analysis offered in this article relies on the keyword “autism” found in *Ontario Newsroom* press releases published between 2001 and 2019. The word autism has been defined in different ways. Autism can be defined biomedically and socially. Privileging certain definitions of autism can lead to differential representation of autism and different governmental priorities.

Unpacking the history of the medicalization of disability and autism is beyond the scope of this paper (see Waltz, 2013, for more information). However, a biomedical approach to autism describes autism as a pathology, depicting autism as “a biological problem needing a biomedical solution, needing to be stopped, cured, fixed, eliminated” (McGuire, 2011a, p. 18). Medicalized discourses of autism exist in past and current editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or the “DSM-5” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), describing autism using symptomology and functioning levels, which may perpetuate perceptions that autistic people are deviant, “non-valuable,” and “non-viable” (McGuire, 2011b, p. 66). An alternative approach to understanding autism is found in the social model of disability, which understands disability as constructed by societies that do not consider or value the bodies and minds of disabled individuals (Hanes, 2016). In contrast, autistic self-advocates and allies have defined autism in ways that reflect and celebrate their lived experiences.

In the context of Ontario, policies and programs have typically privileged a biomedical definition of autism, requiring a DSM-5 diagnosis for the provision of the limited supports and services that are available (Ministry of Children & Youth Services, 2018). Press releases have the potential to display smaller shifts in government priorities, and therefore are useful for investigating whether government and societal framings display a social understanding of autism. By seeking to understand how the *Ontario Newsroom* frames autism, and exploring the priorities found within press releases, this analysis takes an approach that seeks to uncover power relationships or adverse representations of autism, offering an intersectional critique of ableism.

Context of Research

Autism services and supports in Ontario have been provincially sponsored since 1999 (Perry, 2002). Services provided have typically been limited to behavioural services for preschool aged children, beginning with the Early

Intervention Program (Perry, 2002), moving to the Autism Intervention Program in 2006 (Turan, 2014). In 2017 a new program called the Ontario Autism Program was announced (Ministry of Children & Youth Services, 2018). In this family-centered program, much of the funding prioritized Applied Behavioural Analysis for children under 18 years of age (ABA) (Ministry of Children & Youth Services, 2018). Following the election of the Progressive Conservative Party in Ontario in 2018, changes were announced to how services for autistic children would be accessed and funded. It was proposed to replace service-based benefits with cash-based benefits, contingent on diagnoses of autism for children under 18 years of age (Janse van Rensburg, 2020). The 2019 budget-based program allows for more options to be explored in terms of autism supports and services outside of ABA, however, this downloaded the responsibility of navigating supports and services onto the individual family unit.

Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) is technically defined as “the science in which tactics derived from the principles of behaviour are applied to improve socially significant behavior and experimentation is used to identify the variables responsible for the improvement in behaviour” (Cooper et al., 2014, p. 2). It is a popular therapy in Ontario for autistic youth because it is considered to be empirically supported. The evidence that ABA is based on is from the UCLA Young Autism Program by Ole Ivar Lovaas (Lovaas, 1987; Wong et al., 2014) and single-subject methodological research (Dillenburger & Keenan, 2009). While researchers have claimed that ABA can allow autistic individuals to enter “remission” (Greschwind, 2009, p. 374; Lovaas, 1987, p. 8), especially when applied intensively (called Intensive Behaviour Intervention or IBI) (Reichow & Wolery, 2009), exploring why remission is a goal, and the repercussions of ABA, have been the bases of critique raised by autistic scholars and allies (Baker, 2006; Gibson & Douglas, 2018).

Applied Behavioural Analysis interventions exist against a social background in which pressures to conform can cause autistic persons to feel alienated or pressured to hide their autistic characteristics (Meyerding, 2014). Such interventions have been understood by some to deny autistic people their autistic individuality (Haney, 2018). Associating autism with behaviour change therapy connects autism with deviance (Gibson & Douglas, 2018), identifying so-called autistic deficits for behavioural change. Therefore, autistic diversity is regarded “as flaws or imperfections that require fixing” (Muskat, 2017, p. 81).

The government of Ontario’s autism programs represent ABA as a leading approach to autism (Ministry of Children & Youth Services, 2018), disregarding conflicting societal views for and against such a therapy. Furthermore, by emphasizing a behavioural approach, which seeks to augment and limit autistic behaviour, the province places responsibility on caregivers and autistic individuals to change, rather than promoting an accepting and inclusive society (Gibson & Douglas, 2018). A key concern is that ABA, and the idea that individual autistic traits must be restricted,

reduces the need for society to accommodate disabled people, because it promotes the impression that recovery from autism is something to be sought and obtained (Yergeau, 2017).

In this research context a content analysis was conducted, informed by CDS and CAS, to understand the priorities of the government with respect to autism as reflected in government press releases, and to determine whether government and societal framings of autism are congruent with a social understanding of autism.

Context of Researcher

It is appropriate to disclose how I, as a researcher, fit into an analysis which seeks to understand priorities and framings of autism. I conducted this analysis due to my previous work with autistic children in an ABA setting, and my current work with autistic self-advocates. In previous work I noticed that that a biomedical framing of autism was prioritized in autism policies and programming documents, and that there was an absence of governmental documentation reflecting the priorities of autistic adults (Janse van Rensburg, 2020, 2021). As a social worker and non-autistic scholar, I am particularly interested in advocacy, empowerment and promoting self-determination of the autistic people with whom I work. Bringing awareness to the intersections of social and political thought around autism provides opportunities for identifying future advocacy work.

Methodology and Method

In line with the conceptual frameworks of CDS and CAS, this content analysis sought to study the priorities of the government with respect to autism as reflected in government press releases, asking what kinds of societal framings of autism are reflected by the government. To systematically gain an understanding of the dominant priorities of the government of Ontario in its representation of autism this study utilized Drisko and Maschi's (2015) framework of conducting a qualitative content analysis, "a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. These inferences are about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message" (Weber, 1990, p. 2). Content analysis is useful in raising awareness and consciousness about social problems to "address language, content meaning, techniques of communication, specific events, or all of these simultaneously" and "to determine if content is not present in situations where one might expect it to be" (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 5). A benefit of this technique is that it can provide a systematic approach to organizing, refining, and understanding a large amount of data.

I undertook a content analysis because I am interested in raising awareness and consciousness about autism-related social injustices. While other methods like a critical discourse analysis could assist with a deeper analysis of fewer texts (Toolan, 2002), a content analysis allowed for a broader sample of texts to be thematically analyzed and organized. The sample was drawn from the *Ontario Newsroom* website, a repository of strategic press releases reported by the government of Ontario, because these press releases often inform future news items. The keyword “autism” was chosen to identify articles that pertained to content related to the subject matter of interest.

One hundred and seventy-four texts pertaining to autism released by the government were organized into five-year intervals over the last 20 years in order to organize this large amount of data. The organization of the texts was further refined by their headlines, and qualitatively coded for themes. This qualitative, non-frequency approach systematically looked for manifest and latent content, organized themes that appeared, and situated the findings in relation to context of the content (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). There have been many significant changes over the last 20 years in terms of programming and supports for autism in Ontario, however predominant themes remained consistent (Janse van Rensburg, 2020).

Content for analysis was drawn from the *Ontario Newsroom* website using a search term “autism” on June 27, 2020. The data included 174 press releases dating from May 31, 2001 (the most recent article available online) to March 23, 2020 (the final date published before analysis began). The investigation was conducted in two phases. First, a longitudinal design analyzed all 174 titles of press releases for word frequency in five-year blocks (i.e., January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2004; January 1, 2005 to December 31, 2009; January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2014; January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2019) (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 25). A keyword analysis therefore allowed for a broader scope of representations and framings of autism developed in Ontario. The titles were examined in five-year blocks in order to manage the 174 press releases. Through grouping data, the five-year blocks assisted me in examining priorities on a broader scale. Analyses were conducted using NVivo 12 to identify the 10 most frequently used words. I focused on titles because press headings have been a means of presenting priority information (Serdalia et al., 2016).

The second phase of research included a full-text analysis of all articles (n = 174) using thematic analysis. In this stage, “keyword-in-context” lists were created (Weber, 1990, p. 4) and sensitizing concepts were drawn from my previously existing theoretical understandings (Drisko & Maschi, 2015) of autism in Ontario (see Janse van Rensburg, 2020, 2021). These predetermined sensitizing concepts were used to develop initial codes, including the terms “medical,” “treatment,” “choice,” “individual,” “sustainable,” “help,” “consultation,” “advocacy,” “evidence-based,” “technology,” “child,” “family,” “charity,” “professionalism,” “cure,” “Applied Behaviour Analysis,” “school,” and “inclusion.” All analyses were

conducted using NVivo 12 (QSR, 2018) to create broad categories of “adults,” “advocacy,” “autism treatment,” “behavioural services,” “charity,” “children and families,” “choice,” “evidence-based,” “political committees,” and “science and medicine.” See Table 1 for the definitions of these concepts. “Children and families” had the most numerous coding references, and “advocacy” had the least. Coded categories were useful for providing a first step in my thematic analysis. The broader themes that developed out of these coded categories, which overlapped, include “autism as charity,” “charity and normalization,” “normalization and the normative family,” and “normalization and treatment.”

Concept	Definition
Adults	Any reference to youth transitioning out of child services, 18+ services, or mention of programs and services that were not named exclusively for children. May include codes of absence of adults.
Advocacy	Any reference to or naming of advocates, or references to the results of advocacy activity.
Autism treatment	Any reference to the word “treatment,” or references that perpetuate the notion of curing autism.
Behavioural services	Any reference to psychologically-based behaviour change therapies, most notably, but not limited to, Applied Behaviour Analysis and Intensive Behaviour Intervention (however, may include other behaviour-based services, such as cognitive based approaches).
Charity	Any reference to governments, persons, or organizations being displayed as acting in philanthropic ways to benefit autistic people; may or may not have external agendas.
Children and families	Any references to the normative family (the status quo, two-parent employed, family) unit being displayed as a targeted group for autism programs or policies.
Choice	Any mention of the word choice, or description that self-determination is a priority.
Evidence-based	Any description of best practices, evidence-based services or treatment, or mention of scientific literature relating to autism, within texts.
Political committees	Any announcements of persons, committees, or government changes, and the results of such, which impact autism research, policy, and program development.
Science and medicine	Any references to scientific literature, science, or medicine found within texts

Table 1. Definitions of final codes for full-text analysis

Findings and Critique

Keywords in Headlines: Manifest Priorities

Manifest content analysis relies on low-interference events that are manifest or literal in-text as a descriptive research technique, often applied in order to understand trends over time (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Frequently appearing words can be assumed to express concerns of the government and the broader society during the related time frames. Keywords reflect the priorities and content of provincial government policies and messages, and those found within headlines ensure strategic messaging is found and circulated to news outlets and audiences. The manifest priorities, identified through the most frequent words in headlines, therefore expose the priorities of the government with respect to autism, on a surface level.

In searching the term “autism” in the *Ontario Newsroom* online database, 19 press releases appeared between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2005, 63 press releases appeared between January 1, 2005 and December 31, 2010, 18 press releases appeared between 2010 and 2015, and 73 press releases appeared between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2019. Most of these press releases were from a ministry now known as the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Most of the content analyzed was produced between the years of 2005 to 2010 and 2015 to 2019. Perhaps this was due to increased autism awareness or times of heightened advocacy activities.

Over the 20-year time span analyzed, the 10 most frequently used words in titles were identified (Table 2). The terms “Autism” and “Ontario” are unsurprisingly dominant in titles. There is an emphasis on children, followed by youth, in representing autism in these titles, reflecting that most publications were related to autistic children. Furthermore, the name of a former premier of Ontario for just short of 10 years, “McGuinty” is also present, indicating that many developments surrounding autism displayed in newsroom press releases may have been attributed to Premier McGuinty.

A longitudinal analysis of the keywords in five-year blocks reveals differing priorities of the government. Between 2000 and 2005 the terms “government” and “autism” are the two most frequent terms, together with “children” and the terms “developmental” and “disabilities” (which are cited together in text).

“Children” is the most prevalent word cited in titles between 2005 and 2010. “Helping” is a new term introduced during this time, which was not seen as frequently in titles in prior date ranges. Many of the most frequent terms remain in analyzed titles between 2010 and 2015, and a focus on children is not displayed in titles during this date range. However, this does not mean that autism funding and programs were not specific to children, or that adults were now being offered services. During this period, the terms “new,” “action,” “brain,” and “improve” were introduced into these release headlines. Here, the term “new” is not deployed in frequent reference to

autism in headlines but in reference to new funding and investments in brain research in relation to autism. “Action” is frequently used by the government to identify that it is taking steps to reduce wait times and to “improve autism services for kids.” (e.g., Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2012).

Word	Count	Percentage ²
Ontario	95	5.84%
Children	90	5.54%
Autism	84	5.17%
Government	58	3.57%
Youth	51	3.14%
services	43	2.64%
McGuinty	35	2.15%
New	29	1.78%
program	23	1.41%
families	21	1.29%

Table 2. Ten most frequently used words in titles of *Ontario Newsroom* releases between 2000 and 2020.

The spotlight returns to “children” in the headlines in *Ontario Newsroom* releases between 2015 and 2020, and there is also an ongoing focus on “families” and “youth.” The term “needs” appears for the first time in this analysis – only four of these references are implicated in the “needs-based” programming advocated as a response to the Childhood Budgets program. Other references to “needs” appear alongside the term “special needs,” associating autism with services for other disabilities and mental health needs. The title analyses show that on the surface the priorities of the government appear to be giving premiers credit for their leadership in developing autism programs and giving support to families by creating programs.

While the five-year blocks were used as an organizational tool for conducting the initial analysis, which aimed to identify shifts in political and

² Percentage was calculated as count of words in comparison to total of all words present in titles. Overall, the 10 most frequently used words in titles account for 32.53% of all words used in titles.

societal perceptions of autism, there was no substantial evidence in the manifest findings that the priorities of the Ontario government shifted significantly over the 20-year span. Keywords show that the priorities over time favour representing the needs of children, youth, and families.

Thematic Synthesis: Latent Priorities

To unpack manifest priorities that associate autism with youthfulness and programs that medicalize autism, and to understand how reports may perpetuate inequities, a latent content analysis was conducted. This approach uses an interpretive, non-frequency approach in order to describe major themes found within *Ontario Newsroom* reports, with the ultimate goal of understanding how framings of autism are displayed. The following themes were identified.

Autism as Charity. Cultural imagery surrounding disability has been called into question. An example of this exists in a critique of imagery from disability charity campaigns, which hold potential for perpetuating “the perception of disabled people as objects of charity” (Hevey, 1992, 1993, cited in Barnett & Hammond, 1999, p. 310). McGuire (2011a) similarly questions organizations that seek to make autism a charitable cause. In full-text analysis of the press releases, there were references to autism as a charitable cause, containing descriptions of honourable deeds of ostensibly non-autistic persons supporting causes for autism, often in reports of these non-autistic persons receiving honours for their actions.

Some of the charitable acts depicted in press releases might deserve recognition, such as awareness campaigns and programs promoting solidarity (see examples such as Ministry of Education, 2008; Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, 2008). These press releases may serve to encourage persons, groups, and policies to be more accepting and accommodating to the needs of autistic persons. However, in many of these press releases autism as a charitable cause seemed to be used as a way in which politicians could access power and prestige. In 2007, Paula Ball, Vice President of the Kingston Foundation for Autism Spectrum Disorders (Kingston Foundation for Autism Spectrum Disorders, n.d.), received the Medal for Good Citizenship for her “supports to children and to the families of children with Autism in the Kingston and surrounding area” (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2007, para. 1). In 2012, in a report about appointments to the judicial bench, new Justice of the Peace Catherine Mary Shoniker was praised for her work as “a volunteer youth worker helping children with autism” (Ministry of the Attorney General, 2012, para. 11). In these examples, volunteerism in relation to autism is used to promote powerful non-autistic persons, and to make autism a worthy charitable cause. Autism is thus a method for non-autistic persons to gain prestige, using autistic children

as “children with disabilities... paraded across the stage as objects of pity” (Zames & Fleisher, 2011, p. 11). At its extremes, this can be an example of “inspiration porn” (Young, 2014, n.p.).

Charity and Normalization. Depicting autistic individuals as charity cases comes with the depiction of non-autistic persons as honourable for working with an abnormal population. Without consideration for a social understanding of autism, the works of non-autistic experts working in “special needs and autism” (Office of the Premier, 2015, para. 15) and volunteers are celebrated. While experts are featured in their development of political strategies – such as advisory group development (Office of the Premier, 2015) – volunteers are individually presented with medals and awards for their work with autistic people (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2016a; Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, 2017; Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2016b). The perspectives of autistic people in deciding who to celebrate does not appear to have been considered. Rather autistic people are depicted as the recipients of charity.

An example is found in Jake’s House Legends Mentoring Program. A press release states that this program received renewed funding to match “volunteer mentors 18 years or older, many from university and high school hockey teams, with children or youth with autism and their families for three-to-nine-month periods” in 2019 (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2019d, para. 3). The celebration of volunteers, and the recognition of volunteer programs promote the conception that autism is an individual problem that can be addressed through private initiatives. Another concern is that labour is offloaded to private organizations, individuals, and volunteers rather than supplied by the government (Van Aswegen, 2020).

Non-autistic persons can gain merit and recognition, and be recognized as community leaders and experts. Rather than their autistic counterparts, non-autistic people are praised for their efforts to normalize the autistic individual. They are often awarded for their initiatives, which seek to normalize autistic persons. Honours, awards, and funding are given for efforts for autism treatment (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2006), investigating the genetic factors underlying autism (Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, 2008ab), and “working to develop more effective therapies for autistic children by studying what goes wrong in early childhood brain development, and specifically targeting the role of genes and environmental factors such as toxic substances, which may trigger autism in susceptible individuals” (Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, 2008b, para. 4). These depictions show autism as “a biological problem needing a biomedical solution, needing to be stopped, cured, fixed, eliminated” (McGuire, 2011a, p. 18). It is apparent in these press releases that non-autistic persons are rewarded for seeking to normalize autistic persons and populations, or to prevent autism, rather than viewing the issue of autism as one that is socially-constructed – something requiring social and

environmental changes to meet autistic persons’ needs (Hanes, 2016; Haney, 2018; McGuire, 2011b).

Normalization and the Normative Family. The narrative of “normal” was inscribed by prioritizing a normative family, promoting evidence-based treatment, and paternalizing autistic adults. The normative family as priority was made clear in discussions of autism services within the content analyzed. This normative family is the “status quo”: a two-parent, employed family is valorized through government programs and policies.

Since 2007, there has been “an improved and expanded continuum of services to help Ontario families meet the challenges of autism” (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2007, para. 1). Ontario’s autism program continued to focus on the normative family in 2016, seeking to develop “resources for families, including comprehensive one-on-one supports to help them navigate the transition to the new program” (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2016c, para. 6). In 2019 the new Childhood Budgets program continued to be focused on a normative family. In these reports, children are not positioned as benefitting from autism services. Rather, the programs focus on family satisfaction (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2019a). The narrative of families as a priority is maintained throughout government statements made over several years’ time.

Normalization and Treatment. Narratives surrounding evidence-based, effective treatment services are discursively elevated alongside the prioritization of the family unit. Autism treatment is a way to “control, punish and push students and families out who do not fit normalising imperatives” (Douglas, 2010, p. 119), exercising power over autistic children and their families to produce a productive workforce (Douglas, 2010; Sherfinski, 2018). Consistently, treatment is framed as serving the family unit as a whole.

The idea of autism treatment is perpetuated in the press releases’ depictions of autism. Autism is defined in press releases as “a complex neurological condition with no known cause or cure” (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2008, para. 1) and services for autism are provided in “children’s treatment centres” (Ministry of Education, 2006, para. 1; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2006a, para. 1; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2006b, para. 2, Office of the Premier, 2007, para. 1). The Ontario Research Fund provided \$203,494 in funding for Dr. Dorota Crawford to study “what goes wrong in early childhood brain development and specifically targeting the role of genes and environmental factors such as toxic substances, which may trigger autism in susceptible individuals” (Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, 2008b, para. 4). In 2013, the government also supported the research of Drs. Stephen Scherer and Peter Szatmari to help to identify “the

remaining genetic risk factors associated with this illness” (Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, 2013, para. 5). In 2015, the Ontario Brain Institute was supported by provincial funds to “foster breakthroughs in the diagnosis and treatment of cerebral palsy, epilepsy and neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism and ADHD” (Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, 2015, para. 4), and funds were also allotted for the building of “ErinoakKids children’s treatment centre” which will provide services for children with autism amongst other disabilities (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2015, para. 1). In 2016, the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario was supported in building “treatment rooms” which would service autistic children with other children and youth with disabilities (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2016d, para. 4) and the new Ontario Autism Program was announced as being developed to “allow for earlier diagnosis and treatment” and to “increase the number of treatment spaces available” (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2016b, para. 5). A focus on discovering scientific causes, treatments, cures, and risk-factors fails to display autism as a neutral or positive difference (McGuire, 2011a), demonstrating an attitude which controls or others autistic bodies and minds. The treatment which is referred to in press releases is labelled as scientific and ground-breaking. This treatment seeks to find genetic and environmental causes, cures, and preventable factors; or is comprised of behavioural services themselves promoted as best practices and evidence-based. Earlier on, newsroom reports were proud to tout Ontario as “a leader in autism services for children” (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2002b, para. 1) and a “national leader in providing Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) services” (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2002b, para. 1).

The government of Ontario is depicted as supporting behavioural services through developing programs which promote the use of this therapy, and also as supporting college programs to “increase the number of trained behavioural therapists” (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2004, para. 2) and as seeking to recruit therapists (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2002b). The reports of IBI and ABA center around its evidence-based nature: “providing early, evidence-based intervention, when it matters most, will set children with autism on the best path forward” (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2016a, para. 12). There is a focus on the need to expand the program to allow more children to receive its services, and for longer periods of times. The description of ABA promises an autistic child that conforms to what is typically expected of school-aged children (Gibson & Douglas, 2018), and the “evidence” base on which the programs are recommended is weak and cherry-picked. Only one population-level experimental design study about ABA exists (see Lovaas, 1987), while the rest of the evidence depends on single-subject methodology, a research design where a participant is used as

their own control (Cooper et al., 2014). Certain evidence is selected; other evidence that has been written by autistic authors and allies about the negative impacts of ABA (see A4A, 2018; Gibson & Douglas, 2018; Haney, 2018; Yergeau, 2017) is missing in *Ontario Newsroom* reports.

Adults Left Unrepresented. Discourse around treatment of autistic children might make discussions of autistic adults unfeasible. The flawed logic being that if treated as a child, there will be no autistic adult; most of the coded references to adults centered on a narrative of children. In 2002 there was a funding commitment for “young adults” (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2002a, para. 3), in 2012 aiding the transition to adulthood was identified as a priority of one of the members of the Clinical Expert Committee to Advise Government on Autism (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2012), and in 2014 programs for transitioning students from high school into university were funded as pilot programs (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2014). When programs that appear to be applicable to adults also appear to be targeted for children, this calls into question who the programs and services were meant to serve. When autistic adults are discussed in *Ontario Newsroom* reports, the discussion centers around children, and adults are portrayed with a lens of paternalism. One example of this paternalism appears in a 2002 discussion of “Community Participation Supports for Adults” which identifies a support of respite care:

A variety of supports are provided to assist an individual to participate in community life as much as possible. These include employment supports, life skills training, volunteering opportunities, and recreational activities. Respite is provided both in-home and out-of-home to provide relief to the primary caregiver. For example, a parent may need some time to do the grocery shopping or to spend some time with their other children. (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2002a, para. 2)

The example given in the article references that the program is not necessarily for the benefit of the autistic adult, but rather for the primary caregiver. While supports for primary caregivers are important, messaging should directly show the benefits for the autistic adult: how these “employment supports, life skills training, volunteering opportunities, and recreational activities” (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2002a, para. 2) are more than just for the respite of a primary caregiver and also provide meaningful opportunities for autistic adults. Without identifying the strengths in these programs for autistic adults, the latent message displays that the support is not intended for autistic people themselves, but for non-autistic people. Furthermore, autistic adults are conceptualized as childlike, non-autonomous even if they need supports, without recognition of their own wants and needs.

Another example of autistic adults being portrayed as childlike can be found within a 2019 announcement about the Childhood Budgets program, where a quote from a parent is used to represent the perspective of adults on the spectrum:

‘As a parent with an adult child on the autism spectrum, I know that early engagement and understanding of my child’s needs was essential. I think having certified services would have avoided so much wasted energy used to pursue and find appropriate services.’ - Carolyn Morrison, Parent. (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2019b, para. 7)

Seeking out non-autistic persons to represent autistic adults, rather than accessing information from autistic adults themselves, patronizes autistic adults and depicts them as children. Child-like depictions of autistic adults and persons with other developmental disabilities can be attributed to mental age theory, the postulation that the bodies of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities age quicker than their minds, and thus, that they will never have the capacity to enjoy the adult rights of independence and autonomy (Smith, 2017). After autistic adults and allies disputed their insufficient representation, autistic adults were more overtly involved in discussions surrounding autism policy in the Childhood Budgets program (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2019c). Outnumbered by non-autistic advocates of biomedical approaches to autism, two of the 20 members of a panel set to revise the Ontario Autism Program were autistic. In this analysis, this was the most representative presentation of autistic adults involved in press releases surrounding autism provided by the *Ontario Newsroom*.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is critical to consider how autism is constructed by *Ontario Newsroom* (Government of Ontario, n.d.). It is necessary to be critical of government press releases and their framings of social problems, as they hold power to influence societal perceptions, while also displaying common social beliefs that must be challenged.

There are a number of limitations that should be noted in this research. First, the content was divided into five-year blocks to manage data. Alternative ways to manage the data temporally, such as through provincial government leadership or through DSM categorization of autism, could have exposed shifts in societal attitudes and representations about autism in Ontario. Furthermore, this analysis did not include the keyword “Aspergers.” Including this term could have uncovered missed stories. Another limitation was the method of analysis. It was assumed that the most frequently used words could expose manifest priorities, and that a thematic analysis could

expose latent priorities. There may be alternative ways of uncovering social and political perceptions of autism. However, using this analysis provides an opportunity to learn from historic and current framings of autism.

There are a variety of considerations when identifying governmental priorities as reflected in press releases, including historic, economic, and political context, as well as socio-political shifts in understandings of disability and autism. Programs in Ontario have centered on autism funding, supports, and services for children (Janse van Rensburg, 2020). The key results of this analysis however identified that in the past 20 years, the biomedical framing of autism as well as representations which prioritize the needs of normative families, and not the naturalization of autistic persons, have been widely accepted by government and society.

Representations in the media play a role in maintaining power imbalances, and a critical content analysis provides an opportunity to bring awareness to the reflections of social thought found in government discourse. Over the past 20 years in Ontario, there have been multiple programs and policies that have brought autism into the social and political landscape. Press releases by the government have framed autism as a medical and biological problem for children, families, programs, services, and the government to fix, cure, and normalize. Rather than centering the perspectives of autistic people themselves, non-autistic people are celebrated for their work in reforming autism, and autism is framed as an object of charity, and something to be fixed and treated. Throughout, autistic adults are skipped in favour of autistic children more susceptible to reform, and a social understanding of autism is missing.

While non-autistic people, altruists, positivists, treatment-seekers, autistic children, and normative families have historically dominated Ontario press releases surrounding autism, there is hope that in adopting a social understandings of autism, future press releases on government policies, and indeed the policies themselves, will prioritize the autonomy, self-determination, and priorities of autistic persons as experts in their experiences of autism.

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