

**AUTISM AND ITS ASSOCIATED SYMBOLS**

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore four symbols associated with autism: the puzzle piece, umbrella, jigsaw puzzle ribbon, and the three coloured rainbow. Western secular societal assumptions regarding autism will be analysed in each symbol. This will be accomplished via a semiological critical visual methodology that will involve taking into account each symbol's site of creation, the materials used, their surrounding socio-historical discourses, and their colours and shapes. Given that there is currently an Autism Awareness Month and Day in which one or more of these symbols are present, it is important to understand what is being conveyed about autism to national and international audiences. This paper will ultimately reveal that there needs to be more consistent clarification of symbol meanings, especially in regards to colours, and that commendatory alternate symbols can be associated with autism for the future.

### **Importance of Symbols**

Symbols are an important means of learning about the cultures that created them. Studying symbols is a means of figuring out how one culture or, for that matter, many cultures perceive the world around them, from concepts to objects. A single symbol can, upon closer analysis, have embedded in it more than one idea/socio-cultural association that at least one person has formed within it.

In fact, the word “symbol” is “based on...[the] Greek verb *symballein*” which means “‘to toss together’ or ‘to join together’”<sup>1</sup>. In ancient civilizations, *symballein* were used by human groups to achieve the general purpose of communication, with European cave symbols and hieroglyphs as very early examples of this<sup>2</sup>. With *symballein*, concepts became objectified, a process that continues to this day, with many symbols - including the ones that will be explored in this paper - being meant to be conveyed to and recognized by as many people as possible rather than just amongst certain exclusive groups<sup>3</sup>. Symbols are “a short, concise way to communicate” and “represent a deeper meaning or idea” or many deeper meanings and ideas<sup>4</sup>. They can also elicit emotional responses from the human audiences accessing them<sup>5</sup>. There has been a proliferation of symbols which has involved putting more concepts than ever into visual mediums such as “directional signage, food packaging, airplane tailfins, garment care labels, and personal technology devices”<sup>6</sup>. With this usage of visual materials to create symbols, the crucial factors of “historical, social and cultural variables” need to be all the more kept in mind for study because it is all the more likely that many cultural groups are going to be accessing those symbols and interpreting them differently due to any or all of these variables<sup>7</sup>. As well as any personal bias the viewer

may have, interpreting a symbol hinges on its structure and the context in which it is used, both of which shall be addressed with the following features <sup>8</sup>

There are several aspects of symbols that need to be examined closely in order to find out what “idea, message or theme” is being conveyed by them<sup>9</sup>. This includes colours (e.g. their hue), origin or site of creation, and any available historical socio-cultural information - in other words, their context<sup>10</sup>. All of these aspects are important because, in the history of symbols, there have been many that have not had one consistent meaning due to cultural differences over time and in location, or they may also have been misappropriated like the Eastern swastika by the Nazi party<sup>11</sup>. In this way, symbols’ meanings can become complicated and ambiguous.

In the case of the four symbols explored for this paper, such ambiguity will be laid out and the need for greater clarification and further studies on them will be made clear. The colours, origin/site of creation and historical socio-cultural information will be examined for each of them <sup>12</sup>. The methodology that will be used for this paper to examine the symbols is Rose’s semiological critical visual methodology<sup>13</sup>. It is a methodology that involves looking in-depth at the cultural formation of visual objects, especially the power relations that formed them and that could also be challenged by them<sup>14</sup>. This is generally accomplished via examining “three sites at which the meaning of an image are made: the site (s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site (s) where it is seen by various audiences”<sup>15</sup>. The semiological method is one that, in addition, focuses on the image as opposed to audiences encountering the image<sup>16</sup>. The general steps in doing a

semiological analysis are as follows: first establishing the sign (s), that is, the object with its coinciding concept (this includes symbols), second, figuring out what they mean just within themselves and how “they relate to other signs both within the image...and in other images”, and, third, exploring their connections “to wider systems of meaning” which is informed by socio-cultural information<sup>17</sup>.

In following this methodology, societal assumptions about autism within the four symbols - the puzzle piece, jigsaw puzzle ribbon, three coloured rainbow and umbrella (see Appendix A for images used) will be examined<sup>18</sup>. Given cultural relativity in regards to symbolic meanings and that the site of creation for almost all of these symbols can be confirmed to be in Western countries, as well as the fact that they are not religious symbols, this paper will focus on Western secular meanings<sup>19</sup>.

Currently, there is an Autism Awareness Month and Day that has been occurring for almost a decade now<sup>20</sup>. It is during such international celebrations that at least some of these symbols are shown to national and international audiences<sup>21</sup>. It is important to understand what is being highlighted about autism during such celebrations and in general, for it is these symbols that are being conveyed to international audiences who are subsequently accessing them and getting information about autism<sup>22</sup>. These audiences may not always have at least one member that has a personal connection to autism, familial and otherwise<sup>23</sup>. With an overall lack of substantial content on these symbols, figuring out what they are conveying about autism is all the more imperative<sup>24</sup>. As will be shown in this paper, it is clear that there

is a great deal of ambiguity in each symbol's meaning that needs to be further examined and that alternate symbols for autism are certainly possible.

### **Semiotics Introduction**

Given that the methodology used in this project is semiological, it would be beneficial to elaborate further here on the discipline of semiotics itself<sup>25</sup>. The most basic definition of the discipline is that it is the study of signs in speech, sounds, body movement, and visual media and how they relate to each other<sup>26</sup>. Examples include photographs, nods and drawings, just to name a few. Signs are “anything that ...[represents] something else” as well as signs mentioned in every day life such as stop signs<sup>27</sup>. It is through signs that meaning is created<sup>28</sup>.

Theories surrounding signs have been formulated over millennia, starting from ancient philosophy, and John Locke made “the first explicit reference to semiotics as a branch of philosophy” in 1690<sup>29</sup>. The two possibly most influential persons in contemporary semiotics, and whose theories shall therefore be focused on in this section, are the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce<sup>30</sup>.

Being a linguist, Saussure's model was meant to primarily apply to words<sup>31</sup>. According to Saussure, signs consist of a signifier and a signified<sup>32</sup>. The former is “the form that the sign takes” while the signified is “the concept to which it [the signifier] refers [to]”<sup>33</sup>. When Saussure applied this model, the signifier was a sound pattern and the signified was the concept and both were psychological<sup>34</sup>. In other words, this relationship of creating meaning was an immaterial one<sup>35</sup>. Since then, semioticians have applied this model to material objects, making the signifier the material/physical form that the sign takes<sup>36</sup>.

Furthermore, Saussure stressed that the creation of meaning was “purely structural and relational”<sup>37</sup>. In other words, meaning gets created via the relationships signs have with each other<sup>38</sup>. It is precisely these concepts which have been incorporated in the semiological method (which includes signs consisting of objects and their coinciding concepts as well as “wider systems of meaning”) and which shall inform this paper’s analysis<sup>39</sup>.

Around the same time, Peirce was formulating his own model for signs<sup>40</sup>. Unlike Saussure’s dyadic (two part) model, Peirce’s was a triadic (three part) one<sup>41</sup>. To Peirce, signs consisted of the representamen (“the form which the sign takes”, material or otherwise), interpretant (how the sign is interpreted) and object (something which the sign refers to; a referent)<sup>42</sup>. What was particularly radical with Peirce’s model was his stress on dialogic thought (e.g. internal reflection) on the part of the person interpreting the sign which was not stressed by Saussure<sup>43</sup>. He also stressed that the making of meaning involved “an external referent” which Saussure also did not emphasize<sup>44</sup>.

Distinguishing signs from symbols is no simple matter<sup>45</sup>. Both words have even been used interchangeably<sup>46</sup>. For the purpose of brevity (and since it is applicable to the Saussurean model which informed the methodology used for this paper), the particular definition of symbols being a sign mode where “the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is...purely conventional” shall be used and mentioned here<sup>47</sup>. Given that locating where the images used for this paper stand in relation to conventional portrayals of autism shall occur in this paper, this definition is all the more appropriate<sup>48</sup>. In short, the methodology used for this paper was derived from the Saussurean model, one of the most

influential models in the discipline of semiotics and the aforementioned definition of symbols is appropriate for the aims of this paper<sup>49</sup>.

### **Jigsaw Puzzle Ribbon**

#### *What it is*

The jigsaw puzzle ribbon is a downward facing, looped ribbon consisting of red, yellow, deep blue, and azure puzzle pieces (see Appendix A)<sup>50</sup>. To address the difficulty of discussing colour with the images not being printed (this was to save on ink) or being primary source material, all the colours for each of the images (which were copied and pasted from online) selected for this paper were discerned by matching the shades with gradation scales available in works used for this project such as *Color*<sup>51</sup>.

#### *Historical Socio-Cultural Information on Symbol Formation*

The ribbon itself was initially formed in the USA by the Autism Society and gained even more popularity by being launched on the other side of Atlantic in the UK, in 1999<sup>52</sup>. It was one of several instances of this intercontinental exchange of ribbon awareness campaigns throughout the late 1990's<sup>53</sup>. Other examples include the "blue- and- pink ribbon for infant and prenatal deaths" and the white ribbon representing violence against women<sup>54</sup>. The ribbon had by then become a widely recognised symbol for raising awareness and "showing [personal] awareness" for charitable causes for almost a decade - from bullying to male violence to childhood disability<sup>55</sup>. While it is unclear as to precisely when the ribbon came into existence in the USA (which is where the charity ribbon originated), the 1990's was the decade that it became entrenched as a societal norm<sup>56</sup>. It was and still is also a symbol of compassion<sup>57</sup>. How effective this practice is for actually raising awareness of

various causes and for being a genuine personal action of compassion (especially when the wearer has no personal connection to the cause) is debatable<sup>58</sup>. What is important to note here is what the ribbon is meant to stand for -awareness - and its sites of creation (USA), its own site, and where it is seen (accessed) by audiences (internationally, via the USA and UK through online and physical ribbons)<sup>59</sup>. So, with this initial overview of the ribbon's formation, it at first appears to symbolize autism as a disability to be made aware of as well as to merit societal and personal charitable and compassionate responses from those who can access if not also wear them<sup>60</sup>.

But there are more aspects of the jigsaw puzzle ribbon to consider<sup>61</sup>. These include what the ribbon has traditionally meant in Western societies. The ribbon has traditionally been a symbol of sovereign and legal power<sup>62</sup>. It has also represented "the power to bind and to set free" as well as "obligations...[that have been] freely entered into"<sup>63</sup>. So, prior to what the charity ribbon currently means, the Western ribbon has traditionally been a symbol of someone's sovereign or legal power, including their ability to enter into commitments<sup>64</sup>. It is unclear as to who or what someone who had a ribbon could "bind and set free"<sup>65</sup>. But what is clear is that it has previously meant to encapsulate someone's political power and autonomy<sup>66</sup>.

There are several other concepts that the ribbon has symbolized. For example, when it was tied in a bow, thereby replicating the appearance of a flower, it was a symbol for a person blossoming as opposed to their having arrested development<sup>67</sup>. During medieval jousts, ladies would present ribbons to their knights and ribbons were thrown to the joust winner thus evoking notions of generous and heroic deeds<sup>68</sup>. A metal ribbon signified that

those rewarded with it had valour and/or a distinguished career<sup>69</sup>. So, the ribbon has predominantly had positive historical symbolic uses. While there is no evidence from the sources used for this paper that the jigsaw puzzle ribbon used by the Autism Society was initially a different kind of ribbon, this brief overview of what the ribbon has tended to represent and contrasting it with the ribbon's societal importance in the 1990's illustrates a huge leap in ribbon societal values and usage<sup>70</sup>.

Something else to consider is the historical socio-cultural discourses about autism around or at the same time as the creation of the symbol. The 1990's were a decade where there was increased attention as to what idea of autism was being conveyed by advocacy organizations in the USA and UK partly because they were increasingly being run by persons diagnosed with autism<sup>71</sup>. Previously the parents' perceptions of autism had been prioritized in the depiction of autism by such organizations<sup>72</sup>. There was also a trend of disability rights-based movements that were challenging medicalized notions of disability and asserting that disability was a form of social difference<sup>73</sup>. Figures such as Donna Williams emphasized that autism was a part of peoples' neurodiversity<sup>74</sup>. The 1993 manifesto "Don't Mourn for Us" was one of several public examples where the "suffering and deficit" view of autism (which stresses the idea that autism is debilitating and a heartbreaking "problem") was rejected<sup>75</sup>. There was also increased interest into the medical causation of autism by the scientific community<sup>76</sup>. For example, following the 1998 Wakefield report, more published studies were focusing on gastrointestinal symptoms in autism since it was then viewed "as a problem worthy of attention"<sup>77</sup>. Persons with autism were included in the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the United States<sup>78</sup>.

There was also a further entrenching of the political rights of persons with autism as illustrated by the 1996 European Parliament which passed the Charter of Rights of Persons with Autism which stated that persons “with the condition were entitled to the same rights and privileges as all other Europeans, and called on European Union member states to produce legislation that would enforce this”<sup>79</sup>. Even though the first disability-specific legislation would not occur in the UK until 2009, this admittedly patchy history of the 1990’s reveals that the historical socio-cultural atmosphere was one that was now stressing that persons with autism should have protected and entrenched rights and were examples of neurodiversity while there was increased interest in the condition’s supposed causation from the medical community<sup>80</sup>. This history also reveals that these ideas were occurring alongside the ribbon movement of awareness and compassion<sup>81</sup>. The two notions of neurodiversity and societal compassion/awareness certainly differed from each other since the former suggested the existence of neurologically different populations, an idea that was not stressed by the latter’s approach of awareness and compassion for a certain group of sufferers<sup>82</sup>.

There are a variety of other persistent discourses surrounding autism that are also likely to have been circulating during the 1990’s even though the popularity of some may have waned<sup>83</sup>. One of these is the conceptualization of autism as a foreign space geographically separated from the world<sup>84</sup>. The person with autism then either arrives in the rest of the world as an alien or retreats/withdraws into it<sup>85</sup>. The form of this space has been characterized as a box, a shell, a wall, or a fortress by various works on the subject of autism<sup>86</sup>. Autism has also been described as a disease and, as previously mentioned, as an example of neurodiversity or neurological difference<sup>87</sup>. Such neurological difference has

also been characterized as being a “screw-up”<sup>88</sup>. Persons with autism have also been characterized as animals and as being non-human, having a condition that must be militarily defeated or a condition that is a puzzle that must be figured out (a metaphor that has been mentioned alongside the development of the jigsaw puzzle ribbon)<sup>89</sup>. Given that the puzzling metaphor has been a discourse that has specifically been mentioned in the development of the jigsaw puzzle ribbon, this is the metaphor that informed its creation<sup>90</sup>. This is a metaphor that suggests that the solution to autism is outside the person affected and that such affected persons have to be solved and are missing something that must be fixed, thereby questioning whether persons with autism are even human<sup>91</sup>. This is yet another societal trend that coincided with the surrounding socio-political atmosphere of the 1990’s West, elaborated above, which was predominantly about the empowerment of persons with autism and entrenching their political rights as well as autism’s medicalization<sup>92</sup>.

The ribbon appears to be more and more a symbol that propagates a debilitating charity narrative of autism, rendering the population it stands for as being one deserving of charitable awareness, that needs to be fixed and is not even completely human<sup>93</sup>. According to the website where the image for this paper was initially seen, this ribbon was allowed by the American Autism Society to be used by other non-profit organizations in order to create and represent an organizational unity for a common cause—in this case, autism, allowing for further usage of this symbol<sup>94</sup>. However, no names of other organizations who subsequently used the ribbon could be found in the sources used for this paper<sup>95</sup>.

One other aspect of the symbol that merits further analysis is the puzzle piece building blocks that constructs its interior space<sup>96</sup>. There are two alternative explanations encountered

during research for this paper. According to a graduate thesis abstract, “the puzzle pattern of the...ribbon signifies the mystery of life on the spectrum...[e]ach shape and color of the puzzle illustrates the diversity of experience for each family and person living with autism” and such families and people provide insight on how the puzzle pieces work together<sup>97</sup>. The explanation on the website where I initially saw the image appears to be very similar at first<sup>98</sup>. But midway through the explanation, there is an additional statement of meaning regarding the puzzle structure of the ribbon<sup>99</sup>. That statement is “[t]he brightness of the ribbon signals hope — hope that through increased awareness of autism, and through early intervention and access to appropriate services/supports, people with autism will lead full lives able to interact with the world on the[ir] own terms”<sup>100</sup>. This does not appear to question the humanity of persons with autism or, for that matter, their families<sup>101</sup>. In fact, it is a structure that, according to the website, is supposed to be empowering by symbolizing the idea that persons with autism can interact with the wider world and reach their potential<sup>102</sup>. However, what should be noted is that there is a subtle hint of hope in the effectiveness of outside services and supports in helping persons with autism reach their so-called potential<sup>103</sup>. There is also a call for increased awareness of autism which will presumably be helped by the ribbon itself and its distribution since, as mentioned earlier, it has been a means of giving societal attention and awareness to various causes<sup>104</sup>. Also, there is a lack of an explanation in either of these sources as to what each colour represents about the seeming diversity of persons and families affected by autism<sup>105</sup>.

So, one final aspect to review are the colours used in the symbol<sup>106</sup>. As mentioned earlier, these are red, yellow, deep blue, and azure<sup>107</sup>. After closer colour shade examination,

the red colour used was more a maroon colour while the yellow colour was a shade in between golden yellow and leaning more towards a luminous shade of yellow<sup>108</sup>. Changes in shades of colour can change the meanings behind them and the symbol itself. In the case of the jigsaw puzzle ribbon, it was discerning which shade of yellow was shown in it that added yet more ambiguity as to what was being suggested about the diversity of families affected by autism<sup>109</sup>.

The colour yellow in itself has been associated with several contrasting objects and concepts, from the sun, light and hope to deceit, decay and cowardice<sup>110</sup>. For example, golden yellow was attributed to the positive divine essence of Apollo in Greece and the 1215 Lateran Council decreed that Jews had to wear yellow roundels on their clothes, a symbolic gesture condemning them of deception<sup>111</sup>. After analysing the yellow shades further, it was found on the one hand that the more golden the yellow used was, the more positive were its associations, such as the sun<sup>112</sup>. The paler shades, on the other hand, were associated with evil and negative emotions such as avarice and faithlessness<sup>113</sup>. As mentioned earlier, the shade of yellow used in the ribbon was one that was in between this colour shade spectrum, neither pale nor golden<sup>114</sup>. Consequently, it is hard to figure out what is being suggested about families affected by autism since they are not shown positively with a golden colour nor negatively with a pale yellow colour<sup>115</sup>. But given that it is a shade between both yellow extremes, it is likely that the families represented are shown as neither extremely positively or extremely negatively, neither golden community members nor pale deviants<sup>116</sup>. As a result, it is likely that the colour yellow used here is meant to reflect that affected families are in a state of uncertainty as to what their societal position is in their wider

communities<sup>117</sup>. So it is this societal ambiguity that is reflected in this ambiguous shade of yellow<sup>118</sup>.

There is no ambiguity in the case of the red shade used, which was more a maroon colour<sup>119</sup>. However, there is still ambiguity to puzzle out because all of the colours used in all of the symbols shown in this paper represent many contrasting cultural associations<sup>120</sup>. In the case of red (there were no additional notes as to what maroon specifically stood for, but it was listed under the spectrum of red so the meanings used for red apply to this shade), it has stood for — blood, fertility, love, anger, warmth, triumph, passion, shame, and segregation, just to name a few<sup>121</sup>. It is especially interesting to note the last two meanings<sup>122</sup>. Given that the history of autism is one that includes the historical exclusion practice of institutionalization and the blaming of parents for their child's autism with the arrival of first Kanner then Bettelheim's refrigerator mother theory, the maroon red in the ribbon can represent a terrible historical past for the families it is supposed to represent<sup>123</sup>. As for the other meanings listed, the resulting symbolic implications can range from suggesting that the aforementioned families are ones filled with love and passion to being ones filled with and experiencing constant anger because these are all concepts to which the colour red has been connected<sup>124</sup>.

Finally, there is the colour blue. In the jigsaw puzzle ribbon, there are two shades of blue, one deep blue and the other close to azure<sup>125</sup>. Given that no specific changes in those particular blue shade meanings could be found, the meanings that have been applied to the general colour blue shall be elaborated on here<sup>126</sup>. Blue has been associated with - intellect, the sky, the heavens (e.g. in Christian iconography, blue would be paired with white against

the red and green of Earth) truth, water, purity, coolness, peace, loyalty, contentment, illness, nobility and the cold<sup>127</sup>. At first, the symbolic associations seem to be overwhelmingly positive<sup>128</sup>. Families with autism could very well be symbolized as ones that have one or more of these qualities (except for perhaps the sky, water, or heavens) or have the potential to get them (the cold however, could suggest that the families themselves are cold or are facing hard times)<sup>129</sup>. In fact, given that the brightness of the ribbon is supposed to represent hope for affected families such ideas would be appropriately optimistic too<sup>130</sup>. However, there is one negative association to illness that should be looked at further<sup>131</sup>. With this association in mind, it can be deduced that the symbol suggests that at least some of the families affected by autism are ones that have at least some members who are medically sick<sup>132</sup>. Given the aforementioned medicalization mentioned earlier occurring in the 1990's, this colour could therefore be a subtle example of this trend<sup>133</sup>.

With all of this information, the complete visual implications of this symbol will now be laid out<sup>134</sup>.

### *Visual Implications*

The jigsaw puzzle ribbon is the signifier (image attached to signified) and signified (object or concept) for diverse families affected by autism<sup>135</sup>. It is therefore consequently the sign for this particular population<sup>136</sup>. What it signifies in itself is a break from previous ribbon narratives to being one of several kinds of ribbons meant to elicit charitable responses from organizations and persons towards causes that have been socially deemed to be worth raising awareness for<sup>137</sup>. Given the lack of explanation as to what the particular colours are meant to symbolize about the families the ribbon is meant to represent, it is hard to pinpoint

what exactly is being suggested about them even though the coloured puzzle pieces are also signs in the image itself<sup>138</sup>. Meanwhile, the puzzle pieces themselves are signs of the aforementioned puzzling metaphor that questions the humanity of persons with autism<sup>139</sup>. How it relates to the other symbols mentioned in the paper will be elaborated on later<sup>140</sup>.

As for the wider systems of meaning in which the symbol was created, it is clear that it was part of a larger, charitable trend as well as the narrative of the puzzling metaphor<sup>141</sup>. These two trends also strongly contrasted with political efforts to entrench rights for persons with autism as well as emphasizing their own perspectives<sup>142</sup>. However, they did not so strongly contrast with the co-occurring trend of medicalizing autism since it involved efforts to find the causation of autism and possibly cure it<sup>143</sup>. So, while the complete meaning of the jigsaw puzzle ribbon is unclear, what is clear is that it is a symbol conveying a charitable and debilitating narrative about the population it is meant to bring attention to and elicit societal sympathy for while also being used on a website that is meant to convey hope for this same population<sup>144</sup>.

### **Puzzle Piece**

#### *What it is*

The puzzle piece used here, and which will also inform the upcoming analysis, is an azure puzzle piece on the Autism UGA website<sup>145</sup>.

#### *Historical Socio-Cultural Information on Symbol Formation*

Out of all of the symbols looked at for this paper, the puzzle piece is the oldest one<sup>146</sup>. It originated at the UK National Autistic Society (NAS) in 1963<sup>147</sup>. The initial puzzle piece logo, which was designed by Gerald Gasson, a mother of a child with autism and a NAS

board of directors member, was that of a crying child on a puzzle piece<sup>148</sup>. According to Gasson, this was supposed to illustrate that “autism is a baffling condition and that people with autism suffer” and are not integrated in mainstream society<sup>149</sup>. This particular puzzle piece logo is no longer used by the NAS, but the puzzle piece has endured, possibly being the most popular symbol for autism<sup>150</sup>. Its association with autism has been described as being as ubiquitous as the pink ribbon for breast cancer advocacy<sup>151</sup>. While the exact year is not clear, the American Autism Speaks Foundation then decided to “[use] its own blue (perhaps male) anthropomorphized puzzle piece”<sup>152</sup>. While there is no single, consistently used puzzle piece look, it is likely that the azure blue puzzle piece used for this paper may have been at least indirectly influenced by the Foundation’s puzzle piece logo because both pieces are coloured blue and both emerged in the United States<sup>153</sup>.

The suggestion that the colour blue possibly represents maleness in the Foundation’s puzzle piece and also, due to the aforementioned reasons, in the AutismUGA puzzle piece used for the paper is certainly worth noting<sup>154</sup>. Not only is this a more contemporary example of the long standing usage of the colour blue to represent boys and maleness, it could also therefore suggest that autism is a male condition when, as mentioned earlier, the puzzle piece is meant to represent the whole population of those affected by autism which certainly includes females<sup>155</sup>. This could therefore be a symbolic removal of females/femaleness from the puzzle piece<sup>156</sup>.

However, because this suggestion that the colour blue in the puzzle piece also suggests maleness is currently just that - a suggestion - the other meanings of blue are also worth considering in analysing the puzzle piece<sup>157</sup>. Again, the population being represented by the

puzzle piece (in this case, persons affected by autism as opposed to affected families) is one that could be symbolically sick, cold, or hit by hard economic times or any of the positive qualities mentioned earlier such as peace and intellect<sup>158</sup>.

There are other meanings that have been assigned to the puzzle piece which include: disorderliness or, the possibility/promise and hope of being solved<sup>159</sup>. The symbol could also stand for a puzzling condition that disables people and prevents them from experiencing “typical human contact”, and becoming isolated in the process, or it could stand for autism “as a social condition that puzzles, provokes and questions” mainstream society’s ideas of autism, which question the affected person’s/population’s humanity, as well as the confusion and suffering that an affected individual has in a constantly evolving society and the uniqueness of affected individuals<sup>160</sup>. The aforementioned puzzling metaphor has also been mentioned in conjunction with the puzzle piece<sup>161</sup>. This adds further to the consistent disabling trend of the puzzle piece suggesting that something is missing in persons affected by autism and in their societal experience, thereby, as mentioned earlier, bringing their humanity into question<sup>162</sup>. The puzzle piece appears to have represented, and continues to represent, polarizing stances on the subject of persons affected by autism- from suggesting that they may not even be human to their being examples of human uniqueness<sup>163</sup>.

The puzzle piece meaning assigned to the particular one used for this project is, according to the website, meant to reflect the “mystery and complexity of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)” on a nationwide level<sup>164</sup>. Furthermore, it is revealed that “since every puzzle piece is different in some way, a puzzle piece accurately represents the diversity of the individuals affected”<sup>165</sup>. Given that the label ASD is used here, it is clear that the page

was probably created sometime during the 1990's since that is when the label was first conceptualized by Lorna Wing<sup>166</sup>. However, just from the website explanation alone, it is unclear as to whether what is being suggested about the affected individuals or complexity of autism is meant to convey positive or negative professional sentiments<sup>167</sup>. Given the supplementary material mentioned earlier regarding societal meanings assigned to the puzzle piece, it is very easy to interpret the puzzle piece as representing any of the trends mentioned earlier, from possibly suggesting that autism is a male condition to either questioning or vindicating the humanity of the population it is meant to represent<sup>168</sup>.

During the 1960's- the decade in which the puzzle piece was initially created, autism was being analysed more for causes, and the ones that were suggested would send shock waves<sup>169</sup>. About twenty years earlier, Leo Kanner (a child psychiatry specialist) had asserted that the characters of parents with children affected by autism might have something to do with the condition<sup>170</sup>. This idea would then gain unprecedented momentum in the 1960's<sup>171</sup>. Psychoanalysis had become the predominant research method for looking at autism in-depth, in particular through the relationships that affected children had with their parents<sup>172</sup>. This was headed by Bruno Bettelheim, a Holocaust survivor who blamed parents for causing autism in their children<sup>173</sup>. Bettelheim argued that it was through parents' "'coldness' or 'rigidity' [that] produced despair among those who had children with autism", despair that resulted in defensive withdrawal amongst affected children<sup>174</sup>. Bettelheim even went so far as to compare what he deemed to be the internal reality of a child affected by autism to the external reality faced by prisoners in Holocaust concentration camps, who also, according to Bettelheim, did the exact same defensive withdrawal<sup>175</sup>. Bettelheim even compared mothers

of children affected by autism to Nazi commandants while refusing to accept research findings that contradicted his own which later became discredited<sup>176</sup>. Other scholars who were interested in connections between psychoanalysis and children included Melanie Klein and Margaret Mahler<sup>177</sup>.

Within the same decade, critique of Bettelheim's claims that parents were suppressing their children's development through their own cold behaviour was also well underway<sup>178</sup>. Throughout the 1960's, parents would on their own initiative start the beginning stages for what would become disability rights campaigns in later decades<sup>179</sup>. These would occur in the form of "advocacy movements that began to demand better care policies, better education, and greater understanding of the condition [of autism]"<sup>180</sup>. These were also aided by a small handful of professionals who resisted the dominant psychoanalytic method that was popularized and stressed by Bettelheim<sup>181</sup>. For example, in the UK parents came together to form the Society for Autistic Children in 1962, while in 1963, the first US autism organization was formed in upstate New York<sup>182</sup>. Through active campaigning, these pressure groups then began to slowly change the institutional understanding of autism from "greater and more sophisticated medical insight", communal social support to special education provisions for the specific needs of children affected by autism, a population formerly deemed to be "uneducable"<sup>183</sup>.

As for autism organizations, the most prominent ones at the time in the US and UK which included the American National Society for Autistic Children and the British Society for Autistic Children, demanded that autism be recognised as a condition in its own right as opposed to a disorder under the then category of mental handicap<sup>184</sup>. Both of the

organizations then dropped the word children from their titles, becoming the Autism Society for America (ASA) and the National Autistic Society (NAS) (the same organization that created the original puzzle piece to symbolize autism), as the understanding of autism had shifted to it being a condition affecting a person for life, not just as a child<sup>185</sup>. Other Western countries including Ireland and Scotland also followed the UK's and US's examples of autism specific organizations even though they still included the word children in their organization titles long after the UK and US organizations had changed their titles<sup>186</sup>.

The socio-political circumstances in which the puzzle piece was created were ones where parents of children affected by autism were collectively putting their efforts behind autism specific organizations that would be better advocating vehicles for them and their children in the midst of an intellectual climate that predominantly pinned the causation of autism on them<sup>187</sup>. These were indeed bleak circumstances, not least for the parents who were blamed for their child's autism<sup>188</sup>. However, as mentioned earlier, the puzzle piece early on was not a piece that had the perspectives of those affected by autism behind its creation even though it was meant to represent them, and, as shown by whatever historical and meaning overviews could be found, it has not necessarily been altered to include those same perspectives in later decades<sup>189</sup>. In fact, what it is supposed to now symbolize about autism is unclear due to the colour meaning ambiguity and polarizing meanings that have been assigned to it<sup>190</sup>. The resulting visual implications shall now be laid out.

### *Visual Implications*

The puzzle piece is the signifier and signified for persons affected by autism<sup>191</sup>. What it signifies in itself is ambiguous due to the consistently polarizing meanings assigned to it

and the lack of constant or consistent explanations as to what the colours assigned to it (including the blue used for the particular piece shown in this paper) are meant to suggest about autism<sup>192</sup>. Meanings assigned to the colour blue alone and what can then therefore be suggested about autism from the symbol have ranged from maleness, to illness, coolness and intellect<sup>193</sup>.

However, what has consistently been the case in the meanings assigned to the puzzle piece is that they have revolved around the humanity of the population of persons affected by autism - from suggesting that it is a non-human population to being an example of human uniqueness<sup>194</sup>. Far more often than not, the former trend has tended to appear in meanings assigned to the puzzle piece which in fact epitomized it when it originated in 1963<sup>195</sup>. So, the puzzle piece has not historically been a particularly positive symbol and it is unclear as to whether it is even currently meant to be a positive symbol given the changes that have subsequently happened to it such as the removal of the picture of a crying child shown in the original puzzle piece<sup>196</sup>.

It relates to the other symbol so far elaborated on in this paper, the jigsaw puzzle ribbon, not only with the usage of the puzzle piece, and, consequently, the puzzling metaphor, but also with the usage of the colour blue and the ambiguity surrounding what is supposed to be represented by that colour given the multiple meanings assigned to it<sup>197</sup>. They differ slightly on the populations they are meant to represent, with the puzzle piece meant to represent persons affected by autism while the jigsaw puzzle ribbon is meant to represent whole families affected by autism<sup>198</sup>.

Despite this, they do share a similar predominant trend of having meanings assigned to them that question the humanity of the populations they represent<sup>199</sup>. However, as mentioned earlier, the ribbon represents groups of persons (in this case, whole families) in a certain population as opposed to individual persons in an assigned population as represented by the puzzle piece<sup>200</sup>. In this way, there is less of an isolationist approach shown in the ribbon as per one of the ribbon's initial purposes, to elicit societal sympathy for families affected by autism<sup>201</sup>.

However, neither symbol seems to have a history of incorporating the perspectives of persons affected by autism even though both of them were created, at the very least, in order to signal social attention towards autism<sup>202</sup>. They also have a common history of representing societal questioning of the humanity of those affected by autism<sup>203</sup>. So, while they differ on which particular population they represent, they both have the common aim of representing autism and share at least somewhat similar histories regarding some of the meanings assigned to them and the ambiguity surrounding what is meant to be suggested about autism via the colour blue<sup>204</sup>.

As for the wider systems of meaning in which the symbol was created, it is clear that it initially reflected the bleak circumstances in which parents with children affected by autism found themselves<sup>205</sup>. Given that the initial puzzle piece logo was meant to reflect how parents felt having a child affected by autism, this much is certain<sup>206</sup>. With primarily psychoanalytic research that concluded they were to blame for their child's autism and given the almost absolute lack of services that were available to them and how sad they were at not being able to get through to their children, these would have been hard times for them

indeed<sup>207</sup>. But these same parents coalesced together on both sides of the Atlantic and through their collective efforts to create autism-specific organizations, the understanding of autism shifted to its being seen as a lifelong condition as opposed to just affecting children as children<sup>208</sup>. This affected the overall look of the puzzle piece: the image of a crying child was eventually removed from it and the colour blue came to be used (this is not necessarily shared with all existing puzzle pieces, just the ones mentioned in this paper)<sup>209</sup>.

However, these crucial alterations have not necessarily been empowering ones because of one of the consistent meanings assigned to the puzzle piece which is that persons affected by autism are not human, a meaning that was behind its origin<sup>210</sup>. So while there have been other meanings assigned to the puzzle piece since its formation and there is ambiguity on the colour blue's suggestions about autism, this original and consistent meaning is certainly worth noting and should be analysed further for how currently pervasive it is in future studies along with the other aspects mentioned earlier<sup>211</sup>.

### **Umbrella**

#### *What it is*

The umbrella used for this paper is one consisting of red, yellow, blue, and green puzzle pieces<sup>212</sup>. It is red underneath, does not show any supporting interior spokes but rather a curved handle, and includes the names of five various disorders underneath five downward facing points of the umbrella: Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Rett's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified<sup>213</sup>. Finally, it has the title Autism Spectrum Disorders arching over the umbrella and, consequently, the other words used<sup>214</sup>.

*Historical Socio-Cultural Information on Symbol Formation*

The umbrella, or parasol has traditionally had several associations with the sky<sup>215</sup>.

These have ranged from symbolizing the heavens to a solar disc/wheel (with the spokes being sun rays and the haft as the axis of the world)<sup>216</sup>. In antiquity, it symbolized power and high position with servants holding it over the heads of rulers<sup>217</sup>. The umbrella has also stood for protection and warmth (e.g. the shelter afforded by the branches of the Cosmic Tree) and still continues to be associated with power<sup>218</sup>. Given that the umbrella used for this paper does not show any spokes along with the haft, this renders the idea that it may be symbolizing a solar disk/wheel extremely unlikely<sup>219</sup>. Also, given that it is not a religious symbol or being held over a person by others, it is also extremely unlikely to symbolize the heavens in any way, vault or not, or the power of rulers<sup>220</sup>. However, its secular meanings of power, warmth and protection will be examined further given that their descriptions do not include umbrella appearances that are dissimilar to what is shown in the umbrella used for this paper, religious, or ruler associations<sup>221</sup>.

The meanings of warmth and protection could, in this symbol, take the form of illustrating that any of the five diagnoses listed on the umbrella are part of a wider community of similar diagnoses<sup>222</sup>. With this, the umbrella used here becomes a symbol that could provide the function of pictorial assurance to viewers looking for answers regarding autism by illustrating a seeming connectedness between the five aforementioned disorders under the umbrella with the overarching term Autism Spectrum Disorders<sup>223</sup>. In this way, persons given any of these diagnoses or other viewers have the idea that there is a disorders community that has an overarching connection<sup>224</sup>. It could also be within this community

that power (the other secular meaning listed) can be found and used<sup>225</sup>. As such, the umbrella appears to be the one that has been the most commendatory towards autism out of the three examined so far<sup>226</sup>.

However, there are other aspects of the symbol to consider. First is the usage of puzzle pieces forming the entire surface of the umbrella used here<sup>227</sup>. With this usage, the aforementioned puzzling metaphor has to be considered because it has been mentioned in conjunction with the creation of the puzzle piece itself and it is a metaphor that questions the humanity of persons with autism<sup>228</sup>. At the same time, the other meanings that have been assigned to the puzzle piece, which include ones that posit that persons affected by autism are unique human examples, should also be considered given that they have been assigned to the same symbol<sup>229</sup>. So, the umbrella could very well represent persons that happen to have a disorder connectedness or a population that may not be human and that also happens to have a disorder connectedness<sup>230</sup>. Without this latter possibility, the umbrella used here would otherwise be completely impersonal given the lack of person or population explanations in or around the symbol and the interconnectedness occurring via the names of disorders<sup>231</sup>.

There are also the colours to consider. The red shade used is a deeper red rather than maroon (the closer shade used in the jigsaw puzzle ribbon), the yellow is also between the shade extremes of pale and golden yellow, and the blue used is a very deep blue while the handle is more of an azure blue<sup>232</sup>. Given the lack of any other additional shade specific content during this research and since they fall under the primary shade spectrums of red, yellow and blue, the meanings mentioned earlier for these same colours also apply<sup>233</sup>. Again,

the contrasting meanings mentioned earlier apply to the umbrella: from shame, love, segregation, illness, and passion to coolness, intellect, and blood<sup>234</sup>. The ambiguity mentioned earlier regarding the shade of yellow used (neither positive golden or negative pale yellow) applies due to the usage of a very similar shade<sup>235</sup>. As a result, since it is the disorder labels that are prominently shown in the symbol, it is possible that what is being suggested about them, and possibly the corresponding population, can be anywhere from the negative meanings mentioned to the positive ones<sup>236</sup>. Also, what is being expressed by the red colour appears to be most prominent considering that this colour appears on the surface and underside of the umbrella<sup>237</sup>.

Another colour used in the umbrella which has not been previously examined earlier in this paper, is the colour green<sup>238</sup>. The hue used is a much less saturated one<sup>239</sup>. Given that, again, there were no shade specific changes in meaning, the meanings applied to the colour green towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century (how this time frame can be established will be explained later) will be applied to the umbrella<sup>240</sup>. Meanings that have been assigned within this time frame have included: health, hygiene, nature, energy, “revitalization, restoration and renewal...leisure-time activities, attractiveness and even civic responsibility” along with more environmentally politicized meanings<sup>241</sup>. These politicized meanings do not apply to the umbrella because it is a symbol representing autism not an environment cause<sup>242</sup>.

However, the predominantly health and health-related meanings are certainly worth noting<sup>243</sup>. It is unclear as to whether or not it is the disorders (and possibly the corresponding population) that are in need of becoming healthy or are healthy in themselves<sup>244</sup>. Discerning

this is complicated by the lack of explanation as to what the colours used in the umbrella are meant to represent, which thereby leaves the question of what the potential meaning of health in the colour green means in the symbol<sup>245</sup>. It is even possible that health is not even being represented in the umbrella given that there are several other connotations associated with the colour green<sup>246</sup>.

As for the other meanings of leisure activities and attractiveness, it is unclear as to whether or not the umbrella is meant to suggest that one or both of these are needed for Autism Spectrum Disorders and possibly for those affected or whether they are implicit traits of such disorders or the populations supposedly affected by them<sup>247</sup>. As for civic responsibility, it could very well mean either that the cause of Autism Spectrum Disorders is a political cause worth societal attention or that civic responsibility is an implicit trait present in the related disorders (and possibly the affected population) shown in the symbol<sup>248</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, it is possible to figure out roughly when the image would have been created even though there is no evidence from either the image source or the source itself to indicate where it had come from<sup>249</sup>. This is possible by viewing editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) and comparing how autism was categorized in each of them<sup>250</sup>. It is in the fourth edition that the disorders listed at the various points on the umbrella can be found<sup>251</sup>. This edition was released in 1994<sup>252</sup>. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the term ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) was conceptualized by Lorna Wing in the 1990's<sup>253</sup>. So this umbrella was almost certainly released during or after the 1990's due to the then existence of the terms Autism Spectrum Disorders<sup>254</sup>. The umbrella's words are also subsequently an amalgamation of terms from

the DSM-IV and Wing<sup>255</sup>. So while the umbrella could very well uphold the more negative cultural associations with the colours red and blue and the puzzling metaphor or the more positive colour and puzzle piece associations, it could likely also be an example of visually upholding some medicalized classifications<sup>256</sup>.

Given that I have already elaborated on the major autism discourses and events during the 1990's, addressing the usage of the DSM shall now be addressed here<sup>257</sup>.

The DSM is an historical example of the medical model of disability-a model which emphasizes that disability is in the individual and is something to be cured/maintained by health professionals- by being a book listing various disorders with information meant to aid professionals (e.g. psychiatrists) in diagnosing and treating individuals affected by mental disorders<sup>258</sup>. There have been five editions of this manual and its diagnostic categories have been used in a variety of professions, from special education to law<sup>259</sup>. As well as having its categories used in a variety of societal contexts, it has been critiqued for how scientific it is due to the influences of various stakeholders (e.g. psychiatrists) in the formation of seemingly scientific diagnostic criteria that have not even been informed by any etiological conclusions of the disorders listed in it<sup>260</sup>. Furthermore, its medicalized approach to disability does not take into account environmental and societal prejudice towards seemingly affected persons<sup>261</sup>. For the purposes of this paper, the names of the autism categorization found in the DSM-IV and its publication date provided a timeline for when the symbol was created as well as providing an indication as to what DSM model had been incorporated in the symbol itself<sup>262</sup>.

There are the other aforementioned discourses from the puzzling metaphor to the foreign space metaphor to consider since they are not particularly time-bound, at least according to the research reviewed on Western socio-cultural discourses surrounding autism<sup>263</sup>. While there are no clues in the symbol to reveal where it was created or in any works I was able to obtain for research, it is clear that it was created in or surrounding a Western socio-cultural time period that has had several, usually contrasting, trends regarding autism - from medicalizing it to praising it<sup>264</sup>.

#### *Visual Implications*

The umbrella is the sign for various disorder titles that have been associated with autism and possibly for humans affected by autism<sup>265</sup>. What it signifies in itself is an amalgamation of autism-related disorder titles both from the DSM-IV and Lorna Wing<sup>266</sup>. It also signifies the idea that the disorders of Asperger's Disorder, Autistic Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, Rett's Disorder and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder are related to the literally overarching concept of Autism Spectrum Disorders<sup>267</sup>. The only possible clue that it could also be referring to a human population is through the usage of puzzle pieces on the umbrella's surface which, as mentioned earlier, has been used to represent either the vindication of the humanity of persons affected by autism or to question that humanity<sup>268</sup>.

In the meantime, the associated secular meanings of warmth, protection, and power are all ones that, when applied to the disorder labels, suggest that it is within this particular arrangement of labels that there is connectivity between this larger group of disorders<sup>269</sup>. Furthermore, if the symbol is also meant to represent persons, a larger societal group of

persons with these various labels is also represented by the umbrella<sup>270</sup>. This is an exclusively symbolic function given the lack of rain drops in the picture which would suggest sheltering from rain<sup>271</sup>.

Meanwhile, the contrasting associations that have been historically assigned to the colours used in the umbrella used for this paper and the lack of any explanations within or around the picture of the umbrella complicate attempts at definitive answers for what exactly the picture suggests about the shown disorder labels and possibly the corresponding affected human population<sup>272</sup>. For example, one of the associated meanings of the colour green is health<sup>273</sup>. With the lack of a definitive explanation of whether the puzzle pieces used are meant to convey questioning or celebrating the humanity of those affected with any of the listed disorders (if this population is even being represented in the picture), it is hard to figure out whether or not the green expresses the health of those affected or whether they have to obtain health<sup>274</sup>. It is certainly possible that the colour green used in the picture may not even represent health given other associations that have been assigned to the colour green during the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century (the time frame in which the umbrella picture shown here would have been created)<sup>275</sup>.

It relates to the other symbols so far elaborated on in this paper with the usage of the puzzle piece and the resulting ambiguity as to whether these contemporary pieces are meant to either continue to question the humanity of persons affected by autism or celebrate them as unique human examples<sup>276</sup>. They all also share the recurring colour of blue while the jigsaw puzzle ribbon and umbrella also include the usage of maroon/red, yellow and blue colours, with the umbrella also including the colour green<sup>277</sup>. They also all share ambiguity

regarding what exactly the colours are meant to convey about autism and (certainly the case with the jigsaw puzzle ribbon and puzzle piece) the corresponding human population affected by autism given the contrasting cultural associations assigned to these colours and lack of explanation in the image sources used<sup>278</sup>. In the meantime, the umbrella used here has adopted an impersonal approach to representing autism by including the names of the various aforementioned disorders<sup>279</sup>. With this focus on illustrating disorders as opposed to a human population, it is the most impersonal of the three symbols elaborated on so far<sup>280</sup>.

As for the wider systems of meaning in which the symbol was created, it is clear that it was created in the midst of several contrasting discourse and effort trends regarding autism, from medicalizing it and combating it to celebrating it<sup>281</sup>. Evidence of the medicalization appears in the umbrella through its listing of the aforementioned various disorders, almost all of which were from the DSM-IV with the overarching title being derived from Lorna Wing's work<sup>282</sup>. Even though the history of the particular time period in which the umbrella used here was created was itself admittedly patchy if not nonexistent, the contrasting discourse and effort trends are clear<sup>283</sup>. Consequently, even though the umbrella may be the symbol that praises autism the most out of the symbols elaborated on so far with its possible suggestions of community via the umbrella's secular cultural associations, it could very well be also an amalgamation of this communal suggestion and the medicalization of autism<sup>284</sup>.

### **Three Coloured Rainbow**

#### *What it is*

The rainbow used here is one consisting of three colours: a maroon shade of red, a golden shade of yellow, and a lightened cyan shade of blue<sup>285</sup>. These colours are shown in

descending order: light cyan blue, golden yellow, to maroon red<sup>286</sup>. There are also two small circles in the symbol: one the same colour as the top stripe and shown just above the rainbow and a maroon red one shown in between the blue and yellow stripes towards the right side of the rainbow<sup>287</sup>. The rainbow used here is one found on the Children at Risk website<sup>288</sup>.

#### *Historical Socio-Cultural Information on Symbol Formation*

Meanings assigned to the rainbow have tended to be associated with the sky and good fortune<sup>289</sup>. Apart from the numerous religious meanings, the rainbow has been associated with the different states of consciousness, a bridge or boundary between earth and the sky, hope for a better world, or an omen of future wealth or the finding of treasure<sup>290</sup>. While a rainbow occurring in nature has seven colours (red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet), this particular rainbow has only three bands of colour as described earlier<sup>291</sup>. This arrangement of three colours is reminiscent of the Aristotelian tradition to have a three-fold division, which was later emulated in Christian symbolic rainbows (with the colours green, blue and red) even though the meanings pertained more to Church concepts (e.g. Christ's passion) as opposed to colours chosen because of their believed potential to generate light or darkness<sup>292</sup>. Since the particular rainbow being examined here is not a religious symbol and does not even emulate the exact tri-colour schemes described here, it is highly unlikely the meanings assigned by either the Christian Church or Aristotle apply to it<sup>293</sup>. However, the Western usage of a three colour rainbow is what has been laid out here and explains at least somewhat the origins of this particular kind of rainbow which is currently in use on the Children at Risk website<sup>294</sup>.

Given the difference in autism classifications that has occurred over the decades in various editions of the DSM, I hypothesised at the beginning of this project that the three colours used in this particular three colour rainbow might be representing three categories of autism<sup>295</sup>. However, after examining the DSM-II and DSM-III, the edition that was in circulation when the organization was established and the edition released a year after the organization's establishment (Children at Risk was established in 1979), neither of them had three autism categories, so this hypothesis had to be abandoned<sup>296</sup>.

The secular meanings assigned to the rainbow are certainly interesting in regards to their suggestions about autism and the human population of children affected by autism (this can be discerned from the Children at Risk website homepage explanations around the image)<sup>297</sup>. With the different states of consciousness meaning, the rainbow used on the website could therefore convey a spectrum of intellectual or mind levels<sup>298</sup>.

As for a bridge or boundary between earth and the sky, it could be suggesting a transcendence or maintenance of boundaries, in this case probably between children affected by autism due to different autism diagnoses<sup>299</sup>. This is suggested by a title used in the explanations on the website's homepage<sup>300</sup>. That title is Autism Spectrum Disorders, which as mentioned earlier, is a title used by Lorna Wing and the DSM's classification also revolves around degrees of disorder severity<sup>301</sup>. This choice of title is interesting to note given that the organization was established in 1979, at least a little over ten years before the title was used by Wing<sup>302</sup>. So the concept of interrelated disabilities appears to have been engrained in the rainbow used on the website<sup>303</sup>.

The other meanings that have also been assigned to the rainbow are hope for a better world, an omen of future wealth or the finding of treasure<sup>304</sup>. In the case of the hope meaning, this hope could be manifested in the rainbow, making it a symbol of either hope for a better world for children affected by autism or hope that the world can be a better place for this particular population once their full potential is reached due to the organization's help (this can be found on the Children at Risk homepage)<sup>305</sup>. As for future wealth, the rainbow could therefore suggest that children affected by autism (the population that is the focus for the organization and also therefore the population represented in the rainbow) will become wealthy as their seeming potential is aided by the organization (the aforementioned mission of the organization)<sup>306</sup>. Finally, the finding of treasure meaning could very well mean the unearthing of the seeming potential that can be found within children aided by the organization's efforts<sup>307</sup>. As a result, the secular meanings that have been attached to the rainbow, when applied to the mission or other information on the Children at Risk website, largely appear to be ones that can be taken (or may indeed have been taken) to promote the seeming greatness of the organization as well as suggesting differences between the organization's target population of children affected by autism<sup>308</sup>.

However, there is another feature of the symbol to consider: its two circles<sup>309</sup>. As mentioned earlier, one is shown above and to the left side of the rainbow while the other one is shown towards the right side of the rainbow between the yellow and blue stripes<sup>310</sup>. The circle has tended to be associated with limitlessness with no direction, beginning or end<sup>311</sup>. So while considering this meaning of limitlessness, the addition of the circles to the rainbow consequently seems to make it either a symbol of limitless future wealth, limitless

boundaries, limitless potential that can be unearthed by organizational efforts or a limitless better world for children affected by autism whether or not their believed potential is the symbol focus<sup>312</sup>. The circle's association with limitlessness could also be in contrast with the possible differences in autism diagnosis that affected children can receive, or differences in intellectual/mind levels<sup>313</sup>.

There are also the colours to consider. As mentioned earlier, they are whitened cyan blue, golden yellow, and maroon red<sup>314</sup>. The cyan blue is the colour of the top stripe of the rainbow<sup>315</sup>. As mentioned earlier, one of the secular meanings assigned to the rainbow is different levels of consciousness which is interesting to note given that one of the secular meanings assigned to blue is intellect<sup>316</sup>. If that blue meaning is indeed meant to be represented in the rainbow, this lends further credence to the idea of the Children at Risk rainbow possibly representing different mind/intellect levels<sup>317</sup>. Or at the very least, intellect could be being exemplified as one of three concepts that are being associated with children affected by autism via the rainbow<sup>318</sup>.

However, there are other associations with blue to consider here - from the sky, the heavens, truth, water, purity, coolness, peace, and loyalty to contentment, illness and nobility and the cold<sup>319</sup>. Given the association of the rainbow with the sky and heavens, it is very likely that what would be suggested about children affected by autism from these meanings is limitlessness potential given the limitlessness of the two phenomena and the mission of the Children at Risk organization to aid such children to reach their full potential<sup>320</sup>. The truth association could meanwhile suggest that children affected by autism are truthful or that it is by working with such children that the truth of their seeming potential can be made

clear<sup>321</sup>. Meanwhile the water association could suggest that children affected by autism are full of depth and are fluid enough to accumulate the skills stressed by the Children at Risk organization (e.g. communication skills) and, as opposed to remaining in the same state of being, could thereby reach their potential<sup>322</sup>.

As for the associations of purity, coolness, peace, nobility, loyalty and contentment, the blue colour used in the rainbow could suggest that children with autism have one or more of these qualities<sup>323</sup>. The illness association could also very well suggest that children with autism are a population that is sick and must be made well, presumably by the Children at Risk organization given that it stresses how beneficial its services would be and are for children affected by autism<sup>324</sup>. The last listed association, that of the cold, could suggest that children affected by autism are cold individuals and/or they are undergoing hard times<sup>325</sup>. With the addition of the blue circle, it could very well be the case that any of these meanings are also symbolized as being limitless<sup>326</sup>.

Meanwhile, the golden yellow shade has tended to represent light, maturity, transformation, intellect, goodness, the sun, faith, and intuition<sup>327</sup>. These all have overwhelmingly positive connotations<sup>328</sup>. In regards to what they suggest about children affected by autism, the associations of maturity and transformation lend further credence to the idea that children affected by autism will, with the help of Children at Risk, reach their highest potential<sup>329</sup>. As for the other associations of intellect, goodness, faith, and intuition, it is unclear as to whether one or more of these qualities are illustrated as being innate in the organization's target population or whether these qualities will be either unearthed in its members or taught by the organization in its mission to help them<sup>330</sup>. Meanwhile, the sun

and light might be meanings that, in regards to children affected by autism, suggest that they figuratively shine or, with the help of Children at Risk, will come to shine<sup>331</sup>. Despite such positive associations in which the organization's efforts could certainly be promoted and children with autism could be assigned any of these positive qualities, there is no golden yellow circle in the symbol, which raises the question as to why such a seemingly positive colour does not occupy the same amount of coloured area as the cyan blue and maroon red<sup>332</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the meanings associated with the colour red will be applied to the maroon due to my being unable to find any symbolic implications specific to maroon and figuring out that maroon is a shade of red<sup>333</sup>. Those meanings have ranged from blood, fertility, love, anger, and warmth, to triumph, passion, shame, and segregation<sup>334</sup>. As mentioned earlier, the shame and segregation meanings might represent negative past treatments and conclusions of those affected by autism which included institutionalization and shaming parents<sup>335</sup>. The blood meaning might also refer to any blood spilled as a result of institutional abuse, or maybe blood spilled from or by children affected by autism<sup>336</sup>. The fertility meaning might have to do with the seemingly immense potential in children affected by autism<sup>337</sup>. In fact, if that indeed were the case, it would be a meaning that would have similarly positive outlooks regarding the organization's target population alongside the fluidity and intellect meanings of the cyan and golden yellow, just to name an example<sup>338</sup>. It would also further promote the organization's services and aims by visually making the case that it can bring out the potential that such children have<sup>339</sup>.

The triumph suggestion would also fit that visual narrative very well by suggesting that triumph in finding the potential in children affected by autism can and is possible<sup>340</sup>. As for the warmth, passion, love and anger meanings, it is unclear, again, as to whether these qualities are innate in children affected by autism or whether one or more of these qualities could be unearthed by organizational efforts<sup>341</sup>. However, if the point of the rainbow is to create a positive visual narrative, it is unlikely that anger would be included given that it would sharply contrast with the other positive meanings mentioned earlier<sup>342</sup>. There is the probably unlikely possibility that anger might be included as an emotion for the rainbow as evidence that children affected by autism feel or can be made to feel due to the aid of Children at Risk<sup>343</sup>. With the addition of the maroon circle, this can suggest limitlessness for any of these meanings and what they suggest about children affected by autism<sup>344</sup>. In the case of all the colours, there is immense promotional potential for the organization's mission as well as for its target population of children affected by autism<sup>345</sup>.

During the decade in which the organization was established, and therefore the likely time during which the three coloured rainbow became an organizational symbol, which was the 1970's, there were crucial trends that were underway<sup>346</sup>. For example, during the later part of the 1970's, there was an anti-psychiatry movement that was producing evidence that autism might have neurological components and Bettelheim's psychoanalytic understanding of autism was increasingly being proved wrong as those working with children affected by autism observed them<sup>347</sup>. It was also a decade which, like the 1960's, was filled with autism advocacy movements often headed by parents who were demanding "better care policies, better education, and greater understanding of the condition [of autism]", setting precedents

for similar future movements<sup>348</sup>. It was also during this time that the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—IDEA - in 1990) was passed in 1975 due to the efforts mainly of parents to make developmental disorders a legal and political entity in legislation and to demand better education for affected children<sup>349</sup>. How effective this act was can be examined further in another paper<sup>350</sup>. For this paper, however, the Act is noted as an example of what parents were fighting for during the time period in which Children at Risk was established<sup>351</sup>.

Articles on the then current issues of deinstitutionalization and normalization were also being published by professionals with parents weighing in, stressing that such articles take into account the rhythms of daily life experienced by children with disabilities as opposed to the routines at institutions<sup>352</sup>. Research into whether autism is inherited was also beginning although published articles on the topic would be at an all-high starting in the 1990's<sup>353</sup>. Furthermore, the concept of autism as a spectrum was introduced; there was a delineation made between autism and childhood schizophrenia and the cognitive aspects of autism also became a subject of study<sup>354</sup>.

However, the at least temporary seclusion of persons affected by autism was continued in the form of a centre with adults affected by autism that was set up in Somerset Court in southwest England even as the UK passed legislation that guaranteed education for children regardless of their disability<sup>355</sup>.

Furthermore, because they are not particularly time bound, the aforementioned discourses of autism (e.g. as a foreign space to withdraw into or arrive from, a disease, an example of neurodiversity) can also be considered<sup>356</sup>. Given that the puzzling metaphor was

mentioned specifically in conjunction with the puzzle piece, which is not present in the symbol, it is very unlikely that the implications behind this particular metaphor could be potentially applied to the rainbow<sup>357</sup>. After considering the meanings that have been assigned to the rainbow and the colours used, it is highly unlikely that any of these metaphors were behind the creation of the three coloured rainbow except for the colour blue meaning of coldness which could thereby suggest that children affected by autism are innately cold or will become cold due to organizational efforts by Children at Risk (highly unlikely especially given the symbol's probable purpose in promoting the organization)<sup>358</sup>. Even the most empowering of the aforementioned metaphors, the one suggesting that autism is an example of neurodiversity, is highly unlikely because throughout the analysis done to explore the possible meanings of the symbol, none of them have included comparing the target population to other populations<sup>359</sup>.

So overall, the trends of the 1970's appear to be ones that included the active efforts of parents fighting for the rights of persons affected by autism, to the point of rebelling against the professional opinion that they themselves were the cause of autism in children<sup>360</sup>. Parents were even weighing in on academic articles being written on persons affected by autism<sup>361</sup>. However, the seeds for the future medicalization of autism were also sown during this time period and seclusion of persons affected by autism continued at least in the UK even in the midst of inclusive educational legislation<sup>362</sup>. However, the rainbow itself was a symbol that directly contrasted with a lot of co-occurring discourses about autism<sup>363</sup>. It was an era with mixed results indeed<sup>364</sup>.

*Visual Implications*

The three coloured rainbow with circles is the sign for children affected by autism that and probably the Children at Risk organization as well<sup>365</sup>. What it signifies in itself is limitlessness although what exactly is limitless is unclear, especially the degree to which the meanings mentioned earlier were also included as promotional meanings for the Children at Risk organization itself<sup>366</sup>.

It relates to the other symbols elaborated on in this paper as its target topic is autism and it represents, at least, a target population that is affected by autism (although the extent to which the umbrella does so is questionable)<sup>367</sup>. It also shares a colour scheme similar to what is shown in the jigsaw puzzle ribbon even though the ribbon has two differing shades of blue<sup>368</sup>. It also has a shade of the colour blue, a colour that has been present in all four symbols<sup>369</sup>. As a consequence, it has a lot of the same colour meaning possibilities that have been suggested for each of the symbols<sup>370</sup>. Finally, as a result of looking at the meanings in-depth for what they could therefore suggest about the persons being represented by the symbols, all of them raise the question for how laudatory they are in representing their target populations<sup>371</sup>.

As for the wider systems of meaning in which the symbol was created, it is clear that it was created in a Western historical socio-political atmosphere in which mainly parents were struggling to have the believed rights of children with autism recognized and their own perspectives recognized by experts<sup>372</sup>. It was also a time when the credibility of the psychoanalytic stance was questioned while seclusion was continued to a certain extent and the medicalization of autism started even as more inclusive educational legislation was

passed<sup>373</sup>. It was a time of trends about autism that varied strongly in how person-centred they were<sup>374</sup>. It is also clear that the rainbow with its circles was a symbol that contrasted many of the theories about autism occurring at the time of its creation<sup>375</sup>.

### **Discussion**

Images of those affected by so-called disabilities have varied from depicting them “as evil or as pitiable victims”, supercrips who triumph over or heroically succumb to their disability, a burden, their own worst enemy or unable to live a successful life<sup>376</sup>. Admittedly, there is sparse literature specifically on the depiction of autism in media<sup>377</sup>. What little literature there is on the topic indicates that autism has been depicted either as a condition to be cured, “dangerous, tragic, debilitating and ....[an] irresolvable problem” or something that could be aided by certain physical spaces (e.g. a school) or financial resources<sup>378</sup>. There is also the stereotype of the autistic savant where the autistic person “has exceptional talent in a particular area”<sup>379</sup>. All of the symbols discussed here are impersonal in that they do not show a person or persons; they are all objects<sup>380</sup>. Given the ample instances of symbolic ambiguity that have been elaborated on in this paper, it is hard to establish whether or not they fall into these stereotypes of autism<sup>381</sup>. However, as shown by the analysis here, it is clear that none of them especially hail autism<sup>382</sup>.

### **Future Symbols for Autism**

As can be discerned from the variety of meanings analysed for each of the four symbols, none of them particularly praise the population affected by autism that they are representing or autism in general<sup>383</sup>. Even though they may not have been created completely in line with trends at the time of their creation, there have been numerous

possible meanings that even go so far as to question the humanity of persons, families, or children affected by autism<sup>384</sup>. Furthermore, the lack of consistent and peer-reviewed material on what the particular shapes and colours used are meant to mean for autism and other target populations have complicated attempts to give definitive answers as to what each symbol is meant to suggest about either of the two aforementioned topic areas. Some new symbols will be proposed here that could potentially be ones that commend autism and the populations affected by it by. Each symbol was selected on the basis of having at least one meaning that could accomplish that purpose.

The first symbol to be suggested is a huge circle filled with red, golden yellow, blue and green circles. The circle's association with limitlessness can be used to mean the lack of boundaries of populations that can be affected by autism, as well as a lack of boundaries between persons who get varying autism or autism related labels, thus mitigating if not eliminating the categorical boundaries that have been suggested in DSM editions<sup>385</sup>. This would also suggest a lack of boundaries that such persons would have based on such labels, thus suggesting communal interaction and diversity.

As for the colours used, there are particular meanings with each of the aforementioned colours that can have positive connotations for persons affected by autism. The red meaning that would be used would be that of new beginning and new life<sup>386</sup>. With this meaning, the birth of persons who may subsequently be given an autism or autism-related label is celebrated as a joyous event and where the humanity of such persons is recognized and not as an event where the humanity of the affected person is questioned as has often been the

case with the puzzling metaphor of the puzzle piece<sup>387</sup>. This would also celebrate the birth of such persons as unique and new examples of humanity as well.

The particularly intriguing meaning of transformation assigned to golden yellow would also be an empowering one if it were specified that the symbolic subject of such transformation was mainstream society<sup>388</sup>. In having mainstream society as the object of transformation by becoming informed and accepting of persons affected by autism, such persons are no longer the ones being symbolized as needing to be fixed and subsequently reach mainstream society standards<sup>389</sup>.

The meaning behind the blue circles would be that of peace<sup>390</sup>. The peace symbolized would be that of peace between mainstream society and persons affected by autism and peace between persons with differing autism-related labels. In this way, the diversity of persons affected by autism is welcomed and there is mitigation if not total erasure of societal boundaries based on intellect, sensory or other related categories as suggested in the various DSM editions<sup>391</sup>. The ocean meaning would also be included in order convey the idea that persons affected by autism possess depth<sup>392</sup>.

As for the colour green, it would signify transitoriness<sup>393</sup>. This transitory nature would signify the ease with which autism-related labels could be changed for a single person by experts such as psychiatrists as a result of the diagnosis process occurring almost entirely, if not entirely, by the expert's observation of the person<sup>394</sup>. In this way, the subjective nature of such label assigning is shown. The transitoriness would also signify the ease with which an informed and accepting mainstream society and persons affected by autism can have with each other<sup>395</sup>. In the case of all of these colours with these resulting positive empowering

associations, the aforementioned limitless association the circle has had can also suggest the limitless potential for all of the aforementioned proposed associations<sup>396</sup>.

In short, the empowering aspects of this symbol would be its suggestions of societal acceptance of persons affected by autism, acceptance amongst persons affected by autism, and that persons affected by autism possess depth while presenting a subtle undertone of questioning of experts' labels.

The next symbol to be proposed is the turtle<sup>397</sup>. Historically, the turtle has been associated with quiet strength and having the ability to take refuge into itself in order to be protected from external attacks<sup>398</sup>. In European antiquity, it was associated with long life and unwavering vitality as a result of a seemingly chaste love life and a "quiet reserve"<sup>399</sup>. It is also in Aesop's fable that the turtle's patience helps it to ultimately outrun the hare<sup>400</sup>. Out of all the meanings mentioned here, it is the first two that would be assigned to the turtle representing autism<sup>401</sup>. Historical discourses surrounding autism have, as mentioned earlier, included having it depicted as a foreign space to withdraw into or an empty fortress that needs to be beaten down by an outside force such as a therapist's efforts<sup>402</sup>. However, when that withdrawal is paired with the meanings of quiet strength and protection from a hostile outside world, it becomes a positive defense mechanism on the part of the person (s) affected by autism against a hostile environment/society<sup>403</sup>.

Another suggested symbol would be either a single square consisting of smaller squares or a cube with different coloured squares. The different coloured squares would have the same colours mentioned when describing the circle symbol and have the same colour meanings<sup>404</sup>. The square and cube have historically symbolized stability and solidity<sup>405</sup>. The

cube has also stood for eternity<sup>406</sup>. Meanwhile, the square has also stood for the earth, the four cardinal directions, and structural foundations (e.g. those of temples and cities)<sup>407</sup>. It has also been a shape viewed as symbolizing the unity of the four basic elements of air, fire, water and earth or absolute beauty<sup>408</sup>. The square can also be seen as a complete contrast to the circle's historical representation of the sky<sup>409</sup>.

Out of all of the meanings mentioned, it is the one of unity that would be incredibly positive in regards to people affected by autism, by referring to the unity of persons affected by autism, hence implying a communal aspect to the symbol<sup>410</sup>. The unity mentioned here can also refer to the unity of the meanings mentioned earlier-celebrating the existence of persons affected by autism, the depth of such persons, the transformation of mainstream society, the transitoriness of autism-related labels and peace between such affected persons and mainstream society<sup>411</sup>. In short, either the cube or square consisting of smaller squares with either symbol including the colours and aforementioned meanings would be a symbol conveying the unity of the positive meanings mentioned in the paragraph on the circle symbol<sup>412</sup>.

The final symbol to be proposed is that of a star consisting of the different kinds of triangles - scalene, isosceles, and equilateral<sup>413</sup>. The star has tended to be associated with high ideals, spiritual light shining through darkness, deceased persons that have gone up to the sky, or even the peaceful cooperation of divine powers<sup>414</sup>. Meanwhile the triangle has been associated with falling rain as a water symbol, harmony (in the case of two triangles that form a square), and, according to the Pythagoreans, cosmic birth as represented by the

Greek letter delta<sup>415</sup>. It has even represented the Trinity in the early Christian Church and has also been used to contain all-seeing eyes in the Free Masonry and Baroque periods<sup>416</sup>.

Out of all the meanings shown here, the meanings of peace, harmony, high ideals and spiritual light in darkness are of particular interest<sup>417</sup>. The fact that there are different kinds of triangles is also of interest<sup>418</sup>. In the case of the star shape, the peace conveyed would be peace between persons with autism-related labels and mainstream society<sup>419</sup>. The harmony meaning would be manifested in the overall look of the symbol by having the different kinds of triangles fit together and simultaneously form a star shape<sup>420</sup>. Harmony between persons with autism-related labels and mainstream society, as mentioned earlier, would also be conveyed<sup>421</sup>. The spiritual light in darkness meaning would, in the case of its implications for persons affected by autism, present them as positive examples of humanity in a society that is not particularly accepting or aware of them<sup>422</sup>. Finally, the high ideals meaning would be manifested in the star by suggesting that ideals for persons affected by autism not be bound or dictated by a deficit-based approach<sup>423</sup>. The colours mentioned earlier and the meanings assigned to them earlier in the paper would be used in the triangles<sup>424</sup>. In this way, the different forms that the triangles can take suggests that the meanings mentioned earlier can occur in many forms but still represent the same general positive meanings<sup>425</sup>. This final proposed symbol, in short, would be one that stresses the positivity of the existence of persons affected by autism as individuals and as additions to mainstream society while stressing harmony between the two as well as harmony between persons with different autism-related labels<sup>426</sup>. It would also, again, suggest that persons affected by autism exhibit depth while encouraging that mainstream society become more accepting as well as reveal

the subjective nature of the bestowing of autism-related labels<sup>427</sup>. In the case of each of the symbols mentioned here, the explanations provided could also be used to assist in describing the image in reference material<sup>428</sup>.

Now the semiological methodology mentioned earlier shall be applied to each proposed symbol<sup>429</sup>. The circle symbol is the signifier and signified, therefore the sign, of persons affected by autism<sup>430</sup>. What it signifies in itself is persons affected by autism and their peaceful interaction with each other, their celebrated existence as well as depth, an accepting mainstream society with which such persons would also interact and the transitory nature of autism-related labels<sup>431</sup>. All of these symbolic aspects are meant to be conveyed as having a limitless quality to them as per the selected circle meaning<sup>432</sup>.

The circle symbol relates to the other symbols via the consistently used colour scheme of red, golden yellow, blue, and green with their assigned meanings<sup>433</sup>. The target populations of persons affected by autism and mainstream society in general are an aspect that the symbols have in common<sup>434</sup>. One final aspect that all of the symbols have in common is their potential to be more laudatory in regards to persons affected by autism than the four current symbols elaborated on earlier in the paper<sup>435</sup>. This is accomplished by putting a positive twist on consistently negative discourses surrounding autism (e.g. depicting withdrawal as a defense mechanism rather than something to be broken down or out of)<sup>436</sup>. In the case of the circle, it is about celebrating the existence of persons affected by autism, transforming society to become accepting of such persons, suggesting that persons affected by autism are full of depth, and revealing more fully the nature of autism-related label assigning<sup>437</sup>.

The wider systems of values and implications are the historical Western meanings (Church, ancient Greek and other secular meanings) that have been assigned to each of the colours and shapes mentioned for each of the symbols with the selected meanings being secular ones given that Western secular meanings have been the focus of the paper<sup>438</sup>. Other such systems have also included historical discourses and views surrounding autism<sup>439</sup>.

The turtle is a sign for persons affected by autism<sup>440</sup>. What it signifies in itself is a reversal in meaning regarding the withdrawal of persons affected by autism from being a thing to be either conquered or a foreign space to withdraw into or arrive from to being an effective defense against a hostile outside world<sup>441</sup>.

It relates to the other symbols by being one that reverses historically negative opinions regarding autism, which in this case revolve around the connotations associated with withdrawal and a person affected by autism<sup>442</sup>. The aforementioned target populations of persons affected by autism and mainstream society are also the target populations of this symbol. It also emulates the same aim of the symbols which is to be potential symbols that praise persons affected by autism<sup>443</sup>.

The wider systems of significance within which the symbol was created are, as mentioned earlier, Western secular meanings as well as historical discourses on autism<sup>444</sup>.

The square/cube symbol is a sign of persons affected by autism<sup>445</sup>. The colours within it signify the same colour meanings ascribed to the circle symbol with the addition of the suggestion of unity as per the chosen meaning that has been assigned to the square<sup>446</sup>. As mentioned earlier, those colour meanings celebrate the existence of persons affected by

autism, suggesting their depth. They also symbolize how mainstream society is transformed to be accepting of such persons and reveal more of the nature of autism-label assigning<sup>447</sup>.

The square/ cube symbol relates to the other symbols precisely because of its target populations, its colour scheme (which is used for most of the symbols except the turtle) and resulting meanings, its empowering aim and its reversal of negative discourses surrounding autism (in this case, regarding their humanity and having them being brought to mainstream society standards)<sup>448</sup>.

The wider connotation systems of this symbol are the same ones mentioned earlier<sup>449</sup>.

The star consisting of triangles is a sign of persons affected by autism and mainstream society<sup>450</sup>. What it signifies in itself is the same colours and colour meanings used for the circle and square symbols as well as the idea of the colour meanings mentioned earlier taking different forms while still illustrating the same general concepts of acceptance, transience, depth, transformation and peace<sup>451</sup>.

It relates to the other symbols with precisely the same characteristics mentioned earlier and its wider systems of values are the same ones used too<sup>452</sup>.

In short, as a result of incorporating the semiological critical visual methodology and also clarifying the meanings of each symbol, all of the new ones that have been proposed here are far more laudatory towards persons seemingly affected by autism in comparison to the currently used symbols also explored in this paper<sup>453</sup>. This is accomplished by symbolizing such persons as being full of depth and withdrawing from a hostile environment while also illustrating the subjectivity of autism-related labels and a far more accepting mainstream society<sup>454</sup>. This contrasts strongly with the meanings examined with the jigsaw

puzzle ribbon, puzzle piece, umbrella and three coloured rainbow which range from doubting the humanity of persons seemingly affected by autism to suggesting that families of persons affected by autism occupy an uncertain societal ranking in their communities<sup>455</sup>. It is precisely the positive connotations identified here that make the new symbols proposed here viable ones to represent autism for future<sup>456</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Symbols were and have continued to be used as a means to tie concepts together<sup>457</sup>. In the case of the four symbols explored in this paper, there are many potential meanings with sometimes drastically different concepts tied together<sup>458</sup>. As shown here with the help of the semiological critical visual methodology of examining signs and the wider systems of meaning, there is a great deal of ambiguity in regards to the suggestions about autism that these symbols are supposed to represent which is not aided by the brevity of material on the subject<sup>459</sup>. These have ranged from the medicalization of autism and questioning the humanity of those seemingly affected by autism to suggesting that they are persons of peace and loyalty<sup>460</sup>. Furthermore, as illustrated here with the exact same methodology, there are potential symbols that can be used to laud and praise autism in the near future by illustrating those seemingly affected individuals as persons full of depth, the relativity of autism disorder labels and the changing of mainstream society to being more accepting of such individuals<sup>461</sup>. Finally, this paper can further add to the sparsely explored research area of the depiction of autism due to its area of focus<sup>462</sup>. Furthermore, the research shown here can be incorporated into the general topic area of depictions of disability and further exploration

of societal examples of the medical model of disability<sup>463</sup>. It is difficult, “trying to understand the complex puzzle that is autism” through its symbols indeed<sup>464</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, 1994, p. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, 2008, p. 505.; Becker, 1994, p. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Becker, 1994, p. 5-6; Hall, 1997, p. 2-7; Hampshire & Stephenson, 2008, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, 2008, p. 505.

<sup>5</sup> Verkuyten, 1995, 264.

<sup>6</sup> Hampshire & Stephenson, 2008, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bailey, 2008, p. 505.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> DeLong & Martinson, 2012, p. 51-52; Hampshire & Stephenson, 2008, p. 8.; Rose, 2001, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Biedermann, 1992, p. viii; DeLong & Martinson, 2012, p. 51-52; Hampshire & Stephenson, 2008, p. 8.;

Rose, 2001, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16, 69-100.

<sup>14</sup> Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16.

<sup>15</sup> Rose, 2001, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Rose, 2001, 69-99.

<sup>17</sup> Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16, 69-100.

<sup>18</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; AutismUGA.; Autism umbrella.; Children at Risk, 2012.; Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16, 69-100.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Autism Society 2015.; Autism Speaks 2016.; Burlington Post, 2014, p. 1; Herald, 2015, p. 1; Autism Speaks, 2016.; Autism Speaks Canada, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Autism Society, 2015; Autism Society, 2016.; Autism Speaks 2016.; Autism Speaks Canada 2016.

AutismUGA.; Autism umbrella.; Burlington Post, 2014, p. 1.; Children at Risk, 2012.; Herald, 2015, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 1-13.; Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16, 69-100.

<sup>26</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 1-2, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 2, 5, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 14-15.

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- <sup>36</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 15.
- <sup>37</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 18.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 15.; Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16, 69-100.
- <sup>40</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 29.
- <sup>41</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 14, 29.
- <sup>42</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 29.
- <sup>43</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 14-15, 18, 29-33.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 2, 36.
- <sup>46</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 2, 14-15, 18, 29-33, 36.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; AutismUGA.; Autism umbrella.; Children at Risk, 2012.
- <sup>49</sup> Chandler, 2007, p. 1-20, 36.; Rose, 2001, p. 3, 14-16, 69-100.
- <sup>50</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; Moore, 2008, p.1.; Varley, 1980, p. 187, 201, 213.
- <sup>51</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; AutismUGA.; Autism umbrella.; Children at Risk, 2012.; N. Halifax, personal communication, January 22, 2017.; Varley, 1980, p. 187, 201, 213.
- <sup>52</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; Moore, 2008, p.1.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Moore, 2008, p. 1.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Moore, 2008, p. 1, 51.
- <sup>57</sup> Moore, 2008, p. 1-2.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; Moore, 2008, p.1-2.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Becker, 1994, p. 248.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 800.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>70</sup> Chevalier& Gheerbrant , 1994, p. 800.; Moore, 2008, p. 1-2, 51.
- <sup>71</sup> Murray, 2012, p.62.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Murray, 2012, p. 63-64.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> Jones and Harwood, 2009, p. 5.; Murray, 2012, p. 63-64.
- <sup>76</sup> Silverman, 2011, p. 144-229.
- <sup>77</sup> Silverman, 2011, p. 227-228.
- <sup>78</sup> Silverman, 2011, p. 123-124.
- <sup>79</sup> Murray, 2012, p. 63-66.

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- <sup>80</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>81</sup> Moore, 2008, p. 1-2.; Murray, 2012, p. 63-66.
- <sup>82</sup> Moore, 2008, p. 1-2, 31.; Murray, 2012, p. 63-66.
- <sup>83</sup> Broderick, & Ne'eman, 2008, p. 463-471.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>87</sup> Broderick, & Ne'eman, 2008, p. 463-471. Silverman, 2011, p. 228.
- <sup>88</sup> Heilker, & Yergeau, 2011, p. 489.
- <sup>89</sup> McGuire, 2011, p. ii.; Waltz, 2003, p. 1-8.
- <sup>90</sup> Waltz, 2003, p. 1-8.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Moore, 2008, p. 1-2.; Murray, 2012, p.62-64.; Silverman, 2011, p. 123-124, 144-229.; Waltz, 2003, p. 1-8.
- <sup>93</sup> Jones and Harwood, 2009, p. 5.; Moore, 2008, p. 1-2.; Murray, 2012, p.62-64.; Silverman, 2011, p. 123-124, 144-229.; Waltz, 2003, p. 1-8.
- <sup>94</sup> Autism Society, 2016.
- <sup>95</sup> Autism Society, 2016.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup> Tessen, 2014, p. v.
- <sup>98</sup> Autism Society, 2016.
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>101</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; Waltz, 2003, p. 1-8.
- <sup>102</sup> Autism Society, 2016.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid.
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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>179</sup> Murray, 2012, p. 59.

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<sup>197</sup> Autism Society, 2016.; AutismUGA.; Becker, 1994, p. 246-247.; Biedermann, 1992, p. 281-282.; Cooper, 1987, 1978, p. 39-42.; Grinker, & Mandell, 2015, p. 1-3.; Pastoreau, 2001, p. 181.; Rose, 2001, p. 14-16, 69, 92. Theroux, 1994, p. 1-68.; Waltz, 2003, p. 1-8.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Becker, 1994, p. 226, 315.; Cooper, 1987, 1978, p. 182-183.

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<sup>217</sup> Becker, 1994, p. 226, 315.

<sup>218</sup> Becker, 1994, p. 226, 315.; Cooper, 1987, 1978, p. 182-183.

<sup>219</sup> Cooper, 1987, 1978, p. 182-183.

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List of Appendices

Appendix A: Illustrations of Autism Symbols

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Appendix A

Illustrations of Autism Symbols



Web image of Autism Awareness Ribbon. Autism Society. (2016).



Web image of Autism puzzle piece. AutismUGA.



Web image of Autism umbrella. Google image.



Web image of three coloured rainbow. Children at Risk. (2012).