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## Effective Communication as an Option for a Better Social Functioning for People with Autism from an International Perspective

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*When you read about autism it seems very black and white: 'These children do not form relationships, these children do not interact, these children do not play' and I don't feel it's like that at all - I think that's very misleading. (Carol Potter, Chris Whittaker 2001)*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although issues arising from autism are widely discussed in the literature on the subject, still there is a lot of ambiguity and unknown. In this domain, an intense growth of research has been observed, and it has provided a plethora of facts about autism. Nevertheless, the provided information does not constitute a coherent whole (cf. Gałkowski 1979; Wing and Gould 1979; Kolevzon and Hollander 2008; Błęszyński 2012).

Any disturbances in the communication process have an impact on the fulfilment of social roles. Consequently, these may result in social isolation. Undisturbed communication enables an individual to enter into interpersonal relationships and to fulfil one's needs in the field of social cooperation. Ancient philosophy (Antisthenes, Aristotle) which holds that humans are social beings has evolved into the current philosophical, sociological (Zaniecki, Goffman), pedagogical (Mysłakowski, Suchodolski) and psychological trends (Bauley, Brown).

The discussed topic touches upon the difficulties in communication and social functioning of people with autism. Here, special attention is paid to children and teenagers. The aim of the article is to present the significance and the essence of communication of people with autism as well as to depict the interrelation between communication of these people and their fulfilment of social roles. The key objective of the article is to present the triad of relationships between people with autism, their communication and social functioning.

### 2. COMMUNICATION AS A SOCIAL SKILL

There is nothing like social functioning without effective communication. Currently the correlation between using one's social skills and one's functioning in society is pointed out. The ability to communicate is the essence of interpersonal relationships.

Communication means exchanging one's knowledge, experience and ideas with another person. Such an exchange facilitates understanding of the interlocutor (Jefkins 1993). In the psychology of communication everything that one experiences during communication may be meaningful. Communication is the indispensable to create a system of social interaction. Social interaction covers mostly non-verbal communication. Communicating constitutes a part of every human's life. It is constant, conscious and unconscious. Children acquire the ability to communicate through imitating adults. Adults, in turn, learn how to talk and listen effectively by means of modified communication strategies. Along with the evolution of culture, communication strategies have evolved and affected both coding and decoding information. People acquire and use their communication skills while observing their environment. The better communication, the more goals are achieved. It is significant to know how to talk with other people and how to tackle the message that is received. Communication concerns every aspect of one's social functioning as communication with one's self is impossible

(Rybansky, Prajova 2010). Mikosz in the description of her research claims that people spend most of their lives on sending and receiving messages. Poor communication causes discouragement, withdrawal and loss of energy. The lack of communication triggers conflict between people and poor social functioning. It also concerns people with autism (Mikosz, Fąka 2010).

Communication derives from Latin *communicatio*, and it has got multifarious meanings. It may refer to communication, communicating or it may point to the verb to communicate. *Communicatio* is defined as an exchange, conversation, cooperation. This word has been modified, and its meanings in culture have expanded. Starting with entering community, the exchange of relationships with another person, then participation and linguistic meaning as transmission. Cognitive psychology highlights the view that learning process is not only a transmission of messages and skills, but it also incorporates expanding and modifying the already acquired skills. It is similar in the discussion of communicating. The work of a speech therapist with people with autism is not just about developing linguistic and communication skills, but also to use and modify cognitive schemata that a person has already learnt before the therapy. Münch purports that shared communication is a social phenomenon which has developed rapidly. More and more resources of knowledge are accumulated and published. Consequently, people's awareness to certain issues is raised. The author believes that certain social changes are to occur, and communication is indispensable. To attain a certain goal, social attention should be used (Münch after Retter 2005: 11-12). Upbringing, developing, broadening horizons and improving occurs by means of social discourse. Social relations undergo modifications through communication, and in the context of XXI C. social functioning is accountable for the cultural changes. Globalisation and digitalization is supposed to socialise people and enhance communication. However, many studies (Domeracki, Tyburski, Castells, Bauman) indicate that it is the other way round. Online communication, which should socialize people, causes loneliness. Proper functioning mechanism, which is responsible for regulating human relationships, has a fundamental meaning for one's social functioning. The goal of communication is creating optimal conditions and the environment which will facilitate one's fulfilment in various spheres of social life (Mellibruda 2003).

Communication is a skill of sending messages and answering to them. Communication comprises verbal and non-verbal communication. In the context of people with autism, verbal communication may be based on the communication model proposed by Catherine Kerbrat - Orecchioni (1980). The author has modified classic communication model proposed by Jakobson, and took into consideration both sender's and receiver's language competence, cultural and ideological competence, limiting discourse and psychosocial conditions. The model initiated by Necki incorporates partner's perception, social and cultural conditions, motivation, features of character and interaction (Necki 1992). All factors have an impact on social communication.

### 3. AUTISM

Within 20 years, autism, which classified as autistic disorder in accordance with the latest edition of mental disorders from 2013 by Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, has increased tenfold (ONZ). According to the estimated data compiled by the Centre for Disease and Prevention Control in 2012, the issue of autism concerns 100 000 people in Poland. In Northern Ireland there are currently over 20,000 people living with autism, a rate that continues to increase with an estimated 300 children born each year now likely to be diagnosed with autism in the early life stages according to The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2013). The reason for such an increase in diagnosis in European countries such as Poland and Northern Ireland is due to the widespread knowledge of autism, more effective diagnosis and raised awareness of medical, pedagogical and psychological environment. People with autism exhibit substantial problems in social functioning due to the difficulties in acquiring social and communicative skills.

Maciarz and Biadasiewicz (2000) define autism as a multi-faceted disorder stressing the fact that it varies from one person to another. It is crucial for speech therapists working with people with autism to devise action plans based around the level the individual is at on Autism Spectrum. Bobkowicz-Lewartowska (2005) states that half of the people with autism do not communicate in a traditional way, especially with respect to the social purpose of communication. Individuals with autism find reading one's facial expression difficult. Therefore, they cannot decode one's emotions and intentions, and eye contact, which is a significant factor in communication, is disturbed. Moreover, people with autism exhibit difficulty in initiating and maintaining social interactions while imitating others as well as motor mannerisms (Młynarska 2008). Błęszyński (1994) holds that speech constitutes the basis for

networking which allows for one's participation in social life. Some children with autism do not develop speaking ability that enables communication. This lack of ability is frequently not compensated for non-verbal communication in the form of gestures or facial expressions. The speech of people with autism tends to be echolalia with repetitive sounds, words and phrases (Obuchowska 1999). Echolalia is common in all child development until around 30 months when this stage fades out however those with autism may have immediate or delayed echolalia which is an immediate indicator of language barriers and will continue into later developmental (Hill 2008). Autism from the point of view of speech development is a state of unknown aetiology. Communication disorder affects both sending and receiving messages as well as acquiring language. Consequently it causes social withdrawal. Children with autism require their parents' support and assistance. However, the most important is the therapy provided by the qualified specialists (Pisula 1993). In this context, therapy is understood as a set of undertakings which aim at improving the quality of life of a person with autism. Speech therapy is essential in the process of development of an individual who exhibits deficiencies in language and communication. Speech therapists should incorporate various tasks in order to enhance social functioning. One of the elements of speech therapy is to develop language competence that would result in the proper language usage. Shaping communication skills is a priority as it enables social interaction. People with autism have problems with understanding speech. Therefore, speech therapist is accountable for developing communication skills. Problems with social interaction can be already noticed in the first months of a child's life. Such children often do not react to smile or speech, and they rarely cooperate with others. Some enjoy personal interactions such as hugs whereas others avoid and distance themselves from such situations. Relationships with peers are troublesome. Some children with autism ignore the presence of others, they tend to be withdrawn and engaged in their activities. Playtime activities with peers poses great difficulty, some individuals prefer to be observes rather than active members in activities. Many difficulties stem from the lack of communication, which is observed especially among youngsters as they cannot compensate for it in any other way. Social functioning of a person with autism is complex as a clinical picture is still not precise. In order to understand social interactions, people with autism have been divided into three groups taking into consideration their social behaviour. Another group is composed of passive people who accept the environment, but they do not network spontaneously. Direct echolalia that is characteristic of this group may create the impression of the development of their communication. These people are more interested by the repetitiveness of interaction rather than the content. The last group comprises active people who exhibit certain forms of participation in social interactions, especially with adults. Despite active communication, there appears inability to perform social roles. However, every person should be treated individually (Pisula 1999: 36-40).

People with autism exhibit certain cognitive disturbances which affect the quality of one's functioning in society. Problems with attention and concentration hinder communication substantially. It is hard to get a person with autism interested in a particular situation or subject. Specialists claim that the development of a child with autism is different and unexpected. In certain spheres it may be stable, whereas in others it may stop or regress. In other people, it may be delayed. Developed communication skills are a big steps to further social functioning, and it is the main goal of therapy (Randall, Parker 2010).

The functioning of a child with autism in society is difficult since people find understanding autism problematic. The awareness that people with autism have different perception of life is crucial. Therapy is to introduce people with autism into social life.

#### **4. THE ESSENCE OF SOCIAL FUNCTIONING**

According to sociological theory, a human being is a social being who develops and lives in accordance with the stimuli from the environment. The quality of life depends on the stimuli. The more positive and developing signals from the environment, the better social functioning of an individual. The approach that human being is a loner social organism has changed since the ancient times. Antisthenes, an ancient philosopher, while educating about ponos (hardship, toil) acknowledged that a human being is supposed to overcome the need of social delusions and desire. He claimed that an individual can live solitarily and function without society demonstrating high level of intellectual autonomy at the same time. Aristotle held that a human being living outside society is either an animal or God (Urbański - Korż, 2000: 8). Marx believed that an individual is determined by

social relations, whereas Freud purported that social relations are the reason for human's suffering and failures (ibid. 8). Contemporary theories support the statement that a human being is a significant part of society. Living in society enables people to create and copy culture which constitutes humanity (Turowski 1993: 7). Living in social isolation would mean starting and ending your life as an animal (ibid. 7). Individuals living in a particular culture are influenced by it. They adapt to social norms and follow the conventions. Social functioning allows to accept norms, and acquire certain value system. Consequently, it enables one to participate in social life, coexist with others and achieve social competence. In the course of psychosocial development, one learns communication skills, how to imitate and maintain interpersonal relationships, creating emotional bonds, which is difficult for people with autism. An adaptation process of an individual to social life is regulated by one's relationship with the environment, and the quality of fulfilling one's social role depends on the ability to take up actions that correspond with expectations (Giryński 1989: 16).

Socialisation prepares a person to fulfil social roles. Socialisation enables effective participation in the environment as well as to acquire social skills. It incorporates the aspect of personality development that enables shaping skills that are accountable for cooperation (Turowski 1993). A person who is influenced by parents, specialists and speech therapists through imitation identifies with the environment. The difficulty with imitation stemming from disturbed communication and social interaction in people with autism should be taken into account in speech therapy. A significant factor in the process of socialisation is the family. Family is the basic and the first environment for a child's development. It shapes an individual. In the pedagogical approach, family is believed to be the basic unit, and natural upbringing institution. It is the system of mutual relations since the relationships among members of a family influences other relatives. How about the family of a child with autism? Tolstoy starts his great work *Anna Karenina* by claiming "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (ibid. 8). Therefore, every family constitutes a social group that thanks to emotional bonds, common norms and rules form a unit. Any dysfunctions of a family affect all its members (Turowski 1993: 7).

The environment plays a significant role in shaping one's behaviour as it determines social roles, norms and rules of social expectations. In social psychology, two types of social order are distinguished. The first one is demonstrated by creating positive image of oneself, thanks to which one is accepted by society. The second type of social order is described at best by the claim that social norms that are imposed lead an individual to socialisation and proper social attitude (ibid. 16-17). Life is not a theatre and social roles are not written by a playwright. Social roles are spontaneous inert actions which mirror the quality of social functioning. However, people with autism should be assisted in creating their world and life.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Communication is one of the most important activities in life. Effective communication enhances the feeling of belonging in society, and helps people to identify themselves in social groups with which they exchange ideas, opinions, knowledge and impressions. This allows for creating emotional bonds, interpersonal relationships and finally, to coexist. Effective communication is a vital ability in life since it enables functioning in contemporary society. People with autism exhibit difficulties in communication should be guided properly through the therapeutic process. Some people use verbal communication, other use non-verbal communication, whereas other groups have difficulties with both of the above mentioned forms of communication. Knowing an individual and his/her abilities is crucial in spotting their weak points and future development. Specialists and speech therapists working with people with autism should work on language competence and training social and communication skills which are accountable for social interaction. Social interactions gather people around events, situations or contexts. Early and complex diagnosis of one's difficulties stemming from autism is important. This allows for prevention and therapy. Developing communication skills in people with autism enhances their social functioning and raises the level of the independence in social life. The triad of relationships between a person with autism, communication and social functioning presented in the article sets further steps in the therapeutic work on people with autism. While working with autistic individuals, it would be greatly beneficial for everyone to be able to communicate effectively on a daily basis despite the challenges that often occur in communication as often the outcome is often more rewarding than the initial challenge.

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