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ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-NEUROTYPICAL STUDENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS OFFERED BY POLISH STATE-OWNED UNIVERSITIES. SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY¹

More and more high functioning pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are finishing school, graduating and entering higher education, but in Poland the exact number of these students is still unknown. For academics, especially outside the field of pedagogy and psychology, it is a major challenge to work with students with such dysfunctions. This can activate the social labelling process and negative stigmatisation on the part of people who do not have the knowledge and ability to interact with people with autistic traits. This, in turn, can contribute to perpetuating the stigmatic identity of non-neurotypical students. This article is exploratory. Its purpose is to present the complexity of the situation of students with ASD within the exceptional environment of a university. The inspiration was a controversial article published in a newspaper which evoked a media debate on this issue and activated the process of objectification of social representations of non-neurotypical adults, especially those with autistic traits.

This article focuses on media discourse caused by the controversial article: articles, letters, and responses published in newspapers and newspaper forums; it also comments on legal regulations and assistance programmes.

Keywords: stigma identity, Asperger's syndrome, high functioning autism, social exclusion, integration, media discourse

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INTRODUCTION

Asperger's syndrome is a multifaceted disorder and a hidden intellectual disability. It manifests itself in disorders in the area of an individual's social interactions. It is mostly diagnosed in children between 8–11 years old. However, it is also possible to diagnose younger children and adults (Sławińska 2014). It also happens that medical classification of both high functioning autism (HFA) and Asperger's syndrome are often mistaken. According to the CBOS report "A social image of autism" which refers to data from a questionnaire survey carried out on a representative sample of Poles in March 2018, only 40% of respondents have heard about Asperger's syndrome (CBOS 2018: 1). Asperger's syndrome is often connected with a broader definition of ASD or autism spectrum condition. In colloquial speech and among people with no direct experience of this topic, the term autism is most commonly used.

In Poland, unfortunately, knowledge about the presence of students on the spectrum of autism in mass education systems (at the academic level) is still negligible. Moreover, in the many offices for people with disabilities which exist at Polish state universities, the problem of students with autism is not at all distinguished. (Stefańska-Klar 2010: 92). Epidemiological studies on ASD have not been conducted in Poland. However, we can assume that the indices do not differ from those found in countries of similar culture and geographic environment. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) the average incidence of ASD in individuals is 62/10000, meaning that one child in 160 has autistic features and is therefore likely to be at risk for subsequent disability (WHO 2013: 8). According to British data, the incidence of ASD is 1:88 and among children 1 in 50 (cf. Research Update 2013: 84). However, regarding awareness of the presence of students with Asperger's syndrome and HFA at colleges and universities and their specific needs, there are some foreign movements connected with academic education, much more developed than those which we can observe during the past few years in Poland, who are providing information. For example there are some guides addressed to students with such dysfunctions, their teachers, colleagues and parents published in book form (Wolf et al. 2009, Fitzgerald 2003). Its coverage is global, as it is available on the internet, but the data concern the appropriate academic spaces in the United Kingdom and the United States. At the same time in Poland, relatively much is said about autism in the context of children.

High-functioning adults with autism, including Asperger's syndrome, are almost non-existent in the Polish cultural discourse. This was also highlighted in a document published at the end of 2016 called "The National Autism Inventory", which contained data from a study conducted in 2014 on the situation of people with autism and Asperger's syndrome in Poland. Thus it was one of our aims to find out if the media debate caused by the controversial publication of "Should mentally unbalanced people be admitted to higher education institutions?" by Piotr Nowak caused this issue to be noticed at state higher schools, and the organization of a network of support for students with Asperger's syndrome and high-functioning autism and their teachers.

In the Polish legal system, children with a pervasive developmental disorder, including autism or Asperger's syndrome, are covered by institutional and medical support for social inclusion. A lack of legal solutions and developed forms of support applied on a national scale

targeted at high-functioning adults with autism and with Asperger's syndrome has resulted in social exclusion and self-exclusion. This problem is manifested in, among other things, the relationship between students with Asperger's syndrome or HFA and other people in academia of neurotypical personality, including lecturers and co-students. There was a media discussion that arose after publication of Piotr Nowak's article mentioned above, about the difficulties of an academic lecturer in conducting classes with students, including those with Asperger's syndrome. This led various opinion-forming circles to issue statements for several weeks. It contributed to the activation of media representation of Asperger's syndrome students and HFA students, who had previously been present in intersubjective cultural media on an accusative basis. Nowak's article is pejorative and includes highly stigmatising terms. Although this article has been widely criticised by various social actors (from the extreme negative opinion, which was the most significant, through understanding and support), it has certainly contributed to the launch of a media debate on the presence of high-functioning autistic individuals at higher education institutions. Moreover, the reaction to this article also contributed to the articulation of a positive image of students with Asperger's syndrome/HFA. Hence, it is worth taking a sociological reflection on social representation of such adults.

AUTISM AS A DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDER

The first clinical picture of autism was developed by American psychiatrist Leo Kanner on the basis of an 11-year observation of children referred to the Johns Hopkins Psychiatric Clinic for behavioural disorders. In 1943 he published an article in the journal *Nervous child*, which used the term "congenital autistic disorder of affective contact" for the first time. It was Leon Kanner who proposed a holistic approach to this issue, outlining the differences and similarities between autistic disorders and childhood schizophrenia, which had been treated as one and the same (Pisula 2010: 10).

In 1944, the Viennese psychiatrist Hans Asperger of the University Children's Clinic, in his dissertation, described the case of four boys who had a social disorder, aversion to change, lack of empathy, fixation on a subject, and obsessive tendency towards routine. At the same time the boys had high quotients of intelligence (normal or above average), good speech development and good memories. The researcher classified these disorders as "autistic psychopaths" (Maciarz 2010: 8). The term "Asperger's syndrome" was first used one year after the death of H. Asperger in 1981 (Wing 1981). Wing pointed out that the severity of autism-specific difficulties was not the same for all affected people and introduced the term "autistic continuum". In this way, she emphasised that within its spectrum there are both severe forms of the disorder, and lighter ones that disrupt human development to a lesser extent (Wing and Gould 1979).

Autistic Spectrum Disorder was introduced into the literature by Allen Da in 1988, who used it in the title of one of his publications (Da 1988). Currently Asperger's syndrome is classified in various ways. In the international classification of the 1997 ICD-10, this disorder is defined as one form of autism, and in the DSM-IV classification published in 1994 by the American Psychiatric Association, Asperger's syndrome is termed a distinct disorder.

In the latest DSM-V classification the term Asperger's syndrome is subsumed under a single diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autistic symptoms of Asperger's syndrome include: social interaction problems, low empathy, difficulty in understanding non-verbal communication, narrow interests, and difficulties with understanding speech. This decision is controversial. The removal of Asperger's syndrome as a separate category provoked a heated debate among researchers, clinicians, autistic people and parents (Kite et al. 2013; Linton et al. 2014; Volkmar and Reichow 2013). The autistic community still argues for the distinction between ASD and Asperger's. On the one hand there are movements organised by peoples with Asperger's syndrome with the aim of showing that being "Asperger's" means something different from being "autistic" (Kenny et al. 2016: 451, 453). In this way of thinking, autism is considered to be more severe than the condition of Asperger's disorder (Kite et al. 2013). On the other hand, too many diagnostic labels may lead to chaos. It could cause people to believe that Asperger's syndrome is a lesser form of autism, which can lead to underestimating the seriousness of the situation (Kenny et al. 2016: 453). There are also some argumentations for this change: this narrative emphasizes that the medical classifications of High Functioning Autism and Asperger's syndrome both have often been mistaken.

However in the new, 11th version of the ICD, the term "Asperger's syndrome" is likely to be preserved (Sławińska 2014).

The unexpected changes in DSM V (Linton et al. 2014; Volkmar and Reichow 2013) highlight that the „concept” of autism should be studied more deeply. There is much controversy surrounding this topic. We are not going to refer to all of them, but mention one regarding how we speak about autism. The autism community does not agree on how they want to be named. According to a study in UK (Kenny et al. 2016), the terms 'autism' and 'on the autism spectrum', and to a lesser extent, 'autism spectrum disorder (ASD)', were consistently favoured across all groups (autistic people, parents, family and friends and professionals). There were, however, notable points of disagreement between, and even within, groups, many of which appear to be largely attributable to fundamental differences in beliefs about autism – and disability more broadly.

THE STIGMA OF BEING DIFFERENT, STRANGE AND MALADJUSTED

Asperger's syndrome can be diagnosed from about 4 years of age. This process is multi-faceted. The process of diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder/autism spectrum condition is also multi-faceted. On the one hand, there are people whose autism spectrum traits can be overt and evident from their behaviour, or covert. On the other hand we have the family, the environment in which such a person exists (Drzazga-Lech and Ir 2017). This stigma arises from various behaviours that can be perceived as inappropriate, weird or eccentric. Social reaction to them leads to stigma (Świątkiewicz-Mośny 2010).

Social design concepts have their roots in the works of Frank Tannenbaum, Edwin M. Lemert and John Kitsuse. They point out that stigma (deviation) is not a simple consequence of actions/behaviour, and above all it is not the result of social reactions to them. Their work can be summarised as: "Everyone – to a greater or lesser extent, becomes who

he is considered to be. ‘Dramatising evil’ causes isolation of stigmatised people” (Kojder 1980: 50). Lemert (1951) and Kitsuse (1964) draw attention to the processual nature of social determinism. The first stage (primary deviation) is largely dependent on the social audience, and its reaction to behaviour, which in her opinion is deviating from the norm. This can lead to a reorganisation of personality, self-esteem and the stigma (secondary deviation). The internalisation of new qualities (self-recognition), and the new roles associated with them, build this new identity. This is accompanied by rituals and ceremonies (Erikson 1962). Examples of such a ritual are the following stages of the diagnostic process. In cases of ASD, including Asperger’s syndrome, the diagnostic process is relatively long, a multi-staged and multi-annual process. This moment is a kind of “suspension” of the role (see Parsons 1951). It often starts in childhood. The child and parents are between two worlds – one without the acceptance of improper behaviour (e.g. aggressive behaviour, screaming) and another that provides clarity and justification. Diagnosis can be treated here as a kind of absolution, an acquittal (Punshon, Skirrow and Murphy 2009). The child is not rude; he has a disorder. Parents are not mentally insecure; they are caring for a child with autistic features.

In the case of the underaged, another milestone is to obtain documents needed for special education for Asperger’s syndrome or another type of ASD. The process of obtaining this kind of document involves many visits to medical professionals: neurologists and psychiatrists, psychologists, and pedagogy and speech therapists. Obtaining this document is one of the stages of the diagnostic process. In the process of obtaining the documents many pupils are already participating in therapeutic activities. The new identity has not yet been legitimised by diagnosis, but the process of its creation has already begun.

The document allows the organisation of an individualised process of education subordinated to the therapeutic process. It all leads to a change in lifestyle of the person involved in the therapy process and their immediate family. The stigma of autistic features has a special feature of “spilling over” onto family members (mainly parents). This happens in many other cases when the stigma afflicts a child. Then the identity of the parents becomes stigmatised as well. This is especially true for cases where the diagnostic process has already started in childhood. Thus, the identity of parents as responsible for children also becomes stigmatised.

The process of pre-school, school and vocational education of people with autistic features in Poland has been described in detail at the level of legislation and in educational programmes. Individual educational and therapeutic programmes developed for autistic children are required to include revalidation activities that develop social skills, including communication skills. The same solutions do not apply in the university-level education process.

Therapies result in making certain behaviours that are unacceptable to the public invisible. An adult with autistic spectrum features balances between the visible and invisible stigma. Goffman proposes that stigmata should be treated in terms of relations rather than attributes. There are 3 types of attributes that are strongly discredited: ethnicity, character traits and appearance, and body deformities (Goffman 2005: 4). In different situations and in different relationships these attributes can but do not necessarily contribute to the stigma. In this way, it is possible to speak of explicit emblems that Goffman calls discredited, and hidden discourses that can remain a mystery, discreditable. The term Asperger’s is an attribute with both explicit and hidden attributes. A person with autistic spectrum features is constantly

(consciously or not) confronted with the dilemma: “Show, do not show; Say, do not say; Betray, do not betray; Lie, do not lie; And in every case, to whom, when, and where” (Goffman 2005: 42). One space in which this choice is particularly relevant is the academic world. It is in the context of social life, subordinated to the requirements of higher education, that the process of integration of non-neurotypical patients with neurotypicals is fully realised. In state higher education institutions in Poland there are no separate “special classes“ to which individual categories of units would belong.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF AUTISM

In 1963 Serge Moscovici suggested that instead of studying the opinions of a representative group for a given community, we should start to study social representations. Social representations are defined by how the community elaborates the social object, which should work as a source of behaviour and communication (Moscovici 1963: 251). They both construct reality for social groups and are constructs of these groups: they build constitutive elements of reality. Their construction takes place in the process of communication among group members, when social representations are created, transferred and modified. At the same time, their existence allows this process: it is the reference to common shared representations that makes the meaning of facts and opinions understandable and common for members of a given group. “[...] from the dynamic point of view social representations appear as a ‘network’ of ideas, metaphors and images, more or less loosely tied together” (Moscovici 2000: 153).

Social reality neither exists objectively nor does it exist in units; it exists through its social representations and therefore in processes characteristic of social groups (Trutkowski 2000: 7). We can say that social representations display prescriptive and standardizing properties. They are generated by two basic cosio-cognitive communicative mechanisms: anchoring and objectifying. The first one makes the unknown known. Anchoring makes “something” comparable and interpretable by bringing it into a well-known sphere. Objectifying makes the unknown known by transforming it into something concrete, which is for us (society, group) perceivable, touchable, and controllable (Moscovici 1984: 24). By anchoring we can distinguish naming, thematic anchoring, anchoring in antinomies and anchoring by metaphors. Through objectification we can distinguish emotional objectification and personification.

Social representations are not “opinions about”, “images of something” or “attitudes towards something”. They are rather models of reality common to many individuals in a given group, which are used to discover and organize reality (Moscovici 1973: xiii).

Social representations concern something that is important for a given social group. However, they are dependent on communication processes and as such can become the object of such communication even against the will of the group or individuals belonging to this group. The “object” of social representation is conceived and perceived simultaneously as a symbolic reality and as a significant reality. Their basic function is to consolidate and to extract the group. The term ‘group’ is used here in a broad way: its boundaries are determined by sharing social representations. The most important function of social representation is to

make the behaviour, events, ideas, issues, and problems understandable and integrate the isolated units into one whole (Moscovici 1973: xii).

Some media researchers have pointed out that the theory of social representations should be in wider use in this field of humanistic knowledge (Höijer 2011: 3–16). We agree with that opinion and propose that it can be used as a theoretical background into research on new media content. Today, in the time of online communication, which also includes social media, media images of some controversial issues, which consolidate many individuals connected with them, seem to function as social representation. We think that such a situation took place when the article “Should mentally unbalanced people be admitted to higher education institutions?” by Piotr Nowak, published in the Plus Minus supplement to *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper (7/8.01.2017), triggered a media discourse in the press and on social networking sites about the occurrence of high-functioning individuals with autism, including those with Asperger’s syndrome, as university students. Social representations may be full of thought fragments and contradictory ideas. Everyday thinking about something may be characterized by different, even opposite, ways of thinking, according to the concept of cognitive polyphasia (Hoeijer 2011: 5). Thus we do not expect to find one comprehensive definition of autism that will satisfy, nor an answer to the question of how people with autistic traits should study. However, we assume that our exploratory analysis will contribute to the disclosure of a problem that has thus far been absent from the Polish scientific discourse and the public debate. Moscovici makes a distinction between hegemonic representations, emancipated representations and polemic representations. The first one is shared by most of the members of a political party, a nation, or other structured macro-unit. The second refers to subgroups that create their own version of an issue, e.g. of health and illness in traditional and alternative medicine. The third is related to social conflicts, struggles between groups and controversies in a society (Moscovici 1988: 221). It is interesting to find out what kind of social representation was evoked by the publication of Piotr Nowak’s essay.

The study will focus not only on the media discourse on autistic students, but also on the laws that regulate the status of such students, and the university-based programs to assist people with autism. The study is exploratory and covers a relatively short period of time (from 7.01.2017 to 12.02.2017). By concentrating on such a chosen period of time, we want to show the multi-levelness of the discourse. Stoked by a controversial article in supplement to a daily newspaper, the media hype has triggered another environment. The article has become an impetus to formulate a position by social actors who had not previously given their opinions.

The data, the analysis of which is presented in this article, consist of online press publications (some of them were also printed in traditional way); 15 newspaper articles, statements and official letters to editorial office of “Rzeczpospolita”; 18 documents, and attached to them 896 comments from Internet users. By analysing the press publications, official letters, statements and comments of Internet users we want to find out what kind of social representation it evokes. We have also analysed applicable legal regulations in Poland regarding persons with ASD. We want to find out if there are some regulation and state support for adults with autistic traits or Asperger’s syndrome who want to study. Moreover, it was one of our goals

to verify what kind of support for people with ASD² (students/employees) and their lecturers/co-workers/colleagues is offered at state-owned universities in Poland. We have analysed web-sides of 55 Polish state universities/academies³.

STUDENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDER. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social changes in Poland, also in the education system, are leading to the fact that more and more people with developmental disorders including Asperger's Syndrome and HFA will take up studies. The universities should be prepared to work with such students. It is one of our goals to verify if they are.

LEGAL REGULATIONS

Autism as a type of disability first appeared in the rules of educational law in 2005, and Asperger's syndrome in 2010. In the first and second of the acts the term "autistic person" or person "with autism, including Asperger's syndrome" appears once, in subsection 2.1, when referring who the nursery schools, special schools or special departments are created for. There is no separate section in this document that would address the specificities of education for people with autistic features. The right to education and the rules for organising learning for students with autism is governed by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of April 2, 1997 (Article 70), the Education System Act of 7 September 1991 on the Education System (Articles 1, 5, 5a, 14, 14a, 17, 58, and 71b) and the ordinance issued by the Minister of National Education. However, university education for high-functioning individuals with autistic characteristics and those with Asperger's syndrome is not regulated by separate legislation or passages. A separate document was adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Poland on July 12, 2013, the Charter of the Rights of Autistic People. It contains a section on accessible, free and adequate education, but there is no direct reference to ensure that people with autism or Asperger's syndrome have the opportunity to study at a higher school adjusted to their needs.

The Parliamentary Group on Autism was established on the 15th of February 2012 by the Polish Parliament. Meetings of this group are called when needed and not less than once per quarter. During the cyclical meetings this group discusses the adaptation of the Polish legislation to the needs of people with autism. However, the work focuses on changes in the social assistance system, social and occupational rehabilitation, intensive care for adults with autism (completely dependent) and access to special vocational education. It is therefore important to draw attention to the situation of individuals with autism, including Asperger's syndrome, who have the intellectual standard and the capacity to undertake university studies. Their way of functioning within the lifestyles of a higher education institution may differ

² This information relates to the period when the main opinion-forming Polish dailies were involved in discussions on ASD students 5.01.2017–12.02.2017.

³ This information was collected in the first half of 2017.

from typical and it can activate the process of negative stigmatisation and being labelled as deviants. This issue is of particular importance when, by means of mass communication, it gains the status of an intersubjective, available narrative. It is therefore worth analysing what content prevails in this type of discussion. In analysing the media discourse, the content of legal acts and programs of higher education, we pay special attention to the presence of the terms of the dissemination of negative stigmatisation of people with autism as well as phrases promoting the social inclusion of people with autism.

In institutions of higher education operating under the laws of the Republic of Poland the process of integrating people with disabilities with fully functioning people is completely realised. There are no “special classes” or “integration groups” to which people with developmental disorder could be assigned.

There is also lack of any programmes for lectures at universities. As pointed out in the article, professors and neurotypical students are not prepared to interact with students with developmental disorders or other disabilities. Because people with autistic characteristics may behave in an unusual ways, they may be exposed to negative stigma or even discrimination. This may encourage activation of the stigma identity acquisition process. This danger is real, especially when the lecturer, the person who leads the group, and therefore the leader of the students’ social group, does not have the knowledge and practical ability to interact with a non-neurotypical person. It is therefore important to examine whether there are support systems in Polish higher educational institutions for people with autism, their lecturers, and other participants of academic life.

ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

The study was conducted at university units, activities and support programs that enable students with autism traits to take up, pursue and graduate from university studies. There is 19 public universities in Poland, 5 public universities of Economics, 18 public universities of Technologies, 5 public universities of Pedagogy, 6 public universities of Environmental and Life Sciences, 6 public academies of Physical Education, 8 public academies of Music/universities of Music and 11 public academies of Art.

Unfortunately, not all state universities have a separate, and even more, extended unit for people with disabilities. Jagiellonian University runs the Constellation of the Lion and the Constellation Station, which is dedicated to the study of people with mental disorders, including schizophrenia. The extensive support formula that is offered to students, faculty, and university staff allows one to hope that an autistic person can also receive help.

A similar program of support for people with mental problems is carried out at the Pedagogical University KEN in Cracow. An extended offer of support for students and academic lecturers is also described on the website of the University of Natural Sciences and Humanities in Siedlce, where the Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of the Disabled has been operating since 2003. It provides multidimensional help to students and lecturers, as well as speech therapy. University of Siedlce defines itself as the first integrated university in Poland. This can be taken as publicity, but also as a focus on the need to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities and developmental disabilities at the higher education level.

However, only some (exactly eight) state higher schools provide their students and staff with mental health support. It is worth paying attention to the internet portal *Więc jestem* (in analogy to *Cogito ergo sum*), a student development service run by the Student Service Centre at the University of Silesia, where students and Ph.D. students can obtain psychological help, by access to texts and the possibility of consulting a therapist. Moreover, a workshop dealing with Asperger's Syndrome and Savoir Vivre was organised at the University of Silesia in 2013, as a part of the project *Co nas spina? (What is it that binds us? prevention and information campaign)*. It was led by Monika Kłeczek, President of the Asperger's Association for Children and Asperger's Syndrome and Related Disorders AS. A short interview with her about living with Asperger's syndrome is available online, and students and co-workers had also possibility to participate in individual specialist consultations with her

Few institutions have raised the issue of autism on their websites or have published press materials demonstrating their support for the process of social inclusion of people with autism (five higher schools). This contrasts with the fact that postgraduate studies for teachers providing qualifications to work with autistic persons at all levels of education are very popular. The rare presence of solutions for the adaptation of high-functioning individuals with autistic features, including those with Asperger's syndrome, and the scant support for lecturers in aid activities carried out by state higher education institutions may indicate a lack of awareness of this problem among those responsible for the content and practical activities of university units and Rector's proxies for disabled students. The National Autism Inventory has been made available through a recently launched website (the end of November 2016) with a special focus on reaching out to high-functioning individuals with autism, including Asperger's syndrome. The research, however, was conducted in 2014. A consortium of staff was created to deal with this question. It involved the employees of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Physical Education, Sport and Rehabilitation of the Eugeniusz Piasecki Academy of Physical Education in Poznan, the Society of Social Innovation "Mary and Max", and Titanis LLC. The project was funded by the National Centre for Research and Development. The purpose of this research project was to get to know the situation of adolescents and adults with autism in Poland, and thus the process of education in higher schools. As part of the project, the "Max and Mary" volunteer program for people with autism was promoted. Surprisingly, only one of the websites of the universities we have checked – the Warsaw University of Technology – had information about the students' ability to obtain such support. An interesting initiative worthy of dissemination is the "Student Café Opportunities – *Więc jestem*" (in analogy to *Cogito ergo sum*) – an internet portal currently under the auspices of the Student Service Centre of the University of Silesia, which contains Adam Wrzesiński's articles from 2013. Now Adam Wrzesiński is a graduate of the Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry of the University of Silesia in Katowice, a Master of Science and a therapist in the Asperger's Association for Children and Asperger's Syndrome and Related Disorders AS. In 2013 he was a student with Asperger's syndrome.

There is no statistical data on the number of autistic individuals, including Asperger's syndrome, who study or have graduated from higher schools. Data contained in a document of the National Autism Inventory (Płatos 2016) indicates the existence of such students. Among

over 100 respondents with autistic features there were 19 people who were either studying or completing some stage of study. These were people aged 19–34. Eighteen were diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and one with atypical autism. Most of these people (58%) positively assessed their contact with lecturers. Secondly, their participation in the class was positively valued (47%). Only 37% of the respondents positively rated their contact with other students. Academic activity related to the need of interaction with colleagues was relatively rarely undertaken by autistic individuals. However, only those who had successfully coped with the study process were included in the study, so these results do not adequately reflect the barriers that autistic people may face while studying at universities. It is significant, however, that the study also revealed the problem of harassment of students with autism (ignoring and avoiding contact: 47%, insulting: 37%, ridiculing: 26%, instrumental treatment and destruction of personal belongings: 5% (Platos 2016: 43–44). This demonstrates that non-neurotypical individuals are exposed to academic exclusion by the co-creators of student life as well as to the process of self-exclusion, when non-neurotypical students experience the absence of sufficient psychic power and the will to survive.

A compilation of information contained in The National Autism Inventory on the functioning of autistic individuals in the role of students and the media image of Polish state higher education institutions outlined in the offer of support addressed to students with disabilities and their lecturers and programs allows us to hypothesise that under current conditions, individuals with Asperger's syndrome who choose to study at university are exposed to a process of negative stigmatisation, which can contribute to the activation of the stigmatised identity process. This danger is especially real when the media-driven narrative becomes intersubjectively available.

It is noteworthy to compare the activities undertaken by Polish state universities for students with Asperger's syndrome and HFA with activities carried out by selected foreign centres. There are some publications to guide members of academic life with autistic traits and those belonging to the neurotypical majority in United Kingdom (i.e. Wolf et al. 2009), United States (Barnhill 2014: 3–15). There are also some scientific articles, which investigate whether the implemented solutions are practical or need some improvements. Unfortunately there is a lack of such publications on a national scale in Poland. Moreover we can find in the online sphere some solutions that provide the knowledge base for those individuals with autistic traits who want to start/continue/graduate from studies at the academic level in the United States (<https://collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms/>). This solution is on a national scale. There are also scholarship opportunities at superscholar.org for students with autistic traits on the academic level, including degree level (certificate/diploma, doctorate, master's, bachelor's, associate's). Simultaneously there are no similar prospects for adults with such dysfunctions who want to study at Polish state universities. Some guides/articles (University of Warsaw, BON, *Trudności i sposoby wspierania studentów z zespołem Aspergera*, added: 21.07.2017) and a brochure (University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska in Lublin, *Student z autyzmem w społeczności akademickiej*, added: 25.01.2018) appeared on the websites of Polish state universities after hectic press and online debate at the beginning of 2017, its scale is not comparable to those realised in foreign countries, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States.

MEDIA DISCOURSE

The debate about the specific of functioning of students with autistic traits at Polish state universities online in the press was evoked by Piotr Nowak's publication "A lesson with a "lunatic" in "Rzeczpospolita" daily (5th January 2017). After more than a month, the author published explanations for this text (12th February 2017). During this period 15 newspaper articles were published in popular Polish opinion-forming dailies and weeklies, referring to the text of Professor Nowak and its issues. Moreover 18 official letters to the editor board of "Rzeczpospolita" daily and statements were sent/published by institutions acting for people with ASD. Those activities were widely discussed in online space: 896 comments from Internet users. We think that this scale of reaction is significant. Our hypothesis is, that it strengthens the social representation of the students with HFA or Asperger's syndrome generating discourse about developmental disorder.

The article aroused very intense emotions and triggered a discussion that involved many circles (associations supporting the spectrum of autism such as the Foundation Synapsis, Prodeste Foundation, Association for Asperger's and their Families, representatives of the academic community and the Polish Psychiatric Association). The article has been analysed and a discussion has taken place around it, both in the press as in social media. In press there were articles related to the text *A lesson with a lunatic...*, open letters, petitions and blog posts. Because the study material was published on the Internet, it was also possible to analyse the comments.

The writers and commentators are both journalists and people declaring themselves as living with Asperger's, parents of persons with Asperger's syndrome, who also refer to the social status of this disorder, and people connected with associations and organisations supporting individuals with Asperger's syndrome.

The article that triggered the discourse was published in the entertainment section of the newspaper. In it the narrator, an academic, is talking to a colleague who has an Asperger's syndrome student in his group. The author uses pejorative terms, such as mad. It seems these have caught attention and caused the excitement, as most of the press articles, blog posts, open letters and petitions are related to them. Nowak's column is relatively long, at three pages. It is written in the convention of conversation. The author is talking on a train to Białystok with a fellow PhD who works at the fictional University of Popielno. The colleague complains about a student who has documents confirming Asperger's syndrome and behaves inappropriately (bothering, screaming, making other noises during class). The non-existent university was to be a symbol concentrating on the pain of Polish higher education. A small college in the periphery, the eastern outskirts of the country, leading the so-called humanist directions, accepting all without exception, to maintain its status quo. Moreover, the university in Popielno administers young technocrats who look only at the law and do not understand the ethos of the university and its proper culture. The author refers primarily to Foucault, but also to Durkheim, M. Mead, R. Benedict, and H. Arendt. This is a legitimate view through scientific knowledge.

Below the text there are over 100 comments, which are largely critical of the article. Internet users focus primarily to the terminological inaccuracies, the misrepresentation of

information, and the fact that Asperger's syndrome and autism are not diseases. The author of the article explicitly mentions mental illness, interchangeably uses words such as unbalanced, insecure, mentally impaired, mad, mentally ill, a person with mental dysfunction and a person with social dysfunction. Mantra-like, commentators say that autism is not a disease and a developmental disorder. Just like Prof. Nowak, they are trying to argue their beliefs. In this context, the names of famous people with autism (Einstein, Lionel Messi and others) appear.

Only three commentators agree with the author's thesis about the need for limited discrimination that would regulate access to higher education. According to Nowak, physically disabled people should be allowed to study, but not those who are mentally ill. University is not therapy: its aim is to educate generations of intellectuals, the author claims.

The *Rzeczpospolita* article was very emotional. The replies appeared in newspapers, websites or blogs such as *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Polityka*, *Wp.pl portal* and *the Synapsis Foundation webpage*. Professor Nowak has become a symbol of evil, an enemy of people with autistic features. He is being criticised for a lack of knowledge and competence, and a lack of morality, empathy and human kindness. The authorities of the university and the editorial board of *Rzeczpospolita*, do not share Prof. Nowak's views, emphasising that they are private views of the author. Open letters and petitions have been signed, demanding at least an apology from Prof. Nowak.

We know something about the background from an article. It turns out that Nowak's long text did not immediately arouse emotions. It must have been several days before it hit the Facebook boards. This was caused (according to Luisa Luniewska, the author of an article posted on wp.pl 17.01.2017) by Nowak's students. They claim that they know the individual from the text (the person with ASD, who in the text the professor calls a madman). They do not think that this student is a problem to anyone, except for the professor. They are worried about how their colleague, who has been publicly ridiculed, will react. This article also includes comments, which are definitely positive this time. Internet users agree and applaud the text posted on the wp.pl website and at the same time support its rhetorical power by adding their arguments and trying to define Asperger's syndrome and decide whether it is a disability.

The texts responding to Prof. Nowak focus on pejorative terms such as: "crazy", "madman", "mentally ill", and "insane". These are stigmatising terms. Nowak writes:

We have to learn from madman how to behave as antisocial, counter-cultural civilisation. Lunatics of all countries, unite in collective, all-encompassing madness!

Do they (other students) see it? Part of them do; others do not care or are so scared of the correct ideology that they take the side of the madman. They have fun [...].

To live among human beings we just need some caution and common sense. Unbalanced people are devoid of both of these characteristics; therefore, we should refer to them with sympathy and understanding and we must stay away from them (Nowak, 05.01.2017).

These fragments indicate how strongly polarised the author's position is, but let us not forget that the article is written in the convention of a column, rather than an appeal. We suppose that the iconoclastic fragments of the text are placed there deliberately to renew the

cultural discourse. This is shocking because it is shocking to break the apathy, the state of indifference and universal ignorance.

On the one hand, organisations affiliated with or supporting individuals with autism strongly oppose disseminating the negative stigmatising terms used in the article. On the other hand, one can treat professor's statement as a specific diagnosis of the state-run universities, the frustration, confusion and lack of preparation of university staff and other participants in the academic community to interact with people with autistic characteristics.

The reception of this text undoubtedly launched media discussions on the presence/absence of students with Asperger's syndrome at state universities in Poland, but some of the discussion and comments have transformed the meaning of the press statement by over-emphasising excerpts from it.

Nowak's article stirs emotions which are mostly negative. Commentators underline the inappropriateness of the concepts used. Even in the comments under the articles it is difficult to find unambiguously negative terms, but there are a lot of negative terms referring to the author himself. However, he has no voice. He cannot defend himself. There are not many people speaking on his behalf. Other communities in the newspapers and on the Internet are not supporting the views of Prof. Nowak. One may suppose that in the social dimension there has been a kind of reversal. The reaction of various social actors to reject, negate the negative stigmatising narrative contained in Nowak's article, thus counteracting the dissemination of the image of a person with autistic characteristics as a person with stigma, has become a stimulus for the creation and dissemination of a narrative which explicitly stigmatises Prof. Nowak, making him a symbol of "bad things" that happen to autistic individuals whenever they are labelled in a negative and discriminatory way, because others lack knowledge and competence about "atypical", and "bizarre" activities in the area of social life. It may be assumed that the dissemination of this type of speech, aimed at fighting an academic lecturer, whose media image has been transformed into "the torturer of students with autism/Asperger's Syndrome" supports the process of social exclusion of non-neurotypical students. It has contributed to the dissemination of unambiguously negative terms that have been used in a media-induced debate. In addition, the verbal weapons used in the fight for individuals with HFA, a group defined as marginalised, even if one believes that it is the right fight, contributes to the escalation of extreme attitudes, clearly condemning the neurotypical majority rather than seeking understanding.

Nowak's column was, however, also an incentive to disseminate statements that showed a positive image of students with Asperger's syndrome /HFA. Particular attention should be paid to an article on the website of the Synapsis Foundation. In a text that has the character of popular science, it has been pointed out that there are no two identical individuals with autism or two identical ones with Asperger's Syndrome, so in the higher education process it is important to address each non-neurotypical behaviour individually. It has also been suggested that the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, in Polish terminology, Global Development Disorder, does not indicate the pathological nature of individual traits, but rather a different way of functioning, as emphasised by the followers of the British trend, who use the acronym ASC (autism spectrum condition) instead of ASD (autism spectrum disorder). Some specific individuals with Asperger's Syndrome or high-functioning autistic people

who have successfully completed higher education have been described and it was pointed out that they had overcome specific difficulties in their academic life. This is an example of an informative activity that promotes the integration of non-neurotypical students with neurotypical participants in academic life (Burgas, Grochowska, ASD Individuals, Synapsis).

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the number of students with developmental disorders attending universities is growing, we strongly recommended:

1. Implementing programs for students with Asperger's syndrome and HFA:
 - as programs at universities are more flexible than in secondary schools, we propose preparing a series of workshops on the functioning of the university and on how to find oneself at university;
 - we suggest social-skills training adapted to young adults;
 - preparing a kind of university manual; in some universities there are special welcome week/month programmes to help students adapt to new conditions, show how the university works and what is expected of newcomers; a university manual could be the published version of a 'welcome week'.
2. Implementing programs for neurotypical students: a series of workshops about developmental disorders with precise instructions on how to behave and not behave. Generally students would like to cooperate, but they are limited by a lack of knowledge and competence.
3. Implementing programmes for professors and lecturers: a series of workshops or at least leaflets about developmental disorder and some suggestions on how to cope with students with ASD. Professors at academia in Poland are first of all scientists and researchers. Many of them do not have any special teaching training. They are masters in teaching but they rely on their own experience, which is in most cases adequate, but not in the case of students with developmental disorders, when specialized teaching techniques should be used.
4. A nationwide website with information about each state and non-state academic institution and its support for students/co-workers with autistic traits and their lecturers/co-students/co-workers. This exists in the United States (<https://collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms/>).

SUMMARY

Asperger's syndrome is a multidimensional disorder. The social knowledge of these dysfunctions is relatively low in Poland, although systematic initiatives for its dissemination are being undertaken. However, skills and competences in the area of social contact with non-neurotypical individuals are lacking. In the area of legislation, work to facilitate the functioning of people with disabilities, including autism, is underway.

Universities have set up units that support the education of students with physical disabilities. Programs dedicated to people with mental health problems or developmental disorders are not common (or are not shown on the university website, which in turn may indicate their low availability). The article that underpins the discussed discussion is proof that the support that universities offer to students and employees of state higher education institutions in the field of mental health is not sufficient.

The exploratory analysis of the press material related to Professor Nowak's article has shown that there is very strong social support for people with autism and a lack of acceptance for discrimination on the grounds of autism. At the same time it should be noted that the comments supporting students with Asperger's syndrome students were also often stigmatising, as they repeated pejorative terms. In analysing the press materials from this brief period from 05.01.2017 to 12.02.2017, we observed how the process of stigmatisation of autism was incorporated into the media discourse and interwoven into it. The identity management that Goffman (2005) discusses has become even more difficult. The analysis of the collected materials has shown that there is an urgent need to develop a support mechanism for students with autism and intellectual standards for students with Asperger syndrome. This is an area worthy of further exploration. There is a danger of permanent identity stigmatisation among students with autistic disorders unless they receive individual support from those who are familiar with both theoretical and practical academic assistance. We believe that ASC students can be treated as representatives of a marginalised environment threatened by social exclusion.

The publication of Piotr Nowak's essay in *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper evoked a different type of social representation. Firstly it was addressed to all of Polish society, while the problem of the status and quality of academic education applies to all of us. So at the beginning it could be understood as contribution to the discussion about the need for changes in education at the academic level – moving away from mass education towards elitism. Although reception of this essay has led to objectification of social representation of the autism community, in which the voices of therapists and parents of children with autistic traits was dominant. However, there were some important statements published by adults with ASD or HFA. Thus we assume that Nowak's essay was an impetus to reveal social representations of adults with autistic traits. Within the autistic community, which is marginalised because of strangeness of the disorder, there is subgroup of high functioning autistic adults, which is doubly excluded in Poland, considering both peculiarities of behaviour and age. What can be recognized as emancipated representation. It is noticeable that we have found not only comments against the content of Nowak's article but also for it. On the other hand, some reactions, mostly comments by Internet users, were aggressive and addressed to the author personally, instead of discussing the content of the essay. It reveals that there are some conflicts and controversies between the neurotypical majority and non-neurotypical minority and even within the autism community (Drzazga and Mośny 2018). However those problems should be studied more deeply. There is a need to organise the empirical qualitative research with students with autistic traits. It is necessary to find out what kind of anchoring and objectification is characteristic for this narration. These, however, are problems for further research, as they go beyond the scope of an exploratory article.

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ANALIZA MEDIALNYCH REPREZENTACJI STUDENTÓW NIENEUROTYPOWYCH
W KONTEKŚCIE WSPARCIA DLA OSÓB Z ZABURZENIAMI ZE SPEKTRUM
AUTYZMU, OFEROWANEGO PRZEZ POLSKIE PAŃSTWOWE UCZELNIE WYŻSZE.
STUDIUM SOCJOLOGICZNE

Artykuł ma charakter eksploracyjny. Jego celem jest zaprezentowanie złożonej sytuacji osób z zaburzeniami ze spektrum autyzmu, które decydują się na podjęcie studiów na polskich państwowych wyższych uczelniach. Inspiracją do podjęcia tej tematyki była publikacja kontrowersyjnego artykułu *Czy ludzie niezrównoważeni psychicznie powinni być przyjmowani na uczelnie wyższe w „Rzeczpospolitej”* (dodatek „Plus Minus”) (7.01.2017) autorstwa Piotra Nowaka. Reakcja na tę publikację na łamach prasy i w mediach społecznościowych w okresie od publikacji tekstu (7.01.2017) do zamieszczenia wyjaśnienia (sprostowania) (12.02.2017) przybrała formę debaty publicznej, dlatego podjęliśmy próbę zgromadzenia wypowiedzi interesariuszy, których to zagadnienie dotyczy, i analizy treści tych wypowiedzi w kontekście społecznych reprezentacji S. Moscovici. Aktorzy, którzy zaangażowali się w dyskurs, związani są przeważnie z organizacjami wspierającymi osoby z zespołem Aspergera albo szerzej: osoby z autyzmem. Analiza materiału pokazuje, w jaki sposób dyskurs medialny radzi sobie z wykluczonymi społecznie osobami z tożsamością napiętnowaną.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość napiętnowana, zespół Aspergera, wysoko funkcjonujący autyzm, wykluczenie społeczne, integracja, dyskurs medialny