DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH AUTISM IN POLAND

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Abstract

The term autism has been known in Poland for more than 30 years now but the common knowledge of this disorder is very poor. Organisations working for autistic people which want to emphasize the low public awareness of the specific nature of autism often refer to such persons as “invisible people.” This phrase reflects both, the way in which autistic people are functioning in social and professional spheres. It shows their social isolation and false acceptance. Isolation and social exclusion which is experienced not only by the people with autism but also their families is, in the first place, a consequence of their unpleasant experience whenever they behave inadequately to the actual situation and are perceived as being rude or quirk.

The aim of this paper is to show the main problems experienced by autistic people in their surrounding world and to increase the awareness the fact that attitudes and legislation need to be changed if we want to prevent further discrimination and exclusion of people with autism.

People with autism increasingly often take part in various spheres of public life, but their presence in different communities generates both, positive and negative consequences. These consequences often lead to discrimination and exclusion of autistic people and, eventually also to their victimisation.

Despite numerous measures and campaigns promoting anti-discrimination policies in Poland, people with autism often all the time fall victim of broadly defined violence which comes from the surrounding communities.

This analysis of the above problems relies on literature which discusses the prevention of discrimination, exclusion, and victimisation of autistic people in Poland. The main research methods used by the author of this paper include an analysis of the relevant literature, and a comparative study of theoretical, empirical, and specialist studies described in that literature.

Keywords: Autism, Discrimination, Exclusion, Victimology.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of autism has been known in Poland for over 30 years now but still the public knowledge of the problems is rather poor. In order to stress the deplorably slim public knowledge of the problems of autism, organisations working for the autistic people use the phrase “invisible people” (Buława-Halasz, 2017). This term refers to both, the social and professional functioning of people with autism and it very clearly shows their isolation within their communities which all the time pretend to accept them. Social isolation of autistic people and their families is a consequence of unpleasant experience they get whenever they behave inadequately to the actual situation and are perceived as being rude or quirk.

The aim of this paper is to indicate the main problems experienced by autistic people in their environments and to spread the awareness that a change of attitudes and legislation are required to prevent further discrimination and exclusion of people with autism. Autistic people increasingly often take part in various spheres of public life but their presence in different communities and functioning next to disabled persons on various planes generates not only positive but also negative consequences. The negative consequences may lead to such experience as, for instance, broadly defined overt or latent aggression coming from other members of the community. Special attention should be paid to problems connected with the participation of autistic people in the public sphere. Despite numerous measures and campaigns referring to anti-discrimination policies, people with autism often continue to fall victim of broadly defined violence done to them by their communities. We can assume that getting a true picture of problems troubling people with autism is possible by way of studying the phenomenon of discrimination, exclusion, and victimisation, and by defining the relation...
between these phenomena. This assumption allows proposing the following research hypothesis: victimisation of people with autism is a frequent fact but discrimination and social exclusion of those people plays a significant role in the intensification of that phenomenon (Płońska, 2019).

2 METHODOLOGY

The author of this paper carried out an analysis of the relevant research views and evaluation of the literature to identify the key features of the question discussed and also described its essence, purpose, advantages, and disadvantages.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Discrimination of people with autism

Discrimination should be interpreted as unfair and systematic action intended by the dominating group to retain its privileged position. It should be noted, however, that not every unequal treatment is the same as discrimination. This phenomenon may also occur when it has no legally justified purpose or when unequal treatment takes place in uneven proportions. Some differences in the rights of two or more groups may be considered discrimination only when there is significant similarity between those groups or their situations. But limitations dictated by prejudice are unacceptable, though (Burek, Klaus, 2013, Płońska, 2019).

Burek and Klaus (2013) also identified some causes of this phenomenon. They distinguished the following causes: social or cultural patterns stemming from superstition, custom, stereotypes, prejudice and other practices based on the conviction that one group is superior or inferior to another group. These authors also made a general observation on the forms of discrimination and they distinguished: direct and indirect discrimination, harassment (sexual harassment included) forcing to discriminative behaviours and reprisal against a person who has used the respective anti-discrimination law (Burek, Klaus, 2013).

Discrimination may have different roots and occur in different spheres of life. There are a variety of attitudes towards people with autism which depend on the type, circumstance, and intensity of the disorder, and also on the consequences it entails. We can also see the following, among other things: overt and deliberate segregation of people according to their disability or appearance and giving the same treatment to all people whatever their individual ASD-related features, and we also see the attitude of overprotection and extraordinary distinction given to autistic people (Płońska, 2019).

Symptoms of discrimination of people with autism are seen in many such spheres as education, family life, cultural life and employment. There are also barriers: no inclusive education available at all levels, no teachers trained to work with students suffering from different stages of autism, vocational education not addressing the potentials of autistic students, limited access to basic health services, different forms of health care, advanced therapies, etc.

The first generation of people who were diagnosed as autistic at childhood, received their therapies, and went to dedicated schools is now reaching maturity in Poland. This generation runs across many problems on their way through life because there are no reasonable proposals for their further functioning in society which may actually be the reason why the recent years have seen a dynamic growth of interest in the specific way autistic adults are functioning in the community. While in the case of little children with autism we can speak about dignity in access to diagnosis, therapy, education, rehabilitation, and all other forms of public aid offered them by foundations, special and inclusive schools, day care centres (by the way, these are unevenly distributed across the country) autistic people aged over 25 suddenly become “invisible” to the Polish support structures. For years, the attention of experts in various fields focused on the difficulties autistic people had in establishing social contacts, communication, and in having unusual interests and behaviours, especially when they were children. But autism stays with those people for all their lives. Stigmatisation and rejection of people with the Autism Spectrum Disorder from social contacts is widespread, though heterogeneous. Autistic adults get more criticism from others than children which gives them even more frustration and spoils their self-estimation. According to a report published by JiM Foundation, people suffering from ASD accept their autism, they have tamed it, and do not want to change themselves but apart from acceptance, they also need support from the community (Szymańska, 2016).
3.2 Exclusion of people with autism

Exclusion is a situation which makes it difficult or impossible for autistic people to carry out their social roles, use public resources, and secure their living in dignity. The dimensions of exclusion experienced by autistic people lie in the economic, political, and social plane and also in the awareness (Szarfenberg, 2008). It is, sometimes, the result of mistakes in choosing one’s own life path. Parents of children with autism sometimes push themselves into exclusion because they deliberately isolate their children from the rest of the community. They often do so because they are ashamed, see people’s aversion when they and their children show up in public places, see fingers pointed at their children, and hear impolite remarks. Peers make up an environment of exclusion where discrimination of autistic people occurs most frequently. The processes of discrimination taking place in peer groups usually acquire the form of isolation, cyber violence, physical violence (spitting, pushing, hitting) active separation of students, acceptance of school situations in which autistic students are excluded from important school activities, such as, expensive excursions, participation in off-school activities, as access to these is more difficult for students living far from their school. The above experience is especially frequent in representatives of other creeds, religions, children from foreign families, and the disabled. They get unequal treatment because of such features they have, as: the degree of disability, (physical and mental) health condition, social and economic status, and other relatively stable features which decide of who a particular individual really is, what group it belongs to, and what group it identifies itself with. People with these features who belong to the above-mentioned groups are at risk of discrimination, violence, isolation, or perception obscured by stereotypes.

3.3 Victimisation of people with autism

Getting a true picture of problems troubling people with autism is possible by way of studying the phenomenon of discrimination, exclusion, and victimisation and by defining the relation between these phenomena. Thus, we should take a closer look at the phenomenon of victimisation, that is, the question of man’s exposure to the danger of becoming a victim of crime. The science investigating the role of victim as a source of crime, factors increasing the susceptibility to become a victim, and methods of preventing wrongs is called victimology (Blachut et al., 2004). From the viewpoint of victimology, the concept of victim can be interpreted in a broad way.

According to Brunon Holyst (2000) the term victim can be attributed to persons who suffered a wrong or loss, while victimisation takes place in unclear circumstances or can be a result of complex relations. Consequently, victimisation is when somebody suffers a wrong or loss as a result of an event which causes the wrong and can be initiated by (an)other individual(s). When somebody experiences violence, we cannot speak about a one-off instance of victimising a person who has suffered violence but rather about a process of becoming a victim or a process of assuming the role of a victim. The process of victimisation usually begins at the moment when violence is done but it does not end at the moment when violence is over. It modifies the identity of a victim and reshapes its own perception. Victimisation twists the nature of the victim’s relations with other people and reduces its self-estimation. A possible effect of personality changes triggered by the process of victimisation is assuming the role of perpetrator (Mirska, 2009).

Factors responsible for committing crime by autistic children include, in the first place, isolation, social immaturity, sexuality, lack of reliable information about sexuality, low self-estimation, and susceptibility to fear and depression. Autistic children clearly find it difficult to understand social convention and make friends. Students in almost every classroom include individuals who are quick to provoke, harass, reject, or humiliate others. When seeking to integrate, craving for acceptance and respect of their peers, autistic children often get alienated and then ridiculed. Temporary isolation is hard to bear but extreme social exclusion has a destructive impact on the autistic person’s sense of its own value. A child isolated from its companions may tends to comfort itself by taking shelter in its alternative world of imagination where it can build its personality. This situation most frequently concerns persons with high-functioning autism and with the Asperger syndrome. Isolation slows down social maturing but sexual maturing progresses fast. Most teenagers with the Asperger syndrome, as well as healthy children who are rejected from their peers on other grounds, use the computer as the source of important knowledge and entertainment. Here the Internet comes in as a link between the world outside and the safe home. But it steadily becomes a substitute for a human friend. Inability to enjoy inter-human contacts makes the Internet a guide through erotic experience while pornography provides instruction.
Obviously, this situation not only causes irreversible health damage to the autistic under-aged but it also involves dangers of legal nature. The situation of harassment may also follow a different scenario. A child with autism may become a victim. Therapists believe that incidence of crime committed by autistic persons is low but their inborn naivety and susceptibility to external influence more frequently turn them into victims of other people. British studies show that 82 per-cent of highly functioning people with autism or the Asperger syndrome fell victim of violence in 1982 (Attwood, 2015). Harassment may lead an autistic person even to death and it is the number one cause of suicides committed by teens with the Asperger syndrome.

An additional threat coming from the Internet is that sex offenders visit the chats and social portals where they can make new contacts. The risk that an autistic person falls in complicity with crime is rather high because such a person often reads the surrounding world in a strictly literal way. The dangers facing autistic people who use the Internet include: meeting in real world with friends made on the Internet, sexual abuse, or loss of personal data. People with autism who have problems with understanding or identification of the unfriendly intentions of other people often wrongly read such intentions and go on precisely doing what they are told completely oblivious of the potential consequences of their behaviour (e.g., they publish erotic photographs). Inappropriate sexual behaviours may also cause problems resulting from breaching the law. This includes such behaviours as sexual activities performed in public space, touching and caressing without permission of the other person, assault, compulsive masturbation, and sexual obsessions. The Autism Spectrum Disorder also affects the understanding of what the permission is and this is associated with a disturbed theory of mind, in other words, the ability to identify various psychological conditions, and correct ascribing of thoughts, judgments, and emotions to others. The disturbed theory of mind leads to a wrong judgment of actual situations and then it leads to inappropriate behaviours. Surely, not all autistic people are equally interested in sexuality. But in some of them sexuality acquires a new dimension and grows into obsession. This may take the form of a range of disorders: using pornographic materials, voyeurism, compulsive masturbation, pushing for sexual contacts, craving for intimacy, or recurrent fantasies. If these needs are not satisfied, frustration comes in together with alienation and depression. Factors increasing the risk of sexual assault or improper behaviours mentioned by Attwood (2015) include: lack of respect among peers, lack of knowledge about sexuality, problems with recognizing and understanding potential threats, problems with knowing which behaviours are right and which are wrong or criminal, isolation, craving for intimacy and attention, economic, physical, and psychological dependence, poor inter-personal skills, inclination for submission and observing the rules, indecision, poor control of one’s own life, little respect of oneself, being unaware of the right to refuse when told to do certain things.

All these features are highly attractive to potential criminals. Victimisation is rarely a result of incidental meeting between a criminal, who may not be planning any crime at the moment, and an innocent victim who just found itself in a wrong place at a wrong time. In most cases, crime has its source in the victim’s risky behaviours, getting mixed into risky social interactions, and also in certain predispositions which seem to attract criminals. All these factors are behind susceptibility to victimisation and therefore they play a key role in originating crime (Płońska, 2019).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of victimisation refers to a variety of social groups, hence the main purpose of studies in victimisation is to discover the victimogenic risk factor. We can distinguish the main groups of such factors: spatial, situational, related to the individual’s lifestyle, and those related to its physical, psychological, and social characteristics. The identification of these factors is vital in building preventive programmes and measures designed to bring about a real, not false, social integration with autistic people. The aim of such prevention is to provide places where healthy and autistic children can function next to one another and where families of autistic children are not excluded from their local communities or circle of acquaintances, and where early detection of any violence is ensured. This can be achieved through education and sexual education provided to persons with autism and to their families. Social acceptance of maltreatment given to autistic people, acceptance of violence done to them is, among other things, caused by the rejection of that group because changing of social attitudes towards autistic people must begin with the promotion of prevention rules through general social education. The process of including the autistic persons into society, ensuring their proper place and acceptance, should comprise providing optimum conditions of functioning adjusted to their individual development potentials.
REFERENCES


