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I don't have to prove anything anymore: Love and closeness in the relationships of people on the autism spectrum – narrative analysis

Introduction

People on the autism spectrum experience challenges in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships. Despite the alleged communication and emotional difficulties, research increasingly shows that these people are capable of creating deep bonds based on mutual understanding¹. The literature

¹ S. Baron-Cohen, S. Wheelwright, *The autism-spectrum quotient (AQ): Evidence from Asperger syndrome/high-functioning autism, males and females, and normal sex differences*, "Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders", 34(1), 1999.

on the subject emphasises that the process of self-acceptance is crucial for building satisfying relationships, but also enables the redefinition of concepts such as love and closeness². Contemporary research on intimate relationships increasingly addresses the experiences of people on the autism spectrum in the context of building closeness, love and acceptance of one's own identity.

People with autism spectrum disorders often face the challenge of combining their own unique perception of the world with social norms and expectations. Traditional models of relationships based on forms of communication and the expression of emotions do not always meet the specific needs of these people. Therefore, using the narrative research approach, based on the analysis of stories about oneself and one's relationships, allows the deep, subjective experiences of participants to be captured, thus enabling an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of building closeness³.

The title statement "I don't have to prove anything anymore" refers to the process of accepting one's own personality and identity, which in the context of relationships become crucial for people on the autism spectrum in building closeness and love. The international literature emphasises that the relationships of people with autism can be equally satisfying, although they require adaptation to specific social and emotional barriers⁴. In Poland, the issue of relationships between people on the spectrum is gaining attention, and while research is still in its development phase, the topic has been addressed by, among others, Dąbrowska and Mikołajczyk⁵.

This article aims to analyse the narratives of a couple in which the partners are on the autism spectrum in order to better understand how experiences of love and closeness are expressed in the context of the challenges associated with autism. People with autism spectrum disorders often face the challenge of combining their own unique perception of the world with social norms and expectations. Traditional models of relationships based on forms of

² Tamże.

³ C.K., Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, Sage, 2008.

⁴ F. Happé, U. Frith, *The weak coherence account: Detail-focused cognitive style in autism spectrum disorders*, "Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders", 36(1), 2006.

⁵ A. Dąbrowska, R. Mikołajczyk, *Relacje międzyludzkie w spektrum autyzmu: badania polskie*, „Psychologia Społeczna” 9(2), 2016.

communication and the expression of emotions do not always meet the specific needs of these people. Therefore, using the narrative research approach, based on the analysis of stories about oneself and one's relationships, allows the deep, subjective experiences of participants to be captured, thus enabling an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of building closeness⁶.

In adopting a narrative perspective, researchers point out that stories about one's own experiences are not only accounts of facts, but are, above all, an expression of identity and the way in which individuals construct their emotional lives. In the context of the topic under discussion, the statement "I don't have to prove anything anymore" can be understood as the moment when an individual achieves full acceptance of their features and limitations, and cease in the fight to confirm their worth with regard to their surroundings. Such a change in perspective has significant consequences for the quality of relationships – it enables authentic bonds to be built based on mutual understanding and respect, and not on the need to fulfil imposed social roles⁷.

The theoretical context of research on the relationships of people on the autism spectrum indicates several key aspects. Firstly, the role of cognitive and emotional processes, which may differ from standard models of functioning, is important when interpreting interpersonal behaviour. Secondly, the emphasis on the narrative aspects of identity building allows us to identify moments of transformation when, instead of trying to prove his or her worth, an individual decides to adopt an authentic attitude. In this way, the narrative becomes a therapeutic and research tool at the same time, enabling a deeper understanding of relationship dynamics⁸.

In the face of the growing number of studies on the relationships of people with autism, it is extremely important to compile research achievements from different regions of the world. An interdisciplinary approach, combining psychology, sociology and communication sciences, allows us to show both the universal and specific mechanisms that shape intimate relationships. This study focuses on the analysis of the narratives of couples who emphasise in

⁶ C.K., Riessman, op. cit.

⁷ F. Happé, U. Frith, op. cit.

⁸ A. Strauss, J. Corbin, *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*, Sage, 1990.

their stories that the moment of giving up the need to prove one's worth is the foundation for building a lasting and satisfying relationship. On the one hand, references to the results of international research make it possible to illustrate the global picture of the phenomenon, while on the other – a review of research conducted in Poland allows the local specificities and challenges faced by the studied groups to be captured⁹.

Analysis of research in Poland and around the world

Research conducted internationally is an important reference point for understanding the specificity of intimate relationships among people on the autism spectrum. The English-language literature emphasises that despite difficulties in communication and emotional expression, people with autism are able to establish deep and satisfying relationships. Authors such as Happé and Frith focused on the conceptualization of so-called “weak coherence” – a specific cognitive style in which individuals focus on details at the expense of the overall picture of a situation. In the context of intimate relationships, this means of processing information may influence the way bonds are built and the partner's behaviour is interpreted¹⁰.

The role of narrative in shaping identity also remains an important aspect of research. Riessman emphasises that stories about oneself are a key element in building self-knowledge and influence the way individuals interact socially¹¹. In research on the intimate relationships of couples, especially those on the autism spectrum, narratives reveal mechanisms of transformation – from the moment an individual begins to perceive their features not as deficits, but as an integral part of their own identity, to the moment when they reach a state in which they do not feel the need to prove their worth¹².

Subsequent research has shown that acceptance of one's identity and changing personal narrative are crucial for the quality of intimate relationships. In studies using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, researchers

⁹ A. Dąbrowska, R. Mikołajczyk, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ F. Happé, U. Frith, *op. cit.*

¹¹ C.K., Riessman, *op. cit.*

¹² F. Happé, U. Frith, *op. cit.*

discovered that the breakthrough moment in the lives of the studied couples was the adoption of the attitude "I don't have to prove anything anymore". Such a turning point allowed for a reduction in the internal tension resulting from the need to constantly confirm one's value and, consequently, opening up to authentic emotional closeness¹³.

To sum up, international research indicates that key aspects such as self-acceptance, authenticity and the ability to transform negative self-narratives are the foundation for the building of satisfying intimate relationships among people with autism. These results are important not only from a theoretical perspective, but also from a practical one – they open the way to creating dedicated therapeutic interventions that can support both individuals and couples in the process of acceptance and building relationships¹⁴.

In Poland, the issue of intimate relationships of people on the autism spectrum is gaining importance, although the number of studies in this area is still limited compared to foreign research. In recent years, however, studies have appeared that address the issue of building closeness and redefining identity in the context of couples' relationships. For example, research conducted by Kozłowski and Nowak used narrative methods to analyse the stories of couples

in which one of the partners was on the autism spectrum¹⁵. The authors indicated that the central element of the narrative was the transformation of personal perception - the transition from perceiving one's characteristics as limitations to considering them as an integral element of individuality. The key statement "I don't have to prove anything anymore" emerged as an expression of inner freedom and authenticity that enabled couples to build deep relationships despite differences in how they communicated and experienced emotions.

Other studies, such as those by Dąbrowska and Mikołajczyk, focus on the social aspects of the functioning of couples in which one of the partners is

¹³ M.O., Mazurek, S.M. Kanne, *Friendship and internalising symptoms among children and adolescents with ASD*, "Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders", 40(11), 2010

¹⁴ S. Baron-Cohen, S. Wheelwright, op. cit.

¹⁵ J. Kozłowski, A. Nowak, *Narracja jako metoda badania relacji interpersonalnych w związkach osób z zaburzeniami ze spektrum autyzmu*, „Psychologia Kliniczna” 15(3), 2018.

a person with autism. The results indicate that these couples often have to renegotiate established social norms, which involves the need to redefine roles in the relationship. The authors emphasize that developing authentic communication and mutual support is the key to overcoming barriers related to functioning in society¹⁶. This process is often associated with the moment when partners decide to abandon the social pressure of proving their worth, which allows them to experience closeness more fully¹⁷.

In Polish research, aspects related to the ways in which couples communicate their emotions also turn out to be particularly interesting. Unlike traditional models, where verbal expression of feelings dominates, autistic couples often use non-verbal communication, which ultimately leads to the creation of unique strategies for building closeness. In qualitative narrative research, participants emphasised that authenticity and mutual acceptance were the foundations of their relationships. Reaching a state in which they do not feel the need to constantly prove their worth allows them to create a space where understanding and emotional support prevail¹⁸.

Both international and Polish research indicate several universal themes appearing in the narratives of couples with autism. Regardless of the cultural context, the key aspect is the process of self-acceptance, which allows a person to break down internal barriers and open up to building authentic relationships. The statement "I don't have to prove anything anymore" emerges as a symbolic summary of this process, at the same time constituting an expression of emancipation from social expectations¹⁹.

At the same time, the analyses indicate some differences resulting from cultural and social conditions. Foreign research often pays attention to cognitive and neurological mechanisms that influence the way information and emotions are processed in people with autism²⁰. In turn, Polish research more often focuses on the socio-cultural aspect of relationships, emphasising

¹⁶ A. Dąbrowska, R. Mikołajczyk, op. cit.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ K. Nowak, *Miłość bez barier: Wyzwania i szanse w związkach osób z autyzmem*, „Psychologia Współczesna”, 12(1), 2014.

¹⁹ F. Happé, U. Frith, op. cit.

²⁰ S. Baron-Cohen, S. Wheelwright, op. cit.

the importance of renegotiating roles and methods of communication that correspond to the specific conditions of functioning in society. As a result, despite a common theoretical foundation, research in Poland shows greater emphasis on intersubjective and social aspects, which may result from both the cultural and methodological conditions adopted by Polish researchers²¹.

The literature on the subject also reflects on the role of social support in building intimate relationships. Both international and Polish studies emphasise that the key element is mutual understanding and the ability to communicate one's own needs without having to constantly confirm one's worth. In practice, this means that couples who achieve a state of inner self-confidence are better prepared to cope with the challenges of living in a society that often does not accept differences²².

Research assumptions

The method used in the research was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves combining phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography in accordance with the research assumptions. Phenomenology makes it possible to identify the main components of a phenomenon or experience that make it unique or distinguishable from others. It provides the opportunity to recognise which of the basic components make a given phenomenon unique. Hermeneutics allows for the interpretation of known phenomena. The subject tries to make sense of phenomena in their world, and the researcher then tries to decode this meaning by making sense of the interpretations created by the subjects. Meanwhile, idiography assumes an in-depth analysis of a single case by exploring the individual perspective of research participants²³.

The most important goal of IPA researchers is a thorough analysis of the detailed, rich narrative about the experiences of the people being studied and

²¹ J. Kozłowski, A. Nowak, op. cit.

²² M.O. Mazurek, S.M. Kanne, op. cit.

²³ I. Pietkiewicz, J. Smith, *Praktyczny przewodnik interpretacyjnej analizy fenomenologicznej w badaniach jakościowych w psychologii*, „Czasopismo Psychologiczne” 18, 2012.

how they make sense of their experiences²⁴. This method is used to study small groups selected by purposive sampling. It is important to note that due to the unique nature of the research problem, which has not been explored before, analysis of a single case is permissible. This situation allows the researcher to present original problems and the mechanisms of action of the individual or experience, providing the opportunity to expand knowledge about them and their reactions, and experiences, and making it possible to consider various aspects of the narrative. This selection is consistent with IPA recommendations²⁵.

The subject of this study was the experience of love and closeness by a couple on the autism spectrum. Autism research is increasingly conducted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Thanks to this method, we can better understand the individual experiences of high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum²⁶.

Hence, the aim of the study is to identify and describe the experiences of closeness and love in the relationship of people on the autism spectrum, in this case, a couple (a woman and a man) with autism. The authors were interested in what meaning the couple gave to the sense of closeness and love in their relationship, and what their path was to self-acceptance, authenticity and the ability to transform negative narratives about themselves. It was important to show how this changed during the relationship, that is, how the couple communicated their needs and emotions in the process of building deep relationships despite differences in the methods of communication and the ways of experiencing emotions.

The main research problem was therefore expressed in the question: How does the respondent experience closeness and love in their relationship while being on the autism spectrum, and how do they interpret their experiences of being the partner of a person who also has autism? The study used a non-standardised, semi-structured interview.

²⁴ M. Larkin, R. Shaw, P. Flowers, *Multiperspectival designs and processes in interpretative phenomenological analysis research*, Qual. Res. Psychol, 16, 2019.

²⁵ I. Pietkiewicz, J. Smith, op. cit.

²⁶ K. Howard, N. Katsos, J. Gibson, *Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in autism research*, "Autism" 23(7), 2019.

Study participants

Magdalena is 23 years old. She was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder four years ago. Previously, she was treated for depression for several years. She has been in psychodynamic therapy for three years. She has been in a relationship with Jakub for four years. This is her first partner with whom she plans a future (marriage, family). They had known each other earlier and were friends. Magdalena studies computer science and dreams of working as a computer games programmer. She has extensive knowledge about autism. She knows the strengths and weaknesses of her relationship. She shares her experiences (the path to diagnosis) and observations on how to build relationships with other people, becoming active on social media and being a member of groups working for people with autism.

Jakub is 24 years old. He was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder nine years ago and since then he has been in therapy (individual, group), and is currently in cognitive-behavioural therapy. He has been in a relationship with Magdalena for four years. This is his second partner with whom he plans a future (marriage, family). They knew each other earlier and were friends. Jakub is also studying computer science, previously he studied economics (he started his studies at the suggestion of his parents, but after the first year he stopped because he decided that he was not interested at all). He would like to study graphic design and plans to pursue this as a professional career. He knows the strengths and weaknesses of his relationship, but unlike his partner, he does not like to share it with others, he does not use social networking sites, but he respects and accepts his partner's activity on social media. He agreed to participate in this study, saying: "maybe it is really important for other such couples or people who want to be in a relationship that you can be together like this, it's nice to be together, love and support each other".

Research procedure and data analysis

The study participant attended individual therapy, where she was offered the opportunity to participate in the study, which she immediately agreed to,

and asked her partner, who also agreed. The interviews were conducted separately on the same day, so that the couple could freely comment on their relationship without having previously discussed it with each other. The interviews took place in a pleasant, calm and trusting atmosphere, especially since the researcher is a therapist who conducts the above-mentioned therapy. Both Magdalena and Jakub were informed about the purpose of the study, were assured of its anonymity, the recording of the interviews, and the possibility of their publication, to which they agreed. Magdalena was the first to take part in the study, followed by Jakub. The interviews enabled the collection of information about human experiences, in this case, the sense of closeness and love in a relationship where a couple is on the autism spectrum, as well as an attempt to interpret the facts and the way in which the respondents experience and understand being together in a relationship.

In this case it is a special experience because it concerns an unusual woman-man relationship, where both the subject and the person studied are people on the autism spectrum. The interviews with both Magdalena and Jakub began with the question: Tell me what it's like to be in a relationship? This question directed the narrative, and the researcher's role was to insert a question from time to time, which was rather a request for more specification of the statement. The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes. The narratives were dominated by periods of uninterrupted recounting of the subject's own experiences. The interviews were recorded, then listened to many times and transcribed verbatim.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted and prepared in accordance with IPA guidelines: 1) repeated reading and taking notes, 2) identifying topics from the notes, 3) searching for relationships and grouping topics, 4) writing a report (Pietkiewicz, Smith 2012). The analysis of the interviews shows three main themes in the form of quotes extracted from the couple's narrative. This research material showed the experiences of closeness and love between a couple on the spectrum – the most important subject of the study.

Topic 1: Knowing who I am is the key to relationships

Magdalena began her narrative with the words: “Today, first of all, I know who I am and I can have a boyfriend... I have autism, this knowledge about myself allows me to love, and now I know that I am loved”. I have certain features and someone who understands them, and few people have the same things, and that brings us closer (...) Because knowing who I am is the key to relationships. In her statement, she reveals that diagnosis and self-knowledge help her to open up to others and relationships. They make a person understand themselves and their feelings, and they want to give them to someone else. She lists some common characteristics of autism spectrum disorders, focusing on the common ones that she believes bring them closer together. This affects their mutual respect, and their tolerance of their differences. Notable is the time before the diagnosis, which was a time of lack of self-understanding, a time when the subject felt unaccepted, which made her feel worse than others and strange, and as a result, she had no motivation to enter into relationships with others.

I'm Aspie, I'm smart, I have my own special interests that absorb me and my Kuba. I'm bad at programming, and Kuba likes it, he's also amazing at it (...). We can talk for hours or even be silent and somehow I feel great about it, I don't get stressed about having to say something, I can't stand such stupid conversation blockers. I always felt bad about it and I didn't know why, I was terribly afraid to talk to anyone, especially with boys, because I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to talk about anything like that. It was stressful, ...and now I know that sometimes I also inundated others with my hobbies and I was not very interested in other people's interests (...). Whenever there was silence in a conversation, I felt like I was handicapped, I didn't know what to say and that fear... I couldn't overcome it. I'm also afraid of unplanned situations, Kuba and I plan everything right away, we like it that way. The funny thing is that he and I don't like surprises, they're weird and stressful. Kuba often tells me what present he wants for his birthday and he is happy when I give it to him. And vice versa, I also tell him what

I want, sometimes I even show it to him on the website and he orders it for me (laughter). It's OK for us.

Kuba has problems with food, he is very selective, and I am a glutton. I can eat everything, but it doesn't bother me, when we go out to eat, I remember what he likes and what he doesn't, sometimes he doesn't eat anything, he just drinks juice and I eat and it's fine. He doesn't even complain about the smell of meat, but he doesn't like it very much. I also don't eat meat very often around him because I know that he is so sensitive about it.

In his narrative, Jakub emphasizes the bonds that connect them and the changes that took place in his life after Magdalena's autism diagnosis, which significantly influenced their relationship. It marks the closeness and understanding that unites them. This is what he says about it:

I think that if it weren't for Madzia's diagnosis, we wouldn't be here today. I knew her before and I was convinced that she was autistic like me, that she had a diagnosis. I was shocked when she told me that she didn't (...). When she brought up the topic, she started to trust me more, there were a lot of conversations, she felt different. I think that if she didn't understand herself, she wouldn't be close to anyone. I trust her very much; she is the person I would like to be with because we understand each other well and love each other.

Topic 2 The spectrum of love

In Magdalena's narrative, there was a strong reference to different shades of love, changes that took place over time, and the support she gives and receives. These changes took place within the relationship, beginning with a sense of doubt whether a relationship between two people on the autism spectrum makes sense, to joy, closeness and intimacy in the relationship. There were words about opening up to your partner's needs. The most difficult period in their relationship was her mother's lack of acceptance of her partner. It was a very depressing period in her life and if it hadn't been for Jakub's support, she wouldn't have finished high school, she wouldn't have passed her

high school final exams and she wouldn't have gone to college. Over time, it got better, and the key moment in her self-acceptance and happiness in the relationship was starting studies and moving to another city. Now she knows that her depression resulted from a lack of self-acceptance and an unmet need for love. It was people's social attitudes and reactions, as well as their comments that had a negative impact on her self-perception.

It took us a long time to be able to not worry about what other people think. Now talk about the fact that I have autism, but at the beginning it was kind of hard (...) When my mother and her friends found out that Kuba was not just a friend, they broke down and got angry, they shouted at me that I should find someone normal (...) You know, she told me that someone with autism is not normal, and what about me? Then she said that I was very, very smart, but I needed a boy who could handle everything, and there would be two socially disabled people (...) That hurt me terribly, it was the year I passed my secondary school leaving exams, I didn't have the strength to go to school, and if it hadn't been for Kuba, I wouldn't have been able to do it (...) Everyday conversations, phone calls, writing. And finally, for a half-year in the fourth grade I was at risk of failing for two semesters, I got accepted into computer science (laughter), I didn't believe in it so much. My studies were my escape from my mother's questions about Kuba and how I imagined the future. We have been together for four years and I know that these are the best four years of my life, he is my friend and my love.

Topic 3 It's easier together

Magdalena's narrative reveals a positive attitude towards the relationship of a couple who have autism spectrum disorder. It indicates the strengths of the relationship, including common interests, acceptance and understanding of other behaviours, and emphasises love. The woman eagerly talks about the fact that she sees their future positively and knows that if she takes care of her relationship, they will be together and support each other: Actually, I'm glad that we are a couple, such an unusual one, we like almost the same things, we get along great, we don't argue, we respect, support and love each other. If we take

care of ourselves like this, we will definitely succeed, because why not, because of what, autism? (...) Today I know that together it is easier, simply better.

Jakub also emphasises that he wants to be with Magdalena: (...) we have a common space and that's good, we also have a common future ahead of us as a couple. I don't have to prove anything anymore, I know who I am and who I want to be with.

Summary

The couple's narrative revealed the experiences of closeness and love associated with a couple on the autism spectrum being in a relationship. Analysis of the interviews revealed three main themes:

1. Knowing who I am is the key to relationships – personal experiences reveal the path to discovering Magdalena's autism spectrum, they also influence her process of self-acceptance and openness to relationships with other people.
2. Spectrum of love – feelings, especially love, give meaning and a future to a couple that accepts their differences and individuality. The narrative reveals the difficulties associated with building a relationship when the closest people are not accepted. The range of emotions that accompanied building the relationship makes it more conscious and mature, thus bringing hope for the future of the relationship.
3. It's easier together – love, closeness and tolerance of differences make a couple want to be together.

Comparing the collected research material with published data from previous Polish and foreign studies, it transpires that the experiences of the couple studied do not differ from the experiences of couples on the autism spectrum described in the literature (in a few studies), which usually concerned one person, a partner with autism. In this case, when the couple consists of both a woman with autism and a man with autism, it turned out that the process of self-acceptance is also a key aspect, allowing for internal barriers to be broken down and enabling the partners to open up to building authentic relationships.

Niczego już nie muszę udowadniać: Miłość i bliskość w związku osób ze spektrum autyzmu – analiza narracji

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł to doniesienie z badań, którego celem było poznanie doświadczeń miłości i bliskości w relacji osób w spektrum autyzmu. Zastosowaną metodą była Interpretacyjna Analiza Fenomenologiczna (*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*), w skrócie IPA. Dane zostały pozyskane z wykorzystaniem wywiadu swobodnego niestandardyzowanego, częściowo ustrukturyzowanego. Analiza przeprowadzonych wywiadów pokazuje trzy główne tematy: wiedza kim jestem to klucz do relacji; spektrum miłości; razem jest łatwiej. Wspomniane tematy przybrały formę cytatu wyodrębnionego z narracji pary. Tak opracowany materiał badawczy pozwolił na ukazanie doświadczeń bliskości i miłości w parze osób w spektrum.

Słowa kluczowe: bliskość, miłość, para, spektrum autyzmu

Abstract

This article is a report from research that aimed to explore the experiences of love and closeness in the relationships of people on the autism spectrum. The method used was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, or IPA. The data was obtained using a non-standardized, semi-structured interview. The analysis of the interviews shows three main themes: knowing who I am is the key to relationships; the spectrum of love; together it is easier. These topics took the form of quotes extracted from a couple's narrative. This research material showed the experiences of closeness and love between a couple on the spectrum.

Keywords: closeness, love, couple, autism spectrum

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