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Adults with HF-ASD in Loving Relationships – A Research Report

Abstract

Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience a need for loving relationships, however they face problems in engagement and family functioning. The presented study was based of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. 38 adults with high functioning ASD [16 females (42%) and 22 males (58%)] aged 18 to 47, voluntarily and anonymously participated in the study. Two measures were used; the AQ (*Autism Spectrum Quotient*) and the Test of the Triangular Theory of Love. The results showed that among adults with HF-ASD, the intensity of love components is not correlated with autistic symptoms. On the basis of the presented findings, it might be concluded that the intensity of autistic features was not found as a variable affecting love components. The presented survey strives to fill the gap in this field of autism research. However, this preliminary outcome should be verified in wider research with more controlled variables.

Key words: High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder, adulthood, loving relationship, Triangular Theory of Love

Wysoko funkcjonujący dorośli z zaburzeniami ze spektrum autyzmu w związkach miłosnych – doniesienie z badań

Streszczenie

Dorośli z zaburzeniami ze spektrum autyzmu (ASD) odczuwają potrzebę tworzenia związków, lecz równocześnie doświadczają trudności w angażowaniu się w funkcjonowanie rodziny. Prezentowane w artykule badania, w których uczestniczyło 38 wysoko funkcjonującym dorosłym z ASD [16 kobiet (42%) i 22 mężczyzn (58%) w wieku od 18 do 47 lat, zostały osadzone na gruncie trójczynnikowej teorii miłości opracowanej przez Sternberga. W badaniach wykorzystane zostały dwa narzędzia: Test czynnika autyzmu (Autism Spectrum Quotient) i Skala miłości R. Sternberga. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują, że u wysoko funkcjonującym dorosłym z ASD intensywność składników miłości nie pozostaje w związku liniowym z objawami autystycznymi, co może sugerować istnienie bardziej złożonych zależności pomiędzy nasileniem charakterystycznych dla autyzmu objawów, a czynnikami miłości. Prezentowane badania stanowiły próbę uzupełnienia brakujących danych w dziedzinie badań nad autyzmem, lecz ze względu na ich wstępny charakter uzyskane wyniki wymagają

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dalszej weryfikacji przy użyciu metod jakościowych oraz przy ścisłej kontroli zmiennych pośredniczących.

Słowa kluczowe: zaburzenie ze spektrum autyzmu, dorosłość, związek miłosny, trójczynnikowa teoria miłości

Introduction

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is currently diagnosed in 1.43% of children below the age of 8 (Christensen et al., 2016) and a rise in diagnosis in the general population is expected (Kim et al., 2011). People with ASD experience difficulties in making and maintaining interpersonal relationships, recognizing and expressing emotions, communicating, and reading the thoughts and feelings of other people. They may also be hypersensitive to sensory stimuli (Grandin, 1995; Grandin & Panek, 2013). These characteristics have a strong influence on the ability to establish lasting, interpersonal relationships, from childhood and adolescent friendships, to satisfying, long-term, loving and intimate relationships in adult life (Aston, 2012; Attwood, 2012).

In spite of many difficulties, high functioning adults with ASD often want to understand and experience social relationships, including love, intimacy, and sexuality (Aston, 2003; Attwood, 2008; 2013). Involvement in close relationships, alongside work, responsibility for ones own decisions and behaviour, and being a member of the procreational family, are important developmental tasks in adulthood (Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Havighurst, 1981; Levinson, 1986). It was previously assumed, that individuals with ASD would most likely not achieve traditional, long-lasting relationships such as marriage, family, and children (Mesibov, 1985). In spite of considerable difficulties in social development, many people with HF-ASD experience intimate relationships, build long-lasting romantic relationships, and engage in marriage (Slater-Walker & Slater-Walker, 2002; Hénault & Attwood, 2006; Edmonds & Worton, 2005). In the few studies conducted with ASD, case analysis and data gathered through interview revealed, that adults are involved in long-term relationships (Aston, 2003; McIlwee & Myers, 2006; Attwood, 2012), however there is limited research in the field of long-lasting relationships.

Research objectives and questions

The study² was designed to analyse the romantic relationships of adults with ASD through the Triangular Theory of Love. Love, understood in the context of the Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986; 1988), consists of three components namely: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Intimacy refers to closeness, connectedness, and the creation of bonds. It is accompanied by the feeling of safety, attachment, and the experience of warmth in a loving relationship. Passion is related to physical attraction and sensual arousal; motivational states for sexual consummation. Decision/commitment is expressed at two temporal levels. The

² The data for presented research were collected as part of the unpublished master thesis by the second author.

short-term level refers to the choice of the partner, while the long-term level to one's commitment to maintain a single love relationship. It was assumed that adults with HF-ASD engage in differentiated romantic relationships depending on gender and the intensity of autistic symptoms.

Participants

Adults with HF-ASD (N=38) aged 18 to 47 years (average age = 28.62) were recruited through Internet portals for ASD individuals such as: <http://aspi.net.pl/>, <http://www.asperger.fora.pl/> and <http://www.forumautyzmu.pl/>. There were 16 (42%) females and 22 (58%) males who voluntarily and anonymously expressed the desire to participate in the research. However, data from only 34 adults was included in the analysis, which required participants to complete both questionnaires. 50% of participants declared involvement in a romantic relationship. Relationship durability varied from 2 to 22 years, however, short-term relationships lasting up to 5 years (N=11) were most common. The gender of the tested participants with HF-ASD was related to the nature of the relationship, in which they engaged. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study sample

Variable	Frequency	Percent of the study sample
Gender		
Female	16	75
Male	22	25
Relationship		
Without	17	50
Within	17	50
Type of relationship		
Marriage	6	17,6
Informal	11	32,4

Out of 34 participants, 17.6% were married, but the majority of participants (32.4%) remained in an informal relationship.

Methods

Two measures were used for the study. The first, the AQ (*Autism Spectrum Quotient*) consisted of 50 statements. This was the appropriate self-assessment screening tool (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, & Clubley, 2001; Pisula, Kawa, Szostakiewicz, Łucka, Kawa, & Rynkiewicz, 2013) to identify autism spectrum traits in five different domains: social skills, communication skills, imagination, attention to detail, and attention switching or change tolerance.

The second method in the Polish version (Wojciszke, 2013) consisted of 36 statements, based on the Triangular Theory of Love by Sternberg (1986; 1988; 1997), to identify the three components of love theory: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Acker & Davis, 1992).

Procedure

Electronic versions of the questionnaires were posted on two forums focused on the communication and integration of people with ASD: <http://aspi.net.pl/> and www.autyzmwpolsce.pl. Participants were invited to partake in the study and those who volunteered, were asked to anonymously complete the test and send it to the second researcher.

Results

The descriptive statistics of measured variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of observed variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Age	28.62	7.38	18.00	47.00
Duration of relationship	6.06	5.56	2.00	22.00
Autistic feature				
Social skills	8.52	1.89	4.00	10.00
Attention switching/tolerance of change	8.24	1.79	4.00	10.00
Attention to detail	6.64	2.91	1.00	10.00
Communication skills	7.52	1.89	3.00	10.00
Imagination	6.76	2.07	1.00	10.00
Autism Quotient Total indicator	37.68	8.99	15.00	49.00
Love components				
Intimacy	42.40	9.08	26.00	55.00
Passion	47.87	10.18	33.00	68.00
Decision/commitment	40.33	8.56	25.00	54.00

The obtained results in the AQ were compared to those of the Baron-Cohen team (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001); the distribution of individual indices was characteristic for Asperger's Syndrome and HFA.

It was found that autistic features were not differentiated in reference to gender. The data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender differences in the level of autistic features and love components

Variable	Male mean	Female mean	t	df	p
Autistic feature					
Social skills	8.32	8.89	-0.72	23	0.48
Attention switching/tolerance of change	8.37	8.00	0.50	23	0.62
Attention to detail	6.56	6.78	-0.17	23	0.86
Communication skills	7.62	7.33	0.36	23	0.72
Imagination	7.00	6.33	0.77	23	0.45
Autism Quotient Total Indicator	37.87	37.33	0.14	23	0.89
Love components					
Intimacy	34.00	46.60	-3.31	13	0.01
Passion	43.20	50.20	-1.28	13	0.22
Decision/commitment	32.80	44.10	-3.04	13	0.01

As shown in Table 3, neither Autism Quotient nor specific autistic traits in the five measured domains (communication skills, imagination, attention to detail, and attention switching/change tolerance) were found to be differentiated by gender in the tested subjects. It was however found, that the level of love components is partially differentiated in reference to gender. Females with HF-ASD did experienced a significantly higher level of intimacy ($t=-3.31$, $p<.01$) and commitment ($t=-3.04$, $p<.01$) in their loving relationships than males with HF-ASD did. The passion component was not differentiated in reference to gender.

No differences in the autism feature level were found in reference to the formal status of the loving relationship. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Love components level in relation to the formal status differences of romantic relationships of persons with ASD

Variable	Within relationship mean	No relationship mean	t	df	p
Autistic feature					
Social skills	8.37	8.59	-0.26	23	0.78
Attention switching/tolerance of change	7.62	8.53	-1.19	23	0.25
Attention to detail	5.62	7.12	-1.21	23	0.24
Communication skills	7.00	7.76	-0.94	23	0.36
Imagination	6.00	7.12	-1.28	23	0.21
Autism Quotient Total Indicator	34.62	39.12	-1.17	23	0.25

Two subgroups, extracted on the criterion of involvement in the relationship, were found to be similar in the intensity of autistic features measured by the AQ assessment method (Table 4), raising the question of linear correlation. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Relation between love components and autistic features (r-Pearson correlation)

Variables	Intimacy	Passion	Decision/ commitment
Social skills	-0.10	0.02	0.07
Attention switching/tolerance of change	-0.08	0.03	0.06
Attention to detail	-0.11	0.03	0.17
Communication skills	-0.24	-0.03	-0.11
Imagination	-0.09	0.09	0.09
Autism Quotient Total Indicator	-0.13	0.03	0.07

As presented in Table 5, no significant correlation in the tested group was found between the level of autistic spectrum traits in the five measured domains (communication skills, imagination, attention to detail, and attention switching/change tolerance) and love components such as intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Discussion

The results of the study show that people with HF-ASD engage in loving relationships, just as often as they remain single, which is consistent with other research findings (Hénault, 2005; Aston, 2012; Attwood, 2012). The formal status of the relationship is connected to gender. Informal relationships were more common among the surveyed women with ASD. Men were equally committed to having relationships of differential formal status, however most of them lead single lives. The number of long-lasting relationships involving women, had no relevance to the greater intensity of the autistic features examined. This may be caused by biological gender differences that determine the intensity of social needs (Baron-Cohen, 2009) or by gender sensitive profiles of ASD symptomatology. It was found that women with HF-ASD are more skilled in compensation and social masking, camouflaging, and imitation than men. This may cause the diagnostic assessment and screening procedure to reflect a more positive image of female functioning (Rynkiewicz et al., 2016; Ormond, Brownlow, Garnett, Attwood, & Rynkiewicz, 2017).

The obtained data confirms the main assumption. Individuals with autistic disorders, despite serious social and emotional difficulties, are involved in relationships based on passion, intimacy, and commitment. The results oppose the assumptions of Mesibov (1985) and confirm the data and analysis provided by other authors, showing a clear need for individuals with ASD to build long-lasting relationships (Newport & Newport, 2007; Koegel, Detar, Fox, & Koegel, 2014; Aston, 2003; Attwood, 2012). These are most likely not easily achieved relationships, requiring intense preparation during adolescence (Ballan & Freyer, 2017; Tullis & Zangrillo 2013), and followed by professional support. Specific character traits of the partner involved are also essential, such as tolerance, resistance to stress, strength, support, and determination. However, as biographies have shown, such relationships exist and they are valuable to both partners (Schmidt, 2012; Gluszko, 2015).

Research limitations and conclusions for further research

The study was conducted on a small sample selected in the presented manner. Participants in the study were characterized by a HF-ASD level of symptom severity, which may be a significant impediment to generalizing empirical findings. The study of relationships of ASD individuals should be carried out in a larger, targeted group, not only among volunteers.

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Poznawczo-emocjonalne i interpersonalne skutki autodystansowania

Streszczenie

Ludzie stosują różne strategie poznawczo-emocjonalne, kiedy konfrontują się z trudnymi doświadczeniami w celu poradzenia sobie z nimi. Liczne badania prowadzone w nurcie społeczno-poznawczym dostarczają przekonujących danych na temat istotnego znaczenia autodystansowania w regulacji emocjonalnej, radzeniu sobie z bolesnymi przeżyciami oraz w utrzymywaniu satysfakcjonujących relacji z innymi. Stosowanie perspektywy obserwatora opartej na dystansie do siebie (*self-distanced perspective*) jako formy autorefleksji, w odróżnieniu od perspektywy „zanurzenia w sobie” (*self-immersed perspective*), przynosi pozytywne skutki poznawcze, emocjonalne i behawioralne dla funkcjonowania osoby w jej wymiarze intrapersonalnym (pozwala na rekonstruowanie dysfunkcyjnych schematów poznawczych, obniża reaktywność emocjonalną, sprzyjając regulacji emocji i podejmowaniu adaptacyjnych zachowań) oraz interpersonalnym (jest predyktorem zachowań nakierowanych na rozwiązanie problemu, pomaga radzić sobie z odczuwaną złością i hamować agresję podczas konfliktów z innymi).

Słowa kluczowe: autodystansowanie, dystans psychologiczny, adaptacyjne formy refleksji, regulacja emocji, radzenie sobie

The cognitive-emotional and interpersonal consequences of self-distancing mechanisms

Abstract

People use different cognitive-emotional strategies as coping mechanisms when faced with difficult experiences. Numerous studies conducted in the socio-cognitive field, provide convincing data on the importance of self-distancing in emotional regulation, coping with painful experiences, and maintaining good relations with others. The use of the *self-distanced perspective*, as a form of self-reflection (opposite to the *self-immersed perspective*), has a positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effect on a person's functioning in their intrapersonal dimension (it allows them to reduce the level of emotional reactivity, promotes emotional regulation, and adaptive behaviour), as well as their interpersonal dimension (it is a predictor for problem-solving behaviour, a tool helping to cope with anger and reducing aggression during conflicts with others).

Keywords: self-distancing, psychological distance, adaptive forms of reflection, emotion regulation, coping

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