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New theoretical contexts in the understanding of autonomy in Polish special pedagogy

Introduction

It has been said a lot about autonomy in Polish special education. There are numerous publications in which the following issues were thoroughly analyzed: the contents of the notion, its multi-dimensional and multi-aspect character as well as various theoretical contexts of its usage¹. Taking into consideration the necessity of constant reflection of the researcher on the conceptual apparatus used in his or her scientific field, as I consider special education to be, I have decided to carry out a new analysis of the contents of the autonomy's notion from the perspective of the objects relations theories. I refer to this theoretical context mostly because it is still hardly present in the theoretical and practical rehabilitation². I hope that my intention goes together with tendencies which have clearly emerged lately in special education, tendencies to

¹ Cf. Por. W. Dykcik, *Warunki i możliwości kulturowej transmisji postaw i zachowań społecznych wobec autonomii i izonomii osób niepełnosprawnych umysłowo*, [w:] *Spółeczeństwo wobec autonomii osób niepełnosprawnych*, red. W. Dykcik, Poznań 1996, s. 207–234; S. Kowalik, *Autonomia osób upośledzonych umysłowo w procesie rehabilitacji – „za, a nawet przeciw”*, w: tamże, s. 31–49; J. Lausch-Żuk, *Autonomia młodzieży z upośledzeniem umysłowym w jej odczuciu*, [w:] tamże, s. 235–242; I. Obuchowska, *O autonomii w wychowaniu niepełnosprawnych dzieci i młodzieży*, [w:] tamże, s. 15–29; B. Szychowiak, *Autonomia młodzieży z upośledzeniem umysłowym w jej odczuciu*, [w:] tamże, s. 243–250; B. Tylewska-Nowak, *Autonomia niepełnosprawnych w opiniach wybranych grup społecznych*, Poznań 2001; O. Speck, *Niepełnosprawni w społeczeństwie. Podstawy ortopedagogiki*, Gdańsk 2005; A. Krause, *Nauka autonomii jako postawa odkrywania siebie i świata przez dziecko z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*, referat z konferencji „Dziecko ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi w odkrywaniu siebie i świata”, Wólka Milanowska, 5–6 kwietnia 2006 r. [w druku].

² Cf. Por. M. Zalewska, *Dziecko w autoportrecie z zamalowaną twarzą*, Warszawa 1998; K. Drat-Ruszczak, *Teorie osobowości – podejście psychodynamiczne i humanistyczne*, [w:] J. Strelau (red.), *Psychologia. Podręcznik akademicki*, t. 2, Gdańsk 2000, s. 601–653; M. Kościelska, *Psychologia kliniczna dziecka*, [w:] tamże, s. 623–648; I. Obuchowska, *Psychologia kliniczna dzieci i młodzieży – wybrane zagadnienia*, [w:] H. Sęk (red.), *Psychologia kliniczna*, t. 2, Warszawa 2005, s. 25–46; W. Pilecka, *Psychoterapia w rehabilitacji osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*, [w:] *Normalizacja środowisk życia osób niepełnosprawnych*, Olsztyn 2005, s. 58–64.

look for new theoretical contexts of notions used for a long time in special education and not only to confronting them with up-to-date, ever-changing reality of rehabilitation³.

I focus my attention on the notion of autonomy due to its properties such as: limited precision and wide range, as well as saturation with social judgment; these features are addressed by Kowalik⁴. The properties of the notion of autonomy mentioned here designate it to play the role of the notion defining something socially "desirable" and "politically correct". A scientific theory should first of all be logical and multi-dimensional in explaining phenomena⁵. The conceptual apparatus which can be accused of too little precision does not make this task easy. On the contrary, it can facilitate ideologization of knowledge, which is in my opinion a dangerous thing, and this can have adverse effect on the course of the rehabilitation process⁶. The features indicated by Kowalik can be also a source of difficulties in formulating practical guidelines congruent with the accepted understanding of the notion of autonomy. Verbal declarations of special educators concerning the autonomy of a person with intellectual disability accompanied by, unfortunately frequently occurring, lack of answer to the question to the answer concerning measurable behavioral indices of autonomy and the ways of its supporting, illustrate the above dependencies⁷. One can say that the notion of autonomy "decorates" the utterance of an educator, educator is proud of it or refers to it as something desirable and highly valued by society, but there is no translation of this into reality, observable empirical indices of this autonomy. He or she is not able to answer a simple question: "how would you recognize whether a person is autonomous?" or/and "how would you discriminate more autonomous person from less autonomous one?". The deeper the degree of intellectual disability of a person, the greater the problems with the operationalisation of the notion.

I consider the text below to be a preliminary attempt at answering the question concerning the understanding of autonomy on the basis of the objects relation theories. Firstly, a classification of defining views of the notion of autonomy functioning in the literature on the subject shall be

³ These tendencies are exemplified not only by publications in which the issue of special education is undertaken (cf. Wlazło M., *Upośledzenie czy niepełnosprawność – o znaczeniu, funkcjach i podstawach naukowych nazewnictwa w pedagogice specjalnej*, w: T. Żółkowska (red.), *Pedagogika specjalna –aktualne osiągnięcia i wyzwania*, (s. 130-135). Szczecin 2005; Krause, op. cit.), but also conferences and symposia devoted to this issue (e.g. Special Educators Forum [08.06.2006] devoted to notions mental handicap, intellectuall disability).

⁴ S. Kowalik, *Autonomia osób upośledzonych...*, op. cit., s. 49.

⁵ Cf. P. K. Oleś, *Wprowadzenie do psychologii osobowości*, Warszawa 2005, s.75.

⁶ S. Kowalik, *Autonomia osób upośledzonych...*, op. cit., s. 53-54; por.: tenże, *Psychospołeczne podstawy rehabilitacji osób niepełnosprawnych*, Warszawa 1996, s.11-22; S. Oleś, op. cit., s. 75.

⁷ Cf. Szychowiak, op. cit., s. 244-245.

presented. Then, the way of understanding autonomy in the context of objects relation theories, and more precisely, in the context of Daniel Stern's theory of early development of the recognition of one's self shall be discussed. The text shall be finished with conclusions resulting from the material presented, which are important for the theory and practical aspects of rehabilitation.

2. Ways of defining the notion of autonomy

On the basis of analysis of notions of autonomy present in Polish literature on the subject, a classification can be performed. I suggest the formulation of four different ways of defining⁸ the notion of autonomy.

The first one consist in adapting the meaning of the notion from scientific areas other than special education, such as: anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology⁹. These notions are very often accepted by a researcher – special educator as a basis for the construction of the operational definition to be used during empirical research¹⁰.

The second way of defining the notion of autonomy consists in presenting by the authors the description of behavioral indices of autonomous behavior of a person and/or their social context¹¹.

The third group consists of the views in which autonomy is defined by specifying the place generating it. According to this criterion, there is autonomy generated outside and inside¹².

⁸ The aim of the work is not a detailed analysis of definitions of autonomy present in the literature on the subject. That is why direct quotation is not present in the text.

⁹ The fact is worth noticing that, mostly in German language publications concerning special education (cf. Speck, op. cit., s. 143-200), the problem of autonomy is analysed in the wide anthropological context where at the beginning of scientific exploration the researcher – special educator encounters a question "Who is human being for me?" , "Who is a person with disability for me?" We can suppose that the answer given to himself by a special educator and the reflexion over the answer provided will have a great influence on his theoretical as well as axiological ground and, as a consequence, on the conceptual apparatus used (O. Speck, op. cit., s. 143; por. A. Kepiński, *Poznanie chorego*, Warszawa 1978, s. 8). Por. I. Obuchowska, *O autonomii w wychowaniu...*, op. cit., s.15-18; B. Tylewska-Nowak, op. cit., s. 10-17; O. Speck, op. cit., s. 239-243 i s. 281-284).

¹⁰ Cf. W. Dykcik, *Warunki i możliwości...*, op. cit., s. 222-225; D. Kopeć, B. Tylewska-Nowak, *Autonomia osób z głębszym upośledzeniem umysłowym w opinii społecznej*, [w:] *Spółeczeństwo wobec autonomii...*, op. cit., s. 253-254; B. Tylewska-Nowak, op. cit.

¹¹ Definitions of the first and the second type are often integrated by the authors (cf. Dykcik, 1996, s. 220–222; Obuchowska, 1996, s. 21; Pilecka, Pilecki, 1996, s. 31–33; Twardowski, 1996, s. 147–153; W. Dykcik, *Problemy autonomii i integracji społecznej osób niepełnosprawnych w środowisku życia*, [w:] *Pedagogika specjalna*, red. W. Dykcik, Poznań 1997, s. 320-327; B. Tylewska-Nowak, op. cit., s.47; O. Speck, op. cit., s. 281-284).

¹² Cf. I. Obuchowska, op. cit., s.19.

The fourth group, are definitions in which autonomy is treated as a target for supporting the development, educational and/or rehabilitation influences with simultaneous reference to standards applicable in a given community¹³.

The analysis of the ways of defining the notion of autonomy presented above shows that they regard its developmental origin and internal psychological mechanisms to a small degree only. One can also observe the process, noticeable most of all in rehabilitation practice, consisting in the lack of coherence between theoretical notions used and their empirical indices. It can be deduced that the lack of knowledge concerning the area of internal mechanisms generating autonomy of a person can make it difficult to interpret in an adequate way the behavior of a person as more or less autonomous¹⁴. One can also suppose that a person's disability, especially intellectual disability, hinders to a considerable degree and/or distorts not only this person's "self narration" by verbal and non-verbal behavior, also in case when this person's own autonomy is the subject of narration, but also the interpretation of this narration by others. That is why it is so important both from the perspective of the disabled person and from the perspective of people entering into any relationship with such a person to make the attempts to understand the observed behaviors from the angle of a theory the result of which would be learning about mechanisms influencing undertaking autonomous behaviors by an intellectually disabled person.

3. Autonomy in the context of relations with object

Objects relations theories¹⁵ do not constitute a uniform current¹⁶. That is why I would like to present in the text the way of understanding autonomy in the context of one of them, namely in the context of the Daniel Stern's theory of early development of recognition of one's self. (1985). Its advantage, contrary to the remaining theories of the above-mentioned current, is a vast empirical evidence of particular theoretical claims¹⁷. Omitting a detailed presentation of vast assumptions of Stern's (1985) theory, I shall focus on presenting these selected aspects on this

¹³ Cf. M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, *Autonomia czy izonomia (O prawach osób sprawnych inaczej)*, [w:] *Spółeczeństwo wobec autonomii...*, op. cit., s. 71; I. Obuchowska, op. cit., s.20.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Kościelska, 2005; s.634-635; Obuchowska, *Psychologia kliniczna...*, op. cit., s. 27.

¹⁵ The theoretical current in psychology called objects relation theories is characterized with focus on the relations between the subject and another person who is defined as object. Object is understood as internal, psychical representation of another person (K. Drat-Ruszczak, op. cit., s. 627; por. L. Cierpiałkowska, J. Gościniak (red.), *Współczesna psychoanaliza. Teorie relacji z obiektem*, Poznań 2002; P. K. Oleś, op. cit.; s.60–76).

¹⁶ K. Drat-Ruszczak, op. cit., s. 627; L. Cierpiałkowska, J. Gościniak, op. cit., s.7; P.K. Oleś, op. cit., s. 60.

theory which are essential for the understanding of the autonomy of a person. I believe that they imply a multidimensional image of a disabled person, in which this person's SELF is clearly emphasized¹⁸. I shall present one after the other: **a)** selected theses resulting from Stern's theory essential for understanding the autonomy of a disabled person, **b)** implications for the theory and practical aspects of special education.

Thesis I

In the theory of early development of the recognition of one's self Stern attempts a description of child's experience and the way the child sees the world and itself based on possible to observed, present from the birth or gradually maturing abilities¹⁹. This theory has a coherent conceptual apparatus which can be used for describing four aspects of the self following one another, also the autonomy of the child²⁰.

Implications for special pedagogy

Analyzing the autonomy of a disabled person in the context of Stern's theory can, due to the coherent conceptual apparatus, facilitate the observation of its rudimentary manifestations, very often disregarded by the people closest to them. They can be as follows: looking in the other direction, turning the head into a different direction, gestures, vocal intonation, crying. Seeing the above mentioned behaviors in a person and classifying them at the same time as behavioral indices of autonomy will have a significant influence not only on the perception of the person by people around his/her, but it will also play a vital role in supporting such autonomy. We can assume that such knowledge can be helpful most of all during rehabilitation work with intellectually disabled persons, especially those with profound disability and with multiple disabilities.

Thesis II

¹⁷ Stern draws conclusions from observational data on the subjective psychical life of a child. He thus adapts the clinical perspective concentrating on experience and the way the child experiences the world (M. Gracka, *Teoria wczesnego rozwoju poczucia siebie*, „Nowiny Psychologiczne” 1991, nr 3/4, s. 5). Cf. K. Drat-Ruszczak, op. cit.

¹⁸ Pilecka notices that „in the present widely understood rehabilitation activity the shaping of the SELF structure as a developmental task was not taken into consideration. Defining theoretical bases and developing programs of psychological support are important tasks for contemporary rehabilitation psychology” (W. Pilecka, *Psychoterapia w rehabilitacji osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*, [w:] *Normalizacja środowisk życia osób niepełnosprawnych*, Olsztyn 2005, s. 60; cf. M. Kościelska, *Oblicza upośledzenie umysłowe*, Warszawa 1995).

¹⁹ N. D. Stern, op. cit.; M. Gracka, op. cit., s. 19.

²⁰ N. D. Stern, op. cit.; M. Gracka, op. cit., s. 6; K. Drat-Ruszczak, op. cit.; P. K. Oleś, op. cit.

In Stern's theory the SELF of the person is very strongly emphasized. It is understood as "subjective organization of experience" i.e. the sense of SELF²¹. According to Stern, it exists from the moment of birth and it is not a result of social experience but its organizer²². It can be, thus, assumed that in the context of the theory of early recognition of one's self, a person displays specific autonomous behaviors from the moment of birth²³.

Implications for special pedagogy

The above thesis can imply especially questions concerning the specific features of autonomous behaviors of persons with deep intellectual disability. Additional disabilities present in such a group of people can influence the time of onset and/or the image of behavioral indices of autonomy. Preparing diagnostic tools enabling the observation of behavioral indices of autonomy in people at their rudimentary level would certainly facilitate its supporting²⁴.

With regard to the thesis above a question can arise about the most adequate way of narration about a person's autonomy. Discussing a person's autonomy from the perspective of the theory on early recognition of one's self, one can adequately speak e.g. on supporting autonomy versus limiting autonomy. The ones that speak about: **a)** giving autonomy to a person – autonomy cannot be given to anyone, as any person is autonomous; **b)** bringing up for autonomy – how to bring up for something which a person already possesses, seem to be disputable. The above doubts concerning articulation can be an impulse for a discussion concerning the way of narration not only about the autonomy of a person with a disability, but also about a person with a disability in the literature on the subject related to the special education area.

Thesis III

Supporting a child's autonomy takes place only by satisfying relationship with another person. Development "requires a constant, usually silent dialogue between the two" (Stern, 1985, s. 118).

Implications for special pedagogy

The above thesis induces us to consider the essence of the relationship which takes place between an adult and a child in the early period of its life. The very establishing of the relationship is not

²¹ K. Drat-Ruszczak, op. cit., s. 636; por. N. D. Stern, op. cit.; M. Gracka, op. cit.

²² N. D. Stern, op. cit., s. 3-13; K. Drat-Ruszczak, op. cit., s. 637.

²³ According to Stern a child actively examines reality from its birth, looking for a chosen stimulation and organizing its experience (N. D. Stern, op. cit., s. 61-64; M. Gracka, op. cit., s. 7).

²⁴ One can suppose that for the construction of the diagnostic tool information concerning the following will be essential: sense of emergent self and sense of core self (N. D. Stern, op. cit., s. 37-100; M. Gracka, op. cit., s. 6).

sufficient to support the child's autonomy through it. Its quality is important and, we must remember, the shaping of it is conditioned by the fact that the child suffers from a disability²⁵. One can assume that the system of institutional support provided for parents of newly born disabled children and parents awaiting for their child endangered with a disability could influence in a positive way the quality of the relationship parent-child. It is only in the course of a sufficiently good relationship that a parent can see the manifestations of the autonomy of his/her child and support them²⁶.

4. Conclusions

The material presented by me is only an initial attempt at analyzing the autonomy of a disabled person in the context of Stern's theory. I am aware of the fact that it can raise numerous questions, doubts and controversies among people whose profession is work in the area of rehabilitation. I believe that they can be a source for discussion not only about the autonomy of a disabled person but also about the theoretical contexts which have been absent or neglected so far in Polish special education. Certainly the objects relation theories and the Stern's theory of early recognition of one's self can be treated as such.

I believe that exploring the problems of autonomy of a person with intellectual disability in the context of the previously mentioned theories gives us a chance not only for grasping its developmental origin. It also facilitates the answer to the question about factors facilitating, hindering or preventing its development, which have its source e.g. in the course of relationship with object in the early period of a person's life.

Perhaps using the objects relation theory for analyzing the problems of persons with a disability will also facilitate the "positive narration" which I understand as indicating things which constitute a potential of a person in spite of this person's disability, which is often not remembered in the literature on the subject, where the faults are emphasized most of all.

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²⁵ Cf. M. Kościelska, *Oblicza upośledzenia...*, op. cit.; M. Zalewska, op. cit.

²⁶ Cf. D. W. Winnicott, *Dzieci i ich matki*, Warszawa 1994.

2. Czerepaniak-Walczak M., *Autonomia czy izonomia (O prawach osób sprawnych inaczej)*, w: W. Dykcik (red.), *Spółeczeństwo wobec autonomii osób niepełnosprawnych*, Poznań 1996, s. 61-82.
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New theoretical contexts in the understanding of autonomy in Polish special pedagogy — summary

It has been said a lot about the concept of autonomy in Polish special pedagogy. It is exemplified by a number of publications, in which its multidimensional and multifaceted nature has been analyzed taking into account various theoretical contexts. For formal reasons, the definition of autonomy itself, has been cited many times (cf. Dykcik, 1996; Kowalik, 1996; Lausch-Żuk, 1996; Obuchowska, 1996; Szychowiak, 1996; Tylewska-Nowak, 2001; Speck, 2005; Krause, 2006). Considering the researcher's necessity for continuous reflection on definition apparatus employed in their primary scientific discipline, the article will analyze the definitions of autonomy meeting the theoretical context of objects relations theories having been present in Polish special pedagogy for not a long time (cf. Zalewska, 1998; Drat-Ruszczak, 2000; Kościelska, 2005; Obuchowska, 2005). The article consists of four parts. The first part will present the motives for analyzing the concept of autonomy in Polish special pedagogy. The second part will comprise a qualification approach towards already functioning definitions of the concept of autonomy. The third part will show the way autonomy is understood within the context of objects relations theories, particularly in terms of Daniel Stern's early development of sense of self theory. The fourth part will enumerate the conclusions stemming from this dissertation vital for the rehabilitation theory and practice.

Nowe konteksty teoretyczne rozumienia autonomii w polskiej pedagogice specjalnej — streszczenie

O autonomii w polskiej pedagogice specjalnej powiedziano już wiele. Świadczą o tym chociażby liczne publikacje, w których wnikliwej analizie poddana została jej wielowymiarowości i wieloaspektowości z uwzględnieniem różnych kontekstów teoretycznych. Wielokrotnie przytaczana w nich była, ze względów formalnych, również definicja samego pojęcia (por. Dykcik, 1996; Kowalik, 1996; Lausch-Żuk, 1996; Obuchowska, 1996; Szychowiak, 1996; Tylewska-Nowak, 2001; Speck, 2005; Krause, 2006). Mając na uwadze konieczność ciągłej refleksji badacza nad stosowanym w jego macierzystej dyscyplinie naukowej

aparatem pojęciowym w artykule zostanie dokonana analiza pojęcia autonomii z uwzględnieniem kontekstu teoretycznego teorii relacji z obiektem, który jest obecny w polskiej pedagogice specjalnej od niedawna (por. Zalewska, 1998; Drat-Ruszczak, 2000; Kościelska, 2005; Obuchowska, 2005). Artykuł składa się z czterech części. W **części pierwszej** zostaną przedstawione motywy podjęcia analizy pojęcia autonomii w pedagogice specjalnej. **Część druga** będzie zawierała klasyfikacyjne ujęcie funkcjonujących w literaturze przedmiotu definicyjnych ujęć pojęcia autonomia. W **części trzeciej** zostanie przedstawiony sposób rozumienia autonomii w kontekście teorii relacji z obiektem, a dokładniej w kontekście teorii wczesnego rozwoju poczucia siebie Daniela Sterna. **Część czwarta** będzie zawierała wnioski wpływające z przedstawionego materiału istotne dla teorii i praktyki rehabilitacyjnej.