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## **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY OF MIND AND SOCIAL ATTACHMENT AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?**

### **From Theory to Practice: Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties of Autistic Spectrum Disorder youth and young adults and the meaning of group work in Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral aspects**

ABSTRACT. Eden Chen, *What is the Relationship Between Theory of Mind and Social Attachment and What can we do About it?* [Relacja pomiędzy teorią umysłu a więzami społecznymi. Co możemy z nią zrobić?]. *Studia Edukacyjne* nr 40, 2016, Poznań 2016, pp. 305-325. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. DOI: 10.14746/se.2016.40.17

The aim of this article is to examine whether the attitude towards the deficiency of people with the Autistic Spectrum Disorder relies on the Theory of Mind concept and the symbolic interaction approach. Autism is a deficiency hampering the ability to receive messages from others and develop appropriate mutual relations. The deficiencies are apparent in three areas of development – social functioning, communication and behaviour. The study population are high functioning people with autism – ASD. TOM is a concept of consciousness, the ability to understand and interpret human behaviour in interactions and social contexts, including the ability to identify mental states such as: emotions, thoughts, intentions and desires of the individual and those around him.

There are three components within this interaction: cognitive (thoughts, beliefs), emotional (exhibiting and understanding emotions, empathy), and the behavioural component (the actual interaction). Symbolic interactionism is a sociological paradigm claiming that social reality is based on the interactions between individuals in society, based on symbols and interpretations. When we examine the interaction of people with ASD, in order to understand their social thinking, emotions and behaviours we want to have a framework focusing on the interaction within a group. One of important and meaningful groups is the peer group, which has an important general and specific role in youth and young adults.

The peer group has a significant role in integrating personal identity, establishing a different status within the family, and acquiring greater autonomy in the world outside the family. Work within the peer group enables familiarization with the deficiency and different parts of the “self”, thus con-

structuring a solid identity and closer relations with the environment. Group work will include aspects such as projection, giving and receiving feedback, learning about emotional mirroring, and defending oneself.

**Key words:** Autism, ASD, Theory of the Mind, symbolic interactionism, peer group, therapeutic groups

## Introduction

The Aim of this paper is to analyse the cognitive, emotional and behavioural disability's that people with ADS are coping with, in order to find a proper setting, focused on therapeutic-cognitive, emotional and behavioral work. It was found that the earlier the treatment of autism begins and the more intensive it is, the better the development and improvement of the patient. Enables familiarization with the deficiency and different parts of the 'self', thus constructing a solid identity and closer relations with the environment.

Many studies are based on people diagnosed during childhood or early adolescence. A study on adults with autism and adolescents is insufficiently developed because of the growth rate of people diagnosed over the past years, the awareness for these phenomena and absence of frameworks suitable for people on the autistic spectrum during adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

The syndrome of autism was first defined by Kanner in 1943 as a disability from birth to relate to people and conditions.<sup>2</sup> The number of those diagnosed with autism increases annually, and new aspects are discovered related to this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> As for people diagnosed with autism this paper explains cognitive difficulties through "Theory of mind method". The TOM method is a theory of consciousness, the ability to understand and interpret human behaviour in interactions and social contexts, including the ability to identify mental states such as: emotions, thoughts, intentions and desires of the individual and those around him. There are three components within the interaction: cognitive (thoughts, beliefs), emotional (exhibiting and understanding emotions, empathy), and the behavioural component.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Howlin, *Autism – preparing for adulthood*, London 1997.

<sup>2</sup> L. Kanner, *Autistic disturbances of affective contact*, *Nervous Child*, 1943, p. 217-250.

<sup>3</sup> C.J. Newschaffer et al., *The epidemiology of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *Annual Review of Public Health*, 2007, 28, p. 235-258.

<sup>4</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, A.M. Leslie, U. Frith, *Does the autistic child have a 'Theory of Mind'?* *Cognition*, 1985, 21(1), p. 37-46.

## What is autism?

Autism is an extensive developmental deficiency related to all significant areas of functioning. It has three major characteristics: deficiency in social interrelations, deficiency of communication skills and language usage, behavioral patterns and repeated areas of interest.<sup>5</sup> This definition is based on the Diagnostic and statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-4, 1994.<sup>6</sup>

In the past it was believed that the main cause of autism was deficient parental care. Today we know that this is not true. The exact causes of autism have not yet been identified, but there are some research based assumptions, presenting possible causes for this deficiency:<sup>7</sup>

- Biological causes, organic functions;
- Neurological causes, genetics and genetic mutations;
- Causes related to society and the environment.

The population chosen for this study are people with high-functioning autism. High functioning relates to the severity of the autistic symptoms or IQ level (within the norm). People with this diagnosis, that the DSM currently calls ASD have difficulty in areas characterizing classic autism, but the expression of the deficiency is different than that of classic autism.<sup>8</sup> Even highly functioning people, with a high level of intelligence, have difficulty in interpreting social situations, receiving social messages and social judgment.<sup>9</sup> For example, a highly intelligent adolescent may speak publicly and loudly about private matters, and not understand that others may hear him, even if he was not addressing them. Such ideas may be taught 'in theory', and the person diagnosed with autism will require such formal learning, and be unable to grasp the behavioral codes from the social environment, as children with normal development do.

Highly functioning adults with autism may be interested in interrelations with their peer group, and want to have friends, but lack the skills required to develop friendly relations. Without guidance and intervention,

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<sup>5</sup> S. Richman, *Raising a child with autism: Guide for parents in the applied behavioral analysis method*, Arye Hashavia 1995, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 9, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem; M. Aarons, T. Gittens, *The Handbook of Autism a guide for parents and professional*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., London 1999; N. Kaneshiro, *AUTISM*, from: [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001526.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001526.htm) 25/5/2016.

<sup>8</sup> S. Richman, *Raising a child with autism*; M. Aarons, T. Gittens, *The Handbook of Autism*.

<sup>9</sup> A. Mishori, *Autism and communication deficiencies, ways to educate and cope*, Huberman Press 1992.

they will find it difficult to acquire friends, and will feel lonely and frustrated.<sup>10</sup>

By definition, people with high-functioning autism are able to speak. Nevertheless, their speech is often different, based on the characteristic of the syndrome. Their accent may sound 'foreign' (even if the child has always grown in the same environment, and speaks only one language), their speech may sound 'pedantic', and their tone, intonation, and tempo and emphasis are uncoordinated. The grammatical structures are childish, and include many repetitions. In conversation, they have difficulty in exchanging words with others tend to lengthy speech, not allowing the other to respond. They are also unable to understand the other's perspective. Their level of expression is higher than the level of understanding the language. The deficiency in understanding language is apparent in the difficulty to understand questions, simple instructions or jokes. The words are understood literally, and they have difficulty grasping images, conflicting meanings, cynicism, humor or graphic expressions.<sup>11</sup>

Repetitive motions, characterizing classical autism, are also possible for high-functioning people, but those are usually capable of greater restraint. The increased interest, which is seen in autism in attachment to a single object, is mainly apparent for high-functioning autistics in intellectual areas such as reading, interest in maps, gathering data about the weather, or manner of operation of gadgets or vehicles. Often one area of interest will replace another.<sup>12</sup>

The IQ of people with high-functioning autistics is usually normal, but their cognitive skills are usually not uniform. The deficiency may be expressed in various forms, in some of the following areas:<sup>13</sup> People with ADS has most of the times "Concrete thought" the attend to have difficulty in grasping abstract or symbolic concepts, understanding words as having a clear meaning with no sophisticated contexts.

Most of the time the increased dwelling on detail, limited ability to prioritize and Faulty concept of meaning: inability to relate ideas or events, find the unifying idea, or relate cause and effect. We will expect to find Difficulty in joining or unifying ideas, if they appear to be conflicting and Difficulty in generalization. People with ASD also will often have Difficulty in organizing and performing a series of activities (organization relates to the generaliza-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> N. Kaneshiro, *AUTISM*, from: [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001526.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001526.htm) 25/5/2016.

tion of a number of details), tendency towards distraction because of incidental stimuli or attention to insignificant details.<sup>14</sup>

“Social relationships, basic logical skills and language skills of adolescents and adults with ASD have hitherto been dealt with only in pioneering studies, and not universally”. Many claim that such programs are expensive but in fact, it is even more expensive not to enable and establish groups that are learning and developmental communities for this population.<sup>15</sup>

Kanner that was mentioned as the first researcher that defined autism in literature claimed in 1971 that there are two Characteristics that are left in adults with autism: aloneness and Obsessive resistance to changes.<sup>16</sup> Work with older children, adolescents or adults with ASD poses many challenges. Mann claims that the belief that children are stuck in place developmentally and that from that point onward progress can only be minimal is a myth. In fact, during adolescence the brain and nervous system continue to develop, especially areas responsible for regulating emotions, organizing ideas and thoughts and drawing conclusions, which develop until the fifties.<sup>17</sup>

Mann also claims that as a result of this myth, many professionals work with adolescents and adults with ASD in a manner teaching banal and surface skills, instead of attempting to continue and support developmental skills and basic processing abilities and reinforcing them.<sup>18</sup> In the current article we shall try to touch the development of existing and processing skills of youngsters with ASD, by means of group psycho-educational work. The research literature reports a certain amount of success for groups for developing social skills for young people diagnosed with high functioning ASD.<sup>19</sup> These groups give their participants opportunities to exercise and learn a variety of advanced social skills.<sup>20</sup>

## The symbolic interactionism approach

The symbolic interactionism paradigm is a theoretical micro framework focusing on the interaction between people in defined situations.<sup>21</sup> “A per-

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<sup>14</sup> A. Mishori, *Autism and communication deficiencies*.

<sup>15</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, Haifa 2006, p. 234-235

<sup>16</sup> Kanner L., *Follow up study of eleven autistic children originally reported in 1943*, *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia*, 1971, p. 119-145.

<sup>17</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 218-219.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219-223.

<sup>19</sup> T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome. Guide for parents and professionals*, Kiryat-Bialik 1998, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>21</sup> J. Macionis, *Sociology*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed., New York 2008.

son is not what he thinks he is, and not what others think he is. A person is what he thinks others think he is". Cooley was one of the first sociologists to formulate a theory of self-development. According to his theory, the person's identity develops by interaction with the environment. Cooley explained how the self-concept of the individual develops in the socialization process. According to his theory each individual understands we are separate entities, different from the other's self. This is not an innate understanding, but it is created through relationships with others. Namely, people understand themselves by picturing the emotions of others towards their appearance and behavior. "The self in the mirror" is not a direct reflection of what others see about the individual, but a combination of social activities, such as: observation, imagination, reactions of others, the individual's interpretation of those reactions, and the subjective interpretation of the individual.

The unit of analysis for the symbolic interaction theory is social interaction and interrelations between people. Such interaction depends on the existence of common symbols to convey contents and meanings. The most important symbol is language. Language conveys messages between society and the individual, examines how people define themselves and others in a given situation, what is the meaning they award such behavior and how they interpret it. This process characterizes the construction of the individual's personal identity, self-image and self-concept.

The group therapeutic work will deal mainly with interaction patterns in the micro level within the group. The socialization processes by which the individual acquires his culture and develops his identity are significant when mental-emotional processes take place. As this is a life-long process, there are many socialization agents people are in touch with, and there is great importance in learning, studying and conversing with these agents to lead to efficiency, development and growth in many disciplines.<sup>22</sup>

Moshel, in the article about integrating pupils with limitations claims that teachers should be trained to emphasize the improvement of the child's abilities – social skills, behavior and self-image.<sup>23</sup> Educationalists here serve as significant socialization agents mediating and directing the environment towards a healthy interaction with the handicapped person.

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<sup>22</sup> D. Caspi, *Mass communication*, Vol. B, Tel-Aviv 1995, p. 66-81.

<sup>23</sup> A. Moshel (Ed.), *Including pupils with deficiencies in regular education* – literature review, Jerusalem 1993.

## Cognitive, emotional and behavioral difficulties in ASD population

Within such interactions there are three main layers: cognitive, emotional and behavioral.<sup>24</sup> The cognition allows the individual to think, learn and process the interaction between him and others, those thoughts and interpretation leads him to feel and experience diverse emotions and drives him to act and behave according to that. As it comes to people with ASD we expect to have difficulties in interaction, relating to the characteristic of the syndrome.<sup>25</sup>

**The cognitive difficulties in ASD population.** The Theory of Mind deals with the developing ability of an individual to absorb, understand, and draw conclusion about his own mental state and that of others. It is an ability for social understanding including the deciphering of clues, interpreting human behavior, explaining social conditions, thoughts, beliefs, intentions and desires. An appropriate Theory of Mind enables understanding, interpreting and forecasting social human behavioral manipulations,<sup>26</sup> understanding the relations between different mental states (thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions) of oneself and others. Difficulties in the Theory of the Mind hinders the interpretation of directing language: jokes, sarcasm, irony and double meanings, misunderstanding the intentions of oneself and others and their implications, problems in forecasting the other's behavior, misunderstanding reactions in social interrelations, misconceptions (a person knowing he has information about somethings, which others do not have).<sup>27</sup>

Frith from University College, London, and Baron-Cohen from Cambridge University assume that the main problem in autism is damage to the ability to develop 'a theory of the other's brain'. They claim that special neurological circuits in the brain allow us to make sophisticated assumptions about the internal world of others, which in turn enable fruitful forecasting about the other's behavior.<sup>28</sup>

The assumption that adults with ASD have a special problem in mental representations, causing them not to develop abilities to present and understand thoughts of themselves and others. Their inability for meta-

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<sup>24</sup> W. Burr et al., *Symbolic interaction and the family*, [in:] *Contemporary theories about the family: II. General theories/theoretical orientations*, Eds. W.R. Burr, R. Hill, F.D. Nye, I.L. Reiss, New York 1979, p. 42-111.

<sup>25</sup> S. Richman, *Raising a child with autism: Guide for parents in the applied behavioral analysis method*, Arye Hashavia 1995, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, A.M. Leslie, U. Frith, *Does the autistic child have a 'Theory of Mind'?* *Cognition*, 1985, 21(1), p. 37-46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

representation and inability to consider mental states of themselves and others largely affect behavior. The three main deficiencies in autism may result from the inability of People with autism to understand thoughts.<sup>29</sup> Those, who often experience difficulties in the appropriate developmental comprehension of reparability, require mirroring and argumentative interaction processes which enable more efficient learning and development.

One of the major messages and most difficult to internalize for people with ASD is subjectivity. Adler assumes that each individual's choice is different and equal to that of others – there is no right or wrong choice.<sup>30</sup> Subjectivity requires mutual respect and equality as a value, in order to legitimize ourselves and others. The closer one gets to the subjectivity of others, the more he develops his social affinity, because he understands that his is not the only concept, and there are many parallel truths. "What I think is right, you perceive as wrong, and what is right for you is wrong for me, and both our opinions are equally important". This equality, for me, is basic. This simple understanding is difficult to implement, mainly for people having difficulty in understanding the other's awareness.

According to Adler<sup>31</sup> subjectivity results from human choice. A man needs to understand the goal he strives for, examine the pros and cons of his choice. People choose from a reality containing a subject and an object. On the one hand choice gives people power because the choices made formulate life, but on the other hand, it gives the person a lot of responsibility. It should be mentioned that Adler does not talk about pathologies or neurological difficulties, but from the perspective of the healthy person, striving for a sense of belonging and social affinity. Here we assume that people with autism are interested in the relationship, but the way they can achieve it, understand and maintain it is different than the healthy person.<sup>32</sup> We can therefore assume that social interaction is directly affected by conscious and emotional processes and changes where there is damage or inability in one or both these areas.

**The emotional difficulties in ASD population.** Another approach that enables learning of people with autism in group work is Winnicott's boundary concept. Patern, observes boundaries from a differentiation process. "You are not me". According to this concept, the developmental process is focused on confronting a boundaries reality and the developmental process

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<sup>29</sup> U. Frith, J. Morton, A.M. Leslie, *The cognitive basis of a biological disorder: Autism*, Trends in Neuroscience, 1991, p.433-438.

<sup>30</sup> R. Discourse, *Basics of the Adlerian theory*, New York 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 92-101.



of internalizing the external boundary.<sup>33</sup> This approach aims at settling the paradox and conflict between in and out, imagination and reality. Winnicott emphasizes the continuation of the paradox and views it as an existential part of development.

People with ASD have difficulty understanding their own feelings as human beings, and understanding the feelings of others – difficulty in showing empathy for others, expressing their own feelings and given mental condition.

**The behavioral difficulties in ASD population.** We can view this component as the result of the two other components above (cognitive and emotional). The result is unsuitability to social situations and interactions. The interrelations, self-definition and the 'other' among people described in the symbolic interaction approach.<sup>34</sup> The behavioral component mirrors the pragmatic view of the emotional and cognitive difficulties.

In researches, communication of children with autism has been described as instrumental. One of the topics examined was whether gestures and speech that these children use are 'proto-declarative' or 'proto-imperative'. Proto-declarative gestures aim at external relation towards the person facing them. 'I give the other person information about me, and my internal state, so that he can understand me, my feelings/intentions/internal world'. On the other hand, proto-imperative gestures aimed at external attitudes for achieving a behavioral objective. I provide the other person with a message in order to obtain something practical – behavioral. Baron-Cohen showed that children with autism use proto-imperative expressions and understand them better than proto-declarative ones.<sup>35</sup> Atwood explained that: "Since the time that behavioral rules are explained to the child, he usually enforces them rigidly, he becomes a 'policeman', honest to distortion, as this behavior breaks the behavioral rules."<sup>36</sup>

## The peer group of people with ASD

A group of same-age people, usually share the same interests. Macionis, claims that adolescent peer groups help them finish the period of depend-

<sup>33</sup> M. Patern, "The concept of boundary in Winnicott's theory". *Sihot*, Israel Psychotherapy Journal, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> M.A. Longmore, *Symbolic interactionism and the study of sexuality*, Journal of Sex Research, 1998, p. 44-57.

<sup>35</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, A.M. Leslie, U. Frith, *Does the autistic child*, p. 37-46.

<sup>36</sup> T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome*, p. 39, 48.

ence on the adults.<sup>37</sup> The relations within the peer group are based on mutuality and not on dependence and enable interrelations based on equality. In the peer group the relations between members are equi-powered and the child can initiate and formulate social relations, thus developing a self-image separate from his family, as opposed to the family where the child is supervised by the parents and depends on them. In the peer group the child can talk to his mates on any subject that interests him, even those subjects that he is ashamed to discuss at home.

The common activities, interpersonal communication and interaction among the group members provide the adolescent the opportunity to experiment with the adult's role in society. The peer group differs from the family in that it enables the children to act outside the direct supervision of the parents, with (partial) independence. The attraction of the peer group is the ability to allow its members to engage in activities not allowed by the adult world (mostly parents and teachers). The activity within the peer group enables the children to establish a self-identity disconnected from the identity developed within the family, and trains them to establish a network of social relations by themselves.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the influence of the family on its young members is usually maintained, therefore the family and the peer group can co-exist.

Among people with autism the connection and relation to the home are the major and unique source of support, connection and safety.<sup>39</sup> Often we can see gaps in independence, apparent in a non-age-dependent relationship with the parents, problems in maintaining intimate relations with other adults, and difficulties in healthy disconnection, and emotional and functional independence.

It may be claimed that people with ASD have two main circles of peer groups:

1. Same age people, diagnosed with ASD
2. Same age people defined as neuro-typical.

In each of these frameworks there is a different dosage of meeting with the various peer groups.<sup>40</sup> We may expect meetings with the peer group of learning at school, participating in courses and afternoon groups. Most people with ASD who achieve adulthood speak about different doses of meetings with these two main peer groups. Thinking and awareness of the defi-

<sup>37</sup> J. Macionis, *Sociology*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 92-101; T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome*, p. 39, 48.

<sup>40</sup> T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome*, Chapter 2.

ciency characteristics provide the center for the therapeutic work to create a common denominator and emotional discussion within the peer groups diagnosed on the autistic spectrum.

Since membership may be based on common interest, it is important that people with ASD have the opportunity to meet people with similar interests, experiences and abilities. It is crucial that they learn the importance of personal exposure and attention, as well as identify the thoughts and feelings of others.<sup>41</sup> By understanding the importance of the peer group within the desire to establish an interaction, study and experience it, I suggest a model of group psycho-educational work for people diagnosed on the autistic continuum. The group work will mainly deal with micro-level interaction patterns. Within the group socialization processes by which the individual acquires culture and develops his self are important when emotional processes take place, since this is a life-long process. Throughout life there are many socialization agents we come into contact with. There is importance in learning, research and discussion with these socialization agents in order to achieve efficiency, development and growth in various disciplines.

### **From theory to practice - The group work - with ASD population**

**The meaning of work within the group.** In his writings, Asperger describes how a child diagnosed with communication deficiency does not joint others in a group interaction, and may even be frightened by it.<sup>42</sup> Atwood asked whether People with communication deficiencies are interested in interacting with others, or whether their avoidance is a result of the absence of social skills.<sup>43</sup> He claims that often the social interaction is avoided not because of lack of interest or skill but because of the desire to totally control the activity. In adulthood, Vider and Greenspan describe, people with communication deficiencies may isolate themselves because they tend towards over-reactions or because they lack the skills to negotiate by means of simple social gestures - but deep inside they, ay desire the proximity of others and group/social interaction with them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> H. Asperger, *Autistic psychopathy in childhood*, [in:] *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, Ed. and Trans. U. Frith, London 1991, p. 37-92.

<sup>43</sup> Donna Williams 1992 in: T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome*, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 235-237.

Speaking about a group, we mean a number of people communicating with each other not by mediation – but face to face over an extended period of time.<sup>45</sup> Lewin found that all groups are based on inter-dependence among the group members, where one person is affected by the others.<sup>46</sup> He claims that the group is a dynamic whole, and is more than the sum of its parts. The group may be described as a social unit consisting of several individuals, with defined functional relations among them, having values and norms that help regulate the individual members of the group.<sup>47</sup> Dricourse claimed that in order to grow and cope with life tasks, the individual needs to develop the ability to give and receive – exist in a social affinity. The individual needs to have an efficient interaction with the peer group and other groups in order to develop.<sup>48</sup>

Yalom and Mullin in their book on groups say the group has therapeutic processes. They enumerate eleven therapeutic factors with the therapeutic group, such as: inspiring hope, universality, providing information, altruism, developing socialization techniques, imitation, inter-personal learning, group cohesion, catharsis.<sup>49</sup> When examining these factors and considering their contribution to each individual within the group and the group as a whole, it may be seen that in therapeutic, especially content-focused groups, the members have a common denominator. There is great contribution and importance in both the psychological and sociological connections. Such groups are an example for society's influence on the individual – so that he can influence his own life and that of society. They provide support and opportunity for people with ASD to establish friendships and intimacy in communication that are crucial for their experience of themselves.<sup>50</sup> They provide support and opportunity for people with ASD to establish friendships and intimacy in communication that are crucial for their experience of themselves.<sup>51</sup>

The psycho-education group may be viewed as a work method combining the cognitive, emotional and behavioral components. During the work process we observe the interpretation of events and thoughts emanating from them (the cognitive component), maintain social interaction and dis-

<sup>45</sup> G.C. Homans, *The human group*, New York 1952.

<sup>46</sup> K. Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflict*, Ed. by G.W. Lewin, New York 1948.

<sup>47</sup> M. Sherif, C.W. Sherif, *Acceptable and unacceptable Behaviour Defined by Group Normes*, Penguin 1973.

<sup>48</sup> R. Discourse, *Basics of the Adlerian theory*, New York 1981.

<sup>49</sup> A. Yalom, L. Molin, *Group therapy, theory and practice*, Translation: Ben-Zion Herman, Jerusalem 2006.

<sup>50</sup> T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome*, Chapter 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem.

cussion encouraging emotional expression and providing space. In practice, relevant contents are learned operating through the work group and providing tools for coping.

### **Cognitive, emotional and behavioral component in psycho-educational groups group with ASD population**

As a researcher in the area of social sciences and emotional therapy, I have a B.A. in the fields of psychology and sociology, and my M.A. in movement therapy. In my work I am also guiding parent, young adults and youth's groups in the Adler method, which combines cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects in the therapeutic work. Currently I mainly deal in socio-therapeutic work with adolescents diagnosed with highly functioning autism, and their parents. In the course of my work I observed that there are many interesting aspects and contexts I wish to study relating to coping with the diagnosis, the diagnostic process, the outcomes and difficulties that are relating to ASD diagnosis.

In view of my dealing with contents related to emotions and society, the current article combines aspects of sociological and social aspects and disciplines related to psychology. I believe that both these areas are inseparable and mutually affected, when wishing to understand processes relating to human lives. From my experience within the field, therapeutic work which combines cognitive, emotional and behavioral components can improve the communication between people with ASD and society, and enable them integrating in beneficially. In this paper, Aldo choosing to devote the difficulties and the components of the group work to Cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects, it is worth define dose three elements as related, holistic and woven.

**The cognitive aspects of group work.** Learning communities need to combine concrete life and social skills and knowledge acquisition. Historically, a random separation was made between the two, and thus miss out on the effectiveness of learning. Both types of skills require thought. This means that both academic and life skills may be learned by memory and thought – a more effective method than repetition.<sup>52</sup> Psycho-educational groups combine 'academic' knowledge and an emotional-social experience to achieve an effective learning process.

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<sup>52</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 218-219.

There are Contents that are milestones in the psycho-educational group of young people on the continuum. One of the important contributes that can enable improve people with autism's communication and people's communication in general is the "I message versus you message" - the American psychologist Gordon<sup>53</sup> developed a method for instructing teachers and parents. He called it the "I message versus you message". Gordon defines the "I message" as the expression of responsibility, where a person admits to have a problem. He clarifies to the other, who is a source of the problem, the effect of his behavior. The "I message" is a tool that enables us to politely comment to the others about their behavior without hurting their feelings. The "I message" has three stages: the first stage: an objective description of facts. The second stage: "What do I feel" - describing the feelings these facts invoke in me. The third stage: turning to the other person, asking him to change his behavior.<sup>54</sup> This message allows learning and exercise of emotional speech and explanation of my feelings as a person, while understanding the feelings of others.

The "I message" the emotional reaction: the speaker describes what he feels in relation to the listener's behavior. The speaker focuses on himself and not on the listener. The speaker reports what he feels, without accusations or judgment. The message is: "since you ... (non-judgmental behavior, the object's objectivity), I feel... (Describe the object's feeling) since... (Explain the way I understand the situation)... then you can make a request according to the object's needs. High functioning youngsters and adults with ASD can explain simple feelings but have difficulty in describing complex feelings such as embarrassment or pride.<sup>55</sup> In explaining the feelings in the "I message", it is possible to discuss a wide spectrum of feelings, simple and complex.

Another millstone which enables people with ASD improve their communication and empathy in Active listening. High functioning children with ASD need to learn to complement a friend, listen to him with empathy and care.<sup>56</sup> By exercising listening and mirroring 'what I heard' the participants in the group are able to experience empathy and expand their listening abilities, displaying empathy to others.

Attention and empathy are inseparably linked. True attention draws empathy, but this is not empathy but its preceding stage. It is understanding what the interviewee is saying, understanding where he is coming from.

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<sup>53</sup> Gordon T., *Efficient parenting, a practical guide for parents*, Tel-Aviv 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>55</sup> T. Atwood, *Asperger syndrome*, Chapter 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

This means understanding the message of the speaker exactly as it was intended, without contaminating his intentions with our thoughts.<sup>57</sup> During the group learning process we can exercise listening by conveying a message from the speaker to the listener and then resounding it as it was understood by the listener, to confront him with the person conveying the message. Active listening is hard work, requiring the interviewer's concentration, the ability to filter harassing thoughts, avoid thinking about the next question to be asked – but concentrate on what the interviewee is saying, and understanding them.<sup>58</sup>

Understanding other minds<sup>59</sup> is an ability that people with ASD can also improve. “Johari window” – Loft and Ingram constructed a model consisting of four windows of awareness: “What I know about myself and the other knows about me”, “What I know about myself and the other does not know about me”, “What I don’t know about myself and the other knows about me” and “what I don’t know about myself and the other does not know about me.”<sup>60</sup>

Watching these windows allows us to learn in general about the contribution of open communication with others in order to enable mirroring and flow in the interactions around us. For people with communication deficiencies, who have cognitive difficulties when meeting others, the model helps understand the group and personal processes in their lives. Working with this model allows us to deal with the issue of TOM and examine the processes of the other's consciousness as different than mine, and as those I am unaware of and encouraging the participants in the group to expand their awareness by giving and receiving feedback and asking questions, enabling open dialogue.<sup>61</sup>

People with ASD can also extend their awareness to other minds by explore their subjectivity and try to find more than one option to interoperate the same event. The “EFRAT” model. This results from the behavioral-cognitive model based on the ideas of Ellis<sup>62</sup> and Beck.<sup>63</sup> According to their approach, the emotional reactions and behaviors of people are the consequence of their thoughts and beliefs enacted in view of an activating event. When this model is learned and exercised it can be seen that each person's

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<sup>57</sup> Benjamin A., *The assisting interview*, Tel-Aviv 1990.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, A.M. Leslie, U. Frith, *Does the autistic child*, p. 37-46.

<sup>60</sup> J. Luft, *Group processes; an introduction to group dynamics* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), California 1970.

<sup>61</sup> Y. Ziv, Y. Barhav, *A group journey – guide for group leaders*, Tel-Aviv 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Ellis A., *Reasons and Emotions in Psychotherapy*, New York 1962.

<sup>63</sup> A.T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and Emotional Disorders*, New York 1976.

interpretation of the same event is different. The analysis and study of the model enable a significant cognitive learning process that may influence the way a person with ASD grasps his own consciousness and that of the other as subjective.

There are additional models that may be used to develop communication and life skills of the participants. In fact, the unique approach, where the experiential-emotional process is combined with the learning of contents and cognitive explanations may contribute to growth, development and improving the lives of the participants.

**The Emotional aspects of group work.** Therapeutic-social groups combining discussion and cognition, emotion, behavior, between the creative, experience and relational values, will enable a more efficient coping process, encompassing a meeting with a group of coping peers, open and controlled discussion, reduced shame and guilt and possibility for choice in view of the given situation taking into consideration the forces and powers apparent in it. Within the work, there is an opportunity to deal and process intensive emotions, which is difficult for people with ASD to deal with in most cases.<sup>64</sup>

Group work enables acceptance and containment of the person – as a child, an additional experience of encouragement and mirroring, where abilities are grounded within reality and supported by evidence, with group feedback through interaction in the ‘here and now’. Awareness work based on reality, supported by professionals and rational may develop a sense of positive self-efficiency as part of the contribution of acting and ‘togetherness’ for the participants. Bandura coined the phrase self-efficacy which means ‘the extent of the person’s belief that he is capable of organizing and performing behaviors required to achieve the results he desires.’<sup>65</sup> This dimension influences the choice of the person's activities, where he will persevere in spite of obstacles and how he will react emotionally during these activities.

Before a person chooses to get into a specific situation or cope with a certain challenge, we may expect congruence between his level of self-efficacy and his level of readiness to deal with this challenge. Bandura claims that the more a person is sure and confident of his abilities, the more he expects to succeed in the mission and embark on more complex situations or those requiring greater audacity before entering the challenging situation. Self-capability may be attributed to the components of the motivational behavior

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<sup>64</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 347.

<sup>65</sup> A. Bandura, *Self-Efficacy*, [in:] *Social foundations of thought and action. A social cognitive theory*, Ed. A. Bandura, New Jersey 1986, p. 191-215.



- since the motivation to perform the mission relates to the person's ability to perform the task and his positive appraisal of the forecast results. It may be deduced that self-capability, affects the extent of performance and the investment of energy, perseverance and effort and may also be considered a prophecy for motivated behavior and desire for learning.<sup>66</sup>

A significant aspect expressed in group work is 'mirroring'. Mirroring enables a person to see who 'he is' and what he experiences. Mirroring view the individual as a whole object, thus contributing to integration. Arper describes the importance of mirroring as enabling the individual to feel visible, repeat his speech out loud and make the internal focus into an external one.<sup>67</sup> This visibility may lead to development in maintaining interaction with others. Winnicott also discusses the importance of mirroring. He claims that the mother is a mirror of experiences, sensations, thoughts, emotions, wishes and desires of the human being. This structuring is not only a passive mirror, but also one that organizes the experience actively, and enables its integration.<sup>68</sup> When mirroring the child's experience, he can understand that he is a separate entity, understand what goes on around him, and mediate the world for him. An advanced mirroring process within the group is feedback.

Ziv and Barhav's describe the group's uniqueness and ability in terms of feedback, as the group provides the social microcosm and enables the individual to learn about himself in a safe and supporting environment.<sup>69</sup> It serves as a learning laboratory, providing opportunities for concentrated feedback. There is a special meaning in that a large number of people provide the same feedback, because an individual tends to reject feedback which does not seem logical to him, because he is not yet ready emotionally to contain it. The same feedback, provided by many people helps the individual understand that the feedback was not provided out of an unfinished business, but in order to help the individual be exposed to information which causes an emotional reaction he is not aware of, and that his own behavior caused the reaction from different people within the group. The uniqueness of a supporting and constructive group is in the ability of its members to provide practical feedback, enabling the receiver to learn about

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<sup>66</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>67</sup> T. Erfer, *Treating children with autism in a public school system*, [in:] *Dance and Other Expressive Art Therapies: When Words Are Not Enough*, Ed. F.J. Levy, New York - London 1995, p. 191-211.

<sup>68</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *The mirror role of the mother and the family in the child's development*, [in:] *Game and Reality*, Tel-Aviv 1999, p. 128-134.

<sup>69</sup> Y. Ziv, Y. Barhav, *A group journey*.

himself, expand his awareness and allow him space for growth. The group may be described as a large mirror, mirroring the person's silhouette. But the 'group mirror' is unique in that it illuminates this silhouette in a supporting, accepting and encouraging manner.

"Feedback provided alone or in a group has a crucial significance on the person's self-image and the development of his self-value which combines cogitative and emotional aspects. From birth the child undergoes an incessant process of verbal feedback from the near environment and the culture in which he lives.<sup>70</sup> According to the symbolic interaction theory, each person has a cognitive and emotional "filter" for the messages from the external environment. For example a person that will think that the environment is unfriendly or Unfavorable, will probably feel insecure and attacked, that can affect his ability to hear and internalize the message of the feedback.

Passing through the filter makes the messages undergo adaptation according to the person's knowledge and interpretation. Therefore, each message from the environment undergoes changes somewhat, before it is absorbed by the individual. Changes in the influence of feedback from the environment to the individual may result from a number of factors, including the nature of the source of the feedback and its nearness to the receiver (type of feedback, how it is conveyed, the nature of the receiver, the emotional state of the sender and the receiver).<sup>71</sup> In working with groups under different situations, we may observe the effect of the feedback on the receiver, the learning processes and the group atmosphere.

The meaning of the group is coping and choice, taking responsibility for the areas where this is possible. Frenkel.<sup>72</sup> Describes life as a river of opportunities uncontrolled by the individual, but he has responsibility to select the chances, take responsibility and react by acting. The search of meaning is a reaction to actions by taking responsibility for my life. If the search for meaning becomes a more direct and internal one, and be theoretical, it will end like the other experiences such as the search for power, pleasure, happiness and self-fulfillment. In coping with a given crisis/situation the individual needs to ask 'what can I do under such conditions' (sometimes can still do under such conditions), or what can I make of myself.

**The behavioral aspects of group work.** The behavioral aspect refers to practicing in the group work. A child or adult with ASD has a Developmen-

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<sup>70</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>71</sup> T. Lundgren, *A development and evaluation of an integrative health model in the treatment of epilepsy*, University of Uppsala 2004.

<sup>72</sup> L.A. Hjelle, D.J. Zingler, *Personality Theories*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., New York 1992.

tal difference and difficulties in learning processes of social skills, when we attend to teach people with ASD cognitively social skills we need to do so by crating a pattern of learning which combines many practice and high level of emotionality in order to help them relating their feelings to their behavior.<sup>73</sup> In the group work the participants can experience and exercise how to listen, Give and get feedback, show empathy, solve problems and practice how to extend their awareness to other minds by playing and talking with others with mediation and guiding.

## Conclusions

Emphasizing the importance of observing the psychological and relational dimensions in wide sociological contexts as a basis is crucial, as these dimensions may explain the coping and challenges for people diagnosed with autism and the effect of these challenges on development and self-image. Working in a psycho-educational group allows a person to feel visible, listened to, significant, and belonging. The ability to express the high cognitive abilities of the ASD high functioning population characterizing the deficiency, enables a sense of efficiency and ability together with a sense of belonging to the group, having fulfilling interrelations, rewarding and enriching.

Learning through experience may lead to improved self-image, higher ability to maintain intimate and social relations with others and improve functioning, independence and the quality of life of adolescents and adults with ASD. Adler coined the phrase 'social affinity' as a basic concept in therapeutic work. Adler defines 'social affinity' as the ability to see through the eyes of others, hear with their ears and feel with their hearts.<sup>74</sup> Further to the theory of awareness – can we assume that people on the continuum do not have a 'social affinity'? Obviously their 'social affinity' can be defined as dissimilar or different. While combining cognitive, emotional and behavioral in therapeutic work we are creating a model of Mediation, communication and social bonding that can allow people with ASD experience of seeing through the eyes of others, hear with their ears and feel with their hearts. Have the ability of 'social affinity'.

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<sup>73</sup> S. Greenspan, S. Vider, *Dealing with autism*, p. 368.

<sup>74</sup> R. Discourse, *Basics of the Adlerian theory*, New York 1981.

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