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The Relationship between the Strategy of Coping with Difficult Social Situations by Students with Mild Intellectual Disability and their Overt Aggressive Behaviour

Introduction

According to Danuta Borecka-Biernat (2003: 9) psychologists use different terms when referring to human behaviour in a difficult situation e.g. reaction to frustration, behaviour in a stressful situation or coping with a stressful situation. Therefore, it is worth taking a closer look at opinions of researchers on the semantic scope of these terms. When it comes to a difficult situation – the views of T. Tomaszewski and M. Tyszkowa (Kiedrowska, 2016: 84–90) are particularly popular in the Polish psychological literature on the subject. According to the first of these authors, we can talk about a difficult situation “(...) when the internal balance of a normal situation is impeded in a way that the normal process of the main activity will be disturbed and the probability of finishing the task on the normal level will be diminished” (Tomaszewski, 1978: 32). The aforementioned normal situation is the result of a frequent repetition of a specific situation during which “(...) its internal organization stabilizes, mutual adaptation of its basic elements takes place, namely: tasks to be carried out »values«, conditions in which they are carried out, methods of implementation »activities« and the accomplisher himself »subject«” (Tomaszewski, 1978: 32). As a result, the mutual arrangement of the mentioned elements is established and consequently the task is adapted to capabilities. This makes it possible to reduce the difficulty of the task if the capabilities are insufficient or to increase it if the capabilities are greater. This happens without any adverse consequences for the course of the main activity in each situation. If the course of the activity is disrupted and the chances of completing the task diminish, an individual responds with a complex reaction known as stress (Tomaszewski, 1978: 35) which is followed by several “post situational” burdens (Reykowski, cited in Tomaszewski, 1978: 35). These burdens – demonstrated, among others, in a prolonged state of emotional tension, assessment and analysis of a particular behaviour in the past situation or an assessment of the degree of difficulty and meaningfulness of the performed task – result in changing of conditions of “entering” into next situations.

M. Tyszkowa adds an important facet to specify the understanding of difficult situations in social interactions. She believes that we deal with them when “(...) the

values and aspirations of an individual are threatened or thwarted by other people, through the very fact of their presence or as a result of specific forms of their opposing interaction or incompatibility with the individuals' own aspirations" (cited in Kiedrowska, 2016: 87). Among these difficult situations, the author points out situations of social exposure threatening an individual's self-esteem as a consequence of being subjected to public evaluation and criticism; situations of social conflicts that pose a threat to one's own interest as a result of dissonance or incompatibility with other people's goals; situations of social pressure that disrupt or prevent the individual's goal from being achieved as a result of pressure exerted by others to change the course of one's own actions or aspirations (cited in Borecka-Biernat, 2003: 10).

J. Heitzman (2002: 36), on the other hand, mentions the views of J.L. Janis who believed psychological stress can be described as a change in the environment which causes high emotional tension that prevents an average person from normal functioning. The literal reading of this definition suggests that stress should not be defined as a reaction of a person to destructive and threatening stimuli in the environment, but the stimuli themselves, which an individual appraises as stressful. Further explanation suggests that the author proposes separate terms to describe *changes in the environment* and *increased emotional tension*. He defines the first one as a *stressful situation*, the second one as a *stressful reaction*. J.L. Janis appears to have combined two traditional perspectives on psychological stress which is viewed – as Heitzman (2002: 36) reminds – as:

(...) negative external factor (...) an event in the human environment – usually harmful, unpleasant or excessively overloading, generalized reaction to the action of damaging factors or mental state manifested by a series of changes in behaviour, associated with strong negative emotions.

In view of the subject of this work, attention should be paid to the concept of psychological stress developed by R. Lazarus in 1966. According to the author (cited in Heitzman, 2002: 36), psychological stress is defined as a state in which internal psychological processes caused by external factors are dealt by a person in a very individual way. This individual way of coping is related to a subjective assessment of events involving not only a simple perception of a threatening situation, but also more complex cognitive processes which depend on the previous experience associated with processing this type of information, shared values, as well as the level of functioning of perceptual-cognitive and intellectual processes. This theory – as we can see – focuses on the way in which a person interprets a given situation and how this interpretation affects the strategy of dealing with experienced problems. The issues outlined above are key elements of the concept developed by R. Lazarus and co-workers and known as *transactional theory* of stress (Heitzman, 2002: 37). The term *transaction* refers to a relationship between individuals and their environment. W. Łosiak (1994: 15) describing the mechanism of stress in the context of this theory points out the following sequence of such processes as: transaction, cognitive assessment, emotions, and coping:

The individual – environment transaction (...) is assessed as threatening, harmful or challenging, which is a source of emotions. The following elements (...) are coping processes, and their effects in the form of changed subject-environment relationship (...) or changes in meaning and attention (...) (referred to as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping respectively – author’s note) are the subject of another cognitive assessment (...), which stimulates new emotional processes. This cycle can be repeated (...).

Transactional theory of stress points to three types of cognitive evaluation (appraisals): primary, secondary and reappraisals. As a result of the primary appraisal of a specific situation, a threatening impact may be assigned (other options are positive or no impact). Secondary appraisal, on the other hand, allows to determine coping strategies focusing on solving the problem in the assessed situation. Reappraisal is an assessment of the response to the current person – environment relationship that can lead to a change in the first two types of appraisal (Heitzman, 2002: 36–37; Kiedrowska, 2016: 75–77). These ways of dealing with a situation assessed as harmful and threatening can focus – as stressed in the above quote – on the problem, then they are aimed at active attempts to change themselves or a stressful situation, or on emotions, which is manifested by controlling feelings and distress¹ with the intention of lowering or eliminating unpleasant tension and alleviating adverse emotional states (Heitzman, 2002: 37; Korczyński, 2015: 36). The choice of the particular reaction depends – as we already know – on the perception and assessment of the situation: “If someone thinks that they can handle a given situation, they choose a strategy focused on the problem, otherwise they choose strategies focused on emotions” (Wrona-Polańska, cited in: Korczyński, 2015: 36).

In the context of information about the role of cognitive assessment in choosing a coping strategy, the question arises about how people with mild intellectual disability deal with difficult situations, especially those of a social nature? If we take into consideration that the level of functioning of cognitive processes determines the extent of the perception of various types of relationships in which people are the main element, it should be noted that different types of deficits in cognitive orientation and intellectual sphere, which are characteristic of this group of people, contribute to the fact that they have “(...) impaired ability to accurately assess social situations and relationships between people” (Wyczesany, 2012: 72), which makes it difficult for them to assess these situations as threatening, neutral, or challenging. The course of this assessment may be additionally hindered by various emotional-motivational disorders (Giryński, cited in: Mikrut, 1995: 12). This factor cannot be underestimated because the global nature of disability “(...) is not only in the sphere of intellect, but also in the field of emotional and motivational processes,” with anger and anxiety among the most frequent negative emotions experienced by this group of people (Wyczesany, 2012: 71).

It seems that the very fact of not understanding interpersonal relationships that people with intellectual disability are involved in, can lead to the situation being

¹ According to H. Selye (cited in Heitzman, 2002: 19) who views stress as psychological phenomenon, the term *distress* refers to *bad stress*, i.e. excessive, debilitating and leading to illness.

deemed as threat. In a threatening situation – as D. Borecka-Biernat (2019: 259) writes – emotions are felt in a particularly intense way. Anxiety and anger as emotions characteristic of this group of people create conditions for destructive reactions to threat which are aimed solely at reducing unpleasant emotional tension. The first of these emotions is reduced by escape, the second – by aggression. However, it happens – as D. Borecka-Biernat explains (2019: 260) – that “when a man has nowhere else to run away (...), then fear can be the reason for an attack.”

The above-mentioned arguments suggest that a typical way of dealing with difficult social situations by people with mild disability are aggression or escape (avoiding a problem). Stalter (2009: 122) believes that overloading with difficult situations can consequently lead to behavioral disorders due to increased level of anxiety and aggression. Therefore, as the author explains, we are dealing with a situation of positive feedback loops which is expressed in the fact that the mentioned negative emotions indicate experiencing difficult situations, but also intensify already existing problems in the emotional and motivational sphere, resulting in difficult behaviors, including those of aggressive nature.

Methodological assumption of the author’s research

The main problem of empirical inquiries was the question: What is the relationship between the strategy of coping with difficult social situations and the level of overt aggressive behavior of students with mild intellectual disability manifested in everyday life? In addition, an attempt was made to answer the question of possible differences between students with mild intellectual disability and their non-intellectually disabled peers in terms of the examined variables, and above all, the strength of the relationship between these variables?

In order to gather empirical data, two diagnostic tools were used: 1. Questionnaire for dealing with difficult social situation (Kwestionariusz radzenia sobie w trudnych sytuacjach społecznych – RTSS) designed by D. Borecka-Biernat (2003: 9–36) and 2. Questionnaire of overt aggressive behaviour (student version) (Kwestionariusz jawnych zachowan agresywnych – KJZA) formulated by S. Olszewski (2005: 131–133).

The first of these tools (RTSS) is intended for junior high school adolescents; standards are based on scientific research conducted on a sample of girls and boys aged 13–15. The questionnaire contains a brief description of thirty difficult situations, each of which is accompanied by 3 types of behavior which are indicators of a coping strategy. The respondent should choose one of them, with the first indicating aggressive coping with a given situation (A), the second – strategy of avoidance (U), and the third – the rational (task-oriented) strategy (R). Since the questionnaire consists of 30 situations, the respondents can obtain 0 to 30 points in each range. The described tool has appropriate standards, however, due to the fact that a few students that participated in the conducted research were 1 to 2 years older than those in the standardization group, the data obtained was not used for the purpose of this study.

In turn, the Questionnaire of overt aggressive behaviour (KJZA) was designed for testing adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities. It has two versions – one for students and the other one for teachers. They differ only in the grammatical form of the statements used. It is composed of 25 statements, 16 of which are brief descriptions of aggressive behavior – without giving the situational context in which they take place – and eight buffers. Completing the questionnaire consists of responding to all statements by choosing one of three answers, i.e. “never”, “sometimes” and “often”. Each answer is assigned a certain number of points, that is: 0, 1 and 2, respectively. The result demonstrating the level of general aggressive behavior (AO) measured – as shown by the scale used – by the frequency of its occurrence was obtained by summing the points received in each statement (0–32 points). Only the student version was used in the presented analysis. In order to maintain consistency in analyzing the obtained data, also in this case, the reported standards were not used.

Research was carried out in 2018 at junior high schools. In total, 60 students were surveyed, including 30 with mild intellectual disabilities (16 girls and 14 boys) and 30 with normal intellectual development (17 girls and 13 boys). The average age of the former was 15.63 years, the latter – 15.10 years. Empirical material was collected by Justyna Ewiak as part of the master’s seminar under the supervision of the author of this work.

Presentation and analysis of the research results

Matching the distribution of the analyzed variables to a normal distribution

In order to select suitable methods of statistical analysis, the distribution of examined variables i.e. “ways of coping with a difficult social situation” and “overt aggressive behavior” was examined against a normal distribution. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to verify the null hypothesis that assumes compatibility of the analyzed distribution with a normal distribution (Stanisz, 1998: 290). These and all other calculations were made by using the Statistica 13.1 program. As a result, it turned out that in most of the examined distribution there are no grounds for rejecting the proposed hypothesis. Only one exception was noted, which was the distribution of the variable “aggressive coping with difficult social situation by students with normal intellectual development.” Therefore, in statistical analyses that took this variable into account, non-parametric procedures that do not rely on assumptions about the shape of distribution were used (Brzeziński, 1980: 149). These included the Mann-Whitney test and the Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient. For all other distributions, the parametric procedures such as Student’s test and the Pearson correlation coefficient were used.

Ways of dealing with difficult social situations by the surveyed students in the light of the obtained results

The results obtained using the RTSS questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences in dealing with difficult social situations between students with intellectual disability and their non-disabled peers (the Student's t test for independent groups²)

Coping with difficult social situations	Surveyed students	Students with intellectual disability				Non-intellectually disabled students				Test value	Significance level
		arithmetic mean	standard deviation	median	quartile deviation	arithmetic mean	standard deviation	median	quartile deviation		
aggressive (A)	total	3.33	3.24	3.00	3.00	5.10	5.89	3.50	2.50	0.9314	ni.
	boys	4.36	3.73	3.00	3.00	6.08	6.56	3.00	2.00	0.2184	ni.
	girls	2.44	2.53	1.50	2.25	4.35	5.40	4.00	2.00	1.0807	ni.
avoidance (U)	total	8.83	3.31	9.00	2.00	6.80	3.65	7.00	2.50	2.2588	0.0277
	boys	7.64	3.73	7.50	2.50	6.31	3.01	7.00	1.50	1.0178	ni.
	girls	9.88	2.58	9.00	1.25	7.18	4.13	7.00	2.50	2.2358	0.0327
rational (R)	total	17.83	5.02	19.00	3.00	18.07	7.44	18.50	5.00	0.1425	ni.
	boys	18.00	5.96	19.00	3.50	17.63	8.41	19.00	5.50	0.1379	ni.
	girls	17.69	4.22	19.00	2.75	18.41	6.85	18.00	3.00	0.3629	ni.

Considering the fact that for each of the selected ways of dealing with difficult situations it was possible to obtain the same number of points, it is easy to see that students with intellectual disability were most likely to choose a rational strategy (R) and the least often – aggressive strategy (A). This observation applies to the whole group of students in this category, as well as a group distinguished by gender. Therefore, the collected empirical material allows to formulate the conclusion that these students, when experiencing difficult social situations, are more likely to undertake actions – as the author of the KTSS questionnaire explains – that aim at:

(...) solving the problem and reducing and mitigating the negative effects caused by it. This includes behavioral attempts to transform a threatening situation or change one's own actions by means of which a person overcomes the problem, difficulties and remove the state of tension, and at the same time, achieves his goal or goal equivalent (Borecka-Biernat, 2003: 21).

If we take into account that the potentially highest score in each of the examined coping strategy is 30 points, we can observe that the value of the arithmetic mean on the scale measuring the rational approach (R) to the existing difficulties by students with mild intellectual disability, presented in Table 1, oscillate around 18 points

² Due to the fact that the distribution of the variable "aggressive coping strategy in difficult social situation by students who are not intellectually disabled" does not match the normal distribution, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used to verify the hypothesis of significance of differences regarding this variable.

(60% of the potentially highest result). This indicates a higher than average level of this variable – measured as we remember by the frequency of using this strategy as a response to the social situation in question.

Similar regularity was observed in the case of non-intellectually disabled students. Although the arithmetic mean values of the R and A scales are slightly higher in their case (the only exception was the rational response to a difficult situation by boys), the differences are not big enough (statistically insignificant) to think that the level of intellectual functioning is a discriminating factor when it comes to the frequency of choosing these two strategies of behavior. However, it plays a significant role in terms of the strategy of avoidance (U). The obtained results show that students with intellectual disabilities use this strategy more often, whereas this observation applies both to the whole sample of respondents and the girls themselves (statistically significant difference).

Level of aggressive behavior manifested by the surveyed students in the light of the obtained results

Empirical material collected using the KJZA questionnaire is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in aggressive behavior (AO) between students with intellectual disability and their non-disabled students (the Student's t test for independent group)

Surveyed students	Students with intellectual disability				Non-intellectually disabled students				Test value	Significance level
	arithmetic mean	standard deviation	median	quartile deviation	arithmetic mean	standard deviation	median	quartile deviation		
total	5.83	4.09	5.50	3.50	9.13	6.54	9.50	4.00	2.3418	0.0226
boys	5.36	3.99	5.00	3.50	9.85	6.35	10.00	4.00	2.2170	0.0359
girls	6.25	4.27	5.50	3.25	8.59	6.83	9.00	4.00	1.1708	ni.

By analyzing the results of the students with intellectual disability it is easy to conclude that they rank at low level. We can see that arithmetic mean value for the total of the surveyed students, as well as in the group extracted because of their gender, oscillates in the range of 5–6 points which is only about 16–19% of the potentially highest score. Moreover, they are lower than those obtained by non-intellectually disabled students. These differences are statistically significant in relation to the total number of surveyed students as well as boys themselves. The comparison of the results obtained by girls indicates that they are lower in case of the girls with intellectual disability but not enough to conclude that the level of intellectual development of girls is a differentiating factor when it comes to the intensification of their aggressive behavior (statistically insignificant difference).

Analysis of the correlation relationship between coping strategies in difficult social situations and overt aggressive behavior of the surveyed students

Results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 3.

It is easy to notice that most of the correlation coefficient values related to students with mild intellectual disability reached the level of statistical significance. The only exception was noted in case of using the strategy of avoidance (U) by boys. Observation that proved to be particularly important indicates that aggressive (A) and avoidance strategy (U) used to deal with difficult situation of social nature is positively correlated with general aggressive behavior (AO), whereas rational behavior (R) – negatively.

Table 3. Value of the correlation coefficient between coping with difficult social situation and the level of general aggressive behavior (Pearson's correlation coefficient r^3)

Coping with difficult social situation	Surveyed students	General aggressive behavior (AO)			
		Students with intellectual disability		Non-intellectually disabled students	
		coefficient value	significance value	coefficient value	Significance value
aggressive (A)	total	0.69	0.000	0.68	0.000
	boys	0.83	0.000	0.67	0.012
	girls	0.72	0.002	0.72	0.001
avoidance (U)	total	0.53	0.003	0.35	ni.
	boys	0.42	ni.	0.68	0.010
	girls	0.67	0.005	0.21	ni.
rational (R)	total	-0.79	0.000	-0.75	0.000
	boys	-0.79	0.001	-0.75	0.003
	girls	-0.84	0.000	-0.77	0.000

By expressing the regularity descriptively it can be stated that firstly, the more often students with intellectual disability react to a difficult social situation with physical violence against persons or objects associated with the existing problem and/or by manifesting their negative emotions in contact with these people in the form of harmful and degrading comments (Borecka-Biernat, 2003: 21) (aggressive strategy), or the more often they withdraw from this kind of situation and ignore it by "escaping" into substitute activities and seeking contact with other people (Borecka-Biernat 2003: 21), the more often they reveal aggressive behavior in other everyday situations. This pattern – as indicated by the results – does not apply to boys who choose to use the strategy of avoidance. Secondly, the more often they choose a rational strategy (R) in coping with difficult situations of social nature (as previously described is characteristic of this category of students) the less often they show aggressive behavior in other conditions and situations.

³ Given the fact that the variable "aggressive coping with difficult social situation by students with a normal intellectual development" is not matched to the normal distribution in the correlation procedures that take the aforementioned variable into account, the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used.

Similar pattern was noted in relation to non-intellectually disabled students. Described relationships between a strategy of avoidance (U) and overt aggressive behavior in the surveyed group of students apply only to boys.

Conclusions from the research

The quantitative analysis of the empirical material obtained during the research allows to come to a number of conclusions:

- the typical way of coping with difficult situation of social nature by students with intellectual disability is a rational strategy (R), the least prevalent – aggressive strategy. These coping strategies do not differentiate these students from their non-disabled peers;
- students with mild intellectual disability, especially girls, more often than their non-disabled peers use a strategy of avoidance in coping with difficult situations, however this strategy is neither typical nor the least used in the examined situations;
- students with mild intellectual disability are characterized by a low level of overt aggressive behavior, what is more, the frequency of this behaviour especially in boys, is lower than in their non-disabled peers;
- aggressive coping strategy in difficult social situations (A) used by students with mild intellectual disability “goes hand in hand” with their aggressive behavior revealed in other everyday situations;
- avoidance as reaction to difficult social situations by students with mild intellectual disability, especially by girls, also indicates a positive relationship with their aggressive behaviors in various everyday situations;
- rational approach to difficult social situations by students with mild intellectual disability shows a relationship with avoiding overt aggressive behaviors in everyday conditions and situations;
- all mentioned relationships between aggressive (A) behavior and rational coping strategy (R) in difficult social situations and overt aggressive behavior manifested in everyday life related to students with intellectual disability are not different from those observed in the group of their non-disabled peers. This gives grounds to believe that mild intellectual disability is not a factor modifying the relationship between the examined variables.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that the obtained results did not confirm the hypothetical assumption that students opt mostly for aggressive or avoidance strategy in difficult social situation. By attempting to explain this state of affair we can point to at least two reasons. Firstly, it turns out – as M. Koscielska (1984: 288) writes – that these people might adopt correct coping strategies in social situations even if they do not understand all the relationships involved. Secondly, cognitive deficits make it more difficult for them to adopt adequate self-esteem (Wyczesany, 2012: 73) which can result in choosing a strategy that exceeds their capabilities.

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to verify the assumption of mutual relationship between coping strategies in difficult social situations by students with mild intellectual disability and their aggressive behaviour displayed in other everyday situations and circumstances. Justification of this assumption can be found in the repetitive and ensuing sequence of occurrences and processes: the deficits in perceptual-cognitive, intellectual and emotional-motivational functions which are characteristic of this group of people, make it difficult for them to understand and evaluate the interpersonal relationships, hence they perceive them as threatening. Emotional tension arising from those situations is released by using destructive strategies including aggression. The repetition of this experience leads to destructive

behaviours which are manifested in various everyday situations and circumstances. These fixed behaviour patterns are then used in subsequent difficult social situations etc.

Keywords: intellectual disability, difficult situation, strategies of coping with stress

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