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**The level of self-esteem and social functioning
of people with disabilities in a group of students**
**Poziom samooceny a funkcjonowanie społeczne osób niepełnos-
prawnych w grupie studentów**

Summary

Disability as a lifelong human experience is a springboard for making subsequent assessments of one's self, in terms of positive or negative attitude. Self-evaluation as a form of self-consciousness becomes an important factor that influences social functioning of people with disabilities, including the nature of relationships with others and the efficiency of their actions. The aim of this study is to assess the level of self-esteem among students with disabilities and its connection to their relationships with other students.

The study includes 39 students with disabilities from the University of Białystok. In the study a Polish adaptation of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used. Interpersonal relations were examined by way of interviews. The questions concerned: determining the position of a disabled person in a group of peers, their openness to convey problems and needs pertaining to disability, climate during the classes, feeling stressed in situations of speaking in front of the group, the group's reactions to statements in the classroom, the kind of participation activity in the classroom.

The average level of self-esteem, which is considered optimal for proper functioning presented 41.0% of the students. The remaining percentage has either low self-esteem 28.0%, or high 31.0%. Students with low self-esteem often encountered difficulties in establishing relationships in the group: 58.3% said they are not very well-liked in the group, 75.0% did not communicate directly about their needs and have not asked for help, 66.6% met with lack of interest, and found their opinions being ignored; among 50.0% the activity in the classroom was low, or even very low – namely at 33.3%.

Conclusion: The majority of disabled students show mostly average or high level of self-esteem. Students who have low self-esteem exhibit at the same time difficulties in social functioning both in establishing positive relationships in a group and active participation in classes.

Key words: level of self-esteem, relations in a group of students

Streszczenie

Niepełnosprawność jako doświadczenie życiowe człowieka, staje się podstawą kształtowania oceny siebie - świadomej, pozytywnej bądź negatywnej postawy wobec własnej osoby. Samoocena, jako forma świadomości siebie, staje się ważnym czynnikiem, od którego zależy funkcjonowanie społeczne osób niepełnosprawnych, w tym charakter stosunków z innym ludźmi oraz efektywność działań. Celem podjętych badań była ocena poziomu samooceny studentów niepełnosprawnych i jej związku z relacjami w grupie studenckiej.

Badaniami objęto 39 studentów niepełnosprawnych Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku. Do badania samooceny wykorzystano polską adaptację skali SES M. Rosenberga.

Relacje interpersonalne badano za pomocą wywiadu. Pytania obejmowały: określenie pozycji w grupie, otwartość w komunikowaniu problemów i potrzeb związanych z niepełnosprawnością, klimat panujący podczas zajęć, odczuwanie stresu w sytuacjach ekspozycji wobec grupy, reakcje grupy na wypowiedzi podczas zajęć, poziom aktywności podczas zajęć.

Przeciętny poziom samooceny, uznawany za optymalny dla prawidłowego funkcjonowania, prezentowało 41,0% badanych studentów. U pozostałych ocena była niska – 28,0% lub wysoka – 31,0%. Studenci z niskim poziomem samooceny najczęściej przejawiali także trudności w nawiązywaniu relacji w grupie: 58,3 %, uważało, że są mało lubiani w grupie, 75,0% nie komunikuje bezpośrednio o swoich potrzebach i nie zwraca się o pomoc, 66,6% spotykało się z brakiem zainteresowania, ignorowaniem swoich wypowiedzi, u 50,0% aktywność podczas zajęć była niska, a nawet bardzo niska – u 33,3%.

Wnioski: Większość studentów niepełnosprawnych posiada przeciętny lub wysoki poziom samooceny. Studenci z niskim poziomem samooceny przejawiają jednocześnie trudności w funkcjonowaniu społecznym: w nawiązywaniu pozytywnych relacji w grupie i aktywnym uczestnictwie w zajęciach dydaktycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: poziom samooceny, relacje w grupie studenckiej

Introduction

Self-esteem is one of many forms of self-awareness. It allows knowing oneself, assessing one's needs and abilities as well as our behavior in relation to other people. It includes opinions concerning one's person and individual abilities (Vasta et al. 1995). According to Morris Rosenberg, self-esteem is a conscious attitude towards one's own person, positive or negative orientation toward oneself – its global assessment. It is a subjective construct, which is based on the assessment of self-esteem (Rosenberg 1989). Such understanding of self-esteem among adults is relatively permanent in nature, because it is a human trait, where 30-40% is partially genetically determined, subject to gradual or immediate changes during one's lifetime as a reaction to emerging events (Neiss et al. 2002). Self-esteem may be reflected in physical, mental, and social area. Evaluation is done by comparing oneself and one's possibilities with some patterns, such as: an ideal self, achievements of other people, or assessment expressed by the environment.

There is a high and low level of self-esteem; when there is a significant difference between the 'I ideal' and 'I real', i.e. between who one is and whom one would like to be, then the level of self-esteem is low. The subject with a high level of self-esteem may obtain results, which correspond to high requirements in relation to oneself. When results are weaker than expected, then there is a low level of self-esteem (Vasta et al. 1995). High level of self-esteem reflects a belief that one is a good and valuable person, not necessarily better than others, whereas low means that one does not fully accept oneself (Rosenberg 1989).

People with low self-esteem are constantly dissatisfied with themselves, they lack self-confidence, and have a sense of helplessness (Kulas 1986). It is observed among persons who acknowledge possessing lower capabilities than they actually have; consequently, they do not appreciate their skills and expect less than is necessary from others. Such situation may lead to underestimation of the level of expectations relating to future actions of people. This then creates a situation of anxiety instead taking any action and inhibits many activities (Dymek 1997).

High self-esteem is associated with satisfaction with oneself and one's own actions (Kulas 1986). Too high self-esteem is associated with a tendency to overestimate one's capabilities, assigning higher capacities than they actually are, resulting in taking actions that are beyond one's power. This can lead to frustration, feeling of disappointment, but may also have a motivating influence. Too high self-esteem means that people have too high expectations of what they deserve from life, which can lead to subsequent conflicts (Dymek 1997).

It is possible to specify a number of issues obstructing the emergence of a proper self-esteem among people with disabilities. The sole fact of being a disabled person is oftentimes difficult for many to accept. It is often associated with experiencing very strong emotions by the person, who feels a mixture of fear, anger, sadness and shame. People with disabilities are faced with an internal conflict: they love their body, but at the same time they hate it too because of the occurring damage. According to psychoanalysts, a discovery of some damage in one's body is equivalent to the experience of a severe psychological trauma (Krupnicka 1984). Major threats to the development of a proper self-esteem among people with disabilities are indicated by S. Kowalik (1999) as discriminatory practices occurring in their life. These include: shunning – avoidance of close and informal contacts with disabled people; devaluation - assigning by non-disabled people negative characteristics of the disabled and disseminating such views; delegitimization – when negative psychological attitudes of some people towards others become fixed in the form of socially relevant laws; segregation - physical isolation of the individual or whole groups of people from the society.

The aforementioned problems lead to the conclusion that many people with disabilities may be at risk of feeling less valueable, being someone worse, different, or doomed to be at the mercy of other people (Lis-Kujawski 2010).

Self-acceptance has a major impact on emotional human balance and is one of the factors determining social functioning of the individual (Reykowski 1992). Both high and low self-esteem have a negative impact on one's mental health (Ognińska-Bulik, Juczyński 2008). The level of self-assessment decides whether a disabled person enters a particular group, but also influences the specificity of relations in that group, maintainance of satisfactory relationships with peers and performance of social roles in the group (Kulas 1992). Negative attitude towards oneself causes a similar attitude to other people (Ciekotowa 1988). The nature of relationships with others and the effectiveness of its actions depends on how people evaluate themselves (Kulas 1992). Studies provide ambiguous results on the subject in question. The research of R. Ossowski (1982) shows that self-image of disabled students compared to non-disabled students is underestimated. However, the study of Z. Palak (1994) shows that the level of self-acceptance of partially blind young people generally does not differ from non-disabled peers. The association level of self-esteem with social functioning is also not fully explained. It has been indicated that people with high self-esteem perceive themselves as more socially attractive and more popular (Battistich et al. 1993), while people with low self-esteem claim that in their experiences there is a preponderance of negative relationships (Lakey et al. 1994). On the contrary, the research of Bishop J.A. and Inderbitzen A.M. (1995) has found that people with high and low self-esteem are equally liked by peers. Unfortunately, no such studies relate to people with disabilities.

The aim of this study is to assess the level of self-esteem among students with disabilities and its relationship with making interpersonal relationships among students.

Material and methods

The study involves 39 students with disabilities at the University of Bialystok. In the study group, there are people with different types and degrees of disability: namely 29 (74.4%) students have moderate disability and 10 (25.6%) a significant one, 16 (41.0%) are partially hearing, 12 (30.8%) patients have ocular dysfunction, and 11 (28.2%) people have physical disabilities. The students range in age from 21-24 years, medium age is 22.7.

The study uses a Polish adaptation of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a tool for measuring the overall level of self-esteem, disclosed in self-report which is treated as a relatively permanent feature and not a temporary condition (Łagunai et al. 2007). In the questionnaire, respondents indicate their answers on a scale of four, resulting in a total score, which is a general indicator of the level of self-esteem; the higher the score, the higher the self-esteem. The second tool is a self constructed questionnaire concerning the relationships among students. Questions included the following issues: gauging a position in the group, openness to communication of problems and needs pertaining to disability, climate of the classes, the feeling of stress in situations of exposure in the group, the group reactions to statements in the classroom, the level of activity in the classroom.

Results

The average level of self-esteem, which is considered optimal for proper functioning, is noted among 41.0% of the respondents. Among the remaining students the score was either low self-esteem 28.0% or high 31.0%. Fig. 1 shows the results of the self-esteem among students.



Fig. 1 Level of self-esteem among students

The following section provides an analysis of the relationships in the group, taking into account differences pertaining to the level of self-esteem.

Table 1 shows how different levels of students assess their position in the group.

Tab. 1 The level of self-esteem and the position in the group

Assessment of one's position in the group	Level of self-esteem						Total	
	Low		Medium		High		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Very popular	0	0.0%	2	12.5%	7	63.6%	9	23.1%
Quite liked	4	33.3%	9	56.3%	4	36.4%	17	43.6%
Not popular	7	58.3%	4	25.0%	0	0.0%	11	28.2%
Not liked	1	8.4%	1	6.2%	0	0.0%	2	5.1%
Total:	12	100.0%	16	100.0%	11	100.0%	39	100.0%

Pearson correlation $r=1$, $p<0.001$

Almost half of the students with disabilities place themselves in the average position of popularity – i.e. 43.6%. A similar number of students feels that they are very popular -23.1%, or not popular - 28.2%. There are also individuals who feel that they are not liked among the peers - 5.1%.

Most students with low self-esteem feel that they are not popular in the group – 58.3%, or that they are only quite liked on average – 33.3%. Definitely higher position is claimed by students with high self-esteem, who most often indicate that they are very popular - 63.6%, or quite liked – 36.4%. In the group with an average self-esteem scores are distributed more evenly, and dominate opinions that they are quite liked on average 56.3%.

Therefore, it can be noted that students with low self-esteem assess their position in relation to students in a completely different way, namely by far the lowest, than high self-esteem students, but also worse than students with moderate levels of self-esteem. It seems, therefore, that each level of self-esteem determines different self-positioning in the group: the lowest pertains to low self-esteem, an average to medium, and high level of self-esteem with high self-assessment.

Another issue for consideration is openness of students to communicate their problems and needs related to disability. Students were asked whether, in a situation where they need help they turn to friends or rather expect that it will be recognized without the need of verbal statements.

Tab. 2 Level of self-esteem and communication of one's needs

Communication of needs	Self-esteem level						Total	
	Low		Medium		High		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Direct asking for help	3	25.0%	5	31.2%	9	81.8%	17	43.6%
Lack of direct asking for help	9	75.0%	11	68.8%	2	18.2%	22	56.4%
Total:	12	100.0%	16	100.0%	11	100.0%	39	100.0%

Pearson correlation $r=1$, $p<0.006$

Data included in Table 2 indicates that direct communication of their needs and asking for help is not common and moreover is difficult for most students with disabilities - 56.4%. Most often this applies to students with low self-esteem, among them as many as 75.0% do not communicate directly about needs and do not ask for help. At the same time students with moderate levels of self-esteem often do not ask directly - 68.8%. Only those with high self-esteem do not hesitate to ask directly when they have a problem. Apparently, the vast majority state that they directly and openly communicate their problems or needs - 81.8%.

It may be noted that by and large only students with high self-esteem are able to communicate openly issues related to disability, which is a rarity among students with both low and moderate levels of self-esteem.

Many situations are associated with direct participation in classes where it is necessary to speak in front of the entire group, have teamwork and related activities, or taking roles.

Students have assessed the way they feel about prevailing climate in the group during their speaking in the classroom and in the discussions. They were asked to specify the usual reception of their contributions in the classroom.

Tab. 3 The level of self-esteem and the response of the group to statements during classes

Group's reaction to statements	Self-esteem level						Total	
	Low		Medium		High		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Interest, group support	1	8.4%	12	70.0%	6	54.5%	19	48.7%
Low interest, lack of feedback	8	66.6%	2	12.5%	2	18.2%	12	30.8%
Conflict of opinions, criticism	3	25.0%	2	12.5%	3	27.3%	8	20.5%
Total:	12	100.0%	16	100.0%	11	100.0%	39	100.0%

Pearson correlation $r=1$, $p<0.168$

Most often the students believe that their statements are of interest and meet with group's support, this applies to 48.7% of respondents. Other people usually meet with a lack of interest, falling on deaf ears - 30.8% or criticism from other members of the group - 20.5%.

The climate of support and interest of the students is felt most often by students with average level of self-esteem 70.0% and higher - 54.5%. However, students with low self-esteem often meet with lack of interest, or being ignored - 66.6%. Widespread criticism and differences of opinion, is seldom noted by the students, regardless of the level of self-esteem, although students with moderate levels of self-esteem are somewhat less concerned 12.5% than students with low self-esteem - 25.0%, and high - 20.5%. It seems characteristic that students with low self-esteem are often ignored, their statements do not inspire group response, while students with average and high self-esteem come across support and interest.

Appearance in front of a group is for many people a stressful situation. Some students are bothered even by the thought that this is going to happen soon. Students assessed whether and to what extent, speaking in front of a group is stressful for them. The results are shown in Table 4.

Tab. 4 The level of self-esteem and perceived stress in a situation of speaking in front of a group

Level of felt stress in a situation of speaking in front of a group	Self-esteem level						Total	
	Low		Medium		High		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
High	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Moderate	7	58.4%	4	25.0%	0	0.0%	11	28.2%
Low	4	33.3%	9	56.2%	5	45.5%	18	46.2%
None	1	8.3%	3	18.8%	6	54.5%	10	25.6%
Total	12	100.0%	16	100.0%	11	100.0%	39	100.0%

Pearson correlation $r=1$, $p < 0.001$

In the opinion of the students, speaking in front of a group is not a particularly stressful situation; none of them feels high concentration of stress. Most assess their level as low - 46.2%. Also, other people often assess their situation as not stressful - 25.6%, while for 28.2% of the students it is moderately stressful. The most stressed while speaking in front of the group are people with low self-esteem, who often assess the situation as moderately stressful - 58.4%. People with moderate level of self-esteem often feel low level of stress - 56.3%, while those with high self-esteem usually indicate that the situation is not stressful for them - 54.5%, or slightly - 45.5%. It seems, therefore, that people with low self-esteem experience higher levels of stress than those with average or high self-esteem. However, in the case of people with low self-esteem stress level is usually moderately severe, whereas among individuals with average and high self-esteem it is slight or absent.

Students have also assessed their own participation in the classroom. The analysis in relation to the level of self-esteem is presented in Table 5.

Tab. 5 Self-esteem level and active class participation

Active class participation	Self-esteem level						Total	
	Low		Medium		High		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
High	0	0.0%	1	6.3%	5	45.5%	6	15.3%
Average	2	16.7%	5	31.2%	5	45.5%	12	30.8%
Low	6	50.0%	6	37.5%	1	9.0%	13	33.4%
Very low/none	4	33.3%	4	25.0%	0	0.0%	8	20.5%
Total:	12	100.0%	16	100.0%	11	100.0%	39	100.0%

Pearson correlation $r=1$, $p < 0.001$

Students usually evaluate their own activity during classes as average 30.8%, or poor 33.4%. However, in the group of students with high self-esteem it is often high - 45.5%, or average - 45,5%. Also, the activity of students with low self-esteem is usually low - among 50.0%, and even very-low in 33.3%.

It can therefore be observed that the subjects' activity varies in the classroom, namely more actively involved are students with high level of self-esteem, but seldom active are students with low self-esteem.

Discussion

The assessment of self-esteem among students with disabilities indicates that their level is usually average, which is considered optimal for their self-esteem (Heatherton, Ambady 1993). The problem of low self-esteem among students with disabilities applies only to some people in the studied group, namely about 1/4th. As far as high level of self-esteem is concerned the percentage is slightly bigger. Literature often emphasizes the problem of low self-esteem among people with disabilities, studies conducted by R. Ossowski (1992) show that self-esteem of disabled students when compared to non-disabled students is lower.

In fact, there is insufficient data stemming from lack of definite research that may determine the level of self-assessment allowing for confirmation of the results. Słomska B. et al (2012) evaluated a group of people with leg length discrepancy among students who underwent a complete treatment. Apparently, there was a prevalence of high scores in performance over average, with low recorded as well. However, the authors point out that their assessment of the level of self-acceptance was made at a time when patients had had significant improvement in their functioning and felt satisfaction from the treatment; hence, the results may be high. Due to a small size of the group of the students, any clear-cut proposals have not been put forth concerning the distribution of the results; yet, it can be noted that the problem of low self-esteem concerns only some part, perhaps even a minority of students with disabilities. Also, the presence of high (inflated self-esteem), which may have different consequences in their functioning among people with disabilities, is seldom noted. First of all, it poses a risk of overestimating one's abilities and by the same token making too optimistic plans for their activities (Dymek 1997).

The aforementioned results indicate that differentiation in the levels of self-esteem among students is reflected in their interpersonal relationships. Often they present their relationships in the group of students in the following way.

Students with low self-esteem: occupy low position in the group (being not popular), they can not and do not communicate openly about their problems and needs arising from illness, their statements are of little interest to the group, and they are ignored as a result. In a situation of having the floor before a group they feel fairly significant increase of stress (moderate level). Consequently, they do not engage actively in the course or activities (low or very low participation).

Students with moderate level of self-esteem: occupy an average position in the group (they are generally liked), they can not and do not communicate openly about their problems and needs arising from disability, their thoughts are of interest and support of the group, in a situation of speaking in front of a group they experience low stress intensity (at moderate level), they engage from time to time in the course activities (average or low activity).

Students with high self-esteem: occupy high position in the group (they are very well-liked), are able to communicate openly about their problems and needs relating to disability, their statements are of interest and support to the group, in a situation of speaking in front of the group they do not feel much stress, their participation is active or moderate in the course of the activities (high or average activity).

Laguna et al (2007) indicate to early research data of M. Rosenberg (1965) in which 47% of people with high self-esteem were chosen at least twice as a leader in the group, 32% with medium level of self-esteem and 15% with low. Similar results were obtained to the question about who from the school group usually speaks. These studies are in a similar vein as the present study, because they confirm a connection between self-esteem and popularity in the group. It has been shown, however, that when people find themselves in a situation that one's ego is threatened, people with high self-esteem are liked less (Adams et al. 2000, from: Laguna et al. 2007). Such a situation may be a climate of debate, marked by lack of support and harsh criticism. In fact, such situations are not too common, especially in relation to people with high self-esteem, and therefore are unlikely to significantly alter popularity of the persons.

To sum up the results of the research, it should be noted that students with low self-esteem are the most disadvantaged. Firstly, they low rate themselves, secondly, relationships in the student group seem to confirm their current thinking about their persons. Notwithstanding health problems, their impact on functioning and quality of life by disabled people, psycho-social effects of disability in the form of self-esteem and social relationships may constitute an important factor, which can also further develop in a negative direction. Indeed, disabled people with low self-esteem should be paid most attention from the point of view of the student support group. Otherwise they remain in a vicious circle of self-degradation, abandoning also active participation in the teaching process.

Students with high self-esteem are a group allowing mostly to recognize and better understand their needs and problems, which is an important factor in maintaining a good relationship with the environment (Adler et al. 2011). It is only possible to question whether their perception of a highly positive attitude on the part of students is real and fully adequate reflection of the situation. However, persons in question undoubtedly possess more opportunities to satisfactory performance and building self-confidence. They are able to derive from others what works best for them. Another problem pertains to negative effects of inflated self-esteem, which although is beyond the scope of this study is nonetheless worth paying attention.

Conclusions

1. Most students with disabilities have average or high self-esteem.
2. Students with low self-esteem at the same time exhibit difficulties in social functioning: in establishing positive relationships in the group and actively participate in classes.

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