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Marriage Satisfaction of Parents of Children with Autism. Introductory Exploration of the Problem among Polish Married Couples Rearing Children with Autism

Introduction

According to various estimations in our times about 0.7 – 1% of children are diagnosed as the ones with autism spectrum disorder (Russell et al, 2014; Baxter et al, 2015). Such a diagnosis influences functioning of the whole family system and that's why there is a necessity for various specialists (psychologists, educationalists and social workers) to reflect upon and discuss assistance to be given to both persons suffering from autism and their families (Russa, Matthews & Owen-DeSchryver, 2015; Derguy et al, 2015). While working out various forms of support it is worth paying attention to quality of parents' marital relationship because it is of great importance to functioning of the whole family. Initial researches raising this issue have already been conducted with participation of married couples bringing up children with autism. However, the results obtained are ambiguous – some respondents rearing autistic children indicate lower satisfaction in their marriages or even higher percentage of divorces by comparison with parents with healthy children whereas experiences of other couples are quite different – some couples are of opinion that bringing up a disabled child has reinforced their relationship and brought them closer together (Hartley et al, 2010; Hock, Timm & Ramisch, 2012; Shtayermman, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Brobst, Clopton & Hendrick, 2009). Undoubtedly, care of an autistic child means an above-average bear to their parents and oftentimes puts – especially mothers – under high stress (Altiere & von Kluge, 2009; Andreica-Săndică et al, 2011; Harper et al, 2013; Tehee, Honan & Hevey, 2009). A family with an autistic child experiences higher stress than a family with a healthy or suffering from any other disorder child (Dąbrowska & Pisula, 2010; Bitsika, Sharpley & Bell, 2013; Shobana & Saravanan, 2014) and parents rearing a child with autism may present symptoms of depressive and anxiety disorder (Shtayermman, 2013; Bitsika, Sharpley & Bell, 2013; Shobana & Saravanan, 2014), exhaustion or destroying their powers (Seymour et al, 2013) as well as health problems (Benjak, Mavrinac & Simetin, 2009). At the same time it has been proved that high quality of conjugal relationship between parents of children with autism belongs to key resources enabling smoothing out the impact of stress and lowering the number of depression indicators (Kersh et al, 2006; Benson & Kersh, 2011). Nevertheless, number of researches exploring these issues in detail is rather small. More significant of them are presented below. J. Ramisch & E. Onaga (2014) analysed strategies used for maintaining and strengthening marriage bonds among parents of children suffering from autism. They have found that key factors are here: communication with

the spouse and the married couple's shared (mutual) expectations regarding their marriage as well as spending time with the husbands (in case of women). Research conducted by Harper et al (2013) has pointed out importance of respite care to an autistic child because the care can relieve the child's parents and – as a consequence – lower their stress and improve quality of their marital relationship. It has been proved that satisfaction both men and women derive from their marriages is linked with support they receive from their partners (Ekas et al, 2015). Investigations carried out by Hartley et al (2012) have shown that satisfaction mothers of autistic children can get from their marriages may be influenced by incomes their families are on, too.

Subjectively felt marital satisfaction, communication with the spouse, expectations bound up with the marriage, financial situation and religiousness of a married couple are important aspects of each marital relationship (Willoughby, 2015; Dakowicz, 2014; Feeney, 1994, David & Stafford, 2015; Carroll et al, 2013; Dakin & Wampler, 2008). So far, research conducted with participation of parents of children with autism has never taken into consideration all the above mentioned dimensions together; system investigations performed with participation of married couples, not only individual parents separately, are also rare. It would also be interesting to compare in detail both married couples bringing up autistic children with the ones who have healthy children paying special attention to the marriage quality (autism is a strain thereby constituting a challenge that influences relationship between husband and wife) and parents rearing disabled children only (there are different ways you can meet the challenge). This paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

Research procedure

Purpose of the research described below was to find answers to the following questions:

- How much contentment (satisfaction) do parents rearing children with autism derive from their marriages?
- What are expectations in marriage of parents of children with autism?
- Do married couples who bring up children with autism differ in these respects from couples with healthy children and – if so – what are the differences?
- Is the satisfaction parents of autistic children get from their marriages linked with their sex, family's financial situation, support they receive (institutional or informal), quality of their conjugal communication and – finally – with their religiousness?

Question put to the surveyed respondents are based on the knowledge to date (as referred in section "Introduction" above) and constitute an attempt to fill the existing gaps.

Respondents

Respondents were people who had been living in south-eastern areas of Poland. Every single time married couples were surveyed. Pollsters reached parents who had brought up at least one child diagnosed as an autistic one through specialised educational institutions as well as centres and associations rendering therapy services to our respondents' children. In turn, parents rearing healthy children were reached through public kindergartens and schools. Every single time before we started the research, pollsters had first asked management of a given institution enabling us to meet our potential respondents and next a married couple itself for their permission to conduct the poll. The polls were confidential. After incomplete or incorrectly filled up sets of questionnaires had been rejected (several dozen cases among both parents with disabled children and couples rearing healthy ones), data and information given by 50 married couples with healthy children (i.e. 100 persons) and 53 couples (106 persons) rearing children with autism were qualified for statistical analyses.

Research tools

The following research tools were used:

1. Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (WMCQ-2) by M. Plopa & J. Rostowski – this tool was used for evaluating a marital satisfaction degree. It includes the following aspects of being contented in marriage: *Intimacy* (i.e. close relationship between a married couple, belief that both spouses love each other); *Self-realisation* (perception of marriage as a relationship enabling each partner to realise themselves and – in consequence – an important part of satisfying life); *Resemblance* (an extent of unanimity among husband and wife relating to important aims in their marriage and family life, e.g. leisure, developing their matrimony, family tradition, rearing children, family life organisation) and *Disappointment* (belief that living in the matrimony restricts to a certain degree the sense of independence and autonomy or the spouse is trying to renege on and escape from the relationship and does not want to take responsibility for it). Detailed description of psychometric features of the tool: accuracy of the aspects (from 0.80 to 0.90), power of discriminatory position (0.38 up to 0.75) and theoretical correctness of the questionnaire was presented in the M. Plopa's publication (2008).

2. Scale of Success in Marriage (SSM) by M. Braun-Galkowska – this tool was used in order to carry out a qualitative analysis of contentment and diagnose expectations in marriage. The scale consists of two lists, each of them contains 46 items (both lists contain the same items) concerning various conditions of success in marriage. On one of lists a respondent indicates qualities characterising their marriage (SSM I) and on the other one features that – in their opinion – are most important in order to cause the marriage to be fulfilling and happy (SSM II). Accuracy of the tool was checked using the retesting method, it was within the range $0.95 \leq \text{Pearson's } r \leq 0.99$. Detailed information about psychometric features of the tool (mainly accuracy) was presented in the M. Braun-Galkowska's publication (2007).

3. Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) by M. Plopa & M. Kaźmierczak – this tool serves to examine communication behaviours towards the spouse. The questionnaire consists of two forms: the purpose of the first of them is to appraise one of the spouses' own behaviour, the other one is used for appraising behaviour of the other spouse. Each form contains 30 items, both of them serve to examine three main aspects of conjugal communication: *Support* (appreciating the spouse's efforts, interest in his or her problems and readiness to solve them jointly); *Involvement* (showing feelings to each other and talking about them, aiming for a compromise and harmony) and *Depreciation* (criticism, unpleasant comments, controlling the spouse and aggression towards him or her). The surveyed person takes a stance on each of statements basing on a scale of 1 to 5. Detailed description of psychometric features of the tool: accuracy of the aspects (from 0.77 to 0.93), power of discriminatory position (0.25 up to 0.81) and theoretical correctness of the questionnaire was presented in the M. Plopa's publication (2008).

4. The Personal Religiousness Scale (PRS) explained by R. Jaworski (1989) was employed in order to evaluate both a level and a type of a married couple's religiousness. The PRS covers 30 statements and includes four aspects: *Faith (F)* – i.e. strength of a relationship with God treated as the Being that gives meaning to human's life; *Morality (M)* – an aspect determining the extent of compliance between moral behaviour of an individual and their religious beliefs; *Religious practices (RP)* – means a level of an involvement in the relation with God through prayer, contemplation, broadening knowledge of God and *Religious ego (RE)* – means the extent of feeling closeness to God and a sense of pride in “being a Christian”. The surveyed person was to indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 a degree of compliance between their beliefs and meaning of individual statements. A measure of an extent of personal commitment to the religious relationship is defined as the sum of weights (numerical coefficients) calculated by adding all weights related to categories of answers. The maximum score – 210 points – means highly personal religiousness. The lowest score – 30 points – indicates impersonal religiousness. Accuracy of the tool was checked using the retesting method, for individual answers to questions and statements it was within the range $0.69 \leq \text{Spearman's } \rho \leq 0.85$. Verification of theoretical accuracy was presented in details in R. Jaworski's works (1989; 1998).

5. There was also used a self-prepared questionnaire containing questions about parent's sex, age of autistic child and how did husband and wife appraise their financial and occupational situation as well as support they had received.

Results

Marriage duration among parents rearing autistic children was between 3 and 37 years with a median of 14 years. Age of an autistic child was between 2 and 20 years, the median was 7 years. Marriage duration among parents with healthy children was between 1 and 29 years, the median was 11.5. In Table 1 number of children of parents representing both groups is given, Table 2 shows information on the surveyed couples' occupational situations.

Table 1. Number of children in a family

Married couple	one		two		three		four and more	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with a healthy child	11	22.0	27	54.0	7	14.0	5	10.0
with an autistic child	12	22.6	27	50.9	7	13.2	7	13.2

In both groups of surveyed respondents a percentage of couples with 2 children exceeded 50%. In general, proportional representation of respondents with a certain number of children was similar in both groups.

Table 2. Occupational situation of the surveyed couples

Married couple	Both spouses work		Only husband works		Only wife works		Both spouses do not work	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with a healthy child	37	74.0	12	24.0	1	2.0	0	0
with an autistic child	25	47.2	22	41.5	4	7.5	2	3.8

Among the group with healthy children a percentage of employed couples where both spouses had been working professionally was 74% and it was more than among couples with autistic children where only 47.2% of pairs had been employed. Data on subjective appraisals of the surveyed families' financial situations are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Subjective appraisal of the family's financial situation (men's answers)

Married couple	bad		average		good		very good	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with a healthy child	0	0	17	34.0	30	60.0	3	6.0
with an autistic child	2	3.8	32	60.4	17	32.1	1	1.9

Table 4. Subjective appraisal of the family's financial situation (women's answers)

Married couple	bad		average		good		very good	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with a healthy child	0	0	15	30.0	30	60.0	5	10.0
with an autistic child	2	3.8	29	54.7	20	37.7	2	3.8

Compared with parents with autistic children both men and women bringing up healthy children appraised their financial situation as a better one.

Tables 5 and 6 present data gathered together in the Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (WMCQ-2) and based on replies provided by women and men bringing up healthy children and those rearing children with autism.

Table 5. Results obtained from the Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (WMCQ-2) based on replies provided by women bringing up healthy and autistic children

WMCQ-2	Group	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intimacy	healthy children	31.96	4.738	2.345	0.021
	one or more autistic children	29.26	6.700		
Disappointment	healthy children	20.18	7.599	-1.667	ins.
	one or more autistic children	22.57	6.927		
Self-realisation	healthy children	27.52	4.532	1.083	ins.
	one or more autistic children	26.62	3.864		
Resemblance	healthy children	28.44	4.021	2.558	0.012
	one or more autistic children	25.77	6.250		
Total score	healthy children	127.40	17.537	2.408	0.018
	one or more autistic children	118.23	20.872		

Presented in the WMCQ-2 total score obtained by mothers of one or more autistic children is significantly lower. As you can see this group, compared with mothers of healthy children, demonstrates lower marital satisfaction (considering sten scores a mean score obtained from mothers of healthy children was rated within the range of five which is interpreted as an average result, however, the one obtained from autistic children's mothers was about four which is considered to be a low outcome).

As for outcomes concerning individual scales, among mothers of children with autism lower scores related to *Intimacy* and *Resemblance* were found. Compared with women representing the reference group, mothers of autistic children felt weaker closeness to their husbands as well as sense of mutual love and declared inferior harmony between husband and wife related to important marital and family issues.

Table 6. Data gathered together in the Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (WMCQ-2) based on replies of men bringing up healthy and autistic children

WMCQ-2	Group	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intimacy	healthy children	31.72	4.725	1.781	ins.
	one or more autistic children	29.77	6.216		
Disappointment	healthy children	19.82	7.056	-1.396	ins.
	one or more autistic children	21.79	7.270		
Self-realisation	healthy children	27.82	4.530	1.621	ins.
	one or more autistic children	26.40	4.382		
Resemblance	healthy children	28.46	3.981	2.533	0.013
	one or more autistic children	25.96	5.801		
Total score	healthy children	127.38	17.032	2.517	0.013
	one or more autistic children	117.60	21.923		

As for total score presented in the WMCQ-2, a statistically significant difference concerns men, too. Like mothers, fathers of one or more autistic children compared with fathers of healthy children obtained significantly lower average total score.

This fact proves that among this group satisfaction in marriage was lower (considering sten scores a mean score obtained from fathers of healthy children was rated within the range of five which is interpreted as an average result, however, the one obtained from autistic children's fathers was about four which is considered to be a low outcome).

Another statistically significant difference relates to the *Resemblance* scale. Compared with fathers of healthy children, fathers of children with autism declared inferior between husband and wife related to important marital and family issues. Unlike women, men rearing autistic children and the ones bringing up healthy children displayed no differences related to *Intimacy*.

Use of a scale of success in marriage enabled to explore personality traits that in opinion of the surveyed wives and husbands rearing autistic children and the ones with healthy children characterise one's own marriage and a successful marriage. Results are presented in Tables 7 to 10 below.

Table 7. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising their own marriages expressed by women rearing healthy children to the ones given by women with autistic children

Traits characterising the partners' own marriage	Mothers of healthy children		Mothers of autistic children		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%		
Similar bearing	21	42.0	11	20.8	5.423	0.020
Positive appraisal of the spouse	27	54	15	28.3	7.036	0.008
Cheerful disposition of both spouses	20	40.0	9	17.0	6.739	0.009
Spending leisure together	34	68	20	37.7	9.448	0.002
Both spouses' sense of responsibility	33	66.0	24	45.3	4.468	0.035
Helping each other in difficult times	42	84	31	58.5	8.110	0.004
Mutual faithfulness	46	92.0	35	66.0	10.324	0.001
Both spouses' yearning to change for the better	29	58.0	16	30.2	8.089	0.004
Maintaining own sexual attraction in the spouse's eyes	23	46.0	11	20.8	7.415	0.006
Mutual concern for the spouse	27	54.0	16	30.2	5.998	0.014
Equal rights in marriage	28	56.0	18	34.0	5.056	0.025
Physical health of both spouses	31	62.0	22	41.5	4.325	0.038
Similar intellectual level	32	64.0	18	34.0	9.293	0.002

Mothers of autistic children significantly more rarely declared that their marriage had been characterised by similar bearing, positive appraisal of the spouse, cheerful disposition of both husband and wife, spending leisure together, both spouses' sense of responsibility, helping each other in difficult times, mutual faithfulness, both spouses' yearning to change for the better, maintaining by both spouses their own sexual attraction in the spouse's eyes, mutual concern for the spouse, equal rights in marriage, physical health of both husband and wife and similar intellectual level.

Table 8. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising a successful marriage expressed by women rearing healthy children to the ones given by women with autistic children

Traits characterising a successful marriage	Mothers of healthy children		Mothers of autistic children		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%		
Mutual confidence	44	88.0	34	64.2	7.961	0.005
Mutual understanding	41	82.0	34	64.2	4.141	0.042
Selflessness of both spouses	19	38.0	10	18.9	4.656	0.031
Helping each other in difficult times	47	94.0	34	64.2	13.647	0.000
Mutual faithfulness	48	96.0	39	73.6	9.852	0.002
Mutual respect	45	90.0	37	69.8	6.460	0.011

Mothers of autistic children displayed lower expectations in marriage than mothers of healthy children. From statistical point of view they significantly more rarely pointed out the following traits as the ones of importance to marital satisfaction: mutual confidence, mutual understanding, selflessness of both spouses, helping each other in difficult times as well as mutual faithfulness and respect.

Table 9. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising their own marriages expressed by men rearing healthy children to the ones given by men with autistic children

Traits characterising the partners' own marriage	Fathers of healthy children		Fathers of autistic children		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%		
Mutual love	48	96.0	38	71.7	11.026	0.001
Mutual confidence	38	76.0	27	50.9	6.938	0.008
Positive appraisal of the spouse	31	62.0	17	32.1	9.258	0.002
Spending leisure together	30	60.0	21	39.6	4.274	0.039
Helping each other in difficult times	40	80.0	27	50.9	9.554	0.002
Mutual faithfulness	46	92.0	37	69.8	8.095	0.004
Both spouses' yearning to change for the better	28	56.0	19	35.8	4.211	0.040
Showing love to each other	37	74.0	24	45.3	8.786	0.003
Mutual respect	38	76.0	30	56.6	4.315	0.038
Mutual concern for the spouse	30	60	21	39.6	4.274	0.039
Making decisions together	35	70.0	27	50.9	3.899	0.048

Fathers of autistic children significantly more rarely declared that their marriage had been characterised by traits like: mutual love, mutual confidence, positive appraisal of the spouse, spending leisure time together, helping each other in difficult times, mutual faithfulness, yearning to change for the better declared by both spouses, showing love to each other, mutual respect, mutual concern for the spouse and making decisions together.

Table 10. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising a successful marriage expressed by men rearing healthy children to the ones given by men with autistic children

Traits characterising a successful marriage	Fathers of healthy children		Fathers of autistic children		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%		
Mutual love	47	94.0	43	81.1	3.863	0.049
Spending leisure together	33	66.0	24	45.3	4.468	0.035
Personalities complementing each other	16	32.0	28	52.8	4.562	0.033
Mutual faithfulness	46	92.0	36	67.9	9.188	0.002
Showing love to each other	39	78.0	27	50.9	8.182	0.004
Physical health of both spouses	15	30.0	29	54.7	6.423	0.011

Like mothers, fathers of autistic children displayed lower expectations in marriage than fathers of healthy children. They significantly more rarely pointed out such conditions of marital satisfaction like: mutual love, spending leisure time together, mutual faithfulness, showing love to each other and physical health of both spouses. Moreover, fathers of autistic children more often mentioned personalities complementing each other as a trait characterising a successful marriage.

Due to the fact that existence of a child disorder does not determine quality of a relationship between their parents, as a next step married couples rearing at least one child with autism were divided into two groups: a group of couples declaring higher and the one declaring lower satisfaction in marriage. The criterion was a general result obtained from WMCQ-2 and gained by husband and wife.

Married couples where women and men acquired in the WMCQ-2 questionnaire a total result higher than the median (calculated for women and men separately) were recognised as the ones deriving higher satisfaction from their marriages. Analogically, married couples where women and men acquired in the WMCQ-2 questionnaire a total result lower than the median were recognised as the ones deriving lower satisfaction from their marriages. As to results obtained from the WMCQ-2 the median was 122 among women and 123 among men.

Parents declaring various degrees of their satisfaction in marriage differed from each other in their opinions on many significant traits characterising their marriages. Results are presented in Tables 11 and 12 below.

Table 11a. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising their own marriages expressed by autistic children's mothers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

Traits characterising the partners' own marriage	Lower satisfaction		Higher satisfaction		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%		
Similar outlook on the world	5	22.7	13	65.0	7.644	0.006
Mutual love	14	63.6	18	90.0	4.014	0.045
Economy of both spouses	6	27.3	13	65.0	6.019	0.014
Doing the housework together	6	27.3	14	70.0	7.668	0.006
Mutual understanding	4	18.2	12	60.0	7.769	0.005
Positive appraisal of the spouse	3	13.6	10	50.0	6.482	0.011
Spending leisure together	3	13.6	12	60.0	9.808	0.002
None spouse displays egoism	2	9.1	9	45.0	6.988	0.008
Selflessness of both spouses	2	9.1	8	40.0	5.517	0.019
Helping each other in difficult times	8	36.4	17	85.0	10.286	0.001
Personalities complementing each other	3	13.6	13	65.0	11.720	0.001
Mutual sense of security	7	31.8	16	80.0	9.817	0.002
None spouse abuses alcohol	11	50.0	17	85.0	5.775	0.016

Table 11b. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising their own marriages expressed by autistic children's mothers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

Traits characterising the partners' own marriage	Lower satisfaction		Higher satisfaction		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	N	%	N	%		
Mutual faithfulness	10	45.5	17	85.0	7.136	0.008
Both spouses' knowledge of living in a marriage	1	4.5	8	40.0	7.821	0.005
Bringing up children together	13	59.1	18	90.0	5.177	0.023
Showing love to each other	6	27.3	14	70.0	7.668	0.006
Mutual concern for the spouse	2	9.1	11	55.0	10.331	0.001
Equal rights in marriage	3	13.6	11	55.0	8.066	0.005
Making decisions together	10	45.5	17	85.0	7.136	0.008
Ability to forgive each other	7	31.8	13	65.0	4.624	0.032
Both spouses' serious attitude to life	8	36.4	15	75.0	6.313	0.012

Table 12a. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising their own marriages expressed by autistic children's fathers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

Traits characterising the partners' own marriage	Lower satisfaction		Higher satisfaction		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	N	%	N	%		
Mutual confidence	7	31.8	15	75.0	7.832	0.005
Good relationships with the spouse's family	4	18.2	12	60.0	7.769	0.005
Happy sexual relationship	8	36.4	14	70.0	4.752	0.029
Doing the housework together	4	18.2	13	65.0	9.531	0.002
Positive appraisal of the spouse	2	9.1	11	55.0	10.331	0.001
Cheerful disposition of both spouses	3	13.6	9	45.0	5.050	0.025
Getting to know each other well before marriage	4	18.2	10	50.0	4.773	0.029
Helping each other in difficult times	7	31.8	14	70.0	6.109	0.013
Both spouses' knowledge of living in a marriage	3	13.6	9	45.0	5.050	0.025
Both spouses' yearning to change for the better	3	13.6	10	50.0	6.482	0.011
Showing love to each other	5	22.7	14	70.0	9.450	0.002
Composure of both spouses	2	9.1	8	40.0	5.517	0.019
Maintaining own sexual attraction in the spouse's eyes	1	4.5	8	40.0	7.821	0.005

Table 12b. Comparison of opinions on traits characterising their own marriages expressed by autistic children's fathers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

Traits characterising the partners' own marriage	Lower satisfaction		Higher satisfaction		Pearson's chi-squared test	<i>p</i>
	N	%	N	%		
Mutual concern for the spouse	5	22.7	12	60.0	6.041	0.014
Equal rights in marriage	6	27.3	12	60.0	4.582	0.032
Making decisions together	8	36.4	14	70.0	4.752	0.029
Sexual experience before marriage	1	4.5	7	35.0	6.301	0.012
Ability to forgive each other	6	27.3	13	65.0	6.019	0.014
Both spouses' serious attitude to life	8	36.4	15	75.0	6.313	0.012

Comparison between traits characterising a marriage and declared by parents of children with autism enabled to reveal a number of differences between couples experiencing various degrees of satisfaction in marriage. The said differences regard first of all mutual closeness, concern and help because couples satisfied in their marital relationships list these traits most often. It is worth noting that fathers of autistic children more content with their marriages quite often mention fulfilling sexual intercourse and maintaining sexual attraction as factors important for them (this difference was not found among mothers).

In Tables 13 and 14 results gathered in the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on answers given by parents of autistic children declaring diverse degrees of marital satisfaction are presented.

Table 13a. Results gathered in the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on answers of autistic children's mothers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

CCQ scale	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	<i>p</i>
Support behaviour (own)	lower satisfaction	15.41	86.0	-3.383	0.001
	higher satisfaction	28.20			
Involvement (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	18.18	147.0	-1.843	ins.
	higher satisfaction	25.15			
Depreciation (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	22.86	190.0	-0.757	ins.
	higher satisfaction	20.00			

Table 13b. Results gathered in the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on answers of autistic children's mothers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

CCQ scale	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	<i>p</i>
Support (husband's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.02	99.5	-3.040	0.002
	higher satisfaction	27.53			
Involvement (husband's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.20	103.5	-2.939	0.003
	higher satisfaction	27.33			
Depreciation (husband's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	26.07	119.5	-2.535	0.011
	higher satisfaction	16.48			

Mothers of autistic children experiencing higher satisfaction in their marital relationships, when asked about their own communication behaviour, declared higher degree of support. However their opinions on communication behaviours of their husbands revealed statistically significant differences related to all aspects – mothers more satisfied in their marriages reported their husbands' behaviours had been characterised by higher support and involvement and lower depreciation.

Table 14a. Results gathered in the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on answers of autistic children's fathers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

CCQ scale	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	<i>p</i>
Support (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.05	100.0	-3.030	0.002
	higher satisfaction	27.50			
Involvement (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	17.43	130.5	-2.260	0.024
	higher satisfaction	25.98			
Depreciation (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	26.41	112.0	-2.725	0.006
	higher satisfaction	16.10			

Table 14b. Results gathered in the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on answers of autistic children's fathers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

CCQ scale	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	<i>p</i>
Support (wife's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.43	108.5	-2.814	0.005
	higher satisfaction	27.08			
Involvement (wife's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.59	112.0	-2.726	0.006
	higher satisfaction	26.90			
Depreciation (wife's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	25.39	134.5	-2.158	0.031
	higher satisfaction	17.23			

As regards fathers of children with autism declaring diverse satisfaction in their marital relationships, statistically significant differences related to all aspects of the CCQ. Fathers more satisfied with their marriages reported their own and their wives' behaviours had been more supportive, less depreciative and characterised by involvement.

In Tables 15 and 16 are presented results gathered in the Personal Religiousness Scale (PRS) and based on answers given by parents of autistic children rated among two groups declaring diverse degrees of marital satisfaction.

Table 15a. Results concerning the Personal Religiousness Scale (PRS) based on answers of autistic children's mothers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

PRS	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	<i>p</i>
Faith	lower satisfaction	15.61	106.5	-2.164	0.030
	higher satisfaction	23.39			
Morality	lower satisfaction	16.18	117.5	-1.843	ins.
	higher satisfaction	22.82			
Religious practices	lower satisfaction	15.74	109.0	-2.094	0.036
	higher satisfaction	23.26			

Table 15b. Results concerning the Personal Religiousness Scale (PRS) based on answers of autistic children's mothers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

PRS	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	p
Religious ego	lower satisfaction	14.37	83.0	-2.858	0.004
	higher satisfaction	24.63			
Total score	lower satisfaction	15.37	102.0	-2.293	0.022
	higher satisfaction	23.63			

Mothers of autistic children experiencing higher satisfaction in their marriages obtained on the Personal Religiousness Scale a significantly higher score. Leaving aside the total score statistically significant differences related to the following aspects: *Faith*, *Religious practices* and *Religious ego* were found. Scores related to each of these aspects and obtained by women more satisfied with their marriages were higher.

Table 16. Results concerning the Personal Religiousness Scale (PRS) based on answers of autistic children's fathers declaring diverse degrees of marriage satisfaction

PRS	Group	Average range	Mann-Whitney U test	Z	p
Faith	lower satisfaction	15.72	112.0	-2.872	ins.
	higher satisfaction	22.11			
Morality	lower satisfaction	14.61	92.0	-2.413	0.016
	higher satisfaction	23.16			
Religious practices	lower satisfaction	14.86	96.5	-2.270	0.023
	higher satisfaction	22.92			
Religious ego	lower satisfaction	13.94	80.0	-2.775	0.006
	higher satisfaction	23.79			
Total score	lower satisfaction	13.75	76.5	-2.872	0.004
	higher satisfaction	23.97			

Similarly to women, fathers of children with autism declaring higher satisfaction in their marriages obtained a higher total score on the Personal Religiousness Scale. As regards individual aspects of the Personal Religiousness Scale scores related to *Morality*, *Religious practices* and *Religious ego* were higher.

As regards occupational situations of married couples, appraisal of their families' financial conditions or opinions on kindergartens or schools their children had attended (if the kindergartens or schools had met the children's needs or if specialists' care of children had been satisfactory) no statistically significant differences between couples with at least one autistic child declaring higher or the ones declaring lower marriage satisfaction were found.

Discussion

(1) It is obvious that stable and satisfactory relationship between parents constitutes conditions favourable to supporting development of a child with autism. Research described herein has demonstrated that marriage satisfaction of mothers and fathers of autistic children is lower than the one of parents bringing up healthy children. This finding proves a need for supporting couples whose children suffer from this disorder. They can be supported in form of counselling or (as the case may be) marital therapy (Johnson, 2012). Findings of this research can be of help to specialists working with families rearing children with autism.

(2) It has been found that marital expectations among parents with autistic children are lower. It is possible this state of affairs is a result of perceiving the birth of a child with autism as a kind of defeat (personal but also relational). E. Cappe et al (2011) imply that as early as diagnosis is made autism should be presented to the parents as a challenge because couples who interpret this experience as a danger or loss manage it definitely worse. So, one should always take into account, this may be the case. Because of this, while supporting a family it is worth creating together with the spouses and at each stage of family life a constructive and task-based perception of the problem (Ramisch, 2012).

(3) Among surveyed respondents there were 41.5% of married couples where only husband had worked professionally. This may create a risk of establishing an inflexible family structure: mother as the main (or even sole) carer of the child and father as a person who spends most of his time outside the home and provides for the family. Such a pattern of family life, even though it may be a temporary necessity, can over the course of time cause that the woman who stays at home with her disabled child feels lonely (Zimmerman, 2000). The possibility of both parents developing individually offers a feeling of control over each spouse's own life and favours attaining gratifications in many areas. Such a possibility should be available to the same degree to both spouses although because of family duties they probably will take advantage of it in turns. Periods of increased individual activity of a woman can alternate with periods when she focuses her mind on her family while her husband realises his individual developmental plans.

(4) The research revealed a shortage of communicated support among pairs rearing children with autism¹. It relates especially to men; moreover, other research (Jensen, Rauer & Volling, 2013) has proven that communicating support by husband is of substantial importance to the quality of marital relationships. Besides communication, the sexual relationship is another source of strengthening marriage bonds because it allows to share love and sensual pleasure with the partner. It is worth emphasizing that – compared with men less satisfied in marriage – fathers of autistic children declaring higher satisfaction in marriage were more content with their sexual life. Time you can dedicate to your partner only is a very important factor that favours strengthening marital bonds basing on both communication and sexuality. It is often impossible without the help of people around you who take over care of the child. That's why circle of people you live among enables you not only to maintain social relationships with persons from outside your family but can also help you to develop your marital relationships (Abelson, 1999).

(5) Obtained results indicate that there is a connection between religiousness² of parents of children diagnosed with autism and quality of marriage. Religiousness can be an important resource to be used by parents (Coulthard & Fitzgerald, 1999). It has been proved that use of positive religious strategies is linked with a lower number of depression indicators and lower stress mothers of autistic children are exposed to (Ekas, Whitman & Shivers, 2009). It is also a source of hope and sense (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001). Furthermore, one may assume that a sense of stability based on perceiving marriage as an inextricable relationship (which is a religious rule) is an additional incentive motivating the spouses to cooperate and work together so as to look actively for solutions in difficult situations. Taking these determinants into account, it can be recommended that special pastoral care should be provided for the autistic children's parents who consider themselves to be people believing in God.

(6) The most important personality traits characterising couples rearing children with autism and declaring higher marital satisfaction were: spending time together; constructive, supporting and distinguished by involvement communication; shared vision of and expectations related to marriage; happy sexual life and maintaining own sexual attraction in the spouse's eyes; equal rights and doing the housework together (flexible structure of the family) and finally personal religious relationship. Occupational and financial situation of the surveyed couples was similar; their appraisals of educational and therapeutic support they had received were similar, too. One can reach a conclusion that besides religiousness (that can be the case but does not have to) issues related directly to the spouses' relationship are of fundamental importance to quality of marriage of parents bringing up a child with autism (or – as it can be assumed – with other disorders or chronic diseases) and these issues can interest a psychologist or a therapist supporting families with autism. So, it is worth perceiving them in the context of circular family relations – working in favour of any of the said aspects (e.g. communication in marriage) will enhance the other ones (e.g. sexuality, shared vision of marriage, etc.) improving gradually the marriage quality.

¹ Detailed analyses concerning communication between surveyed parents of autistic children will be presented in a separate paper.

² More detailed analyses concerning religiousness of parents of autistic children will be published in a separate paper.

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