

BOOK REVIEW



AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS – CHARACTERISTICS AND EDUCATIONAL-REHABILITATION SUPPORT

POREMEĆAJI AUTISTIČNOG SPEKTRA – ZNAČAJKE I EDUKACIJSKO-REHABILITACIJSKA PODRŠKA, by Zorana Bujas-Petković and Jasmina Frey-Škrinjar, Editors. Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 2010, 358 pages, 22 figures. ISBN 978-953-0-31583-9

The history of autism formally began in 1943, when Leo Kaner, an American psychiatrist, first described the syndrome of infantile autism. In the 1980s, Lorna Wing established the term “autistic spectrum” because it became obvious that there was more than one disorder, actually a group of similar disorders. The latest classifications refer to pervasive developmental disorders or to autistic spectrum disorders. Difficulties in diagnosing specific syndromes in clinical practice are

well known to everybody dealing with the phenomenon of autism.

In the western world, the literature dedicated to the issue of pervasive developmental disorders is extensive. It ranges from scientific and professional papers, books on all aspects of the problem of autism to popular articles and autobiographies. Also, there are many books about various educational treatments and approaches.

The situation in our country is entirely different. There are a few translated and a few author books during the thirty-year period of organized work in the theory and practice of autism. In this sense, the appearance of the book entitled *Poremećaji autističnog spektra* (*Autistic Spectrum Disorders*) by Zorana Bujas-Petković and Jasmina Škrinjar and associates, published by Školska knjiga in 2010, is of great value indeed.

Among all information on the research and dilemmas in almost every issue of autism (etiology, epidemiology, diagnostic criteria, therapeutic approaches, etc.), the book tries to systematize the knowledge and present it in an acceptable way. *Autistic Spectrum Disorders* is a kind of successor of *Autistic Disorder*, a book by Zorana Bujas-Petković from 1995, however, this time incomparably richer in the spectrum of topics and, of course, upgraded with contemporary findings.

In the first part, Dr Zorana Bujas-Petković gives a historical overview of autism, information on diagnostic classifications, subsequently presenting every disorder of the spectrum, dealing with the etiology (neurophysiological research of etiology, biological and biochemical research), diagnosis and differential diagnosis, autistic savant persons, the theory of mind (with co-author J. Škrinjar), psychometric instruments, i.e. rating scales of autism, and psychopharmacology. Due attention is dedicated to each chapter, minutely and precisely pointing to critical problems, dilemmas, uncertainties, and supporting it all with relevant information.

This part included chapters written by two associates, i.e. the genetic basis of autism by Dubravka Hranilović and intellectual functioning of persons with autism by Branka Divčić.

Dr Dubravka Hranilović, for the first time in our medicine theory, presents the genetic basis of autism, which is in itself praiseworthy; moreover, it is an interesting and well systematized reading that leads us in a simple way to the general issues of genetics and autism, charmingly leading to conclusions only to put forward a new condition. These conditions do not allow for the expected premises, but do open some new fascinating assumptions. She does that throughout the article. In short, the author points out that the research in genetics goes in various directions, getting closer to possible causes, and then with new findings opens new perspectives that demand new research.

Prof. Branka Divčić writes about intellectual functioning and psychic traits of persons with autism. The author (with argumentation) argues the popular false beliefs about 'unreachable' IQ measure of children with autism, and questions the relevance of using progressive matrices for assessment. Contrary to other authors who mainly cite worldwide experience, Prof. Divčić mostly quotes Croatian experience, which is the result of long-term work with children with autism. She emphasizes information on the average age of establishing the diagnosis for the first time at age 4.6 years. The mean age of the first successful psychological assessment is 5.1 years. This is inadmissibly late in both cases and is attributable to the level of knowledge and organization of our medical practice. Unfortunately, the same holds true for including children in educational and rehabilitation treatments.

The other part of the book refers to the educational-rehabilitation support for children with autistic spectrum disorders, written by Jasmina Frey-Škrinjar and Jasmina Stošić, both professors at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb. In this part, certain methodical procedures

and treatments are presented, which was not easy to do because nowadays there are many procedures and each one is presented as the best. There is an interesting quote (according to Schopler) of 28 different approaches in modern practice of treating autism. Due importance is given to early interventional programs and treatments that are actually mostly used in practice, i.e. RIO model, more widely known as Floor-Time, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), TEACCH (Teaching and Educating Adults and Children with Communication Handicap), etc.

Furthermore, there is a very impressive part on parents' difficulties, and it is something that usually draws very little attention, seeing as the children's problems overshadow parental problems. Also, there are some important issues related to adult persons with autism, like residence, employment and protection of rights, which are presented clearly and with sensitivity.

In conclusion, all-inclusiveness of the book is its great value. The reader, being either a student (the book is conceived as a textbook and primarily dedicated to students), a professional dealing with autism, a parent, or simply an interested reader, will appreciate its quality, being able to get a wide insight into the majority of issues in autism in one place. On the other hand, the problems are so extensive that there is no book that could embrace them all. In this sense, there is clearly the need for many new books to which the chapters mentioned would be just the starting point, i.e. Asperger disorder, problems of adults with autism, the theory of mind, educational-rehabilitation support, etc.

Indeed, plenty of theoretically and practically based knowledge, achievements or assumptions are addressed in this book. It elegantly depicts the enigmatic and astonishing side of the phenomenon, so that the book is read not only as a study-book, but as informative and intriguing literature.

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