

Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the development of autism in the Czech Republic from an historical-sociological perspective. The study pursues the structural processes related to autism and their impacts on individuals, as well as the roles of various agents in the shaping of these processes. The study utilises the social constructivist approach as well as the standpoints of the interpretative stream of sociology. The concept of autism was introduced in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. It was understood as a rare psychiatric disorder and was known about by only a few professionals. Until the beginning of the 1990s, autism wasn't recognised in Czechoslovak society. Since the beginning of the 1990s new processes have emerged, resulting in the formation of a paradigm of autism – a new dominant and increasingly recognized system of values, methods, approaches and institutions, all connected to the concept of autism. The category of autism was reconceptualized in the 1990s and has started to be used more widely in Czech society. Based on the concept of autism, new institutions have emerged, such as specialized educational approaches and services, therapeutic methods, social services and NGOs etc. Discourses of autism have also started to form. This paradigm has been crucial for the social history of autism since the 1990s and has shaped the day-to-day lives of increasing amounts of people. Autism has formed a new conceptual and institutional space which has emerged from the categories of 'mental retardation', mental illness, undiagnosed differences and 'oddities'. As the final part of this dissertation describes, autism has also emerged as a new form of social identity. It co-shapes the identity of individuals, but it also serves as a tool for the identification and categorization of others. In recent years, people on the autism spectrum have emerged as new active agents. Until recently they had been perceived predominantly as passive agents, and the social history of autism had been formed exclusively by parents and experts. This dissertation draws on empirical qualitative research, and the data used has been obtained through a combination of in-depth interviews (with people on the spectrum, their parents and experts from various fields) and document analysis. Participant observation has also been undertaken in order to increase the erudition of the researcher in the field of autism.