

REGIONALNI CENTAR ZA TALENTE VRANJE

**AUTISM: A CURSE OR A BLESSING?
AUTIZAM: PROKLETSTVO ILI BLAGOSLOV?**

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ABSTRACT

This essay is about autism - something we are not able to see so often. It is about something that is present all the time around us and something that we usually do not know much about. We can read about it on the Internet, in newspapers, or books, or even watch films about it, but rarely be in touch with it. So, when we are eye to eye with that, we are amazed in many cases. There are no words which could explain our thoughts about that topic. It is so unbelievable that someone who has extraordinary skills, sometimes we can say not common to be seen on our planet, has a huge, mostly irresolvable problem, which is poor social interaction and communication. We are amazed about it and all of us would like to have those skills, but we are mostly feeling sorry for them because it carries big burden, too. People do not know how to behave about it, because they do not have much experience, how to react when they come across them, and they do not know what it really means, so that is why I have decided to write about it, to make it closer to all of us.

Key words: autism, extraordinary skills, poor social interaction and communication, big burden, feeling sorry, curse, blessing

REZIME

Ovaj rad je o autizmu - nečemu što nismo u prilici da vidimo tako često. Radi se o nečemu što je prisutno sve vreme oko nas i nešto o čemu mi ne znamo mnogo. O tome možemo čitati na internetu, u novinama ili knjigama, ili čak gledati filmove o tome, ali retko biti u kontaktu s tim. Dakle, kada smo oči u oči s tim, u većini slučajeva mi smo zapanjeni. Ne postoje reči koje bi mogle da objasne naše misli na tu temu. Prosto je neverovatno da neko ko ima izuzetne sposobnosti, za koje ponekad možemo reći da nije uobičajeno da se vide na našoj planeti, ima ogroman, uglavnom nerešiv problem, a to je slaba socijalna interakcija i komunikacija. Mi smo oduševljeni time i svi bismo želeli da imamo te veštine, ali nam je uglavnom žao njih jer takođe nose i veliki teret sa sobom. Ljudi ne znaju kako da se ponašaju u vezi toga, jer nemaju iskustva s tim, kako da reaguju kad naiđu na njih, a pritom ne znaju ni šta to znači, pa sam zato ja odlučila da pišem o tome, kako bih ga približila nama svima.

Ključne reči: autizam, izvanredne veštine, slaba socijalna interakcija i komunikacija, veliki teret, sažaljenje, prokletstvo, blagoslov

A survey

Appendix A

Questionnaire:

- 1 Do you know what autism is? Yes/No
- 2 Do you know who autistic savants are? Yes/No
- 3 If you have heard of Autistic Savants, could you name any?
- 4 Do you know how many types of Savant syndrome there are? Yes/No
- 5 In which areas Autistic Savants are the most successful?
- 6 Is it true, in your opinion, that being a savant means being autistic and being autistic means being savant? Yes, it is. / No, it is not.
- 7 In your opinion autism is:
 - a) A blessing
 - b) A curse
- 8 In your opinion autism:
 - a) Can be easily cured
 - b) Can be cured with lots of persistence and strong medications
 - c) Cannot be cured at all
- 9 How often are you in touch with Autistic Savants?
 - a) Never
 - b) Only once so far
 - c) Often
 - d) Regularly
- 10 How would you react if you met an autistic person?

Report on the survey carried out among the students in classroom III/2 in Grammar school "Stevan Jakovljevic" on the topic "Autism: a curse or a blessing?"

Date: 10th April, 2014

Aim

This is a brief report on a survey carried out among the students in my class on the topic "Autism: a curse or a blessing?" The survey was aimed at finding out whether students were familiar with what autism is, who autistic savants are, how many types of Savant syndrome there are, in which areas Autistic Savants are the most successful and how often they are in touch with autistic savants. Among other things, the interviewees were asked to answer whether they agree that being savant means being autistic or being autistic means being savant. The survey also investigated peoples' opinion on the question about curing autism. Finally, the interviewees were asked to express their opinion about how would they react if they met an autistic person.

Methods

I have conducted a survey in Grammar School "Stevan Jakovljevic" in Vlasotince. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix A. In order to examine equally both genders, the results are separated in two groups (male and female).

I surveyed 26 people. The age range was:

17 year-olds – 14 people (Female: 9 Male: 5) (chart 1)

18 year-olds – 12 people (Female: 4 Male: 8) (chart 2)

Results

Question/Age	17 year (n=14: F: 9 M: 5)				18 year (n=12: F:4 M:8)							
	female		male		female		male					
1 Do you know what autism is? Yes/No	Yes:7	No:2	Yes:4	No:1	Yes:4	No: 0	Yes:7	No:1				
2 Do you know who autistic savants are? Yes/No	Yes:6	No:3	Yes:3	No:2	Yes:1	No:3	Yes:6	No:2				
3 If you have heard of Autistic Savants, could you name any?	Yes: Stephen Wiltshire	No:6	Yes: 0	No:5	Yes: Blind Tom	No:3	Yes: Blind Tom	No:7				
4 Do you know how many types of Savant syndrome there are? Yes/No	Yes: 0	No:9	Yes: 0	No:5	Yes: 0	No:4	Yes: 0	No:8				
5 In which areas Autistic Savants are the most successful?	Typical answers were: -I don't know. -In art and music.		Typical answers were: -I don't know. -In drawing.		Typical answers were: -I don't know. -In art, music		Typical answers were: -I don't know. -In art, music, learning, calculating, sport					
6 Is it true, in your opinion, that being a savant means being autistic and being autistic means being savant? Yes, it is. / No, it is not.	Yes:1	No:8	Yes: 0	No:5	Yes: 0	No:4	Yes: 0	No:8				
7 In your opinion autism is: a) A blessing b) A curse	a) 3	b) 6	a) 3	b) 2	a)3	b)1	a)4	b)4				
8 In your opinion autism: a) Can be easily cured b) Can be cured with lots of persistence	a)0	b)6	c)3	a)0	b)0	c)5	a)0	b)0	c)4	a)0	b)1	c)7

and strong medications c) Cannot be cured at all																	
9 How often are you in touch with Autistic Savants: a) Never b) Only once so far c) Often d) Regularly	a)8	b)1	c)0	d)0	a)5	b)0	c)0	d)0	a)2	b)2	c)0	d)0	a)7	b)1	c)0	d)0	
10 How would you react if you met an autistic person?	The answers were as following: -I would feel sorry. -I would try to talk to them normally. -I don't know. -Just like with all other people. -I would try to understand his/her behavior. -I would be scared. -I would be confused.				The answers were as following: -Just like with all other people. -I don't know. -Kill him with fire. -I would react normally.				The results were as following: -I don't know. -I would support him/her. -Like with all other people.				The results were as following: -I would feel pity. -I don't know. -I would call the police. -I would ignore him/her. -I would be surprised. -When it happens, I will know.				

While analyzing the survey I found out that the big majority of the interviewees (20/26) generally know what autism is: 7/9 females who are 17 year-old, 4/4 female who are 18, 4/5 males who are 17 and 7/8 males who are 18. Generally speaking, the big majority of the interviewees know who autistic savants are: 6/9 females 17 year-olds, 1/4 females, who are 18, 3/5 males, who are 17, 6/8 males who are 18. When I asked them if they had heard of autistic savants and to name any, their answers were as following: 6/9 females 17 year-olds did not know and 3/9 named Stephen Wiltshire, opposite to 18 year-olds females, who have mentioned Blind Tom. However, 5/5 17 year-olds males did not mention anyone. In contrast to them 1/8 18 year-olds males mentioned Blind Tom. It is interesting that both females and males 18 year-olds mentioned Blind Tom. Although the interviewees have heard of Autistic Savants, none of them knows how many types of Savant syndrome there are. While answering the 5th question, the most given answers were: "I don't know." and "art, music, drawing, learning, calculating" and, which is very surprising "sport". All the interviewees, except one female 17 year-old, agreed that being Savant does not mean being autistic, and being autistic does not mean being savant. The answers on the question what autism is: a blessing or a curse, were more or less divided: 3/9 females 17 year-olds think it is a blessing, and the majority of 18 year-olds (3/4) agreed with them, 3/5 17 year-olds males agreed that it is a curse, and 18 year-olds males' opinions are divided. All the interviewees agreed that the autism cannot be easily cured. However, 6/9 17 year-olds females and none of 18 year-olds think it can be cured with lots of persistence and strong medications, and 3/9 interviewees are pessimistic and think that it cannot be cured at all. None of 17 year-olds and 18 year-olds males think it can be easily cured. Except one interviewee, all other 17 year-olds and 18 year-olds disagreed that it could be cured with lots of persistence and strong medications, and the majority 5/5 17 year-olds and 7/8 18 year-olds males think it cannot be cured at all. Almost everyone claimed that they had never been in touch with an Autistic Savant, and 1 17 year-old female, 2 18 year-olds females and 1 18 year-old males however said that they had been only once so far. While some people would react normally when they met an autistic person, try to

talk to him/her normally and try to understand his/her behavior, the others would feel sorry and pity, would be scared, confused and surprised. Some of them do not know how they would react, adding that when it happens, they will know. But, what was very surprising to me is the fact that some of them would ignore them, would call the police, or moreover kill him/her with fire.

INTRODUCTION

What is autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disorder of the brain which is characterized by little or no social interaction and communication at all. People with autism very often behave in the same or a similar way. While some autistic people never learn to speak, others have very good command of languages. Some are clumsy, others draw for hours - there are retarded autistic people and those with extraordinary memory for numbers.

Brain scans show us that autistic people have less activity in the parts of the brain responsible for emotions and speech, or to remember faces. Instead, there is a stronger interaction in the regions involved in the analysis and the details of objects in a system.

Scientists still do not know precisely what is wrong with the brain in autism spectrum disorders, but they have established that the cause is neurological. Furthermore, they have strong evidence that genetics plays a role in many cases. Studies have shown that when one family member is diagnosed with autism, the chances are 50 to 200 times higher that another family member will also have autism. Researchers have also found that tiny gene mutations that can result in autism are sometimes passed down to children from one or both parents.

In autism there is no reduction or return to the initial state, all the time it has the same intensity. Unlike the severe forms of autism, where is a little possibility for independent life, in milder forms it is possible with minimal environmental help.

Signs of autism

The first symptoms of autism sometimes occur in the eighth month of life. Basically, parents are those who notice the very first signs of autism in their children in the first or the second year of their life. The final diagnosis is usually established after the fourth year. The main problem with autistic children is the lack of social skills, which becomes apparent in early childhood. Children with autism do not use gestures a lot, smiles and monitoring view of the person they are spoken to. They also rarely respond when someone calls their name.

Some of the common signs that if are noticed require professional medical attention:

- There is no "chatter" to 12 months
- No gesture (finger-pointing, waving greetings, etc...) to 12 months
- There is no a single word until 16 months
- Stereotypes - meaningless gestures such as clapping hands, head turning
- Compulsive behavior - stacking objects in a particular order, which is done on purpose and by the rules
- Uniformity - resistance to change
- Ritual behavior – which means performing daily activities always in the same order, routine, and it includes not changing the menu or wear order
- Limited behavior - limited interest or activity, for example interest for only one toy
- Auto-aggression - includes movements that can hurt a person. About 30 % of people with autism at some point resort to auto-aggression.

Diagnosis

Autism is difficult to diagnose because there are no blood tests or other characteristics present in all autistic people. Diagnosis usually depends on the observation of specific behaviors characteristic of autism. Early detection of autism and early intervention can positively affect the outcome of autistic disorder.

Problems encountered during the early diagnosis of autism are:

- The reluctance of parents to deal with the problem
- Variability of symptoms

There are 16 descriptive symptoms to watch for. If there is an appropriate combination of eight symptoms, a diagnosis of autism is established. Symptoms are grouped into four general categories.

In some cases, mental retardation may mask autism, and diagnosis can be installed later or never. It is particularly hard to diagnose autism in blind people.

Treatment

So far, a cure for autism has still not discovered. Therefore, so far there is no a single case where autism is fully healed. It is very important to detect the autism early and begin mitigating its symptoms. Medications are mainly used to treat problems that are associated with autism. The goal of treatment is to repair a child's functioning in daily life, such as helping a child to reach a certain level of independence, social and work skills.

Children with autism grow into adults with autism. Many of them will need during the whole life someone who will always be next to them, and who will take care of them. In severe forms of autism, independent living is almost impossible, while in the milder forms independent life is possible.

Everyone involved in treatment must try to understand an autistic child. Like normal people who have emotions and needs, he/she has them, too. He/she needs support, security and affection, and above all someone who understands him/her.

But not all hope is lost! As technology advances, medicine progresses, too. Every day new drugs for the treatment of various diseases are discovered. Last few years in the treatment of autism good results have been given by hyperbaric medicine. However, it is not enough represented in practice.

Savants? Who are "they"?

Savant is a person with extraordinary mental abilities, which are often accompanied by certain disadvantages in behavior.

Savant syndrome is a phenomenon that on the one hand occurs in autistic people and people who have a disorder of the brain, and on the other hand have developed some incredible talent and artistic ability. This condition is usually congenital but it may be acquired later, for example in childhood and even in old age.

There are three categories of savant syndrome:

- Splinter - when a person shows a preoccupation with acquiring specific knowledge;
- Talented - the new knowledge comes by their own knowledge;
- Prodigious (outstanding) - the rarest groups are known to only about 100 in the world. A prodigious savant is someone with a skill level equivalent to or greater than that of a prodigy, regardless of any cognitive disability.

Savant skills (abilities) are usually found in one or more of the five major areas: art, music capabilities, calendar calculation, math and spatial skills. The most common form of autistic savants are the calendrical savants, so called "human calendar" that can calculate the day of the week with the speed and usually with the accuracy.

Frequently intellectual abilities that occur in the savant: computer memory of dates, names, phone numbers, then extremely fast and accurate performance of "heart" of arithmetic operations of addition and multiplication.

Together with savant syndrome, photographic memory can occur. It is the ability of a detailed recollection of different information which they have seen only once. In that way they can remember the contents of entire books that they have read only once.

The cause of this phenomenon is not discovered yet. The only thing all autistic savants have in common is that they all have different abilities and that the majority have just one unusual ability.

There is no agreement about how many people have savant skills. The estimates range from "exceedingly rare" to one in ten people with autism. As many as 50 cases of sudden or acquired savant syndrome have been reported.

To sum up, being savant does not always mean being autistic nor being autistic means being savant!

Top 10 worldwide known autistic savants, so called "prodigious savants"

10 savants with superhuman mental skills:

1. Kim Peek, the Real *Rain Man*
2. Stephen Wiltshire, the Human Camera
3. Daniel Tammet, Brainman
4. Gilles Tréhin
5. Gottfried Mind: Cat's Raphael
6. Jedediah Buxton
7. Orlando Serrell
8. Leslie Lemke
9. Ellen Boudreaux
10. Alonzo Clemons

1. Kim Peek, the Real Rain Man



Laurence Kim Peek was an American "mega savant". He was born with some brain damage, and because of it he did not walk until the age of four and then in a sidelong manner. He could not button up his shirt and had difficulty with other ordinary motor skills. His IQ (87) was below average. A study done in 2008 concluded that Peek probably had FG syndrome, not the autism. During the whole Kim's life, he had been helped by his father. What Kim makes savant was the ability to read two pages for a very short period of time. He would do it scanning the left page

with his left eye, then the right page with his right eye. According to an article in *The Times* newspaper, he could accurately recall the contents of at least 12,000 books. He died of a heart attack at his home, on December 19, 2009, when he was 58.

2. Stephen Wiltshire, the Human Camera



As a young child, Stephen Wiltshire was a mute. At the age of three, he was diagnosed as autistic. At the age of five, Stephen was sent to Queensmill in London, school for special needs children, where he discovered a passion for drawing - first of animals, then London buses, then buildings and the city's landmarks. He began to communicate through his art. Slowly, aided by his teachers, he learned to speak by the age of nine. What makes him extraordinary is the ability to look at a subject once and then draw an accurate and detailed picture of it. He frequently draws entire cities from memory, based on double, brief helicopter rides. In May 2005 Stephen produced his longest ever panoramic memory drawing of Tokyo on

10m long canvas. Since then he has drawn Rome, Hong Kong, Frankfurt, Madrid, Dubai, Jerusalem and London on giant canvases. He also draws fictional scenes.

3. Daniel Tammet: Brainman; Born on a Blue Day

Daniel Tammet is an English writer, essayist and a highly functioning autistic savant with exceptional mathematical and language abilities. When he was four years old, he had bouts of epilepsy that, along with his autism, seemed to have brought about his savant abilities. He was also found to have synaesthesia.



He became famous when he recited from memory Pi to 22,514 decimal places. Numbers are special to him. Daniel speaks 11 languages. In 2007, Channel Five documentary challenged him to learn the language in a week. Seven days later, Daniel was successfully interviewed on

Icelandic television in Icelandic!

What makes him more special is that he can tell how he does what he does. He can describe what he sees in his head. And that makes him so helpful to scientists trying to understand the savant syndrome. The problem with other savants is that they cannot tell scientists how they do what they do.

4. Gilles Tréhin



Gilles Tréhin is a French autistic savant, who has created the whole city in his head. It is a city called Urville, situated in an island off the Côte d'Azur, between Cannes and St. Tropez. By 12, he started building a city he called "Urville". At first he used LEGO, but shortly thereafter, he realized that he could expand his imaginary city much easier with drawings. Gilles has 250 detailed drawings, complete "history" of the founding the city. He has also published a

book about it.

5. Gottfried Mind: Cat's Raphael



Gottfried Mind was a Swiss autistic savant, specialized in drawing. He was called the Raphael of Cats because of the excellence with which he painted that animal. Besides drawing cats, bears were a favorite subject of his art.

Thanks to his father, who was a joiner, Mind had also been good at cutting animals in wood and drawing likenesses of some peasant boys, or carving them in wood.

When Mind was eight, he was placed at the academy for poor children, which he left later. After a certain period of time, he met a painter Sigmund Hedenberger. With him, Mind learnt his art of drawing, and coloring with water-colors.

Mind's special talent for representing cats was discovered and awakened by chance, while Hedenberger was painting a picture with a cat, which Mind did not like, so he told him that it was not the cat. Hedenberger gave Mind an opportunity to draw a better one, which he, actually, did.

Mind died at the age of 46.

6. Jedediah Buxton



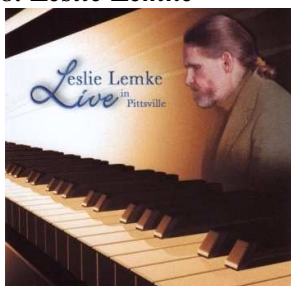
Jedediah Buxton, one of the world's earliest savants, a noted English mental calculator, born in Derbyshire. He could not write and his knowledge, except of numbers, was extremely limited. Everything he saw, he connected with numbers. For example, when he saw a dance, his whole attention was to count the number of steps of the dancers. At a play, Jedediah was consumed with counting the number of words uttered by the actors. His memory was so great, that in resolving a question he could leave off and resume the operation again at the same point after the lapse of a week, or even of several months.

7. Orlando Serrell



Orlando L. Serrell was not born as a savant. Actually, he became a savant. Orlando Serrell did not possess any special skills until he was struck by a baseball on the left side of his head when he was ten years old. He fell to the ground, but eventually got up and continued playing baseball. For a while, Orlando had headaches. He did not get any medical treatment because he did not tell his parents. After a while he realized he had new abilities: he could perform complex calendar calculations and remember the weather, where he was and what he has done for every day since the accident.

8. Leslie Lemke



Just after he was born, doctors had to remove his eyes. As a young child, Leslie did not know how to swallow. He could not stand until he was 12 and walk until 15.

In the middle of one night, his step-mother woke up and found Leslie playing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Leslie, who has no classical music training, was playing the piece flawlessly after hearing it just once earlier on the television. From then on, Leslie began playing all styles of music. He became famous after being portrayed in national television shows. Before his health

started to deteriorate, Leslie held many concerts around the world.

9. Ellen Boudreaux



Ellen Boudreaux is a blind autistic savant known for her exceptional abilities. She can play music perfectly after hearing it just once. Ellen has two other savant skills that are unusual. First, despite her blindness, she is able to walk around without ever running into things. As she walks, Ellen makes little chirping sounds that seem to act like human sonar. Second, Ellen has an extremely precise digital clock ticking in her mind. Ellen knows the exact hour and minute, any time of the day without ever having seen a clock nor having the concept of the passing of time explained to her.

10. Alonzo Clemons



Alonzo was not born as an autistic savant. As a toddler Alonzo suffered a head injury in an accident that changed his life. He cannot feed himself or tie his shoelaces, but he can sculpt. After seeing only a fleeting image of an animal on a TV screen, Alonzo could sculpt a perfect 3D figure of it, correct in each and every detail right down to the muscle fibers.

CONCLUSION

Having finished this essay, I must say that I was not at all surprised by the outcome of the survey. The answers I got were in line with my own thoughts on the subject, but nevertheless it was very interesting to carry out the survey because it backed up what I had expected, except one fact, related to the reaction of people when / if they met an autistic person. What I found surprisingly was that people would ignore an autistic person when they met him/her, call the police or moreover would kill him/her! People are aware that there are autistic persons, and we should behave with them just like with all other people. Life is the biggest gift that can be given. If we are given the chance to live, then we should not forbid other people to live and to do whatever they want in their lives. Everyone should stick to their own life. If we want to live, we must let other live! Live and let live!

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