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## EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF MEN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES REGARDING THEIR LONG- -TERM PARTNERSHIPS\*

**Introduction:** Although researchers have been increasingly interested in *de facto* partnerships between people with intellectual disabilities (ID), there have been few studies concerning males, especially those who succeeded in developing long-term relations.

**Research Aim:** The study aimed to understand how males with ID perceive their relationships and the meanings they ascribe to them.

**Method:** Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore this aim. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with males with ID who were in a long-term intimate relationship.

**Results:** The analysis allowed us to identify four superordinate themes: (1) Meanings ascribed to partners, (2) Road to building a partnership, (3) Barriers on the road to building and functioning in a relationship, and (4) Relationships of the males under study with women: from harmony to conflicts and relationship breakups, followed by several constituent themes.

**Conclusion:** The study has shown the importance of relationships to adult males with ID and has helped to identify the favorable factors and barriers in developing and maintaining such relationships.

**Keywords:** males with intellectual disabilities, female partners, relationships, barriers

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## INTRODUCTION

Researchers have been increasingly interested in *de facto* partnerships between people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in recent years. This study perspective reveals the world of experience of individuals with ID, and it provides a significant supplement to the research conducted so far with significant individuals, such as parents, guardians and professionals supporting persons with ID.

Some issues in this subject matter have been explored more broadly, including the importance of intimate relations and the environmental context of the conditional factors, while others less so, such as the choice of a partner, what one expects of him or her, and the individual factors on which the quality of a relationship depends. Importantly, individuals with ID express a desire to develop such relations and see their importance for the quality of their existence (Rushbrooke et al., 2014; Bogenschutz and Novak Amado, 2016; Ćwirynkało and Żyta, 2019; Neuman, 2021). A strong motivation to establish intimate relations is also perceived by parents and other significant individuals (Retznik et al., 2021).

The findings of studies conducted so far concerning relationships of people with ID reveal the following tendencies:

1. Relationships are highly valued by people with ID (Rushbrooke et al., 2014; Ćwirynkało and Żyta, 2019). People's experience in relationships are regarded from the whole-life perspective as a crossroads (Neuman, 2021), an important element of their lives, but also of everyday existence (Krzemińska, 2019), and having a partner – as one of the three most important things in life (Rojas et al., 2014). A high value of relationships is manifested in the need to formalize them (Yau et al., 2009; Cytowska, 2012; Neuman, 2020b; Retznik et al., 2021).

2. People's preferences and evaluations of a partner are influenced by their individual life experiences, including socialization, previous relationships, and personal values. The assessment of a partner is based on various criteria, which include appearance, personality traits and specific behaviors in everyday life (Bates et al., 2017; Neuman, 2020b). Individuals with ID project a certain model of an ideal partner, sometimes finding him/her in the current relationship (Żyta and Ćwirynkało, 2020). A similarity of opinions, interests and hobbies is important to them (Neuman, 2020b). Important factors also include the other person's commitment and his/her motivation to provide practical and emotional support (Bates et al., 2017).

3. Relationships are based on feelings but also on bodily sensations. When talking about the essence of relationships, people with ID mention love, fascination, friendship, closeness, trust and respect, mutual understanding, sense of security (Lafferty et al., 2013; Rojas et al., 2014; Bates et al., 2016; Karellou, 2017; Ćwirynkało and Żyta, 2019). Bodily sensations are an integral part of relationships (Yau et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2019). Individuals with ID are aware of the variability of the quality of life in relationships and of the need to make efforts

to maintain them (Neuman, 2020b; McCarthy et al., 2021). They are also aware of potential threats arising from a relationship that requires trust and being open to another person (Lafferty et al., 2013). One can say that life experience allows them to mature into good relationships or judge potential partners correctly.

4. Individuals with ID see many benefits in intimate relationships, although their experiences might also be negative.

They are aware that they can fulfil their psychosocial and physical needs owing to a relationship (Rushbrooke et al., 2014; Żyta and Ćwirynkało, 2020). In the opinion of individuals with ID, being in a relationship expands a spectrum of social experiences and enriches the repertoire of their activities (Lafferty et al., 2013). It provides one with resources that help one cope with difficult events and creates a sense of security (Kelly et al., 2009). For many people with ID, a relationship becomes a space of their autonomy, increasing their self-trust and self-esteem and manifesting their life competence (Lafferty et al., 2013; Neuman, 2021). It gives one a sense of “normalness” and boosts one’s social status (Bates et al., 2016; 2017; Żyta and Ćwirynkało, 2020).

It is noteworthy that complementarity becomes apparent when discussing the importance of a relationship – people with ID not only perceive the benefits of being in a relationship for themselves, but they also value the possibility of offering something to the partner (Healy et al., 2009; Lafferty et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2021).

Some experiences of people with ID in relationships can also be negative. Studies have shown the occurrence of violence, regardless of sex (Ward et al., 2010). Interestingly, successful relationships provide one with experiences which compensate for the negative effects of relations with violence, which Bates et al. (2016, p. 69; 2017, p. 607) describe as the “reparative nature of love”.

The possibility of establishing intimate relations and their fulfilment by people with ID depend on the environment. This dependence should be considered multidimensionally. On the one hand, experiences of socialization, especially in the family, help to develop certain psychosocial skills important for future interpersonal relationships, including intimate ones, in everyone, regardless of the disability (Vahav et al., 2015). On the other hand, the dependence in many life decisions on fully-able significant individuals is marked, particularly in the population of people with ID. Adverse attitudes of those individuals create a context that limits the possibility of selecting a partner and developing relationships, including their quality or formalization, which makes the situation of individuals with ID different from the general population (Krzemińska, 2009; Bane et al., 2012; Rushbrooke et al., 2014; Żyta and Ćwirynkało, 2020; Puyaltó et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2023). Studies in which supporting personnel or parents participated showed that partnerships of people with ID were treated by them instrumentally, as a form of “life normalization”, and they belittled their values, which improved the quality of

existence or a person with ID's contribution to it (Neuman, 2020a). Relationships are usually judged from the perspective of potential difficulties, which are a consequence of the disability itself (Ćwirynkało et al., 2017; Neuman, 2020a; Żyta, 2020). People with ID perceive the environmental barriers to developing a relationship (Azzopardi-Lane and Callus, 2015) and the key role of support from personnel or guardians in this regard (Bates et al., 2017).

The life of many individuals with ID is limited to the segregational and institutional conditions, and they become the area in which potential partners are sought but also where specific forms of shared activities are initiated (Bates et al., 2017; Krzemińska, 2019; Żyta and Ćwirynkało, 2020; Retznik et al., 2021; 2022; Puyaltó et al., 2022). Unlike young people or intellectually fully-able young adults, the capabilities of people with ID with respect to experimenting and the choice of places and circumstances of meetings are much poorer at a higher level of structuring. Institutional conditions of life of people with ID at various ages do not allow for intimacy, and the negative social attitudes restrict the right of people with ID to satisfy their sexual needs in both hetero- and homosexual relationships (Lam et al., 2019; Stoffelen et al., 2019).

Studies that examine this issue rarely take into consideration the sex of people with ID. It appears that comparing people with ID to general population obscures gender and the unique experiences of partnerships. Such studies cover heterogeneous groups with respect to sex, usually of heterosexual individuals. Few authors take sex into consideration, showing its role in differentiating the permanence of the relationship, the number of partners or preferences regarding the traits of the ideal partner (Bates et al., 2017; Żyta and Ćwirynkało, 2020; Retznik et al., 2021; 2022). It is also noteworthy that – compared with females with ID – males with ID as partners are analyzed less frequently. Few reports on the subject refer more often to the perspective of third parties – for example, their female partners (e.g. Booth and Booth, 2002; Ćwirynkało, 2021a). Meanwhile, the research conducted so far has shown that being in a relationship is a significant category for reinforcing the sense of masculinity in males with ID (Ćwirynkało et al., 2016). This study is intended to fill the gap by focusing on the perspective of males with ID and their experience in relationships, especially the meaning they ascribe to them and the methods of perceiving and judging the partner.

## RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

The aim of this research was to understand how men with ID perceive their relationships and the meanings they ascribe to them.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTIC

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012) was applied, which has its roots in three theoretical approaches: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Phenomenology, which can be conceptualized as qualitative research that focuses on a person's life experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019), is concerned with exploring the essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experienced it in order to understand the meanings ascribed to this phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015). In a phenomenological study, the researcher is interested in how the meanings given to phenomena are generated and transformed. In turn, hermeneutics focuses on the need to comprehend the mindset and language of a human being and acknowledges the role of language, which mediates an individual's experiences. Taking this approach into account, IPA researchers make attempts to understand what it is like to be in the shoes of participants, interpret their experiences and make their meaning comprehensible to others (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). The last approach that IPA relies on – idiography – is the claim that each person is “unique and this uniqueness often interferes with the formation of nomothetic generalizations that are applicable across individuals” (O'Donahue et al., 2019, p. 19). Applying this idiographic commitment, the researcher will navigate between emergent themes generated in the analysis, exemplify them with individual narratives and show similarities and differences in individual cases (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

The method of data collection was an in-depth interview (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2021). Each interview lasted between one and two hours and took place under conditions which ensured comfort and appropriate confidentiality. All participants gave informed consent to take part in the study and were assured that their identities would not be revealed to anyone outside of the study. In the process of data analysis, the two authors followed four steps: (1) multiple reading and making notes; (2) transforming notes into emergent themes; (3) seeking relationships and clustering themes, and (4) writing an IPA report (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012, pp. 366–368).

The study gained the full ethical approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (11/2018) and is part of a larger research project concerning fathers with ID (Ćwirynkało, 2021b). In the process of recruitment, the first author sent invitation letters to several institutions whose aim was to support people with ID. Their managers were informed about the aim of the project and asked to nominate gatekeepers who would contact potential participants who meet the following criteria: (1) being an adult person diagnosed with ID, (2) being in a long-term relationship at present or in the past, and (3) giving informed consent to participate in the interview. After that, the researcher contacted these persons to inform them about the project and set the date, time, and place of

the interview. In addition to that, the snowball sampling method (Creswell, 2013) was used. Several participants provided contact to other potential interviewers, who were also recruited.

The study group comprised 20 males with light (14 males) or moderate (6 males) ID. All were Polish, aged between 21 and 54. Eight of them were married. Regarding the remaining participants, seven of them were in a *de facto* or informal relationship (not married), and five were not in any relationship during the study. Each participant had at least one child. Detailed demographics of the study participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Participants' profile*

No.	Age	Level of ID	Relationship status	Partner's age	Partner's disability status	Number and age of children	Living situation
M1	48	Moderate	Married for 23 years	45		2: 18, 23	Living with wife and younger son
M2	35	Mild	Married for 10 years	35	Yes – mild ID	5: between 1 and 9	Living with wife and children
M3	22	Mild	<i>De-facto</i> relationship	22	Yes – mild ID	1: 3 months	Living with partner, child, partner's parents and sisters
M4	47	Moderate	Married for 9 years	38	Yes – mild ID	1: 15	Living with wife
M5	39	Moderate	Married for 14 years	34	Yes – mild ID	6: between 1 and 13	Living with wife and 5 children (1 child placed for adoption)
M6	40	Moderate	Informal relationship	31	Yes – mild ID, schizophrenia, motor disability	1: 1	Living with 2 brothers
M7	32	Moderate	Informal relationship	32	Yes – moderate ID	1: 4	Living alone
M8	54	Mild	Single (divorced)	No data	No data	10: between 5 and 18	Living with 8 children
M9	27	Mild	Married for 1 year	29	Yes – mild ID	3: 5 months, 4, 8	Living with wife and 3 children
M10	32	Mild	<i>De-facto</i> relationship	No data	Yes – moderate ID, mental health issues	2: 3, 5	Living with partner and children

M11	41	Mild	<i>De-facto</i> relationship	36	Yes – mild ID, motor disability	7: between 4 and 17	Living with partner and 6 children
M12	36	Mild	<i>De-facto</i> relationship	31	Yes – pro-found ID	1: 10	Living with partner and child
M13	51	Mild	Single (no more in a relationship)	No data	No data	2: 20, 21	Living with children
M14	32	Mild	Married for 3 years (earlier divorced)	27	No data	5: between 1 and 10	Living with wife and 3 children
M15	51	Mild	Married for 24 years	42	Yes – mild ID	2: 20, 23	Living with wife, children and grandson
M16	44	Mild	Single (partner died)	Dead	No data	1: 8	Living with cousin and her daughter
M17	21	Mild	Informal relationship	23	No	1: 1	Living alone
M18	22	Mild	Single (no more in a relationship)	20	No	1: 2	Living with sister and her family
M19	41	Mild	Married for 10 years	39	Yes – motor disability	1: 7	Living with wife and child
M20	29	Moderate	Single (no more in a relationship)	34	Yes – mild ID	1: 4	Living with mother

Source: Authors' own study.

## RESULTS

In this study we wanted to understand how adult males with ID make sense of their experiences associated with their long-term relationships with female partners. In the process of analysis we identified four superordinate themes and several subordinate categories, They are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.  
*Relationships of the participants: topics*

Meanings ascribed to partners
A close, loved person, but with some negative traits
Housewife
Mother for their children
Guardian – not only of the children but also of the partner

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 Road to building a relationship
 

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Factors that favor establishing a relation

Infatuation with a female partner

 Men's activity
 

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 Barriers standing on the road to building and functioning in a relationship
 

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Barriers on the part of the surroundings

Barriers on the part of the female partners

 Barriers on the part of the participants
 

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 Relationships of the participants with women: from harmony to conflicts and the relationship breakup
 

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Supportive couples, living in harmony

Experiencing problems in relationships

 Work to make the relationship work
 

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Source: Authors' own study.

## MEANINGS ASCRIBED TO FEMALE PARTNERS

The participants in this study talked about their partners, focusing on their various roles: significant others, housewives, mothers of their children, and guardians. Some of them described their female partners in an ambiguous manner. They pointed to a broad range of traits, both positive and negative and talked about their affection and everyday activities they did.

This is about... love. You know, I love her. [...] She's a bit lost, she can't do things, she can't cook... [...] Here [shows a photo], she has thickened, this thing [points to the deformities on her fingers]. And here's the bigger ones. She was born like this. Potatoes... She can't cook them. [...] She doesn't get it all. [...] It's hard for her, you know... it's difficult for her... she can't do this, she can't do that, she can't tidy up the room, vacuum. [...] Look, she can't tidy up. Well, she does nothing. She can't tidy up a room; all she leaves is a mess everywhere. (M6)

Well, she has her temper. A woman will always be a woman; she has her temper. [...] She's watching TV all the time. [...] She has everything cooked, washed, everything... I'm telling her to clean up, but she's not. I say, "What are you doing?" "I'm cleaning." "No, you're not; you're leading me on. I know you're not cleaning. I know you're watching TV". (M7)

The above mentioned and other excerpts show that it was a common feature of the participants that they loved their partners, but they also perceived their various negative traits, e.g. physical defects, laziness, and wastefulness.

For some participants, their partners were the closest and the most important persons in their lives. They supported the participants; they were their defenders and gave sense to their existence:



I'm here, so to speak, completely alone [after the death of his next of kin – author's note]. If it hadn't been for her taking me by the hand like this, I'd have gone mad. Well. I wouldn't have survived without her. Because I'm alone now. Because my two brothers died... (M1)

When talking about their female partners, some study participants reduced them to the role of housewives.

She always cooks good dinners. She does. I'm not complaining. Well, she'll cook some soup... Only... Well, on weekdays, there is always soup... Tomato soup, beetroot soup, that depends. And at weekends – there's a bigger dinner. Two courses. (M5)

Similarly, some men, especially those who had broken up with their partners, perceived them mainly as mothers of their children. This is how they saw their role, and they judged them from this angle. This judgement was not always favorable, which is shown by these statements:

I mean... What can I say about her? I don't know; I think she's a good mother. I don't know... Maybe if I spent more time with them, I'd know. And if I spend only an hour, two or three with them, I don't see everything. And if he has a scratch or bruise, I take the phone and call her and ask how he got the bruise or the scratch... "Well, he went where he shouldn't have". "So, keep an eye on him", I say, and I tell her off. (M18)

Instead of looking after the kids, she'd rather leave them with their granny and go to see her friends. And, you know, a kid also needs to be looked after... You should spend some time with them... (M20)

In both cases, the interviewees noted the negative maternity behavior of their partners, while at the same time being aware of how good parenting should be based on the care and responsibility for the child.

## ROAD TO BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP

An analysis of the statements of the participants helped to identify a range of factors that favored establishing their relations with their female partners. Both contextual factors and the traits of future partners attracted participants' attention, leading to the establishment of intimate relationships. A similar socio-economic status was also a common element connecting the study participants with their female partners in many cases.

The following are examples of the participants' statements on the beginning of their acquaintance with their partners (future mothers of their children), indicating the contextual factors that favored the establishment of a relationship:

*Place of residence nearby (e.g. the same village, quarter)*

I mean, I met her when I lived there, in that flat. I lived there, and she was my neighbor. Because I lived there and my wife lived there. [...] And she came there, didn't she? To see us. And that's how I met my wife. And we fell in love with each other. (M1)

O, Jesus, my dear, I met my wife when she was at school no. 4 in B. [a school for children with special educational needs]. And I was, I was once in B., I came to see her when she, Daria, was attending the "four" and... Daria went there by bus. I always went there to collect her. I can see Daria is coming, well, you know, so I kiss her, well, and then I met Daria. She was always so pretty and smiling. (M4)

*Working near the female partner's place of residence*

I met Marysia while I was laying the pavement on her street. We left our tools at her home and, one word led to another, and so we stayed together. Maybe we were not together at once, but I was 25, and so was she. [...] She got pregnant, and we got married. (M2)

*Attending the same school, staying at the same boarding house*

We met at the school, only I was completing my vocational school and my wife, she was living with her mother, who is now my mother-in-law. [...] And so we started meeting. But that was in the boarding house. I saw her and I liked her. (M10)

*Meeting at an institution supporting persons with ID*

She was attending the [Occupational Therapy] Workshops here. This is how we met. (M7)

I was 25 when I met Magda, I was at the facility [Occupational Therapy Workshop] at the time, so we went to the hotel in S. And all the facilities came there, those teams, and they had their presentations. And that was where I met Magda. She also was... She was from the facility in M. [name of town]. And I was here in O. [name of town]. (M12)

*Meeting through common acquaintances / family members*

You know, I met her at my sister's. She came there. (M15)

For some participants, recollections associated with meeting their female partner were still vivid and clear. For example, they gave an exact date, they described the appearance of their partner or their reactions:

I met her in 2005. In December. We went there... with her friend... A friend of hers introduced us... At the pier. And she says, "Come here, [name]". And the female friend,

she says to me, “There’s someone waiting for you, at the pier”. I’m saying, I’m looking... That was in December, on the 23rd, in 2005. And she says, and here, I met her. That’s her. She came there, she was wearing a skirt, a short one. (M6)

Sometimes, those participants also directed their attention to other events in the development of their relations with their partner, e.g. proposing or marriage:

I wanted to propose, I invited her to a restaurant... I invited her to dinner, and I asked her to marry me. With a ring. Her sister was also there. We went there together because my sister’s friend was there, and I didn’t even know they were friends. So she accepted the ring. And I was happy. (M14)

Others found it difficult to talk about the beginnings of their relationship, especially when that was many years ago or when their relationships broke up, because some facts became blurred in their memory or because they were reluctant to share information about it:

I don’t remember... It was so long ago... Well, I met her at school. [...] And I met her. Then she lived at the boarding house. I didn’t because I’m from O. [name of town]. And so I met her, and that’s how we got together. She came to me, and later we got married. (M5)

Some participants talked about their infatuation with their female partner at the time of establishing the relationship.

And so, Magda caught my eye from the start. She had long, black hair and her figure was all right. She was charming. (M12)

She had such nice hair, and she was pretty, the prettiest of them all. (M15)

I liked everything in her. She was pretty and nice and I liked talking to her. (M14)

Establishing a relationship with a woman sometimes required the participants to show greater commitment, to make some effort or show firmness:

And there was someone else here. And she, you know, she changed... And I say, “Listen, girl, it’s one way or the other. So behave yourself”. And later she made her decision. (M7)

I was completing my vocational education, and we were kind of together, and she met this other guy and I was a bit pissed off, I was jealous like hell. I rode a bike to my friends here, to B. And they admired me for riding 40 km to meet a woman. [...] And so we, well, we made a relationship and I didn’t wait any longer. I invited and brought her home. And so it started. (M10)

And I asked her to give me her phone number, I started to text and phone her. I asked her if we'd meet. At first, she said no, but after some time, we met, and so it started. (M14)

Among the factors that favored building the relationship were shared opinions, outlook on life and a similar level of independence. This can be shown by this statement:

Well, I liked her from the start. But we went together, we worked together at the potatoes. And this is how it went. You know, we were resourceful. We didn't look around but at each other. And we got along with people. (M15)

### BARRIERS STANDING ON THE ROAD TO BUILDING AND FUNCTIONING IN A RELATIONSHIP

Among the barriers on the road to building or functioning in a relationship, the participants mentioned various environmental and personal factors, including those related to them and their partners.

I don't know [why my ex-partner left me]. Maybe I went abroad too often. If I could change something in my life, I think I would have stuck to the first [relationship]. (M14)

A self-critical image of one's behavior was also presented by another participant, who saw the conflicts with his wife as caused by his alcoholism:

[...] since I've been living in these blocks... I've got this issue [alcohol abuse]. I just have too much free time. [...] I know I should be with my wife and son, but I, well, I just do the opposite. I'll tell you, my friends talk me into going with them. Usually, I mean, I'll tell you, my wife keeps yelling at me all the time. Because you know, alcohol is the enemy of the family. I mean, my wife's been telling me many times [...] to stop drinking, to not go, but to stay at home, right? And me, instead of refusing, I go, and I don't know why I look for the alcohol, right? (M1)

An interesting finding of the analyses was that some participants said that their female partners had removed them from the process of their children's upbringing.

After the kid was born, well, it didn't work out... we quarreled a bit... But then she didn't want to let me take the child for a walk on my own... This... [...] She wanted to do everything by herself. And I didn't want it like this, I wanted to help. And so she went back to her mum's. And now she's renting a flat. (M20)

Improper behavior of their ex-partner as the cause for their breakup was mentioned by M14 and M8:

I thought this would last forever. I have a grudge against her, and very much so. [...] How did she say it? That as long as she's young, she wants to "sow her wild oats". But she wasn't like that at first. [...] It seemed that it would be forever. I couldn't believe that... when I learned that she went partying every Saturday. [...] And the worst thing was that she wouldn't say anything. [...] She knows nothing, she has no one. She denied everything. (M14)

My wife simply walked out on me. One day she left. She took a boy, a younger one... [...] She had everything. [...] Well, I did everything I could. And she started to get me down because I knew – well, I'll be honest – that she was an easy lay, but then... I gave her one chance, and then another, and then I said, "It's one way or the other". Either she understands that she has a family, and if she doesn't, well... So one day, she left and said she wasn't coming back. [Then] I asked her, "What about the kids?" so she said I'd have to raise them by myself. And how can one do such a thing? (M8)

Some participants pointed to the difference in characters or temperaments between themselves and their female partners, juxtaposing their partners' negative traits with their positive ones.

Now it's that one acts sort of rationally. [...] And I'm trying to make my wife aware, because she's a sort of good-for-nothing. [...] Sometimes she's sharp, and I'm trying to stop her, but then she's loving... (M10)

She [ex-partner] sits at home, but she says that she would rather go to work than sit with children. I say, "Let's switch places. I can sit here with the children and do everything!". And she's like... when I say, "Let's go somewhere", then she's like "It hurts me here, and here". [...] She's like this, lazy. She wants to do nothing. She's always tired. Now she's tired with her children. (M18)

## RELATIONS OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS WITH FEMALES: FROM HARMONY TO CONFLICTS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BREAKUP

Some participants presented their relationships with female partners as full of harmony, love, mutual support.

Well, [name] is really all right. And I'm really happy to have a wife like this. I'm really glad. If I knew her from the start... (M14)

Well, we are a couple... Once, I tell her that I'll buy her, you know... When I save some money... I have saved some and I say, I'll buy an engagement ring and took it to her. And she accepted it, calmly... (M7)

When describing their relationships with their (ex) female partners, other interviewees stressed the difficulties: growing tensions and quarrels, which in some cases led to the relationship breakup.

I have some problems with my wife and I have a probation officer and assistants and they also think that I'm different [better than they expected]. Because my wife again... She... Generally, we are addiction-free, only there's a problem with us that we quarrel a lot. (M10)

Some participants attempted to mend the relationship:

I think that it is the most important thing to live in harmony. I talk to psychologists a lot, they try – maybe they're right, because they're psychologists – that it sometimes has to be difficult, that if you love the other person, when you are with them, it's sometimes that with some things you have to take some burden off her so that she... That one person must give the other person what she likes, so that she... [...] That you should do what you like doing, and my wife should... Well, you should say that, for example, today she's staying with the children to look after them, and then, on the next day, she wants to go somewhere, and she goes and I stay with the children. And this is what I try to do so that she... to take some burden off her. [...] This is not easy in everyday life. It sometimes happens that I don't understand my wife, but I try to understand her better each day to... to prevent the children from suffering. (M10)

Some interviewees, especially those who broke up with their female partners, talked about how their relationships had changed over time.

When the kids were little, there was a sort of connection between us, but then she started to buck around, then you had to do something about it, and, well, that was done. [...] later everything fell apart. [...] She didn't want to be with the kids, she evaded her mother's duties, she did nothing with the kids. [...] And I was accused of molesting the kids. She said that I beat her, and that... And I didn't even touch her. She made it all up. And she finally left, because she didn't want to be with the kids. (M13)

In his statement, M13 showed improper behavior of his female partner not only towards himself, but also towards the children.

Some participants, who had been in several relationships, made comparisons between them, and talked about their better quality in the new ones:

We live as we live. Honestly, it's better than with my ex-wife. I didn't get along as well with my ex-wife as with my present partner. (M11)

## DISCUSSION

This study shows how men with ID perceived their present or ex-partners and the relationships with them and what meaning they ascribed to them. Expectedly, taking into account prior research (Krzemińska, 2019; Neuman, 2021), we indicated that their lived experience in this area were diverse, not always positive, but in each case they were an important part of the participants' lives. Each was a long-term relationship, but not all of them were permanent. There were children in each of them who shaped the relations between the participants and their partners to a certain extent.

When talking about their partners, the participants pointed to their feelings they had for them – usually love and attachment, which corresponds with the findings of earlier studies (Rushbrooke et al., 2014; Bogenschutz and Novak Amado, 2016; Ćwirynkało and Żyta, 2019; Neuman, 2021). As in the research conducted by Neuman (2020b) and Bates et al. (2017), they appreciated their other traits and skills, e.g. their good looks, practical skills and involvement in the family life – looking after the children and caring about them as partners. For some of them, a similarity of approach to life and shared values were also important, which is consistent with earlier study findings (Neuman, 2020b). In their accounts, the study participants also mentioned the traits and behaviors of their partners, which they saw as negative. In some cases, those were the traits “despite which” they loved their partners (e.g. explosive temper, wastefulness, unattractive looks). In other cases, it was the opposite – they led to serious conflicts and sometimes even to the breakup (e.g. unfaithfulness, neglecting the children, ignoring the partner).

In their accounts, the participants pointed to various factors that favored establishing a relationship. Those included: having shared acquaintances/family members who facilitated the first contact, living nearby (e.g. one village, quarters), attending the same facility (school, dormitory, occupational therapy workshop), as well as other contextual factors that made the participants meet their partners (e.g. working at the same place or working at the partner's place of residence). It seems that this atypical – for a population of individuals with ID – situation of the participants, i.e. functioning in a non-institutional environment, was important for the possibility of building long-term relationships and having children. Segregational circumstances restrict such possibilities to a significant extent, as shown by earlier research (e.g. Krzemińska, 2019; Lam et al., 2019; Stoffelen et al., 2019; Retznik et al., 2021; 2022; Puyaltó et al., 2022).

Important findings also include showing the participants as active individuals with high commitment to establishing and (less frequently) maintaining relationships. Covering a long distance on a bicycle, texting and phoning, asking a neighbor for help with the partner's move from a distant town to one's flat – these are only some examples of such actions. They contradict the image of a person with ID as frequently passive (Crowe et al., 2015), helpless, submissive to his/her fate,

which determines the quality and the way of life (Gajdzica, 2005), while showing his/her personal potential and perseverance in attaining important personal goals. Similar tendencies were described by McCarthy et al. (2021) and Neuman (2020b), who demonstrated a strong belief shown by individuals with ID in the need for effort to maintain a relationship.

Some participants vividly recalled significant events associated with their relationships (e.g. meeting their partners for the first time, wedding, proposal). These recollections confirm the importance of the relationship and its value. A similar tendency occurring in fathers with various disabilities was demonstrated in a study conducted by Bartnikowska and Ćwirynkało (2014). This confirms the importance of positive experiences in building the potential of a person, but also an ability to accumulate and arrange such experiences in the context of others and their use in building a high quality of life and a sense of happiness.

The study participants saw various barriers standing on their way to building a relationship and functioning in it. They saw their sources in the contextual factors, in their female partners (e.g. unfaithfulness, mismanagement) or, importantly, in themselves (e.g. explosive temper, addictions). Negative traits of males – fathers with ID – were also revealed in studies with their female partners, who mentioned various positive characteristics of their partners but also pointed out some problems, such as violence or alcohol abuse (Ćwirynkało, 2021a).

The participants' and their female partners' resources and limitations, as well as favorable and unfavorable contextual factors, had an impact on the quality of their relationships, which – according to their accounts – was diverse, from life in harmony to relationship breakup. These men, like the participants in the studies conducted by McCarthy et al. (2021) and Neuman (2020b), were able to describe the quality and, importantly, to take actions to improve the relationship quality. Sometimes, they needed support from others. Interestingly, however, the men did not refer to their family members, but to professionals, e.g. a psychologist or a family assistant with whom they cooperated.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown the importance of intimate relationships to adult males with ID. It has also indicated their potential and has helped to identify favorable factors and barriers in creating and maintaining such relationships. Being aware of these factors might aid stakeholders in developing training policies and services.



## STUDY LIMITATIONS

Being of a qualitative nature, this study has some limitations. It shows a selected section of the participants' experiences of life in relationships. Without doubt, it would be useful for understanding them to take into consideration the perspective of significant persons, e.g. the female partners, family members of people providing formal support. This study is among the first ones in Poland, which take gender into consideration and it includes only individuals in long-term relationships who have children.

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## BADANIA POSTRZEGANIA PRZEZ MĘŻCZYZN Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ INTELEKTUALNĄ ICH DŁUGOTERMINOWYCH ZWIĄZKÓW PARTNERSKICH

**Wprowadzenie:** Choć w ciągu ostatnich lat znacząco wzrosło zainteresowanie badaczy związkami partnerskimi osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną (NI), niewiele badań koncentruje się na mężczyznach, szczególnie tych, którym udało się stworzyć długotrwałe relacje.

**Cel badań:** Celem badań było poznanie, jak mężczyźni z NI postrzegają swoje relacje partnerskie i jakie znaczenia im nadają.

**Metoda:** Zastosowano interpretacyjną analizę fenomenologiczną. Przeprowadzono 20 wywiadów częściowo ustrukturuowanych z mężczyznami z NI, którzy byli w długotrwałych relacjach intymnych.

**Wyniki:** W toku analiz ustalono cztery nadrzędne tematy, w zakres których wchodziły wątki szczegółowe: (1) znaczenia nadawane partnerkom, (2) droga do budowania związku, (3) bariery stojące na drodze do budowania i funkcjonowania w związku oraz (4) relacje badanych mężczyzn z kobietami: od harmonii do konfliktów i rozpadu związku.

**Wnioski:** Badania pokazały, jak ważne są związki dla dorosłych mężczyzn z NI, i pozwoliły na zidentyfikowanie czynników sprzyjających i barier w tworzeniu i utrzymywaniu tych związków.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mężczyźni z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, partnerki, związki, bariery

