

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# How children with autism spectrum disorder perceive themselves: A narrative research

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this article is, through a dialog between the child and the author, to clarify how children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) perceive themselves.

**Methods:** The qualitative study's participants were nine children with ASD. Their ages were 8–18 years. Data were collected through two sessions of dialog between the child and the author. Data were analyzed through a qualitative inductive approach based on the perspectives of narrative analysis.

**Results:** There were eight categories of how the children perceive themselves. The children talked about themselves as follows. The children with ASD wished to share feelings with others, sensitively read between the lines, and talked about the belief to cherish their friends. They were able to anticipate that repetitive behavior or interest in one thing would end someday. And they then made an effort to deal with problematic matters in social life.

**Conclusion:** This article proposes to understand the experience of “increasing alienation” in children with ASD. As a type of support to understand the child, this article proposed a dialog that elicits communication arrangements, specifically a dialog that focuses on forming a profound relationship of being able to share and communicate with each other.

## KEYWORDS

communication, comprehension, development, friends, interpersonal relations

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article engages in understanding how children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) perceive themselves. Here, departing from the conventional views of ASD and considering the relationships between the child and people around him/her, this article clarifies how each ASD child perceive him/herself.

ASD is a disability characterized by deficits in social communication and social interaction and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In Japan, ASD is commonly known as a communication disorder and is legally recognized as a developmental disorder. Developmental disorders defined by the Act on Support for Persons with Developmental Disorders

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(promulgated in 2004) include autism, Asperger's syndrome, pervasive developmental disorders, learning disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2017). This law has promoted early support for children with ASD and their parents. Support at school has also been promoted. Some children with ASD go to special needs schools that provide special support for handicapped children (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2005). Some children with ASD go to mainstream schools where they attend the same classes as children with typical development (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2019). At school, children with ASD are more likely to have interpersonal problems, including bullying (Suzuki et al., 2017; Tanaka et al., 2015), due to their uncontrolled emotions (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2005), poor communication skills (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2005), and inability to understand the intentions of others (Taniguchi, 2013).

Numerous books and articles written by people with ASD have been published. These publications have shown that those with ASD sense and view various things in a unique way and encounter difficulties unique to people with ASD in social life (Higashida, 2013; Komichi, 2009; Williams, 1992). With such books and articles, we can now profoundly understand how people with ASD feel themselves. There are some significant characteristics of their self-understanding. Some articles on the self-perception of people with ASD have been published. First, children with ASD have an under-elaborated self-concept (Kojima, 2014; Lind, 2010). Second, people with ASD hardly recognize themselves in relation to others or society (Lee & Hobson, 1998). Third, their self-evaluation tends to be lower than people without ASD (Takiyoshi & Tanaka, 2011a). Fourth, they have difficulties in connecting the "remembered self" and the "conceptual self" (Takiyoshi & Tanaka, 2011a). Recently, the self of a child with ASD was discussed from the perspective of gender variance. (Cooper, Smith, & Russell, 2018; Tateno & Ikeda, 2017).

However, these studies and reviews only presented experiences of people with ASD through the framework of ASD. In such studies and reviews, only people with ASD were focused upon; the relationships between the people with ASD and others are hardly discussed. Most reports have investigated experience of the children with ASD in the framework of ASD. No reports have studied children with ASD outside of the framework of ASD. The author of this paper has been listening to narratives of children with ASD and their family members as a public health nurse or researcher. Parents of children with ASD

have learned to understand their children not only from the framework of ASD, but also based on the relationship between the children and the people around them (Yamamoto & Asano, 2018). The parents found new aspects of their relationships with their children (Hirano, 2018). As the parents changed, the children also developed in their mind, creating their own stories. When a child is informed he/she has ASD, in most cases the child is school-age or older (Amy & Mandell, 2014; Chamak, Bonnau, Oudaya, & Ehrenberg, 2011; Tamiya, Miyata, Koterazawa, Okada, & Nakano, 2009). They have already started to develop their own understanding of themselves. In general, children learn to understand themselves through interactions with others (Dewey & Mead, 1995; Takiyoshi & Tanaka, 2011a), and their social development influences the process. Children with ASD do not develop their sociability as fast as children with typical development, but children with ASD more actively interact with others when encouraged and supported (Dawson, 1989). A phenomenological study reported that children with ASD, who are usually in an imaginary world where nobody exists, discover the interpersonal dimension through eye contact or body contact (Murakami, 2008). Children with ASD develop their sociability through unique experience; however, they understand themselves within the interactions with others, which is the same process as children with typical development. To clarify how each child with ASD understands himself in terms of relationship between the child and others is to understand the child as an individual who lives in a community, and to work on the issues surrounding children with ASD from the perspective of "the child and others".

The purpose of this article is, through a dialog between the child and the author, to clarify how children with ASD, either diagnosed or suspected, perceive themselves. Their perception is discussed and clarified from the perspective of interaction with others. This article also suggests how we can better communicate with children with ASD to promote their self-understanding.

There is a three-fold significance in the endeavors of this article. The first is that the article expands the field of view in understanding children with ASD. The child's behavior and thinking can be understood not only in the framework of ASD, but through an alternative perspective of how the child wants to live with others. The second is that it is useful in exploring the desirable dialog that will help children with ASD to understand themselves. The third is that it is useful in supporting people who take care of children with ASD. Parents suffer from not being able to understand the reason behind their children's unique behavior and feelings (Krausz & Meszaros, 2005; Safe, Joosten, & Molineux, 2012; Yamamoto, Kadoma, &

Kato, 2010). Those parents repeat trial and error in attempts to understand their children (Yamamoto & Asano, 2018), which as a results, leads to better mutual understanding in the family.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Theoretical perspective

This study relies on the circular interaction described by Gregory Bateson, who emphasized the idea of perceiving matters in a circular manner, claiming that “an idea is a difference that arises within the interacting unit and is transmitted while undergoing successive transformations within a circuit” (Bateson, 1972) based on cybernetic epistemology. Bateson proposed an epistemological concept that self, the mind, and illness do not exist within individuals, but within relationships between individuals (Bateson, 1972). In other words, he explains self, the mind, and illness not as an individual unit, but as a two-person unit. Based on this epistemological concept, Bateson explained schizophrenia from the concept of relationship (ecology of family) as a “double bind” hypothesis (Bateson, 1972; Nomura, 2008).

This study also hinges on the social constructionism that “reality is socially created through a person to person relationship” (Hoffman, 1992) and the narrative in understanding talking and stories from the social constructivist standpoint. Story-like reality is created by dialog, which is “the effort to seek and understand the meaning” (Anderson, Goolishian, & Nomura, 2013). In a dialog, the words being exchanged are not critical. What is important, rather, is the belief by the dialog participants that there is potential in creating new meaning through the interaction, be it non-verbal or sharing the atmosphere, and being in a position of trying to understand the other person.

### 2.2 | Study design

This article covers a portion of my research that aims to understand the child through narratives of the child who suffers communication difficulties and the family, and to investigate the significance of the dialog that embraces a variety of meanings. In this study, I, the author, departed from the existing understanding of ASD and refer to the “outsider witness” approach in order to understand the child through the narrative told by the child and family. This is a method of narrative therapy which “gives value again to the matters the children value, such as things that are important to children or matters they have found

value in, by having someone who knows well about being the audience of the child’s narrative.” (White & Morgan, 2007). I had dialogs with the children, as well as with a family member chosen by the child. Here, I report the dialogs between the children and myself.

### 2.3 | Data collection method

Voluntary groups consisting of a child with developmental challenges and family were recruited as study participants. To depart from the framework of ASD, the term “ASD” was not used in the study when explaining the research to the children. Each child was informed that the study goal was to understand children who cannot express themselves fully in conversation with others or feel uncomfortable talking with others. Data were collected through two sessions of dialog between the child and myself. Two sessions were conducted because children with ASD feel nervous when they talk to strangers, and their talk is often too confusing for the listener to fully understand during the first meeting. I deepened my understanding of the discussion by asking the child’s mother or family member about the episodes, or studying them by myself during the interval between the first and second sessions. During the dialog, I kept in mind to hold a “position of not knowing (Not-Knowing)” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) where I listened to the child’s experience with interest. I focused on a collaborative relationship where the child and I would proceed together in understanding “self” perceived by the child. The dialog between the child and me took place at the child’s house or public facilities such as a community center where privacy could be ensured. The mother was present during the dialog in some cases, depending on the child’s request. The dialog primarily consisted of a free exchange focusing on what the children wanted to talk about with topics such as events that made an impression upon them, fun events, what they are troubled with, and things they cherish. As children with ASD often create their own words that are not understandable to others, I joined in their favorite plays or in discussing their favorite topics in order to understand their unique words. When the children talked about an event, I asked how they felt at that time. At the end of the two sets of dialogs, I asked what they thought about the dialog with me. During the dialog, illustrations of facial expressions of emotions were used to facilitate children communicating their feelings. Furthermore, to better understand the content of the child’s narrative, a tablet was used to look at photos and watch videos together, or research matters that the child had interests in (advertisements on trains, anime, etc.). The dialogs were recorded on an IC recorder with the

child's permission and subsequently transcribed. The situation, the atmosphere, the child's actions and expression, and my impressions during the dialog were noted immediately after the dialog, and field notes were promptly created. Field notes were created by taking notes on the impressions after participant observation, distinguishing the description of observation and the researcher's interpretation, reflecting on the ongoing study process and recording it, and describing the problems and challenges in fieldwork (Flick, 2009).

## 2.4 | Data analysis method

Data were analyzed through a qualitative inductive approach. In a process of analysis, the verbatim dialogs, recordings and field notes were used repeatedly.

The perspectives of narrative analysis are "how the story was told, how the dialog was generated, and why the story was told that way" (Riessman, 2008). According to this, the data collected for this research were analyzed from the perspective of how the child spoke about himself, how the dialog in which the child talked about himself was created, and why his story was told that way. Each dialog was analyzed independently so that each child's preference for conversation topics could be understood. Some of the children participating in this research used words in a way different from their normal usage. Their dialogs had to be interpreted in an unusual context unique to their individual situation. How each child perceived himself and why he perceived himself that way were also understood through their narratives. When I could not fully understand the unique words of each child in his narrative, I talked with his mother and other family members who had been mentioned by the child. In order to better understand the child's narratives, the child's narratives were analyzed in parallel with interviews of family members who had been mentioned by the child. Every child participating in this research showed his preference for a certain emotional distance between the author and himself, and tried to keep it during his dialogs. After each child's narratives were summarized, all the children's narratives were collectively analyzed. The perceived self of the children participating in this research was continuously compared with other participants' narratives in terms of similarities and differences. Through this process, groups were created, not through similarities in events or phenomena, but rather through similarities in the essence expressed by the child. After examining the relationships between the groups, the framework of understanding how each child perceived himself was categorized. Categories were expressed in all-inclusive sentences of the child's narrative.

In some cases, the children's messages needed a unique interpretation that was irrespective of whether the messages are verbal or non-verbal. In communication, there are two kinds of messages: one is a message that spoken words convey, and the other is a meta-message, the speaker's true feelings or intentions that are not expressed in his words (Bateson, 1972). For example, with the social context of intentional winking being a sign of scheming, winking becomes a glance with significance. The message conveying how to read the action of winking is the meta-message. How the dialogs were created was classified based on how to interpret the speaker's messages and meta-messages, whether the meta-messages were shared through playing together or exchanging words.

To ensure the rigor of the analysis, the topics of each child's narrative were checked for accuracy by that child after the second dialog. The self-perception categories were checked by three participants. The categories were presented and explained in writing. The children really shared the same impression as the author about what was described in each category. The accuracy of the research was confirmed by the other researcher with experience using a qualitative inductive approach. Theoretical saturation is the point at which no new data can be found for a category of properties (Flick, 2009). In the present study, theoretical saturation describes the point at which no new categories were created.

## 2.5 | Ethical considerations

The explanation and participation requests for the study were given verbally using a written document stating the study objectives, methods, free will to participate, protection of privacy, advantages and disadvantages of participation, and method of presenting the results. Those who gave consent to participate in the study were included as study participants.

First, I explained the study to a representative of the voluntary group and obtained consent for study cooperation. Subsequently, the study was explained to the mothers, and consent for participation and explanation of the study to their children was obtained. The study was then explained to the children and consent for study participation was obtained. Based on the children's characteristics that they have difficulties acclimating to a new environment or someone they just met for the first time, I held the dialogs with the children at places that were familiar to them such that there was no burden on the child. This study was approved by the research ethics committee at the author's institution (approval number 101). All names in this article are pseudonyms.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Summary of study participants

First, seven boys agreed to participate in this research. Their dialogs about themselves were divided into two groups based on how to interpret the speaker's meta-messages; three children's meta-messages were interpreted through playing together, and four children's meta-messages were interpreted through exchanging words. In order to collect more data, I added one more child to each group. The participants were nine boys (age 8–18 years), including two sets of brothers (Table 1), who were diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorders, autism, Asperger's syndrome, or other conditions collectively termed ASD. Participants also included children who were not diagnosed but displayed communication difficulties according to their parent. One boy knew his own diagnosis. The verbal communications of the nine children had their own characteristics (Table 1). All of the children had favorite leisure activities; for example, watching anime or power rangers on TV, watching moving images of trains, playing internet games, playing trading card games, drawing characters of anime, looking at maps and timetables, and so forth. Occasionally, the children and their mothers met the author at voluntary groups consisting of a child with developmental challenges and family. The analysis of the nine children no longer created new categories. Therefore, it was judged that the data necessary for the analysis could be collected.

### 3.2 | How children understand themselves in terms of relationships with others

There were eight categories of how the children perceive themselves (Table 2). The conversations within quotation marks are excerpts from the dialog between the children and me. Remarks within parentheses are my own words to clarify the meaning of the dialog or the child's or my actions.

The following describes the children's interaction with others. Three children, Ranpo, Doppo, and Junichiro, interacted with friends. Of them, Ranpo and Doppo had some friends at school. In contrast, Junichiro had continued interacting with friends he knew since he was little, but said, "I can't make even a single friend at high school." Four children, Osamu, Ryunosuke, Atsushi, and Chuya, almost never interacted with friends. Osamu said, "I have not said a single word to my classmates in my three years at high school." Kenji and Seishi interacted with other children, but often ran into

problems. Seishi changed elementary schools once because of problems with friends. The following describes the children's social leisure activities. Three children, Ranpo, Doppo, and Junichiro, did activities with friends. Two, Kenji and Osamu, did activities with their brothers. Two others, Ryunosuke and Chuya, only did leisure activities with their parents. Atsushi and Seishi did not do leisure activities with anyone.

#### 3.2.1 | There is sadness in not being able to share happiness with the other person

The children wished to communicate to others events that occurred and their feelings, and to share joy and emotions. However, the children did not know the tricks in communicating their experiences or feelings, and were frustrated or felt sad that they could not empathize with the other person.

During various occasions within my dialog, Chuya (age 10) asked me, "isn't that amazing?" "was that good?" many times, asking for my empathy. Chuya showed me photographs of drawings on the platform of a train station one by one, telling me "two deer" or "a tiger reading a book." Many animals were drawn on this platform, and I knew about these drawings since I had looked at them ahead of time. We talked about the photographs of the drawings on the platform for a while. Chuya showed me a picture of a chicken drawn on the platform and said "it's a chicken." I then replied "you're right. There's a chicken." Chuya then asked me "isn't it amazing?" This was the first time in this dialog that Chuya asked me, "isn't it amazing?" I realized that he had collected all the pictures of the animal drawings on the platform and replied "it's amazing!" Chuya then asked "was that good?" to which I replied "it was great!" The dialog between Chuya and me did not make sense from a verbal interaction perspective. However, Chuya and I shared a sense of achievement through this exchange. The children had matters that they wanted to tell others, and they wanted to share their thoughts.

However, the children could not smoothly communicate their feelings to the other person without generating misunderstandings and felt dejected about it. After the dialog with me, Osamu said "It was the first time for me to talk to like this. I haven't talked so much since junior high school. I'm glad I could talk about what I thought was difficult to say." He told me that he had never talked to his classmates in high school. He said "I can't speak. I don't know why. I can't think about anything." "I don't know why. Maybe, I am nervous or I am embarrassed."

In a dialog with me, Kenji (age 12) repeatedly said "never mind, I don't want to talk about it because you



TABLE 1 Introduction of participants

Name <sup>a</sup> , age, gender	Conversation time, date	Whether the child's mother attended the conversations	Friendship at school	Level of verbal communication	Groups of how to interpret speaker's meta-messages. Playing together/ exchanging words	Affiliation
Kenji, 12 years, M	1st 41 min. Aug. 2014 2nd 49 min. Oct. 2014	Always	He did not talk much with his classmates.	He fast talked short sentences.	Playing together	School for special needs education.
Osamu, 16 years, M	1st 78 min. Aug. 2014 2nd 60 min. Oct. 2014	No attendance	He never talked to his classmates at high school.	He spoke with a unique intonation.	Exchanging words	Employment
Ryunosuke, 8 years, M	1st 76 min. Aug. 2014 2nd 92 min. Sept. 2014	Sometimes	He did not talk much with his classmates.	He spoke in short sentences. Sometimes verbs were used differently.	Playing together	Elementary school
Astushi, 16 years, M	1st 54 min. Aug. 2014 2nd 73 min. Sept. 2014	No attendance	He often spent time alone at high school.	He whispered. Sometimes the word order was different.	Exchanging words	High school
Seishi, 8 years, M	1st 40 min. Sept. 2014 2nd 58 min. Nov. 2014	Sometimes	He had a lot of trouble with the children around him.	He speaks well. His words had a unique meaning.	Playing together	Special needs Classes in elementary school
Ranpo, 12 years, M	1st 28 min. Aug. 2014 2nd 81 min. Nov. 2014	No attendance	He talks to his friends.	He speaks well.	Exchanging words	Elementary school
Doppo, 10 years, M	1st 20 min. Aug. 2014 2nd 44 min. Nov. 2014	No attendance	He talks to his classmates.	He speaks well.	Exchanging words	Elementary school
Junichiro, 18 years, M	1st 103 min. Apr. 2017 2nd 99 min. Apr. 2017	No attendance	He was spending time alone in high school.	He speaks well.	Exchanging words	High school
Chuya, 10 years, M	1st 41 min. Jan. 2018 2nd 46 min. Jan. 2018	Always	He did not talk to the children around him at school.	He uses words. Sometimes there were words that were out of context.	Playing together	Special needs classes in elementary school

<sup>a</sup>All names are pseudonyms. Kenji and Osamu are brothers. Ranpo and Doppo are brothers.

TABLE 2 Categories and narrators

Categories	Narrators
1) There is sadness in not being able to share happiness with the other person	Kenji (12 years) Osamu (16 years) Ryunosuke (8 years) Junichiro (18 years) Chuya (10 years)
2) Talk with friends who share their communication arrangements	Kenji (12 years) Ryunosuke (8 years) Junichiro (18 years) Chuya (10 years)
3) There is a belief to form profound friendships	Seishi (8 years) Junichiro (18 years)
4) Becoming aware of one's own strength and way of thinking through exchanges with others	Astushi (16 years) Ranpo (12 years) Doppo (10 years) Junichiro (18 years)
5) Explore positions to be a member of a community	Osamu (16 years) Astushi (16 years) Seishi (8 years) Doppo (10 years) Junichiro (18 years)
6) Understanding the growing interest through encountering matters of interest and the eventual ending of such interest	Osamu (16y) Ryunosuke (8 years) Ranpo (12 years) Junichiro (18 years)
7) "Personality" and "problematic matters" are two sides of the same coin	Ryunosuke (8 years) Astushi (16 years) Seishi (8 years)
8) Acquired skills to get past troublesome matters	Kenji (12 years) Osamu (16 years) Astushi (16 years) Doppo (10 years) Junichiro (18 years)

don't know about it." When I asked why, he looked frustrated and painfully said "well, I can, but I can't say that! Umm... no, I can't say it!" When his mother who was nearby asked Kenji, "Do you feel like you might want to talk about it if it's with someone who knows (about an event they want to talk about) because you can then have a conversation?" he replied, "yes."

### 3.2.2 | Talk with friends who share their communication arrangements

The children had their own communication arrangements and conversed with friends who could share these arrangements. The communication arrangements were the promise for the same understanding of the meaning of the child's words used in the dialog. The arrangements could only be shared by many dialogs with the child.

Junichiro (age 17) described his conversations with his online gaming friend. "We mainly talk, like we talk and also play games." Whether he sees his friend, or whether it is through gaming, was not an issue, but "basically, it has to do with the person." He said "(that person) understands any topic, so it's comforting to talk to (that person)." In online gaming, certain movements of avatars could only mean a certain thing, and only his friends understood this. In the dialog of online gaming, compassion among friends could be sensed through cooperatively proceeding in the game, and there were also arrangements in their dialogs that only friends could smoothly understand. Ryunosuke and I shared an understanding of the meaning when we talked about maps and railways and could convey what happened there or how we felt about it. We could share Ryunosuke's memories that were scattered throughout the map, and we could play together by seeking various discoveries on the map (Yamamoto, 2019).

### 3.2.3 | There is a belief to form profound friendships

The children held a belief in their own way to cherish the friendship with people they have met and to extend their friendships.

Seishi (age 8) told me at the first dialog that he could not forgive a girl who was destroying the biotope pond and bullying living beings. Later, his mother talked to the girl and found a way to reconcile them, and Seishi was therefore able to reconcile with the girl. At the second dialog, Seishi happily told me, "I became friends with that girl!" When I asked, "can you tell me how you became friends with her?" Seishi said "I put Ultraman's heart in her!" using the worldview of Ultraman. He explained to me that Ultraman's heart means protecting natural environment and living creatures. Seishi talked, using his own words, that he became friends with the girl by maintaining the same view of taking good care of the biotope pond.

### 3.2.4 | Becoming aware of one's own strength and way of thinking through exchanges with others

The children gained confidence through acceptance by others and found their own way of thinking by talking to others about themselves.

Junichiro said he "enjoys" talking to others. When I asked, "what part of it do you enjoy?" Junichiro said, "Like becoming aware of things I don't know by talking

to someone else. (omitted) I talk about whatever I want to, and the other person sees it in a different way, and I realize, oh, I guess you can see it that way too,” talking about how his own way of thinking is established by conversing with others.

### 3.2.5 | Explore positions to be a member of a community

The children, in order to participate in a community of peers of the same generation, carefully observed the flow of dialog and interpersonal relations, thereby exploring their own position.

Junichiro said “I wondered why I couldn’t talk to my classmates. So I listened to what they were talking about. They were talking about something that was only shared within their group. For example about some group events that nobody outside their group knows about. So! So I couldn’t join their conversation. I realized it.” Then he said “I feel like everyone except me is connected.”

Atsushi (age 16) talked about the conversation among his club mates in high school. “If I join the conversation, it’s like I’m ruining the atmosphere because I’m not good at talking.” “I watch the flow. Should I say something? Then I think, maybe I need to read between the lines? It seems like there’s a lot of excitement now, or there’s some interesting story. I was thinking maybe it’s better to just listen (in that situation) to that story.” Atsushi was sensitively aware of the changes in the atmosphere of the dialog that arises when he speaks. He emphasized the continuation of conversation without strangeness, and thought about his own positioning in how to participate in the conversation.

### 3.2.6 | Understanding the growing interest through encountering matters of interest and the eventual ending of such interest

The children found an interest they can immerse themselves in through encountering and being stimulated by an event or object that draws out curiosity. The children also knew that the interest they can immerse themselves into does not continue forever but ends at some point in the future.

Ranpo (age 12) repeatedly played card games by himself. Ranpo said that this card game ends in 1 month and that the purpose of the game is to have the same winning rates for each deck (the card set) by repeating the game. The second session of our dialog was exactly the last day of this tournament. When I asked Ranpo the results of

the tournament, he replied with a fresh expression, “This deck won. Yes. Victory to them.” Thus, this tournament ended in 1 month, just as Ranpo predicted. Osamu replied, when I asked about the anime he was previously interested in, “that (interest) is not a fad I’m researching right now. That fad has passed.” Osamu then said, when he encounters matters he is interested in, such as a newly released game, “a fad starts, like I’m on fire.” He replied that he knows when there is a fad starting, and that he knows that the fad will eventually end.

### 3.2.7 | “Personality” and “problematic matters” are two sides of the same coin

The children’s personalities and their problematic matters are associated inseparably with each other. The children sometimes suffer from interpersonal difficulties caused by their unique ways of expressing themselves, which they consider an integral part of their personality.

Atsushi (age 16) spoke in almost a whisper in the dialog with me. I then asked him why he spoke in a whisper. “I think it suits me better.” replied Atsushi, “It’s easier to talk that way.” However, speaking in a whisper caused him problems. I also asked what trouble he had at school. He simply said “everything”. His “everything” meant every situation in which he had to speak as clearly as other typical students. For example, he had to shout when dancing in class as other students did, which he could not. He also said “I don’t like it. Where ever I have to use my voice.” “I am not good.” at using a loud voice. He was comfortable in a whisper, which he thought was his personality. However, what he wanted to cherish as his personality was not favorably accepted by others, which made him very uncomfortable. Nobody knew that he was thinking that whispering suits him.

### 3.2.8 | Acquired skills to get past troublesome matters

The children made an effort to acquire skills to get through events that do not unfold as expected or troublesome matters in interpersonal relationships. The skills acquired by the children included, for example, devotion to listening, avoiding places where everyone is present, enduring patiently, talking to self to calm down, and reflecting on self by talking to others.

Doppo (age 10) said that being scolded by his mother was a stress source and pointed at an illustration of an angry face to describe his emotion at that time. When I asked, “how do you feel when you are like this (pointing at an illustration of an angry face)?” Doppo responded, “I



want to feel relieved. I want to be by myself.” He then said he started playing tennis to avoid becoming too stressed. Doppo explained by pointing at facial illustrations in order to show how his feelings change and calm down by playing tennis. Doppo made an effort to reset his mood and was aware of the changes in his own emotions. Kenji liked playing on the swings at school. However, he often ran into problems with the other children because he could not wait his turn. To avoid these problems, he decided to stop using the swings on weekdays and instead go to school on the weekends when no one was there to use the swings. Only his mother knew that the real reason he would use the swings on weekends was not that he disliked the swings, but that he was avoiding problems with others.

The relations between the categories are shown below. The children were able to anticipate that their repetitive behavior or interest in one thing would end someday (e.g., Ranpo, Osamu). The children hoped to share their feelings (e.g., Chuya, Osamu, Kenji), and they could talk with friends who were sharing their communication arrangements (e.g., Junichiro, Ryunosuke). On the other hand, the children experienced sadness in being unable to share their feelings with others (e.g., Osamu, Kenji), and the solitude that they could not be connected with anyone (e.g., Junichiro, Osamu). The children knew, through interaction, that they were different from others; they made efforts to behave correctly as a member of society (e.g., Atsushi). The children have acquired skills to get past troublesome matters (e.g., Atsushi, Doppo, Kenji). They were also sometimes silent listeners in conversations with people (e.g., Atsushi), and they avoided going to places where everyone was present (e.g., Kenji) etc. However, people around them did not know the real reason why they behaved that way (e.g., Kenji). The children had difficulty making themselves understood by people around them; their own personality, including what they thought was their strength, sometimes caused them interpersonal difficulties (e.g., Atsushi).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

### 4.1 | The child's “self” understood in terms of relationships

Previous studies reported that children with ASD have difficulty with self-understanding in relationships with people around them (Sato & Sakurai, 2010; Takiyoshi & Tanaka, 2011b). In a study based on the autobiography of a woman with ASD, the ambiguity of self-sense was considered a coping behavior (Sato & Sakurai, 2010). Another study reported that adolescents with ASD use

various strategies to develop relationships with people around them (Murphy, Burns, & Kilbey, 2017). In another study, children with ASD answered that the thing they enjoyed most was social interaction (Clark & Adams, 2020). Some studies are exploring the experiences of children with ASD in relationships with people around them. The children who participated in this research wished to share feelings with others, sensitively read between the lines, and talked about their belief in cherishing their friends. The children made an effort to meet expectation of others in a community, and through interactions with others they found their own way of thinking. They also made an effort to deal with problematic matters in social life. These aspects mentioned above were not fully understood when we tried to understand children with ASD in the sole context of ASD. Understanding children with ASD in terms of their relationships with others is different from understanding characteristics of ASD, such as social communication disability, repetitive behavior, and so forth. Focusing on the relationship between the child and others, this article closely looks at what is going on in the mind of each child with ASD when they try to understand themselves and this new approach was an achievement in this field. Conventional studies have always focused on ASD as a medical model of disability; however, the language used to discuss ASD should also be considered (Jimenez & DeThorne, 2018). By departing from the context of ASD, we can understand and accept children with ASD just as they are, based on their efforts and beliefs. Such understanding and acceptance will help the children develop positive self-image.

Previous studies reported that children with ASD had lower self-esteem than youths without ASD (Cooper, Smith, & Russell, 2017; Crujisen & Boyer, 2020; McCauley et al., 2019; Williamson, Craig, & Slinger, 2008), and they received less peer approval (Williamson et al., 2008). It was suggested also that the child's self-esteem and sociality were correlated (McChesney & Toseeb, 2018). When there is trust between an child with ASD and others, the child can have a positive self-image (Yamashita, Watanabe, & Ideno, 2017); however, in most cases, children with ASD have some interpersonal problems caused by their poor communication skills (Bellini, 2004; Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012). The most important challenge is the difficulty in sharing the same understanding of the words used in their conversation. Previous studies reported that limitation of social interaction contributed to emotional issues of children with ASD, such as social anxiety, depression, loneliness (Attwood, 1998; Gillott, Furniss, & Walter, 2001), and social isolation (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2004). Positive self-images of children with ASD were promoted

by relationships of trust with others (Buhrmester, 1990; Yamasaki, 2010; Yamashita et al., 2017), interaction with same-generation peers (Bauminger et al., 2004; Cook, Ogden, & Winstone, 2016; Kuwaki & Karita, 2017; Murphy et al., 2017), and experiences understood by people around them (Hirano, 2018; Yamashita et al., 2017). Responsive conversations can help reverse negative self-images (Hirano, 2018). When the children and the people around them can share the same understanding of the words used in their conversations, children with ASD can develop a true positive self-image.

Here, I would like to emphasize that when considering how to develop mutually beneficial relationships between children with ASD and people around them, their conversation topics, for example the worldview of Ultraman, action of game's avatars, and personal memories associated with specific points on a map, gave us some keys to their unique conversation rules that they have unintentionally set and follow. We could not understand these unique rules when we did not know the child's interests well. Without sharing the same conversation rules people who are talking with a child with ASD are at a loss how they should respond to the child, what stance they should take during the conversation and what the child's message really is. On the other hand, the child with ASD feels emotional distance which he/she wants to shorten but does not know how. For both parties, the essential challenge is difficulty in sharing the same understanding of the words they use in their conversation and because of this, they cannot communicate to each other what relationship they want. And this challenge is not in the individual of "the child," but in the interaction unit of "the child and others."

## 4.2 | Relationship of "increasing alienation"

A lot of children with ASD understand the quality of friendship (Bauminger et al., 2008). They also understand they are different from their friends without ASD (Williams, Gleeson, & Jones, 2019). They feel uneasy (Bellini, 2004) because of their loneliness (Chang, Chen, Huang, & Lin, 2018), the social rejection (Cappadocia et al., 2012) and the social barriers (Danker, Strnadova, & Cumming, 2019) they experience. Children with ASD who participated in this research also talked about the difficulty in interacting with others. This article studies difficulties of children with ASD in the context of the relationship between that child and others, based on the circular interaction proposed by Gregory Bateson. According to Bateson, disease is not each patient problem but a relationship problem between the patient and

people around him/her. He mentions that mental characteristics are inherent or immanent in the ensemble as a whole (Bateson, 1972). In this section, the difficulties of children with ASD are discussed from the perspective of relationships between the child and people around him.

This article proposes to understand the experience of "increasing alienation" in children with ASD. Many of the children who participated in this study were isolated in the class and had little interaction with their classmates. The children with ASD were experiencing increasing alienation with others. When children with ASD talk with those without ASD, some misunderstanding arises because they do not share the same understanding of their words exchanged in conversation. Since children with ASD use words in unique ways, their words are not always understood with the meaning they intend. When children with ASD are talking with others, hoping to make friends with them, their words may give an impression that they do not want to interact with them. Lack of common understanding of words spoken during the conversation makes them aware of a significant difference between them. In friendships between school-age children or adolescents, being the same is important; they are less likely to build friendships with people who they think are different from them. Communication skills determine positions in the school castes (Moriguchi, 2007); the lower the positions, the lower the sense of adaptation to school life (Mizuno & Ota, 2017). Targets of bullying at school are determined by negative characteristics (Hara & Yamauchi, 2013; Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016); if a child misreads the intention of his peers, he then might be bullied by them (Taniguchi, 2013). If a child is constantly bullied, he comes to consider being bullied as part of his school life (Nakai, 2016). Children with ASD are more likely to be misunderstood by their peers than those without ASD. Actually, previous researches indicated that children with ASD were more often on the periphery of their social networks (Frankel, Gorospe, Chang, & Sugar, 2011; Kasari, Locke, Gulseus, & Fullwe, 2010), reported poorer quality friendships (Kasari et al., 2010), and had fewer reciprocal friendships (Locke, Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, Kretzmann, & Jacobs, 2013), and children with ASD were more likely to be bullied than children without ASD (Maïano, Normand, Salvas, Moullec, & Aimé, 2016; McLeod, Meanwell, & Hawbaker, 2019; Zablotsky, Bradshaw, Anderson, & Law, 2014). Their poor communication skills, in combination with developmental characteristics of school-age children and adolescents, widen the distance between them, increasing alienation. Such changes of relationships between the child with ASD and people around him can be understood as difficulties the child with ASD experience.

### 4.3 | Possibilities of a dialog that communicates the relationship

The numerous types of support that have been proposed up to now were for children with ASD to conform to the communication rules of many other people. On the other hand, there has not been a proposal of a type of support in which people surrounding the children conform to the communication arrangements of children with ASD. “Why do I always have to adjust to them? (Yamamoto, 2016)” is a question that reflects the feelings of many children with ASD.

As a type of support to understand the child, this article proposes a dialog that creates common language, specifically a dialog that focuses on forming a profound relationship of being able to share and communicate with each other, rather than how natural the verbal interaction is. Support of self-understanding for children with ASD tends to focus on the characteristics of the disability (Hirano, 2018). It is important that professionals who provide care for children with ASD make the effort to learn the topics of interest to the child. In addition, experts should have an attitude to learn how to enjoy themselves from the child. For children, a dialog was an experience to share feelings with others and to become a member of a team or community. By continuing a dialog that communicates the relationship to each other, the “increasing alienation” that arises to the unit of that child and others is thought to resolve. Children have the ability to talk about themselves. In a dialog with a child, it is most important for us, who face these children, to emphasize communicating the relationship to each other and to uphold a position to elicit communication arrangements with the child. In so doing, the dialog becomes an opportunity for the child to think about “self”, free from any standpoint.

### 4.4 | Limitations and future directions

The children who participated in this study talked about themselves in their own unique ways of speaking. It is necessary to further investigate how children with ASD perceive themselves based on the children’s communication types and their age. This research could not propose the process of children’s experiences, such as grounded theory, because of the children’s characteristic difficulties talking about events and experiences. This will be possible in the future by listening to experiences from more children. Moreover, regarding the “increasing alienation” proposed in this article, it is necessary to examine it also from the perspective of people surrounding the children with ASD and to further expand on its understanding.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was, through a dialog between the child and the author, to clarify how children with ASD, either diagnosed or suspected, perceive themselves. Eight categories were obtained from this narrative research. The children with ASD wished to share feelings with others, sensitively read between the lines, and talked about the belief to cherish their friends. They were able to anticipate that repetitive behavior or interest in one thing would end someday. And they then made an effort to deal with problematic matters in social life. The child’s beliefs, efforts, and the child’s “self” in interaction were clarified by departing from the view of ASD and standing in the perspective of the unit “the child and others.”

The communication difficulties for the child suggested the relationship of “increasing alienation.” As a type of support to understand the child, this article proposed a dialog that elicits communication arrangements, specifically a dialog that focuses on forming a profound relationship of being able to share and communicate with each other.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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