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CULTURE-RELATED CRITERIA OF INTELLIGENCE AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN BURUNDI. SURVEY REPORT

ZRELATYWIZOWANE KULTUROWO KRYTERIA
INTELIGENCJI A SYTUACJA SPOŁECZNO-
-EDUKACYJNA DZIECI Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIAMI
W BURUNDI. KOMUNIKAT Z BADAŃ

Keywords:
children with dis-
abilities, education,
intelligence

Summary: The article presents the social and educational situation of Burundian children with psychological and physical disabilities. The aim of the presented research is to answer the question of what features dominate in the perception of intelligent people by Burundian children and to look at how the social and educational status of children with disabilities is positioned in this context. The results of the research carried out among Burundian youth from the Integrated Primary School in Bujumbura and among social activists working in the environment of children with disabilities and at risk of social exclusion were subject to qualitative analysis. The analysis of the research showed that there are four main characteristics that the pupils describe as intelligent: serious, hard-working, brave and polite.

Słowa kluczowe:
dzieci z niepełno-
sprawnościami,
edukacja, inteligencja

Streszczenie: Artykuł prezentuje sytuację społeczno-edukacyjną burundyjskich dzieci dotkniętych niepełnosprawnościami, zarówno natury psychicznej, jak i fizycznej. Przedstawione badania odpowiadają na pytanie, jakie cechy dominują w postrzeganiu przez burundyjskie dzieci osób inteligentnych i jak w tym kontekście pozycjonuje się status społeczny i edukacyjny dzieci z niepełnosprawnościami. Analizie jakościowej poddane zostały wyniki badań przeprowadzonych wśród burundyjskiej młodzieży z Integracyjnej Szkoły Podstawowej w Bużumburze oraz społecznych aktywistów działających na rzecz środowiska dzieci niepełnosprawnych i zagrożonych wykluczeniem społecznym. Analiza badań wykazała istnienie czterech głównych cech, którymi uczniowie opisują osobę inteligentną: poważna, pracowita, dzielna i grzeczna.

Introduction

Burundi is a small country in East Africa with an area of 27,834 square kilometers (Institut de Statistiques et d'Etudes Economiques du Burundi, 2018) – for the sake of comparison, the Lublin Voivodship currently covers 25,122 square kilometers (Statistical Office in Lublin, 2018). The country is inhabited by over 10 million people, and it is worth noting that the population census of 1990 estimated slightly over 5 million inhabitants (Institut de Statistiques et d'Etudes Economiques du Burundi, 2018). According to the UNDP report, it is the fifth poorest country in the world. It is ranked 185th out of 189 countries in the report in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI).¹ Demographically, it is a very young society with an average age of only 17.6 years. The 2018 data presented below (UNDP, 2018a) show the extremely difficult socio-economic situation in which Burundians live:

- life expectancy: 57.9 years;
- illiteracy rate (adults and young people over 15): 61.6%;

¹ The Human Development Index (HDI) focuses on three main dimensions:
– the ability to lead a long and healthy life – measured by life expectancy at birth;
– the ability to acquire knowledge – measured in terms of average years of schooling;
– the ability to achieve a decent standard of living – measured by the value of gross national income per capita.

- average period of schooling: 2.7 years (women) and 3.7 years (men);
- mortality rate of children under 5 years of age (per 1000 live births): 71.7%.

Given the level of poverty, the political situation and health problems of the Burundian population, it can be concluded that the majority of minors living in Burundi are at risk of social exclusion. Children with disabilities are in a particularly difficult situation, as they are often socially rejected and neglected because of their condition. According to a report by the Minister of Education, only 9,676 (Institut de Statistiques et d'Etudes Economiques du Burundi, 2018) disabled students attend schools.² In the countryside, where traditions related to folk beliefs and religious practices are very strong, disability is sometimes seen as a sign of a curse, which often determines the rejection and stigmatization of a disabled person (Janus, 2013).

It is precisely to this social group that I have dedicated my volunteering and research activities. The research presented in the present article was carried out at the Integrated Primary School in Bujumbura (Kamenge district) and was supplemented by interviews with three Burundian social activists: a female teacher in an integrated school; a pastor, the president of the Network of Centers for Persons with Disabilities (RCPHB) and vice-president of the Association of Mothers of Disabled Children AMEH Indemesho (Fr. Association des Mères ayant des Enfants Handicapés – A.M.E.H. – INDEMESHU); and a male teacher, the president of the AJGA Teachers' Association (Association des Jeunes de Gakungwe – AJGA).

The sociopolitical background

Burundi has three ethnic groups: Hutu (85%), Tutsi (14%) and Twa Pygmies (1%). Similarly, to the Rwandans, the Burundians have been struggling with bloody ethnic battles between the Hutu and Tutsi for several years, starting in 1993. Recent years have brought new socio-political perturbations. A political crisis related to the violation of human rights, which began in Burundi in April 2015, caused chaos in the country (HRW, 2018). Its source was that

² In Burundi, there are no statistical data confirming the exact number of children with disabilities. Taking into account the statistics proposed by WHO – the number of all disabled people oscillates around 15 per 1000 people, which, with the total number of inhabitants, means about 150 thousand people with disabilities (without division into children and adults).

President Pierre Nkurunziza had again taken power by force and that, in breach of the constitution, he had not left office at the end of his second term (Czarnecki, 2015). Street protests led to bloody fights, and hundreds of thousands of Burundians fled to neighboring countries in search of security. Over 394,000 people left the country due to repression and a series of anti-government protests (UNHCR, 2018).

As a result of the crisis that swept through Burundi, hundreds of people died or were injured in street fighting, and the country fell into even greater poverty, worsening the economic situation of its people. Almost all non-governmental organizations and UN institutions have ended their humanitarian and development-oriented projects. Due to the undemocratic and anti-constitutional behavior of the ruling party, most of the countries supporting projects implemented in Burundi withdrew their subsidies. Such a decision was also made in 2015 by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. How dangerous this region of Africa has become is also evidenced by warning announcements issued by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the last one dated August 16, 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).³

Social and educational situation of children with disabilities in Burundi

It is clear that education plays a key role in the social and intellectual development of the young generation. Unfortunately, the majority of disabled children in Burundi, especially those with mental disabilities, are excluded from the education system. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory." In Burundi, this postulate is not implemented. A child cannot

³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs advises against all travel to: Cibitoke and Bubanza provinces, in particular along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda; the northern part of Kayanza province; the north-eastern part of Bujumbura Rural province, along the border with the DRC; Kibira National Park. We recommend that travelers should not make any unnecessary journeys to the other parts of Burundi, either, including the capital, Bujumbura. The political situation in Burundi remains tense and a sudden escalation cannot be ruled out. In the recent past, there were bloody riots and violent confrontations with the armed forces in Burundi. In the border areas with the Democratic Republic of Congo and partly with Rwanda, there may be armed conflicts with rebels and smugglers. In the past, military operations took place in the national parks. Robbery can occur throughout the country.

go to school if the parents cannot afford a uniform, the cost of which is about 12–15 thousand Burundian francs (BIF) or about 7–9 dollars (USD). Given the widespread tendency to have many children and the fact that 89.5% of the working population in Burundi live on less than USD 3.1 a day (according to purchasing power parity)⁴ and 71.7% in extreme poverty (less than USD 1.9 a day), a large number of parents cannot afford to send their child to school, and what is more, there is no legal regulation in Burundian law that would oblige them to do so. No one requires or verifies this.

One of the Millennium Goals proclaimed by the UN in 2000 is to: “achieve universal primary education by ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling” (Polish Aid, 2018). In Burundi – in the case of children with disabilities due to motor or intellectual dysfunctions – it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this goal. The reasons for this, apart from poverty, include the lack of infrastructure for children in wheelchairs and the lack of qualified personnel in schools and centers. As a result, people with disabilities who have been neglected and excluded from social life are passive and often fall into extreme poverty.

Many Burundians believe that disability is the result of a curse or of conflicts between people or between humans and invisible forces – that disability is rooted in jealousy and misunderstandings between members of a social group or in the anger of ancestors and spirits against the disabled person. It may be the result of his or her violation of a traditional ritual or rash involvement in the world of magic and mystical practices (Devlieger & Nieme, 2011; Janus, 2013). The belief that it is necessary to expel evil spirits from the disabled is still alive in society.

Burundians often keep people with disabilities at a great distance and fear them, believing that they are a harbinger of misfortune, “bad news” (Nieme, 2011, pp. 69–80) for a given community and its future fate. A pregnant woman who steals, can bring a curse upon herself and give birth to a disabled child; a person who causes problems to others can draw a curse and become involved in an accident, becoming disabled for life (Nieme, 2011; Janus, 2013) – such theories are not uncommon in this country. One Burundian teacher describes the situation of mentally disabled women in this way: “Most Burundians think that children with disabilities are stupid. For example, for children with mental health problems, who sometimes do unwise things, there

⁴ Percentage of total number of employed persons aged 15 and over.

is no place in the local community, they just need a good beating as they have chosen their own disability themselves.”

Such thinking refers to the phenomenon of the so-called belief in a “just world,” described in social psychology, which consists in attributing merit or guilt to people experiencing unfortunate or happy situations in their lives (Aronson, 2009). We can treat this phenomenon as a cognitive error based on the belief that the world is a safe and just place, and so, if something happens to someone, it depends on the person him- or herself (Moskowitz, 2009). Believing in curses cast on people with disabilities can give the Burundian community a false sense of security, predictability and control. Therefore, disabled children and their closest relatives are considered to be the cause of their own misfortune – “they are guilty of their own destiny, so they should also manage on their own.”

Although Burundi has the Network of Centers for Persons with Disabilities (RCPHB)⁵ consisting of 14 facilities, the Burundian government provides them with only a very basic level of assistance in terms of health, rehabilitation and educational needs. An important role in the care of people with disabilities is played by the Catholic Church,⁶ which helps international organizations such as Handicap International.

Understanding of the term “intelligence” in the literature on the subject

The functioning of elementary and complex cognitive processes is the subject of much research in the field of cognitive psychology. However, there is still no consensus on a uniform and universally accepted definition of intelligence,

⁵ The network has been operating at the grassroots level for many years and was officially registered on 4 July 2007 by the Ministry of National Solidarity, Refugee Repatriation and Social Reintegration. The offered system provides space for information exchange and consultation in order to find solutions to problems common to all centers, improve the quality of services provided and promote them as beneficiaries of various types of assistance. As part of its project for the social rehabilitation of children in the suburbs of Bujumbura (“Réhabilitation à Base communautaire”, i.e., “Community-Based Rehabilitation”), the Emmanuel Church in Burundi, one of the members of the RCPHB, inspired the creation of the Association of Mothers of Disabled Children AMEH Indemesho, which at the moment brings together around 300 children with disabilities in three locations.

⁶ In 1965, for example, the first centre for children with disabilities in Burundi, the Saint Kizito Institute of Bujumbura, was established at the initiative of the Bishop of Bujumbura, Michel Ntuyahaga. Due to their disability, the children had not been admitted to school and were begging on the streets of the capital. The centre successfully operates to this day.

especially in the context of intercultural research: “Only a few concepts in psychology have been given equal attention and only a few have been able to resist explanation equally effectively” (Reber, 2000, pp. 272–273). Intelligence can be understood as:

- “the ability or group of abilities to think, learn, reason and solve problems” (Nęcka, 1994, pp. 13–16);
- a “theoretical construct which refers to the relatively constant intrinsic conditions of a human which are formed as a result of a unit-specific interaction between genotype and environment” (Strelau, 2002, pp. 62–89);
- “a particular instance of biological adaptation [...] its function is to structure the universe [...]” (Piaget, 1966, pp. 11–24);
- the “ability to adapt and function adequately in a particular social context” (Reber, 2000, pp. 272–273).

The last of the definitions seems to be the most accurate in light of the research presented in this text. Each culture celebrates and rewards a different repertoire of abilities (Anastasi, 1984, after: Szustrowa & Jaworowska, 1992; Janus, 2013). Consistent with Richard Nisbett (2009), who with his research undermines the thesis of the universal nature of human thinking, I make the assumption that “people use cognitive tools that seem to make sense – given the sense they make of the world” (Nisbett, 2009). The differences in perception and thinking between Europeans and Burundians should therefore be viewed from the perspective of cultural relativism. The way in which the former organizes the world will, to a large extent, differ from the way the latter perceive it, but this difference cannot be subject to evaluation.

The postulate of refraining from making judgements in terms of culture does not mean that the researcher should not compare cultures and organize them according to, e.g., complexity and wealth, type of recognized ethical and aesthetic values. It does not mean, moreover, that a social activist and practitioner should be neutral towards cultural phenomena and renounce their hierarchy and selection. (Kłoskowska, 1980, p. 41)

Numerous intercultural studies demonstrate the presence of intercultural differences in thinking, focus of attention and visual perception (Masuda, 2001; Chiu, 1972, after: Nisbett, 2009; Janus, 2013). For example, research has shown that children in North America tend to categorize objects and learn nouns more quickly, while their Chinese counterparts tend to connect objects

because of their relationships, for example, a cow and grass match because “cows eat grass” (Superson, 2017b). Research on the cognitive functioning of children in Burundi (Janus, 2013) also pointed to the difficulty of classifying objects – they order the world mainly by means of relationships, not by individual categories. Differences in thinking arise as a result of how individuals function in different ecological conditions which are shaped by different social practices. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner, 2002; Kopik, 2016) may also be helpful in explaining intercultural differences in cognitive functioning. According to the creator of this concept, every human being has a different biopsychological potential expressed in the existence of eight types of abilities. The dominant type of intelligence is determined by biological and cultural inclinations (Kopik, 2016).

The consequence here is a difference in the categorization of objects, various attributions, the perception of others and communication (Peng & Nisbett, 2000; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Nisbett, 2009; Kwiatkowska, 2014).

Methodological assumptions of own research

Fieldwork conducted in East Africa by a European researcher is very difficult because of the many constraints, ranging from geographical and economic ones (such as distance, travel and research costs) to cultural ones (different language, customs, traditions, beliefs and others). In the case of psychological research carried out in Burundi, one finds scarce information regarding social phenomena in the literature on the subject. In my research, I adopted cultural relativism as my approach and interpretative paradigm. The main direction of development and interpretation of the research results was determined by the methodology of the well-established theory and directives of cultural relativism. The initial preconceptualisation of research when analyzing the functioning of people with disabilities in Burundi carries a risk of cultural attribution error and of stereotyping and unconscious narrowing of observation. Specific “preconceptions” have a direct impact on the research activities undertaken, acting as certain cognitive schemes (Leung & van de Vijve, after: Kwiatkowska, 2000, p. 15).

According to the guidelines of grounded theory methodology, the study should begin with a thorough examination of data that may intuitively reveal a general hypothesis (Babbie, 2008), and this was also the purpose of the pilot studies presented in this article. Moreover, according to the assumptions of cultural relativism, “the reality of an object does not determine any specific

theoretical approach, but – on the contrary – in an attempt at cognitive understanding and mastering of this reality, everyone applies interpretative formulas which dominate in his or her environment and which he or she unconsciously (though sometimes also deliberately) internalized, assuming that they are the only, proper, true, etc.” (Majcherek, 1995, p. 17). The relativistic approach assumes that human behavior is culturally determined and can only be explained by referring to meanings shared by people belonging to the given culture (Kwiatkowska, 2014).

This article aims to present the features that dominate the perception of intelligent people by Burundian children as well as how the social and educational status of children with disabilities is shaped in this context. However, it is necessary to stipulate that an objective understanding of the Burundian reality by a European researcher is, in the understanding of cultural relativism, virtually impossible. Despite a tangible world of artifacts which asserts itself with its autonomous presence, a European’s perception will always be entangled in the subjectivism of linguistic and cultural ethnocentrism. Thus, the research objective may be – only and as much as – to understand the ways in which autochthons act and think, while at the same time discovering and respecting the symbols, values, meanings and specific rules inherent in this community.

This article analyses the statements of 65 students (including 20 boys and 45 girls) from grade 8eC at the ECOFO MIRANGO I Integrated Elementary School in Bujumbura (Kamenge district)⁷ and the interviews given by three Burundian social activists: a female teacher at an integrated school; a male teacher, the president of the AJGA Teachers’ Association; and a pastor, the president of the Network of Centers for Persons with Disabilities (RCPHB) and vice-president of the Association of Mothers of Disabled Children AMEH Indemesho.

The students answered three questions in writing: What does it mean to “be intelligent?” What qualities does an intelligent person have? Can a person with a disability (physical or psychological) be intelligent? According to the data triangulation method, the analysis of interviews was complemented by data from participatory observation and field research notes which I conducted myself in Burundi during the implementation of projects for the environment of people with disabilities.

⁷ After the education reform in 2013 in Burundi, the course of primary school cycle, the so-called *L'Ecole fondamentale*, lasts nine years.

Results of own research

Qualitative data analysis with the application of open coding method showed that in the interviews given by the Burundian youth, there are four characteristics which pupils use to describe an intelligent person:

- *sérieux(-euse)* – an adjective denoting a serious, solid, reliable person on whom one can count, reasonable, diligent (Larousse. French-Polish Dictionary, p. 1109) – 22% of the statements referred to this character trait;
- *courageux(-euse)* – 20% of the respondents see the intelligence criterion in being brave, bold and enthusiastic (Larousse. French-Polish Dictionary, p. 271);
- *travailleur(-euse)* is an adjective describing a hardworking person (Larousse. French-Polish Dictionary, p. 1232); according to 15% of respondents, an intelligent person is “hardworking,” “liking work,” “well-working,” “taking work seriously;”
- *poli(e)*, i.e., a polite and kind person (Larousse. French-Polish Dictionary, p. 903) – this adjective appeared in 11% of the interviews.

Respondents also point to other criteria for intelligence, such as respect for others (8% of responses), the ability to answer questions (6%), knowledge of French (5%).

The definition given by the female teacher of the examined children was: “An intelligent person is capable of reflection, logical thinking and reasoning in order to answer questions or adapt to situations.” She described the characteristics of an intelligent person as follows: “Striving for knowledge, having a lot of knowledge, being well-organized, orderly, sociable, open, giving thoughtful answers.” Both statements clearly indicate the social component.

The answer to the third question provides important conclusions on the social perception of disability.⁸ In the surveys, 29% of students said that a person with disabilities cannot be intelligent. Here is an excerpt from the interview with the teacher who acted as an intermediary in collecting interviews: “They were very surprised when we wrote the third question concerning a disabled person. I was surprised because the school I work in is an integrated school.” Thus, in social perception, are people with disabilities devoid of characteristics that are attributed to intelligent people?

⁸ Of course, this is too small a sample to draw conclusions about the whole of Burundian society, but it is a pilot piece of information that I shall further study in my doctoral thesis.

Children with disabilities often have enormous intellectual potential which, unfortunately, is not used due to the lack of opportunities to attend school or overcrowding (from 80 to even 120 children in the classroom) (Janus, 2013). An example of the stigmatization of a child due to an intellectual disability is the story of 12-year-old Angella, a girl with a serious speech impediment who was expelled from school because of her disability. She participated in my workshops conducted using the Montessori method. In just two weeks she learnt to count to 20, got acquainted with continents and, most importantly, she opened herself up to communication with her peers and became more courageous. During the project evaluation,⁹ the participants often mentioned the change that had occurred in Angella, who had ceased to fear attempts at verbalization.

Children with mental disabilities are in a particularly difficult situation: “On Tuesday, a teacher expelled a disabled child from the classroom; fortunately the child’s mother is brave, she came to school quickly to ask if the disabled aren’t like other children, and the principal supported her,” recalls the teacher from the Integrated Primary School in Bujumbura during her interview.¹⁰

When implementing development projects in Burundi,¹¹ I witnessed many situations in which children with disabilities were discriminated against because of their state of health. I saw an intellectually disabled teenager trapped in a church room because his family, persuaded by the local community, wanted to expel evil spirits from him. His hands and legs were tied, and his food was a piece of bread thrown in through a small window once a day.

It is very common for children with physical and mental disabilities to be marginalized because of their psychophysical condition. This opinion is confirmed by my interlocutors working for the community of children with disabilities. According to one of them: “Children with disabilities do not go to school because of their disability, so special schools should be set up for

⁹ “We learn not for school, but for life – the support for the methodology of working with children with disabilities in Centres run by the Association of Mothers of Disabled Children AMEH Indemesho in Burundi.”

¹⁰ Interview with Digne Dusabe – a teacher at the Integration School in Bujumbura, 10.11.2018.

¹¹ I implemented two projects in Burundi as part of the Polish Aid Volunteering Program in 2012 and 2013 financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “We learn not for school, but for life...” (see above) and “The development of psychological knowledge and skills of the staff at the Disability Centre in Muyinga, Burundi, as well as of the Centre’s wards and their families.”

them; otherwise, they will still be considered worthless, although they are able to do quite a lot of things.”¹²

Here are the basic conclusions from the research presented in this article:

1. The basic criteria of “intelligence” are social competences and life resourcefulness.
2. The respondents distinguished four main traits with which they describe an intelligent person: serious, hard-working, brave and polite.
3. People with disabilities, both mental and physical, are considered unintelligent by 29% of respondents, which may be a factor contributing to the high level of social exclusion of people with disabilities in Burundi.

At this point, it is worth looking at the cultural determinants that may influence the above perceptions of intelligent people and the conclusions of this research. The first emerging hypothesis to explain the attribution of such traits to intelligent people is the typology proposed by Geert Hofstede, a Dutch sociologist who is known as the creator of the cultural differences model of many countries and their impact on the organization of governance (1997). Due to collectivism which constitutes one dimension of the Burundian national culture, the students’ responses assign an intelligent person to a paradigm expressed in the cooperation and harmony of society, where the individual plays an insignificant role. In such societies, the people who are considered socially “useful” are those who are hard-working, kind, polite and reasonable.

The second hypothesis may be the understanding of intelligence as presented in Daniel Goleman’s model, or the so-called emotional intelligence, which consists of five elements: self-awareness, self-management (here, what will be of importance for a Burundian is the adaptability to change), motivation, empathy and social skills – inter alia, creating bonds, cooperation with others (Lamczak, 2001; Strelau, 2000, p. 179). The results show that from the respondents’ perspective, an intelligent person must *a priori* possess social competences.

The third hypothesis that emerges from the qualitative data analysis suggests that it is also the difficult socio-economic situation that may indicate such a perception of intelligent people. Among other things, the respondents point to the relationship between intelligence and work, being reasonable, diligent and eager to act. In a country with such a high level of poverty, it is

¹² An excerpt from an interview with Pascal Twagirayezu, a teacher and president of the AJGA Teachers’ Association in Burundi.

not surprising that such “life resourcefulness” can be perceived as a criterion of intelligence.

Conclusions

The lack of legislation governing the rights of persons with disabilities, socio-economic problems and the lack of educational facilities all hamper the daily lives of children with disabilities in Burundi. The isolation of people with disabilities and their families is often a factor in social exclusion, which makes it impossible or very difficult for people with disabilities to fulfil their social roles.

The analysis of interviews concerning the understanding of intelligence and the perception of people with disabilities showed how culturally relative the definition of intelligence is and what consequences it has in the social perception of children with disabilities. Research has shown that there are four main characteristics that pupils use to describe an intelligent person: serious, hard-working, brave and polite. Identifying intelligence through a range of traits referring to social competences makes it even more difficult for children with disabilities to adapt to society and the education system.

The perception and treatment of disabled people in Burundian society is a very broad subject which shall constitute the direction of my further research.

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