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STEREOTYPES ABOUT BLINDNESS AND PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

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Abstract

Social representation of the abilities and potential of people with visual impairment are predominantly stereotypes, blindness being considered to be one of the most difficult and feared human conditions. Often the "sighted" people know very few real elements about the size of the disability, the education and the possibilities of social-professional integration of the visually impaired, most of the information coming from stories conveyed in the collective mind, which create unrealistic, exaggerated images, many times in the fictional realm. The existing stereotypes regarding this category of people are both positive and negative, the blind people being portrayed from objects of mercy, eternally unhappy individuals as a result of a life marked by tragedy, to superheroes, people endowed with a range of mystical abilities, super powers, worthy to admire. Some of these stereotypes are still found today in the Romanian society. The present paper aims to identify among the students of the "Dunărea de Jos" University, the dominant stereotypes about the visually impaired and the main meanings attached to the blindness.

Keywords: social representation; stereotype; disability; visual impairment;

1. INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of the population has little information about the potential of visually impaired people. In the absence of certain information about their real features, people have built mental models through which they can represent and explain social reality and define the visually impaired.

The system of beliefs included in the content of the social representation regarding the visual impairment constitutes a cognitive landmark, a guide of the social conduct, generator of taking positions towards the other, being used in the orientation in the world, in relation to the other, in designing and evaluating one's own behaviours. By socializing some of these beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation (Turliuc, 2004, pp. 96-98).

The social representation of blindness and the blind are marked by the historical, cultural and economic contexts, circumstances and practices of the group and community to which the individual belongs (Moscovici, 1998, p. 243). They are formed under the pressure of cultural, ideological and behavioral models. The stereotype is an image of a person who embodies widely held beliefs about the



characteristics of a group to which the person belongs (Șerbănescu, 2007, p. 171). The sketched descriptions about the blind were predominantly stereotypes. Since ancient times the blind have been assigned a wide range of divergent characteristics and stereotypes, most of them being negative. Even from the pre-Christian times the serious deterioration of the vision was often explained as a sanction for the transgression of moral and religious norms. Loss of vision was associated with guilt, sin, and shame. The handicap, regardless of its type, was explained through the moral and / or religion model, which rendered it as a result of the lack of social morals and of non-observance of religious precepts, either by the person suffering from blindness, or by his family or by the group he belonged to (Retief, 2018). Under the influence of the medical model, the visual disability was interpreted as a personal tragedy as a result of an unusual event that radically changes one's life, leaving behind a defective body, biologically inferior to "normality" represented by the whole, complete, healthy organism (Oliver, 1990).

Many people believed that blindness is one of the most feared of all disabilities, a beliefs still present in the 1970s. Wagner-Lampl & Oliver (1994, cited in Moore & Wolfe, 1996, p.8) identify existence of a "folklore" of blindness, which included various myths that perpetuate many negative stereotypes and misconceptions. According to Tzvetkova (1997, cited in Papadaki, 2013, p. 485) there are three main categories of sighted people's beliefs with regard to the blind people: negative, positive and neutral. Negative images perpetuate the stereotype of blindness as punishment (Oedipus myth), the belief of the contagious blindness (viewers will become blind if they touch or shake hands with a blind person), the belief that they are evil individuals and associated with begging. Positive beliefs include beliefs about the special powers of the blind, the belief that the blind can better judge and have musical talent. In neutral beliefs, the author identifies the belief that all individuals with visual impairments are people who are totally deprived of their sense of sight, living in total darkness, being helpless and totally dependent on others, the visual impairment being either by birth or acquired throughout life.

Regardless of the elaborated explanations, the content of social representations reflects organized and structured combinations of cognitive and affective elements that allow the individual and the group to reduce the unknown to the familiar (Turluc, 2004, p. 186). According to Abric (1997), the content of any social representation is organized and structured, with a central core and a peripheral system. The central core, consisting of stable, concrete and coherent elements, is the fundamental element of social representation because it determines its meaning and organization. At the same time, it represents the common basis that contributes to the consensus and homogeneity of the group, being determined by the norms and values of the group, by the social and historical conditions through which it passes, by its collective memory. The peripheral system comprises elements which express opinions, descriptions, beliefs or stereotypes about the object of representation, their presence having the role of "the interface between the central core and the concrete situation in which the representation is elaborated or functioning" (Abric, 1997, p. 118).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Numerous studies on beliefs and social attitudes towards visually impaired people show that large segments of the population have little knowledge of their real abilities and the individuality of blind people, confirming the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes regarding blindness and the blind. Blindness and loss of vision frequently arouses fear of many people, much of the fear held by the wide range of divergent and stereotypical characteristics that have been attributed to individuals who are blind, since ancient times (Moore & Wolfe, 1997, p. 8).

Stereotypes about visually impaired people are both positive and negative. Sighted people describe the blind through attributes such as: visibly repulsive; helpless; pathetic; dependent; too independent; resolute, courageous and brave; full of bitterness, hell-bent, with weights on their shoulders; mean; mentally retarded; endowed with mystical powers, etc. The most common stereotype about the blind describes them as heroes (Sardegna et al, 2002, pp. 21-23). The blind is considered a person worthy of admiration, endowed with miraculous powers which help him overcome all obstacles, to achieve goals that would seem very easy for the sighted people, such as going to school or going to work.

Opinion polls indicate three main stereotypes about the blind, referring to their pathetic situation (they deserve sympathy and pity), to their abilities (either they are totally incapable or have extraordinary non-visual senses) and to the homogeneity of the group traits (all share similar interests). (Pissaloux,

2017, p. 637). The belief in the existence of miraculous compensatory powers, such as "second sight" or clairvoyance is also confirmed by Wagner-Lampl & Oliver (1994, cited Moore & Wolfe, 1997, p. 6).

Following a study on a sample of 115 sighted people in Greece, Papadakis (2013) finds that people with visual impairments are still treated with prejudices about the size of their disability, their education and their integration into society.

It is thought that the blind have additional powers and abilities such as hearing, the sixth sense or better judgment skills. The content of social representation no longer includes stereotypical beliefs that the blind people are sinners, beggars, punished and that they have musical talents and abilities. (Papadakis, 2013, p. 481).

Today's stereotypes about the blind promote mainly a negative image, which reinforces the social stigma of blindness. At the center of these stereotypes are the expectations that the blind people are helpless, docile, dependent and melancholic. (Clinard, 2008, p. 384).

Wainapel (1989, cited Moore & Wolfe, 1996, p.8) points out the general tendency to see people with visual impairments as either completely blind or completely sighted without recognizing types and levels of vision impairments, either as having other disabilities, such as mental retard or deafness, or as being helpless, objects worthy of pity that are unable to lead independent lives, or unable to work except for certain types of jobs, such as salesman or court stenographer.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Does the university program of studies followed by the student structure the content of the social representation of the visual disability? Is there a way to perceive the visual disability specific to the group of students from a certain specialization?

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In this article I will identify the stereotypical representations used by the students from three study programs from "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati in making portraits of people with visual impairments and attaching meanings of blindness. At the same time, we will capture the differences in structuring the content of social representations according to the study program followed. In the present study we stopped at the specialties of Orthodox Theology Social Assistance (OTSA), Human Resources (HR) and Engineering and Management in Food Service and agrotourism. (EMFSA).

We believe that social representations of blindness and visually impaired people perpetuate the cultural stereotypes of Tiresias (blind hero, endowed with supernatural powers) and Oedipus (blind victim, helpless, unhappy, worthy of mercy), but the elements of their social representation are structured differently depending on the university program of studies followed.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

Our study is a qualitative comparative approach made on a sample of 27 student from three university studies programs. Its selection is made by a random strategy, choosing an equal number of students from each specialization. The research is conducted through the interview method.

6. FINDINGS

Data analyse in our approach show that most students have little knowledge of real abilities and the individuality of the visual impairments people, confirming the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes regarding blindness and the blind. Serious impairment of vision and the occurrence of blindness in people's lives is believed to be the result of either natural causes or God's will (as a punishment, as a curse, or as a salvation test), or of the action of evil spirits summoned by various spells performed by those who practice magic.

The belief in supernatural causes of the disease (religious and magical) is prevalent in the explanations elaborated by the students from OTSA (77.7%) and constitutes the core of the social representation of this specialization, while, in the other two university programs of studies, the majority are the explanations that attribute natural causes to blindness (66.6%).

6.1. Who are the people with visual impairment?

The attributes that characterize the visually impaired people are both positive and negative, but the images are predominantly negative. The structuring of the attributes varies from one specialization to another, disability interpretation schemes highlighting a central core with predominantly negative traits and a peripheral system with various elements. Figure 1 show the features associated by the students to the visually impaired.

From the analysis of the content of the social representation it is found that, regardless of specialization, the theme of *personal tragedy* is the defining note of the social representations of the visual impairment, regardless of the visual impairment degree. The disability is, first of all, perceived as a disabling condition which places the suffering person in an abnormal condition, at the edge of society, characterized by helplessness, dependency, mercy and misery.

People with visual impairment are seen as defective bodies that lost their balance as a result of serious damage or absence of the most important function. Through the label *defective body*, persons with visual impairment are identified only among individuals whose sight is missing or functions very poorly, considered to be the most important human sense, being either blind or barely seeing with the help of glasses.

They are incomplete, with a “defect” from birth or acquired during their life, dysfunctional, with the balance of all functions disturbed as a result of loss of vision, with a low emotional state, are unable to know the “unknown” and to communicate with the “normal” naturalness of the majority who sees.

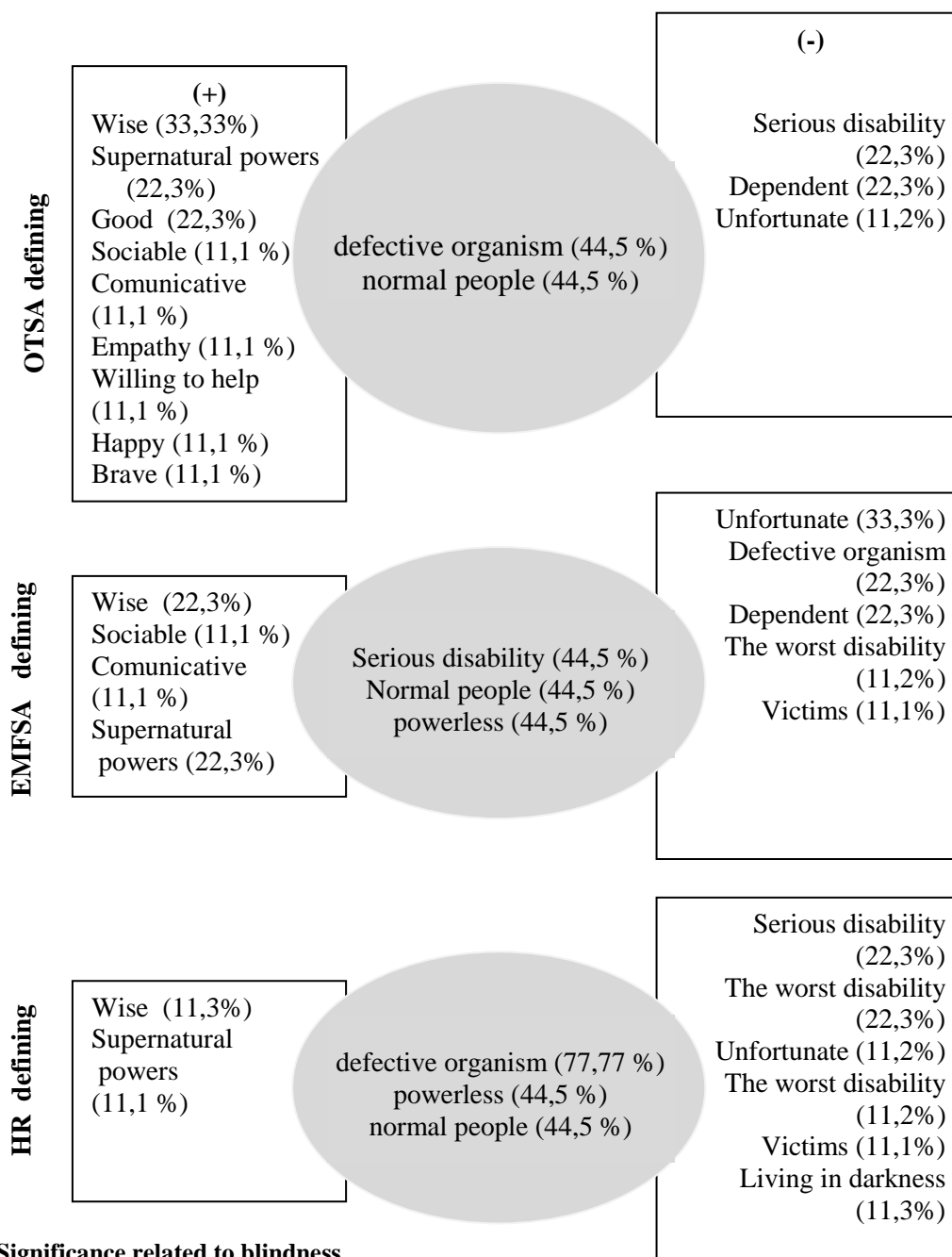
Through the label *serious disability*, impairment of vision is described as a serious, difficult disability, being one of the hardest disabilities, being the hardest by comparison with being without a leg and staying in bed, having a strong impact on the psychic of the individual (“it can cause psychic diseases”) and also to the external environment, creating isolation (“it isolates you from the other people”). Also, blind people are seen *victims without defense*, to be prone to fall prey to the unpleasant events and unable to react to injustice.

The subject of the blind person seen will be the normal person, is secondary in the structure of social representation, including the descriptions such as: “the same as others”, equal to anybody, capable to be independent, to do daily activities without asking the help of others, to start a family, to raise alone and to educate their own children, with a variety of personalities that make them optimists or pessimists according to their education level, the environment where they live or their own nature, the lack of sight not determining the character of a person.

The main components of the peripheral of the representation, resulting from perception reading related to the disabled persons are the following:

- *The wise and virtuous blind*: it is endowed with an inner view that knows how to appreciate and enjoy the small things, evaluates those around without prejudice, has “beautiful” moral values, is good and empathetic. He has supernatural powers (inner view) and support from God;
- *Brave and cheerful*: accept the new way of life, are cheerful and optimistic;
- *Blind beggar*: present faith in the representations of the students of human resources, sends to pencil of some people who declare themselves blind for material benefits, beg or benefit without having the right to social assistance, or they are stolen from different activities;

Figure 1. The features associated by the students to the visually impaired



6.2. Significance related to blindness

We will reproduce an ensemble of meanings attached to blindness, found in the representations elaborated by the respondents:

Blindness as *punishment*: the stereotype is found only in the social representations of female students from EMFSA and HR specializations, but its presence is marginal, the weights recorded being 22.2% in the case of the first and 11.1% in the case of the latter. The appeal to this type of judgment is made whenever a natural cause that generates the deficiency cannot be identified. The rural environment of childhood (all the respondents living in villages), through the collective mind of the traditional Romanian village marked by the religious and moral model, is one of the factors that play an important

role in perpetuating this belief:

„...it is believed that they did not believe in God and did not respect his words or were wrong about others.” (female, HR)

Blindness as *salvation test*. Faith in the call to salvation constitutes the core of the social representation of the students from the OTSA specialization and a peripheral element in the case of the representations of the other specializations, being found in 77.7% within the OTSA, 11.1% at EMFSA, respectively 11, 1% in the HR. The appearance of the visual impairment until blindness occurs is believed not to be accidental in the life of man because otherwise the whole life would make no sense.

The torment of the sufferer is thus loaded with religious meaning, explained as an attempt that God is testing him in order to be saved. Then everything will depend on whether or not he will be able to obtain salvation.

„blindness is an attempt that God gives to man to save him[...] It depends on how the blind person succeeds in assuming this” (female, OTSA)

Blindness as a result of *witchcraft*: The belief that blindness is the result of witchcraft, a system that functions separately from religion and placed in the service of the devil, is part of the central core of social representation of OTSA students, being found in 44.44%. Spells, tools made by people who "work with the devil", only affect those who are not good Christians:

„ ... No spell cast on the believer.... God does not allow such a thing to a good Christian” (female, OTSA)

This explanation given to the visual impairment can be found, in a very low percentage (11.1%), in the social representation of the students from EMFSA .

Blindness as a result of *curses*. In the core of the representations of the blindness elaborated by the students from OTSA we also find the belief in the existence of curses, the percentage being 44.4%. The blindness is seen as the result of invoking misfortunes for the evil caused by the sufferer or his family by the serious transgression of social norms. It is believed that the practice of cursing is widespread, but the curse has effect only on the nonbeliever and only with the allowance of God:

"... The curse can take root only in man who is not united with Christ." (female, OTSA)

Blindness as *wisdom*: the representation of the blind as the "divine blind" who reaches true and profound knowledge with the help of the inner sight mediated by the soul (the eye of God) is found among the peripheral elements of the social representation elaborated by students from EMFSA (11.1%) and HR (11.1%), and for OTSA students it is part of the central core of representation (33.3). Blindness is positively valued, being perceived as a model of knowing the other, without prejudice, not influenced by the external aspects of the world.

"... a lesson from which one can learn and show others to see more with the inner self ... people can see only with the soul" (female, OTSA)

"... the deep knowledge of a soul, without prejudice to the aspect" (female, HR);

According to Evseev (1994, p. 122), this belief reflects one of the themes of the mythical imaginary, that of wisdom given by the attainment of the inner sight as a result of blindness, the blind people becoming the master of the spiritual world.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Persons with visual impairments are defined predominantly by personal trauma, with the attributes that accompany such a state (deficiency, inability, dependence and limitation). Images about the blind and the visually impaired are mostly stereotypes, being both positive (wise, supernatural power, empathic, understanding the suffering of other) and negative (powerless, dependent, victims, beggars).

Cultural stereotypes that explain blindness as a result of supernatural and / or spiritual causes (witchcraft, curses, divine punishment) are still being conveyed, but they are marginal in social representation. The stereotype of the asexual blind, an individual incapable of engaging in a relationship and of having a family life, is no longer conveyed. Instead, the inability to raise and care for their children is a dominant representation.

The hypothesis of the influence of the program of university studies on the structuring of the attributes by which the blind are characterized was validated, observing the differences between the elaborated representations. The images described by the students from the Orthodox Theology Social

Assistance university study program are closer to reality compared to the images created by students from the other two specializations, containing fewer stereotypes, given the specific study program that puts them in touch with the vulnerable world.

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