Local conception of disability: examples from Moroccan proverbs

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ABSTRACT: Moroccan government and civil society have recently been working on projects with the aim of preventing and eliminating different barriers people with disabilities (PwDs) face in Morocco. Exclusion from schools, underemployment, underrepresentation in the media, and inaccessible and unsafe built environments are all examples of daily barriers faced by PwDs.

Despite these efforts, these barriers appear to be changing at a relatively slow pace, and many PwDs are still not fully enjoying their most fundamental rights.

The goal of this article is to investigate the causes for resistance to change through an examination of the many depictions of PwDs in Moroccan proverbs. The difficulty is that these views are not always positive, especially when it comes to PwDs. Our approach is based on the premise that proverbs preserve certain beliefs and attitudes that have stood the test of time and are believed to be true. It analyses these proverbs based on their portrayal of PwDs and Disability. As a result, we believe we should be aware of these proverbs with ableist overtones since they may inadvertently influence society's attitude toward PwD. According to the conclusions of this article, ableism is the most difficult barrier that PwDs face in Morocco because it goes unseen.

KEYWORDS: Ableism; proverbs; local conceptions; people with disabilities; attitudes.

Introduction

Over the last decade, both the Moroccan government and civil society have made significant efforts to ensure that people with disabilities (PwDs), who according to the national survey of 2014, make up at least 9.5% of the general Moroccan adult population, have access to their most basic rights. However, the results of the deployed efforts did not meet PwDs’ expectations. This inefficiency in meeting the special and diverse needs of PwDs is primarily due to the mainstream's policies' solely technical approach to the issue; an approach that rarely considers the importance of targeting cultural representations of PwDs and/or disability.

The focus of this article is to uncover the dominant cultural representations of disability by highlighting the most prevalent attitudes and perspectives regarding disability and PwDs in Moroccan proverbs, thus filling the existing gap in knowledge and illustrating the sociocultural mechanisms that prevent PwDs from enjoying their rights on an equal basis in Moroccan society.

1. Definition of proverbs

Proverbs exist in all human languages; however their importance and occurrence vary from one culture to another. They are common in many Arab and African societies because they are considered as significant tools that reflect cultural wisdom. Since proverbs are regarded as universally understood across all languages, it is crucial to define them. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (2005) a proverb is "a short pithy saying in general use; a concise sentence, often metaphorical or alliterative in form, stating a general truth or piece of advice." Similarly, Wolfgang Mieder (1999) defines a proverb as
“... a short, generally known sentence of folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional view in a metaphorical, fixed memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation”. Wolfgang Mieder constructed this definition on the basis of words that occurred from four to twenty times in a survey, where he asked fifty-five ordinary people to write their own definition of the proverb.

James Howell, as cited in the book Wit and Wisdom (1930), considers that what makes a true proverb are “sense, shortness, and salt”; he considers them to be the essence of a proverb. To these, Edward Westermarck adds “popularity, acceptance, and adoption on the part of the people” as being the other essential and generally recognized characteristic of a proverb. Though there is no definite agreement about the definition of proverbs, there is a general consensus about the elements that comprise a proverb, about the fact that proverbs exist in all cultures and in all human languages, that they are known for their conciseness, popularity, for epitomizing truth and wisdom and for representing a heritage that has been handed down from generation to generation as an absolute sacred truth. A proverb, like other oral traditions, reflects people’s past/present values, the way they thought/think, and their attitudes towards their surroundings.

Proverbs in Morocco are no exception; they are considered a sign of both wisdom as well as eloquence that no one questions. They are typically phrased in a way that is easy to remember and repeat which why people like to incorporate them to their speech to decorate it and give it credibility. Dickson (1951) says that “The Arab is forever quoting proverbs or sayings of some poet or other, and he seems to enjoy this almost as much as story telling”. Barakat (1980) supports Dickson’s claim saying that “Arabs take vast pride in being able to invoke proverbs when the need arises and pay great respect to any person who is capable of using these sayings correctly”. Moreover, proverbs are seen as an element of instruction; they convey morals of social behavior. Therefore, they are believed to play an important role in the transmission of values. As a consequence, the understanding of this heritage would help understand our present and shape our future.

In this article, I look into Moroccan proverbs to see whether they are supportive of PwDs and how these latter have been portrayed by wise Moroccan ancestors. I consulted Westermarck, E. (1930), Messaoudi, L. (1991), El Attar, B. (1992) and Zerrouk, M. (1998) to look for Moroccan proverbs that directly mention disabilities and/or make reference to PwDs. The final list comprises sixty two proverbs.

2. Absence of the categories Disabled and PwDs

My analysis of the collection of disability related proverbs demonstrates first: The absence of the general category ‘people with disabilities’ and ‘disability’.

In fact, Moroccan proverb instead of using a single concept to refer to disabilities or PwDs, they group together individuals with same types of disabilities (i.e. the blind, the deaf). Although traditionally there are broad categories (i.e. the unfortunate, the infirm), the idea of disability as a single category into which individuals with all types of physical, emotional and intellectual disabilities are routinely placed, is inexistent in proverbs. To confirm this finding, I searched for the word disabled in Wit and Wisdom in Morocco, a well-known book with 2003 proverbs; one of the largest collections of Moroccan proverbs. Neither the word disabled, nor any of its derivatives, nor any word that is synonymous with it or any one of its derivatives, is to be found in this large collection of proverbs. This is a key element in the analysis of the attitudes towards PwDs. Disability and PwDs are two new concepts that have been in use only during the last few years. Before, there has been no such general category summing up all disabilities. The inexistence of these two concepts can be interpreted
as community’s awareness that PwDs are not a homogeneous group, each person depending on his/her disability has got unique needs that are different from those of another PwD. In fact, people with the same type of disability might experience things quite differently, as their disability might affect them in different ways. So, to group all PwDs or all disabilities under one label, could be harmful to this category. In reality, disability intersects with nearly every other identity, race, religion, gender and the list goes on. In the same line of thought, John Lawson (2001) warns against using PwDs to refer to this category as being a one homogeneous group except when used to emphasis their shared experience of oppression within society.

3. Not all disabilities are equally presented

Second, proverb analysis reveals that some disabilities are given prominence over others. The study of the sixty two proverbs demonstrates the dominance of eye-disabilities related proverbs over other disabilities; 76% of analyzed proverbs are about eye related disabilities. Such prevalence, in proverbs collected so far, may be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it reflects how people with eye-related disabilities feature in all aspects of everyday life and interact with nondisabled people in Morocco, whereas the under-representation of the other types of disabilities, like intellectual disabilities, can be an indication of these PwDs’ exclusion from the mainstream. On the other hand, such prevalence can be an indication of the importance Moroccans give to eye related disabilities over other types of disabilities.

4. Disability is used in figurative and metaphorical ways

A third interesting finding is the use of metaphor. Though all collected proverbs refer to and use disability they do not all target PwDs. Reference to PwDs and/or disability is most often a metaphor for moral prohibition in relation to specific aspects of everyday life. The following proverbs are a case in point:

- [kayjibr:nlama o 3aatu] → (He comes between blind one and his/her walking stick.). It refers to those who separate two persons who love each other and who are always close to each other as does a “blind” with his/her walking stick.
- [weri:h, nhla:wi3amasi:r o khel:i:h] → (Show him/her, prohibit him/her but if s/he becomes blind go and leave him/her.) Here, blindness represents stubbornness and obstinacy and does not refer to the blindness of the eyes.
- [niyetla3malqa:ha3ikuza] → (The blind finds his/her bad intentions in his/her walking stick.) Another similar proverb says: He who digs a hole shall fall into it. Meaning, those who have bad intentions are the first to suffer from them.
- [li nkehe3amtu: isti:h’alatla: la3ma, lfaqr we jde3m] → (He who has sexual relationship with his paternal aunt God afflicts him with three punishments: blindness, poverty and leprosy). In this context, blindness is seen as a punishment not different from poverty or leprosy that is being inflicted by god as a punishment for committing a sin.
- [li zaouesdar’na3ma] → (S/he who reveals our secret will become blind.)Similar to the previous proverb, blindness is used as a threat to deter someone from revealing a secret.

The study of proverbs reveals how disabilities carry with them implicit negative attitudes and are loaded with images that negatively portray PwDs. The above proverbs reveal that disabilities are believed to be a punishment and a curse for bad deeds or sins that are refused by society; therefore, they are feared and used metaphorically to push community members to act in socially acceptable ways to avoid being cursed with blindness. Unfortunately, such negative attitudes have often contributed to the marginalization and discrimination of PwDs which hampers their full participation in society.
The difficulty with negative attitudes is that they are deeply ingrained in societies’ cultural beliefs and practices, and can be difficult to challenge and change. To do so, it is first important to unveil some of the generally held negative attitudes about disability and/or PwDs, and extract the community’s attitudes through surveys and analysis of the most dominant attitudes to and cultural representations of PwDs. This is an important step to take since misconceptions and negative attitudes about disability are reported to be among the most daunting obstacles that PwDs have to contend with. “Attitudes to disability are the major barrier to disabled peoples’ full participation…From pity, awkwardness and fear, to low expectations about what disabled people can contribute, stereotypical and negative attitudes hold people back” (Massie, 2006).

Recognizing that persons with disabilities are still exposed to and oppressed by prejudice and discrimination may be the first step in reducing prejudice (Marks, 1997). It is true that, conceptions of disability are not all the time negative. But whether positive or negative, it is essential to understand traditional models in order to effect necessary changes.

**Conclusion**

This study looks into a number of Moroccan proverbs to see whether they are negative concerning disabilities or not. Our focus is based on the idea that proverbs maintain certain beliefs and attitudes that last for ages. Yet, these attitudes are not always positive, mainly when it comes to PwDs. Also, the fact that a proverb’s authority has the function of legitimizing certain beliefs and at the same time preventing them from being questioned means it becomes of primordial importance to study them to unveil the cultural bias against PwDs and draw attention to proverbs’ role in shaping images and representations of PwDs through stereotypes. We must keep sight of ways Moroccan culture perpetuates ableism through oral modes such as proverbs. This is of extreme importance because proverbs do not only reflect the social reality of PwDs, but help construct it.

It is high time we started considering seriously attitude change and awareness raising about disability and PwDs. It is disturbing to see how we use these proverbs in our day-to-day conversations without blinking our eyes. The dominant groups intentionally or unintentionally through the construction of biased language exclude the marginalized groups. In fact; some nondisabled people have conflicting attitudes, and sometimes hold both positive and negative (implicit) attitudes. They remain unaware that their implicit attitudes affect their behavior toward PwDs.

Consequently, as long as traditional misconceptions about disability and PwDs persist and go unseen, this could result in denial of equal opportunities in education, employment, the built environment and even in politics.

**Literature**


