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THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD IN POLISH PROVERBS. HOW TO CREATE A BETTER FUTURE FOR CHILDREN

Wizerunek dziecka odzwierciedlony w przysłowiaach polskich. Jak kreować jego lepszą przyszłość

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Abstract

In this article the author justifies that the analysis of the ways children are perceived in Polish proverbs is significant scientifically and pragmatically since it proposes not only to change the way children are treated, but also to capture the role of the educational system and the system of public health. It becomes much easier to understand the child's psyche and appreciate its exceptional emotional and moral sensitivity once we manage to clearly define who the child is and what its specificity really is. The author argues that it is highly advisable to show to wide social circles what adults owe to children, how much they learn from them and how they self-improve thanks to children. This kind of knowledge may assist parents and teachers in the process of changing improper attitudes towards children in their surroundings, especially as regards negative linguistic habits. A critical approach towards child-discrediting terms contained in the proverbs and towards statements that evoke ambivalence, support the overcoming of stereotypes concerning child perception in many communication contexts of both local and global character. First and foremost, however, one must promote a constructive perception of children in various environments, based first on a professional and scientific definition of the term "child" and then on the content of properly selected proverbs.

Keywords: child, image, stereotype, process of upbringing, proverb.

Streszczenie

Autorka uzasadniła w artykule, że analiza zawartych w treści polskich przysłów sposobów postrzegania dziecka jest istotna pod względem naukowym i pragmatycznym (ponieważ skłania do zmian nie tylko w traktowaniu dzieci, lecz także w ujmowaniu roli systemu edukacyjnego oraz systemu zdrowia publicznego). Sprecyzowanie, kim jest dziecko, jak również podkreślenie jego specyfiki, sprzyjają rozumieniu psychiki dzieci oraz docenieniu ich wyjątkowej wrażliwości emocjonalnej i moralnej. Autorka przekonuje, że warto ukazywać szerokim kręgom społecznym, co dorośli zawdzięczają dzieciom, jak wiele się od nich uczą, a także jak dzięki nim doskonalą. Przeswojenie przez rodziców oraz nauczycieli wiedzy tego

rodzaju może pomóc im zmienić w otoczeniu nieodpowiednie postawy wobec dzieci, zwłaszcza niekorzystne przyzwyczajenia językowe. Krytyczny stosunek do zawartych w przysłowiach określeń dyskredytujących dziecko – bądź do wypowiedzi rodziców ambiwalencję – wspiera przezwyciężanie stereotypowego postrzegania dziecka w wielu sytuacjach komunikacji społecznej, zarówno lokalnej, jak i globalnej. Przede wszystkim jednak w różnych środowiskach należy promować konstruktywne postrzeganie dziecka, korzystając wpiery z profesjonalnego, naukowego wyjaśnienia pojęcia „dziecko”, a następnie dopiero – z treści właściwie dobranych przysłów.

Słowa kluczowe: dziecko, wizerunek, stereotyp, proces wychowania, przysłowie.

Introduction

The dynamics of individual development and upbringing of children and general perception of a child and its place in the family and the society, have undergone substantial evolution over the centuries. A contemporary reader is often amazed at descriptions of child abuse in the middle ages, or even more recent epochs. Although the current status of scientific knowledge regarding childhood and the child, considered as a human being from its conception until the end of adolescence (Izdebska, 2016, p. 322), has changed significantly and may be deemed satisfactory, especially among teachers, psychologists and sociologists, certain views and beliefs continue to be held in social awareness, a testimony to the stagnation of common knowledge and even its conservatism. This lore is well reflected in some proverbs which, despite being anachronistic, remain in common use nonetheless. Such irrational views and beliefs are referred to as superstitions or stereotypes.

Family members, especially the parents, follow a certain system of beliefs concerning the child and perceive him or her either subjectively or objectively, and have an impact on the well-being of their child (Ribar, 2015, p. 11–27) (this includes satisfaction and dissatisfaction connected with many everyday life situations, as well as general feeling of happiness or unhappiness). The preponderance of negative emotions over positive in a child may in turn lead to depression (Cole et al., 2008, p. 141). This is why rational perception of a child, without either idealization or depreciation, proves to be of paramount significance.

A number of teachers, including Ellen Key (1909), John Dewey (1897), Maria Montessori (1999), Janusz Korczak (1958a, 1958b) and Philippe Ariès (1973), Diana Gittins (1997), Mary J. Kehily (ed. 2008), Chris Jenks (1996), Joel Bakan (2013), Małgorzata Jacyno and Alina Szulżycka (1999), Krzysztof Blusz (ed. 1992), Dorota Klus-Stańska (2019, p. 13–31), Maria Szczepka-Pustkowska (2011), Barbara Smolińska-Theiss and Jadwiga Bińczycka (ed. 2005), Barbara Smolińska-Theiss (1993, 2014), Bożena Matyjas (2008), have attempted to answer the question of who the child is, or rather, what kind of human being the child is. The author of this article, however, does not intend to describe their views, but to respond to the judgments and beliefs that strengthen reductionist attitudes among parents, teachers and educators and complicate the interpersonal relationships between parents and children within

the family, at different stages of schooling and at other educational institutions. Many statements, seemingly obvious, but often dubitable, will be questioned. Such statements negatively impact the quality of the upbringing process of contemporary and future generations.

This article also discusses those proverbs which show that the younger members of the society are also perceived ambivalently and positively. Such positive patterns of child perception sustain pedagogical optimism, motivate parents and teachers to persistently act for the benefit of children and in general terms shape an attitude of trust towards young people all the way through their individual development until they reach mental maturity. Appropriate recognition and thorough analysis of constructive ways for perceiving children can bring parents, teachers and educators closer to them, strengthen the bond with children, and encourage peace and intergenerational solidarity (Żywczok, 2015, p. 143). The issue of perceptual patterns concerning children and their upbringing is therefore of extraordinary practical significance, because the perception of the child, especially by adults, determines the way in which the child is treated: either subjectively (as a fully-fledged human being), or objectively (as a defective being).

Social and emotional learning of how to adopt a positive perception of the child is also an important educational goal, the implementation of which may have a significant global importance, not only in promoting public health and effectively preventing irregularities in this area (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 13), but above all in stimulating the development process of the youngest members of the community. It is worth emphasizing, that proverbs are only one instrument for shaping educators' beliefs about the child, as contemporary culture has much more powerful means at its disposal, such as the media.

Prejudices and stereotypes.

Clarification of concepts and the current state of scientific knowledge

In modern science, especially in psychology, perception processes, both correct, as well as the deformities in the perception of people, have been thoroughly investigated. Also well documented are the mechanisms generating such deformities, related to incorrect processing and selection of information, placement of control, improper self-evaluation, erroneous beliefs or attitudes referred to as prejudices or stereotypes. These issues have also been studied by sociologists. Walter Lippmann (1934), an American intellectual and creator of the theory of stereotype, defined the stereotype as an image in the human mind (a simplified mental construction), which is authoritatively and consistently passed down from generation to generation, which makes it seem tantamount to a biological law, or an unquestionable truth.

Subsequent researchers, such as Eugene Hartley (1946) and Gordon Allport (1954), supplemented this concept by arguing that a stereotype, or prejudice, is a pre-conceived opinion, or a biased assessment of a person, or thing, characterized by incorrect beliefs that result from the expressed emotions and attitudes of a given person, without any attempt being made to verify them. Stereotypes or prejudices are most often associated with an unfavorable attitude towards a certain group, or its members (although they can also be positive). Researchers usually classify them as follows:

- a manifestation of dehumanization, e.g. Paul Bain (2012; Bain et al., eds., 2014);
- a manifestation of age-related discrimination, i.e. ageism, e.g. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012) or Erdman B. Palmore (1999);
- non-compliance with ethical principles, also referred to as deviations from these principles, e.g. John Wall (2006).

According to some researchers, stereotypes and prejudices also result from a tendency to defend one's "ego", e.g. Rosemary Gordon (1962), and from reductionism and the related predisposition to excessive simplification, which in turn generates deformation in the perception of people, e.g. Paul Bain (2012), Tadeusz Mądrzycki (1986; cf. Kofta & Jasińska-Kania, eds., 2001; Macrae et al., eds., 1999). They are counted among dangerous tendencies that can lead to injustice and social exclusion (Fidelus, ed., 2014; Chlewiński & Kurcz, ed., 1992). These issues are analyzed with an emphasis laid on family environment, e.g. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (2012), school environment, e.g. Rupam Saran and Rosalina Diaz (2010), and other social groups, including ethnic and national groups, in which the child is perceived in a certain way.

The issue of stereotypes hidden in language, e.g. in proverbs, was also taken up by a Polish linguist and ethnolinguist: Jerzy Bartmiński (2009, 2018). Describing the functions of language, he emphasized its role in creating collective identity, especially national identity, and in preserving the memory of history, often reflected in ethnic stereotypes. The interpretation of reality contained in language can, in his view, be expressed as a set of judgements about the world. The content of this article is therefore part of the current of research in the humanities and social sciences.

Proverbs as reflection of views and beliefs of a given community

The proverb is defined as a concise literal or figurative expression of a given general truth that is common for all the social groups from which it originates (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 5). It usually assumes the form of "a short sentence, willingly repeated as it expresses a certain general thought [...], advice, or warning for those who commit shameful deeds, since proverbs stigmatize, for example, human flaws such as greed, laziness, arrogance, etc. Such a concisely expressed thought may also provide a kind

of commentary to a given situation” (Bańko, ed., 2017, p. 379). In terms of function and structure, linguists clearly distinguish proverbs from maxims (or sentences) and aphorisms and consider them to be separate literary genres (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 5). The origin of proverbs as one of the oldest literary forms can be traced back to the Bible (e.g. the Old Testament: the Book of Proverbs attributed to Solomon, the Book of Job, the Book of Prophets, the Book of Psalms) and to the works of ancient and modern thinkers. Many proverbs have roots in so-called “folklore wisdom”. Whatever their source, proverbs, anonymous in nature, have been passed down from generation to generation, as a result of which their present day wording may differ from that of several centuries ago. This makes proverbs a “living” component of cultural consciousness. Although they result from the accumulated experience of many generations, they do not refer to generality, but to a variety of numerous situations and events, to which the listener is directed (Kessler, 2005; Woroniec, 2013). Proverbs are also viewed as linguistic carriers of values important among a given community (Kuszak, 2013).

If we assume that proverbs primarily reflect local beliefs, but are also sometimes recorded in language as regularities of human behavior, one can discover numerous examples of stereotypical perception of the child, revealing a frightening vision of the relationships between children and their parents and other members of the community. Exposing such stereotypes will make it possible to avoid those mistakes in the upbringing process that result from significant simplifications in the perception of the child and in the perception of the upbringing process. It may therefore be assumed that the stereotypical perception of children, which is characteristic of some parents and teachers, may generate serious threats to the cognitive, emotional and moral development of children, as well as hinder them from achieving functional autonomy and well-being.

The author of this article is convinced that only by becoming fully aware of all the negative, ambivalent and positive perceptual patterns exemplified in the proverbs will one be able to obtain a comprehensive cognitive insight, and to determine and create a well-defined upbringing process. The basis of the author's separation and division of proverbs into those containing positive, negative and ambivalent images of the child were based on two concepts of upbringing, which give rise to certain perceptions of the child and childhood. The main concept was emancipatory pedagogy (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006), according to which the child is a full-fledged subject, even if different from an adult or senior citizen. The child, according to this concept, has the right to be liberated from many physical, social, intellectual and emotional blocks to his, or her, development. The concept was complemented by a pedagogical felicity (referred to as a “pedagogy of of successful existence”), whose tenets justify the need to affirm life and the child's right to a happy childhood as the foundation of axiological and emotional human maturity (Żywczok, 2011).

The claim that “there is no future without children” is certainly a truism, but its transposition in the form of, “without proper perception of children, humanity will deprive itself of its future”, is definitely more thought-provoking.

A pejorative image of a child.

Towards a more mature perception of children in the future

The analysis and interpretation of the proverbs in this article was facilitated by the assumptions that the language results not only from forms and functions developed by human cultures since the dawn of time, and that it is not only a creation generated by these cultures (which use proverbs to express their views and beliefs), but that first and foremost it constitutes a tool (Everett, 2018, p. 7), by means of which human beings can get to know themselves and their surroundings and change the reality, giving it a human face.

There are a large number of proverbs that a certain part of the society repeats thoughtlessly, thus bearing witness to an insufficient pedagogical culture and indifference to unconstructive attitudes towards the child. The following several selected examples have been studied more closely:

- “Little children won’t let you sleep, big children won’t let you live” (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). The negative impact of this proverb is revealed in perceiving the child as a parental problem. What is worse, children appear to be a trouble not only in their early childhood, but also in the so-called late childhood and adolescence. The offspring is not depicted here as the most precious gift of life, but as a permanent burden to the parents, who are not allowed a moment of respite, or a longer rest. Here, the anguish caused to parents by their growing children is even more clearly emphasized. The drawback of parenting is not only the lack of sleep resulting from having to take care of the newborn baby; the greatest burden is borne much later, when the child matures. The problems that parents experience at this stage are often traumatic, making it impossible for them to function normally, or to lead a peaceful life. Such an image of a child is hardly worthy of approval.

- “You cannot feed other people’s children” (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). According to this proverb, there is an emotional difference in how adults approach their own and other people’s children. It justifies an attitude towards other people’s children that lack deep and positive emotions. Completely ignored here are foster care, adoption and the circumstances in which non-biological parents display just as intense (or even more intense) feelings toward their adoptive children as natural parents may show toward their own. The determination to metaphorically feed so-called other people’s children seems exactly to match the determination with which one is ready to protect one’s own offspring. The blood bond may therefore be considered unnecessary in

building a strong emotional relationship and a sense of family community between parents (or guardians) and their children. In general, this proverb does not express the truth about human relationships, which, regardless of the presence or absence of blood ties, may be full of emotional warmth, friendship and love. Such positive emotions may even be present in the educational relationship between a teacher and his or her students.

- "You cannot raise a child without punishing him" (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). The genealogy of this simplified understanding of the upbringing process, which counsels the use of punishment to control the behavior of the child, can be traced to the autocratic style of upbringing, common especially among patriarchal families of the past centuries. The findings of modern pedagogy and psychology, however, mark this statement as stereotypical and show that successful educational outcomes result from positive strengthening and support offered to children and simply not from punishing them. To make matters worse, strictness, or punitiveness on the part of parents, guardians, teachers, or educators may impede the process of upbringing and the development of personality in children. Therefore, this proverb does not seem worth repeating, or perpetuating in the social consciousness. Its content requires analysis and updating according to the stage of development of pedagogy. The dominance of an adult that is expressed by severe corporal, or mental punishment, is also sanctioned by another proverb, i.e. "You will punish a good child with a word, while a naughty child cannot be taught a lesson even with stick" (Masłowsky, 2008, p. 121).

- "May you teach other people's children" (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). Targeted by this highly contemptuous saying are teachers, educators and generally all those involved in the process of teaching children. According to this proverb such jobs are unglamorous, manifest someone's inability to find any other occupation, and may even be considered as a social curse.

Even in some proverbs that do not concern children directly (referring to a different period of life, for example the last one), their pejorative perception is visible. This is well illustrated by the proverb: "The old are children twice" (Hermann & Syjud, 1998, p. 203). In this saying, both the elderly and children are stereotypically assigned immaturity, dependence and helplessness. Thus, although proverbs are generally considered to be a manifestation of the philosophy and wisdom of those who came before us (Ścigalska, 2011), it is also worth realizing that many proverbs existing today reveal how ready some of our predecessors were to voice rash and unreasonable opinions, concerning, among others, the perception and education of children. Hermeneutical diligence and thorough examination of the message carried by each proverb are therefore needed in order to identify stereotypes among these texts.

About a child – with undisguised ambivalence

A certain number of proverbs convey neither a positive nor a negative image of the child. The proverbs presented below cause ambivalence, a simultaneous occurrence of opposite or mixed feelings towards a given issue. Our thoughts and feelings are effectively channeled in two directions that exclude each other, i.e. towards both a positive and a negative image of the child conveyed by the proverb. A question now arises whether the message contained in these proverbs evokes ambivalence in everyone. It is safe to assume that most prone to this feeling are educators and parents who understand children, who are sensitive to their experiences, and who are aware of their needs, rights, and developmental and educational potential. The following listicle contains a selection of such proverbs:

– “Children are dear because their parents’ hearts pay for them dearly” (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). A melancholic note of disappointment is heard in this proverb, caused by awareness of the mental costs incurred by parents in bringing them up. Children are dear (they are loved and valued) not because the parents suffer mental, physical or material loss while taking care of them throughout the entire process of their upbringing and education, but because children are born into this world and start to exist. Besides, it is not only the parents may be hurt and find their deep feelings incompletely reciprocated. Children also suffer as a result of irresponsibility on the part of their parents. In the model process of family upbringing in a loving environment, the mental costs are minimized and the profits – maximized.

– “Whoever has children, also has expenses” (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). This proverb shows a simplified image of the child as a consumer of his or her parents’ financial resources, although it is difficult to completely defy the logic in this statement. The rather one-sided (materialistic) approach to the relationship with the child evokes anxiety and the desire to show a valuable, meaningful psychological connection between parents and children. Pondering this proverb, one may easily feel a significant deficiency in the image of children it conveys, since, obviously, whoever has a child is also no longer alone; they have someone to love and to live for, they have found a greatest, irreplaceable treasure and a faithful friend and confidant. This point may help us to better understand the ambivalence one feels about this proverb.

– “All children are clever, so where do fools come from?” (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 55). This proverb exposes our proclivity to idealize our children, as well as the fact that we often take it for granted that the young ones are not only intelligent, but even above average. It is common knowledge, however, that adults struggle with numerous problems of an intellectual, emotional, or moral nature. It is then only natural that one begins to doubt the actual abilities, skills, intelligence, talents, or supposed genius of children. In the light of modern research, the aforementioned personality traits can be

diagnosed in the early stages of a child's development. They should manifest themselves even more clearly in an adult than in a child who is just developing his predispositions. However, this does not exclude the rare case in which a child's skills may be wasted (due to a lack of training or for other reasons), or go almost unidentified until adulthood. The very word “fool”, however, generates reservations related to the one-sided, unfair assessment, of both adults and children.

– “Children and debts grow like mushrooms after the rain” (Muras, ed., 2004, p. 72). Although the proverb focuses on a positive aspect of the child’s development – the rapid growth of his body (compared to the growth of mushrooms after the rain), the comparison of the child’s growth rate and increasing debts (which are always a kind of burden for the indebted person) violates the clearly positive image of the child. Ambivalence is also generated by the close lexical proximity of the terms “child” (*dziecko*) and “debt” (*dlug*), although they are in fact very different. After all, a child is a conscious and self-aware subject while a debt is simply money borrowed from another person or an institution. Another interpretation of this proverb is associated with the rapid expansion of the family. The ironic emotional tinge proves discriminatory against multi-child families, which are also stigmatized in another proverb, relatively often heard in spoken form (less so in the formal context), i.e. “Every year brings a new baby” (The exact wording of this proverb in Polish is “Every year a prophet is here” (Nyczaj, ed., 1994, p. 177) (here the word “prophet” simply means “child”). The ambivalence caused by the proverb: “Children and debts grow like mushrooms after the rain” (Muras, ed., 2004, p. 72) can only be reduced if we interpret this saying to be little more than a humorous statement.

The scope of this paper renders it impossible to analyse all the existing proverbs in which the presented image of the child arouses ambivalence. The following three are simply included here in conclusion of this section for the reader’s own insightful interpretation: “Children are best loved when they are asleep”, “Children carry their tears and their smiles in the same pocket”, “Children, jesters and great lords are allowed to do anything they desire” (Muras, ed., 2004, p. 72).

A positive perception of a child as perceptual model and a chance to overcome stereotypes

The meaning of the formally defined term “child” (as included in the introduction to this article) evokes many positive associations that are significant in shaping the pedagogical culture of contemporary communities. Further clarification of this term, supported by scientific explanations, has significantly facilitated the process of exposing stereotypes. It has also become easier to distinguish between proverbs that are worth repeating today from those that contain ambivalent and socially destructive content.

Set out below are a few proverbs, recited by a certain part of the society, that reveal positive perceptions of the child:

– “Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater” (Nyczaj, ed., 2004, p. 55). Here we learn that a child is a great treasure that should never be sacrificed in order to achieve other, less important goals. Applying the meaning of this proverb to modern circumstances, parents are advised to achieve a balance between their work and care for their child, who needs parental help in a variety of daily activities such as learning, resting and playing; the time parents and children spend together decisively strengthens the emotional familial bond between them.

– “A child will tell the truth” (Muras, ed., 2004, p. 72). This concise statement emphasizes a specific feature of most children, i.e. truthfulness (also understood as honesty). Children express their thoughts, observations and convictions directly, “not beating around the bush”, or hiding their feelings, not concealing their opinions, even when what they say out loud turns out to be uncomfortable for someone else. In comparison with the adults’ ability to use sophisticated manipulation of the social environment, children’s truthfulness appears as a unique character trait and a valuable quality of the human psyche, the more desirable the more its absence is felt. This proverb also conveys a pragmatic view, namely that if adults find it difficult to resolve complex interpersonal issues (including those within their families) and reach a consensus, they should ask or consult their children. The opinions expressed by a child on many contentious issues often turn out to be nearest to the truth and of a revealing nature.

– “A good child is his mother’s treasure” (Masłowski, 2008, p. 121). Here the image of the child is clearly positive. It is not the child per se, however, who is considered a treasure in this saying, but the child who is good. The term “good children” identifies those who remain in a good relationship with their parents (here – with their mother), who show them affection and respect and who express love/care and help their parents in their daily activities.

Although it is commonly accepted that “proverbs are the wisdom of nations”, rarely does one fully realize that many such sagacious sayings are a testimony to the prudence of our ancestors who, through trial and error, came up with constructive ideas, including within the sphere of the upbringing and development of children. If modern parents, guardians and teachers wish to tap the potential hidden in proverbial wisdom accumulated over the centuries, they would need the insight to discover the meaning and message contained in the proverbs (especially the oldest ones) that comment upon the youngest members of the society.

Conclusions

A scientific analysis of different ways of perceiving children may significantly contribute to the initiation of beneficial changes (related to humanization of intergenerational relations or social development), not only as regards the treatment of children, but also to in capturing the educational role, public health, and social policy systems today and in the future. The existence of pathological social phenomena such as infanticide, child trafficking, child abduction, violence against children in the family/school/peer circles, child neglect and corruption of minors, encourages the search for causes of such manifestations of structural evil, and for methods that can be effectively used to counteract these kinds of crime, or negative behavior.

Once we have managed to clearly define who the child is and what his, or her, specificity is, it becomes much easier to understand the child's psyche and appreciate its exceptional emotional and moral sensitivity. A wide social environment should be made aware of what adults owe to children, how much they learn from them, and how often adults self-improve thanks to children. Child stereotypes may effectively be challenged in many communicative situations, both of local and global nature, as soon as we assume a critical approach towards such ways of thinking and to a long list of derogatory terms in common use referring to children.

A clear distinction between proverbs with constructive meanings and those that convey a destructive, or ambivalent, message can be conducive to the adoption of a courageous attitude of avoiding social oppression towards children and of disallowing any signs that bring depreciation or discredit to the youngest members of our society in linguistic communication. The analysis of the proverbs in this paper provides evidence that the negative image of children results, among other things, from the distorted way they are perceived by adults, which requires timely correction. Improper perceptions of a child leads to the intensification of such processes as discrimination, dehumanization, or social exclusion.

The author of this paper strongly encourages parents, teachers, educators and guardians, responsible on daily basis for the successive humanization of the process of child upbringing and education, to popularize the concept of constructive perception of children proposed in this work. This kind of knowledge may in turn support professionals, including teachers, psychologists and sociologists, in their attempts to change the unfavorable beliefs and habits of others toward an instrumental treatment of children. It may also contribute to the adoption of a more mature attitude toward the youngest members of the society.

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