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Ideologies and Views Towards Disabilities and Abnormalities Across Cultures

In this paper, the research shows what disabilities and abnormalities, both physical and cognitive, that have been most prevalent in certain regions in the past, and how the differing cultures treat them. By using a comparison of past and present, one can see if views of the cultures change over time, and if those changes for the better or worse. Also, given that a certain region has a predominant pattern in any disability of sorts, like the sudden increase in Autism as well as ADHD in the United States, or the frequent prevalence of physical mutations throughout Vietnam, it makes sense to research into why those genetic mutations happen in that location, for example, if they are caused by environmental, chemical, or genetic causes. Another factor that is discussed is how the cultural customs of the United States, India, Vietnam, China, and East Africa affect the citizens' ideologies and sentiments towards those that have disabilities, for example, in the way that religion, language, or social structure affect the peoples' views, like in the culture of India.

First, many countries and regions around the world have such diverse cultures that largely influence the views of their citizens. According to the World Health Foundation (WHO), culture can be defined as “a pattern of ideas, customs and behaviors shared by a particular people or society”. Another, more in-depth, definition of culture would be “Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects

and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving” (Hofstede, 1997). Given that a country or region’s culture entails all of this, it is no wonder that each culture has the possibility to produce an entirely unique sentiment toward those with special needs. As an effect of having different culture, the term ‘disability’, which can be defined as “as a set of abilities and characteristics that vary from the norm in the limitations they impose on independent participation and acceptance in society”, can have many different meanings, too (Odom, Horner, Snell, Blacher, 2007). The views of disabilities in certain cultures may also have different levels of severity, in the way that while some cultures are ashamed of any impairment (whether physical or cognitive), like in China or Vietnam, while other cultures disregard the disability as long as the individual is able to contribute to their household and in their society, like in certain East African cultures. These disabilities may include cognitive/mental impairments (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Downs Syndrome, etc.), physical impairments (genetic related malformations, amputations, cerebral palsy) and other disabilities such as blindness or deafness that may cause an inability to properly work or function independently. With these differences in cultural views of disabilities also comes differences in beliefs over the cause of these abnormalities, as well as the method of treatment that the culture has adopted.

According to the World Health Organization in its latest World Health Survey, *World Report on Disability*, there are more than a billion people throughout the world are believed to have disabilities, meaning that around 15% of the world’s population – based upon the 2010 global population estimates- live with disabilities. This number of those with impairments is much higher than the World Health Organizations previous numbers, which were laying at about 10% of the population having disabilities during the 1970s. The World Report on Disability also

reported that “around 785 million (15.6%) of persons 15 years and older live with a disability, while the Global Burden of Disease estimates a figure of around 975 million (19.4%) persons. Of these, the World Health Survey estimates that 110 million people (2.2%) have very significant difficulties in functioning, while the Global Burden of Disease estimates that 190 million (3.8%) have “severe disability” – the equivalent of disability inferred for conditions such as quadriplegia, severe depression, or blindness” (World Health Organization, 2016). This increase in the prevalence of disabilities around the world is caused by the aging of the populations (older people are known for higher rates of disability) and because of the world spread increase in chronic health conditions related with the term disability, such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mental illness such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Also stated in the World Health Survey, “Chronic diseases are estimated to account for 66.5% of all years lived with disability in low-income and middle-income countries (1). Patterns of disability in a particular country are influenced by trends in health conditions and trends in environmental and other factors – such as road traffic crashes, natural disasters, conflict, diet, and substance abuse” (World Health Organization, 2016). As seen in some countries and regions such as the United States, China, Vietnam, India, and East Africa, the cultural differences lead to different affects on the lives of those with disabilities- such as poor health outcomes, lower educational achievements, higher poverty, less economic participation , and higher dependency and less acceptance.

In a brief overview, compared to other countries and their cultures, the United States culture has seemed to have embraced those with cognitive differences. Currently, approximately 52 million Americans are known to have an impairment such as cerebral palsy, mental disabilities, depression, spinal cord injury, visual impairment, arthritis, and muscular dystrophy ,

as well as numerous other impairments. With so many American citizens impaired, much improvement has been made in efforts to help them. During the past few decades, there have been numerous changes in our society relating to the treatment of people with disabilities, which can be seen in acts passed into law to make things fairer for those with disabilities, such as the Fair Housing Act, which now prohibits discrimination in selling and renting of public and private housing, as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in July 26, 1990. In addition, there have been many advancements in health care and living circumstances, as many facilities have been established for the purpose of community living, which allows for proper care for those with needs. Also, the United States has established school programs specifically modified for those who need a slightly bigger push than the rest, with many institutions now integrating multiple special needs programs into their schools. Also, the culture of the United States over the last few generations is one example in a view change over time, with how younger generations seem to be much more accepting of those that have both cognitive and physical disabilities. A way that one can see the changes in the views of the impaired in U.S. culture is in the change of terminology. During the 19th and 20th centuries, those who were impaired were often sent to institutions for the disabled, and were seemingly removed from society. Those who were impaired had been frequently labeled with 'mental retardation', 'handicapped', 'disabled', and other insensitive terms. In today's society, there has been a noticeable movement to terms such as the 'impaired', those with 'special needs', or 'differently abled'. This topic can be seen as important due to the fact that it has become scientifically proven that more and more children are being born with Autism, formerly known as Asperger's Syndrome, so it is important that people are more aware, and accepting of that fact. A noticeable difference between the culture of the

United States and others, such as India, Vietnam, or China, is that the religion of the U.S. doesn't seem to have a significant effect on the peoples view on disabilities.

Another area to examine the affects that culture has on a populations view on disabilities would be East Africa, which consists of Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. In East Africa, the more traditional beliefs about the causes of disability continue to be the most prevalent. When reporting her research Angi Stone-MacDonald, Ph.D. cited S. G. Harknett, who stated that the beliefs of the causes of disability in East Africa can be divided in three categories. Traditional animism includes beliefs that disabilities are punishments for bad deeds or the result of witchcraft inflicted upon a person. Christian fatalism beliefs include that disability results as an act of God's will. Lastly, Medical determinist beliefs accept the explanations of modern medicine as to the cause of disabilities (Harknett, 1996). An example of these beliefs would be that people in Zimbabwe have believed that cerebral palsy is a result of witchcraft, spirits, or disobeying an ' taboo'. They also made witchcraft to blame for blindness. Most East African cultures also believed that disabilities were punishments from the gods for misdeeds or were bad omens, which caused those with impairments to be abandoned. There are also descriptions restricted actions ('taboos') that are thought to cause a disability when broken . For example, the Nandi people of Kenya consider it a bad offence to kill animals without good reason during a wife's pregnancy (Stone-MacDonald, 2014)(Ogechi & Ruto, 2002). Another of the East African cultural beliefs is that ridiculing those with impairments could cause one's child to be born with defects or disabilities, bring oneself harm, or bring a curse onto one's future family's generations(Stone-MacDonald, 2014; Ogechi & Ruto, 2002; Talle, 1995). Many tribes also believe that disabilities are caused by God's influence, having been marked (blessed or cursed) by God himself. Even more, some African countries such as Nigeria hold the belief that

disabilities in children are a sign of evil-spirit possession, which makes the parent take care of the child- but only to protect themselves and the community from the anger of the spirit (Eskay, 2012). However, today, much more people are accepting the medical reasoning such as birth defects and genetics for the disabilities in place of ideals such as witchcraft. In much of the East African countries, families will still care for the family members with impairments, however, those that are impaired are less accepted into society if they do not contribute economically to the community. As long as one can work, disabilities become second-nature and are ignored and even accepted. For example, Among the Abagusii and Nandi people of Kenya, individuals are described by how well they integrate into social and communal life (Ogechi & Ruto, 2002). For example, in some tribes, blindness or deafness isn't really seen as a big disability. Similarly, the Maasai of Kenya only see people with disabilities as "abnormal" if they are unable to carry out daily activities (Stone-MacDonald, 2014). In many East African communities, important life events such as coming of age ceremonies, marriage, and childbearing involve very important rituals. If those with disabilities aren't able to take part in these, then they are less likely to be accepted. Even worse, the language limitations make it so that many of the East African countries do not have a word to describe "disabled", only words that describes the body function of the part of the person that is disabled, or even more derogatory words in Ugandan that mean "fool" for blindness.

The culture of India has caused a different perspective on its population's views on disabilities, too. In India, Many families do not report their children's disability in order stay away from negative attitudes toward people with disability in most communities. It is estimated that there are about 90 million people that are living with disabilities in India. Many citizens with with leprosy, amputations or visual impairments often use their impairments to solicit money.

This interaction may cause the impaired person to be pitied, shunned or supported by charity. Negative attitudes result from this type of contact in which people with disabilities are viewed as inferior. In some places in India, people with disabilities are abandoned at birth, since parents are ashamed of their disabled child.. This may stem from the religious beliefs such as Karma, that signify the disability as a punishment for past deeds. Within the Indian culture, it is accepted as one's fate that they have an impairment. Rehabilitation and medical services are not easily available to the majority of the overpopulated India, so not many people have access to places to receive help for those with disabilities. Also, Economic hardship, poor transport facilities and a lack of education make it harder for the parents to access services for their child (Pinto ,M.S., M.S.W., Sahur, 2016). On the other hand, an example of the religion of India affecting the belief towards a disability would be Lakshmi Tatma. She was born as a girl with “four arms and four legs” and because of this, was hailed as the reincarnation of the Hindu goddess, Vishnu. Even further, her parents stated that it had been God’s will to make her that way, and still cared for her. Despite there being a medical reason for the girl being born with so many limbs (her twin had been absorbed into her body, and became a ‘parasitic twin’), many people disregarded and thought of it as a manifestation of their religion in their culture. As of recent years, there has been a movement to help the disabled. There are over 1600 voluntary organizations in India that work to give help to those on need. These range from the very professional, successful organizations, to smaller organizations that lack resources (Pinto ,M.S., M.S.W., Sahur, 2016). The government of India, with the assistance of the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), a U.S. government organization, has created the National Information Center on Disability and Rehabilitation in Delhi, in order to organize

and gain information on disability throughout India, and on top of this, there has been a rise in institutional care in India, as well(Pinto ,M.S., M.S.W., Sahur, 2016).

Within Vietnam, culture emphasizes the importance of family and community, harmony, duty, honor, respect, education and allegiance to the family. There are two main ideals on disabilities within the Vietnamese culture. The more traditional view of disability in Vietnam is heavily inspired by its religious beliefs and cultural values as the culture believes a disability to be a result or an effect of the bad deeds or sins committed by one's ancestors. This belief stems from their Buddhist Religion's concept of reincarnation, which signifies that from birth to death to the afterlife, a person assumes the same identity, in physical or spiritual form (Hunt, 2002). The reincarnation cycle has its own hierarchy of significance. Humans rank the highest and insects are at the lowest level. Persons who committed bad acts in their life will be reincarnated into a lesser form in their next life, and future generations of their family could also be inflicted with impairments and disabilities. Because of the fear of public humiliation, family members usually take extraordinary measures to keep the person with disabilities out of the public eye. People with mental disabilities in the Vietnamese culture are viewed differently from those with physical disabilities. Due to the beliefs of Buddhism and Animism, mental illness is believed be possession by evil spirits and exorcism by monks or fortunetellers is considered the remedy. On a more positive side, those who are blind from birth may be thought of as psychics and fortunetellers. The Vietnamese believe that these people have special vision that can see beyond the present life into the past and the future and so they often work at a temple, in their own shop or in the open market, which is a way that demonstrates how culture and religion positively affect the views of disabilities across cultures (Hunt, 2002). Opposite of the traditional view, is the newer perspective on disability that takes on the medical reasons as to why the impairments

are prevalent In Vietnam: Agent Orange. Today, more evidence has been found that indicates Agent Orange as the cause of many diseases, debilitating conditions, and disabilities, birth defects and congenital disabilities. A 1998 report by the National Academy of Sciences attributed the high incidence of Vietnamese children with Spina Bifida to the effect of Agent Orange (Hunt, 2002). Agent Orange was a herbicide developed by the U.S. military, and used in the Vietnam War. The U.S. military used 19 million gallons of Agent Orange to destroy all trees, vegetation, and crops in jungles and farmlands to keep the enemy from hiding. Agent Orange has been discovered as harmful to humans and contains tetrachlorodibenzoparadioxin (TCDD), which has been the cause of the numerous genetic mutations and disabilities found throughout Vietnam, today. (Agent Orange Website, 2002). With this new perspective on Agent Orange, most people with disabilities were more accepted by the public, as they could be seen as victims of the war, and now there are about 1.3 possible victims of this chemical living in Vietnam, today. In the past few decades, the government of Vietnam has used a better approach to protect the needs of those with disabilities by enacting what is called the "Ordinance On Disabled Persons" , which provided a legal foundation for protections of the disabled.

Lastly, the Chinese culture has its own effects on its population's ideologies towards disabilities, as well. With the largest population in the world, 5 percent, or 63 million people in China are known to have disabilities. The traditional Chinese term for disability is "canfei," which translates to "handicap" and "useless," or the word "canji," in Chinese, which means "handicap" and "illness." This is an example of how language and terminology can determine the culture's sentiments towards disabled- China's pattern seems to be the opposite of the U.S., which has made more well-meaning sentiments towards the disabled with more modern, accepting terminology. The terms used in the Chinese language easily demonstrate how the

Chinese have viewed disability. In many areas of China, the appearance of a disability is viewed as a punishment for the disabled person's parent's or their past-life's wrong-doings. When one has health problems, many religious people, especially in areas where medical resources are not readily available or sufficient will visit temples or priest houses to pray, worship or perform rituals in order to find the cause and solution to their diseases or disabilities.

Mental health is something that is believed to be achieved through self-discipline, exercise of power and the avoidance of bad or sinful thoughts. In some cases, mental illness is blamed on evil spirits or punishment from gods.. Another belief is that unbalanced diet, eating food that should be avoided, or emotional imbalances during pregnancy could cause illness or disability of the newborn (Zhang Liu, 2001). As of recent decades, China has adopted many aspects of the Western medical/rehabilitation system and it has aggressively developed its own rehabilitation system over the past two decades. Another way that shows a positive view for the disabled is the establishment of school programs in the field of special education. China's Education Law of 1986 made it mandatory to provide special education for individuals with special needs.

Conclusively, the cultural views of a country or region can have a great effect on those who are impaired or disabled. With 15 percent of the world being impaired, it is important to see how differences in cultural values lead to such diverse treatment of the disabled. For example, With such strong ties to religion and its culture, places in East Africa, China, Vietnam and India all have a strong traditional sentiment towards those with disabilities. Though they do not all share the same religion, or share the same history or folklore, most of them have shared the belief that the disabled can be a burden, and in some way reflect a bad omen, or a punishment from the god that they believe in. Along with the United States, that has had a recent surge in acceptance towards those with special needs, China, Vietnam , as well as India has tried to start

rehabilitation for those with needs. It is the Fokelore, the religious beliefs, and the history behind each country and region that has inspired the different , and increasingly positive and accepting views towards those that are impaired.

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