



# Paremiology in the Study of Cultural Aspects of Depression: The Case of Polish Proverbs

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## Abstract

The paper presents how proverbial-like narratives depict the cultural aspects of depression. Typical automatic thoughts are illustrated by paremioscripts, defined as mental scripts imprinted in proverbs. The paper outlines the conceptual context of depression in the dialogical self, and proverbs as collective memory. Key dimension of optimism-pessimism is a background to isolate the typical thoughts of the depressed. It shows how psychology may be culturally adjusted by typical narratives familiar to clients from their distinct cultural background. This paper proposes that paremiology (the study of proverbs) and proverb thinking when applied to depression reveal specific cultural features of depressiveness. It presents how optimism and pessimism imprinted in typical Polish proverbs bear cultural aspects of depression. Some practical implications are presented as to how proverbs may be applied in culturally-oriented psychotherapy.

**Keywords:** Depression; Proverbs; Culture; Optimism; Pessimism; Paremiology

## The Scope and Needs Related to Cultural Aspects of Depression

Culture and personality seem to be an inescapable tandem of human behaviour. Considering the degree to which culture matters, psychology must reach more deeply to be legitimized by culturally-shaped and transmitted by language human experience. Avoiding the vibrant debate on definitions, I understand culture to be a distinct means of satisfying various needs [1] experienced, conceptualized and mediated by language and related to collective memory [2,3].

Researchers have noticed that cross-cultural psychology has frequently failed to define mental disorders in a

precise and culturally adequate manner [4], going beyond empirical evidence of significant differences when it applies to depressiveness e.g. of Western and non-Western societies [5]. Over the decades, the default mode of the mainstream American or European psychology has resulted in ungrounded generalizations, while depression varies across cultures.

Along with cultural shifts, affective disorders have become the most prevalent ones, significantly diminishing the quality of life, as episodes of Major Depression occur in 17% of the world population [6]. According to the APA, 25 to 33% of the population suffers from a depressive disorder at least once during their lifetime [7]. According to epidemiological data on the growth rate of people with

depression, the WHO estimates that in 2030, depression will be one of the primary diseases of civilization across all cultures. At present, Poles constitute approximately 10% of all Europeans suffering from depression and are the most vulnerable of all national cultures [6].

Depression is still a relatively poorly-explored disorder. Despite the continuous development of psychotherapeutic and medical intervention, there is a large group of patient's refractory to currently available methods of therapy or counseling [8]. According to WHO data more than 50% of people suffering from depression worldwide (in some countries up to 90%) do not receive the necessary assistance. Additionally, the relatively low therapy efficiency is associated with a high mortality rate of patients with affective disorders. Every year, approximately one million people die from suicide, which is associated mostly with depression [9].

Inaccurate and unreliable diagnoses pose severe limitations in the fight against depression. Even in countries with advanced health care development, cases of undiagnosed or misdiagnosed depression occur, along with the application of inappropriate antidepressant pharmacotherapy or psychotherapy [10,11]. Heretofore unexplained etiology and mechanisms of affective disorders require the search for new practices of support and new methods of treatment for people with depression [12].

A search for new ways to prevent depression is still needed, because remission rates within the following few years after the end of therapy are very high and affect about 40% of people treated for depression disorders [13]. In addition to the dramatically high psychosocial costs (leading to morbidity and mortality), the economic costs of depression and medical care are estimated at 92 billion Euros a year worldwide [14]. Studies on the effectiveness of methods used against depression indicate the significance of culture and language and daily discourse analysis in the development of adequate and effective techniques for treatment of depression [15-17]. In this context, we face the urgent need to seek a new, more cultural perspective such as language and metaphoric narratives of persons suffering from depression.

Mental health is affected by culture and addresses the more fundamental concern of mind-culture relation [18]. Hence, mental disorders and their treatment should also refer to a national 'genome' shaped by the culture-like premises of socialization and language [19,20]. In the context of ethnocentric tendencies in psychology and increased globalization reinforced additionally by massive

migration, the question arises as to how cultural factors matter in mental disorders and treatment, especially when this concerns particular migrating and culturally diverse societies.

Poland is the most prominent example of the leading migration countries with more than half of the present population (38 million) of Poles living abroad, mainly in the USA and Western Europe. This raises the question as to what extent models and culture-related interventions can be used universally, bypassing the meaning of typical cultural scripts, differentiating communities, or categories of people with disorders such as depression. The depressed person's beliefs correspond to their emotional functioning and reasoning abilities reflected in daily discourse and these beliefs will meaningfully influence thoughts and problem-solving capabilities in times of depression [21]. Hence, the main obstacles to successful psychotherapeutic support, prevention, and prophylaxis come frequently from misunderstandings of the patient's environment. This includes cultural factors, such as commonly used language playing an outstanding role as a "mental disorders carrier" [22].

Summing up, the "proverb thinking" presented in the following sections is an attempt to overcome culturally biased or "blind" psychology and therapy highlighting the role of language. These points to cultural traits of affective disorders in the subtle aspects of pessimism and optimism anchored in Polish proverbs as carriers of culture. Just as the individualism-collectivism dichotomy became an essential reference in cross-cultural psychology [4,23], optimism-pessimism serves as a fundamental characteristic of mood and personality [24]. Hence, to what extent may optimism and pessimism play a meaningful psychological and cultural role?

### **Pessimism as a Cultural Trait of Depressiveness**

What makes us think somebody is depressive? As we encounter people suffering from depression, we immediately notice and hear certain qualities that lead us to recognize their depressive state and typical features. Among many clinical traits, pessimism belongs to its key and most frequently mentioned indicators [24]. Hirsch's research [25] on mental health predictors points out an optimism and pessimism continuum as one of the significant mediating variables influencing depressive symptoms in suicide attempts. Empirical studies evidenced role of sunlight intensity in explaining the prevalence of depression in the North and South Pole regions and the annual seasonality of admissions of patients with affective disorders in Poland [26]. However,

we may assume there are particular cultural factors underlying the emotional mechanisms and mental health [25]. The relation of sunshine and optimism reflected in language seem an insightful analogy guiding us to view the role of cultural constraints in depression.

What makes people optimistic or pessimistic? "Optimistic" derives from the Latin "optimum" meaning "favourable" and denotes the person expecting the best possible results from any situation. That is why optimism is usually associated with happiness, good moods, and a positive attitude towards life [27]. Interestingly, optimism is also related to time, specifically, to the belief that future circumstances will unfold advantageously. Optimism and pessimism are considered to be robust determinants of specific cultural traits of persons with affective disorders and also cognitive features important for survival [28]. These two constructs coincide with cognitive strategies and guide the way in explaining why certain experiences or events happen, and why they are regarded as being either positive or negative. In other words, the optimist is said to see the glass as half full, while the pessimist sees the glass as half empty [29].

The complexity of depression still challenges studies aiming to better understand the mental schemes of depressed people. Despite intense research on this association in diverse ethnic samples [30], no study has examined whether proverb-like narratives on optimism and pessimism may cast new light on the phenomenon of depression. The basic question is whether pessimism and optimism as imprinted in commonly-used narratives may be applied to describe depressiveness and influence the mind of the depressed that is immersed in a typical underlying culture [31].

### Narratives That Depressed Persons Live By

One of the most intriguing findings in psycholinguistics is how language affects culture and the way we think, feel, remember, and perceive the world. Language is a primary cognitive tool we use to categorize experience as it embodies our naive conception of reality and self. People need to understand the world, so they develop their implicit theories, which help them understand reality and everyday life behaviors [32].

Every day we experience how the way we think is closely related to our culture and what we say [33] including the "narratives we live by" [34]. Hence, language is frequently seen as a mirror which reflects the thoughts of homo loquens. Though the original form of linguistic determinism lacks sufficient empirical support [35], there is substantial proof of how language, and specifically

narratives and sayings, influence thoughts [36]. The idea of linguistic relativity evidences that language may evoke specific narratives as cultural referents of self, other people, time, etc. Though empirical support that the relationship between culture and cognition is weaker than was assumed in linguistic determinism language is involved in human cognition affecting higher-level cognitive processes [37].

Narrative psychology claims that our capacity to narrate, understand, and integrates our most essential life stories may be a key aspect in the creation of culture. Many clinicians and researchers confirm the crucial role of self-narrative and personal stories in therapy for depression [38]. The phenomenon of inner speech seems to be a way to connect experience with the ongoing present and probable future imprinted in culture. Self-narratives condition coherence and stability over time, explaining different cultural domains [39].

The concept of the dialogical self proposed in Hermans' theory [40] outlines a promising path to explore affective disorder mechanisms in areas of language and culture. Narrative psychology assumes that the self is dialogical by its nature. The philosophy of dialogue and literature describe the "polyphonic self" and "dialogical self" and can be traced to the works of William James, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Martin Buber that claim dialogical traits of the self. Hermans' concept of internal speech underlies narratives that may arise in self-awareness as a system of common sayings circulating in the society.

The dialogical approach argues that the nature of the self is inseparably linked to the embodied experience rooted in the social environment and discourse [31]. Hence, we may assume that Hermans' theory on internal dialog tends to locate sources of depression in the socio-cultural context with an emphasis on the role of language. Cabell describes a general construction process of self (self-making) as a kind of synthesis where the self is emerging in the process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of conventional narratives and positions of "I" [42]. Furthermore, Dimaggio et al. [43] give examples of how to reorganize these dialogues in the process of psychotherapy in the sphere of intra as well as interpersonal dialogues [43]. Apart from the conceptual context of narrative psychology there is robust empirical evidence on the linguistic character of mood disorders in spoken language and narratives [44]. Hence, a change in self-narratives may also underlie cultural shifts, where metaphoric proverb-like expressions function as mini-stories permeating the natural discourse and play a significant role in facilitating specific experiences in depression [45]. McAdams and Janis advise that

internalized self-narratives may have as much impact on guiding actions and behavior as dispositional traits. Therefore, when therapists help clients construct new self-narrative representations, they are impacting the self-image rooted in a specific culture [46,47].

Similarly, Angus and Greenberg also view self-narrative representations as guiding future actions and note that life satisfaction often depends on how events conform to our narrative expectations. Hence, the verbalization and consolidation of the self through narratives become a vital part of the therapeutic change process and may be reflected in more general traits of language and culture [48]. Watkins emphasizes the role of negative narratives and repetitive thinking in the prevention of, or an other hand, in the development of, depressions and anxiety disorders [49]. He describes some mindfulness practices where therapeutic intervention seeks to discourage automatic, habitual patterns of thoughts and typical narratives in clients with depressed moods. In conclusion, the dialogical approach supports the significance of the daily discourse imprinted in typical, common sayings to better understand "culture of depressiveness". People with depression are somehow imprisoned in their personal stories struggling to define and express themselves due to their emotional and cognitive conditioning [50]. In the attempt to articulate themselves they often use the language of metaphors, images, and common sayings, through which it is easier for them to capture and convey their feelings and state of mind.

### Proverbs as a Window into the Depressed Mind of Polish People

Why should we study culture by the proverbs permeating a specific culture in the context of depression? First of all, proverbs are a natural component of our daily discourse. Significantly, cross-cultural studies on language of everyday communication have evidenced that the Polish culture has been generally characterized as a culture of complaint and pessimism [51,52]. Proverbial expressions, as an excellent example of self-narratives representation, offer a 'handle' to better understand and approach the self-speech of depressive people, in this case in the Polish language and culture. Additionally, because of the massive migration and a growing number of cultural nomads often forced to leave their homes, it is not surprising that paremiologists (researchers of proverbs) have elaborated a so-called "proverbial minimum" in order to briefly grasp typical cultural codes required to effectively immerse in a foreign culture with its collective memory code. Expatriates' acquaintance with typical proverbs often indicates to what extent they are familiar with the new national spirit (Volkgeist) imprinted in typical proverbs

[53]. These proverbs become an indirect indicator of new language competence and a passport legitimising a new cultural mastery with its typical national traits such as: Deru kugi wa utareru [The nail that sticks out gets hammered down]; Ordnung must sein [There must be order]; Time is money or My home my castle, etc. reflecting briefly some typical cultural features such as: Japanese collectivism, German order, American pragmatism or British individualism.

This section presents a new perspective based on typical mental scripts conveyed by Polish proverbs with typical culture traits of depressiveness. As numerous scholars emphasize the role of language in therapeutic change, depression may be influenced by commonly-used narratives in daily discourse [9]. An interesting example of how language emerges from experience is the omnipresent phenomenon of proverb thinking. It allows making a shift from abstract discussion about the relation between culture, language and cognition into the daily discourse illustrated by commonly used proverbs. What are proverbs? The definition of what a proverb is emerges from a long scholarly discussion [54]. Proverbs (gr. paroimia) are expressions coming from the past, generalized, repeated, and frequently grasped by metaphor. They give commonly used advice as adopted and familiarized by individuals and society.

Proverbs denote a naturally conversational genre [55], hence it is a good point of departure to study them, either the inner dialog or the one omnipresent in daily speech. Tannen distinguishes the proverb, with its descriptive, interpretative, and prescriptive functions, from other genres, as a conversational form not associated with any particular source or author [53,56]. Proverbs fulfill the human need to summarize experiences and observations into nuggets of wisdom that provide ready-made comments on personal relationships and social affairs.

Some authors point out that proverbs have a cultural loading as they reflect traits of certain groups, be they national groups or any group of people with a specific worldview, such as, in this case, depressed people. Other studies indicate that the linguistic properties of proverbial expressions make them useful in diagnosis and therapy. Though proverbs may serve in the diagnosis of schizophrenia or higher order mental processes [57], however there has been little said on the application of proverbs to indicate automatic thoughts or mental scripts typical for persons with depression.

Up to now, there have been relatively few studies on the relationship between commonly used proverbs and the way people with depression function [58,59]. This



paremiological perspective on depression is in line with the philosophy of language by Ricoeur who was convinced that language, especially commonly used metaphors, symbols, and stories, is essential to understanding depression and culture [60]. What makes the proverb so influential in a culture with depressiveness as national trait? A fundamental aspect of affective disorders is the system of concepts acquired and created along the lifespan and stored as "latent but reactive" factors activated in stressful moments [61-63]. Segal and Show are convinced that these latent, but reactive mental structures may create or activate negative patterns that are related to ego, and are typical for depressive cognitive structures.

According to some scholars, proverbs have therapeutic power coming from their metaphoric nature [21,64] but also from their specific enthymematic nature. Enthymeme is based on the syllogism where at least one argument is missing but obvious. The primary mechanism that makes the enthymeme work in mental processing is often an analogy or hypothetical syllogism related to the person. The enthymeme premises recognized in the specific metaphoric script imprinted in the proverb (translated from Polish) have the potential to grasp and even reconstruct the mental space of the person with depression by new rules, discovered by the person, e.g.:  
 Po nocy wschodzi słońce [After night the sun rises]: natural rule of the variability of life;  
 Co cię nie zabije, to cię wzmocni [Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger]: the value of life difficulties and inconveniences; Każdy jest kowalem swojego losu [Everyone is the blacksmith of his or her own destiny]: continuous ability to influence one's own life.

### In Search of Typical Polish Proverbs as Carriers of Depressiveness

According to Kelly the key to mental disorders is a distorted self-concept imprinted in naive personal theories (Furnham, 1988). Proverbs present short and practical suggestions about how things should be interpreted and how to deal with problems which depicts particular cultures. Hence, proverbial expressions as mini-theories become vital carriers of cultures and specific patterns of perception, thinking, and behavior (Tanrikulu & Taşkın, 2011). Hence, proverbs as culture factors may affect members of the group distinguished by typical sayings reflecting, e.g., different levels of optimism or temporal perspective [65,66]. Some possible examples of how key depression traits of culture may be imprinted and expressed in the figurative language of Polish proverbs come from the paremiological study. They are listed below as a fragment of an extensive preliminary

analysis of hundreds of proverbs which resulted in the collection of 400 proverbs assessed semantically by competent judges and categorized according to their intensity of optimism and pessimism [67].

Key features linked to typical national character of these proverbs may be exemplified by narratives on optimism and hope, or narratives on fatalism and pessimism, considered the most representative characteristics of depressiveness in Polish culture and imprinted in Polish proverbs.

Porywać się z motyką na słońce [Try to conquer the sun with a stick]  
 Nieszczęścia chodzą parami [Misfortunes come in pairs];  
 Nie chwal dnia przed zachodem słońca [Do not praise the day before the sunset];  
 Nadzieja matką głupich [Hope is the mother of fools];  
 Wyżej głowy nie podskoczysz [One can't jump higher than one's head];  
 Jak ktoś nie ma szczęścia, nic mu nie pomoże [If you lack good luck, nothing will help you];  
 Człowiek nie zna dnia ani godziny [You never know (Man knows neither the day nor the hour)];  
 Człowiek całe życie się uczy i głupim umiera [Man learns throughout his life and dies stupid];  
 Człowiek jest samotną wyspą [A man is a lonely island];  
 Za wysokie progi jak na moje nogi [The threshold is too high for my feet];  
 Człowiek człowiekowi wilkiem [Man is a wolf to his fellow man (homo homini lupus)];

The common use of metaphoric expressions such as these examples reveal some depressive traits of Polish culture, while some contrary sayings, on the other hand, tend to illustrate opposite life experiences and contrasting worldviews. The result of an additional study was the set of proverbs related to optimism and highlighting the opposite traits carried simultaneously in Polish proverbs:

Każdy jest kowalem swojego losu. [Everyone is the blacksmith [master] of their [own] fate];  
 Nie mam wpływu na wiatr, ale ode mnie zależy ustawienie żagla; [I have no influence on the wind, but it is up to me to set the sail];  
 Praca ustawiczna wszystko przemoże [Continuous work will make all the difference];  
 Po każdej nocy wschodzi słońce [After each night the sun rises];  
 Dla chcącego nie ma nic trudnego [Where there is a will there is a way];  
 Nie ma tego złego, co by na dobre nie wyszło [Every cloud has a silver lining];

Każdy kryje w sobie olbrzymia [Everyone is hiding a giant deep inside.];

Dobry początek to połowa roboty [A good start is half the work];

Co się źle zaczyna, to się dobrze kończy [All's well that ends well]

Nadzieja umiera ostatnia [Hope dies last];

The examples of the proverbs given above can be used as antitheses, i.e. anti-proverbs (Mieder, 1998) opposing dysfunctional cognitive strategies and promoting culture marked by optimism. The key issue of the culture embodied in typical proverbs is how up-to-date they are for the individual and his/her reasoning.

Though considered "words of wisdom," proverb thinking reveals a different kind of rationality imprinted in specific cultures one can meet in Poland. Unlike analytic thinking, this mode of reasoning focuses on the functional aspect and is called 'personal rationality' [68]. Similarly, Melvin Pollner states that it is 'a mundane reasoning' [69], Golwyn Trevarthen speaks about 'a dialogic mind,' coinciding with Mark Turner and Hubert Hermans' concept of 'a narrative mind' [40]. All these modes of reasoning deal with more intuitive structures of thoughts than pure analytic thinking. Personal rationality reflects the most typical cultural characteristics recalling specific individual experiences and may function as a so-called "grandmother's voice" activated in critical circumstances such as depression.

In general, the proverbs used in speech, including inner speech, function as arguments to convince, to persuade, or to defend particular beliefs so typical in certain cultures (Lauhakangas, 2007). In that sense a proverb can be considered as a piece of advice concerning a recommended direction of thinking, feeling, or action. As such, a proverb is priming some cultural features associated with the latent feelings, wishes, and intentions of the speaker. Summing up, proverbs with their formal and pragmatic aspects become a collective memory evoking distinct experience recorded in Polish language by proverbial narratives. Hence, the power of particular proverbs as a cultural carrier depends on the familiarity effect: the more familiar and typical, the proverb, and the stronger the effect [70].

### Towards a Culturally Oriented Perspective on Depressiveness

Psychology and psychiatry insistently seek the most adequate model of depression. The way we understand the minds and culture of depressed persons depends on the way we deal with the interplay between culture and

depression, between social memory and individual cognition [71]. These two levels, the collective and personal, seem to be combined with proverb thinking phenomenon, fusing the more stable aspect of collective memory with more personal, ontogenetic experience, both interrelated in concise and imaginative proverbial narratives. Although we have access to precise definitions provided by experts classifying mental disorders as ICD-10 or DSM-5, this paper augments these by presenting a link between depression and culture. The paremiological perspective has been proposed to understand and use the influential language of proverbs and proverb thinking, as well as to depict typical depression indicators of pessimism and optimism illustrated by proverb-like narratives in Polish language.

According to Mieder people are keen to use metaphoric proverbs, although they call them clichés or well-worn expressions. He claims, however, "they are never out of season," especially when in applied to more stable national character features carried in collective memory. This creates the opportunity to understand and reconstruct the "client's story" based on his or her culture by proverbial metaphors representing the most typical automatized scripts [72,73].

The theoretical background of narrative psychology has a potential to combine two seemingly distant fields such as clinical psychology and paremiology. Conceptual apparatus of dialogical self in the paremiological perspective set new paths for analysis of human psyches in crisis or depression. Gonçalves shows the applicability of the polipsychism and internal dialogue for priming adequate new paths of perception and understanding of oneself and the world in the process of psychotherapy [74].

Psychological studies on proverbs demonstrate how the phenomenon of proverb thinking may be helpful in rooting depression in culture [32,58]. Proverbs may encourage the client to conduct internal dialog with the paremioscripts as tools recovered and introduced in the therapy process to rebuild the self-concept on the bases of powerful antiproverbs depicting protocols typical for culture [75]. Proverbiality, though an omnipresent phenomenon, highlights a new perspective on depression reflected in polyphonic nature where proverbs become windows to the cultural aspects of depression. As such, proverb thinking is an example of a dialogical nature of self where narratives may serve in inner speech and in searching for adequate and balanced beliefs concerning e.g. pessimism and optimism as key correlates of depression.

Paremiocripts as personal stories with their descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive purposes may not only express national character, but in more specific cases may effectively stimulate insight and even new "story-crafting" to reconstruct typical dysfunctional attitudes such as depressiveness. In the context of therapy and counselling, clients' settings of their most typical and experience-based narratives move to deeper levels of depressive attitudes that are usually difficult to grasp and coin in a more literal, direct way. Assuming the nature of depression linked to social context and language, we can employ figurative language in the psychotherapy process of affective disorders to stimulate mental change by culture-bound paremiocripts.

According to psychiatric experience, interventions with proverbs enhance motivation and participation in therapy and decrease defensiveness [63]. Proverbs are an efficient way to express problems and provide the opportunity for psychologically sensitive insights [76]. They stimulate clients to explore and articulate more inaccessible thoughts and feelings [77]. The new concept 'the proverb speech' denotes the aspect of communication where a proverb-like saying is used to stimulate an inner speech and narrative mode of thought. Beyond this, proverbs may encourage the client to reconstruct or create new culture and adequate stories by new self-narratives brought out during the counseling or psychotherapy process.

The power of language is linked to proverb-like narratives commonly considered "the language of power" as solutions that are ready-to-use and endorsed by culture. The metaphor language of proverbs enhances attention and focus and stimulates the development of insight especially in youth and children with depression [78]. Metaphoric proverbs by their vivid imagery may inspire patients to undertake constructive dialog, be it internal or external, and can lead to appropriate solutions associated with the particular experience carried in commonly-used sayings [79]. In some sense, we may state that the phenomenon of using commonly used proverbial narratives is the externalization of the internal speech coined by the dialogical self and embodied in the commonly-used proverb.

One of the limitations in the application of proverbs in counseling is that it is necessary to "contextualize" their use. Then it is necessary to anchor them in the specific experience of the depressed person: in his or her cultural, occupational or personal interests. Secondly, proverbs require higher-level cognitive processes to grasp their metaphorical meaning. Hence, applicability may be limited in cases of severe depression or pharmacotherapy

or other cases, where mental abilities are limited. Summing up, the presented analysis suggest some strategies to explore depressive mind in a more culture-bound model anchored in collective memory. This paper aimed to discuss how proverb-like statements may help us to get to know typical thoughts transmitted from generation to generation as a typical depressive script of a national culture. In that sense, we might see depression as a social phenomenon of shared memory and as a collective carrier of depressive traits. And what more relevant proverbs might be used as a culturally valid defense by "language of power" against dysfunctional automatic thoughts in therapy of persons with affective disorders.

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