



Research Article

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A Socio-Anthropological Look at Candidates Who Are Ill during the End-of-Year Exams

Silue Donakpo¹

Soro Nahoua Adama²

Kone Siata¹

¹Teacher-researcher, Sociology Department,
University Peleforo GON COULIBALY of Korhogo,
Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire

²Researcher, Ivorian Centre for Economic and Social Research,
University of Félix Houphouët-Boigny de Cocody-Abidjan,
Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract

This study addresses the issue of sick candidates during end-of-year exams. Based on qualitative socio-anthropological work in reflection on the psychology of learning, it deals with the socio-anthropological factors that weaken the psychological well-being of teachers, regardless of the discipline, during the exams. The collection tools were individual interviews and the study took place at the Peleforo GON COULIBALY University of Korhogo from April 20 to June 30, 2021. It involved a total of 64 undergraduate students selected by the reasoned method. The results show that students who do not have family support or who do not come from a family with a health or educational culture succumb to the stress of exams and fall ill. According to some respondents, these illnesses are due to an unbalanced diet, lack of physical activity and sports, and insufficient rest during the exam period. Others suffer from the negative influence of spiritual forces in their environment. Also, it appears from the investigations that the failure of the psychological well-being of learners is linked to a lack of confidence in their skills. This crisis of self-confidence causes imbalances in their being; hence the need to introduce a personal development module (which can take into account stress and fear management) in the examination programs.

Keywords: socio-anthropological perspective, sick candidates, examination composition

1. Introduction

In an attempt to address the high university dropout rate that creates consequences for both the student, society, and universities (Tremblay-Wragg et al, 2018), it is important to understand what affects success and persistence in postsecondary education in order to provide students with good assessment and learning conditions. To this end, understanding why some university candidates are sick during end-of-year exam compositions is an important issue for university authorities and exam boards that are working on it. Faced with this challenge, the actors of education systems in the world

in general and in particular those of developing countries, are multiplying evaluation strategies to enable candidates to succeed in end-of-year exams. A number of actors, particularly institutions, are seeking to prevent occupational illnesses and accidents at work by aiming to improve well-being at work (Robert, 2007). In the school and university environment, several strategies are often proposed and not those that must be imposed (Duclos, 2016) to improve the well-being of learners. It is in this sense that some researchers argue, that a plurality of pedagogical strategies allows for the benefits of each (Beutler, 2013; Tremblay-Wragg et al, 2018). Thus, one of the strategies often advocated, is the psychological well-being at work (BEPT) in schools which is perceived in this study as a harmonious conception of man and the universe, apprehended as a good balance between the main organs and humors that form the human body (Fischer et al, 2020). This implies a positive subjective experience where one tends to express the best of oneself and which is built through oneself, through one's social relations at work and in interactions with one's organization (Dagenais-Desmarais and Privé, 2010; Clément et al, 2020). This well-being at work includes both physical and psychological medical symptoms at work, general life experiences and experiences at work. It looks at the psychological factors contributing to health and well-being at work (Spector, 2008; Dagenais-Desmarais, 2010).

However, even though the concept of well-being experienced at work in the school setting (primary and secondary) is well endowed in the literature, it is still poorly understood by the academic community. To date, most of the work on academic failure has been conducted by researchers whose often cited factors are socioeconomic and pedagogical. Little effort has been devoted to developing knowledge about psychological well-being at work that is grounded in the reality of students. The transition to university manifests itself in anxiety, somatic disorders, depression and obsessive symptoms in undergraduate students who have left home. It seems appropriate to us, therefore, to question the conditions that promote or cause illness among candidates during examinations. To this end, we put forward the idea that the favouring factors are of a socio-anthropological nature. This socio-anthropological approach has three (3) specific objectives: 1) to determine the socio-anthropological factors that are favourable to illnesses among certain candidates, 2) to describe the socio-anthropological perception of sick candidates during the end-of-year exams and 3) to determine the health prevention method to be used by the candidates.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Materials

The materials section defines the subjects or objects studied (survey subjects and objects of scientific observation) and describes in detail how these subjects or objects are chosen. In the context of this study, it refers to the geographical and sociological fields.

2.1.1 Geographical scope

This study was carried out at the Peleforo GON COULIBALY University in the town of Korhogo in the Poro region of Côte d'Ivoire. The choice of this site was motivated by the fact that the University of Korhogo is still young and does not have sufficient facilities for the students who are oriented there. In addition, as a member of the examination commission of the Social Sciences Training and Research Unit (UFR), we observed each year sick candidates during the end-of-year examination compositions in the departments making up this UFR. The data collection was carried out in the four departments that make up the Social Sciences UFR of the Peleforo GON COULIBALY University. These are the departments of Sociology, Geography, Law and Economic Sciences. To these main departments we added the Agro-pastoral Institute (control department) to take into account the social variability of the people surveyed in order to ensure optimal representativeness of the investigations.

2.1.2 Sociological field

The population that is the subject of this study consists mainly of students who were ill at least once during the end-of-year exams. They come from the Sociology, Geography, Law and Economics departments. The students surveyed are mostly at the Bachelor 3 level. In order to include the students most likely to provide information, the snowball and purposive sample technique was chosen.

2.2 Methods

The methods used here describe in detail the chronological and logical interventions of the observer or experimenter. They also describe the measurement or observation tools, the information gathering techniques and the statistical evaluation techniques. They justify the choice of techniques used.

2.2.1 Tools used

The methodology was based essentially on a qualitative socio-anthropological approach. The use of participatory qualitative research techniques provides deep and substantial information on people's representations, attitudes, behaviours and motivations. Two main techniques were used in this study. These were semi-structured interviews and direct observation. In the first case, the collection tool used was the interview guide and in the second an observation grid. In total, the study involved 64 students. This sample size was defined a posteriori, after the saturation of the interviewees' responses. Of these 64 students, 37 were male and 27 were female. The fieldwork took place from 20 April to 30 June 2021.

2.2.2 Methods of data analysis

For data analysis, we used thematic data analysis. This type of analysis is appropriate when the data was collected using an interview guide, as is the case for this study. Indeed, in this case, the titles of the guides become at the same time the themes of the analysis. However, given the nature of the study (which is not basic but applied research), the importance of the theme and the interest in the results of this study (which ensure psychological well-being at work in a student environment), we have combined the thematic analysis with the content analysis. In other words, each theme of the study was subjected to a content analysis, the specificity of which is to make a thorough analysis that leaves no information untouched. It is therefore with the aim of filling the gaps in the thematic analysis that we have combined the content analysis.

3. Results

The results reveal that the end-of-year exams are a critical period in terms of the well-being of students. The results are based on three themes, namely the socio-anthropological factors favourable to the onset of illness among certain candidates, the perceptions that sick candidates have of the end-of-year examinations and the health prevention methods to be used by candidates.

3.1 Socio-anthropological factors favourable to the occurrence of illnesses in candidates

The socio-anthropological factors that explain the occurrence of illnesses in candidates are firstly the social background of the student, which is made up of social support and family culture, then the student's previous knowledge and personal organisation.

As regards the effects of social background, a socially supportive environment makes it easier for students to learn than a poor social environment. Thus, a respondent from the licence 3 in

sociology with a local development option, explains:

"... it all started with the absence of certain health care and encouragement from my late father, especially during examinations (such as the BEPC and BAC), and then my mother's inactivity and illiteracy... When I think about it, it creates a distress in me which materialises in muscular fatigue during the exams that followed". (Survey of 22 April 2021)

Another respondent from the same level and option said:

"I live in a polygamous family with limited means where rivalry reigns and I receive no care or support except afflictions. No motivation from parents during university exams. This climate weakens my health when I make extra efforts to prepare for exams." (Survey of 12 June 2021)

From these verbatim and those of several of the respondents, it emerges that depending on the social background, the student is not stimulated in the same way. Learners from a socially well-to-do family or living in a family with good social relations have more access to advice, stimulation and means to succeed. This potential reduces the student's physiological reactions to stress, especially when the family has experienced academic success. Thus, social support increases the rate of resilience or recovery from various diseases. Consequently, it facilitates the success of many students in final examinations. On the other hand, students living in or coming from poor families where social support is absent, are often deprived of material, moral and financial means. They are left to their own devices or face complicated family problems and parental pressure, so that the fear of failing exams becomes a cause of illness for some.

From these verbatim statements, questions arise about the culture of parents, which can be situated at two levels: education and health.

At the educational level, *"... my father's absence, my mother's inactivity and illiteracy..."* students who have not benefited from a literate family culture find themselves overwhelmed at the end-of-year compositions. For most of them, this submersion creates sometimes irreversible problems that are externalised by illnesses such as overwork, depression and road accidents.

In terms of health culture, *"the absence of certain health care and encouragement that my late father gave us, especially during exams"*, children tend to reproduce the health-related behaviours that they inherited from their parents. Indeed, students who come from or live in families with a health culture are more likely to avoid illnesses during examinations.

As for local knowledge, this relates to prior knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that affect the meaning and process of the exams. The student's educational background. It concerns what happens during the end-of-year compositions, i.e. the examination ground, and is defined as a set of understandings and experiences. Indeed, in the category of strategies for passing end-of-year exams without being sick, there is the ability of the student to establish links between previous knowledge and new input so as to be able to memorise his or her lessons and to be able to reproduce them on the day of the exam without sparing any effort. Thus, students with a similar background to the university stream do better in examinations of the said courses of study. For example, obtaining a scientific baccalaureate, which is more highly prized, has a positive impact on the feeling of personal effectiveness and, in the same sense, on motivation. The influence of one's educational background would thus be clearly known through motivation. Also, an upstream analysis makes it possible to verify that there is a partial conciliation of intrinsic motivation between the series of the baccalaureate and the success of university examinations.

To the question of whether students integrate the notion of personal organisation into their university studies, the answer is no. Many of these students lack the ability to organise themselves in a way that is consistent with their academic goals. Many of these students lack work strategies to the extent that they accumulate courses until the composition period. Thus, students in this case, especially those of the licence 1 and 2, wanting to learn everything in the time of the exams, end up cracking. However, some of them, having been sick from the previous exams and having organised

themselves in study groups or having learnt their lessons from day to day, pass their end of year exams without being disturbed.

3.2 Sick candidates' perceptions of end-of-year exams

The analysis of the data on candidates' perceptions during the exams allowed us to achieve another objective. This second objective aims to describe students' perceptions in terms of habits or living conditions and beliefs related to their state of health during the end-of-year exams.

With regard to the perception of lifestyle habits related to student health during the exam period, we selected the perception of eating habits, physical exercise and sleep. In this respect, the respondents recognised firstly the need to eat; secondly, they expressed the need to sleep (or rest); and lastly, they would like to be physically active in order to remain in good health, especially during the end-of-year exam period.

With regard to the perception of eating habits, although it is not appropriate here to say that a balanced diet is essential for maintaining a student's health, it should be noted that many studies show that students adopt deleterious attitudes towards their diet. Most of those interviewed admitted that they did not. One of the respondents from the Bachelor 3 Sociology degree said: "I don't have a balanced diet and I eat at irregular hours during the exam period. One of the respondents from the licence 3 of sociology said: "... I only eat 'placali' and 'attiéké' which I can afford because a full meal costs at least 1000F" (Interview, 13 June 2021). However, although 'placali' and 'attiéké' are traditional Ivorian dishes made from cassava, they remain incomplete foods and are only marginally consumed by the low class or low economic level population.

In response to the question "What do you think about your health habits?" most of the students interviewed claim to have a good diet. However, many of them attach little importance to breakfast, and they start the day without eating. During the exam period, most of them only eat fast food and juices, which are not very hygienic, or traditional fast food and juices. "During the exam period I rarely eat in the morning, I prefer to take my meals with me to save time, no vegetable sauce, no fruit, but I don't think that this will influence my health", said a respondent from the licence 2 of Geography in an interview on 14 June 2020. A minority of them do not even perceive a link between fast food and their health, which they attribute to spiritual attacks. "I don't think that there is a link between fast food and our health performance degraded by spells," said a respondent from a law degree in an interview on 16 June 2021.

Regarding the perception of sleep habits as a factor influencing students' well-being and academic performance, it should be noted that there is a link between students who are ill during examinations and sleep habits. Indeed, when students do not get enough sleep, they have more difficulty performing at their best. However, the students interviewed do not seem to make this link as the following verbatim statements indicate:

"On the eve of an exam, I prefer to study all night"; "When I have an exam the next day, I have difficulty sleeping. I take advantage of it to study"; "I always prepare my exams at night, it doesn't influence the result because I take advantage of it to study" (Interview with students from licence 3 in economics on 23 June 2021).

Thus, the majority of the respondents are not convinced that their sleeping habits have an impact on their state of health and others are even ready to demonstrate it. "I am able to study at night. I only feel tired at certain times of the day, but it works."

In addition, there is also a correlation between physical activity and perceived health, so that the more physical activity a student undertakes, the better his or her perceived health. Indeed, regular physical activity leads to physical fitness which has a positive influence on the health of the student. However, students who are ill on the eve of exams do not engage in physical activities during the composition period. We realise that those who used to do physical exercises stop them during the

exam period, as stated by this respondent of licence 3 of Economics: "I used to do sports from time to time, but for the last two months, especially when we were informed that the exams would be scheduled, I stopped everything" (Interview, 15 May 2021).

For some of them, the need to engage in physical activity seems to be of little importance, as the following statement indicates: "Given the number of exams, I prefer to spend the time studying for my classes rather than engaging in physical activity" (Interview, 12 May 2021).

Moreover, there is a relationship between these three lifestyle habits (physical activity, diet and sleep) that explain the occurrence of illnesses among students during the exam period. Indeed, insomnia is often associated with poor diet and lack of exercise. The consequences of insomnia are an increased risk of developing metabolic diseases (obesity, diabetes, general fatigue, etc.) and cardiovascular pathologies.

In addition to these perceptions of students' lifestyle habits, there is the socio-spiritual environment or beliefs of these students. In fact, according to some respondents, their state of health during the exam period is subject to bewitchment or attacks from spiritual or enemy forces. The following verbatim testify to this: "Every time I have an exam and I have not worshipped the village river, I get sick"; "I have been sick during exams because I was the victim of a family curse".

3.3 The mode of health prevention to be used by the candidates.

Health prevention for candidates who are ill during the exams would be achieved through three (3) means: mastery of one's field of study as an objective that the candidate sets for himself/herself, visualization of the exam field before the date of the compositions and confidence in his/her skills.

With regard to the mastery of one's field of study, in order to avoid succumbing to the effects of stress or being overworked under the pressure of examinations, the student must set as his objective the mastery of his field of learning. Indeed, it is a question of the student's initiative to master the field in which he or she has been oriented at university. For example, a student who has been oriented to Sociology must bear in mind that this is not the result of chance, but the fact of his or her previous skills which have militated in favour of his or her orientation in this field. He/she therefore has the capacity to pass the exams of the said course. In this regard, he must take the necessary precautions to make the appropriate preparations and use the best methods such as concentrating on revisions, rewriting the key concepts and notions of each course. In this way, he/she would make the best use of his/her time and increase his/her chances of success, avoiding, above all, putting his/her health at risk.

As for the examination ground, the student should have in mind a concrete visual conception of how the examination will be conducted. They must be aware that examinations are not an end in themselves and familiarise themselves with the place in order to succeed in the end-of-year compositions. In fact, he/she should remember the exam as a means of evaluation and not as a test.

In addition to the object of mastering their field of study, some respondents who are ill during examinations have weaknesses in knowledge that make them doubtful. To this end, the student must be confident in his or her abilities and think positively. In other words, the ability to believe in one's abilities should create a sense of inner security.

4. Discussion

The results of this study on the socio-anthropological view of sick candidates during the end-of-year exams were based on three points: socio-anthropological factors favourable to illness attacks among certain candidates, the perceptions that sick candidates have of themselves during the end-of-year exams and the health prevention methods to be used by the candidates.

4.1 Social background

With regard to the socio-anthropological factors favourable to illness in candidates, we note four essential variables that explain their occurrence in the student during the end-of-year exam period. These were the social origin of the student, previous knowledge and the personal organisation of the student. The social background of the student has a positive influence on his or her health if the family is socially and financially well off. Indeed, students from socially well-to-do parents usually receive assistance or means and care that allow them to enjoy an educational and health culture. This culture enables them to avoid certain illnesses or gives them resistance to illnesses, especially during the end-of-year exams. In this respect, we were able to observe through the various interviews that the students who were ill during the exams came from illiterate families or families with no health culture. They were composed of families of workers, breeders, planters or farmers who were often illiterate. Thus, the hypothesis of the students' social origin better explains their health conditions, as do the results of the study by Marion et al. (2008). In this study, the authors showed that the differences in health status between social groups are due to the influence on health status of differences in living and working conditions, in access to health care and in the adoption of risky or beneficial behaviours.

4.2 Impact of student background and motivation

As regards prior knowledge and personal organisation of the student, the above-mentioned results corroborate those of the studies on the influence of cognitive abilities and motivation on the performance and health status of first-year university students by Lambert - Le Mener (2012) and those of Clément et al. (2020). Indeed, students who were ill during the exams underestimated their prior knowledge and had no personal organisation in preparing for the exams. As a result, they found themselves overloaded, stressed and overworked by the amount of lessons to be learned during the end-of-year composition period

5. Conclusion

At the end of our study, we can say that the problem of students who are ill during the end-of-year exams remains a topical issue. It appears that several reasons are at the root of this problem, including socio-anthropological factors favouring the onset of illness in certain candidates, perceptions in terms of lifestyle and the belief in an unhealthy socio-spiritual environment. Socio-anthropological factors include family social support, family health and educational culture. Students without social support or health culture or literate families are very often ill during examinations. As regards the perception of lifestyle, sick students have an unbalanced eating habit, they do not engage in physical activities and do not rest much during the examination period. In addition to these students, there are those who are under the negative influence (curses and bewitchments) of spiritual forces in their environment. Investigations have shown that the lack of psychological well-being of learners is linked to a lack of self-confidence and skills, which leads to imbalances in their being. Hence the need to introduce a personal development module (which integrates stress and fear management) into the examination class curriculum.

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