

Thesis Summary

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Children's Concepts of Competition, Winning and Losing

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Abstract

Competition as a social skill is very important in a democratic society based on market economy. Equal chances and equal opportunities for women and men are considered to have key importance and this includes being able to cope with competitive situations and their results i.e. winning and losing in an equally adaptive way. Every society – the Hungarian society as well – has its specific ideas about what kind of competition and what amount of competition is beneficial, necessary and useful for those, who live in that particular society. Children learn these attitudes with other elements of culture through growing up in that particular cultural context. They learn the concept of winning and losing partly from their parents and from their family at home, and from their teachers in the school. In addition, they also learn via their own experiences. These experiences also shape their representation of these phenomena and as a consequence influence their interaction with their parents and teachers. This process corresponds to Markus and Kitayama's model of co-construction (1991), in which the parents, the teachers and the children themselves construct jointly the specific way of competing embedded into the specific cultural context.

With our research our significant goal is to explore the views of children living in today's Hungarian society regarding competition, winning and losing. We compare the attributions concerning success and failure of 8-9 year old boys and girls and analyze these concepts in a complex and coherent system.

Altogether 67 children – 33 boys and 34 girls – participated in this research. The mean (average?) age of the children was 8 years and 7 months. They attended two different schools in Budapest, Hungary. We applied three different, but interconnected methods. At the *first* stage, in three separate settings, we asked the children to draw a picture about competition, winning and losing in a group situation. At the *second* stage in individual situation we asked the children to freely associate words with their drawings. At the *third* stage we carried out an individual clinical interview referring to the drawings and the associations and exploring children's understanding of the studied concepts. The answers were qualitatively analyzed and categorized.

Study

Methods

1. Drawing – In the first part of the examination, we asked children to draw something about competition, winning and losing. We analyzed the drawings in two different ways. At first we made a “traditional” content analysis about these drawings, and then we used a special method developed by Bombi, Pinto and Cannoni (2007) for the analysis of social relationships on the drawings in connection with winning and losing.
2. Associations – In the second part of the research we collected associations in relation to competition, winning and losing. We asked all the children individually to tell as much associations to the words they draw about as they can in 2 minutes. We listed all the associations then analyzed them in two different ways. At first we used Vergés's method (1994) based on social representation theory, and then analyzed the same data with Szalay's AGA method (Szalay és Brent, 1967), too.
3. Clinical interview – Last but not least we carried out individual clinical interview referring to the drawings and the associations and exploring children's understanding of the studied concepts. The answers were qualitatively analyzed and categorized. The

categories were not determined before the analysis, those evolved and developed during the process. After the qualitative analysis we used quantitative methods to compare the data we had got.

Results

Drawing

In the traditional content analysis we compared the topics of the competitions on drawings, the attributions of the figures, the emotions belong to the winners and the losers, symbols and other visual elements on boys' and girls' drawings. During this analysis three persons independently analyzed the drawings, than we compared the results and discussed the discrepancies. The categories of the analysis weren't determined before the analysis, these evolved and developed during the process. We tried to find a structure in which all the three studied concepts can be defined.

Through the analysis we stayed in a complex system and worked with all the drawings of a child concerned.. We tried to find a complex strategy for every particular child and tried to find relationship in the applied strategies, the applied symbols and other characteristics of children.

In our analysis we focused on:

- The areas of competition, winning and losing
- The characters on the drawings
- The emotions that appear on the drawings
- The symbols of competition, winning and losing

After the traditional content analysis we focused on the social relationships on the drawings about winning and losing. In order to know more about this issue, we selected those children's drawing on which both the winner and the loser appeared and we analyzed these drawings with the PAIR (Pictorial Assessment of Interpersonal Relationship) method (Bombi, Pinto and Cannoni (2007)). At this stage of the research, we could analyze altogether 60 drawings – 30 drawings on winning and 30 drawings on losing drawn by the same 30 children.

The results of the two different analyses show the same characteristic differences:

- Most of the 8-9 year-old children, who participated in our research, knew a lot about competition, winning and losing and they all could draw something in relation to the three examined concepts
- Both in relation to winning and losing the more frequently visualized area of competition was the *sport* – which is a typical structural competitive situation
- Within sports the results showed characteristic gender differences: boys drew frequently *team sports* like football, but girls drew more *individual sport* actions like running or swimming
- Areas like war appeared only on drawings of boys and other areas like beauty contest appeared only on drawings of girls – corresponding with the well-known gender stereotypes
- Both boys and girls used a lots of symbols like cup, podium or gold medal on drawings related to winning, but girls used them more frequently - in relation to losing boys used more winning symbols than girls

- On most of the drawings (82%) related to winning, the winner was happy, but on drawings related to losing only 61% of losers were sad and 19% of them was as happy as in related to winning
- Both on drawings relating to winning and losing most of other children (appearing on the drawing??) (66%) were happy – in relation to winning the other children were happy because that child won, and in relation to losing the others could be happy because of their own winning.

With the PAIR method and analysis we could observe in depth those social relationships which belong to winning and losing. As we compared the winners and the losers on the drawings of winning and losing we could explore the typical patterns which could differentiate the two concepts from each other.

- Situations related to the concept of winning, *Cohesion* is more significant than situations related to losing – especially on the drawings of the girls
- Both in connection with winning and losing the winners are in the more dominant position and this figure has a higher *Value*, but on the drawings about winning the difference between the winner and the loser is more significant.

Associations

As we used two different methods for the analysis of the collected associations, next to the three concepts we could compare the two methods with each other.

- Around the competition as a concept in the central part of the social representation are “contest” and “running”. The peripheral elements are “winning”, “conflicts”, “poem reciting”, “sport” and “car-race”. With the other (AGA) method the “sport” (29%) as an area of competition also is the most significant. But in the area of sport issue, there are some gender differences. We found the same tendencies like in the case of drawings: boys used frequently associations connected to *team sports* like football, but girls used more *individual sport* actions like running or swimming.
- Around the winning as a concept, in the central part of the social representation are “victory” as a synonym, “happiness” as a typical positive emotion and “competition”. Those words on the peripheral parts of winning like “gold-medal”, “cup”, “first place” and “a good feeling” make more stronger and positive the concept of winning. “Running” which was a significantly important area of competition, is also between the peripheral elements of winning. This also shows that the two concepts are really close to each other.
- In contrast with winning, in the central part of the social representation of losing is “sadness” as a negative emotion and “competition”. Between the peripheral elements there are other negative emotions like “bad feelings”, “crying”, and “jealousy”. Upon the results of the AGA analysis between the associations of children on losing the negative emotions are the most significant (42%) – especially girls mentioned it extremely frequently. The areas of competition also appeared frequently (21%), but it’s less than in case of competition.

Clinical interview

After we qualitatively analyzed the concept of competition, at first we focused on how children interpreted the concept of competition. Upon the results of this analysis, 8-9 year old children typically defined this concept as a “contest”, and/or as a “winning-losing situation” and/or “social comparison” and/or “evaluation”. Upon/according to our results, those children, who felt themselves more successful, used a more complex definition with “social comparison”.

After the interpretations, we focused on the different functions of competition. The most common function which connected to competition was “social comparison” and “self evaluation”, but “entertainment” as a function was also connected to it frequently.

In the next step of the systematic analysis we could identify four different types of the relation to competition:

1. Love to compete without any reservation
2. Like to compete under process
3. Mostly don't like to compete, only in particular situations
4. Definitely don't like to compete

By the results of our examination, most of the 8-9 year old children loved or liked to compete.

Conclusions

Upon the results of our research we can be sure that it was justified to triangulate the three different methods – all of them pointed out a different aspect of competition, winning and losing, but the results can be integrated in a solid system.

The main question of our study was reveal if there were valid conceptual representations among 8-9 years old children in relation to the concept of competition, winning and losing. Our results showed more similarities than differences among boys and girls of this age group. The differences we found were subtle, however might have indicated the beginning of more meaningful differences later in their development.

On drawings of 8-9 year old children, both boys and girls illustrated a structural competitive situation, a kind of contest, especially sports. Boys more often depicted team sports i.e. competition among groups (that requires cooperation among the team members) while girls rather portrayed individual sports competitions. We found differences among the areas of competition in relation to gender. Topics like car-race or war appeared exclusively on boys drawings, while beauty contest or poem reciting only on girls' pictures. This shows that already at this age there are certain areas of competition that are considered to belong to a certain gender.

It seemed that girls reacted to losing in a somewhat different way than boys did. For instance on drawings related to losing they were less likely to illustrate both the winner and the loser, than boys; they more often drew only the winner or only the loser in a drawing that represents losing. Also girls drew more symbols of winning than boys not only on drawings related to winning, but also on drawings related to losing. Losing also evokes more negative emotions

in girls and they were the ones who portray the loser crying. However if they represent both winner and loser together in the picture they depict the loser as happy as the winner.

Our results gave the impression that for girls it was more problematic to keep together the winner and the loser in case of losing, if they were both present in the situation there was a more 'rosy' representation of the loser than in case the loser was alone, when he/she was sad and even cries.

According to our previous results teachers expressed more often sadness in case a girl loses (Sándor, 2006) while they encouraged boys to stand up and continue after losing. In our study girls expressed more negative emotions in relation to losing than boys in situations when the loser was alone, indicating the potential consequence of a kind of gender based socialization related to competitive situations.