



This paper is taken from

*Future Citizens in Europe
Proceedings of the fourth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2002

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 356 5

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Fülöp, M. (2002) Young people's perception of the competitive and the non-competitive person in a society in social transition, in Ross, A. (ed) Future Citizens in Europe. London: CiCe, pp 97 – 104

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- The University of North London (now part of the London Metropolitan University) for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the European Commission Department of Education and Culture for their support and encouragement.

Young people's perception of the competitive and the non-competitive person in a society in social transition

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The decline of the socialist system during the late 1980s and early 1990s in Eastern and Central Europe resulted in dramatic macro-system changes at both political and economic levels: the process of democratisation and the introduction of a free market economy.

Before the political changes competitiveness was not a well-regarded personal characteristic in Hungary, and becoming competitive was certainly not one of the goals for children socialisation. Since the political changes of 1989, competitiveness has become a trait that is both required and necessary in order to function successfully in a society now characterised by a capitalist free market economy, political pluralism, and a shift from full employment to a high level of unemployment. 'Competition' and 'enterprise', terms previously ideologically denied and banned, became highly valued and praised at all levels of society.

The main aim of this study is to show how Hungarian adolescents, living a society undergoing such rapid transition, perceive the competitive and the non-competitive person, and to discover what characteristics they attribute to them. What is their prototypical picture of these two groups of people? We were also interested in adolescents' self-perception in terms of competitiveness. Do their views differ by gender, family background or schooling? These last two are predictors of an adolescent's chances of future success in enrolling in higher education and getting a good job, and consequently might influence their perception of and attitude towards competitive and non-competitive people.

Adolescence is a period when the complex development of social values and related attitudes takes place. Although many different values and attitudes are present in childhood, it is only in adolescence, when individuals reach greater intellectual and moral maturity, that they establish an abstract way of thinking about the world and develop autonomous ideas concerning social, political, economical and questions.

Conceptions of competitive and non-competitive persons were studied following the approach used by Azuma and Kashiwagi (1987) to reveal the prototype of the intelligent person. Students were first asked to think of a competitive person known to them, to explain how they knew them, and to describe why they thought that they were competitive. Secondly, they had to describe a non-competitive person in the same way. Finally, they were asked to describe themselves in terms of competitiveness. These descriptions were content-analysed and a list of approximately 150 different characteristics was identified in each category (competitive, non-competitive, self-description). A demographic questionnaire was used alongside these open-ended

¹ Research supported by National Foundation for High Priority Social Science Research (OKTK), the Johann Jacobs Foundation and the Hungarian National Research Fund (NO. T 029876)

questions. As a result of the qualitative and quantitative analysis we obtained prototypical picture of adolescents' perceptions of the competitive and non-competitive person in present day Hungary.

Participants were students from different types of schools in Budapest: traditional 8-year long elementary school (11-14 years of age, low academic achievement, little opportunity to get into high level secondary schools); vocational school students (16-19 years old, who start work after graduation; low academic level); low level secondary school (16-19 years old, low academic achievement, little chances of achieving higher education); high level secondary school (16-19 years old, with very good chances of attending the top universities in Hungary).

Table 1 Distribution of the sample according to school and gender

Type of school	Gender		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Traditional primary school	45 77.6%	13 22.4%	58 100.0%
Vocational school	71 65.7%	37 34.3%	108 100.0%
Low level secondary school	45 56.2%	35 43.8%	80 100.0%
High level secondary school	43 36.8%	74 63.2%	117 100.0%
Total	204 56.2%	159 43.8%	363 100.0%

The age range was from 11 to 19 and average age: 15.4.

Table 2 Distribution of age

Age group	Under 14	14-17	18-19
Percentage	16.5%	75.5%	8%

Demographic background of the respondents

Students attending different types of schools have different family backgrounds. We categorised the students' social status into four different groups according to their father's education and profession. Upper middle class signified that the father is a leading intellectual or a businessman with high income. Middle class meant highly educated father with higher than average income. Lower middle class meant fathers with secondary or vocational education and average income, and Lower class meant fathers who were unemployed or who were retired due to sickness.

Table 3 Distribution of the sample according to family background and school

Type of school	Social status					Sum
	Upper middle class	Middle class	Lower middle class	Lower class	No answer	
Traditional primary school	6 10.3%	20 34.5%	25 43.1%	1 1.7%	6 10.3%	58 100.0%
Vocational school	9 8.3%	4 3.7%	63 58.3%	14 13.0%	18 16.7%	108 100.0%
Low level secondary school	21 26.3%	33 41.3%	17 21.3%	3 3.8%	6 7.5%	80 100.0%
High level secondary school	29 24.8%	59 50.4%	13 11.1%	4 3.4%	12 10.3%	117 100.0%
Total	65 17.9%	116 32.0%	118 32.5%	22 6.1%	42 11.6%	363 100.0%

The results of the Chi-square test showed a significant difference among the different schools in terms of the family background ($p < .001$). Vocational students came from families with the lowest social status (the highest proportion of lower class and lower middle class parents, virtually no middle class and the lowest proportion of upper middle class parents). The traditional primary school students' parents are typically lower middle class and middle class, while the low level and the high level secondary school students have very similar parental backgrounds, namely mainly upper-middle class and middle class.

The prototype of the competitive and non-competitive person

The role of the competitive and non-competitive person

The competitive persons described were schoolmates (24%), rivals (22%), friends (13.5%), and family members or relatives (9.6%). In 31% percent of the cases there was no reference to the role of the person. The primary school students wrote significantly more frequently about their rival, the vocational school students about their friend, and the high level secondary school students about their schoolmates ($p < .001$).

The high proportion of rivals among the primary school students might refer to a developmental factor, namely that between the ages of 11 and 14 children are more open and explicit about their competitive efforts than they are in late adolescence, when they have learned that acknowledging their competitiveness might not have positive consequences in the Hungarian milieu (Fülöp, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b).

Vocational school students mentioned competitive schoolmates significantly less frequently ($p < .001$) (13,9%) than secondary school (both low level and high level) and primary school students, but they referred to their friends the most frequently (25%).

Vocational students were typically not involved in academic competition and defined themselves more in terms of their group of friends outside the school setting than in their class.

For the non-competitive person, vocational school students most often described a family member or relative (10%), while the other groups mentioned this category much more rarely (3%). Vocational school students also mentioned their friends as non-competitive most frequently (23%). The fact that they most often described a friend in both categories suggests that their attention focuses mainly on friends.

In the overall sample, in both cases (competitive and non-competitive) schoolmates (including rivals) were mentioned most frequently, followed by friends, which indicates that in terms of competitiveness adolescents pay the most attention to their peers.

The gender of the competitive and non-competitive person

Our expectation was that the prototype competitive person would be a boy/man, as males are generally considered to be more competitive than females and open competition is more accepted in males. However, our results do not reflect this. If we look at all the answers without further categorisation it seems that the competitive person is more often a male (52.1%) than a female (29.5%), but when we look at who describes whom, we see that boys typically describe boys (76.0% versus 6.4%) while girls describe girls (59.1% versus 21.4%). Thus both genders mention significantly more somebody as a competitive person from their own gender ($p < .000$). However, when this is not the case, girls more often describe boys as competitive (21.4%), than boys describe girls as competitive (6.4%).

We also expected the non-competitive person to be a woman rather than a man, but again this was not the case. In fact 32% of the respondents described a boy/man and 25% a girl/woman as non-competitive (in 43% of the descriptions the gender of the person described was not clear), but this result may have been due to the fact that more boys than girls participated in the research. In fact the 'same-sex rule' applied in this prototype too: boys significantly more often ($p < .000$) described boys as non-competitive (46% versus 7%) and girls more frequently wrote about girls (48% versus 14%).

It seems that in the competitiveness dimension young people perceive and pay attention to their own gender's behaviour rather than apply traditional gender stereotypes.

The profession of the competitive person and non-competitive person

Most of the students described another student as a competitive person (66%) or as a non-competitive person (47%). Other professions associated with the competitive person were those generally considered to be competitive and/or belonging to the upper-middle class, such as businessman, entrepreneur, lawyer, sportsman, policeman, film hero, journalist. However, non-competitive people were referred to as coming from professions belonging to the lower middle class or the lower class, such as skilled-worker, unemployed, the homeless, pensioners, and low-paid intellectuals like researchers and teachers, in addition to professions that are considered outside the bounds of competition such as ornithology and the priesthood.

The emotional content of the descriptions

Descriptions were analysed according to their emotional content, reflecting the particular person's attitude towards the described person (very positive, positive, neutral, both

positive and negative, negative, very negative). According to the analysis there were significantly more negative ($p < .01$) or very negative descriptions (30%) than positive or very positive ones (13%) about the competitive person, suggesting a tendency to see the competitive person in a negative light. High level secondary school students were significantly least neutral; they gave the highest number of negative (38%) and the highest number of positive (18%) descriptions, suggesting that they assess competitiveness on an emotive level and that they have a negative rather than a positive picture. The proportion of the both negative and positive (30%) and the neutral (27%) answers were basically the same across the whole sample.

In case of the non-competitive person there was no significant difference in the emotional evaluation among the students attending the different schools. 31.5% gave a positive description and only 7.5% displayed a negative attitude towards the non-competitive person. The proportion of the neutral and both positive and negative answers were 43% and 18% respectively. There was a significantly more positive picture about the non-competitive person (32% versus 13%) and the competitive person was viewed much more negatively (30%) than the non-competitive person (7%).

There were more neutral descriptions among the non-competitive (43% versus 27%), suggesting that that non-competitive persons evoke less emotive perceptions but that when they do the emotion is more likely to be positive.

The characteristics of the competitive and non-competitive person

There were altogether some 150 different characteristics mentioned in as applying to both competitive and non-competitive people. The most frequently mentioned twenty (between 32% - 5%) are listed in Table 4.

Table 4 Competitive and non-competitive characteristics

Competitive	Non-competitive
Competes with everyone at everything (hyper-competitive)	Avoids competition
Wants to be the first	Inhibited
Goal oriented	Friendly
Loves challenges	Afraid of open competition
Selfish	Modest, does not boast
Smart	Helpful
Does things at others' expenses	Does not want to be first
Wants to be in the centre of attention	Indifferent
Wants to pretend	Autonomous
Studies hard	Lazy
Conflict-seeker	Does not fight, gives up
Wants to be different	Unselfish
Ill-willed	Does not want to be in the centre of attention
Persistent	Passive
Boasts	Conflict-avoidant
Superior	Gives in
Wants to prove	Low self-confidence
Compares	Smart
Winning is important	Satisfied with what he/she accomplished

The twenty most frequently cited characteristics can be divided into different categories, the largest of which refers to interpersonal relationships. Competitive persons are seen as selfish while non-competitive people are unselfish. The competitive show ill-will and do things at others' expense while the non-competitive are friendly and helpful. The competitive person wants to be the centre of attention, but the non-competitive deliberately avoid such attention. Competitive people constantly compare themselves to others, like to be different from others, and want to prove to others that they are as good or better, that is, for competitive people the way others perceive them is of great importance, while non-competitive people are autonomous and not so much concerned with the opinions of others. The competitive are conflict-seekers, and the non-competitive are conflict-avoiders. The competitive like to win, and the non-competitive give in.

In terms of motivation there is a clear difference between the two groups. The competitive compete with everyone over everything at any time; they want to be first, they are goal oriented, persistent and study hard, while the non-competitive avoid competition, do not want to be first, are indifferent, lazy, passive, do not fight but give up, and are satisfied with what they have. In summary, the competitive are motivated and the non-competitive are not. Non-competitive people have low self-confidence; they are inhibited, modest and afraid of competition, while competitive people love challenges and are boastful. It was also noted that being competitive or not is perceived as having nothing to do with intelligence, as 'smart' is among the twenty most frequently cited characteristics of both descriptions.

Self descriptions

We asked the respondents to reflect upon themselves in terms of competitiveness and to state whether they were competitive or not, and why. More than half of the students categorised themselves as competitive (53%), which is especially interesting if we take into consideration that only 13% of them gave a positive description of another competitive person. 26% considered themselves non-competitive and 16% both competitive and non-competitive depending on the area, the goal and the situation. There was no significant difference among the different groups of students in their self-classification.

The emotional content of self-descriptions was mainly neutral (48%), secondly positive (31%) then both (20%) and finally negative (only 1%!). More than half of the students said that they were competitive, but only 1% of them gave a negative self-description, which suggests that in case of their own competitiveness students are much more positive than when considering competitiveness in others. The largest number of students having a favourable picture of themselves were the high level secondary school students (48%), while the lowest number of positive self-description (24%) was among the vocational school students, reflecting a much less positive self-image. The ten most frequently mentioned characteristics (26% - 3.5%) are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Self-characterisation as a competitive and as a non-competitive person

Competitive	Non-competitive
Goal oriented	Avoids competition
Wants to be better than others at a certain field	Friendly, kind
Loves challenges	Low self-esteem
Competes when the situation requires	Does not want to be the first
Correct, fair	Inhibited
Competition motivates her/him	Helpful
Wants to be the first	Lazy
Persistent	Afraid of open competition
Makes efforts	Serious
Wants to prove	Autonomous

If somebody described herself/himself as competitive, the characteristic was much more favourable than when used to describe others. The adolescents did not speak of themselves as hyper-competitive or selfish, nor as doing things at the expense of others: in contrast they compete only in certain fields that are important to them and only when the situation requires it (moderate competitors); they are correct and fair and strongly motivated (goal oriented, persistent, make efforts etc.). There is no big difference in the self and other descriptions of non-competitiveness though, probably because non-competitiveness causes less conflict and evokes less emotion than competitiveness.

Summary

In terms of competitiveness both boys and girls pay attention mainly to their peers and to their own gender. While competitiveness is an explicitly required trait which is valued by the present day Hungarian society as leading to success, and non-competitiveness is considered to be a shortcoming that makes people losers, when it comes to implicit concepts, competitive people are evaluated negatively and non-competitive positively by young Hungarians between 11-19. However, when respondents described themselves, the majority of them considered themselves competitive, i.e. as somebody who has a good chance of success. There was no difference among students attending different schools in this respect, in spite of the fact that in reality their chances of being successful in Hungarian society is very different. There was no significant gender difference.

The results reflect confusion about how to evaluate competitiveness. Young people know that they should be competitive, but when somebody demonstrates this characteristic they do not like it. There is a clear contrast between the explicit and implicit expectations of Hungarian society, and this manifests itself in the young peoples' prototype of the competitive and non-competitive person. This suggests a slower change in social attitudes than in the social structure in a society undergoing change.

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