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Economic competition perceived by French and Hungarian adolescents

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Competition is one of the basic principles of a capitalist economy in democratic multi-party societies. The aim of our study was to compare the views of participants from two contrasting countries: one in which capitalism and a market economy have been flourishing for centuries (France), with one where this system has been recently implemented after decades of a state-controlled economy (Hungary).

Through socialising processes one acquires attitudes, values and notions. Socialisation concerns the acquisition of some knowledge, skills, behaviours, opinions, attitudes and representations (cf. Roland-Lévy, 2002). Our concern here is the divergence between the long-lasting economic context of the country, parents' principles, and young people's perception of the situation. It is assumed that the different socialisation processes linked to specific environments influence the perception and understanding of economic competition.

In addition to orientating behaviour, social representations can serve as a basis for perceiving and interpreting reality. They are related to people's social characteristics, and are specific to particular social groups. Thus a social representation expresses a group's identity, and the interpretation of an object is expected to differ from one social group to another. Since social representations express the values, norms and attitudes of social groups, the concept is well suited to analysing how a social object - in this case competition - is perceived by different social groups. It has been established that attitudes tend to influence how people act towards a specific social object such as competition, or to a new situation such as the recent introduction of economic competition in Hungary.

In a previous study (Fülöp & Berkics, 2002), a group of 16-to-18-year old Hungarians were examined. It was found that they had a rather negative view of entrepreneurship and business. They also had a negative representation of economic competition. These results will be kept in mind when comparing Hungarian and French secondary school students in the present study.

Do French and Hungarian teenagers perceive the role of competition in economics in a similar way? Do they share a common representation of competition? Is their perception and socialisation linked to the general political and economic context of their countries? These are some of the questions asked in this paper. The social representation and attitude towards competition of Hungarian and French teenagers, who grew up in contrasting societies, will be compared. The aim is also to understand how secondary school students perceive the role of competition in economics and what was their general social representation of competition.

Method

The same questionnaire of 13 main questions was used in both countries. It began with the classical free association task used to capture the social representation of competition, with each participant being asked to provide five terms or expressions connected to competition. Then came closed questions: some implied selecting the response which corresponded best to the respondent's perception of competition, while others involved a classification or ranking of a list of items. An Osgood semantic task and a 23-item Likert-type attitude scale were also included. The similarities and differences between the two groups in terms of attitudes, conceptions and understanding of competition in private life, in business life, and in society, are then described.

Sample

The total sample was composed of 219 16-to-18-year old girls and boys. The French students attended some lessons on economics during their secondary school years, while the Hungarians attended an economics programme called Junior Achievement to introduce them to the principles of the market economy. The French sample was composed of 112 teenagers while the Hungarian sample was composed of 107; all the participants were still at school. The French sample had equal numbers of girls and boys, while the Hungarian sample had an over-representation of girls (64%). The other main difference noted between the two samples was that fewer Hungarian (69%) than French (88%) students had travelled abroad.

Results

Social representation of competition

The analysis of the French data from the free association task shows some notions linked with competition are shared. In the central core of the representation of competition, victory comes first, followed by the need for a competitive spirit, and this is clearly linked to sports; with the same mean rank but with a lower frequency comes the idea of position and the idea that competition is useless. In the near peripheral part of this representation motivation and defeat are found, and even fewer subjects produced ideas related to economy, fair-play or rivalry (low rank).

In the Hungarian sample the shared social representation of competition undoubtedly focuses on the model of victory. It is also defined by three other prominent ideas: rivalry, being a required quality, and the benefits of competition. References to competition in sports were produced by half of the subjects. In the near-peripheral part of the Hungarian representation economy is associated with the need to work (a rather low mean rank); it goes with two negative dimensions, defeat (higher mean rank) and the disadvantages of competition.

From the terms produced and shared it can be inferred that both Hungarian and French adolescents view competition both positively and negatively.

Personal attitude towards competition

Do you like to compete?

The majority of the interview subjects stated that they sometimes enjoy competing (60.7% for the Hungarian group and 40% for the French). Both samples agreed that they enjoyed competition (over 30% for the Hungarian group and 28% for the French). But, when combining the positive statements ('love' and 'like'), and the two negative statements ('hate' and 'dislike'), more French students (27%) indicated that they did *not* enjoy competing. Only 8.4% of the Hungarian sample selected one of the negative options. On the whole, Hungarian students tended to show a more favourable attitude towards competition than their French counterparts, who select more negative evaluations.

When I play games the most important thing is...

On average the subjects tend to agree that it was most important to have a good time (64.5%); the second most often selected idea, for both groups, was to perform as well as possible (21%).

When I am involved in a game with others...

Hungarian students put in first place winning without undermining the others, whereas French students put first the idea that what is most important is not to win, but to play well.

When I compete with someone, I consider that person...

The opponent was not perceived in a different way by each group, but the dominant tendencies varied. The Hungarians describe the person with whom they imagined competing mainly as someone with the same goals as themselves, whereas the French students described the opponent mainly as an adversary they must surpass. The opponent was only rarely perceived either as a friend or as an enemy to be eliminated.

General attitude towards competition

In the Osgood semantic task, five pairs of terms were proposed: good versus bad; important versus unimportant; useful versus useless; interesting versus uninteresting; and motivating versus de-motivating. On the questionnaire the terms were separated by a 10-centimetre space into which respondents had to put an X at the point where they felt their perception of competition should be best located.

The main result was that the Hungarian teenagers had a very positive vision of competition. In contrast, the French teenagers tended to provide relatively neutral responses (near the centre of the line). For both groups, the most positive shared idea was that competition was a motivating factor. This could also be observed for the

usefulness of competition: Hungarian students recognised it as extremely useful, much more so than the French students who selected a more neutral position. The results also showed that the Hungarian subjects perceived competition as a very good social object, whereas the French students placed it, still on the positive side but farther away, nearer the centre of the line. When comparing the five pairs of terms, the highest mean distance was that referring to the importance of competition; this was perceived as clearly important for the Hungarian sample, whereas for the French competition was unimportant (the only opinion which any group placed on the negative side).

We conclude that competition is perceived as positive by both groups, although much more so by the Hungarian students in all five aspects: for them, competition is motivating, good, useful, interesting and important.

Twelve items of the Likert-type scale were put forward to evaluate overall attitude towards competition. The Hungarian subjects on the whole had a very positive picture of competition, tending to agree with the following statements: *competition*

- *motivates people to achieve their goals,*
- *is a fundamental aspect of human nature,*
- *gives people goals, something to strive for,*
- *rewards those who excel in a particular domain.*

The only statement among the top five perceived negatively was

- *competition leads to tension and conflict between individuals.*

They also agreed significantly more with the statement that

- *people need to compete to survive and prosper*

and they tended to believe more that

- *life would be boring without competition*

and that

- *competition leads to success.*

The French students emphasised more the negative dimension of competition. The five items they agreed most with referred to

- *competition leading to stress and anxiety*
- *competition leading to tension*
- *competition leading to conflict among people*
- *People live in a dog eat dog world where the*
- *strong are divided from the weak.*

The only positive statement about competition in general among the top five was about the *motivating* effect of competition.

Both groups agreed equally with the statement *competition motivates people to achieve their goals*: the perception of the motivating effect of competition was something that both groups shared.

When asked about what the students considered the most important characteristic of competition, the majority of French subjects (60%) believed that the main characteristic of competition is that *the effort is more important than the result*. The opposite is true of

the Hungarian participants, who mainly believed that *the final result is more important than the effort* (57%).

Perception of economic competition

Economic competition is seen by the majority of French students as something which gives the *best value for consumers*. Hungarian students' perception is not clear-cut; it is distributed among the suggestions that competition *stimulates activities in businesses*, provides *best value for consumer*, can *satisfy businesses as well as consumers*, and has *negative consequences* for both *businesses and consumers*.

Competition, whether in economic activity or in other aspects of life, rewards those who work with assiduity according to the majority of French students (69%) In contrast 40% of the Hungarian sample stated that *competition rewards the strong but not the weak*, which was not selected by any of the French subjects

Contemporary and historical evidence demonstrates that...

Both groups agreed that competition rarely works well in resolving economic problems

The enterprises which are most successful are those which...

Very few subjects from either country thought that the most successful businesses were the ones *that maintain a relatively constant size and remain in a particular niche in the market*. Most French students believed that successful businesses *continue to grow by expanding into different types of markets* and that they *continue to grow and merge with the competing enterprises*. Hungarian students overall believed that successful enterprises *eliminate all competing enterprises and take over the entire*. Twice as many Hungarian students as French chose the idea of *getting rid of business rivals in order to control the entire market*.

Both groups agreed that when several businesses produce and sell the same product, their final goal is *to achieve sufficiently large market share that they do not have to worry about competition from other firms*. However a difference in perception was noted; most French subjects believed that the final goal of competition was *expanding and developing activities better than their competitors* and finally to *absorb them*, whereas the majority of Hungarian students chose the item stating that the final goal should be *expanding and developing activities better than the competitors and drive them out of business*.

Among the Likert-items both French and Hungarian teenagers disagreed most about the statement that *in a market economy everyone observes the moral rules of business*. This indicates that both French and Hungarian teenagers have a somewhat negative and disillusioned view of the morality of the business world. However, they also both equally disagree with the statement that *market economy has only negative consequences*.

While the French sample in general tended to be more negative than the Hungarian sample in the attitude scale about competition in general, they had a more positive perception about two aspects of competition in the business world, stating that *economic competition results in better prices and products* and that *entrepreneurs work hard to achieve success*.

Summary

French and Hungarian students attributed different levels of importance to competition in general. French participants stated that competition was *useless* and rather *unimportant*, while their Hungarian counterparts considered competition as a *fundamental aspect of human nature, useful and good, exciting and interesting*. French students pointed out that we live in a *dog eat dog world, that divides the strong from the weak*, where competition *creates stress and anxiety*, thus leading to *tension and conflict among people*. Given these views, it is logical that Hungarian students stated significantly more frequently that they *like to compete*, while French students significantly more frequently asserted that they *do not like to compete* or even *hate* it.

There are, however, positive aspects to competition which were agreed on, for instance that it is *necessary to survival and prosperity*, as well as a *motivating* factor. Both French and Hungarian teenagers considered competition to be related to *victory*, clearly linked to *sports*. Both groups indicated that competition does not only include benefits by mentioning the potential *defeat* and the idea of *rivalry*.

They also attributed different and somewhat controversial importance to winning as a result, as well as to the actual process and learning that occur in a competitive situation. The French participants tended to emphasise the *efforts* rather than the results, while the Hungarian students considered the *results* more important than the effort.

The notion of the rival was also perceived with both similarities and differences. Hungarian teenagers portrayed the opponent as someone who has *the same goals* as themselves, whereas French teenagers described the opponent as being mainly *an adversary they must surpass*. In both groups elements of the meritocratic and of the social-Darwinian way of thinking can be noticed. Both French and Hungarians indicated that those *who excel at a certain domain will be rewarded* thus supporting the *meritocratic* way of thinking. Both also had social-Darwinist views: French respondents agreed with the statement that as a result of competition there was a *division between the strong and weak* and for Hungarian respondents competition *rewards the strong but not the weak*.

The notion of the rival in the economic life seems to differ between the two groups. While both desired to 'win', i.e. to control the market, they wanted to do it in different ways. Most French subjects believed that the final goal of competition for a company was to spread its activity by developing it more effectively than rivals, to end up by *absorbing them or merging with them*, whereas the majority of Hungarian students

stated that the final goal should be to *develop more effectively than rival businesses by eliminating and driving them out of business.*

Conclusion

In our study with Hungarian and French teenagers, both similarities and differences were found. The answers obtained showed that both samples see positive and negative aspects in personal and economic competition. Although the Hungarian teenagers had a more positive view of competition in general, when it comes to competition in business life they had a more negative view than the French respondents.

French students overall had more of a meritocratic than a social-Darwinist view, in both personal and market processes, emphasising the importance of effort and hard work in both contexts. They considered victory and winning important, but they also paid attention to the process and in economic life they wanted to gain control over the market without eliminating their business rivals. The notion of the rival at the personal level (as an opponent to beat) and at the economical level (business to be merged with or absorbed) were seen as relatively compatible.

The Hungarian responses showed a more controversial picture. There was an overall positive view of competition at the personal level, but in business life the picture tended to be less favourable. The concept and role of the rival was also clearly different in the cases of personal and economic competition. While in their personal relationships Hungarian students did not indicate that they would consider the rival as an enemy, when it came to the economic world they wanted to force the rival out of the process. They indicated the wish to gain control over their business partners by eliminating them like enemies.

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