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Semantic Selection Test: A new methodological approach towards the exploration of children's views on social issues

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Abstract

Social issues often have moral, ethical or value connotations which make our research complicated as well as requiring high ethical standards from the researchers. There are several methods of exploring the real opinions and viewpoints of children and teenagers. The most fruitful approaches have been the qualitative techniques, eg. interviews (starting with Piaget), associations (Abric, 1994, Szalay, 1967), or drawings (Bombi, 2002). The Semantic Selection Test (Urbánek, 2000, de' Escury, 2008) is a semi-projected test that can be useful to reveal children's views on different social issues including attitudes towards other nations and ethnic groups. The subject has to choose 8 pictures (out of 16 pictures) that he/she feels most relevant to a given concept (eg.: prime minister, gypsies, money etc.). The test gives an opportunity to explore the place of these social issues (or concepts) in a two-dimensional semantic area where the dimensions are defined by the researcher according to the aim of the study. In our study we used this test to explore the feelings of Hungarian teenagers (N=120) towards five ethnic groups in two dimensions (love and fear). The results showed that the teens were most afraid of the "Roma (gipsy)" and "Arab" minorities, and had the most positive attitudes towards "Italians". The test result shows significant correlations with the findings on Bogardus Social Distance Scale which confirms the validity of the test. The greatest advantage of SST is that it does not require well developed verbal competencies, therefore it can be used with very young children (from 5 years) and under-educated samples, too. Moreover, by its projective nature, it also helps to avoid socially desirable responses.

Key words: *ethnic groups, attitudes, semantic area, feelings, social distance*

Introduction

For some time it has been a central question of psychologists how to get a deeper insight into knowledge and feelings regarding human relationships in social world. The roots of the research investigating cognitive development go back to Piaget (1929). His views and perceptions have always served as a means of several studies. It is a fact that trying to carry out a research within the realms of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes is a methodological challenge for each researcher. It is especially true in case of exploring the cognitive constructions of children and youngsters. It has to be taken into consideration that their verbal abilities and skills develop differently and they are not able to listen to, observe and monitor of events around them at the same level. Besides all these, social issues are always related to moral questions and scale of values. If we look at the question of prejudice it is well known that negative and discriminative attitudes toward minority groups are not accepted publicly. Therefore to be able to investigate such questions we need more sophisticated methods and approaches to avoid

socially 'correct' answers lacking valid and true ones. It is thought that the knowledge of/about a society is partly social representations that are based on shared beliefs brought about by the active construction process. Therefore qualitative approaches are used to investigate social issues.

Methods for exploring children's wives

Techniques based on interviews are the most frequent and well known methods to compare different groups by their beliefs about society or economy fluctuation and the opinions of this phenomenon (e.g. Fülöp, 2002, Fülöp, 2004). This method supports our understanding of a semantic context within which an individual/person thinks. This approach is a time-consuming one thus it can be used only for a sample containing few elements and it questions the validity of the answers of a group or a bigger population.

The other frequently used method is working with projective techniques, for example, story telling approach which is one of the basic means of narrative psychology (Bruner, 1986). It really helps having an overview of the semantic context of the interviewees but for the before mentioned reasons the outcomes of this type of research cannot be related to bigger population. By analysing the contents certain social constructions can be detected but subjective elements may appear when categorizing and coding. As every epistemologic approach it may also risk personal bias (Harnett, 2009) generated by the researchers' political attitudes, stereotypes and expectations in the mirror of their outcomes (Cajani, 2009, Fülöp, 2009).

Due to children's cognitive and mainly their language skills and abilities techniques based on drawings are can be much more fruitful than the verbal tests. Children can express themselves by their drawings easier as they are an appropriate way of communicating their feelings, emotions and thoughts (Kosslyn, Heldmeyer, Locklear, 1977). As verbal activity is not needed this method allows the comparison of data gained from different social groups/classes in the process thus communication and self-expressions (Berti, 1999, Bombi, 2002) are not affected either. Again it is worth remembering that coding and quantification of these data take lots of time and energy.

Nowadays the most preferred qualitative methods within the realm of socially representative researches are the ones that are based on word associations (Szalay, Brent, 1967), especially the so called Associative Group Analysis (Ross at all. 2005). The sequences of associations and their relationships with each other reflect the central and periphery signification of connotations the given notions but the verbal abilities of young children may also block the individuals' self-expressions.

The quantitative methods generally less efficient in get the main conceptions and organization of social beliefs although some of them are good accessories of the qualitative methodology. The semantic differential, developed by Osgood and co-workers (Osgood, Suci, Tannenbaum, 1957), are used to explore the meaning of social and non social conceptions. This method is able to settle a concept on three or more dimension We should also bear in our mind that very often it is not easy to find pairs of adjectives with opposite meanings referring to different things, not speaking about translating them into foreign languages.

Another well known method applied for measuring prejudices is the so called Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1933). This technique is a valid one to see clearly to what extent a person intends to keep back from an ethnic group. The interpretation of test's results based on the preconception that the bigger social distance holding toward the members of a group the more negative affect or prejudice associated toward that group. The validity of this method in relation to investigating prejudices has already been proved (eg. Karakayali, 2009). Therefore in our research we will adopt this method to test the validity of our relatively new measurement instrument.

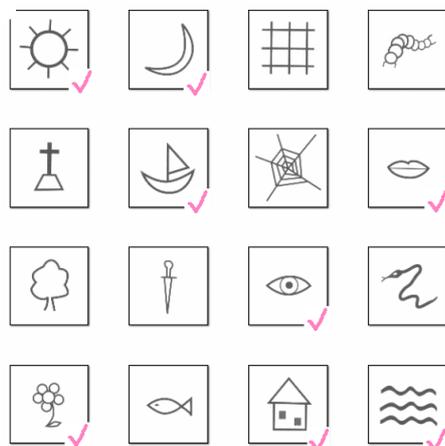
Our aim here is to show that this approach can be a valid means of tests used so far. The Semnatic Selection Test (combined with the well known ones) helps us to eliminate difficulties accompanied by examining social constructions and representations.

The Semantic Selection Test

The Semantic Selection Test is a relatively new method developed by Thomas Urbánek. Originally, they used it to explore semantic concepts of individuals and their change after psychotherapy (Urbánek,2000; Filip, Urbánek, 2006). In further researches d'Escury and her research group find the test useful in the exploration of group ideas and feelings as well (d'Escury, Gajodosjova, Beunje, 2008).

The SST is a semi-projected test. The subject has to choose 8 pictures (out of 16 pictures showed fig.1.) that they feel most relate to a given concept. (Every picture has a little number on its corner.)

Figure 1. Pictures of SST.



The target-words can vary according to the purpose of the study (eg.: prime minister, gypsies, money etc.). The test gives an opportunity to explore the place of these social issues (or concepts) in a two-dimensional semantic area. The dimensions are also defined by the researcher according to the aim of the given study. The 16 pictures are repeated as often as many words are used. The context and order of the pictures are not changed.

The analyses of the answers

The researcher needs to count cases (using by SPSS program) when the person chooses the same picture for a dimension-words (e.g. fear and love) and for a target-word (e.g. Arabic). The number of these cases can range from 0 to 8.

Let's take an example.

Example:

Numbers of choosed pictures

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| 1 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 9 | 12 | 14 | 16 |
| 1 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 12 | 15 | 16 |

Fear
Arabic
Fear-Arabic = 6

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| 1 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 11 | 14 | 15 |
| 1 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 12 | 15 | 16 |

Love
Arabic
Love-Arabic = 3

This procedure should be repeated with all target-words comparing them to the two dimension-words. After counting all cases we can put the target-words into a two-dimensional semantic area, because the two dimension-words (eg. fear and love) split the semantic area into four different parts. And the two score of each target-word (e.g. fear-Arabic score and love-Arabic score) define the place of the given target-word (e.g. Arabic) in this two dimension semantic area. Of course when we used other words we got other semantic parts, for example: we can use 'responsibility' and 'understanding' (regard to homeless or to poor, or politics or other concepts).

As far as I know, my work is the first step to use this method in the field of social issues, and the first to test its convergent validity. According to this, in our study we had two different aims. On the one hand, we wanted to test the convergent validity of a relatively new research method, that is, Semantic Selection Test by comparing the SST scores with the results coming from the well-known Bogardus Scale. On the other hand we wanted to explore the emotional attitudes of Hungarian teenagers towards other nations and ethnic groups, namely the Roma, Arabic, Chinese, American and Italian groups.

Sample and procedure

120 high school students (58 female and 62 male) were involved in the study. Their average age was 16,3 years. We used two paper-pencil tests: The SST and The Social Distance Scale (Bogardus). It took about 30 minutes to complete the tests and it was conducted in groups in their classroom.

Method

In the Bogardus Scale task they had to mark the extent to which they would accept a person from the given groups. The target groups were: Roma, Arabic, Italian, Chinese and American.

We offered them the following answers:

'I would accept them:

1. As close relatives by marriage
2. As close personal friends of mine
3. As class-mates
4. As neighbours in the same street
5. As citizens in my country
6. As tourist (visitor) in my country
7. Would exclude from my country

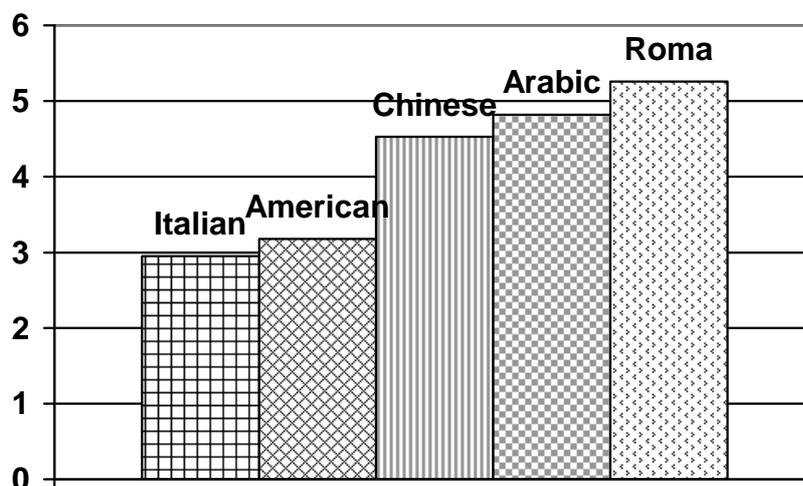
As it can be seen, the higher score shows bigger social distance and stronger rejection.

In the SST we used the same target groups (target-words) then in Bogardus scale: Roma, Arabic, Italian, Chinese and American and used two dimension-words: fear and love.

Results

The results of Bogardus Scale show that the Roma minority seems to be the least accepted group, Italians are the most accepted, followed by Americans in the second place. (see Fig. 2.)

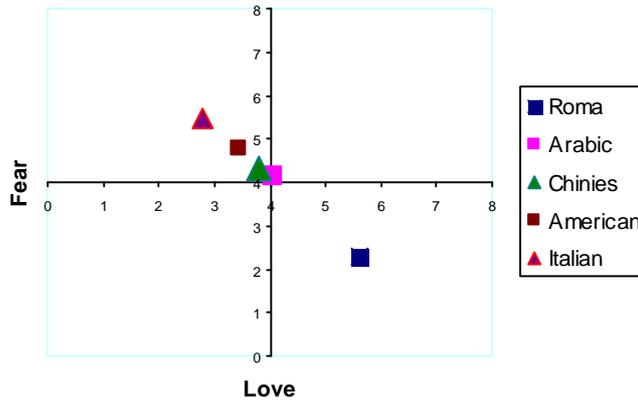
Figure 2. The results of Social Distance Scale



The refusal of the Gipsy ethnic group creates lots of tension in Hungary proved earlier (Szabó, 2008, 2009). Most Hungarians have no personal relationships with any Italians or Americans which means that their positive stereotypes of these nations are rooted in the influence of media.

The results of SST show very similar pattern then the outcomes of Bogardus Scale (See Fig. 3.)

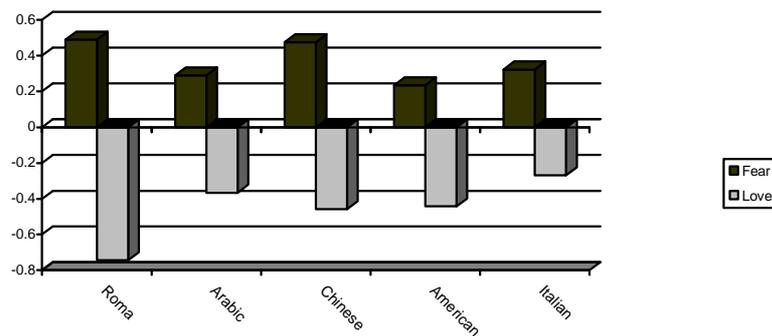
Figure 3. The place of 5 ethnic groups in a semantic field (N= 120)



The Roma minority is situated on the ‘strong fear and less love’ area and the Italian is the most loved nation. The places of the other nations are also similar to those shown by the Bogardus scale.

The convergent validity of SST was also examined to see if there was any relationship between the outcomes of the two tests. To measure the dependence of the two tests results we used Pearson correlation. As the figure shows we found significant correlations between the results in every cases. The level of significance was 0,001. (See Fig. 4.)

Figure 4. Correlations between the results of SST and Bogardus Scale (N=120)**



**Pearson correlation $p < 0,001$

We got a very strong negative correlation between the social distance score on Bogardus and love on SST and also a relatively strong positive correlation between social distance score on Bogardus scale and fear on SST. These results clearly confirm the validity of SST.

Discussion and further suggestion

The primary aim of our research was to examine the convergent validity of SST. For the sake of the cause we choose and compare a method used to tests similar concept construct that the SST measure. We presumed that bigger social distance would show/reveal fear and lower rates of happiness. Throughout the process of our research a convergent validity of the SST was confirmed by the strong significant correlations with the results of Bogardus' scale. The sequence of rejection showed similar pattern like the emplacement of the ethnic groups in the fear-pleasure semantic space. Our data have proved that this method is a useful one to explore children's attitudes towards social issues and concepts. Besides the fact that the results harmonize with those of Bogardus' scale the two dimensions support our understanding of the intensity of feelings behind certain attitudes especially in case of fear and love/affection. This means that the test has not only confirmed the results gained by Bogardus' scale but it also complement it.

The advantages of SST compare with other techniques

Its greatest advantage is that it is a variable and flexible method. We can change target-words and dimension-words according to the subject and aims of our research. As pictures are used to get answers it doesn't require good verbal competencies from the subjects. It makes possible to use it with children and under-educated people, too. Pictograms help us avoiding difficulties rooted in social, linguistic and cultural differences. Therefore the test is applicable to carry out researches focusing on cultural differences and their comparisons.

By its projective nature, it also helps avoiding socially desirable responses. The fact is that the interviewees have no idea of how our data are processed thus they cannot manipulate their answers so that they would reflect social expectations and norms. Furthers tests have proved the time reliability of SST. If the interviewees' life do not change significantly it means that the outcomes of the two tests correlate with each other (Szabó, 2010). At the same time the test is sensitive to attitude changes, therefore it is applicable to measure the effect of various development project (Gajdosova and 'Colollot, 2008).

The drawback of the test is that the number of target concepts are limited. There is no point using more than 7-9 word, because the process become monotone and the responds will be contingent. Consequently it is necessary to choose carefully the possible dimensions and concepts which determine the bases of words proportional for each research plans. It is also worth clarifying that as the target-words and dimension-words are chosen by the researcher it will not allow us to learn more about the individual aspects of the target audience as It can be detected by, for example, REP test developed by George Kelly (Kelly, 1955).

Summary

As has been indicated before this method can be applied only to look at how certain notions considered relevant are placed along dimensions. Then it seems evident that the test itself cannot serve as a means of revealing all the aspects of the interviewees' views and opinions. Therefore we suggest that the test should be used together with other quantitative/ qualitative methods and techniques to back up researchers' perceptions. This approach especially supports to investigate and explore questions which are difficult to verbalize such as the meaning of European identity and the interviewees' attitude towards drugs, money, economics, corruption and ethnic groups etc.

The aim of citizenship education is to develop children's views about societies as well as their thinking and behaviour. Taking in to consideration all of this (and the results of this research) we believe that the SST is a useful method which gives plenty opportunities for researchers to observe and measure beliefs and also the change of beliefs in an effective way.

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