



This paper is taken from

*Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship  
Proceedings of the twelfth Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2010

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,  
ISBN 978-1-907675-01-0**

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
  - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
  - a official of the European Commission
  - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as  
*Szabó, B. (2010) Investigating the Representations of Social Differences in the Function of Family Socialization, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp. 731 - 741*

© CiCe 2010

CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

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



**Lifelong Learning Programme**

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 therein.

#### **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
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

# **Investigating the Representations of Social Differences in the Function of Family Socialization**

*Beata Szabó*  
*Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary)*

## ***Abstract***

*Recent theories argue that beside the individual cognitive development the socio-cultural context plays a significant role in determining the content of children's representations. The following study examines the effects of various social contexts through children's representation about social differences in the Hungarian society. We compared nearly a hundred primary school students' (N=91) conceptions about wealth and poverty who live in families with different socio-economical status and the conceptions of children in State Custody (N=37) who live in children's homes. Children were aged between 9 and 11 years.*

*Based upon the children's drawings and structural interviews, we compared the two groups' representations along several indices (i.e. external, internal and social features of wealthy and poor figures as well as the attributions of these social conditions).*

*We supposed that the impact on the different social contexts (family and children's homes) can be detected through various forms of representations of poverty and wealth among these children.*

*Results indicate that the representations of foster children differ along several domains from the control group. We found particular patterns in the degree of reality connected to the positions, and in the tendency of the attributions. The findings show the dominant effect of social context alongside the characteristic of age.*

**Key words:** *foster children, social cognition, socio-economic status, attribution of wealth, attribution of poverty*

## **Introduction**

### ***Understanding Society***

This empirical research focuses on the influence of socialization and of different social backgrounds on children's social representations of wealth and poverty.

How do children understand and represent the societal circumstances and the social differences? It is a popular topic in both social and developmental psychology. Children's representations as knowledge-structures form the basis of opinions, beliefs and views in

adulthood. (Bombi, 2002) Theories of political and economical socialization are engaged in exploring the conceptualisation of social differences. First we briefly present the basic conceptions which constitute the theoretical background of this research.

According to the classical theory from Jean Piaget (1959) the understanding of economical and political conceptions can be described with the individual cognitive development of the child. The cognitive development model argues that before the age of 7 children are not interested in questions of social structures and functioning. At the age of 10 however they show interest in social inequalities and comparisons. At this Piagetian stage (from the age of 10-11) representations move from concrete to abstract level, children become more sensitive to the judgment of social status. (Bombi, 2002)

Later theories argued that in the forming of social knowledge beside children's cognitive development and own experiences the socio-cultural context also has a significant role in mediating information about society. (Barrett, Buchanan-Barrow, 2005; Berti, 1999; Bombi, 2002) According to the models of social constructions in the forming of social knowledge there is a dynamic interaction between social factors and individual development. Examinations have shown that the socio-economic status (SES), the value judgment of the family as well as parent's political views and other demographic factors cause significant differences in children's ideas about social inequality. (Bombi, 2002; Mannetti, Tanucci, 1993; Percheron, 1999) Bombi investigated children's conceptions of wealth and poverty in Italy. She found that between the age of 11 and 13 the differences in representations were determined rather by the social backgrounds, while the influence of the level of individual cognition was less dominant. (Bombi, 2002)

According to the social representation theory in the present study we aspired to explore in addition to the contents of their ideas, the children's social features as well. Analysing the data we considered these variables as a possible explanation of the differences between children from the same age group.

### *Understanding Social Inequality*

How do people interpret poverty and wealth? Why does somebody become rich or poor? What are the causes of these social inequalities? The answers to these questions are at the centre of interest of studies investigating the attribution of social differences. Examinations are mainly based on a taxonomy developed by Feagin (1972). He divided the explanations of poverty and wealth into three main categories. According to individualistic explanations, the individual is responsible for his/her social position. Structural attributions make the social system responsible, while fatalistic explanations make fate responsible for a particular situation. In other words, the difference between the attributions is the place of responsibility: internal, external factors or fate can be 'blamed' for the existing social position. The preferences of attributions can be connected to factors, such as SES, gender, political attitudes or religiousness. (Furnham, 1982, Furnham and Gunter, 1984) Studies

indicate that people with high SES prefer individualistic explanations suggesting supporting the status quo. While people with lower SES prefer more structural and fatalistic explanations, suggesting that something should be changed in the society. (Feagin, 1972; Furnham, 1987). The interpretations of attributions can be described from several aspects. Behind the structures of explanation of poverty can emerge self protective mechanisms, the protestant work ethic, which emphasizes that hard work is necessary for a person's worldly success, or belief in a just world. (Lerner and Miller, 1978) According to this hypothesis, people have a need to believe that the world is fair, and they can maintain feelings of control over their own fate. Unfortunately, the integration of these interpretations into a complete theoretical model is still unrealised so far.

Discussing the significant socio-cultural features shaping the social representations we must not forget to mention that the Hungarian Society has gone through important structural, political and economical changes in the last 20 years. It is important to examine how children are growing up in this 'new' system, conceptualise and perceive the political and social transformations. It is possible to suppose, that the examinations of social representations show a slightly different picture in the Eastern European area than in West Europe or in the US, where the afore-mentioned studies come from. In the formation of social knowledge the interpretations of parents play a significant role, thus, the broader social context of the family affects indirectly the development of social constructions.

At the age of 10 the main sources of societal knowledge are children's own experiences, observations and attitudes, and the opinions of parents and other authorities (e.g. teachers). The role of peers and media in social understanding is at this age less dominant. In other words just as in political and economical socialization the most important source of socialization is the family. Occasionally, this natural process becomes seriously damaged, the family socialization fails, and the functions of the family have to be transferred to another institution, e.g. child welfare, State Custody or foster care.

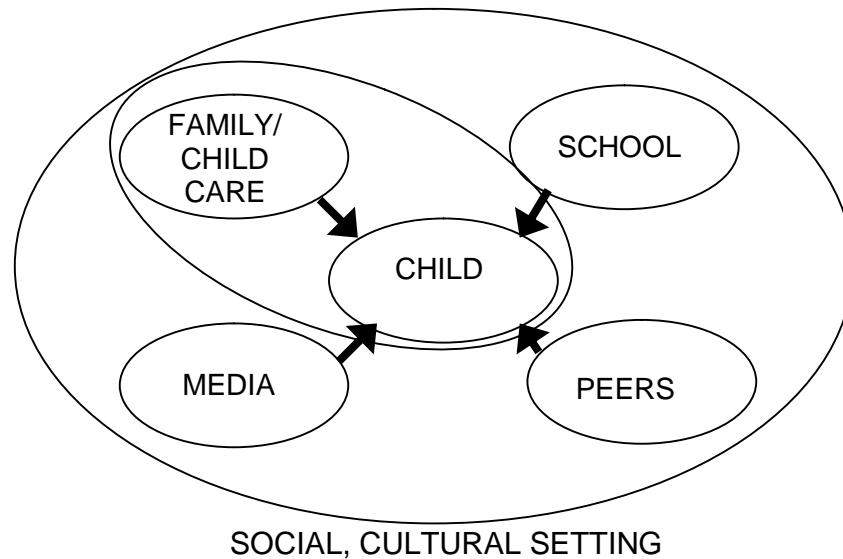


Fig. 1: The main sources of socialization

Currently, there are more than 21.000 children placed under child protection in Hungary. About half of them live in foster families, and the other half lives in children's homes. (These Statistics are from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office from 2006.)

Studies in this topic indicate that these children are disadvantaged on many levels: emotional, cognitive, social and behavioural. The psychological and social problems are over represented in this group. (Barth et al., 2006; Veczkó, 1990; Volentics, 1999) Every foster child has his/her own personal history, but one theme is common: they all have had a trauma, a loss in their lives, which affects many psychological domains.

Based on cultural capital foster children often integrate into the lowest ten percents of the society after they 'leave' child welfare, they have less family and social capital, they have a higher chance to get separated or segregated, they have more conflicts in social functioning, and a lower percentage are successful integrated into society. In our opinion, we can detect remarkable differences also in these children's level of social representations about social positions.

### Hypotheses

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that different socialization contexts (i.e. growing up in a family or in foster care) have an impact on the social functioning of a child through the

forming of social representations about social issues. Previous research has demonstrated that the SES of the family has an impact on the representations. We suppose that the absence of a safe family has remarkable influence on these conceptions as well.

Our hypotheses were that the representations of poverty and wealth among children in foster care differ from the representations of children living in their biological families along several indices: e.g. in external, physical features of poor and wealthy people and also in the attributions of these social conditions. In the explanation of the differences social context plays a significant role, it determines the content of representations. Thus, foster children interpret poverty in a more realistic way, while wealth is interpreted rather in an 'idealistic' context, since their life experiences serve as a basis of these representations. They often come from families with low socio-economic status and they used to seeing poor people more often than rich people.

A previous research in 2005 studied the influence of different family SES on children's ideas about social equality. Participants in that research were 91 elementary school students. They came from four elementary schools of *Szeged*, a city located at the Southern border of Hungary. In a study Bombi (2002) has shown that the effect of the resident area is in connection with the SES. Therefore we concluded the social position of the children from the school they attend. Two of the schools were located on a housing estate. Here they had pupils with generally lower SES. The other couple of schools could be found in more wealthy areas of the city. Thus we can state that these children came from families with a relative higher SES. In other words from the schools' different social backgrounds we concluded to the family SES. The influence of SES on social representations of wealth and poverty was demonstrated. The same methodology was used, and they formed the control group in the present research.

## **Method**

### ***Subjects***

The participants were primary school children living in their own biological families (with higher or lower SES - concluded from the surroundings of their school), they formed the control group in the study (N=91), and foster children living in institutions, in children's homes in the capital (N=37). These children attended 'normal' primary schools as well; they did not have any intellectual disabilities. (Table 1)

Children in the control and the research groups (N=128) were aged between 9 and 11 years (M= 10,37). At this age children reach a cognitive level where they can handle the concept of poverty and wealth, handle causality and attributions. They can make meaningful representations about these social positions.

	Number of children with Higher SES	Number of children with Lower SES	Number of children in Foster care
Boy	26	24	22
Girl	21	20	15
Sum total	47	44	37

Table 1: The Sample

## Procedure

We relied on a special methodology developed by Bombi (2002). At this age the social representations are often implicit and children cannot verbalize them, therefore verbal interviewing is not enough to explore the structure of these ideas. (Barrett, Buchanan-Barrow, 2005) Bombi asserts that drawing is an alternative option for children to communicate.

First, children were asked to draw a rich and a poor person, who are already doing something. From the drawings we collected data about the representations of physical (external) features associated to SES. Subsequently children were interviewed one by one about the drawings, and through the pictures about the emotional (internal) and social characteristics of poor and wealthy people. They were asked to talk about the attributions of a person's social position. The analysis was carried out using a previously edited code system.

We compared the data of the groups along several variables, e.g. external features, sex, height, activity of the figures, the context of drawings, the emotional and social features of figures.

## Results

### *External features*

The analysis of the drawings in terms of context and the activity of the figures confirm the impact of social context. There was no significant difference between the groups (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 1.43$ ; non sign.) Interestingly, children in child care represent the poor almost every time in a real context (83,8%) (e.g. a beggar on the street) (Figure 2), while the traces of imaginary thinking can be detected only in the representation of rich person (e.g. princess and king).

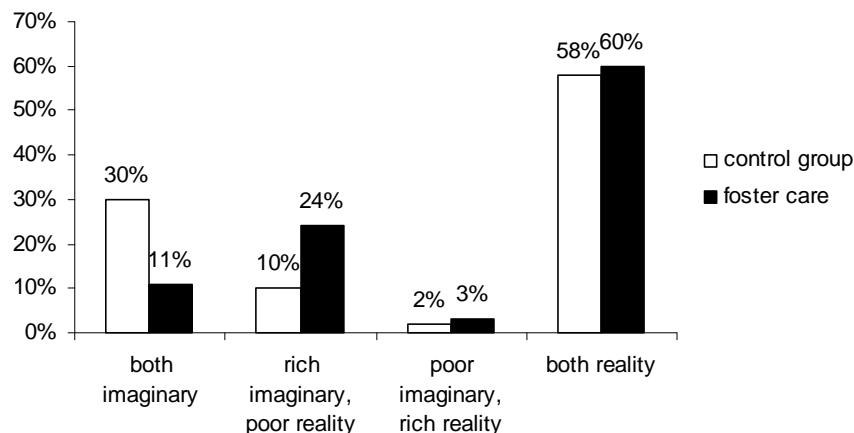


Fig.2: Imaginary and reality context of poor and rich figures on drawings in control and the research group

The activities of figures underlie the impact of the social context. Rich figures are mainly engaged with their money, doing nothing or having fun. (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 18,79$ ; non sign.) In case of the poor figure according to control group they do manual work (about 50%), however according to the research group they mainly do begging (30%) or nothing (19%). These children see this social situation more often in the capital, sometimes they themselves experience this position before placed under foster care. There are significant differences between the groups in this question. (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 31,165$ ;  $p < 0,005$ )

### ***Internal characteristics***

In the interviews children were asked to describe the emotional state and the social network of rich and poor figures. The answers were coded as positive, negative or mixed feelings, and having/ not having a family/friends. There was no significance difference between the emotions as well as the social network attributed to poor and rich figures between the groups (Emotions rich- Pearson  $\chi^2 = 3,244$ ; non sign.; Emotions poor- Pearson  $\chi^2 = 5,385$ ; non sign.). The data support the existing stereotypes: rich people tend to be happy, poor people are rather sad. In the social features of rich people we found significant difference (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 15,31$ ;  $p < 0,005$ ) According to the research group in 92% rich people have a family, in control group this is only 71%. The need for living in a family was associated with another desired position (getting rich). It is also remarkable, that the research group assume poor people lost their family (22%). (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 5,14$ ; non sign.)

### ***Attribution of wealth and poverty***

In terms of attribution of social inequalities, there were several distinctions between the groups. The differences were not always significant, but a tendency could be observed.



(Wealth: Pearson  $\chi^2=18,73$ ; non sign.; Poverty: Pearson  $\chi^2=13,98$ ; non sign.) It is interesting that work and fame plays a significant role in getting rich beside inheritance according to the research group compared with the control group, who attribute wealth to inheritance, work and luck.

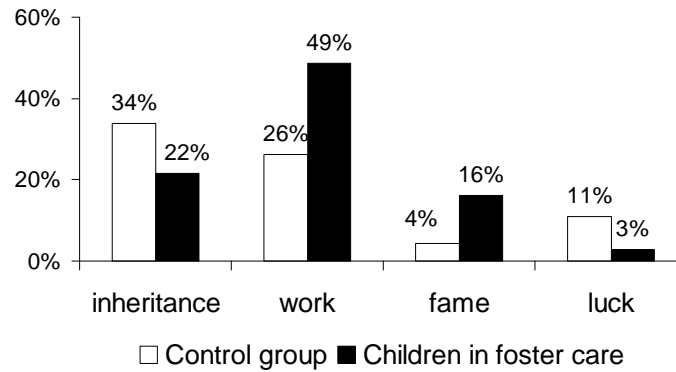


Fig. 3: Attribution of wealth in control and research group

Running into debt, having no job or being left alone are frequent explanations of impoverishment according to the research group in contrast to the control group, where being born in the situation is a frequent attribution.

The differences between the groups are more visible using Feagin's taxonomy, and divide the control group in terms of SES.

□ Higher SES group □ Lower SES group ■ Children in state care

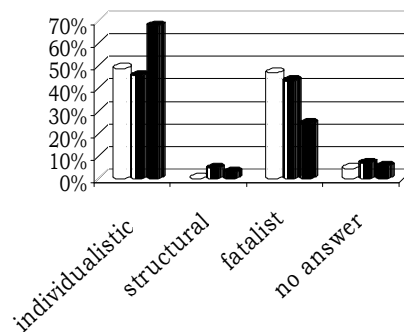


Fig. 4: Attribution of wealth according to high and low SES group and the research group

There was no significant difference between groups (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 6,43$ ; non sign.), however individualistic attributions were dominant in the research group. While the frequency of fatalist explanations was lower than in control group. (Figure 4)

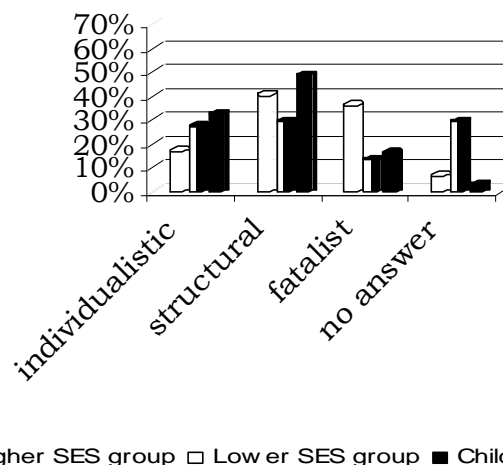


Fig. 5: Attribution of poverty according to high and low SES group and the research group

Significant difference occurred concerning the field of attributions of poverty. (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 10,304$ ;  $p < 0,005$ ) (Figure 5) The individualistic and structural explanations were dominant again, and the frequency of fatalistic explanations was low by foster children.

## Discussion

Representations of foster children showed differences from children living with their birth parents, mainly in external features, the activities of rich and poor figures, and in the attributions of these social conditions. There was no significant difference in internal features.

Foster children's conception of poverty was connected to reality. It appeared in the context of the drawings and in the attributions, reflecting a certain complexity of perception of poverty. According to foster children structural and individual factors can be 'blamed' for impoverishment. Being left alone, being a victim, or losing the family appeared often in the explanations, which refers to their present life situation. It suggests that the representations come rather from individual experiences. There is also the influence of the SES of the biological family, and the influence of the peer group.

The question of wealth was idealized. With learning and hard work it seemed accessible for everyone, even for poor people. A rich person is generous, has positive emotions, several social connections and a family, everything what one desires according to the research group. In their representations we can detect the influence of media and peers, and the marks of wishful thinking. Sometimes children have drawn themselves in the rich position, just like a form of fulfilling their desires.

In the light of results, we can point out the influence of different socializational contexts on experiencing and interpreting social differences in childhood. These representations are the basis of the following conceptions in adulthood, and they determine the citizens' behaviour. For this reason the education to support appropriate functioning within the society has to consider these consequences, and has to utilize these perceptions to motivate foster children as they grow older.

Future research should examine the influence of other institutions of foster care system on children's representations, e.g. foster family homes. The other direction of research should investigate additional psychological and contextual factors that moderate the link between representations and socialization (e.g. locus of control, belief in the just world), and should focus to answer questions applicable in practice.

## References

- Barrett, M., Buchanan-Barrow, E. (2005) Emergent themes in the study of children's understanding of society, in Barrett, M., Buchanan-Barrow, E. (ed) *Children's Understanding of Society*. New York: Psychology Press
- Barth, R. P., Whildfire, J., Green, R. L. (2006) Placement Into Foster Care and the Interplay of Urbanicity, Child Behavior Problems, and Poverty. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 76, pp 358-366
- Berti, A. E. (1999) Psychological studies on children's understanding of society, in Ross, A. (ed) *Young Citizens in Europe*. London: CiCe
- Bombi, A. S. (2002) The representations of wealth and poverty: Individual and social factors, in Fülöp M., Van Den Dries, A-M. (ed) *Young People's Understanding of Economic Issues in Europe*. UK, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books
- Feagin, J. (1972) Poverty: We still believe that God helps them who helps themselves. *Psychology Today*. 6, pp 101-129
- Furnham, A. (1982) Why are the poor always with us? Explanations for poverty in Britain. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 21, pp 311-322
- Furnham, A. (1987) The Structure of Economic Beliefs. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 8, pp 253-260

- Furnham, A., Gunter, B. (1984) Just world beliefs and attitudes towards the poor. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 23, pp 265-269
- Lerner, M. J., Miller, D. T. (1978) Just world research and the attribution process: Looking back and looking ahead. *Psychological Bulletin*. 85, pp 1030-1051
- Mannetti, L., Tanucci, G. (1993) The meaning of work for young people: the role of parents in the transmission of social representation, in Breakwell, G. M., Canter, D. V. (ed) *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Percheron, A. (1999) A gyermekek politikai szóincse, [Children's political vocabulary] in Szabó I., Csákó M. (ed) *A politikai szocializáció [Political Socialization]*. Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó
- Piaget, J. (1959) *The language and thought of the child*. New York: Basic Books
- Veczkó J. (1990) *A gyermekvédelem pszichológiai és pedagógiai alapjai [Psychological and Pedagogical basics of Child Welfare]*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó
- Volentics A. (1999) *Gyermekevédelem és reszocializáció [Child Welfare and Resocialization]*. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyv Kiadó