

How do children perceive their peers? Commonalities of external and internal features perceived of other children in the responses of 10-11 years old pupils¹

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Abstract

Several findings support the statement that a curriculum designed around concepts describing universal socio-cultural phenomena (so called cultural universals) can serve as a basis of students' social science education (Brophy & Alleman, 2008). In an online research project involving grade five pupils (N=1748), our aim was assessing children's ability to find one's way around in 21st century societies and cultures. This paper presents the first results of a survey, which was carried out in 2016. The aim of the study was exploring (1) the commonalities that pupils attribute to pictures of children of their age group, and (2) students' views and attitudes based on their answers. On the online test pupils could see the pictures of eight children with considerably different looks. We asked them to write down their opinion about the common features of the children portrayed in these pictures. Our presentation is based on the content analysis of the responses we received to our open questions. We found that 97% of the participants gave meaningful answers that were classified into ten categorical variables based on their contents. Most responses (782 pupils, 44.7%) identified the persons portrayed by the pictures as children, it was followed by the recognition of an emotion (by 638 pupils, 36.5%). 307 pupils (17.6%) identified the children as their fellow human beings. 165 pupils (9.4%) gave answers that made references to the presumed places of living, while 121 respondents (6.95%) pointed out the fact that they were students. 55 pupils (3.1%) made references to their appearance, 50 respondents (2.9%) referred to their age, 29 (1.1%) to their skin colour, 25 of them (1.4%) to their genders. The educational application of the results is also discussed.

Keywords

Cultural Universals, Childhood, Content Analysis, Electronic Testing

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Theoretical background

Cultural universals

Cultural universals – which are also called societal/human universals or universal socio-cultural phenomena – have first appeared in cultural anthropology and later have spread to other human sciences including educational sciences. Cultural universals denote societal phenomena necessary to humanity (Brown, 2013), which appear in all present, past and future communities regardless of cultural differences. They have various forms and levels of abstraction.

Cultural universals are categories, which are used by a community to describe different aspects of life. Categories related to human behaviour (e.g. classification of colours, planning, rituals), emotions (e.g. fear of death, envy), institutions (e.g. government), everyday life (e.g. eating, clothing, living, family, communication, transportation, finances, religion, professions, free time).

For example, the need to explain and understand the origins of the universe and the need to distinguish humans and animals are two widespread universals. Because of their common appearance in all human cultures, they are rarely recognized as cultural universals. The ideas about the structure of the world and the universe have many joint similarities across cultures. The explicit goal of understanding and reasoning about the origins of the universe makes the different explanations a coherent category. Various approaches try to explain the origin of the world, some of them give a mythical explanation (see origin myths and legends), while others use scientific approaches. Cosmology – the science researching the birth and development of the universe – aims to use scientific methods to better understand the origins of the world (Antweiler, 2015).

The other cultural universal is the need to distinguish humans from animals. Antweiler (2015) points out four distinct human behaviours: (1) using fire to heat and cook, (2) altering the body with face and body paintings, tattoos, body modifications and clothes. (3) Anthropomorphism i.e. the treating of inanimate objects and phenomena as if they have human characteristics. Child literature, cartoons, everyday communication with children and various belief systems (e.g. animism) give us many examples how it works in practice (see Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley, 2014). Finally, (4) the mapping, altering and objectifying of nature is a significant trait differentiating humans from animals.

Characteristics and origins of cultural universals

Cultural universals are present in all cultures, in all kind of human communities (e.g. societies, nations, ethnicities). They are the characteristics of the culture. Individuals sharing the same culture also share the cultural universals too which are present in that community. However, this does not mean that all

individuals possess all the cultural universals present in the community. This specialty differentiates cultural universals from characteristics of humanity: characteristics of humanity are common traits among people, while cultural universals are part of the cultural knowledge people can share with each other. Individuals in the same group share them, but it is not necessary. There can be members who do not possess these categories, or their interpretation of the category is different from the community meaning. Contrary to general beliefs, universals and human characteristics (see Csányi, 2015) are not identical, and they could not be used as interchangeable notions. However, they surely have a lot in common.

The nature of cultural universals is not static: new ones appear, new meanings are attached to them, they are modified, or they can disappear. They have appeared because of the past and present worldwide connections between cultures, so their presence is global now. Despite the common belief, globalization is not the cause of their spreading. Human communities from the beginning migrated, got in touch with each other and dealt with common problems, which led to the sharing of these concepts. At the same time, they had to face similar challenges and circumstances, which have been similarly solved by human communities. These factors resulted in universal patterns in human cultures (see living conditions, behaviours, institutions, etc.). Thus, the use of cultural universals is not the consequence of a common genetic background.

The nature or nurture debate about IQ is well known in psychology (see Vajda, 2002). Antweiler (2015) emphasizes that this unprofitable argument complicates the research of cultural universals. However, in this case the difficulty can be solved effortlessly. He emphasizes the parallel nature of culture and genes in shaping differences and similarities. Genes determine various characteristics of humans (e.g. physical appearance, temperament), while at the same time many distinct factors affect these characteristics. Alike genes, culture shapes the personality of individuals, but other variables also have a significant impact.

In lay and scientific public opinion, there is a rigid idea that cultural universals are genetically determined. According to this approach, they have a solid genetic foundation, and at the same time, they are complemented with an unstable layer of meaning. Antweiler (2015) points out that this reasoning is incorrect, because cultural universals do not have genetic background. Because of stereotyping, people have these beliefs, which offer more simple interpretation than explaining the differences with the role of culture.

The previous approaches emphasized the role of universals as cultural phenomena, which have been a crucial part in all human cultures. The reasons why they have evolved have not been discussed in depth. Cultural universals appeared in human culture for various reasons.

1. First, evolutionary aspects must be taken into considerations. They are the results of the development of humanity. Throughout history people had to face similar opportunities and challenges and they gave analogous answers to them independently (e.g. nepotism).
2. Through global processes (e.g. trading) they have spread among communities and became fundamental aspects of describing life (e.g. the use of fire during cooking).
3. They impersonate innovations that have spread among people and have important, necessary functions (e.g. money).
4. They also describe universal natural laws that appear in every people's life (e.g. heavy arrowhead, left/right directions in traffic).
5. Finally, communication across cultures made them possible to spread all over the world through factions and unions.

It is important to note that the source of universal societal and cultural phenomena can be multi-faceted, and the various reasons usually appear interrelated.

Classification and functions of cultural universals

International studies aim to classify cultural universals along different aspects (see Allemann and Brophy, 2001, 2002, 2003). The intention of classification is logical and reasonable. However, it is arbitrary sometimes. The number of categories depends on the level of perception. Thus, some researchers report shorter lists of universals, while others present much longer and detailed lists (e.g. Brown, 1991). In our view, the classification of cultural universals is essential along the dimension of the relationship between individuals and the community.

The general, philosophical and psychological driven approach emphasizes the historical perspective of cultural universals and the role of categorization in the perception and interpretation of the world and the environment. This interpretation regards universals as categories –category systems that are based on cumulative knowledge, broadening and changing over time. The collective memory of the community enhances this process, because collective memory can preserve the knowledge of the community. Individuals' knowledge are stored in oral narratives, but these can only record events, which happened during a persons' lifetime. Contrary to personal memory and oral history, collective memory preserve memories over a persons' life-span (Assmann, 1999).

According to this approach, cultural universals can be classified along two aspects. The first category of universals are the common structures of the human mind which are the basics of all human activity, such as space, time, biological needs and thinking. The other category is based on historical perspectives and the universals related to this category are the results of

cultural development. It consists of abstract phenomena such as society, good, bad, justice and freedom (Stiopin, 2014). The two categories are interrelated, and their distinction is only theoretical. They are present in all human societies, and they are used by a community to create the specific interpretation of time and space, life and death, nature, work and private space. Unique community norms and behaviours are developed based on these interpretations which determine the person's life in the society. These are also called specific cultural universals.

Cultural universals have societal and personal functions as well. Their three functions in human communities are mentioned by researchers and are related to different time intervals. First, cultural universals represent constancy. They are the basic structures of human thinking about society in all time periods. Second, in larger time intervals, the selective function of cultural universals is significant. The experiences of the community culminate in them with time. During this process, the positive, useful practices of the group are collected in the universals while the adverse experiences are pushed into the background and are not passed down to the next generation. Finally, cultural universals are important in maintaining and shaping the public thought about life and society during a specific age. They contribute to the process of enculturation while individuals get acquainted with the culture of humanity (Németh, 1997), and support the learning of national enculturation, the learning of the norms and beliefs present in a society (see Dancs, 2016).

After summarizing the public functions of cultural universals, it is necessary to outline their personal aspects, too. The interpretation of cultural universals are always shaped by the individual viewpoints and experiences through which individuals see and understand them. Through the categories (aka cultural universals) the person views and interprets the world (Stiopin, 2014) so the personal function of cultural universals gives meaning to and helps people interpret the social world.

At this point it is useful to note that cultural universals have a lot in common with social representations. Social representations are belief systems which are shared by the members of a group, are results of collective communications, and are useful to a community (Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli, and Abric, 2011). According to our view, these characteristics of social representations can also be applied to cultural universals. A community attributes meaning to a general category during the formation of cultural universals, the interpretation of the category spreads through various communicative acts. Cultural universals are also useful categories which are used to understand the life in that culture. They can be viewed as belief systems, and the interplay of the elements can also be hypothesised.

The impact that factors of social psychology exert needs to be mentioned and highlighted here. We are fully aware that neither adults, nor children can detach themselves from biases known from social psychology. Every

individual's consciousness is shaped by group psychology and stereotypes. We always look at the world as well as the cultural universals through the filter of our personal experiences.

Children, cultural universals and categories

We have limited knowledge of what children know about cultural universals. However, we do know that at the beginning of primary school, pupils already have hands-on knowledge of both the world and society, and some key concepts (e.g. wealth, property, money) emerge in pupils' thinking early on. Nevertheless, this sporadic knowledge does not fit into a coherent knowledge system. Generally, lower grade children in primary schools do not understand the social, cultural and economic differences between individual cultures.

In the USA, Jere Brophy and Jane Allemann were at the forefront of research exploring children's understanding of human universals. They have conducted focus group interviews for several years to map out what children know about universals, and their findings are still being published. The findings of their collaboration established the view that curricula can be designed around human universals, which then can lay the groundwork for competence in humanities. As an outcome of their curriculum development efforts, teachers' books and workbooks have been designed to teach universals in humanities.

At the same time, developmental psychology studies vividly investigate children's categorization processes and their development. Three-month old infants can categorize faces based on their similar appearances and they also give similar reactions to them. Infants make categories based on physical characteristics, while older children and adults can use more abstract traits during categorization (Quinn, 2011; Liberman, Woodward, and Kinzler, 2017). There are several different approaches to describing the development of categorization. A general conclusion of the studies is that between age 3 and 6 children categorize people based on their physical traits while between age 6 and 10 they use the activities and behaviours of people to make categories. After the age of 10, abstract traits are used to make sense of the social world (Bennett, 2011).

Aboud (1988) also suggests a periodic development in categorization. First, emotions, later personal experiences dominate children's thinking and reasoning about human groups. At the same time, the focus of their attention also changes: initially they focus on themselves, later on groups and finally on the individual members of the groups. It is important to note that cognitive development is not the only source of the developmental processes but social, societal and individual factors also shape how they categorize (Aboud, 2005).

Aims and research questions

In this research the aim was assessing children's way of finding their way around in 21st century societies and cultures. In Hungary children's thinking and reasoning about societal issues are rarely studied. We aimed to gather information about childhood as a cultural universal represented in students' thoughts. Two research questions were investigated: (1) What are the commonalities of external and internal characteristics that pupils attribute to pictures of children of their age group coming from different parts of the world? (2) What views and attitudes can be mapped based on their answers?

Sampling, data collection and data analysis

51 partner schools of the Szeged School Longitudinal Program joined the research, which ensured the participation of 83 school classes. Schools participated voluntarily. A total of 1748 pupils were involved in the research from different areas of Hungary. The pupils' group was not skewed to either genders: there was no statistical difference between the ratio of boys and girls participating in the study.

Data collection was carried out through an online electronic diagnostic system called eDia, which had been previously used to diagnose numerous cognitive and affective domains involving thousands of pupils in Hungary (Csapó, Molnár, and Nagy, 2014). During the data collection process, students completed a questionnaire related to our topic. The questionnaire was completed in school during a 45 minutes lesson. Schools used their own IT infrastructures and internet service to access the questionnaire. Participants filled out the questionnaire anonymously using an assessment code. During the assessment, teachers helped students to type in their assessment code. All the necessary information was visible on the different screens of the questionnaire. Teachers were not allowed to give further instruction or to help students during the assessment. Data collection had not been uninterrupted. We received no reports of any technical glitches. Data collection took place from May to June in 2016.

In this paper the answers given to an open-ended question are analysed in depth. On a page of the online test, pupils could see the pictures of eight children with considerably different looks. During the selection of the pictures the aim was to represent the diversity of children living all around the world. At the same time, pictures were selected where children at the same age as the participants are presented. We asked the pupils to formulate their opinion about the common features of the children portrayed in the pictures. There were no constraints to their answers, they could type in their text freely and autonomously. They could decide about the length and the content of the text. During the data collection process, participants could go back to the previous page any time and modify their answers. The eDia system recorded pupils' verbatim responses.



Figure 1. The instruction and the pictures presented to the participants

(The instruction in English: What do these pictures have in common? Write what you think in the text boxes below the pictures!)

After the data collection period, the data was transferred to the SPSS statistical program. Students' answers were analysed using content analysis. No content analysing software was used. The data analysis was carried out manually. After the review of the answers basic categorical variables were defined which represented primary information units. The next step investigated all responses and determined whether the text included in each category is explicit or not. Code one was used to mark an answer if it included the code category and code zero was used if it did not.

Results

We found that 1697 pupils (97% of the participants) gave meaningful answers that we could translate into categorical variables. The majority of the participants named only one shared characteristic, 25.5% named two and 6.1% of them named three. These outcomes are valuable and give an insight into the thinking of children. The highest number of mentions was five. The average number of identified response categories was 1.4. There were only 25 pupils in the sample who listed four or five shared characteristics in their answers. In most of the cases, participants were reticent and only wrote a few keywords.

In this section some suggested examples from pupils' answers are presented. The examples are unconventional because students gave a longer and more meaningful answer to the question.

"All of them are school children, they are human, they think they are cool, and they have a country of their own."

"They are children. They come from different countries. Both boys and girls. All their faces reflect joy and happiness. Neither of them resembles each other. They are all children and happy. Maybe not as much as we are or someone else is. But at least as much as a mother or a family can be happy."

"They are all children in these pictures, but they are of different religions, and these pictures were mostly taken in schools, all the children are smiling."

"They are all children from all over the world, who go to school to learn. Because it doesn't matter which country you are from, you have the right to learn."

Students' digital literacy was not assessed, but it can be hypothesized that their familiarity with computers and typing are related to the elaboration of their answers. At the same time, the participants' family background, their school performance and their thinking skills can also affect the length and the content of their answers.

The frequency of the answers is the following. First the frequency of each category was calculated and then the ratio of the category within all the answers. Most respondents (782 pupils, 44.7%) identified the person portrayed in the pictures as children and this was followed by the recognition of an emotion (by 638 pupils, 36.5%). 307 pupils (17.6%) identified the children as their fellow human beings. 165 pupils (9.4%) gave answers that made references to the presumed places of living, while 129 respondents (7.38%) pointed out that they were students. 55 pupils (3.1%) made references to their appearance, 50 respondents (2.9%) referred to their age, 29 (1.1%) to their skin colour, and 25 of them (1.4%) to their genders. The majority of the answers were non-judgemental but 24 (1.4%) answers proved to be discriminatory.

Figure 2 presents the categories which were identified in the answers, and their proportional ratio. The most frequent category was children (36%), while 14% mentioned that they are all human beings. 29% recognized that they all express the same emotion. Exactly half of the students identified the children in the pictures as humans, and most of them realized that they belong to the same age group. This outcome confirms that the physical characteristics were the main aspect with which participants categorized the pictures. If we add the third most frequent response – the recognition of an emotion – these three categories include 79% of the responses. At the same time, respondents who answered with a presumed place of living or referred to the children as students also used visible cues in their reasoning. The background of some pictures showed other children

and classrooms. Probably these details helped participants to formulate their answers.

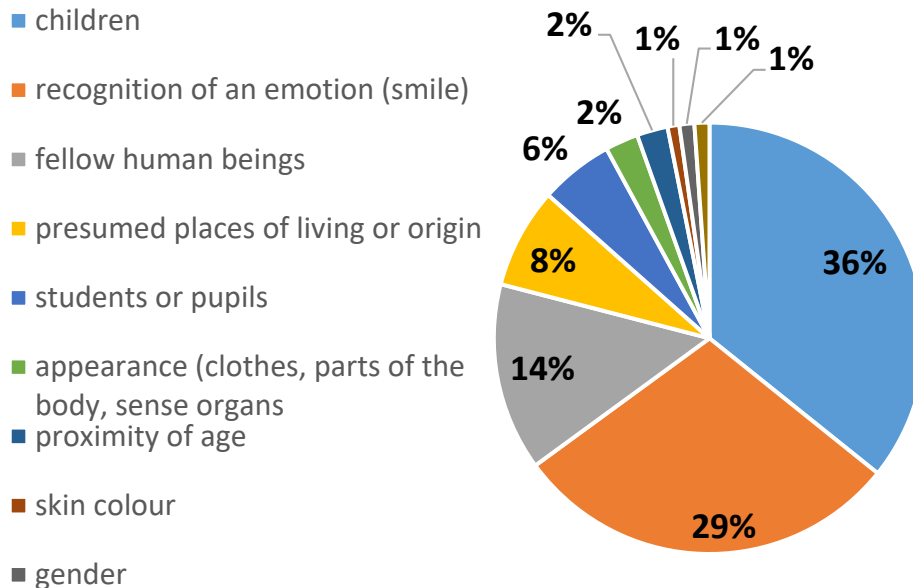


Figure 2. The ratio of the answer categories

The content analysis enabled a deeper analysis of the responses and the exploration of the deeper structure of students' views. Some of the categories proved to be simple, without any subcategories. For example, in the case of gender, skin colour and negative orientation participants expressed their explicit views and the coding of the answers was obvious. At the same time, expressing emotions, the presumed place of living, students' physical appearance and their presumed age were created using various subcategories. For example, in the case of physical appearance several answer categories were created: body parts, clothes and faces. The presumed place of living consists of the following subcategories: mentioning a country where the children may live, expressing their nationality, mentioning that they are foreigners or saying that they are not Hungarians. If the answers are analysed on the level of abstraction, it can be deduced that the respondents mainly used physical traits, perceivable outer characteristics to determine the common features of the children. Inner personality traits do not appear in their answers. Table 1 shows the aggregated findings of the content analysis.

Table 1. The frequency of the answer categories and some examples to the categories

Category	Percentage of mentioning	Stratification of answers
Child	44.74%	
Expressing emotions	36.50%	smiling, laughing, grin, being happy
Human	17.56%	
Presumed place of living, presumed origin	9.44%	another town or country of origin another people, nationality, ethnic group globe, hemisphere, world, planet, continent a guess of the place of origin foreign country as keyword place of origin is “not Hungarian” concrete ethnic groups presumed Roma or Gipsy origin
Student	7.38%	school as a scene where learning happens learning process
Physical appearance	2.48%	picture/image hair sight dress parts of body
Presumed age	2.92%	being young, addressing actual age, being adolescent
Other	1.49%	religion, health, living conditions
Gender	1.43%	
Negative orientation, exclusion	1.37%	
Skin colour	1.09%	

Gender differences

We have examined whether there is any polarisation of responses depending on the participants' gender. We have found that – with three exceptions – there have been no significant differences, and the categories have been equally mentioned by boys and girls. All three exceptions are linked to the human nature and emotions. The categories are the following: expressing emotions ($\chi^2=4.59$, $p=0.03$), student/pupil status ($\chi^2=7.28$, $p=0.01$), and the fact that they are children ($\chi^2=24.75$, $p=0.00$). It is not surprising that these response categories are significantly more prevalent among girls. The outcomes confirmed that girls tend to be ready to recognize emotions. Furthermore, some of the common traits (students and children) are also more likely to appear in their answers. Two main conclusions can be formulated here. One is that our study has underpinned girls' higher tendency of recognising emotions and responding to the human visible traits over boys. The other is that these differences between the genders already manifest themselves as early as age 10-11, in an exercise demanding freestyle and unguided text production. At the same time, it is an interesting result that there is no gender difference in the case of negative orientation and gender. It is also important to note that in these cases a small portion of the respondents gave these answers. Thus, a small amount of data could be analysed.

Table 2. Distribution of responses according to the gender within response categories

Category	Gender	In his/her answer...		χ^2	p
		mentioned	not mentioned		
Appearance (clothes, parts of the body)	boy	28	821	0.48	n.s.
	girl	23	822		
Colour of skin	boy	11	838	0.46	n.s.
	girl	8	837		
Student role	boy	45	804	7.28	0.01
	girl	73	772		
Proximity of age	boy	24	825	0.09	n.s.
	girl	26	819		
Presumed places of living or origin	boy	70	779	3.73	n.s.
	girl	93	751		
Recogniton of an emotion	boy	289	560	4,59	0.03
	girl	330	516		
Negative orientation	boy	17	832	4.18	n.s.
	girl	7	838		
Child(ren)	boy	328	521	24.75	0.00
	girl	428	417		
Fellow human being	boy	158	691	1.69	n.s.
	girl	137	708		
Sexes	boy	11	838	0.38	n.s.
	girl	14	831		

Conclusion, limitations, further researches

Cultural universals are categories in a culture, which have a common meaning, while individuals develop their own interpretations as well. They are learned during socialization processes, they express a person's cultural affiliation while, at the same time, cultural universals help them to understand the world and attribute meaning to it. They can change over time. As human culture develops new categories, universals appear while others lose their significance.

Our study investigated how students interpret a cultural universal – childhood – as well as the commonalities, external and internal features they attribute to children at the same age group as them. Pictures of children from different cultures were used, participants had to think about the common characteristics of the children depicted. During the data collection process, they had to answer an open-ended question, the answers were analysed through content analysis.

The results showed that grade five respondents (10-11-year-old pupils) only used external traits to express what is common in the children. The most common category was that they are all children, the second one was recognizing a common emotion on their face, and the third one was recognizing that they are all human beings. 79% of participants mentioned these characteristics, while the other categories (gender, skin colour, presumed place of living, etc.) also referred to external features. Developmental psychology studies emphasize that using physical traits during categorization is mainly frequent in younger ages. However, activities, behaviours that can be perceived are important aspects between age 6 and 10. Children mentioning an emotion or the fact that they are all students presumably used children's visible actions and their surroundings to draw their conclusions. Apart from these cases, the occurrence of abstract content has been negligible.

The outcomes proved that the participating Hungarian children mainly use visible cues to make their judgements. The internal characteristics, personality traits are not mentioned in their answers. 8% referred to the presumed place of origin of the children. This may be a sign of potential biases in the responses. Themes from current political topics (mainly the immigration) emerge and sometimes appeared in pupils' responses. Another interesting result was that they did not refer to the fact that these children could be their friends or classmates. These outcomes imply the need of developing pupil's tolerance and perspective-taking ability. New approaches can emphasize the common traits rather than stress the differences. For example, enhancing the role of teaching civics, giving more opportunity to debate, to discuss and work in teams during classes would be helpful.

The data collection method also brought some novelties. Computer-based assessment allowed to collect significant amount of data about children's thinking and reasoning about childhood as a cultural universal in contrast to qualitative studies. At the same time, a limitation emerges parallel to the data collection method: students' digital proficiency could influence the behaviour of

participants (e.g. the number of traits mentioned, the complexity of answers given). Further ways of data collection can also be useful. Interviews with pupils would make a good opportunity to recognize their thinking and reasoning in depth. At the same time, other computer-based assessment methods could be used to collect more data. For instance, using predefined answer categories based on this research could help to collect more data and make data collection less time-consuming. Finally, a long-term goal can be conducting intercultural comparative studies. During these investigations, pictures can serve as a universal language which all participants can understand.

The assessment of students' thinking about different type of cultural universals (e.g. childhood, gender, conflict, cooperation, culture) presents a new approach to study their civics performance, get new information about their civic competence. In practice the emphasis on the common traits of all cultures could help to develop students' tolerance, openness to other cultures and nations.

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