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Socialisation for coping with competition, winning and losing in two societies: Hungary and the UK[1]

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Continuous political changes in the former socialist countries over the last decade - the appearance of political pluralism, the market economy, unemployment and competition in the job market, the growing number of enterprises that require a competitive spirit - have resulted in competition (a previously banned and denied phenomenon) becoming a key concept in these societies. However, in the new and harshly competitive environment characterised by scarce resources, there is confusion about the personal, interpersonal and moral requirements and consequences of competition. This is partly because there have been no explicit and well-structured principles or rules to govern competition, so people have not been prepared for the emotional consequences of open competition. The transformation to market economics in former European socialist countries has shifted the nature of the personal and social skills needed for success. Being able to compete, to deal with losing, and to withstand the stresses of competition are now essential abilities for those living in societies in transition. The rapid change at every level of Hungarian society requires citizens to modify their perception and understanding of this phenomenon, and to change their attitude and values towards competition (Fülöp, 2002).

As a Western capitalist democracy and a leading economic power in Europe, Britain has a characteristically different history of competition. The intellectual tradition of support for the free market and upward mobility through dynamic capitalism (e.g. Adam Smith) is found in full-blown form possibly only in Britain and in the United States, and Britain has fewer anti-capitalist cultural traditions than virtually any other society (Rubinstein 1993). England was the cradle of the idea of the liberty and rights of the individual driving people to competition (Paxman, 1998). She is also a society with an ‘eminently civilised faith in honesty, fair play patient queuing’ (Rubinstein, 1993 p. 51) and a belief in the rule of law (Paxman, 1998); this results in intense competition being controlled by implicit and explicit rules.

It also seems unarguable that British culture is more sympathetic to business life, entrepreneurship and capitalism than any other European culture (Rubinstein, 1993). On the other hand the UK, after losing its colonies, has had to adjust to its relegation from major world economic and military power to a much weaker role. Competition and enterprise are cited by the government as a way of maintaining (or restoring) national economic security and prosperity. As a result of the perception that education and the economy are linked, schooling has seen an increased emphasis on competition and enterprise in a number of ways. Firstly, the education system become more competitive structurally (i.e. schools compete against each other in a more explicit manner) and there

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is an increased emphasis on schools achieving targets. They operate in a highly competitive system in which league tables and performance indicators have replaced the 'old' Left discourse of direct links between social class and achievement and the need for welfare and collaboration (Ross, 2000). Secondly, classroom climate has become more obviously competitive. When John Major was Prime Minister he bemoaned the lack of competition within schools. Now, with a continuing focus on public examination results, there is a tremendous incentive for individuals to compete and achieve (Davies, Fülöp, *et al.* 2001). There is, however, a lack of studies revealing young people's perception, understanding and experience of competition in Britain.

In a previous study we compared the ways in which Hungarian and English secondary school students perceived the role of competition in their own society (Fülöp, 2002). The results showed that while in both countries students saw competition as very intensive and as playing an important role, this role was perceived mainly positively in Great Britain and mainly negatively in Hungary. In Hungary the main areas of competition were thought to be making money, the economy, finding a job and survival; the main areas in England were sports, jobs, international comparisons and education. English students attributed more positive consequences to competition, such as developing the country, motivation and self-development. Hungarian students gave almost three times as many negative as positive consequences. The most frequently described negative consequences were immorality, interpersonal conflict and aggression, and the development of money-oriented people. The responses indicated that Hungarians wanted to win at any cost (especially in the material sense) and by any means (aggressive or immoral). In this new democracy and market economy there are no well-established rules to control competition: the disintegration of the former social rules resulted in the disintegration of the classical moral rules.

The immorality of competition was only an issue for a few British respondents. Corruption and bribery - everyday media news in Hungary - are not so prevalent in the British political and economic scene, and despite the legendary principle of 'fair play' that was considered one of the virtues that made Britain great (Paxman, 1998), this still represents a set of implicit rules to govern everyday social life. But this is not the case in Hungary, where 'fair play' has never been a deeply ingrained concept. The British gave aggression, stress and discrimination as the most frequent negative consequences of competition, although interestingly the inequality created by competition in the society was more of an issue for them than immorality. Money orientation was not even mentioned by this group, probably because it was considered to be natural rather than a negative trait.

Being a 'winner' or a 'loser' has become a part of the everyday discourse of Hungarian adolescents. They use the expression 'loser' if they despise somebody, and being a 'winner' is increasingly highly valued. In England sport is much more present in the secondary school-aged young people's everyday lives, and the market economy, enterprise and political pluralism have long traditions, therefore the socialisation from competition and its potential positive (winning) and negative (losing) results is much more present than in Hungary. In a society that has no clear rules about competition, it is more difficult

It is very important however, in terms of psychological health and successful functioning in a competitive society, to learn to deal with both sides of the competitive coin: to know

how to be a graceful loser and to continue on after losing, and how to be a guiltless, self-confident winner who is able to be sensitive to the loser's needs too.

The sample

Our respondents were 16-18 year old secondary school students from five different secondary schools in Budapest, Hungary and two in York, England (Table 1). Three of the Hungarian secondary schools are top rank schools and two are at the bottom of the league table. Both secondary schools in York had top rank status in the city.

Table 1 The sample

	English	Hungarian	Total
Girls	64 (54%)	174 (55%)	238
Boys	55 (46%)	145 (45%)	200
Total	119	319	438

Method

The examination of attitudes to winning and losing in the two countries is part of a broader study that aims at revealing the similarities and differences of the culturally constructed concept of competition among young people in Hungary and England. We used a questionnaire with open-ended questions, asking about different aspects of competition in the young people's lives. In the present study we concentrate on the results of the analysis of two questions: 'What does winning mean to you and how do you react to it?' and 'What does losing mean to you and how do you react to it?'

Both the Hungarian and the English students gave free descriptive answers. During qualitative analysis we categorised the answers in each national sample separately and in addition to the qualitative comparison we also compared the frequency of answers falling into one category between the two countries.

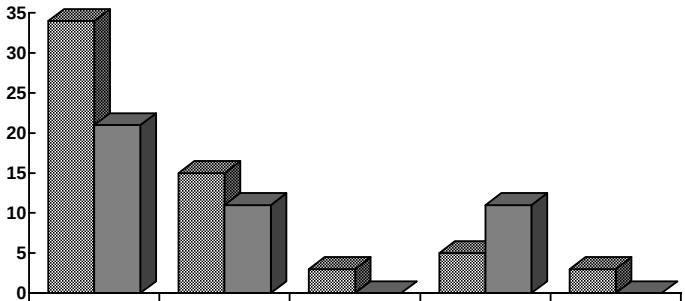
The Results

Winning

The importance of winning

One main aspect of the answers referred to the importance of winning. For Hungarian students winning had greater importance: many more Hungarian students consider winning 'everything' than English (34%; 21%) and those who thought that winning was important although not the most important thing in life also tended to be Hungarian (15%, 11%). In total almost half of the Hungarian adolescents (49%) referred to the importance of winning compared to one third of the English (32%). In contrast, there were more English young people who said explicitly that winning is not important to them at all (11% and 3% respectively). It was however obvious in both samples that winning had an explicit importance for many more young people than an explicit non-importance, although the contrast was bigger among the Hungarians (49% as opposed to 3%). 3% of Hungarians mentioned that it is best is to win over oneself, while another 3% found winning disturbing. These types of answers did not appear among the English respondents (Table 2).

Table 2 The importance of winning



	Winning is important	Winning is not the most important	Best to win over oneself	Winning is not important	Winning is disturbing
Hungarian	34	15	3	5	3
English	21	11	0	11	0

check = Hungarian; grey = English

Emotions regarding winning

In general many more Hungarians mentioned emotions in relation to winning than the English (83% compared to 31%) Almost half of the Hungarian respondents mentioned joy and pleasure, compared to only a fifth of the English (42%, 21%). The difference in terms of a more intensive positive emotion, namely happiness, was even bigger (25%, 3%) indicating that English young people were far less enthusiastic and emotional about winning than Hungarians and were more reserved in terms of strong emotions. Hungarians also described pride and satisfaction related to winning more often (13%/6% and 18% versus 5%) (see Table 3).

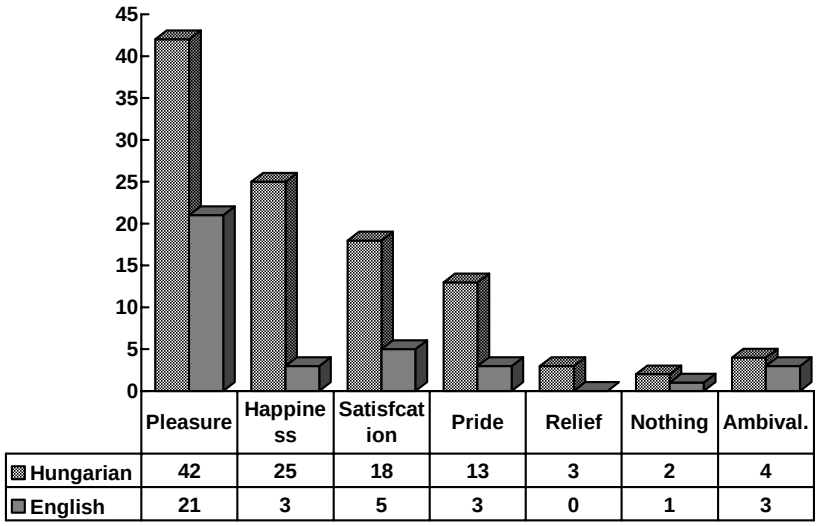
An interesting aspect of the Hungarian answers was that a group of Hungarians (8%) said that they hide their positive emotions when they win.

The meaning of winning

Besides the importance of winning and the emotions it evoked, the respondents also wrote about what kind of meaning they attributed to winning. While English students were less willing to emphasise the importance of winning and its emotional consequences, they gave a form of cognitive interpretation to winning (English 51%; Hungarians: 33%).

In both groups the most frequently mentioned meaning of winning was ‘being the best’ or ‘being better than others’, but the English mentioned it more often (20% and 13%). Winning as being successful, affirmation of effort and hard work, and a way to social recognition were equally often mentioned by the two groups (around 8% among Hungarians and 7% among English). Hungarians mentioned winning as reaching a specific goal, and the English more often as accomplishment. The English also mentioned learning and improvement, doing well or doing one’s best, following own goals, getting good grades, gaining an award, beating others, others being bad, not being a loser, an extra bonus for playing well, etc (Table 4.).

Table 3 Emotions regarding winning



	Pleasure	Happiness	Satisfcation	Pride	Relief	Nothing	Ambival.
Hungarian	42	25	18	13	3	2	4
English	21	3	5	3	0	1	3

check = Hungarian; grey = English

The consequences of winning

Hungarian respondents mentioned more consequences of winning than English (40%, 16%). The positive consequences of competition were motivation (15% and 5% respectively) increased self-confidence (13%, 7%) and self-knowledge (8%, 4%). Only Hungarians mentioned a negative consequence of winning, namely that it goes to one's head (4%). See Table 5.

Losing

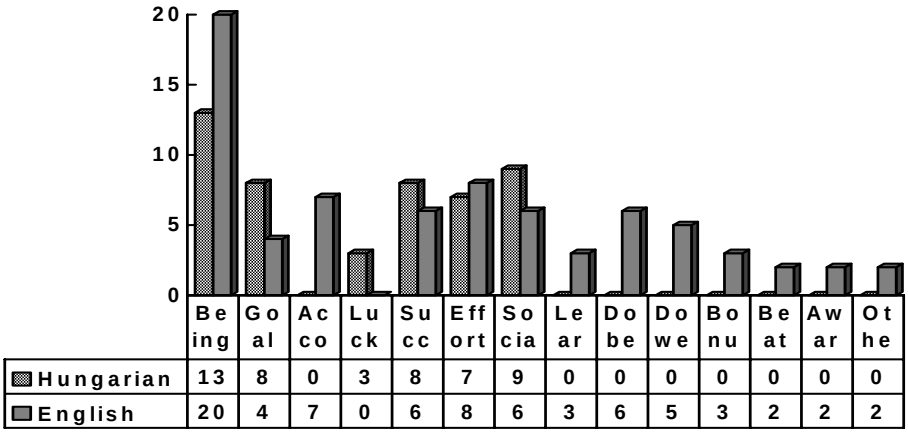
Attitudes regarding losing

While Hungarians mentioned the importance of winning more often, they also wrote more often that they hated or disliked losing (17%, 6%).

Emotions regarding losing

While the English expressed much less emotion in connection with winning than Hungarians, there was no significant difference between the two groups in the number of respondents who mentioned emotions related to losing (Hungarians 60%, English 71%). While there was no quantitative difference, there were qualitative ones. Pekrun (1999) differentiates between activating and deactivating negative emotions - disappointment, anger and frustration, and pain are generally activating negative emotions, while indifference, sadness, depression, shame, inferiority and relief are deactivating. Hungarians mentioned significantly more deactivating emotions like sadness (20% / 8%), depression (10% /3%) and relief (1%), shame (2%), and inferiority (1%). The only deactivating category that was mentioned more by the English students was indifference (8%/14%), and the English mentioned many more activating emotions: disappointment (2% and 28%!) and anger/frustration (14% and 19%). See Table 6.

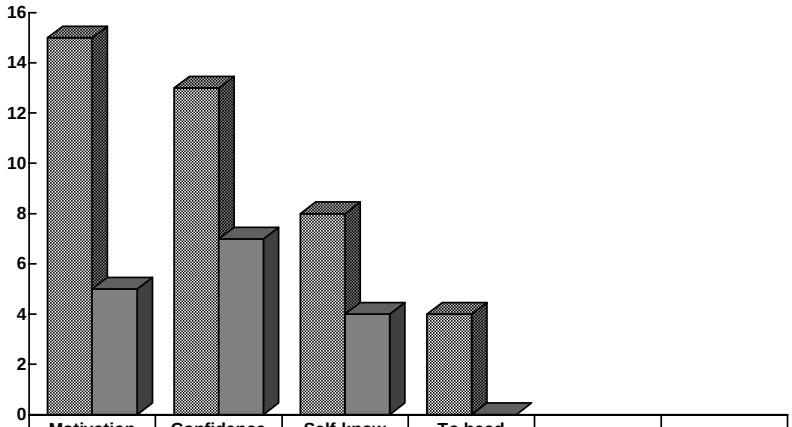
Table 4 The meaning of winning



	Being	Goal	Acco	Luck	Succ	Effort	Socia	Lear	Dobe	Dowe	Bonu	Beat	Awar	Othe
Hungarian	13	8	0	3	8	7	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
English	20	4	7	0	6	8	6	3	6	5	3	2	2	2

check = Hungarian; grey = English

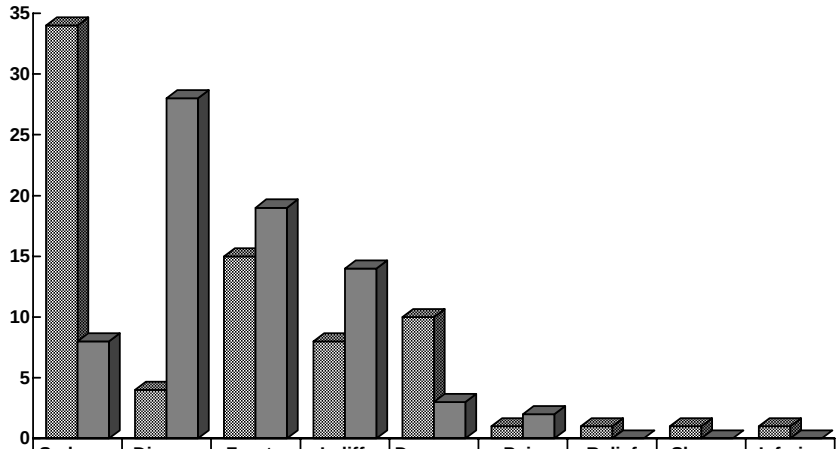
Table 5 The consequences of winning



	Motivation	Confidence	Self-know	To head		
Hungarian	15	13	8	4		
English	5	7	4	0		

check = Hungarian; grey = English

Table 6 Emotions regarding losing



	Sadness	Disapp.	Frustr.	Indiff.	Depress.	Pain	Relief	Shame	Inferior
Hungarian	34	4	15	8	10	1	1	1	1
English	8	28	19	14	3	2	0	0	0

check = Hungarian; grey = English

When we looked at the answers, concentrating not only on the emotions mentioned but also at how respondents reported coping with them, we found that sometimes sadness (but not depression!) can be overcome quite fast by a cognitive analysis of the situation or by general optimism, so that it is not necessarily deactivating. However anger, if it takes the form of self-blame and results in a lowering of self-confidence, can lead to deactivation. This was demonstrated in many Hungarian answers.

Disappointment - mentioned mainly by the English - is an emotion that arises when we set up a goal and trust that we are able to reach it, but finally learn that we cannot. The feeling of disappointment can be both activating and deactivating depending on the causes we attribute to not reaching our goals. In the English answers, disappointment in all but one case led to activation.

If we summarise the answers in terms of the overall reaction to losing with activation or deactivation, an interesting pattern appears (Table 7). While both the English and Hungarians gave more answers that reflected activation within their own national group, the proportion of the 'activating' answers was significantly higher in the English group, and the proportion of 'deactivating' answers higher in the Hungarian group.

Table 7 Activating and deactivating negative emotions and reactions

Negative emotions/reactions	Hungarian	English
Activating	39%	55%
Deactivating	26%	16%
Altogether	65%	71%

An interesting aspect of the qualitative analysis is that some female English respondents mentioned crying when they lost, and some female Hungarian respondents cited eating as a way of coping with the emotional stress of losing.

Hungarians mentioned hiding their positive emotions about winning (8%); the English mentioned hiding their negative emotions over losing (6%).

Meaning of losing

While the English gave more meaning to winning than Hungarians, Hungarians gave somewhat more meaning to losing (25%; 13%): it was one's own mistake, others were better, it is a failure, 'I am worthless', 'I am not the best', 'my goal was not reached', 'I was not well prepared' (Table 8.).

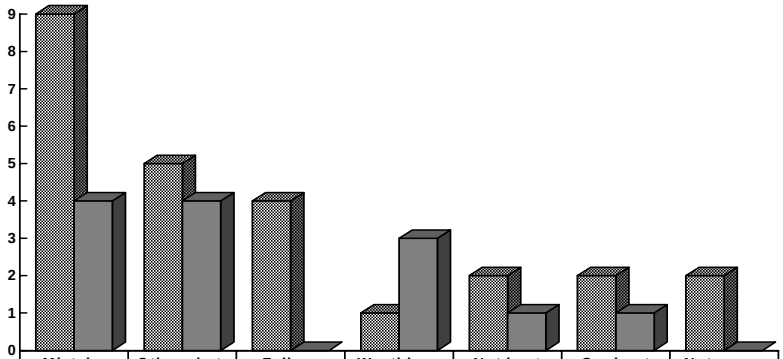
Reactions to losing

Significantly more Hungarians wrote about their reactions to losing than the English (63%; 39%) The proportion of constructive reactions to losing was higher in both groups than that of the destructive reactions, the number of Hungarian respondents being higher in both the constructive and the destructive group of reactions.

Constructive reactions to losing

40% of Hungarians and 28% of the English wrote about learning from one's own mistakes, not giving up, trying hard again, improvement and finding a new way or domain in which to win (Table 9.)

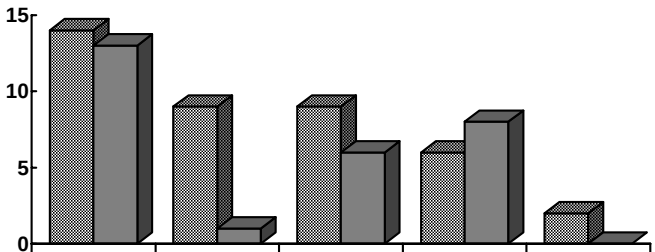
Table 8 Meaning of losing



	Mistake	Others bet.	Failure	Worthless	Not best	Goal not	Not prep.
Hungarian	9	5	4	1	2	2	2
English	4	4	0	3	1	1	0

check = Hungarian; grey = English

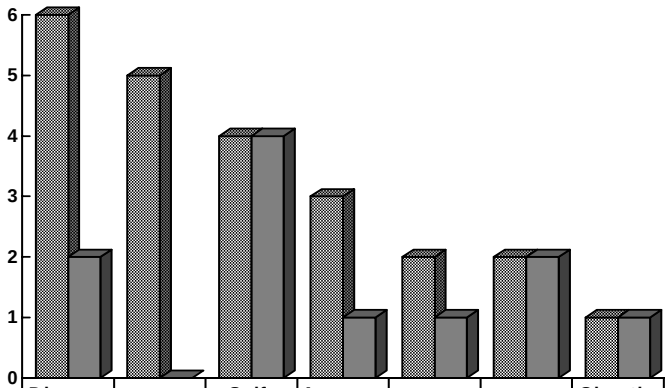
Table 9 Constructive reactions to losing



	Learn	Not give up	Try hard	Improve	Find new
Hungarian	14	9	9	6	2
English	13	1	6	8	0

check = Hungarian; grey = English

Table 10 Destructive reactions to losing



	Discourage	No conf.	Self-blame	Aggression	Give up	Excuses	Cheating
Hungarian	6	5	4	3	2	2	1
English	2	0	4	1	1	2	1

check = Hungarian; grey = English

Destructive reactions to losing

23% of Hungarians and 11% of English respondents mentioned destructive reactions to losing, such as long-lasting discouragement, loss self-confidence, self-blame, aggression and violence, giving up further trials, finding excuses and cheating (Table 10.).

Summary

Our expectation was that for cultural, historical, economical and political reasons English young people between 16-18 are better socialised for competition and coping with its potential outcomes, both winning and losing. Traditionally sport has been a very important part of young people's education in England, while it never gained significance in Hungarian secondary schools. Being socialised by parents who were brought up by a generation that was also brought up in a capitalist market economy and democracy also may help English young people to take competition, and winning and losing, as part of their everyday lives. Our previous study showed that the majority of English students have a positive attitude towards competition, while there are more Hungarians who have a purely negative perception.

Our present results seem to be in accordance with our expectations. Hungarian young people attribute great significance to winning and are enthusiastic about it because when they lose they tend to be deactivated and are unable to cope as well as their English counterparts. The English respondents take winning as a more natural outcome of competition and they confidently attribute it to their being the 'best' or being 'better than others'. They become more activated by losing than Hungarians, therefore a smaller number of them express an explicit negative view about losing than the Hungarians. There is some evidence suggesting a different socialisation of emotional reactions to winning and losing in the two countries. Hungarians tend to be very happy about winning, but there is a tendency to hide this feeling from others. The English seem to be socialised not to show their negative emotions about losing, and this social norm does not appear among the Hungarians – the loser's negative emotions are acceptable. This might create a paradoxical reaction in Hungary between striving for winning but on achieving it not being accepted by the social environment, and trying to avoid losing but being more acceptable as a loser.

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