The meaning of national identity amongst Spanish and Colombian children and adolescents[1]

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Within the literature on children's understanding of society, nationality has been a significant topic since the first study conducted by Piaget and Weil in 1951 (Barret & Buchanan-Barrow, 2002; Echeita *et al.*, 1984). Nationality is one of the major groupings by which societies are structured. Within the framework of societal cognition, the construction of national identity illustrates the genesis of the individual as political thinker, and contributes to the understanding of her/his behaviour as a citizen. This political dimension of the individual, related to the meaning and value of her/his national group, is shown in their reasoning on phenomena such as abstention in elections, electoral corruption, attitudes towards national symbols, and attitude to foreign people. Societies are also increasingly characterised by the phenomenon of migration: individuals from different countries attempt to become full members of new communities by acquiring legal nationality.

Research has slowly progressed in supporting our understanding the logical issues associated with nationality (Delval & del Barrio, 1981; Jahoda, 1964) and the relatively early self-identification and value of one's own national group. The influence of the particular national group has been less studied, but this issue is relevant when the targets of study are children and adolescents coming from countries different to those in which they live. Nationality includes cognitive and emotional aspects that define the identity of the person in relation to both her/his own national group and to other groups. Different issues associated with national identity develop on the basis of the individual's interaction with a variety of contexts, among others, individuals from own and other countries and knowledge learned in schooling (Torres, 1994; Cutts Dougherty *et al.,* 1992).

This study aims to explore the meaning and value of national identity for Colombian and Spanish children and adolescents, and the possibilities of changing it. Besides the relevance of age-related changes in meaning and value given to national identity, the influence of the particular country was explored.

Method

A total of 98 participants, equally distributed in five age-groups (7, 10, 13, 16, 19 years olds) gender and country, were interviewed about issues related to their knowledge and attitudes to their country.

In the Spanish sub-sample, the children and adolescents came from state schools in a northern district of Madrid and the young adults were students in one of Madrid's universities. Due to societal differences between countries and for reasons of comparison, the Colombian children and adolescents came from private schools in the city of

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Barranquilla, northern Colombia[2], and the young adults were college students in the same town.

School participants were randomly chosen from those in their classes who fulfilled two criteria - to be the specified age (e.g., 7 years old in the second grade) and to have parental permission to participate. College students were invited to participate when staying on campus.

For the data collection, the Piagetian clinical method was used (Piaget, 1926; Delval, 2001): an individual semi-structured interview with the participant; a questionnaire used as a script on related issues as basis of conversation; and unplanned questions introduced by the interviewer to make the interviewee's reasoning clear. The interviews were carried out in the same school in a separate room. All were audio-taped and then transcribed *verbatim* for later analysis.

The *questionnaire* included the description of a set of hypothetical situations concerning nationality (see Figure 1) inspired by real life events; and a set of general questions on cognitive and affective meanings of nationality. The following issues were tackled: representations of national identity and ways to obtain it; description of own national group; attitudes to national symbols; socio-geographical knowledge; and attitudes toward foreign people.

Figure 1 Example of a hypothetical situation

'Imagine that you go to a different country. There you meet a boy/girl and then you marry him/her and stay to live in that country. Your children are born in that country. Where are these children from? Can they become people from the other country?'

For each issue a qualitative analysis was performed to identify meaning through the discourse. In this procedure the whole set of answers concerning the same issue (resulting from the practical situations or from the questions) were analysed jointly rather than as specific issues. As a result, a set of themes together with a set of levels of complexity were obtained. In this paper only the results about the representation of national identity are presented.

Results

Is nationality considered a part of personal identity? Is it viewed as a fixed characteristic or can it change? We were interested in the participants' ideas of possible changes of nationality, and in their defining criteria for nationality (see Figure 2).

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[2] In every Latin-American country, there is a lack of public educational resources, so the majority of the school population attends private institutions. State schools are attended only by children and adolescents in the lowest social-economic levels (Llanos, Ramos *et al.*, 2002).

Figure 2 Questions on representation of nationality

What does it mean to be Spanish/ Colombian?
Do you think that you can stop being Spanish/Colombian?
Can someone not born in Spain/Colombia become Spanish/Colombian?
What is necessary to be Spanish/Colombian?
Can someone speaking English be Spanish/Colombian?

The answers to these questions and the hypothetical situation presented in Figure 1 were the basis for analysing the meaning of nationality. In what follows, levels of reasoning on this issue are first described and illustrated with examples. Second, their distribution in the different age-groups of participants is presented. Third, the distribution of thematic categories of content is presented.

Levels in meaning of nationality

Four levels of complexity in the meaning of nationality were identified.

Level 1. Nationality as fixed characteristic

Participants considered that it was not possible to change nationality. All the answers at this level referred to nationality as something essential and defined by the place of birth; few references were made to cultural issues or to the possible process of obtaining nationality.

> Laura (7:03): *(Being Spanish means) you are a person from here... because you were born here...* – If you're going to live in another country, can you stop being Spanish? *No.* – A person not born in Spain, can she/he be Spanish? *Spanish is the one born there. If she/he was not born there, she/he can't be Spanish.* – Someone speaking English can be Spanish? *Only if he/she is from Spain*

Level 2. Uncertain nationality

Diverse criteria for defining nationality were mentioned, e.g., living in a different country, talking the language, knowing local customs/traditions. These criteria were unstable, the participants shifted from one reason to another, and were influenced by counter-suggestions.

> Raúl (7:04): *(Being Spanish means) that we speak Spanish.* – Can you stop being Spanish? *Yes because if I go to another country and I want to stay there to live there forever, I then stay.* Another kid said that although he goes to another country to live there, he never would stop being Spanish. Do you agree with him? *Yes... I don't know whether I can stop being Spanish...*

> Melisa (7:08): *I'm Colombian because I was born in Colombia....* – Can you stop being Colombian? *Well, you can stop being Colombian if s/he's adopted in another country... It's to say that s/he was born in Colombia and being fifteen days old the baby went to Medellín...* – Can someone not born in Colombian can be Colombian? *No, because s/he was not born in Colombia.* – Someone speaking English can be Colombian? *If s/he learns Spanish.*

In these two examples, changing criteria were mentioned to justify national identity. Language was abandoned in favour of living in the country in the case of those acquiring a new nationality. After the counter-suggestion, Raúl was not sure anymore about losing his original identity. Melisa did not seem to acknowledge the contradiction shown by the shift in her argument from place of birth to place of living or language to justify the nationality change. In both cases, the difficulties of seeing contradictions in arguments for justifying the old and the new national identities were evident.

Level 3. Non-reciprocal societal nationality

Different criteria were also mentioned to define nationality. National identity was viewed as a changeable feature. Nevertheless, this possibility was not generalised to every citizen: in some cases, it was attributed to others but not to the respondents' own national group (*'I cannot stop being ..., but people from other countries can become nationals of mine'*). Alternatively, this change was only possible for one's own national group (*'I can stop being..., but people from other countries cannot become nationals of mine'*). Moreover, the nationality change was associated to some judicial issues in very concrete terms, but no signal of understanding about the process was shown.

> Alexandra (10:09): *(Being Spanish means) that I'm from here... that I speak Spanish... I was born here. (For being Spanish) it's necessary to be born here, to have the language. (A person not born in Spain) can be Spanish because s/he's been living here since s/he was a little child and so s/he gets the way in which we talk and gets accustomed to our things and then s/he can be Spanish. (I cannot stop being Spanish) because in my mind I have the Spanish-speaking way... I can speak differently in other countries but never I'll forget...* – Someone who speaks English or another language can be Spanish? *Yes, learning the Spanish...* – Even if s/he was not born in Spain? *Yes*".

Level 4. Nationality as societal identity

Nationality is a societal concept in this level, defined by the membership of a national community. The nature of this membership is not only natural, but also institutional, i.e. established by legal conventions. There was a reciprocal/symmetric view of the possibility of changing nationality: criteria used to justify this change were applied to co-nationals as well as to members of other national groups. This possibility of achieving a new nationality was more related to legal prerequisites, showing the progress towards understanding the legal process of acquiring a national identity.

> Jessica (16:04) *"(Being Spanish) means that I was born in Spain. (It's possible to stop being Spanish) if you become nationalised in another country.* – What does 'nationalise' mean? *It's shifting from being Spanish to Canadian or Italian. (A person not born in Spain can be Spanish) if s/he wished to be Spanish s/he has to go to the Embassy and change her/his nationality...(then) s/he's a citizen of this country"*.

For Jessica, nationality allows a person to be considered a citizen of a country, so it is more or less explicitly considered as the right to be a member of a national community. This right is inherent to those born in that community, and can be achieved under certain circumstances by those who maintain certain relationships established by law within the

national community. The institutional nature of nationality appears in references to the legal procedures or to the institutions responsible for implementing them.

Table 1 Distribution by level of representation of nationality, and age-group (%)

Levels	7 ys.	10 ys.	Age 13 ys.	16 ys.	19 ys.	Total	
Fixed status	25	20		10	11		n.s.
Uncertain status	40						0,000
Non reciprocal societal	15	40	40	15	17		n.s.
Reciprocal societal	20	40	60	75	72		0.002
N	20	20	20	20	18	98	

The data show that from 7 years of age children considered the possibility of changing nationality, although their arguments shifted from one to another criterion in justifying the acquisition of nationality. Some of the difficulties could be related to the logical elements underlying the notion of nationality (class inclusion, reciprocity in relative concepts, etc,) revealed by some studies (Delval & del Barrio, 1981; Jahoda, 1964; Piaget & Weil, 1951). These difficulties seem to be overcome by the age of 13.

Thematic categories in the representation of nationality

Together with levels of complexity in reasoning on nationality, different themes can be identified when analysing the content of participants' answers. Themes are informational elements or content pieces of the argumentations given.

As shown in Table 2, to be born in or to move to a country are frequent themes. Place of birth as a prerequisite for acquiring nationality is mentioned by more than 80% in every age-group except for the youngest group, which shows a lower incidence. Moving to a country as prerequisite is mentioned by more than 70% in every group except for the oldest group. In relation to language, the highest percentage appears in the youngest group (75%) and decreases for the older respondents, confirming earlier results of lower relevance with age of linguistic uniformity as a differentiating feature of a nation (Torres,1994).

The other frequently mentioned issue (from 10 years upwards) is nationality as something essential. This idea is linked to emotional aspects leading to an almost compulsory identification with the place in which one was born, or the place where one moved to live. For children and adolescents, their homeland is not related to the language they talk but to the place they live - including the social/cultural environment which receives them.

Table 2 Distribution of themes on nationality by age (%)

Themes	Age					Total	
	7 ys	10 ys	13 ys	16 ys	19 ys		
Anecdote	5						
Positive affect	15	55	65	70	78		0,001
Requisites for nationality							
Concrete aspects							
. Being born	55	80	85	90	94		0.05
. Moving to country	80	80	85	70	50		n.s.
. Language	75	35	5	15	28		0.001
Psycho-social aspects							
. Intrinsic nationality	15	70	60	75	89		0.001
. Heredity	25	35	65	75	50		0.01
. Pro-social behaviour	5	10		10	17		n.s.
. Voluntarism		5		30	22		0.01
Societal aspects							
. Legal process minimised		10	20		39		0.01
. Social-political situation			10	5	6		n.s.
. Legal aspects		50	75	70	83		0,001
. Cultural aspects	25	30	40	60	83		0,001
. Double nationality	50	80	95	85	78		0,01
. Inter-national parallelism		15	15		22		n.s.
N	20	20	20	20	19	98	

Discussion

The increased difficulty of understanding societal-political issues in social knowledge has been emphasised (Berti, 2003; Delval, 1994; Jahoda, 1964; Torres,1994). Children shift from a conceptualisation of a concrete, anecdotal and peripheral nature, linked to their personal experiences, to a progressive integration of elements and more objective discrimination of cultural, psycho-social and geographical categories. Delval (1994) points out the need of this integration in the wider societal domain, stressing the relevance of institutional elements. A similarly relevant issue in nationality understanding is a consideration of legal issues, established by each state as prerequisites for nationality. This issue goes beyond the more concrete daily experiences (birth, residence, language, customs-traditions) affecting the nationality and intrinsic to the native of any country. It acknowledges the possibility of considering as citizen of any country individuals who were not born in that particular national territory.

The double analysis of levels of complexity and themes of content in children's, adolescents' and adults' representations of national membership, shows that not only more knowledge about nationality is acquired in the course of development, but also a qualitatively different notion of nationality. The higher level in the meaning of nationality includes issues mentioned also by the participants classified in lower levels, but in a different way: these are co-ordinated and their relevance hierarchically ordered. So language is not a relevant feature of national identity: it is a probabilistic feature associated with a certain nationality, but anyone fulfilling the legal conditions of any state (normally not including language) could be considered member of a nation even in the absence of fluency in the official language of the country. So the legal process of obtain the nationality is central to the concept, and constitutes a basis for thinking of it in terms of an institutional notion, present in the representations of adolescents and adults.

If we acknowledge the high incidence of the consideration of nationality as something essential, we need to include in school curriculum a more relativistic or cosmopolitan view which counterbalances the possible risk of fundamentalism implicit in the essentialist position. We may also need to develop a knowledge of the legal and cultural issues implicit in the notion of nationality, as they seem not to be spontaneously reached by a considerable amount of people Carrington & Short (1995).

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