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Knowing our neighbours: space perceptions through national stereotypes

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Introduction

Spatial identification with a certain space is greatly influenced by the relationship to society, which co-forms the individual's spatial notion through stereotypes, viewpoints and values. Following the appalling results of the stereotypical thinking of Nazis and Fascists during the Second World War, many countries considered that the abolition of all forms of such thinking was among their most important educational tasks. The school as an educational institution has a very important role in this task. Geography as a subject can contribute to the reduction and abolition of stereotypes bound to ideas of space, national identity and multiculturalism.

Education should teach the young to overcome prejudice and the one-sided, simplified presentation of different regions, countries, nations or individuals. The Commission for Geographical Education (CGU) - part of International Geographical Union (IGU) - set as a basic task the development of international guidelines for planning the Geography curriculum, the education of teachers and geographical teaching aids to 'stimulate understanding between all nations, races and religions' (*International Charter on Geographical Education*, 1992, p 8). According to the Commission, geographical education should be based upon

> the foundation of teaching about people of other cultures, about different ways of living in different provinces. This way geographical education contributes to the basic ideas of the United Nations Declaration of Children's rights, which tries to ensure special protection for the children. Children need to be given legal possibilities and other options to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially healthy in freedom and with dignity (*ibid*, p 9).

The Commission established that geographical education should contribute to international education on a quality basis without political motivation, value judgements, stereotypical views or other ways of disqualifying individuals or broader communities (IGU, 1992).

Stereotypes are constantly repeated and deeply-rooted prejudices that represent social conformism more than individual thinking (Musek, 1993). In teaching geography we need to be aware when forming spatial notions that we often encounter negative prior learning or very selective understanding in pupils based on stereotypes. Spatial stereotypes are linked to simplified and untrue or incomplete observations, for example, when Slovenians speak of France most think only of Paris; about Switzerland we emphasise the beauty of the mountains or the quality of the watch-making; to talk about Australia and not to start with kangaroos or boomerangs is almost impossible. When

these are only initial associations there should not be a problem, but when they become the basis of an individual's spatial notions they lead to unwanted simplifications and negation of the complexity of understanding a geographical space.

Among the most common personal stereotypes are national stereotypes (Musek, 1993, p 315). No nation or ethnic group is immune from stereotyping or even more from hetero-stereotypes, which are simplified and/or unfounded judgements of nations or national groups or the individual members of these groups. They are established by generalisation of certain characteristics and features, which can be completely or partly true for some individuals but cannot represent the whole nation or group. National stereotypes supposedly represent collective 'national character' and are an example of public stereotypes linked to a certain country, nation or culture. They carry with them fabricated ideas of 'us' and 'them' and are therefore an important element of social differences' (*ibid*). As an example, Finnish geographers have studied the source of very common stereotypical Finnish view of the neighbouring Swedes, who are most commonly defined as 'our dearest enemies' (Rikkinen, 1994, 60).

Daily newspapers often bring into common currency new political phrases that can. with frequent repetition, become new stereotypes. *English Newsweek* (Haubrich, 1994, p 8/9) wrote 'I am European, therefore I think,' could easily lead to 'those who are not European and therefore do not think, are…'. These are not isolated examples: they can also be found in our domestic press. Daily speech is full of such stereotypes, for example mean as a Scot, Italian temperament, American optimism, German punctuality, wide Slavic soul etc.

Stereotypes can be important agents of social power and ideology, but because they simplify and tend to be rigid any serious application from them cannot be accepted. They often form an image of good or bad, of friends or enemies. 'National stereotypes can easily be used in propaganda purposes, in which the propaganda is directed to feelings, myths, prejudices and similar' (Hajdu and Passi, 1995, p 35).

Many national stereotypes are relatively stable, but many also change. They tend to be specific to time and space and can change as political and economic circumstances change. Many researchers have confirmed a strong connection between affection toward certain nations and the characteristics that respondents attribute to these nations. They have found that respondents always give a positive critique to their own nation (auto-stereotype) and that these assessments are very different for different nations, even through time. For example, according to public opinion surveys (Klinar, 1994) in Slovenia in the last ten years we have distanced ourselves more and more from 'brotherhood and unity' with the nations of the former Yugoslavia, and now feel ethnically closest to Austrians and Germans. Croatians and Italians are defined as hostile to Slovenia (*ibid*). Even fifteen years ago this would not have seemed possible, and even less so in the years following World War II when Germans, Austrians and Italians were disliked most.

For young people who are in the process of forming their view of the world and their value judgements and therefore either accept or deny stereotypical thinking, the role of

family, coeval groups, media and school is especially important. If these are also the individual's reference groups (those whose value systems the individual most accepts and identifies with), then their influence is particularly strong. The influence of school is especially important. Knowledge acquired through education is always based on cognitive and affective elements, and in many cases teaching interpretations on the affective, emotional basis are subject to stereotypical thinking (Hajdu and Passi, 1995).

Empirical research

In empirical research on spatial notions of youth carried out in 1996 on a sample of Slovenian pupils in gymnasiums (Kolenc-Kolnik, 1997) data was acquired through a survey. We wanted to compare this data over time (similar surveys were undertaken in 1993, 1996 and 2000), and also to include different age categories in those surveyed (adults, secondary-school pupils, students). We therefore compared the results of the Slovenian public opinion research (SJM) from 1994 (the survey was done in 1993) and the views of the student population from 2000.

The sample from SJM is representative (SJM, 1994/2), the samples of youth groups are experimental. 120 secondary-school pupils and 103 students answered the questions. The average age of the secondary-school pupils at the time of survey was 17.4 and the average age of the students was 21.3. In both groups there were more women than men; 59% female pupils (of 120) and 63% female students (of 103).

The research hypothesis was based on findings about the influence of socio-political circumstances in the last ten years in Slovenia in relation to neighbouring countries and nations from the viewpoint of auto-stereotypical comparisons with neighbouring nations.

Hypotheses

- We were expecting to observe an influence from common socio-political opinion about neighbouring countries on the younger respondents.
- Due to political circumstances, the pupils surveyed in 1997 would be more critical toward their neighbouring nations (especially Croatia), than the students surveyed in 2000.
- Both groups would express similar feelings towards the more pleasing neighbouring nations.
- The opinions of both groups would be more unified than the opinions acquired in SJM in 1994.

First question

Much is said about the differences and similarities of certain nations. Mark every neighbouring nation with how similar it is to Slovenians.

The scale: 5 means 'very similar', 1 means 'not similar at all'.
Total number of answers: 223
1st group = 120 pupils: 2nd group = 103 students

Table 1: Similarities of neighbouring nations

| | very similar | | | | | | | | not similar at all | | |
| | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	Rank
Croatians											
Pupils	7	6.4	42	38.5	31	28.4	23	21.1	6	5.5	2.9
Students	11	10.6	40	38.8	31	29.1	15	14.6	6	5.8	3.3
Hungarians											
Pupils	4	3.3	4	3.3	25	21.0	49	41.2	37	31.1	2.1
Students	4	3.9	9	8.7	37	35.9	32	31.0	21	20.4	2.4
Austrians											
Pupils	5	4.2	41	34.5	36	30.3	24	20.1	13	10.9	2.9
Students	6	5.8	19	18.5	44	42.7	29	28.2	5	4.6	2.9
Italians											
Pupils	2	1.9	6	5.0	29	24.4	52	43.7	30	25.2	2.1
Students	1	0.9	7	6.8	36	34.9	32	31.2	27	26.2	2.3
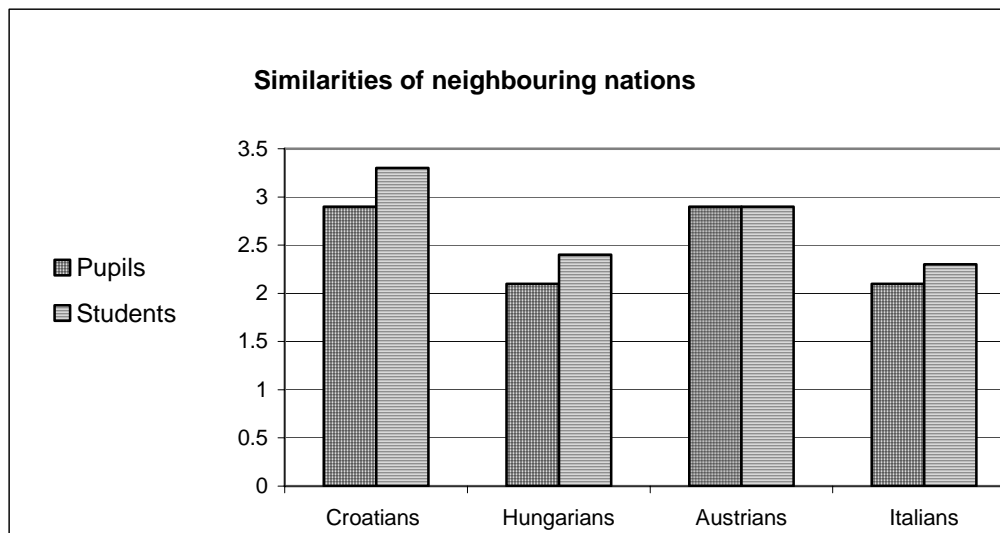
Certain differences between the opinions of pupils and students were noted, which had been expected because of the four-year time gap. The ranking of answers showed that in the students' opinion Slovenians and Croatians are most similar, while pupils put Croatians and Austrians in the same rank: to the pupils the least similar were Hungarians and Italians. The students showed a higher level of discrimination: to them Italians were more different to Slovenians than Hungarians. Both groups were on the same level when ranking similarities with Austrians.

It is interesting to compare these results with the results from Slovenian public opinion (SJM, 1994/2, question 1.06), where the adult surveyed felt closest and most similar to Austrians. Croatians and Italians were ranked some way behind, and they felt least similar to Hungarians.

Second question

How friendly or hostile are the four neighbouring nations toward Slovenians?

Mark each nation with: very friendly (5) …   very hostile (1).
Total number of answers: 223
1st group = 120 pupils 2nd group = 103 students

Table 2: Neighbouring nations and friendship

	very friendly								*very hostile*		
	5		4		3		2		1		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	Rank
Croatians											
pupils	2	1.7	16	13.9	42	36.5	43	37.4	12	10.4	2.4
students	7	6.1	21	18.3	34	33.0	26	25.2	15	14.6	2.5
Hungarians											
pupils	12	10.5	38	33.3	51	44.7	11	9.6	2	1.8	3.3
students	9	8.7	34	33.0	34	33.0	20	19.4	6	5.8	3.4
Austrians											
pupils	7	5.9	52	44.4	46	39.3	9	7.7	3	2.6	3.4
students	11	10.7	36	34.9	40	34.2	11	10.7	5	4.9	3.2
Italians											
pupils	-	0	13	10.8	38	31.7	49	40.8	20	16.7	2.5
students	4	3.9	12	11.7	32	31.1	32	31.1	23	22.3	2.4
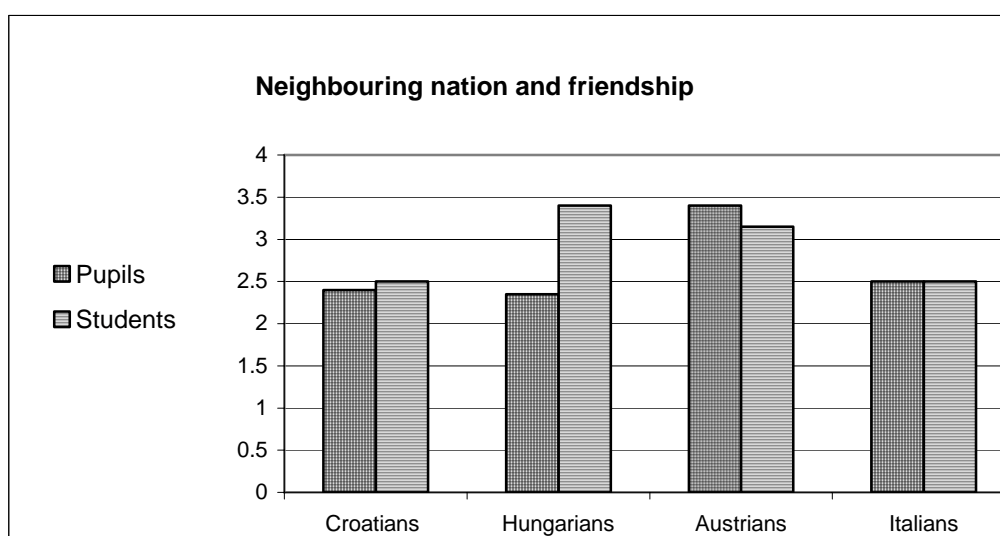
There was a high level of unity of answers from both groups. For the friendliest nations, pupils chose Austrians and students Hungarians (rank 3.4); while for lack of friendliness Croatians and Italians (ranks 2.4 and 2.5). Due to the time difference we expected certain differences between the surveys, especially in the attitude toward Austrians, because at the time of the survey daily politics was full of negative images. At the same time, the war in Croatia was further away in time, and political reactions toward solving mutual problems had calmed. We asked the students for a short oral explanation on their answer. The majority described their affection toward Croatia through their knowledge

of the Croatian seaside (holidays) and pop music. Explanation of the affection toward Hungary was interesting: it seemed to be the consequence of the fact that 'they never bug us', as on student summarised in slang.

Our hypothesis can be only partly confirmed.   Opinions from both groups were more unified than the opinions acquired in SJM in 1994.

Conclusion

Research into Slovenian public opinion in the decade 1992 to 2002 showed that national consciousness is more pronounced and that the phenomenon of ethnic intolerance is growing. With a highly valued national identity, Slovenians show care toward connecting with other nations and also some dislike toward other cultures.

We were rather pessimistic at the beginning of our survey, considering the too-often used opinion of the lay public on 'other and different', and also the fact that in the last decade the formation of our own country coincided with the critical teenage years and puberty of the pupils and students we surveyed. However the responses from the young people to our questions showed some differences from the opinion of the adults from SJM (1994) and showed a more tolerant attitude toward neighbouring nations. Our respondents were less negative toward Croatians than the adults in SJM and the same toward Italians, and they assessed Austrians and Hungarians as more friendly, in spite of the fact that they found one nation very similar and the other not similar at all to themselves.

The survey was conducted with a relatively small and selective sample of young people, but it is our opinion that such positive phenomena need to be loudly praised and we are glad that our young ones showed more tolerant and friendly thinking.

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