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

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Gender differences in competition in childhood: coping with winning and losing

Mónika Sándor¹, Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Hungary)

Márta Fülöp, Eötvös Lóránd University (Hungary)

Abstract

Competition as a social skill is very important in a democratic society based on a market economy. All societies, including Hungary, have specific ideas about the type and level of competition is beneficial, necessary and useful. This study explores the result of this socialisation, particularly the representation of competition, winning and losing. We compare 8-9 year old boys and girls and analyse their concepts in a complex and coherent system. This study of children's own views relates to our previous studies of children's views of their parents' and teachers' attitude towards competition.

Introduction and aims

Competition as a social skill is very important in a democratic society based on a market economy. Equal chances and equal opportunities for females and males are considered to have key importance and this includes being able to cope with competitive situations and their results i.e. winning and losing in an equally adaptive way.

Every society – so the Hungarian society as well – has its specific ideas about what kind of competition and what amount of competition is beneficial, necessary and useful for those who live in that particular society. Children learn these attitudes with other elements of culture through growing up in that particular cultural context. Partly, they learn the concept of winning and losing from their parents and from their family at home, and from their teachers in the school and they also learn via their own experiences. These experiences also shape their representation of these phenomena and as a consequence influence their interaction with their parents and teachers. This process corresponds to Markus and Kitayama's model of co-construction (1991), in which the parents, the teachers and the children themselves construct jointly the specific way of competing embedded into the specific cultural context.

In a previous study (Sándor, 2006) we studied children's views of their parents' and teachers' attitude towards competition, winning and losing and their socialization 'techniques' experienced by the children. We found that parents and teachers have somewhat different messages towards boys and girls. Parents congratulate more often their sons and express their happiness in case of winning than their daughters. Girls reported more often that their teachers were sad if they lose and boys more frequently mentioned their teachers telling them that next time they might perform better.

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Study

With our present research our main goal is to explore the ‘result’ of this socialisation process, namely the representation of competition, winning and losing. We compare 8-9 year old boys and girls and analyse their concepts in a complex and coherent system. In contrast to our previous research, this time it is the children themselves who are the focus of our investigation.

Methods and participants

Altogether 67 children – 33 boys and 34 girls – participated in this research. The mean age of the children was 8 years and 7 months. They were in two different schools in Budapest, Hungary.

We applied three different, but interconnected methods. In the first stage we asked the children to draw a picture of the above-mentioned concepts in a group situation. In the second stage in individual situations we asked the children to free associate to the words they drew about. In the third stage we carried out an individual clinical interview referring to the drawings and the associations and exploring children’s understanding of the studied concepts. The answers were qualitatively analysed and categorised.

Table 1: The number of the drawings we analysed in relation to competition, winning and losing

| Drawings | Total (195) | Boys (94) | Girls (101) |
|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Competition | 67 | 33 | 34 |
| Winning | 64 | 31 | 33 |
| Losing | 64 | 30 | 34 |

In three separate settings we asked the children to draw something about competition, about winning and about losing. These three drawings of each child are in the focus of this paper. We content analysed the drawings and compared the symbols and other visual elements of boys’ and girls’ drawings. During the content analysis three persons independently analysed the drawings, than we compared the results and discussed the discrepancies. The categories of the analysis weren’t determined before the analysis, these evolved and developed during the process of analysis. We tried to find a structure in which all the three studied concepts can be defined.

In our analysis we focused on:

- The areas of competition, winning and losing,
- The characters on the drawings,
- The symbols of competition, winning and losing,
- The emotions that appear on the drawings.

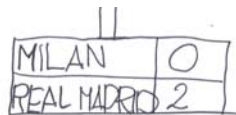
The areas of competition, winning and losing

Based on the results of the content analysis we can state that most of 8-9 years old children know well what competition, winning and losing mean and most of them can draw something about these concepts.

First we looked at the particular type of competition that is depicted in the picture: structured or spontaneous competition. We consider structural competition to be all contests that are organised competitions with clear rules and winners and losers based on a clear criteria system. Spontaneous competition is based on social comparative processes which go on mainly intra-psychically and winners and losers are more or less self-defined. The drawings of the majority of 8-9 years old children represent structural competitive situations. Within these structural competitive situations the most frequently used area was sports (42%).

Table 2: The areas of competition in relation to the three studied concepts

| The area of competition | Sports | Car-race | Games | Poet-reciting | Beauty contest | Other |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|---------|---------------|----------------|----------|
| Competition | (28) 42% | (16) 24% | (7) 10% | (5) 7% | (1) 2% | (10) 15% |
| Winning | (36) 56% | (10) 15% | (6) 9% | (1) 2% | (3) 5% | (8) 13% |
| Losing | (36) 56% | (10) 15% | (8) 13% | (0) 0% | (2) 3% | (8) 13% |



Drawing 1: Losing – international football match – 8-year-old boy

Children drew individual sport situations more frequently than team sport situations. We didn't find gender differences in the proportion of drawings related to sports but there was a difference in terms of what kind of sports they depicted: individual or team. Girls drew more frequently individual sport situations – especially running contests and almost only boys drew team-sports like football, basketball or water polo. This tendency appears in the case of all the three studied

concepts. *Drawing 1* is an example of a team sport situation from an 8-year old boy, *Drawing 2* is an individual sport situation – it is a running contest.



*Drawing 2: Competition – Running contest
– 8-year-old boy*

After sports, children most frequently drew car races – mainly boys - quizzes and poem reciting – this latter one especially girls. Areas like war were only on drawings by boys and other areas like beauty contests were only on drawings of girls. These results harmonise with the known gender role stereotypes. Boys more frequently draw areas which are closer to masculine roles and girls more frequently draw areas which are feminine.

Table 3: Drawings about sports in relation to competition, winning and losing

| Drawings about sports | Competition | | | Winning | | | Losing | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Total n=28 | Boys n=13 | Girls n=15 | Total n=36 | Boys n=15 | Girls n=21 | Total n=36 | Boys n=17 | Girls n=19 |
| Individual sport | - | (17) | (6) | (11) | (24) | (8) | (16) | (21) | (6) |
| running | 61% | 46% | 73% | 67% | 53% | 76% | 58% | 35% | 79% |
| contest | | | | | | | | | |
| Team sports – | (6) | (6) | (0) | (3) | (3) | (0) | (8) | (7) | (1) |
| football, | 21% | 46% | 0% | 8% | 20% | 0% | 22% | 41% | 5% |
| basketball | | | | | | | | | |
| Other | | | | | | | | | |
| individual | | | | | | | | | |
| sports | - | (5) | (1) | (4) | (9) | (4) | (5) | (7) | (4) |
| swimming, | 18% | 8% | 27% | 25% | 27% | 24% | 20% | 24% | 16% |
| rowing, box, | | | | | | | | | |
| gymnastic | | | | | | | | | |

Characters in drawings

On most of the drawings in relation to the three studied concepts there are people. We found only a few drawings with animals, but these animals were also in human-like competitive situations. For example two girls drew a running contest between a rabbit and a turtle, where the turtle could win with his brightness.

On drawings in relation to competition and winning most of the children (72%-80%) drew both the winner and the loser. There was no gender difference in this. But in the case of drawings on losing girls represented less frequently both the winner and the loser together, instead drawing either the winner or the loser alone. Drawing only one party of

the competition in case of losing might avoid facing the interpersonal consequences of losing, a potential conflict. (See *Table 4*)

Table 4: Gender differences in depicting the winner and the loser on drawings in relation to competition, winning and losing

| Depicting the winner and the loser on the drawings | Competition | | | Winning | | | Losing | | |
|---|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Total n=67 | Boys n=33 | Girls n=34 | Total n=64 | Boys n=31 | Girls n=33 | Total n=64 | Boys n=30 | Girls n=34 |
| Both the winner and the loser are on the drawing | (48) 72% | (23) 70% | (25) 74% | (51) 80% | (25) 81% | (26) 79% | (44) 69% | (24) 80% | (20) 59% |
| Only the winner is on the drawing | (12) 18% | (5) 15% | (7) 20% | (10) 15% | (5) 16% | (5) 15% | (3) 5% | (0) 0% | (3) 9% |
| Only the loser is on the drawing | (0) 0% | (0) 0% | (0) 0% | (0) 0% | (0) 0% | (0) 0% | (12) 19% | (4) 13% | (8) 23% |
| Neither the winner nor the loser are on the drawing | (7) 10% | (5) 15% | (2) 6% | (3) 5% | (1) 3% | (2) 6% | (5) 7% | (2) 7% | (3) 9% |



Drawing 3: Winning – Depicting both the winner and the loser – 8-year-old girl



Drawing 4: Losing – Depicting only the loser – 8-year old girl

Symbols

As the next step of our study we identified if there are any symbols of competition present in the drawings. We found no gender differences in this respect, but we found

more symbols both in relation to winning and losing than in relation to competition, the biggest number of symbols appeared on the drawings related to winning (57 drawing, 86%).

Table 5: The presence of symbols in relation to competition, winning and losing

| The presence of symbols on drawings | Competition | | | Winning | | | Losing | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Total n=67 | Boys n=33 | Girls n=34 | Total n=64 | Boys n=31 | Girls n=33 | Total n=64 | Boys n=30 | Girls n=34 |
| There are symbols on the drawing | (35) 52% | (17) 52% | (18) 53% | (55) 86% | (25) 81% | (30) 91% | (42) 66% | (21) 70% | (21) 62% |
| There are no symbols on the drawing | (32) 48% | (16) 48% | (16) 47% | (9) 14% | (6) 19% | (3) 9% | (22) 34% | (9) 30% | (13) 38% |

Then we tried to find what kind of symbols of competition and winning are present on the drawings in relation to the three studied concepts. At first we differentiated the symbols into two groups: in the first group there are symbols in relation to a contest. Symbols like stadium, start, finish, judge, and audience belong to this category. In the second group there are symbols in relation to winning – for example cup, medal, podium, present, girdle or champagne. In Table 6 you can see the rate of the two groups of symbols.

Table 6: The rate of the two groups of symbols – symbols in relation to a contest and symbols in relation to winning

| Different symbols on the drawings | Competition | | | Winning | | | Losing | | |
|--|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Total n=38 | Boys n=18 | Girls n=20 | Total n=76 | Boys n=32 | Girls n=44 | Total n=49 | Boys n=27 | Girls n=22 |
| Symbols in relation to the competitive situation | (34) 89% | (16) 89% | (18) 90% | (34) 45% | (18) 56% | (16) 36% | (26) 53% | (14) 78% | (12) 60% |
| Winning symbols | (4) 11% | (2) 11% | (2) 10% | (42) 55% | (14) 44% | (28) 64% | (23) 47% | (13) 22% | (10) 40% |

In relation to competition we found symbols on 35 drawings (52%). The most frequent symbols in relation to the competitive situation were the finish, the audience and the stadium. In relation to winning children most frequently drew podiums, cups and medals.

Interestingly enough girls drew more winning symbols than boys, both on their drawings related to winning and somewhat paradoxically also on drawings related to losing

Emotions in drawings

We studied the following aspects:

- Are there any emotions on the drawings?
- Which types of emotions can we detect?
- Are there any gender differences in the frequency or the types of emotions?
- Are emotions different in the case of the winner and the loser?

The presence of emotions

Most of the drawings referred to some kind of emotions. This we called emotional saturation. Girls depicted more emotions than boys in all three cases (competition, winning and losing).

Table 7 – Emotional saturation

| Emotional loadedness | Competition | | | Winning | | | Losing | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Total n=67 | Boys n=33 | Girls n=34 | Total n=64 | Boys n=31 | Girls n=33 | Total n=64 | Boys n=30 | Girls n=34 |
| Depict any emotion on the drawing | (49) 73% | (18) 55% | (31) 91% | (50) 78% | (22) 71% | (28) 85% | (50) 78% | (22) 73% | (28) 82% |
| No emotions on the drawing | (18) 27% | (15) 45% | (3) 9% | (14) 22% | (9) 29% | (5) 15% | (14) 22% | (8) 27% | (6) 18% |

Positive and negative emotions

In the next step we worked only with those drawings on which children depicted any emotions. This amounted to 49 drawings in relation to competition and 50 drawings in relation to winning and losing. We categorised the emotions which appeared. If we observed any smiling face or hands up we identified it as ‘happiness’ and as positive emotion and if we observed a sad face or crying we categorised it as ‘sadness’ and as negative emotion. Although boys more frequently choose an area like car racing or war, where characters wear helmets therefore we can’t detect the faces of the winners or the losers, still other signs of emotions – like hands up – show us the presence of positive emotions.

There were drawings with only positive emotions, others with positive and negative emotions and some with only negative emotions. If we compare the three studied phenomena in relation to emotions which appear, we can detect major differences in emotions which belong to competition, winning and losing and we can see gender differences, too. In relation to losing children generally depicted less positive and more negative emotions than in relation to competition and winning. In relation to losing both boys and girls present more negative emotions on their drawings, but on girls’ drawings we find more negative emotions – especially crying children – than on boys’ drawings.

Table 8: Positive and negative emotions on the drawings

| Positive and negative emotions on drawings | Competition | | | Winning | | | Losing | | |
|--|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Total n=49 | Boys n=18 | Girls n=31 | Total n=50 | Boys n=22 | Girls n=28 | Total n=50 | Boys n=22 | Girls n=28 |
| Positive emotions | (41) 84% | (15) 83% | (26) 84% | (36) 72% | (14) 63% | (22) 78% | (16) 32% | (11) 50% | (5) 18% |
| Positive and negative emotions | (6) 12% | (1) 6% | (5) 16% | (12) 24% | (7) 32% | (5) 18% | (26) 52% | (20) 45% | (16) 57% |
| Negative emotions | (2) 4% | (2) 11% | (0) 0% | (2) 4% | (1) 5% | (1) 4% | (8) 16% | (1) 5% | (7) 25% |



Drawing 5 – Winning – The car racers (both the winner and the losers) are happy (without their smile on their face) on a drawing by an 8-years-old boy

Drawing 6 – Losing – The losers are crying on a drawing of an 8-year-old girl



The emotions of the losers

Both in relation to winning and losing, children often draw winning-losing situations and they present both the winner and the loser. In this presentation there are some differences

in the loser's emotion depending on the main topic of the drawing: if it is on winning or on losing.

Losers on drawings in relation to winning are happier than on drawings in relation to losing. Especially on girls' drawings we can find a difference in the presentation of the loser's emotions. In the case of a drawing about winning the losers are more often happy like the winners. But if it is a drawing on losing the children who lost are sad and often even cry. (See on Drawing 7 – 8 by the same girl)



Drawing 7 and 8 - Losers on the drawing of winning are happier than on the drawing of losing – from an 8-year-old girl

The results show characteristic gender differences in these areas: Boys present emotions more realistically in relation to winning: they draw the loser's negative emotions in this case more frequently than girls, but in relation to losing girls depict the loser's negative emotions more frequently than boys

Conclusions

The main question of our study was to reveal if we can find any gender difference among 8-9 year old children in relation to the representation of competition and winning and losing. Our results show more similarities than differences among boys and girls at this age group. The differences we found are subtle, however might indicate the beginning of more meaningful differences later in their development.

On drawings of 8-9 year old children, both boys and girls illustrated a structural competitive situation, a kind of contest, especially sports. Boys more often depicted team sports i.e. competition among groups (that require cooperation among the team members) while girls rather portrayed individual sports competitions. We found differences among the areas of competition in relation to gender. Topics like car racing or war appeared exclusively on boys' drawings, while beauty contest or poem reciting only on girls' pictures. This shows that already at this age group there are certain areas of competition that are considered to belong to one or another gender.

It seemed that girls react to losing in a somewhat different way than boys. For instance on drawings related to losing they are less likely to illustrate both the winner and the loser, than boys; they more often draw only the winner or only the loser in a drawing that represents losing. Also they draw more symbols of winning than boys not only on drawings related to winning, but also on drawings related to losing. Losing also evokes more negative emotions in girls and they are the ones who portray the loser crying. However if they represent both winner and loser together in the picture they depict the loser as happy as the winner.

Our results give the impression that for girls it is more problematic to keep together the winner and the loser in case of losing, if they are both present in the situation there is a more 'rosy' representation of the loser than in the cases where the loser is alone, when he/she is sad and even cries.

According to our previous results teachers express sadness more often in cases where a girl loses (Sándor, 2006) while they encourage boys to stand up and continue after losing. In our study girls expressed more negative emotions in relation to losing than boys in situations when the loser was alone, indicating the potential consequence of a kind of gender based socialisation related to competitive situations.

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