

CHILDREN'S CONCEPTION OF POLITICS, A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Children of different age (8, 11 and 14 years) were questioned about the politics in general and in Slovenia. Their conceptions were rather naive, but the level of understanding increased with age. While the knowledge of the youngest group was at a very concrete level, the older children gave a greater variety of more complex answers.

Rosenberg (1987, 1988; after Milburn, 1991) has proposed a "structural developmental" approach to political understanding. By this he means that the ideology can be understood through an examination of the structure or an individual's thinking about politics. Various components are involved in the structure of an individual's thinking, including the number of perspectives that a person takes on a specific issue and the relationships the person sees among these perspectives.

Rosenberg proposed that individuals think about politics in three different ways: sequential, linear and systematic. The most complex political thinking is the systematic one. Sequential thinkers do not use abstraction and generalization. They see events that occur close together in time as related to one another. Linear thinkers think in casual terms but do not go beyond models that view one variable causing another. Systematic thinkers go beyond simple causal models and consider that different factors may interact with each other in nonlinear ways and that there may be reciprocal relationships among different variables.

Rosenberg's (1987, 1988) research indicates that individuals differ considerably in the type of thinking they use to solve problems, and that the sophistication of their thinking about politics and political situations is very similar to the way they approach traditional psychological cognitive problem-solving tasks.

The development of political socialization is a complex process, connected with child's intellectual development and general development and by social, political and economical situation.

According to Piaget's cognitive theory it could be expected that political conceptions become more complex and more abstract by older children. This opinion was

confirmed in the investigation of Berti (1988). She followed the line of research of Adelson and coworkers and explored the notions "organization" and "conflict", which are fundamental to political thinking, as the word "politics" refers both to the way in which the community is organized and to the arena in which different conflicting projects or "policies" compete.

80 Italian children from 6 to 15 years old participated in the study. At the age 6-7 there is no political idea. The conceptions of 8 to 9 years old children differ from those described above owing to increasing recognition of conflicts and to the idea that large groups of people are ruled by "chiefs" or "boss" who give orders and impose prohibitions. This result could be explained by the fact of concrete operational thinking. A minority of children at this age express a general and abstract conception of the function of the law.

Conceptions about government change at the age of 12 to 13. These conceptions differ from the conceptions of younger ones in the idea that making laws is the job of the whole community, not only of one or several political leaders. This idea does not reflect any present political system, but resembles conceptions on the origin of game rules that Piaget found at the same age level. For this reason, it appears to be rooted not in factual knowledge but in autonomous morality arising in preadolescence. The most substantial advances in children's political thinking take place after the age of 12 to 13 with the onset of formal operational thinking. 14 to 15 years olds spontaneously talk about conflicts, regard the constitution of a government as the starting point for the establishment of a community and express a general and abstract idea of the function of the law. As we have seen, the above described sequence agrees with the findings on children's social knowledge, in this way supporting the cognitive developmental approach.

Adelson and O'Neil (1966) made investigation in which participated children from 11 to 18. They have examined the development of political reasoning. The results showed that the most substantial advances take place in the periods between 11-13 and between 13-15 years. During the first period, children show a change from concrete, tied-to-present thinking to mature political reasoning in at least some of the items. In the second period, they become able to reason abstractly and use general principles. The onset of formal operational thinking allows children to have better understanding of the actual working of the political institutions and to understand the various ideologies and their links with the conflicting interests of different social groups.

METHOD

Subjects: The sample was comprised of 79 school children, 26 of 8 years old, 25 of 11 years old and 28 of 14 years old. The same age children were from the same class. The interviews were taken in their schools. All of them took a part with their parents' permission.

Instrument: The questionnaire has 20 questions. Most of them are opened. They covered three topics, the politics and the politicians, the democracy and the last one, political parties.

Procedure: Research was going on in February 1992. The youngest children answered individually, the others in a group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are some specifics in the answers, depended on the child's development. In the Piaget's sense, younger children are egocentric, so they can not transcend a purely personal approach to matters which require a sociocentric perspective. So the answers were categorized in individual and group tendency.

Another reflection of the concreteness of younger children can be found in their tendency to treat an activity as a simple or as complex one. So the answers could be put in these two categories.

And the last one is the value of the answers, which could be positive or negative. Older children stress the positive function of politics. All the results are discussed in percentages.

Table 1
WHAT IS THE POLITICS?

AGE	N	PERSON		ACTIVITY		VALUE		NOT KNOW
		Individ.	Group	Simple	Complex	Positive	Negative	
8 years	26	0	3.8	7.7	3.8	3.8	0	69.2
11 years	25	4	8	44	8	4	0	28
14 years	28	0	0	14.3	50	7.1	7.8	14.3

The knowledge about the politics increased with years. Many 8 years old children did not know what the politics is (69,2%), 14 years old were more concerned in activities in politics than in person. They threat the politics like the complex activity (leading of the country, representing the country), while the younger children emphasized simple activities (meeting of the presidents, meeting of the government). All three groups had positive approach to politics, older children were more concerned in value.

Table 2
WHO ARE THE POLITICIANS? WHAT ARE THE POLITICIANS DOING?

AGE	N	PERSON		ACTIVITY		VALUE		NOT KNOW
		Individ.	Group	Simple	Complex	Positive	Negative	
8 years	26	7.7	0	65.4	3.89	0	0	38.5
11 years	25	8	4	48	44	0	0	8
14 years	28	0	3.6	32.1	92.8	7.1	0	0

Because they had to mentioned concrete activities or concrete actions of the politicians, the answer "not know" was rare. It was the highest for the younger group (38,5%). Younger children in their answers stressed simple activities of politicians (talking, go to meetings, traveling through the world), while for the older children the complex activities were more important (they represent Slovenia, they solve economic problems). Children of the age of 11 have stressed equally simple and complex activities.

Younger children more emphasized individual role of politicians (president), but the older ones group role (members of parliament).

Table 3

WHAT IS THE DEMOCRACY?

AGE	N	PERSON		ACTIVITY		VALUE		NOT KNOW
		Individ.	Group	Simple	Complex	Positive	Negative	
8 years	26	0	0	19	7.7	0	0	80.8
11 years	25	0	0	0	12	8	0	80
14 years	28	0	7.1	0	35.7	21.4	0	39.3

Because the conception of democracy is rather abstract, the percentage of "not know" answers was 80,8% at the age of 8 and 80% at the age of 11. 8 years old children very often mentioned simple activities (the possibility of talking), 11 years old emphasized complex activities (country fight for independence). The group of 14 years olds gave more complex answers on this question. They found out the group role of democracy (all people have the same rights), they had positive attitude to it (free country, democratic country) and they emphasized complex activities in the democracy (fighting for the rights of people).

Table 4

HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT ONE COUNTRY IS DEMOCRATIC?

AGE	N	PERSON		ACTIVITY		VALUE		NOT KNOW
		Individ.	Group	Simple	Complex	Positive	Negative	
8 years	26	0	0	11.5	0	7.7	0	73.1
11 years	25	0	0	4	4	4	0	80
14 years	28	7.1	14.3	25	14.3	17.9	0	32.1

The percentage of answers "not know" was rather high, specially for the group of 11 years olds.

8 years old children stressed simple activities (time without war) and positive value of democratic countries (independent country).

The oldest children had more complex answers again. They thought that the group role is the most important (all people have the same rights) and they had positive attitude to democratic country ("smart" life). But it was rather surprising that they mentioned more simple activities than complex ones.

When they had to answer which country is the most democratic and which is the least democratic, they were rather confused, they classified the same countries in both groups, what indicates that they do not have developed this conception yet.

Table 5
WHAT IS THE POLITICAL PARTY?

AGE	N	PERSON		ACTIVITY		VALUE		NOT KNOW
		Individ.	Group	Simple	Complex	Positive	Negative	
8 years	26	3.8	3.8	7.7	3.8	0	0	88.5
11 years	25	12	0	12	4	0	0	72
14 years	28	0	42.8	0	0	0	0	60.7

The majority of children did not know what the political party is, specially younger ones.

8 years old children emphasized simple activities (people talking). 11 years old children stressed individual role in political party (president) or simple activities (they have meetings).

14 years old talked about group role of political party (organization with special goal).

Table 6
WHAT IS THE OPPOSITION?

AGE	N	What is the opposition?	What does the opposition do?
		NOT KNOW	NOT KNOW
8 years	26	0	3.8
11 years	25	4	8
14 years	28	0	0

It is not surprising that children did not know what are the differences between the political sides. Only low percentage of the older children answered to this question (25%, people around the president, the main political party).

Table 7
WHAT IS BETTER, IF THERE IS ONE, FEW OR MANY POLITICAL PARTIES?

AGE	N	YES			NO		
		Person	Activity	Value	Person	Activity	Value
8 years	26	0	7.7	0	0	11.5	44
11 years	25	4	8	0	0	16	20
14 years	28	0	7.1	0	0	21.4	32.1

More than a half of younger children were sure that it's better if there are many political parties, because many people could have more ideas.

Children of 13 years old were not quite sure what's better, if there are many, few or one political party. They argue if there are a lot of people, they can't consider the ideas of all of them, but the others thought that many parties could solve more problems.

Children of 14 years old answered that smaller number of political parties is the best, because they can talk to each other and can solve problems quickly, the decisions are more complex, they can make better decision if they consider more parties than only one.

WHAT IS THE OPPOSITION?

Younger children did not know what the opposition is. Children of 14 years old also did not know, but a few of them told that the opposition is a party which is not the most important.

WHAT DOES THE OPPOSITION DO?

The result was the same as for the previous answer. The oldest children thought that the opposition take control the main political party, the party which has a power.

The most of them did not want to work in politics when they will be grown up. They thought that politicians must work too hard, they spent a lot of time in job, they have to travel a lot and they are worried all the time. One of them meant, that to be a politicians is too responsible, but the others thought that the politics is stupid, nonsense and so on. Specially younger children (8 years old) gave answers with value. The reasons mentioned by the children, who want to work in politics, were that they can travel a lot, they could meet a lot of interesting people and they could learn a lot of interesting things.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of children stress the activity in politics, younger children the simple activities, older ones more complex activities.

The tendency of egocentric perception by younger children is not obvious. But they are more oriented to person than older children.

The older children give more answers with value then the younger. They have more positive attitude to politics in the whole.

Younger children (8years old) give answers more on concrete level than on abstract one. They can name some activities and are able to tell some facts, but they can not apply their knowledge effectively to the question. Their thinking is egocentric, tied to present and current experience. The political thought of the youngest is constrained by personalized, concrete and present oriented modes of approach. Their thinking is sequential.

11 years old children give the answers on both levels, on concrete and on formal one. Their answers were similar both to the answers of younger and older group. They stress the connection between the events, but it is linear.

14 years old children are closer to formal stage of thinking, although some answers were also on concrete level. Their thinking is more general and abstract.

They are able to reason from premises. They consider many factors in interactive way. The mature modes of reasoning are capable of slipping back easily.

The political reasoning is also connected with knowledge. Younger children have less experience and less knowledge on this topic (8 years old). The older ones are more interested in political information, that does not include only knowledge, but also the apprehension of consensus, a feeling for the common and prevailing ways of looking at political issues. They reflect internalization of adult perspectives.

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POVZETEK

V psihologiji je še vedno dokaj pomanjkljivo raziskano vprašanje, kako se oblikujejo vrednote in vrednotne usmeritve v odvisnosti od starosti in razvojne dobe. V raziskavi smo skušali ugotoviti, kako ocenjujejo pomembnost glavnih osebnih vrednot in vrednotnih kategorij osebe v različnih starostnih obdobjih odraslosti. Pri tem smo izhajali iz hipoteze, da obstajajo tudi na področju vrednot razvojne težnje in hierarhije, ki zajemajo glavne kategorije vrednot. Rezultati raziskave so pokazali, da v odrasli dobi s starostjo relativno upada pomen hedonskih in potenčnih vrednot, ne upada pa pomen moralnih vrednot in narašča pomen izpolnitvenih vrednot. Na ravni vrednotnih makrousmeritev lahko ugotovimo upadanje pomena dionizičnih in naraščanje pomen apolonskih vrednot. Ti rezultati v grobem potrjujejo obstoj razvojne hierarhije vrednot, ki vodi od hedonskih in potenčnih (dionizičnih) vrednot k moralnim in izpolnitvenim (apolonskim) vrednotam.

VALUE ORIENTATIONS THROUGH THE LIFE - ABSTRACT

The relationship between value orientations and the developmental stages of adult individuals are still unsatisfactorily investigated. In our study an attempt was made to establish, how the persons of different ages rate the importance of cardinal values, value types and value orientations. It was hypothesized that in the field of values a

best, because they can talk to each other and can solve problems quickly, the decisions are more complex, they can make better decision if they consider more parties than only one.

The majority of children stress the activity in politics, younger children the simple activities, older ones more complex activities. The tendency of egocentric perception by younger children is not obvious. But they are more oriented to person than older children. The older children give more answers with value than the younger. They have more positive attitude to politics in the whole. Younger children (8 years old) give answers more on concrete level than on abstract one. They can name some activities and are able to tell some facts, but they can not apply their knowledge effectively to the question. Their thinking is egocentric, tied to present and current experience. The political thought of the youngest is constrained by personalized, concrete and present oriented modes of approach. Their thinking is sequential. 11 years old children give the answers on both levels, on concrete and on formal one. Their answers were similar both to the answers of younger and older group. They stress the connection between the events, but it is linear. 14 years old children are closer to formal stage of thinking, although some answers were also on concrete level. Their thinking is more general and abstract.

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