

# WAR IN THE EYES OF CHILDREN: A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Children from different age groups (7, 11, and 13 years old) were questioned about the nature and causes of war in general, and about the recent wars in Slovenia and Croatia. Their answers were coded and compared. It was found out that the level of understanding increased with age, but also that it was highly contaminated with current war events. While the knowledge of the youngest group was at a very concrete level, the older children gave a greater variety of more complex answers. We can also comprehend the whole process as the development of event schemata of a very complex nature.

Tragical events, connected with the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, had motivated this research on children understanding the war. Conceptual and methodological origins were found in the research on economic socialisation, conducted by Leiser and others (Zabukovec & Polič, 1990). Especially two theoretical approaches must be mentioned here, Piagetian developmental-cognitive and the environmentalistic learning theory, where the former provides the framework and the second the content of socialisation.

While socialisation could be defined as a process by which an individual develops through transaction with other people, his specific pattern of socially relevant behaviour and experience (Ziegler & Child, 1969), also the concept of a schema, as a cognitive structure that represents organised knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus, could be applied here, particularly event schemata (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). The last ones are structures that describe what we know about classes of events. Well-developed schemata are more organised, abstract, moderate and complex. Human knowledge about the war could be termed war schemata. As Peterson (1990) mentioned, human experience, our life spaces, help to shape our views of the

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world, manifest as schemata, and our behaviour. The content of schemata is therefore dependent on both, the cognitive level at which the person can reason and cues the environment supplies.

While there are a number of reports on different aspects of socialisation (economic, political etc.), a war was rarely included in this kind of investigations. In this study, we were interested how children of different ages comprehend the nature and causes of wars in general, and the recent wars in Slovenia and Croatia. We were therefore investigating the development of the war schemata.

## METHOD

Subject: Eighty-four children, primary school pupils from two schools in different Slovenian towns (with different experience in the recent war in Slovenia; the conditions during the war were more severe in Slovenjgradec), were interviewed (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Number of children from different age groups, sex and towns.

TOWN		LJUBLJANA			SLOVENJGRADEC			Σ
AGE		B	G	N	B	G	N	
7	Years	6	7	13	6	6	12	25
10	Years	11	4	15	9	5	14	29
13	Years	6	8	14	8	8	16	30

Children in each age group, and school were from the same class, and took part in the interview with their parents' permission.

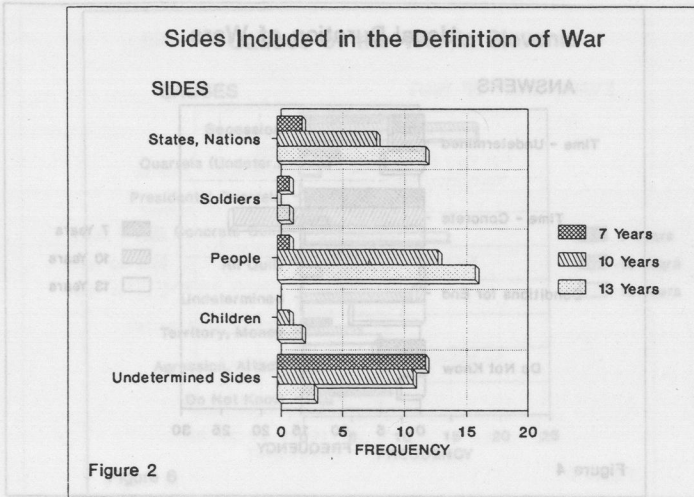
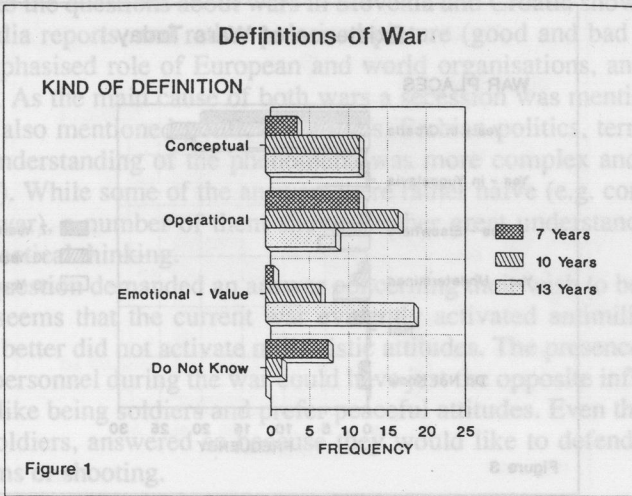
Material: The questionnaire with 19, mainly open questions was prepared. Questions referred to different aspects of war in general, and wars in Slovenia and Croatia in particular (causes, duration, termination, engaged sides etc.).

Procedure: Research was conducted in February 1992, half a year after the war in Slovenia, and during the war in Croatia. While the children from the older two groups were questioned in a group, the youngest children were questioned individually.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General war schemata showed clear developmental changes (figure 1). While, for the youngest group, the war was mainly shooting and bombarding (operational definitions), the older groups gave more complex answers, e.g. political and economic conflicts were mentioned as the causes or reasons of wars (conceptual definition). In answers to additional question, about the causes of wars, the older two groups quite often mentioned also territory and money. Strong emotional (fear, dread) and evaluational (bad) aspects were present in the answers of the oldest children. Is this the consequence of the current situation or developmental lawfulness remain to be answered.

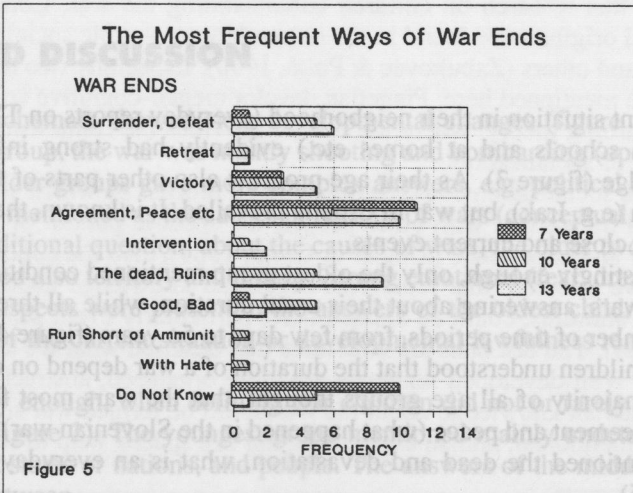
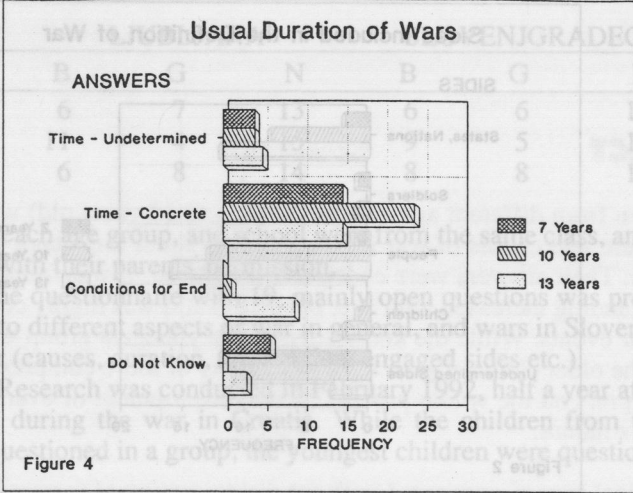
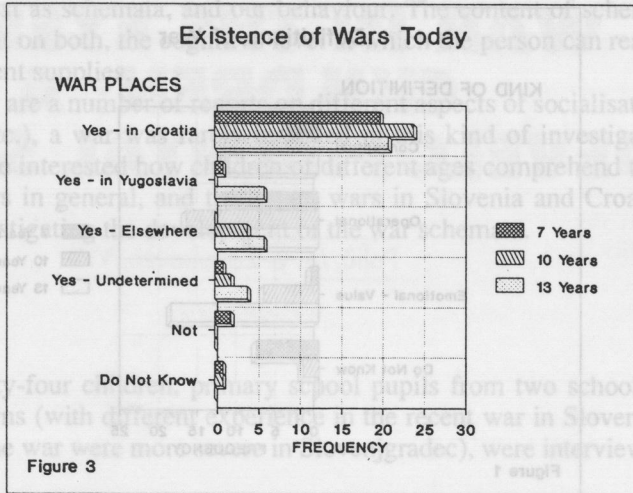
Interestingly enough, when defining war children did not or rarely include fighting soldiers (figure 2). The youngest group mentioned mainly undetermined sides, and the oldest states or nations, and people. The answers of the middle group were somewhere between.



Current situation in their neighborhood (everyday reports on TV and radio, discussions in schools and at homes etc.) evidently had strong influence on children knowledge (figure 3). As their age progress also other parts of the world came into question (e.g. Irak), but war in Croatia prevailed. It is known, that people usually remember close and current events.

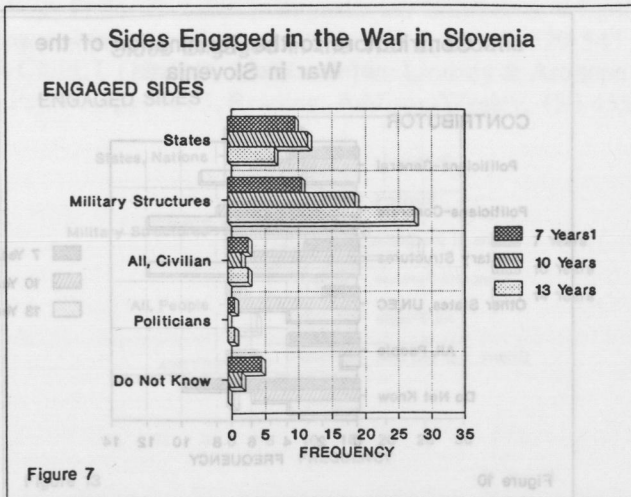
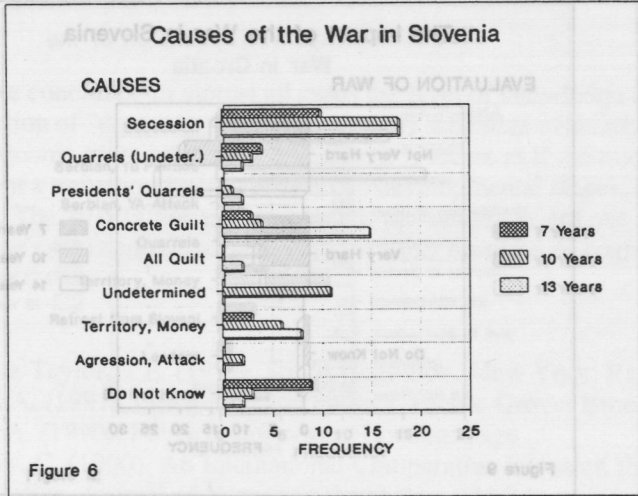
Interestingly enough, only the oldest group mentioned conditions for the termination of wars, answering about their usual duration, while all three groups enumerated a number of time periods, from few days to 50 years (figure 4). Only some of the oldest children understood that the duration of a war depend on certain conditions.

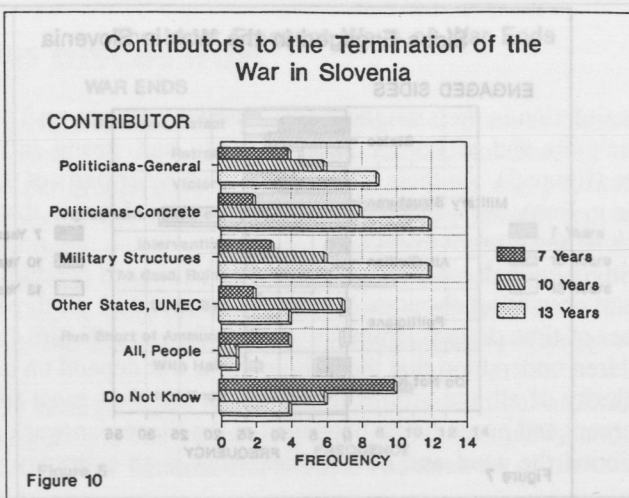
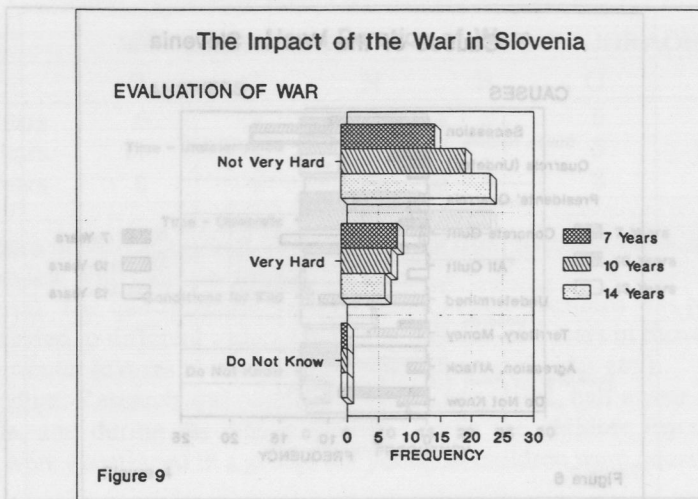
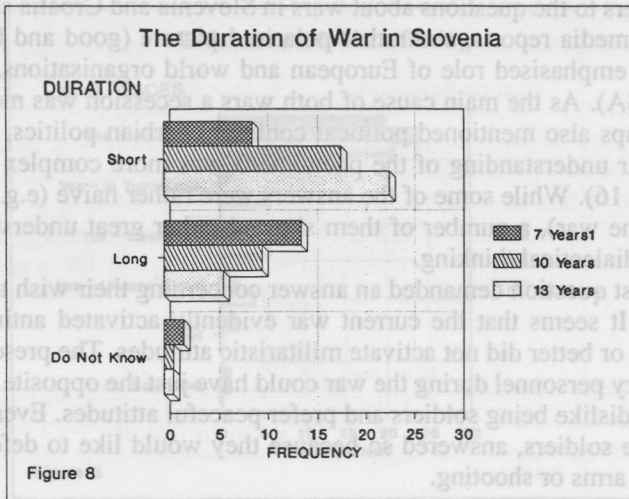
The majority of all age groups thought, that the wars most frequently terminate with agreement and peace (what happened in the Slovenian war), while older groups also mentioned the dead and devastation, what is an everyday picture on our TV (figure 5).

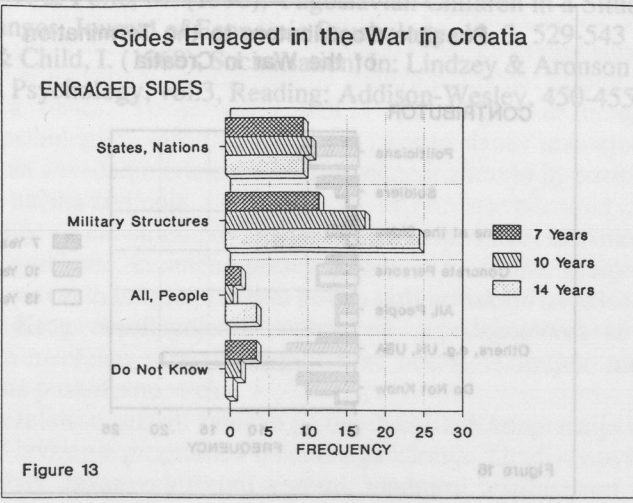
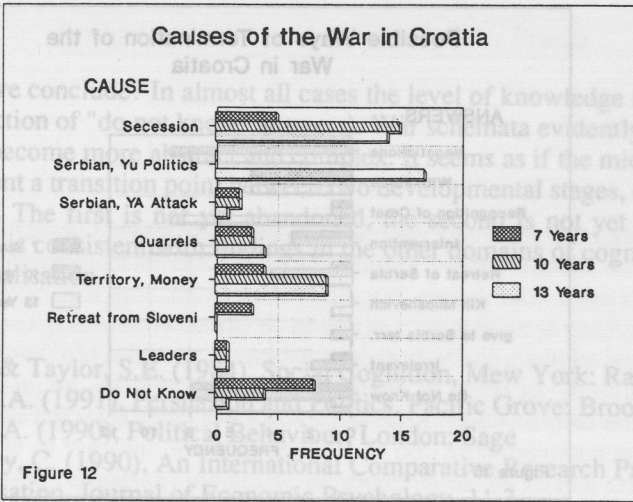
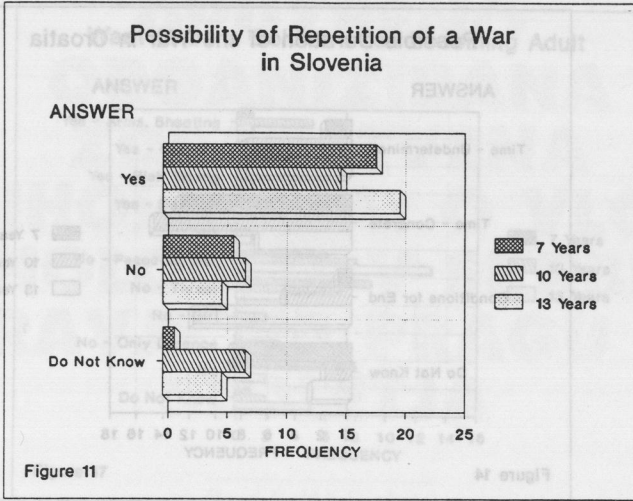


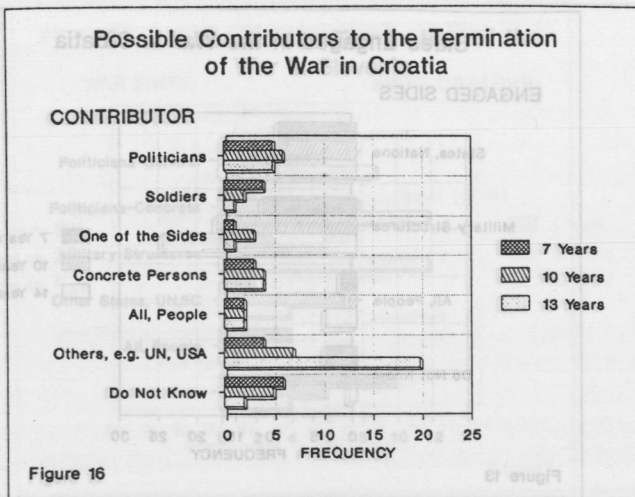
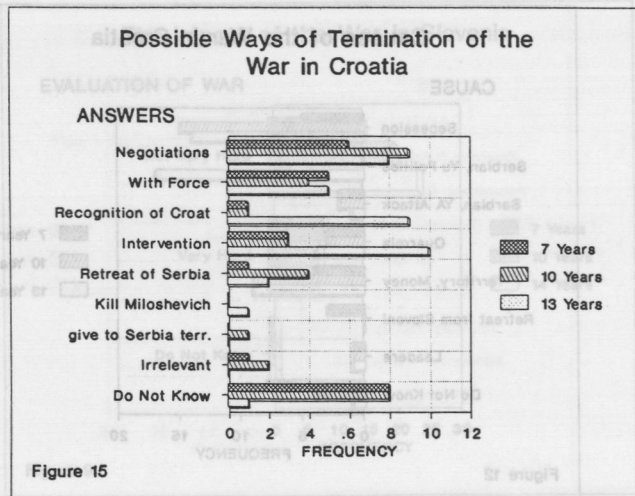
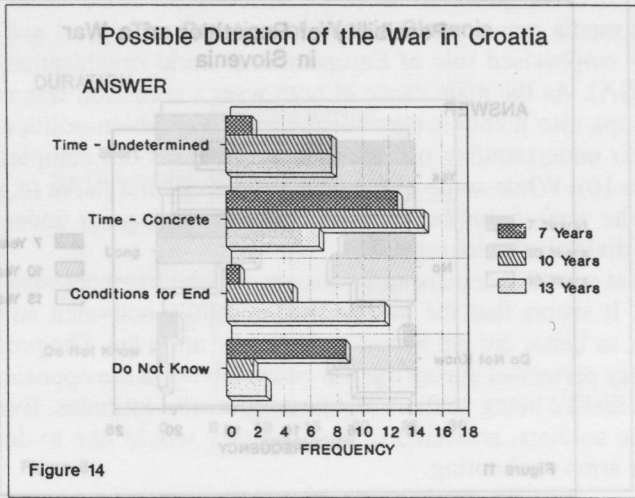
Answers to the questions about wars in Slovenia and Croatia showed great impact of mass media reports, and rather polarised picture (good and bad "guys"), with a strongly emphasised role of European and world organisations, and foreign countries (USA). As the main cause of both wars a secession was mentioned. The older two groups also mentioned political conflicts, Serbian politics, territory expansion etc. Their understanding of the phenomena was more complex and complete (figures 6 to 16). While some of the answers were rather naive (e.g. concrete politician ending the war), a number of them showed rather great understanding and certain level of dialectical thinking.

The last question demanded an answer concerning their wish to be a soldiers (figure 17). It seems that the current war evidently activated antimilitary feelings in children, or better did not activate militaristic attitudes. The presence and popularity of military personnel during the war could have just the opposite influence. Anyway children dislike being soldiers and prefer peaceful attitudes. Even those, who would like to be soldiers, answered so because they would like to defend the country, or they like arms or shooting.

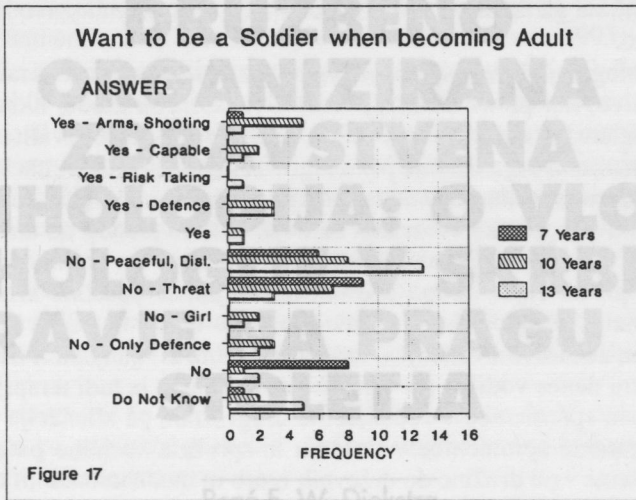












What can we conclude? In almost all cases the level of knowledge increased with the age (reduction of "do not know" answers). War schemata evidently develop with the age, and become more abstract and complex. It seems as if the middle group (10 years) represent a transition point between two developmental stages, a concrete and abstract ones. The first is not yet abandoned, the second is not yet developed. In principle, this is consistent with findings in the other domains of cognitive development and socialisation.

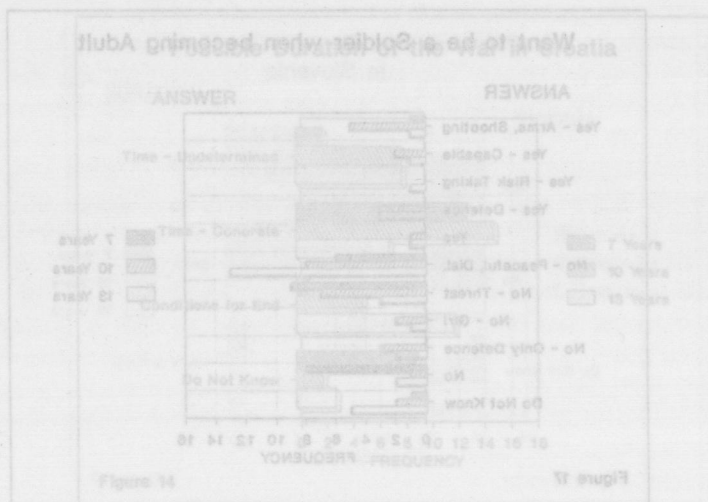
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"zdravstveno psihologije" (health psychology) kot to danes imenujemo. Ta stroka močno vpliva na zavedanje o telesnem in psihičnem zdravju in pozitivno vpliva na izbiro zdravega načina življenja.

Skrb za zdravje na eni strani povzroča pritisk na zdravstvo, ki samo zase ne more dati rešitev za probleme, ki močno presegajo okviro medicine. Ljudje, ki skrbijo za ustreznost zdravstvenih programov zato bolj in bolj pritiskajo na sklade in proračunska sredstva. Krog neprilagojenih reakcij na neprilagojenost se tako zapira, strokovnjaki za mentalno zdravje pa, v boju za obstoj, tekmujejo med seboj in se fragmentirajo na posamezne stroke.

V razvitih deželah so zaznali zahtevo po novih oblikah kooperacije vseh disciplin, pomembnih za izvajanje programov mentalnega zdravja. Gradijo novi konsenz med plačniki, družbo, zavarovalniškimi sistemi, vladnimi institucijami ter različnimi



What can we conclude? In almost all cases the level of knowledge increased with the age (reduction of "do not know" answers). War phenomena evidently develop with the age, and become more abstract and complex. It seems as if the middle group (10 years) represent a transition point between two developmental stages, a concrete and abstract ones. The first is not yet abandoned, the second is not yet developed. In principle, this is consistent with findings in the other domains of cognitive development and socialization.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

