Teachers’ subjective definition of a family
- frequency conceptual analysis

Jana Marie Havigerová*, Jiří Haviger, Irena Loudová

* Institute of Social Work, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové 500 03, Czech Republic
b Department of Pedagogy and Psychology, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové 500 03, Czech Republic

Abstract

The family as a topic is an essential part of primary school curriculum in the Czech Republic. The present study describes the expressions used by teachers (N=219) to define the term family and the possible implicit theories behind the definitions. A total of 513 expressions were used by the respondents to define family, the ten most frequent ones being: člověk, ten, dítě, skupina, spolu, žít, blízký, rodič, my a rád (man/human being, this, child, group, together, live, close, parent, we and like). The initial analysis suggests that the teachers’ implicit understanding of the concept of family is associated with 1) parenthood and blood kinship, 2) emotional relations (love each other), 3) the co-existence in the household. The teachers’ implicit understanding is based on egocentric and pedocentric view (the family equals mainly me-child and my parents or me-parent and my children). The lexical trace makes it evident that the implicit understanding is deeply embodied in language (the expressions that occur to us are commonly used ones, which restricts the final concept) and that it reflects the changing socio-cultural discourse (for example, the modern concept of family is typically nuclear, based on partnership, which is a result of the postponement of parenthood, other phenomena include emancipation, economic independence, independent housing with variable individualized features, such as pets as a part of family structure). Czech teachers do not use in their definitions concepts like education, nation, culture or religion which sometimes appear in theoretical academic concepts of family.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +420-493-331-341.
E-mail address: jana.havigerova@uhk.cz
1. Introduction

The aim of the study is to reveal the implicit theories of teachers linked to the concept of family. The term *implicit* is derived from Latin *implicatus* (entwined) meaning “included”, “present but not directly expressed” or “going without saying”. *Implicit* (also subjective or naive) theory refers to a lay theoretical concept, i.e. a concept formed unconsciously by lay people, similar terms include beliefs, personal constructs, mental representations or mental/folk/naïve models (for details see Sedláková, 2000).

This sort of personal constructs concerns specific phenomena which permanently reside in the minds of individuals (Furnham, 1988), which means that they are not ephemeral immediate states of mind but relatively persistent constructs. They are often internally inconsistent and include contradictory statements (Furnham, 1988). This feature is partly a result of the gathering of answers to questions which one poses to himself/herself in connection with various experiences and pieces of knowledge concerning the phenomenon in question and which are not dependent on the capacity to ask or the intelligence of the individual (Havigerová, & Burešová, 2013).

It is useful to reveal implicit theories since their general purpose is the interpretation of individual as well as social reality. They serve as an explanatory and predictive tool of human behaviour. Richardson (1996, quoted according to Stuchlíková, 2005) claims that they have two functions in the process of education:

1. they work as a filter which focuses the attention, contributes to the forming of meaning, helps to organize knowledge and supports remembering during the process of learning to teach;
2. they influence decision making and actions, interaction with others but also professional and emotional satisfaction.

If we differentiate between two types of situations – those in which the behaviour is pre-planned and those in which situational influence prevails, we may state that scientific (rational, explicit) theories are employed in connection with pre-planned behaviour while implicit (intuitive) theories are associated with behaviour conditioned by immediate circumstances (e.g. the education process in complex situations with quick interaction). Janík (2003: 2) suggests that: “Subjective theories help teachers to stand the pedagogical situations, guide their thinking, feeling and actions and are a sort of plug-in for decision making in action.” Levická (2004) specifies that in practice, subjective treatment of the term *family* in all its forms affects the communication of the expert with the individual family members, which concerns not only teachers but also psychologists, doctors, social workers and other professionals from the area of helping professions.

Implicit theories are explicable to a certain extent, mainly through discourse – the process is sometimes called the actualization of implicit theories (Carston, 2008). This feature of implicit theories is the basis of research in this area. The primary objective of our research of implicit theories of family is the reconstruction and analysis of the lexical elements which teachers associate with family, since family as a topic is a part of the compulsory curriculum.

2. Family – lexical meaning of the term

The basic dictionary meaning of the term family in Europe and America is relatively stable, the differences consist merely in the degree of stress on various aspects. Let us look at some traditional definitions for illustration:

- 1830, New York: *Household; race; generation; class*. Worcester (1830: 120).
- 1879, Oxford: *The slaves in a household, a household establishment, family servants, domestics*. Lewis, & Short (1879: 723).
- 1895, Praha. *Familia, a Latin word which the etymologists associate with stems meaning settlement, housing or education, the primary meaning in the Roman law is all the persons and objects in the legal power of a certain citizen. In the narrow sense, f. refers to the togetherness/integrity of those persons for themselves or the integrity of those objects for themselves. F. is then used in the material sense to refer to the total of possessions.*
In the personal sense f. stands for all persons over whom a certain Roman citizen has power of a father (patria potestas) or power of a husband (manus), including the head of the family himself Heyrovský (1895: 5-6).

• 1903, Praha. *Familia – family, family line, children, family members excluding parents, children and servants belonging to the family.* Gebauer (1903: 163-164).

• 1933-1944, Oxford. Family: 1. The servants of a house: the household. 2. The body of persons who live in one house under one head, including parents, children, servants, etc. (1545). 3. The group consisting of parents and their children, whether living together or not; in wider sense, all those who are nearly connected by blood or affinity (1667). A person’s children regarded collectively (1732). 4. Those descended or claiming descent from a common ancestor: a house, kindred, lineage; a race; a people or group of peoples (1583). 5. Combination of meanings 3 and 4 (1611). 6. A group of objects connected together and distinguished by the possession of some common features or properties (1626). In scientific classification: a group of allied genera (1753). 7. Family of Love: a sect which originated in Holland, and found a footing in England about 1580; they held that religion consisted chiefly in love, and that absolute obedience was due to all established governments (/1579). 8. Attributed: as in family life, family butcher, family plate etc. (1602).

• 2014, Oxford Dictionary. 1. A group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit. 1.1A group of people related by blood or marriage. 1.2The children of a person or couple being discussed. 1.3 Informal A local organizational unit of the Mafia or other large criminal group. 2All the descendants of a common ancestor. 2.1A group of peoples from a common stock. 3A group of related things. 3.1 Biology A principal taxonomic category that ranks above genus and below order, usually ending in -idae (in zoology) or -aceae (in botany). 3.2All the languages ultimately derived from a particular early language, regarded as a group. 3.3 Mathematics A group of curves or surfaces obtained by varying the value of a constant in the equation generating them.

3. Research question

What are the terms used by teachers to define the concept of family?

4. Method

4.1. Instruments

The respondents were asked to fill in a set of online questionnaires within a wider research project dealing with implicit theories of family. The part serving as the basis of the present study was the so-called short written description. The respondents were given the following instructions: Imagine that you meet someone who does not know the concept of "family", try to explain it to him/her the best you can. There were no restrictions on the answer as to its form or length.

4.2. Research sample

Considering the character and objectives of the pilot research of the implicit theories of family, a combination of the purposive sampling technique and self-selection method was used (Som, 1995). Three strata (from Latin stratum – layer, see e.g. Foreman, 1991) were selected for participation in the research:

1. Stratum: students studying teaching (nursery and primary schools) at the University of Hradec Králové,
2. Stratum: practicing teachers at selected primary and nursery schools in the city of Hradec Králové,
3. Stratum: pupils of the first and second grade of two cooperating primary school from Hradec Králové region.

The present study is concerned with the first and the second stratum only, i.e. the research sample comprises students of teaching and practicing teachers. All participated through online questionnaires. We addressed
approximately 350 students and teachers, and 229 took part by 31st December 2013. Two questionnaires filled in by the authors and 8 incomplete ones were excluded from the research.

The final research sample of this study comprises N=219 respondents, 24 males and 197 females, the average age being 23 years (ranging from 16 to 60), 201 respondents are single, 17 are married and 1 is divorced.

4.3. Procedure

There were three steps leading from the original texts to frequency analysis:

1. Lemmatization (lemma is „the word without its phonological clothing“, Aitchison, 2012, n. p.) of the individual tests – transforming the words into their basic form determined by their form and context. For example the word “žít”(in Czech language the word is homonymous) it may be collocated with the word “život” (“žít život” = “to live a life”) or may be collocated with the word “obílí”(“žít obílí” = “to reap grain”); based on the surrounding words it is automatically identified, which of the possible meanings is the correct one. Furthermore, the word classes and further morphological features were indicated (person, number, case, and positive/negative – depending on the word class).

2. Elimination of diacritics (since Czech diacritics are not supported in some of the tools for data processing and visualization). This masques the differences between words such as “rádi” (glad) and “řádi” (he/she/it rages), however, the difference remains identifiable thanks to the original question. Thus the possible mistakes remain acceptable for this research.

3. Elimination of synsemantic words (Muysken, 2008, Těšitelová, 1992), i.e. mainly prepositions and conjunctions. There were no interjections.

The resulting database of expressions was processed using the software MS Excell, SPSS and Tableau.

5. Results

The respondents (N=219) used a total of 2517 words in their definitions of the term family. The lexical trace of the term family comprises 513 unique expressions. Table 1 gives the top ten expressions. Frequency analysis showed that in the teachers’ definitions the most frequent terms (top ten) are: člověk, ten, dítě, skupina, spolu, žít, blízký, rodič, my a rád (man/human being, this, child, group, together, live, close, parent, we and like).

Table 1: Lexical trace of the term family: frequency analysis of unique expressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Unique expression</th>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>Word class</th>
<th>% from 2517</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Člověk (man, human being)</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>6,79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ten (this)</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>3,73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Dítě (child)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3,26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Skupina (group)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3,06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Spolu (together)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1,99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Žít (live)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>1,87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Blízký (close)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1,79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Rodič (parent)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>My (we)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>1,63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Rád (like - V)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1,39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>639</td>
<td></td>
<td>25,39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table makes it evident that the most frequent word used to define family is člověk (man/human being), the second is the demonstrative pronoun ten (this) and the third is dítě (child). The remaining seven items are: skupina, spolu, žít, blízký, rodič, my a rád (group, together, live, close, parent, we and like). The last row shows that the top
ten expressions (of the 513 unique expressions constituting the lexical trace of the term family) constitute one quarter of all the expressions used. As a matter of interest, we verified whether Pareto principle holds for our data (as expected e.g. by Marvin, 2011, p. 298). The results are very close to the expected 20-80 ratio: the 127 most frequent words (i.e. 24.95 % of unique expressions) constitute 80 % of the whole lexical trace (i.e. 80 % of the instances of all the 513 lemmas).

6. Discussion

The discussion focuses on the individual expressions used to define family. Metaphorically speaking, words are the building blocks of a sentence. We are going to examine which building blocks (unique expressions) were used to build the definition of family, analysing it first from the formal perspective and next from the content perspective.

6.1. Formal perspective

The lexical trace of the term family comprises 513 unique expressions, the top ten shows the ten most frequent ones, which constitute one fourth of all the lemmas. Table 2 gives the rank of these ten expressions and the word rodina (family) in the frequency dictionary of the Czech language (Čermák, & Krčen, 2011).

Table 2: The rank of the top ten expressions of the lexical trace in the frequency dictionary and the ARF values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unique expression</th>
<th>rank (lexical trace)</th>
<th>rank (frequency dictionary)</th>
<th>ARF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ten (this)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My (we)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Člověk (man, human being)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dítě (child)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rád (like - V)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skupina (group)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Žít (live)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spolu (together)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodina (family)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blízký (close)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodič (parent)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*ARF indicates the number of instances of the expression in a random sample of 1 million words taken from the corpus

The values in the table show that the most frequent expressions in the lexical trace of family are also high frequency words in the common vocabulary. Supposing that an average adult has a vocabulary of 15-20.000 words in his/her mother tongue (Carter, 1998, p. 236) and knowing that the frequency dictionary lists 5000 words in the active vocabulary, we clearly see that the examined lemmas are in the top 10 % of the active vocabulary. We may further assume that if we took the 10 % of the most frequent content in the whole complex of human communication, family and related topics would certainly be a part of such a corpus. Family is and inherent, i.e. a common and essential topic in human communication.
6.2. Content perspective

Although the word family is polysemous, the list of the most frequent expressions used to define it suggests that we implicitly perceive only one level of meaning – family as a community of people (see the lemma člověk (man, human being)). Family is something specifically and primarily human to us. If the term family is used on other than human level (non-human groups, categorization of phenomena), the usage is based on two principles. First, the principle of abstraction or analogy: we transfer the important features of the prototype (i.e. human family) to other phenomena, e.g. we refer to similar languages as language families because they have a common parent language, they grow and transform, having common features, which, however, become more and more dissimilar with every generation, same as human families grow horizontally and vertically and children have characteristics similar but not identical to their parents etc. (Bendová, 2011). Secondly, the principle of expanding the boundaries of the prototype by including an atypical representative in the category of family (Lakoff, 1990): a dog can be a member of a family because it lives with us and we care for it and like it even though it is not human, was not given birth by human and did not marry into the family. Still, dogs as a family member or a pack of dogs are not typical representatives of the category known as family. We may therefore conclude that the prototype of family is a family of humans.

An important role in the definitions of family is played by the implicit perception of its structure: family as a group of people defined by three or at least three persons/roles since it consists of parents and one or more children. It is sometimes stressed that these three persons or roles are a sine qua non condition of the definition of family. The prototype of three roles (mother, father, child) is expanded by some of the informants by enumerating other possible representatives of the category (see Lakoff, 1990), mainly aunt, uncle, grandma and grandpa (grandparents) but also girlfriend/boyfriend, partner, friend or even a pet. This list demonstrates at the first sight how strongly is the implicitly perceived structure of family embodied in language: the respondents mention only roles for which there exists a word in the language (they do not mention e.g. “the daughter of the father’s brother” which is a concept for which the modern Czech has no word while other languages may have one). Moreover, it is obvious that the implicit theories of family reflect the changing socio-cultural discourse. For example, cousins, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law or godfathers and godmothers are no longer mentioned as members of family. This is a result of the fact that the traditional wide multigenerational concept of family is being abandoned in favour of the nuclear and marital view, described as individualized and variable in the postmodern age (Možný, 2006). This is also the reason why (surprisingly) pets occur in the definitions of family (in the Czech Republic, it is not exceptional for a couple to have a pet instead of a child and postpone parenthood).

The top ten expressions include terms referring to relationships (together, close, like) as the fundamental element holding the family together. The teachers’ implicit theories therefore perceive the family as a phenomenon in the centre of which are positive emotions, especially love. Positive emotions are omnipresent, expected and desirable essence of family, which penetrates and adds to its other attributes (see also other research studies – e.g. Stašová, & Serbousková, 2012). Positive emotions are usually considered to be the key element of a functional family (i.e. the implicit idea of what the family should be), negative emotions were mentioned rarely as an opposite or a feature of an incomplete or dysfunctional family. Positive emotions and good interpersonal relationships are fundamental conditions of satisfaction and happiness (Slezáčková, 2012). Good family relationships even influence our health and health supporting behaviour (Dosedlová, Slováčková, & Klimusová, 2013).

The basis of the implicit theories of family is essentially egocentric – the family as my relatives, not the family as a general sociocultural phenomenon. It might also be pedocentric (the child stands in the centre of the community and the family consists of persons whom the child knows and considers to be family members). Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that a great part of the informants are young people with no children of their own.

7. Conclusion

Family as a topic is an essential part of primary school curriculum in the Czech Republic. The present study described the expressions used by teachers and prospective teachers to define family and the implicit theories that
might be reflected in them. The teachers used a total of 513 unique expressions, the ten most frequent being: člověk, ten, dítě, skupina, spolu, žít, blízký, rodič, my a rád (man/human being, this, child, group, together, live, close, parent, we and like). The initial analysis suggests that the teachers’ implicit understanding of the concept of family is associated with 1) parenthood and blood kinship, 2) emotional relations (love each other), 3) the co-existence in the household. The teachers’ implicit understanding is based on egocentric and pedocentric view (the family equals mainly me-child and my parents or me-parent and my children). The chosen words make it evident that the implicit understanding is deeply embedded in language (the expressions that occur to us are commonly used ones, which restricts the final concept) and that it reflects the changing socio-cultural discourse (for example, the traditional wide multigenerational concept of family is being abandoned in favour of the nuclear and marital view, described as individualized and variable in the postmodern age). This is also the reason why (surprisingly) pets occur in the definitions of family (in the Czech Republic, it is not exceptional for a couple to have a pet instead of a child and postpone parenthood). Czech teachers do not use in their definitions concepts like education, nation, culture or religion which sometimes appear in theoretical academic concepts of family.

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