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Teacher’s subjective definition of family

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Abstract

The research purpose is to gain information about how the teachers understand the term family. The aim of this contribution is to document the main ideas underlying the teacher’s subjective definition of term family. The research was attended by 45 students of a combined form of pre-primary and primary education studies (age: 20 to 52). There were appeared 95 different terms used for a definition of the family that have been aggregated into 7 categories: social roles (including kinship relations and ancestry), emotions, responsibilities (including child welfare), being together, economics (housekeeping), leisure and care. Some students were able to include in the definition families without or with adopted children, extended family (such as grandmothers and grandfathers) or some non-traditional forms of family life – these definitions have occurred only rarely. Within the framework of teaching (there is a theme Child and the family in the curriculum) we reveal some blind spots in understanding of family and we try to enrich student’s concepts of family towards huge comprehension, a better orientation at the problematic and more open treatment of the subject for pupils. Teachers should be therefore able to explain the problematic in an acceptable, sensitive and, if possible, positive way.

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1. Introduction

If you ask anyone whether he/she knows what a family is, he/she would look in a surprise towards such a strange question. For sure Family is the state basis, a basic social unit (William James Durant even says that family is a nucleus of civilization), where a child is born to, where the child is further socialized into wider
society. The answer for this simple question is not easy to answer. The society is changing and its basic unit, the family also. Well, it’s time where the need of ingrained content should be redefined (Corbett, 2004).

1.1. Family

The term family comes from Latin familia - household (including servants as well as kin of the householder), from famulus – servant. It was first known use of the term in the 15th century in Middle English familie.

It can be traced in the dictionaries (Merriam Webster, n.d.) mostly 8 types of definitions of family:
1. a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head: household,
2. a group of persons of common ancestry: clan or a people or group of peoples regarded as deriving from a common stock: race,
3. a group of people united by certain convictions or a common affiliation: fellowship, the staff of a high official (as the President),
4. a group of things related by common characteristics: as a closely related series of elements or chemical compounds, a group of soils with similar chemical and physical properties (as texture, pH, and mineral content) that comprise a category ranking above the series and below the subgroup in soil classification, a group of related languages descended from a single ancestral language,
5. the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children; also: any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family (a single-parent family), spouse and children (want to spend more time with my family),
6. a group of related plants or animals forming a category ranking above a genus and below an order and usually comprising several to many genera, in livestock breeding: the descendants or line of a particular individual especially of some outstanding female or an identifiable strain within a breed,
7. a set of curves or surfaces whose equations differ only in parameters ,
8. a unit of a crime syndicate (as the Mafia) operating within a geographical area.

Synonyms for term family can be blood, clan, folks, house, kin, kindred, kinfolk (or kinfolks), kinsfolk, line, lineage, people, race, stock, tribe.

The scientific theory of family is usually based on basic definition that the nuclear family is a universal institution for nurturing children. Three features of family follow from this instruction developed the world famous Bronislaw Malinowski (Skalnik, 2006):
• family is a bounded social unit,
• families have shared place,
• family members have emotional ties.

Family can also be consider as institutionalized social formation of at least three persons, among whom there are parental, family or marital ties (Stašová, 2001).

Some authors further claim that it is a unit whose primary function is not to give birth to children but to socialize them. Parsons (In Parsons, & Bales, 1956) attributes to unit further characteristics:
• family is a solidary group stratified by ascribed statuses such as age and gender,
• family is a cooperative unit; families shared the principle of division of labour.

Becker (1993) adds that:
• family has collective goals.

Family members’ interests that differ from their family ones might be viewed as ‘deviant’. This is undoubtedly true in families’ interests that differ from their society ones might be viewed as abnormal, strange or deviant.
Some authors point out on many other aspects such as an isolated family, lesbian/gay family, biological/blood family, peaceful and nurturing family versus male domination or domestic violence, patriarchy/matriarchy and so on (Tae, 2009).

1.2. Implicit theories

The notion of implicit theory comes from Latin implico (to weave) and means: inclusive, contained but also failed directly or understanding itself. Implicit (also subjective, naive) theory is designation of laical theoretical concepts, so concepts which are made by common people inadvertently and unconsciously about the life and the world all around (sometimes in this context also labelled as knowledge and conviction - belief, personal construct, mental representation or mental folk or naïve models, further see Sedláková, 2000).

It can be defined as relatively stable sets of imaginations, definitions and knowledge connected with specific phenomena (e.g. normalities, learning, life origin etc.) (Groeben, Scheel, 2001). Rosch and Lakoff (Lakoff, 1987) understand as set of types or categories purely descriptive character (e.g. we can on a request to describe a normal family or to list several typical examples of problematic families). These unconscious mind contents reflect towards inner reality (e.g. let us answer the question what is my own family, what type of family I want or is my family normal?) and the behaviour and acting in the outside world (e.g. I could have lived in this family or something does not add up here, they look strange to me). Although people tend to have a clear imagination about a prototype they are usually not able to justify and mark the boarder for the notion (e.g. they are able to mark certain cohabitation as a family without being able to justify it etc.). In the area of implicit theories it is common while explanation the cause and effect is confused and many other similar “symptoms” (Furnham, 1988). Therefore it is different from scientific studies which always have well thought and certified system of statements interpreting following phenomenon.

The establishment of implicit theories is presumed by analogical development of attitudes: either by the way of unwitting acceptance of social surrounding (including media contents) and/or on the base of evaluating own experience (Sternberg, 1985).

The general purpose of existence of implicit theory is the interpretation of individual and social facts, works as a tool for explanation and prediction of human behaviour.

To penetrate into the interior of implicit theories is possible by linguistic utterances. Research is developed since such characteristics. We have recorded waste range of methods for obtaining data for this study of implicit theories. (Benveniste, Lecouteur, & Hepworth, 1999, Cameron, 2002, Howarth C., Foster, J, & Dorrer N., 2004). It is possible to use any of listed methods or their combinations for study of implicit theories. As far as we are concerned that it is possible to use any method. But however any method used the emphasis must be placed on understanding and verification of gained model of implicit theory by the informant him/herself.

2. Method

2.1. Purpose of study

Research questions for this paper are three:
1. Which categories are used by teachers to explain the concept of family?
2. How many categories are used by teachers to explain the concept of the family?
3. Where are the blind spots in the teacher’s implicit theories of family?
2.2. Participants

This part of research was conducted in 45 students of part-time master study of pre-primary and primary education. It is a study when working and therefore all the respondents are working in education at the same time.

Forty-four women and one man participated in the research which is a reflection of a typical state of Czech education which is mainly in the field of pre-primary and primary education highly over-feminized.

The research group in terms of marital status is described in table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 single</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35,6</td>
<td>35,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 married</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55,6</td>
<td>91,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8,9</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 describes a research group in terms of a number of children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number Of Children</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40,0</td>
<td>40,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11,1</td>
<td>51,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37,8</td>
<td>88,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6,7</td>
<td>95,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 describes a distribution of research sample in terms of variable age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34,24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9,333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Method

The contribution presents partial results of a wider research project. The proceeded data have been gained by the method of free explanation. The instruction for students of combined pedagogical study was: Imagine that you met someone who had not heard anything about the term family (child, stranger, UFO, Mr No...). Explain to Mr No, what is the meaning of family term.
2.4. Procedure

The students of education are asked in several psychological disciplines to work with different themes and methods. In the course of social psychology there is address issue of family. At the start of the lesson the students are confronted with their implicit theories of family. Firstly, they are asked to imagine that they met someone who had not heard anything about the term family (child, stranger, UFO, Mr No...), the instruction is: Explain to Mr No, what is the meaning of family term. They subsequently explain what is similar and what is different in term of: marriage, cohabitation, bloodline, wider relationships. In the course of Research methods the teachers fill the method of repertory grid, where are the feedbacks for choice of elements selected by both introduced poles of behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements of posture and the most frequent stereotypes (e.g. Family where we would like to live, Typical Czech family). In the course of Czech language the students generates adjectives for description and family evaluation. This contribution refers about results gained by the first mentioned method.

2.5. Data processing

The obtained answers of the teachers were transcribed into PC and processed in two phases.

The first phase was based on the procedures of qualitative methodology. The data was pre-processed using the creation of clusters (trsy) described by Miovs ký (2006): reduction of the first order (omission of the unimportant, rhetorical padding etc.) and segmentation of statements to units of meaning. Each unit of meaning corresponded either to a word or phrase (e.g. Love, they love each other). Each unit was assigned a label in the form of a noun (i.e. the label of the units which were not nouns was created with substantivization, e.g. they love each other = love, they return to each other = return). The labels were categorized based on the methods of similarity, overlap, contrast and comparison (i.e. the labels protection and support were put into the category care as the contents of both fall under the phenomenon of being together, another example: the labels loneliness and togetherness were both put into the category being together, since they refer to the two sides of the same phenomenon). The categorization was done by two independent observers according to the following rules: 1. the categories are independent of each other, 2. the categories describe phenomena on the same level of generality, 3. the maximum number of categories is 15. Note: We are aware of the fact that despite our effort to make independent categories their character can be fuzzy (in mathematic terms, they undoubtedly correlate to some extent). We consider this to be a natural consequence of the categories’ relation to the phenomenon of family, therefore we believe our work with them as independent to be justified. The final number of categories was 7, they are described in more detail in the section Results.

The second phase was based on the procedures of qualitative methodology: the authentic answer of each respondent was coded using the system 0-1, i.e. each answer was assigned a code based on which of the 7 categories it mentioned. The system of coding was continuously verified and validated comparing the generalized terms to the original transcriptions (e.g. some categories were re-named to depict the content of the terms in them as precisely as possible). The data was further processed using the standard mathematic and statistical procedures.

3. Results

Question 1: Which categories are used to explain the concept of family?

Categorization enabled to identify 7 categories of units of meaning, which the teachers used to describe the term family (examples of the labels of some units are given in brackets)

- social roles – partnership, marriage, mum, dad, two men/women raising children, children, grandma, grandpa, relations, generation, lineage, children without family, children from children’s homes etc.,
- emotions – feelings, good feeling, love, happiness, well-being, security, trust, intimateness, sadness (result of loneliness), emotional needs etc.,
- responsibilities (including child welfare) – authority, duties, education, organization, rules, work, contribution,
- being together – being together, cooperation, coexistence, sharing, belonging together, community, togetherness, unity, loneliness, reclusiveness etc.,
- economics (housekeeping) – housing, house, place (where one feels good), household, management, home, background, material security,
- leisure – hobbies, free time spending time together,
- care – protection, care, support, help, concern, refuge, reliability (relying on one another.)

Table 4: Categories of terms used for definition of family: Frequencies (N=45)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
<th>Cumulative Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social roles</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20.41</td>
<td>20.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21.09</td>
<td>41.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>48.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being together</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21.77</td>
<td>70.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.93</td>
<td>82.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>87.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.93</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>147</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that the units which were used most to define the term family belong to the categories of being together, emotions and social roles, each representing approximately one third of the used units. Roughly one tenth is represented by care, one tenth by economics and the categories responsibilities and care constitute one twentieth each.

Question 2: How many categories are used by teachers to explain the concept of the family?
A new variable giving the total of the used categories was introduced and descriptive statistical measures were computed. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Number of categories used: Descriptive statistics (N=45)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of categories used</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.2667</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 shows the numbers of teachers (y axis: frequencies) who used a given number of categories (x axis: number of categories). It makes evident that most teachers used 3 to 4 categories.

![Graph showing numbers of teachers using categories](image)

Fig. 1. Number of categories used by teachers: Descriptive statistics (N=45)

Question 3: Where are the blind spots in the teacher’s implicit theories of family?

This question will be answered by method of comparing subjective theories with the objective scientific theories in the discussion part of this paper.

4. Discussion

In order to reveal the implicit theories of family in primary and pre-primary education teachers we used the method of free explanation. The teachers were asked to explain the term family to someone who does not know it yet. The explanations were segmented into units of meaning, which were assigned a label formed by substantivization (all word classes were converted into nouns). 95 labels were identified in the 45 explanations. As this number is too high, the labels were categorized. The explanations of the term family given by primary and pre-primary education teachers were based on the following seven key categories (descending order according to frequency): being together, emotions, social roles, care, economics (housekeeping), responsibilities (including child welfare), and leisure.

The first sight makes evident the similarity of subjective concept of the term family (connotation) with the objective definitions (refferent). The eight definition of family included in Merriam Webster dictionary (n.d.) and quoted in the theoretical chapter of this paper (introduction) contain units of meaning which could be put into the same categories: being together (common, series), emotions, social roles (unit, group, individuals, persons, parents, descendants, clan, related common ancestry, livestock, stock, line, race, genus), care, economics (living under one roof, household, operating within a geographical area), responsibilities (one head, rearing their children), leisure (spending time).

Some labels which did not occur in the subjective theories of the teachers include: people united by certain convictions (conviction), common affiliation, similar properties, line of a particular individual especially of some outstanding female or an identifiable strain within a breed, a set of st differ only in parameters, and any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family (a single-parent family), spouse and children. These definitions/labels represent categories which seem to represent the blind spots in the subjective theories of the teachers and which could point to potential hidden problems (e.g. if the questions of race, multicultural or bilingual families and emigration (or other question connected with the missing categories) arise...
during the discussion of the topic Child and family at school). Hornáčková (2011) says in this context that teacher must be able to apply activating educational methods, situational, staging methods, including group work and cooperative forms of striking the problem solving tasks and situations, using the methods of experimentation and creative drama in its diverse forms. It is all about emotional intelligence (Hornáčková, 2011, 83).

On the other hand, we may state that the explicit definition of the term given in dictionaries do not enough reflect the socio-emotional element of the term – family means a coexistence of people who spend their time together, feel good and safe together and if they lose their background, they experience sadness and discomfort.

Cox (2009), for instance claims that family fulfils all six functions that are necessary for the maintenance of society:

1. socialization for children to become participating members of the society,
2. individual goals harmonized with the values of society,
3. supplying for intimacy and emotional gratification and dealing with emotional crises and maintaining the sense of purpose,
4. distribution of goods and services,
5. provision for solving conflicts and maintaining order,
6. replacements for dying members.

This agreement of views is something to be found in contemporary literature as well as in sources which could be considered older. Ruth Nanda Ashen’s book from 1946, for instance, comments on the “greater weight” of husband-wife relationship (1949: 78) or economic considerations (1949: 421).

Current theories and knowledge also stress the increasing influence of family on leisure and recreation (Wilson, 2001), which appeared as an independent category in our research.

5. Conclusion

In order to reveal the implicit theories of family in primary and pre-primary education teachers we used the method of free explanation. The teachers were asked to explain the term family to someone who does not know it yet. The explanations were segmented into units of meaning, which were assigned a label formed by substantivization (all word classes were converted into nouns). 95 labels were identified in the 45 explanations, they were merged into seven categories: being together, emotions and social roles, each representing approximately 1/3 of the used units; roughly 1/10 is represented by care and economics and the categories responsibilities and care constitute 1/20 each. Most teachers used 3 to 4 categories. The teacher’s definition of family including all categories could be: family is a social unit consisting usually of mom, dad and who love each other, parents are caring for children and raise them, parents provide care and support to their children and each other, relationship is based on reciprocity, the coexistence takes place in the household, home and in free time.

Some labels which did not occur in the subjective theories of the teachers include: people united by certain convictions (conviction), common affiliation, similar properties, and any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family (a single-parent family), spouse and children. These definitions/labels represent categories which seem to represent the blind spots in the subjective theories of the teachers and which could point to potential hidden problems (e.g. if the questions of race, multicultural or bilingual families and emigration (or other question connected with the missing categories) arise during the discussion of the topic Child and family at school).

Current explicit theories and knowledge also stress the increasing influence of family on leisure and recreation, which appeared as an independent category in our research. On the other hand, we may state that the explicit definition of the term given in dictionaries do not enough reflect the socio-emotional element of the term.
family means a coexistence of people who spend their time together, feel good and safe together and if they lose their background, they experience sadness and discomfort - which is the moment that our teachers perceive very sensitively.

Acknowledgements

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References