

## SOCIAL COMPETENCES

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*For some time we have come across the concept of 'social competence' increasingly frequently in the specialist literature of pedagogy. In our study, we intend to explore the various meanings of this very complex technical term.*

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Social competence is considered to be a complex system of social cognition, social motives, social abilities, traditions and skills as well as social experience. *Argyle* (1983) says that social competence is the possession of abilities and skills that enable you to bring about the desired effects in your social relations. *Trower* et al. (1978) maintain that social competence is the possession of social behavioral skills. Regarding social competence the aspect of social behavior plays a major role in the prevention of physical and psychological illnesses. According to it a socially competent person is able to effectively utilize their personal abilities and environmental conditions and has good achievements in their development. There is a similar approach saying social competence enables one to perform the required social behavior, enriching one's interpersonal relations in a way respecting others' interest.

*József Nagy* (2000) says the best way to model social competence is by using the theory of component systems. Under the theory, 'social competence is made up of sets of inherited and acquired components (social motives, inclinations, traditions, skills, patterns and experience). Under Nagy's model, the operation of social competence is regulated by the set of personal social values and the system of social abilities. The set of personal social values is a hierarchical system of motives (social inclinations, attitudes and convictions), while the system of social abilities includes the skills of social communication, help, cooperation, management and competition. It is this system of abilities that operates and governs social behavior by activating the components available and by producing new ones therefrom. The system of social abilities governs the operation of social competence and social behavior using sets of skills and experience, traditions and patterns.

Social competence thus consists of sets of inherited and acquired components. Inherited components are called inclinations. Based on the research of human ethologists, many of the social inclinations have become well known, the most important of which are referred to as the Darwinian algorithms. Darwin's famous book on emotional communication, well known since 1872, reveals that there are basic emotions which are culturally independent. Thus, any basic emotion triggered and photographed in any culture is recognized in all other cultures. There are six basic emotions: joy, anger, sorrow, surprise, disgust

and fear. The fundamental revelations made by Darwin and human ethologists have been proven right by research. Moreover, it has been found that 'every single basic emotion is accompanied by a typical vegetative pattern, i.e. if the expressional pattern of a basic emotion is produced on a face, e.g. by muscular movement, the vegetative phenomena that accompany this particular emotion automatically appear, too. In later research, *Ekman et al* even proved that the basic emotion concerned is also felt at the same time.' (Zsolnai ed., 2003:139-140.) Thus, 'whatever is on your face, is in your guts' (Molnár, 1993, 5). The latter findings were confirmed by other research, like an experiment conducted by professor *Iresmus Eibl-Eibesfeldt* (1970), which proved the hereditary character of movements of emotional expression. The professors filmed children born blind in typically different states of emotion. It was revealed that every single emotion that appeared was accompanied by a congruent facial expression each time. Since these children had never had the chance to observe a human face, the experiment proved that the automatic reflection of emotions on the face of humans was an innate, phylogenetically determined ability. From this it certainly follows that the ability to interpret these emotions is also hereditary.

Two American psychologists, *Andrew Meltzoff* and *Keith Moore* made a discovery of similar significance in 1977, when conducting the following experiment with newborn babies. They held their faces 20-25cm from the babies and made typical grimaces like sticking out their tongues, making an 'a' voice and pursing their lips. It was found that the newborn babies, who were not more than two weeks old, did not only see these facial expressions but even imitated them. This experiment was repeated by *John Kugiumtzakis* in the island of Crete with babies younger than 45 minutes of age, with the same result, and *Tiffany Fields et al* also confirmed the ability of imitating basic emotions with a group of newborn babies of a few hours old, in 1982. It has thus been proven that really newborn babies also imitate at least three of the basic emotions: joy, surprise and sorrow. Moreover, later findings reveal that babies of a few hours old not only imitate but even initiate interactions.

The description of the *Meltzoff-Moore* effect resulted in a real paradigm shift in our notion of humans, questioning the 'schoolbook data' of all paediatric literature that newborn humans are absolutely helpless, with rudimentary sight and hearing. It is to be accepted as a conclusion that the exact opposite of the 'barbarian invasion' described by Talcott Parsons is right: humans are born social creatures. Our personal development is thus not a development into social creatures - which latter we are by birth - but is, quoting the poet Kosztolányi, our development into 'unique individuals'.

A series of experiments have been conducted to find out what factors influence the development of social competence. Three groups of influencing factors have been established: those following from the personality of the individual, factors represented by the family and factors following from the school environment. All the three groups comprise several factors. As regards the factors following from the personality of the individual, the following have positive influence on the development of social competence:

- positive self-esteem,
- positive attitude,
- active cooperation,
- tolerance,
- efficient communication skills,

- good problem-solving abilities,
- open personality,
- the ability of reconciling personal and group interests.

Research has found that an important prerequisite of the development of good social competence is that the individual should have positive self esteem and a positive attitude towards their environment. Tolerance towards others, active cooperation and efficient communication are also important factors of social competence: all these three factors help individuals to be successful in their interaction and, on the basis of the reactions of interacting partner(s), to make the right changes in their social behavior if necessary (Tunstall, 1994). The influential effect of problem solving abilities has become apparent through research conducted by *Spivack* and *Shure* (1974) and *Rutter* (1979). It is positive for the development of social competence if the individual is able to solve problems in creative and alternative ways, while considering both their own interests and those of others. Finally, an open, friendly and cooperative personality also positively influences the development of social competence.

The scene of early childhood socialization - during which the child learns to get to know him/herself as well as their environment, learns the rules of coexistence as well as the possible and the expected ways of behavior - is the family. Under the relevant literature, the most important family factors influencing a child's social competence are the following:

- ✓ a positive child-parent relationship
- ✓ the parents' social relations
- ✓ the social competence of the father and mother
- ✓ strong devotion to the mother
- ✓ the family's high self-esteem
- ✓ right expectations by the parents
- ✓ positive model set by the parents
- ✓ a warm, tolerant and supportive family environment

The system of components made by *Schneider* (1993) is very similar to the above. Under the latter, the social behavior of a child is directly influenced by the following six factors: the social competence of the father and mother, the child's temperament, upbringing, the effects of brothers and sisters and the quality of child-mother relationship. It is the latter that most influences the child's social behavior later on: this is the basis that decisively determines the development of social competence (Zsolnai ed., 2003:141-142.).

By way of summary, it can be established that the above competence model is based on the notion that social competence can be best grasped as the combination of several interacting factors. The factors, influencing one another, produce a self-sustaining circular mechanism. Some of the factors may operate almost automatically and greatly stereotypically. Social competence also includes the interpretive system of the individual, or, in other words, their current interests (which latter are referred to as cognitive structures), which change by experience as well as depending on the requirements of the situation. The interests of the individual do not only influence the cognitive information processing procedure but also the behavior of the individual in a given situation. From the above it follows that the following elements of the cognitive procedure are important in the definition of social competence: inner dialogues,

expectations, the evaluation of end results, problem solving and other social cognitive abilities and information processing styles (e.g. the creation of information blocks, the use of meta-perspectives, etc.). The type of cognitive processes that one activates in a social situation depends on the maturity of one's information processing procedures, the requirements of the situation, one's current attitudes (interests) as well as the reactions of the other participants. The observable behavior - i.e. what the individual does in a given situation - is only one element (although an important one) of social competence. Yet, the observable behavior is of special significance since it may have personal and interpersonal consequences and the nature of the cognitive processes related to these consequences has further effects on the self-sustaining mechanism. It is also important to note that individuals actively participate in the creation and selection of these mechanisms (whether or not these are intra- or interpersonal mechanisms) and thus actively participate in the formation of their social environment. In the formation of social competence, schools and the solution of cooperative tasks, primarily in pair work or group work, also have a major role (Torgyik, 2005, pp. 117-131.), on condition that the atmosphere is not disturbed by destructive prejudice or the stigmatization or exclusion of certain groups and if there is an intention and the necessary means are available for the constructive formation of inter-group relations (Karlovitz, 2004).

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