



Identity and Locality: Developing a Community Board Game Research Seminar Report

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Abstract

This research seminar report presents the experiences of a three semester project seminar. The authors aimed at developing personality and widening the inventory of methods to teach local history both in and outside the classroom. The goal of the project was to develop the concept of a board game which helps children in a playful way to recognize their own values, get to know their fellows' world of values, and discover together the values of the geographical and social space where they live, in short to positively develop their local and their own identities. The research was of an interdisciplinary nature, the students and colleagues came from different specialties so in addition to the psychological aims, local history, archaeology, ethnography, anthropology, environmental studies and of course gastronomy were also involved. The first semester was devoted to field research and in the second semester we developed the concept of a board game together with the students of a research seminar. The game was first tested in a school and then a survey was conducted by the monitoring system of model STEP 21. Finally, some necessary corrections were carried out on the basis of its findings. The research continues in the 2015/16 academic year. We are going to make the game ready for print and on the basis of our experience would also like to adapt the idea to a village with a German ethnic minority population.

Key Terms: research seminar, local identity, identity development, board game

The first part of the report will deal with the issues constituting the basic concept (premises) of the game. Then the research work performed during the semester, together with its results, will be described in detail and the board game itself briefly.

Identity and locality

The questions, “*Who am I?*” and “*Who are we?*” can be answered in a number of different ways. We have a personal identity and a social identity including our local identity. It means we can identify ourselves by affiliation to an ethnic group, by naming our profession or trade, religion or social roles and also by a geographical location. In the case of someone from Paris, Provence or Budapest, it is more likely than in the case of someone from a small Eastern-European village like Vajszló in Hungary. At least this is what our experience shows. The value ideas which are the attributes of the settlement indisputably play a role in this self-identification based on space. When developing our concept, we started with the hypothesis that the residents of disadvantaged small regions in Hungary do not know or rather do not reflect on the values which might otherwise be the key to their future. The lack of



financial means together with the thought of their own worthlessness creates the view that they cannot expect positive changes. Although European Union (EU) projects offer several possibilities for helping small regions catch up, this is not only a question of finances but also a serious mental problem, which if neglected, reduces the effectiveness of the financial resources poured into the area. The *space where we live is also the shaper of our identity*, be it assessed either positively or negatively. Does research pay sufficient attention to this issue nowadays?

We do not get identity by birth but we develop it and this effort requires several decades (Marcia, 1966). Our modern world allows a lot of freedom for making choices (freedom to choose one's occupation and partner etc.) but the burden of choice is often oppressive as the individual must find out which is suitable for him or her: this often causes an identity crisis. Going through a crisis can improve or even strengthen the individual because if one can find a constructive solution to the crisis, this person has good chances to step further into the next, more mature phase of his life. Identity has a social aspect, too, so it is important to reflect on where and to whom we belong in respect to nationality, religion and other communities, family. In Bálint's wording, in the case of the development of personal identity the person "feels comfortable about himself" and in the case of developing social identity he "he feels himself at home in the world" (Bálint, 2014, Marcia, 1966). The concept of local identity can be derived from the concepts of personal and social identities.

Several forms of place attachment are described by researchers (Low-Altman, 1992; Lewicka, 2011); despite mobility and globalization, place continues to be an object of strong attachments. Of the three components of the tripartite model of place attachment, the Person component has attracted disproportionately more attention than the Place and Process components (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). We should keep track of all these attachments because the quality of these links is often unrealistically cast upon the judgment of broader geographical spaces, particularly in Hungary. In the geographical place we can be attached to the settlement and the countryside where we live, to a county, a region, a country or the cross-border 19th century cultural nation, to which spatial ideas can also be linked. These spatial attachments can have emotional and cognitive components just as national identity has spontaneous and conscious elements, since ideological identity manifested in national attitudes assumes a kind of intellectual consciousness in Hungary. (Murányi and Szoboszlai, 2000).

When defining the concept of local identity, our starting point was the social psychological term of national identity, according to which national identity is a feeling which links the individual to the group of the nation. It is a cognitive and emotional identification. (László, 2012: 83) Local identity, as derived from the concept of national identity, is *a feeling which links the individual to a geographical place, e.g. his village, It is a cognitive and emotional identification with the group of persons living there and with their world of values.*

Research into local identities

The issue of identity appeared in scientific discourse only with modernism. Although historical identities kept being shaped permanently, self-identification arose as a problem for the individual only in the last two centuries. In Hungary, among the



historical collective identities, national identity was acceptable for almost everybody regardless of political beliefs and affiliation. The Soviet system expected another kind of identity. It placed emphasis on so-called internationalism while traditional community identities dissolved, and religious and local identities were regarded deviant. (Murányi and Szoboszlai, 2000: 27) However, the concept of internationalism actually meant Soviet nationalism (Lukacs, 2002). In other words Soviet-type “internationalism” cannot be brought into harmony with cultural plurality offered by the European Union, the salient feature of which is community building without enemy images.

The possibility to choose national and European identities began to leak back into the “identity vacuum” after the political transition and local identities did not represent a competitive alternative. Politics and the fact that identity mainly became a matter of personal choice after the change of regime have indisputably been playing a part in the revival of national identity in Hungary. (Dessewffy, 1996) This preference has been shown in empirical research in the field of social sciences as there are only few examples of research conducted into identities based on historical-geographical attachments. (Murányi and Szoboszlai, 2000: 28) Research into local identities in Hungary started only in the new millennium, while for example in Germany, study articles treating this issue were published back in the 1970s. Today issues such as European identities and community associations in modern societies are more in the limelight; however, thorough research on local identities is still a debt of Hungarian science.

Local identity and national history

Every group has a story (narrative) and this story has an essential role in forming the group identity as it creates continuity. Although a central feature of identity is adherence to constancy that is to continuity, identity itself keeps being shaped and is a process. It contains our past and our present as well. Our social identity is the result of a permanent dialogue conducted with our social environment. We may be attached to more than one group, be it a nation, a region or a village. Still, national identity, even if it could be placed among attachments to a geographical space in respect of its character, markedly differs from local attachments. The elements of national identity may not integrally build on traditional local identity (partly based on value elements) and may be shown primarily in the system of political symbols, see the different definition of Hungarian national identity, views on the Trianon Treaty after WWI (1920) or the European Union. (Murányi and Szoboszlai, 2000)

The National Core Curriculum highlights the development of a positive attitude towards a settlement and emphasizes the importance of developing a sense of responsibility and accepting and respecting common values grounding community affinity. (Hungarian Official Gazette, 2012/66: 10641) Nevertheless, this idea has not been given an adequate place in the teaching materials on history. As the leading historians of the project *Identity and Locality*, we would like to draw attention to the fact that the history of localities should also be included in teaching history. It is local history that can transform the chronology centered concept of history found in textbooks into a living world that can really be experienced. The main danger of syllabuses built on the “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) of the nation is that the very essence is lost, namely the actual community and man itself. History,



although many think so, is not the story of a “lost world” where, saying with some sarcasm, the “common man” only acts as an assistant to the game of the “big ones”. History is a totality which is present everywhere and which links together millions of past lives. The history of the locality, the destiny of the grandfathers and grandmothers living there are all parts of this totality and the factual presentation of history textbooks can come to life just through their stories. As historians we usually deal with the history of localities because we are interested in the history of a place or because it played an important role in the life of a historic person. *Locality as a factor creating identity* gains importance in this project.

The importance of developing local and personal identities

However, local identity as any other social identity is inseparable from the personal identity of the individual and from the maturity of the personality. Reversing the above cited explanation of identity given by Ágnes Bálint, he who does not feel comfortable about himself, will not feel himself at home in the world, either. The National Core Curriculum also specifies the objective of a healthy personal identity, “*Constructive participation also entails a supportive attitude towards civic activities, social diversity, social cohesion and sustainable development, as well as respect for others' values and privacy. Personal and social wellbeing requires knowledge of one's own physical and mental health and the application of such knowledge*”. (Hungarian Official Gazette, 2012/66: 10656) Thus, fostering the development of personal identities is an important objective. All the more so, as local identity – even national identity in an extreme case – can be excluding, can build on an enemy image and can even urge aggression against foreign people. These problems can be rooted in a weak/under-developed identity which can primarily identify itself through others or rather by delimiting itself “from others” and not by reflecting on its own values. This problem is often accompanied by glorifying the own group and demonizing out-groups. This project reflects on this issue as well.

Research seminars of the project Identity and locality

The research seminar project *Identity and Locality* originally had two essential objectives, one of them was to develop – within the framework of the higher education talent development program – the *mentoring skills and social sensitivity* of students; and the other was to make the people of a region living in difficult circumstances be aware of the values inside and around them and help them *find a way out from societal and social traps by deliberately utilizing these values*. (Hankiss, 2004) The venue of the research was in a disadvantaged small region. The village of Vajszló, located 30 kms away from Pécs, offered a perfect field for research. Not only because it is situated in the heart of a region with special ethnographic culture (Ormánság) and has a lot of natural and cultural values, but also because we could find a devoted, co-operating pedagogic partner there. Jenő Pelenczei, deputy principal of Kodolányi János Comprehensive and Vocational Secondary and Primary School of Vajszló (hereinafter the school), gave all the help possible for the implementation of the project. Our common work resulted in a long-term agreement for co-operation between *the University of Pécs and the school*.



development exercise entitled *Value-game*, in which they drew the attention of the children to the importance of values determining our lives. The final part of the program was a folk dance program managed by *Marianna Török* and her folk music group. They played songs from the region and taught some local folk dances to the students and the pupils. The values of the kitchen of Ormánság were also explored, the grandmother of a teacher helped the enthusiastic schoolgirls to cook and bake. The raw materials left were given to a family with six children where students could gain first-hand experience as to what life is like for a family with six children in a disadvantaged small region. In this way the days of the workshop became days of genuine common experience for teachers, students and children alike.

The concept of the community board game was elaborated in the second semester of the project. We wanted a board game which could be played not only by children, but also by grandfathers and grandchildren or even by the whole family. There has been only one criterion for the scope of players. They must live in the place which the game is about. In our case, it is Vajszló. The concept of the game is built on co-operation and not on competition. This means that there is no single winner as the goal is, in the wording of Ferenc Mérei, the experience of togetherness (Mérei, 1949). The game combines the advantages of a board and a card game, which means it is inexpensive and can permanently be developed. The prototype of the game, which was piloted in the school, was ready by the end of the semester. The second seminar workshop was held in December 2014. The game was piloted in three age groups, with pupils of classes four and six of the primary schools. We played two rounds with the pupils of the secondary school and then we mixed the age groups. The game was always conducted by a referee and two observers took notes. This task was primarily assigned to psychology majors.

The complex elaboration of the prototype of the game began on the basis of the practical experiences concerning the game and the feedback from the children participating in the experiment (semester 3 of the seminar: the spring of 2015). Due to the constraints of this paper, the game cannot be described in detail here; still, we would like to give the reader some insight. Puppets represent the players in the game and the players can move them on a board divided into colored squares (designed by János Csontos, psychology major) depending on what number the particular players have made by casting the dice. Whichever square the player steps on, he has to draw a question from a pack of cards and answer it. The questions were arranged into four thematic packs:

1. The aim of the pack of cards *About me* is to motivate the player to share his or her personal experiences or thoughts. For example, 1) "What is the most wonderful experience of your life? Tell us about it, and say why this has been your most wonderful experience." 2) "What do you think you are good at? Name at least two things. If it is difficult to answer, ask your fellow players for help."
2. The pack *The world of values* contains questions making the players aware of the human and material values of their environment. For example, 1) "Do you have a mentor or role model? If yes, tell us about him or her; if no, say why not." 2) "Is there anyone you look up to in Vajszló? If yes, say why."



3. The topics of the pack of card *The history of Vajszló* are based on local history. The source material was provided by Mária Dani, the widow of Lajos Dani, local historian. For example, 1) “Do you know what Batthyányi street was called formerly and how it got its former name?” (If the player does not know the answer, he or she can have recourse to the “Book of answers”. In this case the answer is Magosdi street, the name coming from the fact that it is the highest point of the village.) 2) “There used to be a granary in the village. Do you know what a granary is? Make a drawing about what you imagine it to be like and guess where it could have been situated.” (Answer: Grain was stored in a granary. There is a huge system of vaulted cellars at 26 Batthyányi street in Vajszló. Grain (tithe) was collected there and in the granary built on the edge of the slope. This building cannot be found there any longer as it was demolished at the beginning of the last century.) (Dani, 1993)
4. The pack of cards *What would you do?* sets tasks related to the everyday life of the community living in the village. They motivate players to think and act together. For example, 1) “What measure would you first take if you were the mayor of Vajszló from tomorrow on?” 2) “If snow cut off the village for a week, how would you survive these days? With whom would you join hands and why? Make a quick plan.”

These questions actually generate a conversation but the topic is determined by the “game” itself, and the conversation has no pre-determined end only a beginning. Although several “brakes” help avoid becoming “shoreless”, actually it is the players who can decide about the duration of the game. During the game, children talk about topics which are rarely discussed in everyday life but which should be discussed on lessons with the class master, on history lessons, in day-care centers and even outside the classroom. The game can be played but it can also be developed further, which can even be the subject matter of the game. In order to improve the efficiency of the idea, a diagnostic survey was carried out. In addition to the feedback from students, we needed some professional control; this is why we examined the operation of the game from a professional aspect by the help of the lesson diagnostic model called STEP 21 (developed by Sarolta Monori Papp in Hungary).

The elaboration of the game, the common work and common thinking provided a lot of experience, joy and success for all the active participants of the project. It set in action the creativity of the students, improved their debating skills and independence. In May 2015, three of our students presented the results of their research in Philadelphia thanks to a grant from Campus Hungary (Herke, Bordás and Mayer, 2015). We firmly believe that students should actively be involved in research as this is the way they can learn and develop an interest in the profession. The experience can make them devoted and they might understand what science means in practice. It is important to shape our students socially and with more mental sensitivity. They may become better teachers and more devoted researchers. However, pupils participating in the project should also be mentioned here. If pupils of class six of a primary school say this game is good but “we haven’t had such a good conversation so far”, this means the amount of dialogue is insufficient. *Space should be opened up and chances should be provided.* If children are asked, “What are you good at?” and the majority of them become unsure and say, “Well, actually at nothing.” then it means these children do not feel they are valuable, so *we must*



show they are valuable and this is of utmost importance as perhaps there will not be anybody else in their life to tell them so. This can also be the task of science.

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