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# A Comparison of Ethnic Majority and Minority Students' Epistemological Beliefs about History<sup>1</sup>



## ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to compare ethnic majority and minority students' epistemological beliefs about history. A total of 732 (509 from Hungary and 223 from Vojvodina) grade 11 and grade 12 students were involved in the study. The students evaluated 26 closed, abstract statements of the adapted paper-and-pencil questionnaire (STOEL et al. 2017, translation by László Kojanitz) on a six-point Likert scale. The results showed that ethnic minority students tend to nurture both naïve and nuanced beliefs about history that are basically contradictory to each other. This may be related to their “*survival instinct*” (PECK 2018. 322); minority students do not question contradictory viewpoints or historical narratives but use them in parallel. The research draws attention to the impact of cultural factors (e.g. ethnic identity) on epistemological beliefs.

## KEYWORDS

history teaching, epistemological beliefs, ethnic identity

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GREENE and his colleagues (2016) argue that in our increasingly complex century epistemic cognition and epistemological beliefs play a crucial role as they continually help us to verify the authenticity of the huge amount of information and to draw sound conclusions. In the context of history education, Carla VAN BOXTEL and Jannet VAN DRIE (2018) emphasize that the significance of epistemological beliefs is widely recognized in the literature, but there is relatively little empirical evidence about how they do so in the case of history teaching and learning. This study is designed to contribute to the empirical research of this internationally important topic.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 1.1. Epistemological beliefs and history teaching

From a psychological point of view, epistemology refers to the knowledge and its origin of a person (HOFER–BENDIXEN 2012). Its interpretation as a belief system originates from SCHOMMER (1990. cit. HOFER–BENDIXEN 2012). In the context of history teaching, VAN BOXTEL and VAN DRIE (2018. 155) highlight that epistemological beliefs are “mental resources” that influence historical reasoning, which can be interpreted as the goal of learning history. According to the researchers, historical reasoning is an endeavour to “*reach justifiable conclusions about processes of continuity and change, causes and consequences, and/or differences and similarities between historical phenomena or periods*”. (VAN BOXTEL – VAN DRIE 2018. 151).

In recent decades, several international studies have been conducted to investigate the role and impact of the epistemological beliefs in teaching and learning history (e.g. WANSINK et al. 2017, RETZ 2016, VOET – DE WEVER 2016, MCCRUM 2013, MAGGIONI 2010, MAGGIONI–VANSLEDRIGHT–ALEXANDER 2009, YILMAZ 2008). As the questionnaire from STOEL and his colleagues (2017) is used in this study, the theoretical framework is based on their understanding of epistemological beliefs. Summarizing the results of previous general and history-specific instances of research, in their multidimensional approach, they distinguished between (1) the content and (2) the development of epistemological beliefs. (1) Beliefs can relate to historical knowledge or historical knowing (how the knowledge is constructed) (HOFER–PINTRICH 1997. cit. STOEL et al. 2017). (2) Regarding the (2) development of these beliefs, they may be quite beginner (naïve) and much more advanced (nuanced). Naïve beliefs about historical knowledge refer to that there is a certain truth about the past, while nuanced beliefs mean that knowledge is subjective and therefore questionable. In the case of historical knowing, it is a naïve belief that external objectivities (e.g., from textbooks) allow us to learn the one and only truth about the past. At the same time, individuals with nuanced beliefs know that cognition is subjective because of the person, but appropriate methods can be used to ensure reliability (BUEHL–ALEXANDER 2001. cit. STOEL et al. 2017, KING–KITCHENER 1994. cit. STOEL et al. 2017, KUHN 1991. cit. STOEL et al. 2017).

With regard to the main context of the research, after the millennium, major changes have begun in the Hungarian history teaching and learning (e.g., JANCÁK 2018, KAPOSÍ 2017, FISCHERNÉ DÁRDAI 2010). According to the *National Core Curriculum* (2012. 78), one of the most important aims of history teaching is to establish and develop a “*differentiated way of historical thinking*” by understanding the nature of history. In the draft version of the *National Core Curriculum* for 2019, it is stated that at least one topic has to be enlarged to develop historical thinking (Nat tervezete 2018). JANCÁK (2019) stated that the new generations have to face with the increased danger of uncontrolled information. Therefore, history teaching has to take students’ and teachers’ values into consideration. It can be seen that there is a need to renew history teaching and to understand the nature of history. All this justifies that the number of empirical research about the nature of history has to be increased in Hungary.

## 1.2. New research directions: investigating the impact of ethnic identity on epistemological beliefs

According to HOFER and BENDIXEN (2012), studying the impact of cultural environment on epistemological beliefs has a great potential in future research. They justified this approach with the socially constructed nature of epistemological beliefs. In relation to history teaching, this notion is consistent with EPSTEIN’s (2009. cit. SEGALL–TROFANENKO–SCHMITT 2018) view that students’ identity and the cultural environment determine how they learn history. Based on a detailed review of the literature on the concept of ethnicity or ethnic identity, Carla PECK (2018. 315) identified three basic characteristics: (1) Ethnic identity is inherently “*fluid and plural*”, as it is strongly determined by the environment. (2) It can be interpreted both as “*a personal and a social process*”. (3) Common “*language, religion, appearance, ancestry, regionality, nonverbal behavior, values, beliefs, and cultural symbols and practices*” are defining elements of ethnic identity.

As an ethnic minority, Hungarian students from the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina were included in the research. Vojvodina is located in the northern region of the Republic of Serbia, with a population of approximately 2 million people and 26 different ethnicities, forming a diverse community (Autonomous Province of Vojvodina n. d.). According to the latest census (*Census* 2011), 251,136 Hungarians live mainly in the northern part of the province, and Hungarian is one of the six official languages of Vojvodina. Their cultural, political and economic relations are close and many-sided with Hungary. Since 2011, Hungarians living in ethnic minority in Vojvodina have the opportunity to apply for the simplified naturalization, and thus to the dual Hungarian–Serbian citizenship (*Act LV of 1993 on Hungarian Citizenship* 2010). Regarding the elements defined by PECK (2018), it can be stated that the Hungarian community in Vojvodina has a strong ethnic identity, and almost all of the elements listed are identifiable in their case.

Taking the situation of the history teaching in Vojvodina into consideration, it is worth noting that the prestige of the subject is weaker than in Hungary (MÉSZÁROS 2019). Mészáros emphasized that history teaching in Hungarian language struggles with many difficulties. Among others, there is a lack of appropriate history textbooks, and the general aim of teaching history is not determined precisely (MÉSZÁROS 2019).

## 2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

### 2.1. Aims and pedagogical relevance of the study

The purpose of the research is essentially twofold. On the one hand, I intend to compare ethnic majority and minority students based on their epistemological beliefs about history. On the other hand, it is important to underline that the development of the questionnaire is also in progress (see STOEL et al. 2017), and I endeavour to draw conclusions regarding the psychometric characteristics of the instrument. Based on these aims, the following research questions were identified:

1. What similarities or differences can be identified in the epistemological beliefs of ethnic majority and minority students on the basis of the questionnaire of STOEL and his colleagues (2017)?
2. What similarities can be identified in the related literature?

Because of Carla PECK's (2018) advice that the research on historical understanding and identity should avoid any generalizations, no hypotheses have been formulated at the beginning. Instead, I have used the strategy that in the light of the results, I searched for similar patterns in the literature.

The (pedagogical) relevance of the research can be determined from different perspectives. It is primarily the sociocultural environment that makes this study unique, which allows to join the international discourse. It is important to emphasize that a high number of Hungarian students from Vojvodina are studying at some Hungarian higher education institution, so the results can be useful in their learning and teaching process as well. In addition, based on my knowledge about the literature so far, the nature of the research is novel in the teaching of history in Hungary.

### 2.2. Instrument

I used the core questionnaire from Gerhard Stoel and colleagues, which was published in 2017. It contains 26 statements (short version 15 statements), which are categorized along two dimensions in a multidimensional approach as mentioned above. By combining the two dimensions, the authors defined 5 scales (STOEL et al. 2017. 126):

1. historical knowing: nuanced beliefs (6 statements), example: 15. *A good historical account discusses multiple perspectives on the past,*
2. historical knowing: naïve beliefs (4 statements), example: 16. *When eyewitnesses do not agree with each other, it is impossible to know what happened,*
3. historical knowledge: objective beliefs (5 statements), example: 9. *Connections between causes and an historical event are fixed,*
4. historical knowledge: subjective beliefs (3 statements), example: 7. *Historical accounts are mainly opinions,*
5. historical knowledge: nuanced beliefs (2 statements), example: 26. *For many events, historians will continue to debate the causes.*

The exploratory factor analysis confirmed the existence of the first three scales, so in this research, I compare the students based on these.

The closed-end statements had to be evaluated on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). It is important to emphasize that the statements are abstract, independent from any historical topics.

Besides the 26 statements and the general demographic characteristics (age, gender, grade), the questionnaire included questions about the highest planned level of education, parents' and/or foster parents' education, grades from the previous year (history, Hungarian language and literature, mathematics) and the estimated number of books at home.

## 2.3. Data collection process

Gerhard Stael was notified of the intention to use the questionnaire and approved the research. After the multi-stage translation work, the final Hungarian version, which was also used in this research, was prepared by László Kojanitz. The questionnaire, supplemented with general background questions, was also reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Doctoral School of Education at the University of Szeged.

The research was conducted between October and December 2018 in three grammar schools in the South Great Plain in Hungary and in four grammar schools in Vojvodina in Serbia. The grade 11 and 12 students were presented with the details of the research, and then they could decide if they wanted to complete the questionnaire, which was always voluntary and anonymous. Filling in the questionnaire took about 15 to 20 minutes. After the paper-based data collection, the data were coded and statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 25.0 software.

## 2.4. Sample

A total of 732 grade 11 and 12 students have been involved in the study. The Hungarian subsample (see *Table 1*) contained 509 students ( $M_{age} = 17.59$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) from three grammar schools, with the majority of girls ( $N_{girls} = 325$ , 64.2%). In grade 11, 263 students ( $M_{age} = 17.15$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) and in grade 12, 243 students ( $M_{age} = 18.06$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) joined the research.

Grade	N of students	Age		Gender		N of students per the city involved ( $M_{age}$ )		
		M	SD	Girls	Boys	City_1	City_2	City_3
11	263	17.15	0.72	164 (62.6%)	98 (37.4%)	127 (16.76)	72 (17.75)	64 (17.25)
12	243	18.06	0.63	160 (65.8%)	83 (34.2%)	111 (17.85)	42 (18.69)	92 (18.02)
Sum	509	17.59	0.82	325 (64.2%)	182 (35.8%)	238 (17.27)	114 (18.10)	156 (17.71)

**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of the subsample from Hungary (Note:  $M$  = mean,  $SD$  = standard deviation)

In the subsample of Vojvodina (see *Table 2*), there were 223 students, who conducted their secondary studies in Hungarian language in four different secondary schools. In grade 11, 104 students ( $M_{age} = 16.83$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ) and in grade 12, 119 students ( $M_{age} = 17.89$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ) answered the questions. In this case, too, girls constituted the majority of the subsample ( $N_{girls} = 145$ , 65.3%).

Grade	N of students	Age		Gender		N of students per the city involved (M <sub>age</sub> )			
		M	SD	Girls	Boys	City_4	City_5	City_6	City_7
11	104	16.83	0.41	70 (67.3%)	34 (32.7%)	46 (16.83)	16 (16.94)	18 (16.78)	15 (16.80)
12	119	17.89	0.37	75 (63.6%)	43 (36.4%)	51 (17.90)	14 (17.86)	19 (17.74)	32 (17.97)
<i>Sum</i>	223	18.40	0.66	145 (65.3%)	77 (34.7%)	97 (17.39)	42 (17.29)	37 (17.27)	47 (17.60)

**TABLE 2** Demographic characteristics of the subsample from Vojvodina (Note: *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation)

### 3. RESULTS

Regarding the general psychometric characteristics of the questionnaire, the reliability was acceptable in both subsamples (e.g. COHEN–SWERDICK 2010). The Cronbach's alpha values are .66 in the case of the subsample from Hungary (*N* = 458) sample and .73 in Vojvodina (*N* = 193).

#### 3.1. Comparison of the ethnic majority and minority students

##### 3.1.1. Independent samples t-test

The epistemological beliefs of ethnic majority and minority students were compared using independent samples t-test with regard to the three scales of the questionnaire (see *Table 3*). The analysis has shown that there is no significant difference between the two subsamples with regard to the epistemological beliefs about historical knowing. However, in the case of the naïve beliefs both about historical knowing and historical knowledge, there is a significant difference between ethnic majority and minority students. The results show that the nuanced beliefs of ethnic majority and minority students are at a similar developmental level. At the same time, the naïve statements are evaluated more positively by Hungarian students from Vojvodina living in an ethnic minority.

Scales	Hungary		Vojvodina		Levene test		Independent samples t test	
	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	?t?	p
Historical knowing: nuanced	4.60	0.62	4.62	0.65	1.414	n.s.	0.222	n.s.
Historical knowing: naïve	3.69	0.80	4.03	0.91	6.728	n.s.	4.895	.000
Historical knowledge: objective	3.06	0.74	3.34	0.82	3.514	n.s.	4.443	.000

**TABLE 3** Independent samples *t*-test between students from Hungary and Vojvodina (Note: n.s. = non significant)

### 3.1.1. Correlations

Based on the correlations among the three scales and background variables, the two subsamples were compared in parallel (e.g. COHEN–SWERDICK 2010). Regarding the research topic, I primarily focused on the correlations across the three scales of the questionnaire.

In the case of students from Hungary (see *Table 4*), there is a positive significant correlation between naïve beliefs about historical knowing and historical knowledge ( $r = .200, p < .01$ ). Although there is no significant correlation with the nuanced beliefs about historical knowing, it is important to note that both naïve scales have negative relationships with the nuanced scale. From the background variables, history grade and the highest planned educational level correlate with the epistemological scales. The nuanced statements about historical knowing is positively related to the history grade ( $r = .131, p < .01$ ) and to the highest planned level of education ( $r = .158, p < .01$ ), too. In the case of the naïve scales, there are significant negative correlations between historical knowing and the highest planned level of education ( $r = -.101, p < .05$ ), and historical knowledge and history grade ( $r = -.133, p < .05$ ).

	N	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Historical knowing: nuanced	509	1							
2. Historical knowing: naïve	509	-.034	1						
3. Historical knowledge: objective	509	-.012	.200**	1					
4. History grade	509	.131**	-.068	-.133*	1				
5. Highest planned level of education	509	.158**	-.101*	-.052	.387**	1			
6. Mother's education	509	-.053	.014	-.040	.201**	.186**	1		
7. Father's education	509	.001	.026	-.065	.187**	.187**	.513**	1	
8. Books at home	509	-.026	-.026	-.050	.148**	.188**	.350**	.337**	1

**TABLE 4** *Correlations in the subsample from Hungary* (Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ )

In the case of the students from Vojvodina (see *Table 5*), there are positive significant correlations among all the three epistemological scales. The nuanced beliefs about historical knowing show a positive significant correlation with the naïve beliefs about historical knowing ( $r = .139, p < .05$ ) and historical knowledge ( $r = .182, p < .01$ ). The two naïve scales also show significant positive relationship with each other ( $r = .250, p < .01$ ). This means that in the case of the ethnic minority students, the naïve and nuanced beliefs are not separated. Other background variables in this subsample show no significant correlation with either epistemological scale.

	N	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Historical knowing: nuanced	223	1							
2. Historical knowing: naïve	223	.139*	1						
3. Historical knowledge: objective	223	.182**	.250**	1					
4. History grade	223	.122	−0.22	−0.22	1				
5. Highest planned level of education	223	.092	.035	−.013	.256**	1			
6. Mother's education	223	−.041	.006	−.081	.034	−.008	1	–	
7. Father's education	223	−.020	.031	.047	−.003	.001	.384**	1	
8. Books at home	223	.127	−.046	−.016	.082	.221**	.330**	.339**	1

**TABLE 5** *Correlations in the subsample from Vojvodina* (Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ )

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, it can be said that there is a marked difference between the epistemological beliefs about history of ethnic majority and minority students. Nuanced beliefs about historical knowing were similarly positively evaluated by the two groups. At the same time, the students from Vojvodina evaluated significantly more positively naïve beliefs than their counterparts from Hungary. It means that ethnic minority students can accept both nuanced and naïve beliefs. This is akin to what Carla PECK (2018. 322) called “survival instinct”. She concluded the existence of this instinct based among others on PORAT’s (2004) research conducted in Israel. Porat proved that students with strong ethnic identities are able to accept the narratives of their own ethnic community and the official (state-controlled) one, even if the two narratives present conflicting views and perspectives. The survival instinct manifests itself, firstly, in conforming to the official position and, secondly, in the intention that the intellectual heritage of its own, smaller community survives.

One of the very important features of the empirical research presented in this paper is that the existence of the “*survival instinct*” (PECK 2018. 322) is verified through abstract statements. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that the study of cultural factors that influence epistemological beliefs has a great potential.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STEPS

It is worth noting that the nature and volume of the research do not allow me to formulate general conclusions. Moreover, the questionnaire is currently under development in Hungarian and international research, too.

During the academic year of 2019–2020, the geographical scope of the research will be expanded, as data will be collected in Croatia, Romania and Slovakia. This new research is supported by the “ÚNKP-19- New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology.”



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