

The relationship of young people to national symbolism in the 21st century in Hungary

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Abstract

The civic values of a 21st century man, the acquisition of the traditions and symbols of his own national culture are changing. The sustainability of the process of national enculturation and the significant impact exerted by the media pose serious challenges for the leaders of states, the creators of school systems and methodologies, as well as the representatives of arts. One of the most effective and dominant actors in enculturation can be the state, which maintains the institutions shaping their methodology, gives direction for and often specifies the content through funding, and provides public law definitions of the symbols that can be decisive for citizens in this process of enculturation. The younger generation's openness for cultural traditions and their historical memory are of particular interest here. The concept of enculturation was introduced by M. J. Herskovits (1962). Enculturation is a most comprehensive learning process. This means the acquisition of basic skills, which are indispensable for all human beings. These skills are gained through the help provided by the institutions and forms of activity established by the society and through education. To continue this idea, these skills are indispensable in the Hungarian society, where they are gained through the help of the institutions and forms of activity established by the society, such as language, religion, technology, art, sport, and through education. Education is the most important means of reproducing the culture of a society in the individual and passing it on to each generation. My study was designed to briefly represent the results of a micro-survey, which paved the way for a collection of nation-wide data. I collected the presented research data during a small sample survey to prepare a questionnaire (pending) to gain a deeper understanding of the national memory of university students. The form of the study is a research paper. It reflects a state at a given point of the research, commenting on the relevant findings of literature, and raising new dilemmas in a changing youth scenario, which I would like to analyse in their deeper patterns later.

Keywords: national memory; national identity; civic values; enculturation

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1. Introduction

The last twenty years have seen intense civilizational changes. The phenomena of globalization and globalism have now become more pronounced (Beck 2005; Beck 2008; Jancsák 2016). Cultural and educational processes have undergone significant changes. The social institutions of socio-cultural regions and the systems of the nation-state cannot keep up with the developing global mechanisms (Bogár 2006; Harcsa 2021). Education is the most important means for a society to reproduce its culture in the individual (Pusztai 2020; Kozma 2022) and to pass it on through the generations. “The instability and uncertainty caused by the crisis of commonly agreed norms and social values is characteristic of our times. Economic and political crises, new migratory flows, the rise of political populism and technological changes have created new vulnerabilities for children and young people. There are for example the crises of the values of freedom, solidarity, empathy, autonomy, responsibility, i.e. the crises of universal humanist values, as well as the exposure to the manipulations of the post-truth era, i.e. the fear industry.” (Jancsák 2020b:1016).

The research, aiming at a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of national enculturation and its special features, highlights the specific points of the individual’s national culture and the effective institutions and state-coordinated programmes aiming at its acquisition. It is stressed that it is not possible to live a civilized life without culture. Therefore, the process of learning through which one “grows into” culture is vital for human beings. Furthermore, it is necessary to narrow down our scope of analysis by focusing on how individuals “grow into”, become initiated into their own national culture, and where they can find their cultural roots (Herskovits 1962).

“History is not just an invention of governments and academic institutions – it is ubiquitous. We breathe it in with the air, it is in the view of our cities and landscapes. It is not just school which teaches us about it, but also our grandparents at home, folktales, the television, public sculptures, war memorials, public buildings, museums, and galleries” (Furtado 2014:79). The editor of *History Today* explores the role of enculturation in people’s everyday lives in his book *Histories of Nations* (2014). He claims that we are surrounded by stories, narratives, objects, and memories in our everyday lives, through which we form opinions about our own nations and others. These are the foundations on which we can build and from which a shared national consciousness is constructed (Furtado 2014). In history, it is often not how events happened that is interesting, but what and how we remember. History and national memory are shaped in the family (Jancsák 2020a), later at school (Kaposi 2020; Kojanitz 2019, 2021), but mostly in the different groups of society (Pászka 2007; Varga 2009; Gyáni 2020), whose values and ways of thinking are determined by the individual development of their members and their identification with national values.

Culture, in the Geertzian sense, refers to historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols. It is a system of inherited concepts expressed in symbolic forms that people use to communicate with each other, perpetuate and develop their knowledge of life, and attitudes (Geertz 1994).

Human culture can only exist in community. It is in communication and feedback with others that cultural phenomena unfold and survive. The predominant medium for the spread of culture today is by the creation of symbols, colours, shapes, and visual meanings that directly affect the individual's subconscious. When a group of individuals shape the quality of their memory, through secondary experiences (social campaign or the mass media), they will establish a value order.

The scientific approach cannot leave out the conceptual system of collective memory, as this is the basis on which all memory is built. It is important to stress, however, that the human mind is only part of the memory, and that the medium, the social situation and cultural symbols are just as important. These are the means by which memory can be conceptualised. The importance of space is emphasised by Peter Burke when he says that it is images, as well as actions, rituals and collective representations, that provide the means for the experience of the past (Burke 1991). Our knowledge of history, beyond the transfer of lexical knowledge in schools, is expanding ever more rapidly today – by the mediation of visual content in videos and films rather than family stories and conversations with friends. Film art, for example, in its distillation of time and space, contributes to the imagination that sustains nation states (Cummins 2012).

There is a collective memory, but memory has a social framework, and our individual thinking can only remember if it is within the frame of reference of the collective memory and becomes part of it. Most of our memories emerge when we are reminded of them by our parents, friends, teachers or others (Halbwachs 2018). Jan Assmann extended the concept of collective memory by defining communicative and cultural memory within collective memory. By communicative memory, Assmann means memories that an individual shares with peers. An example is generational memory. When the bearers of this memory die out, the next generation takes their place as the bearers of the knowledge passed on to them. But this living memory fades over time. Communicative memory based on oral history can be maintained for about three generations, after which it is replaced by tradition, i.e. it merges into cultural memory (Assmann 2018).

Family or community history is rarely passed on today therefore it is replaced by the reality conveyed by culture. This reality is accepted as authentic if people can relate it to their situations and if they can override their community memory without consequences. The development of traditions and rituals, as well as the identification and regulation of places, elements and symbols of memory, is an increasingly urgent and strategic issue for nation states. The government surveillance, cultural and commemorative content and the tasks of institutions are closely interdependent. Therefore, they must be examined together. Knowledge of national culture and traditions is an essential condition for the survival of a nation state. In the last decade, Hungarian governments have set up a number of institutions and programmes to perpetuate national themes and explore all the details of history.

However, it is only in the last few years that these institutions have begun to open up to young people. They offer content based on scientific research, but this often appears an overly professional framework ('adult thinking', 'adult language') and through communication channels not used by young people. Furthermore, government communication often places the form and ritual of remembrance in a political narrative. It may provide concepts that prevent the active involvement of the younger generation in the process of acting and valuing national memory. It is true that, alongside the memory policies of national governments, global media players have opened up new channels of communication, especially in recent years. In those years historical events were presented in a professional way (accessible to young people). However, the identities conveyed are sometimes conceptual, detached from historical reality, but at the same time embedded in youthful, human and enjoyable stories (which emphasise entertainment and increase media consumption). Their impact is growing and their popularity is increasing significantly, especially among young people who are receptive to visual cognition.

2. Dilemmas emerging from the research and the data

The notion of identity is not a definition of completion or determination, as neither the identity of an individual or a social group is a completed fact but is characterised by a type of determination which is changing, influenced by its history, experiences and social environment (Pataki 2010). Not only people, but also states have an identity, determined by their geographical location, demographics, geopolitical position, history, culture (and many other factors) (Bende-Halász 2014), and therefore we cannot ascertain a stable state, but can only examine it as a dynamically evolving factor.

I will now describe my own research findings through which I would like to demonstrate how young people's current knowledge about and attitudes to this topic can be presented: how they think about school commemorations, civic duties, historical places, holidays, and their historical past. I used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in my research. The research was based on interviews (18 in-depth interviews and 6 focus group interviews) and a questionnaire survey of students (n=178). My research, presented here, is limited, including only a small number of cases, and does not allow for strong claims due to the representativeness-related indicators. But it does allow for the formulation of research dilemmas under "reasonable suspicion". My aim in collecting the data was both to test my questionnaire (which is my instrument of data collection for a large sample survey) and to test, on the small sample, statements that can be made on the basis of the results of national research on young people and that are described by researchers with the following terms: 1. "faceless (?) generation" (Bauer-Szabó 2011); 2. "silent generation" (Székely 2014); 3. "rationally rebellious students" (Szabó 2014); 4. "generation alienated from history" (Jancsák 2020b).

The development of traditions and rituals, the presentation of places and elements of memory, heroes and symbols that have a strong impact on national identi-

ty, is one of the functions exercised by states. To what extent is this knowledge alive in the collective memory of the young generation? In recent decades, the Hungarian government has established an increasing number of institutions, research centres and programmes to shape remembrance policy and national identity (Balatoni 2022). Can the institutional systems reach young people with their results? Can they contribute to and shape the rituals present in education? In the following, I shall present the answers provided by students in higher education in the first half of 2020 with the help of the data of the research below.

The Hungarian youth survey of 2016 showed that young people in Hungary had turned away from politics and lost their trust in democratic institutions (Székely-Szabó 2016). The survey showed activities typical of young people, and their strong desire to be included in national policies. We can read about the results of research on the life of “rationally rebellious students” (Szabó 2014) or the “new silent generation” (Székely 2014), a question posed by Nagy and Fekete (*Will the new silent generation speak up?*, 2020) also asked by Szabó and Oross (*Silent or Rebellious?*, 2017), as well as Bauer and Szabó who raised a dilemma (*Faceless [?] generation*, 2011) –namely that it was difficult to record the elusive rapidly changing youth scenario, or its adaptation to the changes of the social environment (Somlai 1997; 2011; Jancsák 2013; Székely 2020). There was a demand for “a stronger lens or a new camera” (Chisholm 2006), or a need for innovative methodological renewal in the tools of research. The international thematic field of youth studies has already been in the process of shaping new youth paradigms and conceptual responses for two decades (see Jancsák 2011). From my data, it seems as if the silent generation is speaking.

Our micro-survey data shows that 81% of university students consider themselves to be reasonably informed on public policy issues, while young people who consider themselves to be very informed make up one tenth of this group. In the sample, not only the perceptions of awareness, but also their interest in Hungarian politics, differ from previously published results (although here I present the results of a micro-survey). A “reasonable suspicion” can be used as a starting point of my larger sample of higher education students, according to which the snapshot taken in 2021 shows a world of young people actively shaped in public questions, this youth is much more than the generation of “silent” and “rationally rebellious” young people. Respondents who are ‘not at all interested’ and ‘rather not interested’ in Hungarian politics make up one fifth of the sample. An explanation for the different opinions may be provided by the internal pattern of the sample of higher education students, the gender distribution of respondents (women make up more than two thirds of the sample) and the deviation from the typical responses by type of residence (Budapest 36%, county capital 11.8%, city 32%, village/town 22.5%), as young people from the capital are over-represented in the sample. Female students are also over-represented in the sample. This group is identified by youth surveys as less active in matters of public interest. Our data, however, shows the opposite picture: the majority of female respondents are also interested in politics.

According to youth researchers, one explanation for young people’s reflective and contradictory opinions is that their worldview is increasingly shaped by family,

peers and the media, with school and social culture playing a smaller role in this process. My data shows that the existence of national memory is part of everyday reality according to 85% of respondents, while memory politics is not a valid (not understood) concept for almost two thirds of respondents. At the same time, the data shows a surprising result about students' perceptions of social institutions in the care of national memory. Respondents mostly identified the role of the state and the school in shaping the national memory, and in addition to these, the institution of the family. The former two were cited by half of the respondents, while the latter was mentioned by one third of the respondents as an important factor in the cultivation of national memory.

This confirms the socialization theories that emphasize the role of intergenerational value transmission processes, including the preservation of collective memory through family histories (Somlai 1997: 2011 and 2013; Jancsák 2020a), in the context of the community-public socialization function of the family as a primary group. At the same time, the data strongly emphasizes the responsibility that the national (collective) memory places on schools and policy actors (Rüsen 2004; Seixas 2016). The data from our micro-research confirms these claims. Eight out of ten respondents indicated that, for them, it is the family that determines their approach to being Hungarian. Two thirds of the respondents attributed this to the school, and half of them to the state. According to respondents, their circle of friends has the least influence on their opinion about being Hungarian. So, we do not necessarily see a generational effect here, perhaps because the focus of their discussions is not on patriotic and historical issues. This raises a further dilemma, namely, the need to systematically shade the questions in my research on the identity-shaping influence of the peer group, in order to gain a deeper understanding of generational influences.

There is more uncertainty about their knowledge of national symbols. How does this uncertainty become obvious? I measured national symbols against the symbols defined in the Constitution, namely the coat of arms of Hungary, the national flag, the Holy Crown, the national anthem and the poem *Szózat*, considered to be the second national anthem by tradition. In this group of questions, I have offered several possible answers. I see the uncertainty of the respondents in the fact that, although the symbols defined in law are marked most frequently by them, but those that are linked to a particular holiday (e.g. the cockade as a symbol of the 1848 revolution, the flag with a hole as a symbol of the 1956 revolution) are also "marked". Many people also marked the cockade and the flag with a hole or the cloak of St Stephen as symbols. It is true that these symbols have a meaning and refer to the role of symbols as "memory magnets" in preserving national memory. Based on this result, I was prompted to turn this question from a closed question to an open question.

What do you think are our national symbols? (persons, %)

Crown	70 (85,4%)
Coat of arms	66 (85,4%)
National flag	65 (83,7%)
Anthem	64 (82%)
Cockade	51 (55,6%)
Szózat	46 (50,6%)
The Robe of St Stephen	37 (37,1%)
The Holy Right	26 (36%)
Flag with a hole	21 (25,8%)
Fundamental Law	15 (19,7%)

Source: Author's own research 2022.

This interesting dichotomy emerges when we ask young people about their views on school commemorations. Only a third of respondents consider school commemorations to be meaningful, but twice as many think they are both compulsory and meaningless, and the picture is not positive for the rest either. The majority felt that school commemorations were a pointless waste of time, boring and unnecessary. I think it is important to explore this question in my research in deeper patterns and to look for components that can support the creation of school, municipal and state commemorations that are meaningful vs. meaningless, value-laden vs. value-free, that arouse feelings for the historical past vs. without attitudes, that respect traditions vs. postmodern, that help young people to understand the present system of relations rooted in the past. All this also suggests that the phenomenon of alienation from history and the historical past described in the literature (Jancsák 2020b), the understanding of historical interpretations, the educational dilemmas and challenges of the subject area of national cultural heritage and national heritage studies (Kaposi 2020; Kojanitz 2019 and 2021) and the tasks that can be derived from these should be undertaken not only by the institution of the family, (although it takes on more and more) but also by schools and communities, but also by the players of the state memory policy. If these players cooperate with professionals (history teachers, historians, museum educators, experiential educators, etc.), they can preserve the value of collective remembrance, and promote national enculturation for new generations.

3. Summary

The results reported in this paper do not provide a nuanced picture due to the scarcity of data, but they raise valuable dilemmas and can be considered a successful test case to guide my further research. The study that I wrote during my research shows that the role of education, cultural institutions and family communities is becoming increasingly important in the process of enculturation. The results of

my micro-research support the hypothesis that national cultural foundations can only be sustained through conscious state and social construction, which requires significant changes in the methods and channels of mediation. This is particularly important if we want to support the value-based socialisation of young people and strengthen the national identity and civic engagement of the new generation of school children. As one young man, aged 23, put it in an interview: “...we young people don't like to be told what to do, but we don't really have any idea of what we really want!”

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