

EXPLORING THE MODERATING EFFECT OF FIELD DEPENDENCE-INDEPENDENCE ON RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUPIL'S SCHOOL SATISFACTION AND SOCIAL CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

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Abstract: The research was aimed at exploring the relationships between pupil's school satisfaction and social classroom atmosphere, and also between school satisfaction and cognitive style field dependence-independence. The main intention of the presented study was to detect possible moderating influence of the field independence level on the relationship between school satisfaction and social classroom atmosphere. The perceived social atmosphere was assessed by the *Social Classroom Atmosphere Scale* (Kollárik, 1999). The field independence was assessed by the *Embedded Figures Test* (Oltman, Raskin, Witkin, 1962). Pupil's school satisfaction was assessed by a school satisfaction subscale from the *Life Satisfaction Scale for Children* (Huebner, 1994) and emotional relation towards school was assessed by the *Semantic Choice Test* (Smékal, 1990). The research sample consisted of 208 pupils of older school age attending the 6th and 7th school grade (i.e., 11-12 year olds). The findings indicate that the field dependence-independence is not the moderator variable influencing relationship between social classroom atmosphere and pupil's school satisfaction. Pupil's school satisfaction significantly correlates with social classroom atmosphere. A significant relationship between field independence level and pupil's school satisfaction was not proven.

Key words: field dependence-independence cognitive style, social classroom atmosphere, pupil's school satisfaction, older school age

INTRODUCTION

Cognitive style is related to psychological dimensions mainly representing the approach of man's accepting, receiving, elaborating, processing and using information. It is a personal invariant and its manifestations may be monitored in cognitive processes, and as well in personal attitudes, in approaching a problem and its solving, as well

in the affective personal domain (Sarmány-Schuller, Zlámalová, 1989). According to Sarmány-Schuller (1995) we can identify around 20 styles classified into five basic groups accordingly to – functional level, specialization, differentiation, flexibility and stability.

The field dependence-independence cognitive style is a dimension of individual differences exceeding the perceptual, eventually intellectual activities and is expressed

by characteristic approach to a wide range of situations. Field dependent people seem to have problems with distinguishing some significant stimuli from insignificant ones, they are less capable of recalling details in the exams of reproduction, and they appear to be less receptive and easier influenced by other people (Witkin et al., 1977).

The cognitive style itself implies the interaction of cognitive and non-cognitive personal characteristics. Therefore the continuance of cognitive styles correlates with personal features and it has a considerable impact on educational domain (Jurčová, 1991). Cognitive styles prove a considerable variability; every pupil can proceed differently. Forcing one style of cognition can be a source of stress, disgust and failure (Jurčová, 1991). Each dimension of a particular cognitive style brings to pupils both advantages as well disadvantages. Field dependent pupils can have difficulties analyzing a problem situation, detecting relevant elements and ignoring irrelevant ones which are not important when solving a problem, and even they can make this resolving harder. They need clearer target specification, more often constant reinforcement of their effort to achieve these targets and also more concrete instructions for solving a problem. On the other hand, field independent pupils can find and use their own procedures dealing with problems, they are able to restructuralize the original situations, and they have a tendency to state their own targets and keep on trying to achieve these targets (Veselský, 2005). Considering the relation to learning, they have a bigger capacity for active analysis and perception differentiation. They prefer independent activities; personal targets stated by themselves, reacting to their in-

ner reinforcement, they are more able to develop their own learning strategies (Witkin et al., 1977).

Field dependence-independence influences people's behavior in social situations as well. It is applied not only in personal achievements, but also in interpersonal relationships (Sedláková, 1975, in Jurčová, 1991). Field dependent individuals pay more attention to social relation framework, social environment is the main source of information for them about what people are thinking and feeling and they pay more attention to external social sources to define their own attitudes and feelings. Field independent individuals are more aware of their own needs and feelings; therefore, their inner reference framework is more important for them (Witkin et al., 1977). Field independent individuals learn best if they are allowed to develop their own strategies in the non-social domain of problem solving, while field dependent individuals learn the best when they are provided with a certain strategy or structure in social non-abstract situations (Canino, Cicchelli, 1988). In the agreement of a cognitive style and learning activity lies the satisfaction and improvement of the attitude towards learning (Hudak, 1985, in Wágner, Bajčík, 2000) as well as a positive impact on learning achievement (Hayes, Allinson, 1996). These findings suggest an explanation why some pupils are better at learning than others with a similar level of ability and they also allow us to predict some learning difficulties. They bring the possibility of creating learning activity individualization in order to respond to different pupils' learning preferences, of modifying the education style and its verbal and visual context aiming to respect the wide scale of styles within one activity (Wágner, Bajčík 2000). Research

based on monitoring children with a higher risk of hypertensive disease development (Sarmány-Schuller, Zlámálová, 1989) proved that besides the genetic predisposition of hypertensive disease, stress situations caused children to be significantly more dependent. These results support the idea of a greater influence of social environment for field dependent children – passive acceptance of incoming information, lower self-activity in decision making, higher vulnerability to social environment, lower self-acceptation and a tendency to lability in the affective domain.

Research studies (Moos, Moos, 1978, in Mocharová, 2010) show that pupils are more satisfied in classrooms where relationships among them are strong, where teachers use new methods, state especially clear rules and where not only the particularities but also needs of every pupil are respected. Verkuyten a Thijs (2002) in their research of Danish children's satisfaction at the age of 10-12 came to the conclusion that school satisfaction depends on the classroom context. One of the strongest predictors of children's school satisfaction is their experience of a fair-play treatment, feeling of security and a belief that the teachers support them (Samdal et al., 1998). A comparative study aimed at talented pupils proved that a school with a positive atmosphere is important for their satisfaction (Ash, Huebner, 1998). Reflecting these findings we can presuppose that social atmosphere correlates with the level of school satisfaction.

The main purpose of the presented study was to research a relationship between pupils' school satisfaction and social classroom atmosphere with a possibility to predict a moderating effect of field dependence-independence cognitive style towards this rela-

tionship. The cognitive style was considered to be a potential moderator variable, i.e., a variable influencing the direction or strength of the relationship between two variables. Field dependence-independence influences people's behavior in social situations. We perceived it as a stimulus to state a prediction that it can also moderate the association between pupil's satisfaction at school and social classroom atmosphere. We expected that school satisfaction of field dependent pupils with a higher orientation towards other people can be positively related to social classroom atmosphere. However, a question still remained, whether satisfaction is in a relationship to social atmosphere also for field independent pupils who are more oriented towards themselves. Regarding the above mentioned intentions, we were looking for the answers to the following research questions: a) Is pupil's school satisfaction related to social classroom atmosphere? b) Is pupil's school satisfaction related to field dependence-independence level? c) Is pupil's school satisfaction related to social classroom atmosphere after controlling the moderating effect of field dependence-independence? d) Is the relationship between social classroom atmosphere and pupil's school satisfaction in a group of field dependent pupils stronger than in a group of field independent pupils? e) Do the groups formed according to the field independence level and social classroom atmosphere perception differ in their level of school satisfaction?

The correlation between two variables can be sometimes misleading. In simple correlation we measure the strength of linear relationship without taking into consideration the fact that both related variables may be influenced by a third variable. But the corre-

lation relationship can be influenced or moderated by some other variable or variables. Sometimes, in order to get an accurate picture of the relationship between two variables, we need to first eliminate the influence of the other variable or variables. In such case, after excluding the influence of the third variable, correlations can decrease to zero. Our assumption is that cognitive style moderates the relation between satisfaction and social atmosphere, i.e., that field dependence-independence as moderator variable alters the strength of this relationship. Reflecting these facts we had expected lower correlation between school satisfaction and social atmosphere after removing (controlling) the influence of field dependence-independence. Moreover, we expected stronger association between satisfaction and social atmosphere in a group of field dependent pupils than in a group of field independent pupils.

METHODS

Participants

The research sample consisted of 208 older school-age pupils attending the sixth grade ($n = 130$) and the seventh grade ($n = 78$), i.e., 11-12 year old pupils. The research was conducted at three elementary schools in the Slovak town of Považská Bystrica in January and February 2011. The measure instruments were administered in groups during two morning lessons.

Instruments

The indicator of field dependence-independence cognitive style was a gross score in the test EFT (*Embedded Figures Test*) by

Oltman, Raskin and Witkin from 1962 (Slovak modification by Musil), which is the result of the number of correctly identified shapes out of 25 images. Subject's task was to find a simple shape hidden within a more complex picture. The score determines a position in the field dependence-independence dimension (the higher the score, the higher degree of field independence).

The indicator of social classroom atmosphere perceived by individuals was the gross score of the *Social Classroom Atmosphere Scale* (Kollárik, 1999). Basically, the scale represents the understanding of social classroom atmosphere as the real, integral, relatively stable, multidimensional character of the classroom, which can be detected, diagnosed, and then defined on the basis of its perception and evaluation by individual pupils of the class. The final gross score is obtained by averaging the gross score of emotional-social and activity-moral factor. In our research, we did not define the social atmosphere of the class as a whole, but we followed the social atmosphere perceived by individuals.

We operationalized the pupil's school satisfaction on both quantitative and qualitative levels. The indicator of satisfaction as an interval (quantitative) variable was the gross score of school satisfaction subscale from *Life Satisfaction Scale for Children* (Huebner, 1994; Slovak modification by Medved'ová, unpublished). The original scale consists of 40 items that measure the degree of subjective satisfaction of individuals in five of his/her major environments or areas of life – namely family, friends, school, close neighborhood and with him/herself. In our study, we used only the subscale measuring school satisfaction. The pupils were presented eight statements reflecting their de-

gree of agreement by circling numbers (on a scale from “never” to “almost always”). Reliability in terms of internal consistency of items of the school satisfaction subscale for our research sample was sufficient (Cronbach coefficient $\alpha = 0.80$). The indicator of satisfaction as a nominal (qualitative) variable was emotional load, in other words, emotional relation towards school identified by the *Semantic Choice Test*. The original version of this test was designed by Czech psychiatrist and biochemist Doležal (unpublished) in the 60s of the 20th century (in Smékal, 1990). The principle of this method lies in the fact that a subject matches images to the target concepts. There are 16 schematic pictures – archetypical symbols (sun, moon, grid, worm, grave, boat, spiderweb, mouth, tree, dagger, eye, snake, flower, fish, house, water), out of which the subject must always choose eight which he/she considers appropriate to characterize the target concepts. Among the main concepts are also placed the so-called reference concepts. In our research the only main target concept was school and as reference concepts we used emotions such as joy and fear. We evaluated the results with regard to the corresponding concept of school (in the sense of the same associated pictures) with the reference concepts such as joy and fear. Then according to the results we divided the pupils into four quadrants (positive, negative, ambivalent, indifferent emotional relations towards school). To determine a positive emotional relation, the concept of school had to correspond with the term pleasure, assigning more than four identical images, and also with the concept of fear assigning four or fewer than four identical images. To determine the negative emotional relation, a link had to be fulfilled between the concept of

school and the concept of joy assigning four or fewer than four identical images, and also with the concept of fear and also assigning more than four identical images. We identified an ambivalent emotional relation if a school concept corresponded to both concepts – joy and fear together – with the assignment of more than four identical images to both terms, for indifferent emotional relation with connection of fewer than four identical images for both terms.

Procedure

For detecting the relationships between our research variables we used the Pearson correlation coefficient. For identification of a potential moderating effect of cognitive style on the relationship between satisfaction and social atmosphere we used the partial correlation coefficient. Partial correlation analysis involves studying the linear relationship between two variables after excluding the effect of another variable. The moderating effect can also be determined by means of detecting the relationships between two variables in groups formed according to different forms of moderator variable. Therefore, we conducted a statistical analysis in groups formed according to field dependence-independence. When testing the significance of intergroup differences, we used the t-test and ANOVA for quantitative variables, and the chi-squared test of homogeneity for the qualitative variable.

RESULTS

The introductory explanation of the observed variables by means of descriptive characteristics is presented in Tables 1 – 4.

Table 1. Basic descriptive indicators for observed quantitative variables

	Field independence	Social atmosphere	Pupils' satisfaction
AM	14.1	5.79	19.61
Median	14	5.9	19
SD	5.03	1.74	4.71
Minimum	0	1.2	8
Maximum	25	9.2	32

Table 2. Respondents' frequency tabulation in the extreme groups according to the level of field dependence-independence

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Field dependent	82	39.4
Field independent	85	40.9
Not ranked	41	19.7

Table 3. Respondents' frequency tabulation in the extreme groups according to perceived positive/negative social atmosphere

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive atmosphere	65	31.3
Negative atmosphere	69	33.2
Not ranked	74	35.6

Table 4. Respondents' frequency tabulation in the individual quadrants of emotional relation towards school

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Negative relation	68	32.7
Ambivalent relation	1	0.5
Positive relation	47	22.6
Indifferent relation	17	8.2
Not ranked	75	36.1

To determine the relationship between pupils' satisfaction with school (operationalized as a quantitative variable by raw scores from the school satisfaction subscale of *Life Satisfaction Scale for Children*) and social classroom atmosphere we computed a correlation coefficient. We can state that

social atmosphere is related to satisfaction, and this relationship is highly statistically significant, relatively close and positive ($r = 0.58, p < 0.001$).

The satisfaction was also operationalized as a qualitative variable in the sense of emotional relation towards school (results of the

Semantic Choice Test). However, only pupils with a definite positive or negative emotional relation towards school were included in the statistical analysis. The correlation between emotional relation towards school and social atmosphere was researched indirectly in this case – comparing groups of pupils with a positive and negative relation towards school. We identified statistically highly significant inter-group difference in favor of pupils with a positive relation towards school. Thus, we can state that pupils with a positive relation towards school perceive social classroom atmosphere more positively in comparison to pupils with negative relation towards school. Also, this result supports the existence of a relationship between school satisfaction and social atmosphere perception, however only indirectly. The results comparing groups are presented in Table 5.

Researching whether pupils' school satisfaction is related to a level of their field-independence, we again operationalized the satisfaction at the quantitative and qualitative level. The correlation analysis results did not prove a statistically significant relationship between pupils' satisfaction and their field-independence level ($p = 0.325$). A statistically significant difference between pupils with positive and those with negative relation towards school at their level of field independence ($p = 0.654$) was not identified either.

The cognitive style field dependence-independence was considered to be a potential moderator variable in the relationship between pupils' satisfaction and social atmosphere. To determine the relationship between satisfaction and atmosphere while controlling the influence of field independence level, we used partial correlation. We identified a relatively close statistically significant relationship between pupils' school satisfaction and perceived social classroom atmosphere. After eliminating the influence of field independence, this relation barely changed – calculated partial correlation coefficient reached almost the same value as Pearson correlation coefficient (Table 6).

The extreme groups of field dependent and independent pupils were formed by percentiles. We ranked into the group of dependent pupils those with a number under the level of the 40th percentile (12), i.e., lowermost 40% of our research sample with a low independence score ($n = 82$). We ranked into the group of independent pupils those with a number above the level of the 60th percentile (16), i.e., uppermost 40% of our research sample with a high independence score ($n = 85$). To assess the relation between social atmosphere and satisfaction in these mentioned extreme groups, we used correlation analysis. The existence of highly statistically significant relations (relatively close, positive) in a group of field-dependent and also

Table 5. Comparison of pupils with a positive and negative relation towards school in perceiving social atmosphere

Groups	Social atmosphere		t-test (p-value)
	AM	SD	
Positive relation (n = 47)	6.52	1.51	p < 0.001
Negative relation (n = 68)	5.23	1.69	

Table 6. Pearson correlation coefficient for pupils' satisfaction and social atmosphere and partial correlation coefficient after excluding the effect of control variable field independence

	Atmosphere – Satisfaction
r	0.575
p-value	p < 0.001
CONTROL	
Field independence	Atmosphere – Satisfaction
partial r	0.577
p-value	p < 0.001

field-independent pupils was proven. The results are summarized in Table 7.

The pupils' extreme groups of perceived positive and negative social atmosphere were arranged using these percentiles. Pupils with their scores above the 60th percentile (6.3) level were ranked into a group of positive social atmosphere (n = 83). Pupils with their scores under the 40th (5.4) percentile level were ranked into a group of negative social atmosphere (n = 86).

Regarding the inter-group difference in a quantitatively operationalized satisfaction (raw scores from school satisfaction subscale of the *Life Satisfaction Scale for Children*) between groups formed according to both, field independence level and perceived social atmosphere, we carried out the comparison of group mean scores including mean difference testing by ANOVA. Statistical test-

ing of inter-group difference proved a highly significant difference in the satisfaction level (p < 0.001). There are more satisfied pupils perceiving social atmosphere positively than negatively, regardless of being field dependent or field independent (Figure 1).

A possible inter-group difference in the satisfaction qualitatively operationalized as an emotional relation towards school (result of the *Semantic Choice Test*), was assessed on the basis of frequency comparison of positive and negative relation towards school in the groups formed according to both – field independence level and perceived social atmosphere. The significance of the difference in frequency division was tested by chi-squared test of homogeneity. The results of statistical testing pointed to an inter-group difference being highly statistically significant (p = 0.002).

Table 7. Pearson correlation coefficients for the variables of social atmosphere and pupils' satisfaction in field dependent and field independent groups

	Independent (n = 85)	Dependent (n = 82)
Pearson's r	0.62	0.6
p-value	p < 0.001	p < 0.001

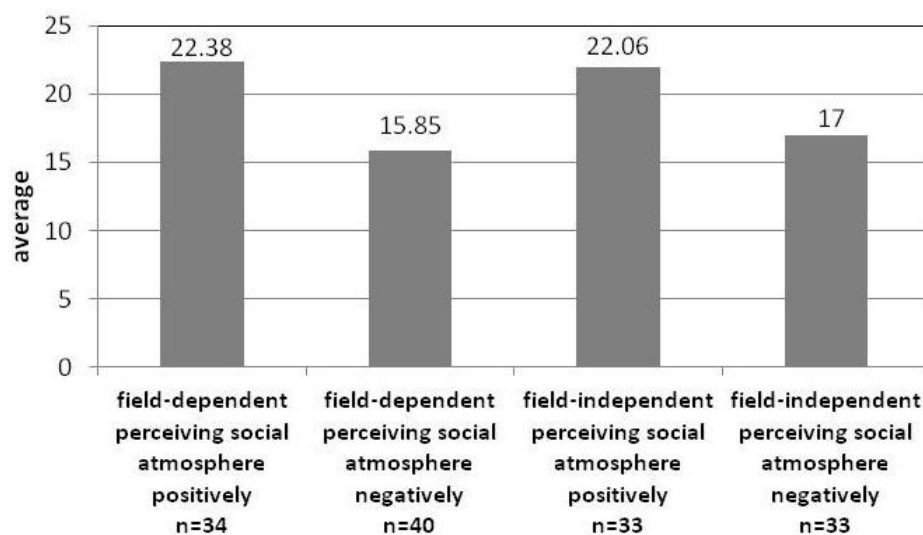


Figure 1. The satisfaction average scores comparison of groups formed according to field independence level and perceived social classroom atmosphere

There are many more pupils with a negative relation towards school perceiving social atmosphere negatively regardless of their field dependence or independence

(Table 8). Those pupils with a positive relation towards school perceive the social atmosphere positively as well regardless of the level of field independence.

Table 8. Frequency comparison of positive and negative relations towards school in groups formed according to the level of field independence and social classroom atmosphere

Groups		Emotional relation towards school	
		Negative	Positive
Field dependent perceiving social atmosphere positively	number	5	9
	%	35.70%	64.30%
Field dependent perceiving social atmosphere negatively	number	20	5
	%	80.00%	20.00%
Field independent perceiving social atmosphere positively	number	9	12
	%	42.90%	57.10%
Field independent perceiving social atmosphere negatively	number	16	3
	%	84.20%	15.80%
Chi-squared test of homogeneity (p-value)		0.002	

DISCUSSION

The main aim of our research was to determine a potential moderating effect of field dependence-independence cognitive style on the relationship between pupils' school satisfaction and social classroom atmosphere.

After analyzing the results, we came to the conclusion that a pupil's school satisfaction is significantly related to perceived social classroom atmosphere. If a pupil sees social atmosphere more positively, he/she is more satisfied at school, if he/she sees the social atmosphere more negatively, then he/she is rather unsatisfied. Our assumptions corresponded to the final results in terms of expecting positive relation between satisfaction and social atmosphere. However, we did not expect to obtain such a close relation between these two mentioned variables, as we had expected a moderating effect of the cognitive style.

Our results did not prove any significant relationship between pupils' school satisfaction and the level of their field independence. These findings were not in accordance with our expectations. Actually, we expected slightly stronger relationship between this pair of variables in comparison with the relation between satisfaction and social atmosphere. Furthermore, we assumed that the partial correlation coefficient between satisfaction and atmosphere would get closer to zero when controlling for the cognitive style. Such situation would correspond to our expectation that the cognitive style field dependence-independence moderates the relationship between satisfaction and social atmosphere. However, the relationship between them without control-

ling for field independence was very strong, and after controlling for field independence it essentially remained strong as well. It leads us to the finding that this cognitive style is not a moderator variable in the relationship between satisfaction and social atmosphere. This conclusion corresponds to the results of sectional correlation analysis in groups of field dependent and independent pupils, and also with the results of the comparison of four groups formed according to field independence and social classroom atmosphere.

This negative finding in our study may be due to individual perceptions of social classroom atmosphere – it was the subjective perception of every individual's social atmosphere reflecting a variety of factors – including school satisfaction of a pupil. It is logical that the happier the pupil is, the more positively he/she perceives social classroom atmosphere. Considering the group evaluation of social classroom atmosphere on the basis of all pupils' statements, or on the basis of teachers' assessment, we could look for a more objective indicator of total classroom atmosphere. Moreover, this would open the way to further research of this subject with the possibility of evaluating group, cumulative social atmosphere, and eventually finding out relationships between our observed variables but pupils of different age groups.

However, on the basis of our research we can only draw the conclusion that cognitive style field dependence-independence has no moderating effect on the relationship between pupils' school satisfaction and perceived social classroom atmosphere.

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SKÚMANIE MODERUJÚCEHO VPLYVU ZÁVISLOSTI-NEZÁVISLOSTI OD
POĽA NA VZŤAH MEDZI SPOKOJNOSŤOU ŽIAKOV V ŠKOLE A
SOCIÁLNOU ATMOSFÉROU TRIEDY

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Súhrn: Výskum bol zameraný na zisťovanie súvislostí medzi spokojnosťou žiakov v škole a sociálnou atmosférou školskej triedy a taktiež medzi spokojnosťou žiakov v škole a kognitívnym štýlom závislosť-nezávislosť od poľa. Hlavným cieľom výskumu bolo zistiť prípadné moderujúce

pôsobenie miery nezávislosti od poľa na vzťah medzi spokojnosťou a sociálnou atmosférou. Na hodnotenie vnímanej sociálnej atmosféry bola použitá Škála na meranie sociálnej atmosféry triedy (Kollárik, 1999). Miera nezávislosti od poľa bola meraná prostredníctvom Skúšky vložených tvarov (Oltman, Raskin, Witkin, 1962). Na zisťovanie spokojnosti žiaka v škole bola použitá subškála školskej spokojnosti zo Škály životnej spokojnosti pre deti (Huebner, 1994), emočný vzťah k škole bol zisťovaný Testom sémantického výberu (podľa: Smékal, 1990). Výskumnú vzorku tvorilo 208 žiakov staršieho školského veku navštevujúcich 6. a 7. ročník základnej školy. Zo zistení vyplýva, že kognitívny štýl závislosť-nezávislosť od poľa nie je moderujúcou premennou ovplyvňujúcou vzťah medzi sociálnou atmosférou a spokojnosťou. Spokojnosť žiakov v škole významne súvisí so sociálnou atmosférou školskej triedy. Miera nezávislosti od poľa sa nepreukázala byť v signifikantnom vzťahu so spokojnosťou žiakov v škole.