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Cooperation across cultures: An examination of the concept in 16 countries

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ABSTRACT

Businesses are coordinated organizations, and cooperation among employees reduces overall organizational costs. Understanding how important cooperation is among different cultures is important, as business becomes increasingly global. However, cross-cultural literature on cooperation deals with firm alliances, joint ventures, and other firm interrelationships, but not on societal differences in cooperation. Is cooperation similar across cultures? Using proxies, this study sought to operationalize cooperation and examine its underpinnings in countries, using the cultural dimensions of individualism and power distance. Although the initial hypotheses stated that cooperation would look different across these dimensions, the international set of 6452 respondents showed that the overwhelming majority had a similar view of cooperation. The study adds to our understanding of cooperation in different societies and contexts, and suggests that there may be a universal view of cooperation across cultures.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Cross-cultural of cooperation at the individual level

Businesses have been defined as coordinated organizations, dependent upon cooperation of employees (Barnard, 1938). The need to work toward “promotively interdependent goals” (Deutsch, 1949:132) requires that firms understand how to capture and build cooperation. Roberts (2006) and Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) identified cooperation as a probative workplace trait, essential for workplace survival (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Organizations with highly interdependent tasks foster the need for cooperation as they try to move from local to global functioning, often using such things as virtual teams (Allred, Snow, & Miles, 1996).

Kerr (1975) argued that organizations cannot depend on chance cooperation. Borman and Motowidlo (1993) stated that the reduction in communication barriers during cooperation reduces overall organizational costs. However, managers must convince employees that cooperation is important by emphasizing the need to achieve a common goal for a common benefit (Barnard, 1938). Although this literature is not recent, it is worth reviewing for its current application in modern global organizations. Since the initial work in this area, few have examined cooperation across cultures in terms of individual preferences or reactions. Much has been limited to firm networks, joint ventures, or strategic alliances (cf., Contractor &

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¹ See Appendix A.

Lorange, 2002; Holm, Eriksson, & Johnson, 1996; Park & Russo, 1996; Sattler, Schrader, & Luthje, 2003; Wilkinson & Young, 2001).

And as many have discussed, it is crucial to understand those functioning in different societies and contexts as the workforce becomes global (cf., Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002; Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999). Cultural dimensions are so much more than individual determinants of behavior; they also influence how people interact within organizational settings (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2000). When cultures and firms intertwine, interesting dynamics are likely to result. The research question examined in this study is whether cooperation can be operationalized through proxies (i.e., concrete measures representing cooperation) in the same manner in cultures with various cultural dimension ratings (Hofstede, 2001), specifically in terms of individualism and power distance. The direct outcome of this proxy would indicate whether there is truly a difference in the value of cooperation across cultures with various ratings of individualism and power distance.

1.2. Overview of cooperation research

Cooperation is essential, because organizational goals are only achieved when members cooperate to reach them. The form of cooperation may be deliberate or accidental, kind or contentious, but cooperation exists or the organization cannot (Barnard, 1938). Roberts (2006) and Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) identified cooperation as a positive workplace trait, especially important as exceptional performance becomes increasingly necessary for workplace survival (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Therefore, organizations with highly interdependent tasks foster the need for cooperation.

Cooperation often requires incentives, as self-interested individuals are more likely to cooperate when rewards result (Kerr, 1975; Smith, 1776/1991). However, many researchers view cooperation as a socialization of values that induces compliance with social norms (cf., Durkheim, 1938). If cooperation is a social norm in a society, then members will be socialized into cooperative behaviors. Deutsch (1949) found that, in general terms, people readily cooperate if (a) they see that their goals are interrelated and (b) cooperation will help them achieve them.

Deutsch (1949), Durkheim (1938), and Smith (1776/1991) saw cooperation in a broad sense, across different organizations and societal structures in the West. However, from a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974), based on research in Western societies, cooperation is based on reciprocity (Fehr & Gintis, 2007; Gouldner, 1960). In other words, cooperation by one person creates an expectation of cooperation by the other (Koster & Sanders, 2006).

Individuals also make sacrifices to punish those who violate norms as to the appropriateness of the exchanges (Fehr & Gintis, 2007). Studies in the West show that, when punishment opportunities are given, cooperation rates increase, sometimes to 100 percent (Anderson & Putterman, 2006; Ostrom, Walker, & Gardner, 1992; Yamagishi, 1986). If there are costs to self-interested behaviors, then individuals are more likely to reciprocate (Anderson & Putterman, 2006; Carpenter, 2007).

Cooperation has been found to be an important component in organizational behavior research in organizations. Individual cooperation in work activities has been shown to increase organizational loyalty (Hage, 1980; Hirschman, 1970) and improve organizational commitment (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1982). Research also defines cooperation as a main part of contextual performance or organizational citizenship behaviors (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Organ, 1997; Van Dyne et al., 1995) and prosocial organizational behavior (Koster & Sanders, 2006). The most frequently studied form of cooperative behavior is contextual performance or organizational citizenship behaviors (Koster & Sanders, 2006; Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000), with the majority of work done in Western societies. Contextual performance has, at its root, the idea that individuals will help each other and work together to achieve organizational goals.

In the West, excellent performers, those whose work regularly exceeds the average, use cooperation as a useful strategy more often than do moderate performers (Sonnentag, 2000). Sonnentag also found that peers use cooperation as a measure of competency when describing excellent performers (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). This is important in organizations relying more on teamwork and other cooperative arrangements (Stevens & Campion, 1994; West, Borrill, & Unsworth, 1998). Therefore, organizations with highly interdependent tasks have attempted to foster cooperation as they move from individualized work to team work (Allred et al., 1996) and from local to global functioning.

1.3. Cultural dimensions relevant to the current study

Individuals living in various areas of the world have different orientations to their environments, resulting in different approaches to dealing with local geographical, political, and economic situations (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1996). Culture consists of the norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes of a group of people, and often the definition includes traditional practices. It is thought to be a reaction to environmental situations (cf., Hofstede, 2001; Kluckhohn, 1954). Although the multitude of definitions and dimensions of culture are breathtaking, most indicate that elements are shared within each culture (cf., Hofstede, 2001; Kluckhohn, 1954; Skinner, 1981; Shweder & LeVine, 1984), including ways of “perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting” (Triandis, 1996: 408). Culture often appears to be virtually seamless – not requiring much conscious thought to incorporate the norms, values, and attitudes into behaviors. In this study, we will employ the cultural dimensions of individualism and power distance to determine whether there is truly a difference in the value of cooperation across cultures. Culture is self-construal, “a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning the relation of the self to others and the self as distinct from others” (Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Yiu Lai, 1999:316). The self is defined as indepen-

dent in societies where individualism is the dominant societal cultural value; the self is defined as interdependent where its opposite, collectivism, is the dominant societal cultural value (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a result, those in individualistic societies define personal goals as more important than group goals; the opposite is true in collectivistic societies (Schwartz, 1990, 1992, 1994; Triandis, 1988, 1990). Non-Western societies tend to be more collectivistic in behavior (Hofstede, 2001) – and 70 percent of the population lives in non-Western societies (Triandis, 1995)! Scholars have examined many different cultural dimensions, but the most prominent has been individualism (cf., Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995).

Power distance, as a cultural dimension is the acceptance and expectation of inequalities which are basically hierarchical or resource differences (Hofstede, 2001). Individuals in higher power distance cultures often do not question statements of those in power (Yang, Mossholder, & Peng, 2007). Organizations in higher power distance cultures often reflect this by having strict hierarchies and communication channels, with little visible input into decision making by lower ranking members. Organizations in higher power distance cultures are more likely to use hierarchy as a guide, rather than a rule. In these cultures, structures are often flat, and participative decision making has become a desirable trait (Hofstede, 2001). Singelis et al. (1995) and Triandis and Gelfand (1998) stated that power distance may covary with individualism/collectivism in many studies, making it difficult to distinguish between the two.

In the work of Singelis et al. (1995), a promising measurement instrument was promoted to measure horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. The research indicated that there is a tight matrix structure among the students surveyed in the pilot study. However, no other studies showing international reliability were found.

The two dimensions of individualism and power distance were chosen because of the frequency of their use and their salience in most of the business literature. In exploring these two dimensions, we do not mean to indicate that the other dimensions would not be of value, but instead that these two appear to be of particular value in the business communities that are interested in topics such as cooperation.

1.4. Cooperation and cultural dimensions

Cooperation emphasizes group accomplishments, so it is generally considered to be a collectivistic trait (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998). Variations in individualism are suspected to influence cooperation (Wagner, 1995), and this study seeks to determine whether power distance does as well. We have been unable to uncover prior research on this point. Many researchers speculate that, since cooperation diminishes personal resources that could be used to achieve personal goals, those in individualistic cultures would be more likely to avoid cooperation (Spence, 1985; Wagner, 1995). Earley (1989, 1993), Gabrenya, Latane, and Wang (1983), Hsu (1970), and Yang (1981) found collectivist group cooperation, although they did not measure the underlying structure. Wagner and Moch (1986) found that individualists may ignore groups if the goals conflict with personal desires, while collectivists may ignore their own personal desires to achieve group goals.

Similarity of values often fosters cooperation, as does similarities of status and social ties (Triandis, 2000). These similarities are strong in collectivistic ingroups and often lead to higher levels of cooperation than those found in individualistic ingroups (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2000). Collectivists, by definition, have fewer and tighter ingroups than do individualists (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2000). Helping others is a requirement of membership in collectivistic culture ingroups, creating focus and identity for the group (Moorman & Blakely, 1995; Paine & Organ, 2000). Therefore, this study is built on the supposition that those in collectivistic cultures would value cooperation more than would those in individualistic cultures.

Power distance would also seem to be a potential factor in cooperation and its value within different cultures. Because of the acceptance of inequalities in higher power distance cultures, group members would be expected to cooperate with those in power over them; however, those in lower power distance cultures might not feel the same pressures to comply.

1.5. Purpose and hypotheses of the study

The purpose of the study was twofold. The first is to determine whether cooperation can be operationalized through proxies in the same manner in cultures with various cultural dimension ratings (Hofstede, 2001). The work within this study is, therefore, to determine the cultural equivalence of the measure across cultures, using statistical validation methods.

The direct outcome of this proxy would indicate whether there is truly a difference in the value of cooperation across cultures with various ratings of individualism and power distance. Two hypotheses are posited from the review of the current literature:

- (1) Cooperation will be more valued in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures.
- (2) Cooperation will be more valued in high power distance cultures than in individualistic cultures.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

A total of 6452 respondents working in various organizations in sixteen different countries participated in the study. The respondents were each born and held citizenship in their respective countries, listed alphabetically in Table 1, along with the demographic data for the overall set and each country. The respondents were each employed in various industries, rather

Table 1
Demographic and other data for sample.

	Countries	Individualism Index/Power Distance Index ^a	Number of respondents	Age	Sex ^b	Occupation ^c	Cronbach's α^d
1	Australia	90/36	744	37	42.9 M 56.7 F	Retail 42.0 Health 33.1	.760
2	Canada	80/39	122	43	14.2 M 85.8 F	Health 100	.694
3	Chile	23/63	588	40	44.5 M 54.5 F	Finan 39.9 Health 35.4 Govt. 24.7	.686
4	France	71/68	93	37	43.0 M 57.0 F	Manuf 40.9 Educ 16.1 Finan 11.8	.641
5	Germany	67/35	256	38	51.2 M 48.8 F	Manuf 25.4 Health 17.2 Retail 10.5 Finan 10.2	.717
6	India	48/77	458	36	26.0 M 28.6 F	Health 54.6 Finan 45.4	.672
7	Lithuania	50/45 ^e	199	41	15.1 M 79.9 F	Health 100	.754
8	Malaysia	26/104	111	–	64.9 M 35.1 F	Manuf 100	.827
9	Poland	60/68	248	41	57.7 M 42.3 F	Manuf 46.4 Retail 25.4 Govt 10.5	.606
10	PRC	20/80	240	36	68.6 M 31.4 F	Manuf 96.8	.692
11	S. Korea	18/60	271	32	26.9 M 72.7 F	Health 100	.773
12	Taiwan	17/58	220	34	10.9 M 87.7 F	Health 100	.773
13	Turkey	37/66	1567	32	32.5 M 67.1 F	Health 100	.721
14	United Arab Emirates	38 ^f /80 ^g	237	33	61.4 M 36.9 F	IT 25.8 Health 21.6 Finan 16.1 Manuf 16.1 Support 10.2	.803
15	United States	91/40	589	32	39.4 M 59.6 F	Health 43.6 Manuf 18.4	.740
16	Venezuela	12/81	509	37	64.4 M 35.8 F	Manuf 60.9 Health 38.7	.740
Total		World averages ^a Individualism-43 power distance-55	6452	35	42 M 58 F	Occupation ^c health 56.2 Manuf 18.8	.777

^a From Hofstede (2001) and http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php.

^b Percentage of respondents.

^c Percentage of major occupations listed ($\geq 10\%$).

^d Cronbach's alpha (scale reliabilities) for each country for the scale comprising the Cooperation Index. Note: None showed significantly improved reliability if one or more questions are deleted.

^e "Arab World" = Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, and Saudi Arabia (http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php).

^f Total number responding to the survey instrument.

^g Mockaitis (2002, 2005).

than a student population. As suggested in Bhagat and McQuaid (1982) and Bhagat and Moustafa (2002), the instrument was translated in countries where the business language was not English, at the direction of country collaborator, with checks through back-translation for fidelity to the original instrument.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Measure of country culture

This study is built on Hofstede's (1981, 2001) analyses of country culture for the individualism and power distance dimensions, whose link between country and culture has been accepted in the mainstream cross-cultural organizational behavior literature, as discussed previously.

Table 2

Factor analysis from each country.

Country	Percent of variance explained by 1st factor	Eigenvalues for factor 1 ^a				
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Total data set	52.981	.722	.727	.749	.745	.695
Australia	51.294	.744	.669	.706	.767	.691
Canada	53.121	.726	.772	.832	.778	.486
Chile	45.032	.629	.653	.711	.719	.637
France	42.821	.771	.596	.723	.726	
Germany	48.608	.791	.614	.679	.789	.586
India	43.486	.650	.620	.673	.695	.657
Lithuania	50.647	.742	.747	.737	.668	.659
Malaysia	59.216	.732	.780	.812	.782	.739
Poland	39.200	.590	.566	.697	.652	.617
People's Republic of China	44.890	.688	.613	.663	.713	.668
S. Korea	52.608	.746	.675	.759	.744	.699
Taiwan	52.818	.629	.795	.711	.782	.703
Turkey	47.349	.640	.710	.701	.701	.687
United Arab Emirates	65.830	.834	.748	.836	.818	.817
United States	56.113	.775	.722	.791	.726	.728
Venezuela	49.272	.720	.724	.702	.693	.669

^a Extraction using principal component analysis.

2.2.2. Measure of cooperation

The measure of cooperation consists of five statements providing a measure of individual attitudes toward cooperation, measured using a Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree). There was a cohesive scale with excellent face validity for use in measurement. These statements are:

- (1) The well-being of my coworkers is important to me;
- (2) If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud;
- (3) I feel good when I cooperate with others;
- (4) It is important to me that I respect decisions made by my groups; and
- (5) I respect the majority's wishes in groups of which I am a member.

The survey is adapted on the work of Singelis et al. (1995), Triandis and Gelfand (1998), and Triandis (2002). We analyzed the entire survey used by Singelis et al. (1995), but there was no identifiable matrix structure and poor reliabilities in the international sample, except for the five questions noted above. We found this to be of interest, and pursued the cooperation perspective, as it is a critical ingredient of business effectiveness in cross-cultural management.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed with SPSS 17.0. Initially, factor analysis was undertaken to determine if there was indeed a single factor structure. To determine whether there was cross-cultural equivalence of the scale, Levine's test of homogeneity of variances was performed. One-way ANOVA with Welch test were used to assess differences in scores between the country/cultural groups on the variable.

3. Results

3.1. Cross-cultural equivalency

Before assuming that scales developed in one country are suitable for another, cross-cultural equivalency is determined. This has been a significant difficulty in cross-cultural empirical studies. Using Vandenberg and Lance's (2000) suggestions, Levine's test of homogeneity of variances was performed, since there was a single dependent variable. Results indicated no significant differences among the variances of the scale across cultures ($p = .000$). This was taken as an excellent indication of the cross-cultural equivalency of the scale.

3.2. Cohesion of the scale

In examining cross-cultural responses to the scale, factor analysis was used. Principle component analysis without rotation showed a single factor matrix structure for the entire data set, as shown in Table 2. Results showed that one factor explains 52.981 percent of the variance and, when eigenvalues below .4 are suppressed, one factor emerges. The reliability of the scale was also tested, using the entire data set, and Cronbach's alpha was .777 for the five items, with no improvement if items were removed.

Table 3
Cooperation scores.

Country	Cooperation index ^a	Percentage respondents ^b	Standard deviation
Australia	5.51	99.6	.875
Canada	5.56	100	.862
Chile	6.28	99.3	.686
France	5.05	98.9	.942
Germany	5.17	100	.863
India	5.91	100	.716
Lithuania	5.24	100	.944
Malaysia	5.35	100	.762
Poland	5.63	100	.753
People's Republic of China	5.14	100	.789
S. Korea	5.14	100	.774
Taiwan	5.60	100	.807
Turkey	5.95	99.6	.917
United Arab Emirates	5.60	99.6	1.125
United States	5.50	100	.923
Venezuela	6.22	100	.828
Total	5.80	99.6	.885

^a Cooperation index = summated mean score for country (taking all respondents answering 4 or more of the five questions, i.e., 70 percent).

^b Percentage of total country respondents answering 4 of 5 cooperation items.

3.3. Country data

There was no significant difference attributable to age, gender, or industry group. ANOVA for the entire data set (Between Groups: Sum of Squares = 792.385; $df = 15$; $F = 79.908$; $p = .000$) demonstrates that there is no significant statistical variation between country respondent means. Welch test ($p = .00$) indicates that there are no statistically different responses between the country respondent means.

Factor analysis was performed for each country group of responses. As shown in Table 2, we found a good factor matrix structure for each country, reflected in the factor structure for the entire dataset. Most of the countries had one major component, when eigenvalues less than .4 were suppressed. We also examined the reliability of the scale for each country, and Cronbach's alphas are given in Table 1. For each country, the alpha values are above the $\alpha = .6$ suggested for reliability in many cross-cultural papers, with most near or above the $\alpha = .7$ recommended for studies within the same culture (Nunnally, 1978; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

Creating a mean Cooperation Index for each of the 6452 respondents was performed using a reductive method: Respondents must answer at least four of the five items (70 percent) before their responses can be used in the remaining analyses. Of the total respondents, 6423 (99.6 percent) answered four of the five items. An individual mean score of 1 indicated the lowest importance given to cooperation, while a score of 7 indicated the highest. With statistical validity and reliability, face validity, and content validity of the entire data set established, further analysis by country was undertaken.

The distributions of country means overlap, ranging from a mean of 5.05 (France) with a standard deviation of .942, to a mean of 6.28 (Chile) with a standard deviation of .686 on the 7 point scale. As shown in Table 3 and Fig. 1, the lowest average country mean is above the midpoint of the scale (4). This indicates that the majority of the respondents surveyed in each country believed that cooperation was important. Analyzing the small differences between countries is counterproductive and could lead to an oversimplification.

Table 1 shows the Individualism Index and Power Distance Index of different countries, based on Hofstede (2001) scores. We had thought to divide the countries, based on their Individualism Index and Power Distance Index, into high, low, and medium individualistic and power distance groups and analyze the data based on these divisions. At this point, correlation analysis was performed using the Individualism and Power Distance Indexes and the newly developed Cooperation Index of this study (-0.182 , $p = .000$; $.157$, $p = .000$, respectively). In neither case was there a strong or significant correlation between cooperation and cultural dimension of the study (Fig. 2).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The multicultural data set of 6452 respondents indicated that there is an interrelationship of five questions that involve the concept of cooperation. Our first hypothesis proposed an inverse relationship, i.e., the lower the Individualism Index, the higher the mean on the Cooperation Index. Our second proposed a direct relationship, i.e., the higher the Power Distance Index, the higher the mean on the Cooperation Index. Our data shows that an individual's attitude toward cooperation is not a function of either index. Whether a person lives in an individualistic or collectivistic country or whether the power distance is high or low, the understanding and agreement as to the importance of cooperation was similar. It would seem that cooperation is not a function of these particular cultural dimensions. The correlation of cooperation and power distance

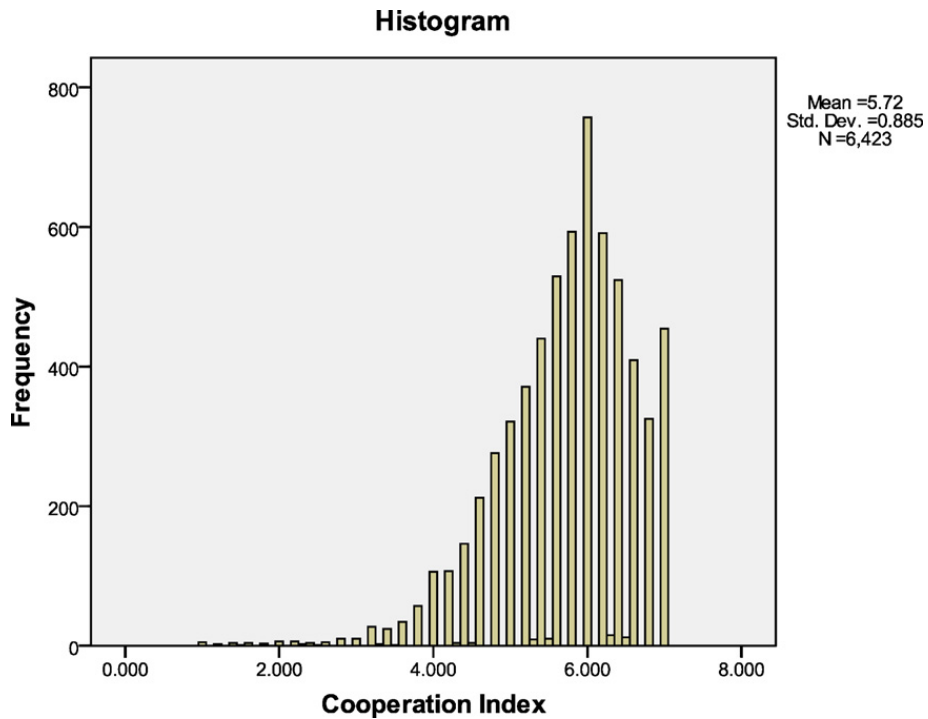


Fig. 1. Frequency of totaled responses to cooperation questions.

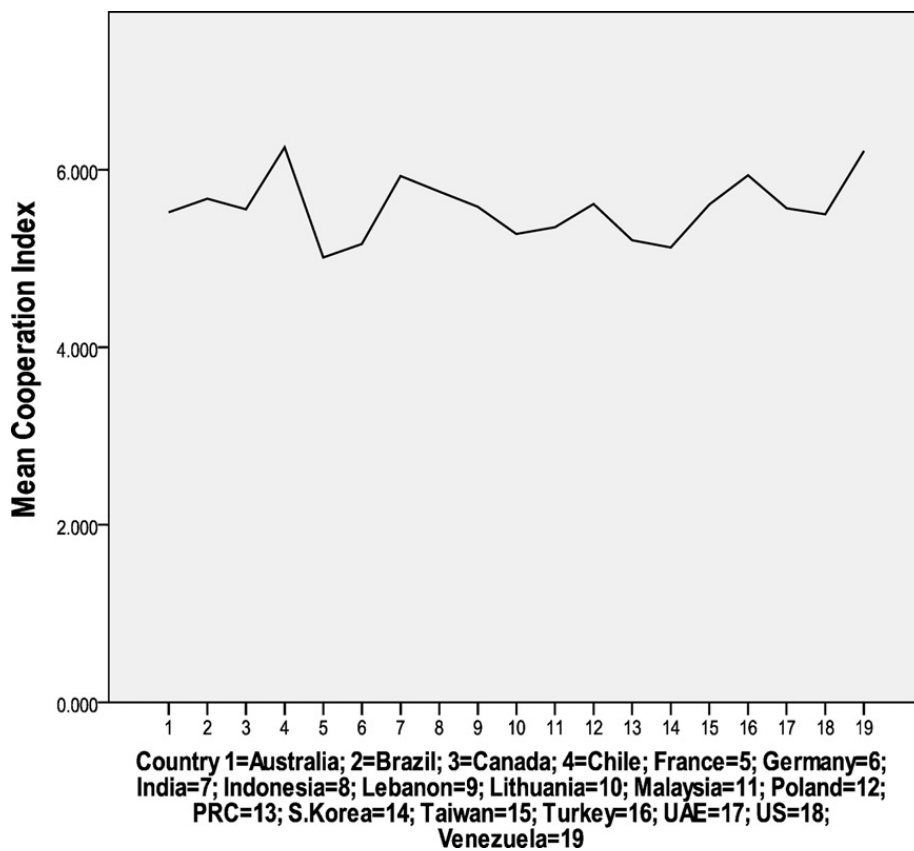


Fig. 2. Cooperation index means for countries.

Table 4
Pearson's correlation analysis.

		Cooperation index	Hofstede Individualism Index	Hofstede Power Distance Index
Cooperation index	Pearson's correlation	1		
	P value			
	N	6423		
Hofstede Individualism Index	Pearson's correlation	-.182**	1	
	P value	.000		
	N	6224	6253	
Hofstede Power Distance Index	Pearson's correlation	.157**	-.787**	1
	P value	.000	.000	
	N	6224	6253	6253

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

is interesting, and we plan further studies to determine the nature of the correlation, which was not reflected in the way that individuals perceive cooperation (Table 4).

Our data shows no statistically significant differences in the means; therefore, we can see that cooperation at work is strongly valued among all cultures. Therefore, we can strongly suggest that, even if two groups of people have different languages and cultures, they can cooperate using a similar basis of understanding of what cooperation entails. We were somewhat surprised to find that little empirical work had been done using cooperative behaviors across cultures. In analyzing the multinational data, we hope to have an impact on the theoretical view of cross-cultural cooperation.

As globalization increases exponentially with unforeseen technological and economic changes, it is crucial to understand those who function in different societies. We often make false assumptions about the “West,” assuming that individuals in these countries are similar and that each person has an individualistic outlook (Hofstede, 2001). We understand the dynamic between the knowledge developed in the West and considered “universal” (Prasad, 1997) and “native knowledge” from elsewhere (Banerjee, 2000; Banerjee & Linstead, 2001; Said, 1981; waThiong'o, 1981, 2006).

In looking at our data, cooperation appears the same, but there are some striking differences that might affect individuals differently. For example, one approach to human relations, called the investment approach (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripli, 1997) indicates that more contextual performance, including cooperation, occurs when employees perceive that the employer is investing in them. Other research indicates that supervisors who are cooperative toward employees are likely to receive cooperation in return (Koster & Sanders, 2006), and this is a likely affect among peers as well (Bommer, Miles, & Grover, 2003).

Our primary factor, cooperation, is the subject of this paper, and we hope this provides new and useful information for the discussion and analysis of the concept. Given the differences between individualist and collectivist societies, it is likely that the reasons for cooperation might be different, which is an interesting idea, but beyond the scope of this paper. We suggest that there is much benefit in examining cross-cultural cooperation, because of its importance in the future, as we turn from individualized work structures in a single cultural environment to teamwork in a global context.

Appendix A.

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