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## Inter-firm Relationship Quality vs. Perceived Cultural Differences

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## **Inter-firm Relationship Quality vs. Perceived Cultural Differences**

### **Abstract**

The objective of this exploratory study is to determine whether and (if so) how perceived cultural differences influence relationship quality.

To make this determination this study analyzed the cooperation of 278 Polish exporters and importers with their German and Chinese partners. Indicators of perceived cultural differences by cooperating companies were created, and then linear regression models were derived, showing the dependence of relationship quality dimensions on the perceived cultural differences. The findings confirmed the impact of the cultural differences perceived by Polish partners on all dimensions of inter-firm relationship quality. However, not all the perceived differences influenced the relationships. The perception of the differences did not depend strongly on the partner's country of origin.

This study identifies new antecedents of relationship quality, which not only contribute to the international business theory but also suggests practical managerial implications. On the whole, managers can improve relationship quality if they behave similarly to their partners.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural management, relationship marketing, cultural differences, international cooperation, relationship quality

**JEL:** F23, L14

## Introduction

Growing competition on the global market makes cooperation with the right partners an important condition for success. Inter-firm relations have gained therefore in importance. Good relations with a business partner also lower transaction costs, help building customer commitment and allow access to knowledge and technology of the partner – thus increasing the length and intensiveness of the cooperation. Lasting and good relations can serve as bridges to other firms that may be instrumental in mobilizing partners against threat from competitors [Johanson, Mattsson, 1987]. Research provides empirical evidence of the dependence between relationship outcomes and perceived relationship quality, or satisfaction with the relationship. The positive influence of satisfaction with a relationship on customer loyalty on the B2B market was empirically tested by Chumpitaz, Caceres, and Paparoidamis [2007]. Their findings confirmed the high efficiency of investments in building trust and commitment. The research by Hennig-Thurau et al. [2002] suggests that relationship quality influences marketing outcomes. Also Kose et al. [2013], in their study on relationship quality in sports organizations, shown that relationship quality positively affects satisfaction and recommendation behavior.

Cooperation with foreign partners has been practiced by a growing number of firms, even small ones. Cooperation with international partners can be influenced by factors usually absent on the domestic market, such as cultural, economic, political, legal and technological differences. This impact has been a research topic of many studies, most of which were devoted to cultural differences.

Cultural differences influence cooperation between independent enterprises [Conway, Swift, 2000; Gianetti, 2012], the performance of partnerships [Meirovich, 2010] or trade between countries in general [Tadesse, White, 2010]. Cultural similarity and a partner's national culture awareness are considered conditions of effective cooperation [Pabian, 2008; Stępień, 2011, p. 229], while cultural differences are treated as cooperation barriers [Leick, 2011]. According to de Burca et al. [2004], perceived relationship quality in a business-to-business context is influenced by two factors: culture and prior experiences, with prior experiences having an impact on the relationship assessment by customers while culture impacts both suppliers and customers.

The above mentioned studies hardly explain how cultural differences influence business relationship quality, which has mostly been studied rather in the business-to-business context. A study on cultural determinants of international relationship quality requires an exploratory than explanatory approach, as the existing literature offers only general explanations. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to determine whether and, if so, how perceived cultural differences influence the quality of relationships between companies.

### Inter-firm Relationship Quality

Inter-firm cooperation and relations constitute an important element of such theories, as:

- the agency theory, pertaining to the relationship between principals and agents [Dowrick, 1954];
- the transaction costs theory, that pays particular attention to the possibility of opportunistic behavior of partners and to the costs of protection against such behavior [Williamson, 1991, pp. 75–94; Williamson 1998];
- network theories, focusing on cooperating subjects, activities they undertake and assets at their disposal [Håkansson, Johanson, 1992], and analyzing the relations between a supplier and customer (among the elements of the relation there are the exchange of goods, technologies, financial exchange and informal contact – see: Fonfara [2012, p. 15]);
- resource-based theories, according to which close, collaborative relationships with key customers and suppliers can be perceived as valuable firm assets [Hogan and Armstrong 2001]; and
- the social capital theory, pertaining to the role of trust in the cooperation [Putnam, 1995; Carlos, Pinho, 2013].

Relationship management is a subject of research and theoretical considerations in relationship marketing [Gummesson, 1987; Storbacka et al., 1994], institutional marketing [Szmigin, 1993], and – recently – international marketing [Lages et al., 2005].

Relationship quality is defined as “the overall depth and climate of the inter-firm relationship” [Johnson, 1999, p. 6], as an “overall assessment of the strength of a relationship and the extent to which it meets the needs and expectations of the parties” [Smith, 1998, p. 78]. It is frequently conceptualized as a high order construct, encompassing factors such as “trust, satisfaction, commitment, minimal opportunism, customer orientation, and ethical profile” [e.g., Dorsch et al., 1998, p. 130]. The latter approach is particularly helpful in measuring the relationship quality, although one could consider the proposed list of factors comprising the relationship quality as not complete. Moreover, it reflects the customer perspective, as it includes customer orientation. There are many studies concerning relationship components, factors influencing relationships or relationship aspects of inter-firm cooperation. None of the approaches reported so far predominates in the literature. The concepts of inter-firm relationship components (for a review of relationship quality definitions and studies, see Holmlund [2008]) differ in the degree of specificity and meaning ascribed to the individual properties of relationships, but one can still find certain similarities like ascribing crucial importance to trust or communication.

In line with the current research on the topic, this paper examines the ten dimensions of relationship quality described in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. Relationship quality dimensions**

Relationship quality dimension	Terms used in other studies	Authors
Trust	trust	Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Naudé and Buttle, 2000; de Burca et al., 2004; Światowiec, 2006, Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Holmlund, 2008; Provan and Sydow, 2008; Ashnai et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2010; Kang et al., 2013; Kose et al., 2013
Atmosphere/ commitment	relationship commitment	Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Roslin and Melewar, 2004
	building a personal relationship	de Burca et al., 2004
	atmosphere	Woo and Ennew, 2004
	commitment	Ulaga and Eggert, 2006
	acquaintance, respect, congeniality, pleasure	Holmlund, 2008
	relational commitment, intimacy	Kose et al., 2013
Information flow	information exchange	Johanson and Mattson, 1987
	communication	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
	provision of timely and relevant information	de Burca et al., 2004
	amount of information sharing, communication quality of the relationship	Lages et al., 2005
	information exchange	Światowiec, 2006
	communication	Kang et al., 2013
Forced cooperation/ dependence	asset specificity	Williamson, 1998
	dependence	Johanson and Mattson, 1987
	relations termination costs	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
	power	Naudé and Buttle, 2000; Ashnai et al., 2008; Provan and Sydow, 2008
	specific assets in relationship, dependence	Światowiec, 2006
	switching costs	Kim et al., 2010
	dependence, transaction-specific investment, termination cost	Kang et al., 2013
Flexibility	adaptation processes	Johanson and Mattson, 1987
	acquiescence	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
	adaptation	Woo and Ennew, 2004
	flexibility	Światowiec, 2006; Holmlund 2008; Hammervoll, 2009

Relationship quality dimension	Terms used in other studies	Authors
Fulfillment of obligations	opportunistic behavior	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
	fulfilling the promises made during negotiation or before the close of the deal	de Burca et al., 2004
	opportunism	Światowiec, 2006
Conflicts	functional conflict	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
	conflict resolution	Hammervoll, 2009
	conflict	Kang et al., 2013
Similarity	shared values	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
Perceived risk	decision-making uncertainty	Morgan and Hunt, 1994
	risk and uncertainty	Światowiec, 2006
	technological uncertainty	Kim et al., 2010
Competencies	use of competence	Holmlund, 2008

Source: own elaboration.

All the relationship dimensions mentioned above refer to intangible aspects of business cooperation. Therefore, it is hard to measure relationship quality objectively. What can be measured and studied is subjective relationship quality. As Holmlund stated: “The content of perceptions is a key element, and perceptions of a relationship are based on the interactions taking place in the relationships” [2008, p. 44].

Moreover, one can not expect symmetry in relation quality perceptions between partners. The relationship quality perceived by one partner can be different than the quality perceived by the other one.

## Poland, Germany and China in Selected Studies on Culture

Culture was defined by Linton as “a configuration of learned behaviors and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society” [1945, p. 32]. Although culture was earlier a matter of interest on the part of representatives of many sciences, became imbedded in economic studies in the 1960s, when the interdependence between organizational and national culture was first investigated by Hofstede. The issues of cultural differences between individual nations are touched upon in the literature in the context of – among other topics – their influence on social development and economic progress [Harrison, Huntington, 2000], entry mode choice [Kogut, Singh, 1988], international organization management [Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, 2002], consumer behavior [Briley, Aaker, 2006] and, finally, intercompany cooperation [Gesteland, 1999].

National cultures are described and compared by characterizing (most frequently through indicators) their individual dimensions. The methodology of some research (especially the research conducted by Hofstede) has been criticized by many authors (e.g., Fang [2003; 2005; 2012], Yaprak [2008], McSweeney [2009; 2013], Sasaki [2012], Filippaios, Avlaniti [2012] Taras et al. [2014]). These critiques mentioned above do not undermine the existence of cultural differences between countries and among individuals.

In order to establish the influence of cultural differences on relationship quality the cooperation of Polish companies with their Chinese and German partners was studied. Native countries of partners of the surveyed firms were selected according to their positions as Poland's trade partners (in 2011 Germany was Poland's most important trade partner both in imports and exports, while China was Poland's third biggest imports supplier [Rocznik Statystyczny, 2012]). The second reason for choosing these countries was the cultural distance between them and Poland, as indicated in the literature.

Some results of pertinent, previous research are presented below. However, the focus here will be on outcomes rather than applied methodology, which is studied in other publications [e.g., Minkov, 2013].

Each of the three countries under study belongs to a different culture cluster [House et al., 2004, p. 191; Gesteland, 1999]. According to Hofstede et al. [2011], Poland's culture is close to the culture of Germany and China on certain dimensions (femininity-masculinity dimension), and in the case of others it differs in varying degrees.

Table 2 presents the results of selected studies on the national cultures of Poland, Germany and China (including observations by Gesteland [1999]). They are not consistent (e.g., indices for power distance in the case of GLOBE research, mainly in practices, are quite alike for the three countries while in the studies by Hofstede et al. they decidedly differ) as they were conducted at different times, using different methodology and with different cultural dimensions taken into account. However, the general conclusion is that according to these studies the national cultures of Poland, China and Germany are different.

**TABLE 2. Culture of Poland, China and Germany in selected studies**

Culture dimension/index	Poland	China	West Germany	East Germany
Schwartz [1994]				
Conservatism	431	397*	342	350
Affective autonomy	313	332*	403	416
Intellectual autonomy	409	427*	475	447
Hierarchy	253	370*	227	269
Mastery	400	473*	407	416
Egalitarian commitment	482	449*	537	529
Harmony	410	371*	442	408

Culture dimension/index	Poland		China		West Germany		East Germany	
Gesteland [1999]								
Deal-focus vs. relationship-focus	Moderate relationship-focused		Relationship-focused		Deal-focused			
Informal vs. formal	Formal		Formal		Moderately formal			
Monochronic vs. polychronic	Polychronic		Monochronic		Monochronic			
Expressive vs. reserved	Variably expressive		Reserved		Reserved			
GLOBE [House et al., 2004]								
	P	V	P	V	P	V	P	V
Performance orientation	3.89	6.12	4.45	5.67	4.25	6.01	4.09	6.09
Future orientation	3.11	5.20	3.75	4.73	4.27	4.85	3.95	5.23
Gender egalitarianism	4.01	4.52	3.05	3.68	3.10	4.89	3.06	4.90
Assertiveness	4.06	3.90	3.76	5.44	4.55	3.09	4.73	3.23
Institutional collectivism	4.53	4.22	4.77	4.56	3.79	4.82	3.56	4.68
In-group collectivism	5.52	5.74	5.80	5.09	4.02	5.22	4.52	5.18
Power distance	5.10	3.12	5.04	3.10	5.25	2.54	5.54	2.69
Human orientation	3.61	5.30	4.36	5.32	3.18	5.46	3.40	5.44
Uncertainty avoidance	3.62	4.71	4.94	5.28	5.22	3.32	5.16	3.94
McCrae and Terracciano [2005]								
Neuroticism	507		465		481			
Extraversion	492		466		496			
Openness	486		501		549			
Agreeableness	485		486		521			
Conscientiousness	494		480		523			
Hofstede et al. [2011]								
Power distance	68		80		35			
Individualism	60		20		67			
Masculinity	64		66		66			
Uncertainty avoidance	93		30		65			
Long Term Orientation***	38		87		83/78**			

P – Practices.

V – Values.

\* China combined.

\*\* Germany and Eastern Germany, respectively.

\*\*\* According to data by World Values Survey.

Source: own elaboration.



Two concepts are used as general measures of cultural differences: cultural distance and psychic distance. Cultural distance is defined as “the degree to which cultural values in one country are different from those in another country” [Sousa and Bradley, 2008, p. 471]. This notion is more suitable applied at the national level rather than the individual one. A previous study on Polish firms’ cooperation and cultural differences [Danik, Duliniec, 2014] finds that Polish firms’ relations with foreign partners are rarely influenced by the partners’ national culture (cooperation with partners from China and Germany did not differ significantly in information flow, similarity, competencies, atmosphere/commitment, conflicts, fulfillment of obligations and forced cooperation/dependence), so cultural distance seems to have a relatively small influence on relationship quality.

Individual perception of differences between the home and foreign country is associated with the notion of psychic distance [Sousa, Bradley, 2005; 2006; 2008]. Psychic distance is positively correlated with the existence of cultural distance [Sousa and Bradley, 2006], but it can manifest through different phenomena like language differences, differences in literacy and education, climatic conditions, lifestyles or geographical distance (see Sousa, Bradley, 2006; Zanger et al., 2008). The further analysis here will focus on dissimilarities in the culture conditioned behavior of business partners (as perceived by Polish managers) and I will employ the concept of perceived cultural differences in partners’ behavior.

To find antecedents of relationship quality this paper concentrates on perceptions of cultural differences. As asserted by Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg, the perception of a given group “leads to behavior corresponding with specific attributes of the stereotype” [1998, p. 873]. Hence, one can assume that the perception of differences between cooperating partners will influence their behavior and thereby the relationship quality. However there is a need to explain which perceived cultural differences influence relationship quality and which relational dimensions are influenced by perceived cultural differences.

The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate the ties of quality of relationships between companies and perceived cultural differences in their behavior. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) Do the perceived cultural differences in the behavior of Polish firms and their Chinese and German partners influence cooperation quality?  
(in case of “yes” to Question 1):
- 2) Which perceived cultural differences in the behavior of Polish firms and their Chinese/German partners influence relationship quality?
- 3) Which relationship dimensions are influenced by perceived cultural differences in the behavior of Polish firms and their Chinese/German partners?

## Research Methods and Sample

Data was collected through the CATI method (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) in January and February 2013. Standardized questionnaires were used.

The selected sample consisted of small and medium-sized companies because in firms of this size managers usually decide about the international cooperation, whereas in bigger companies such cooperation could be influenced by more people (the object of the research being decision makers' perceptions). The Hoppenstedt & Bonnier (HBI) database updated at the end of 2010 and containing information about companies operating in Poland served as a sampling frame.

A random-stratified sampling was applied. The sample included three groups of firms, arranged according to the number of employees (1 to 9, 10 to 49 and 50 to 249). The entry frame (gross sampling) was  $N = 41\,520$  records (enterprises employing 1 to 249 employees and belonging to the C section of the Polish Classification of Activities – PKD, i.e., firms dealing in industrial processing). The randomized algorithm in the software for telephone surveys offered an equal chance of entering the sample to each record in the data base. The interviews began with the screening questions eliminating companies not cooperating with Chinese or German partners. For the sake of the research, cooperation was defined as the relationships of more than one year in length, involving performing regular (and not one-off), joint business tasks by partners when the partners were independent, i.e., with no capital ties, or, if capital ties existed, neither of the firms could have supervisory powers over their partner (see Stępień [2011, pp. 15–33]). Of 1791 respondents who refused to take part in the research 334 proposed to give the interview after the deadline. Fully 6418 companies did not cooperate with German or Chinese partners. Interviews covered 280 SMEs operating in Poland and cooperating with partners in China or Germany. Two of the surveyed firms were further excluded from the analysis due to not meeting the criterion of employment size.

The target respondents were persons responsible in a company for cooperation with foreign partners. Accordingly, interviews involved sales, export and marketing directors, company owners, sales, export and marketing managers. In most cases (89%) the scope of the cooperation with foreign partners was limited to export-import transactions and services connected with manufacturing.

To demonstrate the influence of cultural differences on cooperation between Polish enterprisers and their Chinese/German partner's respondents were asked about their and their partner's behavior and their cooperation. Respondents were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality, and the questions regarding relationship quality and partners' behavior were separated in the questionnaire to avoid a common method bias. Before the data analysis a *post hoc* Harman's single factor test was conducted. The common method bias seems not be a pervasive issue in this study, as less than 20% of the variance was explained by the single factor.

TABLE 3. Sample characteristics

	Category	Frequencies	% valid		Category	Frequencies	% valid
Cooperation type*	Exporters to China	64	23.0	Staff size	1–9	24	8.6%
	Importers of goods from China	84	30.2		10–49	107	38.5%
	Exporters to Germany	83	29.9		50–249	147	52.9%
	Importers of goods from Germany	76	27.3		Total	278	100.0%
Share of exports in total sales over past three years	Under 30%	84	32.4	Share of imports it total supply over past three years	Under 30%	120	54.1
	30–49%	65	25.1		30–49%	45	20.3
	50–79%	74	28.6		50–79%	42	18.9
	80–100%	36	13.9		80–100%	15	6.8
	Total	259**	100.0		Total	222**	100.0
Sales	Up to PLN 2 mln (inclusive)	43	18.8%	Capital	Polish	239	86%
	Above PLN 2–10 mln (inclusive)	81	35.4%		Mixed	26	9.4
	Above PLN 10–50 mln (inclusive)	84	36.7%		Foreign	13	4.7%
	Above PLN 50 mln (inclusive)	21	9.2%		Total	278	100.0%
	Total	229**	100.0%				

\* % do not add up to 100 as some surveyed companies were simultaneously exporters and importers or cooperated both with Chinese and German partners.

\*\* Some respondents refused or were unable to provide answers, hence  $n < 278$ .

Source: own elaboration.

Questions referring to enterprise behavior addressed the following aspects of national culture:

- individualism/collectivism [Hofstede, 1983; Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, 2002; House et al., 2004],
- approach to time, monochronism/polychronism, long- and short-term orientation [Hall, 1959; Hofstede, Bond, 1988; Gesteland, 1999; Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, 2002; House et al., 2004],
- gender egalitarianism [House et al., 2004],
- ceremoniousness [Gesteland, 1999],
- contextuality [Hall, 1976],
- uncertainty avoidance [Hofstede, 1983; House et al., 2004],
- deal-focus / relationship-focus [Gesteland, 1999],

- femininity/masculinity (assertiveness) [Hofstede, 1983; House et al., 2004], and
- power distance [Hofstede, 1983; House et al., 2004].

Respondents were asked 22 questions about the degree to which a set of statements (e.g., “we attach great importance to procedures”) applied to their enterprise in the course of its cooperation with major partners from China/Germany. Next, they were given a set of 22 identical questions about the degree to which these statements applied to the conduct of the partners in during the cooperation (e.g., “my partner attaches great importance to procedures”). The results were measured on a Likert type scale from 1 (absolutely not practiced) to 5 (practiced very frequently). Respondents could also classify statements as inapplicable to the described cooperation (encoded as 6) or choose an “I don’t know” option when answering questions about partners (encoded as 7). In the further processing such replies were classified as missing values and were not taken into account.

Next, the respondents were asked 52 questions concerning their cooperation, especially its relational aspects. Results were again measured by a Likert type scale from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). The questions were compiled based on the relationship quality literature studies described above. As only one part of the cooperation (Polish companies) was interviewed, the questions reflected its perspective (e.g., questions about competencies were limited only to the respondent’s perception of the competencies of their partner’s employees), but some questions were also related to the respondents perception of the partner’s perspective (e.g., the statement of “cooperation involves a high risk for our partner”). Moreover, questions about flexibility concerned supplier’s flexibility, hence questions put to importers differed from those to exporters (see Table 4).

To reduce the number of pertinent predictors in the multiple regression analysis, attempts were made to create composite indicators for the cultural aspects of behavior and relations during cooperation. However, the effort was not entirely successful since cultural differences indicators proved to have too low internal reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha < 0.6$ ), therefore the individual items were later analyzed separately, and not as part of composite variables. On the whole, nine indicators measuring relationship quality were developed and used later in the regression analysis. All nine represented the mean values of replies addressing a given feature. Three items (“my partner’s behavior is predictable”, “we achieve our aims by fighting our partner rather than by cooperating with him”, and “if we only could, we would cease cooperating with this partner”) were not included in any of the indicators owing to their low correlation to the remaining items. Due to excessively low reliability values ( $< 0.5$ ) the results of the trust scale were also excluded. Table 3 lists the items and the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  values for individual scales.

Because of the significance of trust in the relations quality underlined in the literature, trust was included in the analysis. Mutual trust became a part of the dimension atmosphere/commitment and a partner’s trustworthiness was treated as a separate dimension of relationship quality.

TABLE 4. Items and Cronbach's alpha values for individual scales

Cooperation assessment indicator	Items	Exporters to China	Importers from China	Exporters to Germany	Importers from Germany
Information flow	We never conceal information from our partner Our partner never conceals information from us Information flow between our partner and ourselves is efficient Together with our partner we have developed information relaying procedures Information is relayed in a previously-agreed way Misunderstandings occur in our dealings with our partner (reverse scale) Our partner understands our enterprise's needs	0.630	0.714	0.675	0.583
Similarity	The way in which our enterprise conducts business definitely differs from the way our partner conducts business The way business is conducted in our partner's country definitely differs from the way business is conducted in Poland	0.593	0.879	0.754	0.676
Perceived risk	Cooperation involves a high risk for our enterprise Cooperation involves a high risk for our partner	0.517	0.542	0.888	0.748
Competencies	Our partner's employees are competent	x	x	x	x
Atmosphere/commitment	We are satisfied with our cooperation with our partner Our partner does not want to let us down We do not want to let our partner down The cooperation conditions are negotiable Unexpectedly and without explanation our partner has demanded a renegotiation of the cooperation conditions (reverse scale) Our cooperation with our partner is efficient Our partner is very committed to cooperating with us We are very committed to cooperating with our partner We strive to maintain good relations with our partner Our partner strives to maintain good relations with us Relations with our partner are based on mutual trust Relations with our partner are based on mutual control (reverse scale) Relations with our partner are based on the fulfilment of contractual obligations	0.823	0.848	0.815	0.845

Conflicts	<p>Conflicts occur frequently during cooperation with the partner                  Together with our partner we have developed procedures for resolving conflicts                  When conflicts occur we use specified procedures                  Conflicts with our partner are resolved by compromise and negotiation</p>	0.639	0.607	0.665	0.682
Fulfillment of obligations	<p>Our partner fulfills his obligations well                  Our partner keeps deadlines                  Our enterprise keeps deadlines</p>	0.807	0.684	0.813	0.752
Forced cooperation/dependence	<p>Cooperation with this partner would be hard to replace by cooperation with another enterprise                  Our partner would have trouble finding an enterprise to replace ours                  Our partner makes use of his leverage in dealings with us                  We make use of our leverage in dealings with our partner                  The termination of cooperation with this partner would incur serious costs for us                  Most of our exports/ imports are connected with our cooperation with this partner                  Cooperation with this partner is of key importance to our enterprise                  If we were seeking a cooperation partner, we would choose this enterprise                  We incurred high costs to launch cooperation with this partner</p>	0.667	0.580	0.755	0.619
Trust	<p>Our partner is trustworthy                  We trusted our partner from the outset of our cooperation                  We developed trust in our partner in the course of our cooperation, when we realized that he could be trusted</p>	0.819	0.503	0.455	0.469
Flexibility	<p><u>Exporters:</u>                  We continuously upgrade our technology to keep abreast of the latest achievements in hi-tech                  In changed conditions we would offer new technological solutions to our partner                  We are always open to our partner's suggestions regarding technological improvement                  We introduce organizational changes when required to by our partner                  We are able to combine a broad variety of technologies if required by our partner  <u>Importers:</u>                  Our partner continuously upgrades technology to keep abreast of the latest achievements in hi-tech                  In changed conditions our partner would offer new technological solutions to us                  Our partner is open to our suggestions regarding technological improvement                  Our partner introduces organizational changes when required by us                  Our partner is able to combine a broad variety of technologies if required by us</p>	0.679	0.716	0.739	0.520

Source: own elaboration.

The next step was to determine indexes measuring differences in culture-conditioned behavior in the surveyed companies and their partners. These indicators were obtained from studying differences in the behavior ratings of the surveyed enterprises and their partners ( $X_{\text{resp. company}} - X_{\text{partner}}$ ).

## Research Results

To compare cooperation with Chinese and German partners, a t-test for two independent samples was applied. In four instances the perceived differences between Polish firms and their foreign partners turned out to be significant: long-term planning ( $p < 0.05$ ), importance of punctuality ( $p < 0.05$ ), importance of etiquette ( $p < 0.05$ ) and direct communication ( $p < 0.01$ ). In all these cases the perceived distance to China was bigger than to Germany – it seemed that enterprises cooperating with Chinese partners were more likely to attribute said behavioral patterns to themselves (the indicators of perceived differences were positive). On the other hand, companies cooperating with German firms were apt to show a reverse pattern by more often reporting such practices in their partners than themselves. In the case of the indicator “looking for compromise in negotiations” the difference was significant at a less stringent level of 0.1. Here too, the distance to China was bigger than to Germany. Poland had in this case the highest score, which suggested that Polish enterprises made more concessions during negotiations than either their German or Chinese counterparts (Table 5).

**TABLE 5. Indexes of cultural differences perceived by cooperating companies**

Index	China		Germany		Averages difference
	M	SE	M	SE	
Participation of the top management in negotiations	-0.282	0.199	-0.366	0.194	0.084
Taking decisions about cooperation solely at the top management level	-0.205	0.186	-0.098	0.181	-0.108
One decision maker	-0.667	0.228	-0.171	0.223	-0.496
Good relations as a pre-condition for doing business	0.256	0.142	0.220	0.138	0.037
Business result more important than good relations with the partner	0.667	0.193	0.439	0.188	0.228
Looking for compromise in negotiations	0.641	0.197	0.110	0.192	0.531 <sup>^</sup>
Attempts to dominate the partner	-0.359	0.171	-0.488	0.167	0.129
Cooperation rather than struggle with the partner	-0.154	0.181	-0.573	0.176	0.419

Preference for inclusion of all cooperation conditions in the contract	0.179	0.176	0.000	0.172	0.179
Considering oral commitments as binding	-0.333	0.213	-0.378	0.207	0.045
Importance attached to procedures	0.000	0.175	0.061	0.171	-0.061
Preference for stability versus innovativeness	-0.282	0.156	-0.085	0.152	-0.197
Long-term planning	0.333	0.115	-0.024	0.112	0.358*
Current problems' focus	0.385	0.220	-0.098	0.215	0.482
Importance of punctuality	0.436	0.150	-0.098	0.147	0.533*
Importance of etiquette	0.308	0.154	-0.220	0.150	0.527*
Reliance on direct communication	0.590	0.134	-0.085	0.130	0.675**
Withholding emotions in contacts with the partner	-1.795	0.166	-1.585	0.162	-0.210
Importance of being friendly to others	0.256	0.107	0.256	0.105	0.000
Tolerance for errors	0.026	0.177	0.317	0.172	-0.291
Participation of women in management	0.462	0.254	0.183	0.248	0.279
Participation of own female employees in negotiations	0.026	0.269	0.146	0.263	-0.121

^ – result on a less rigorous significance level of  $p < 0.10$ .

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

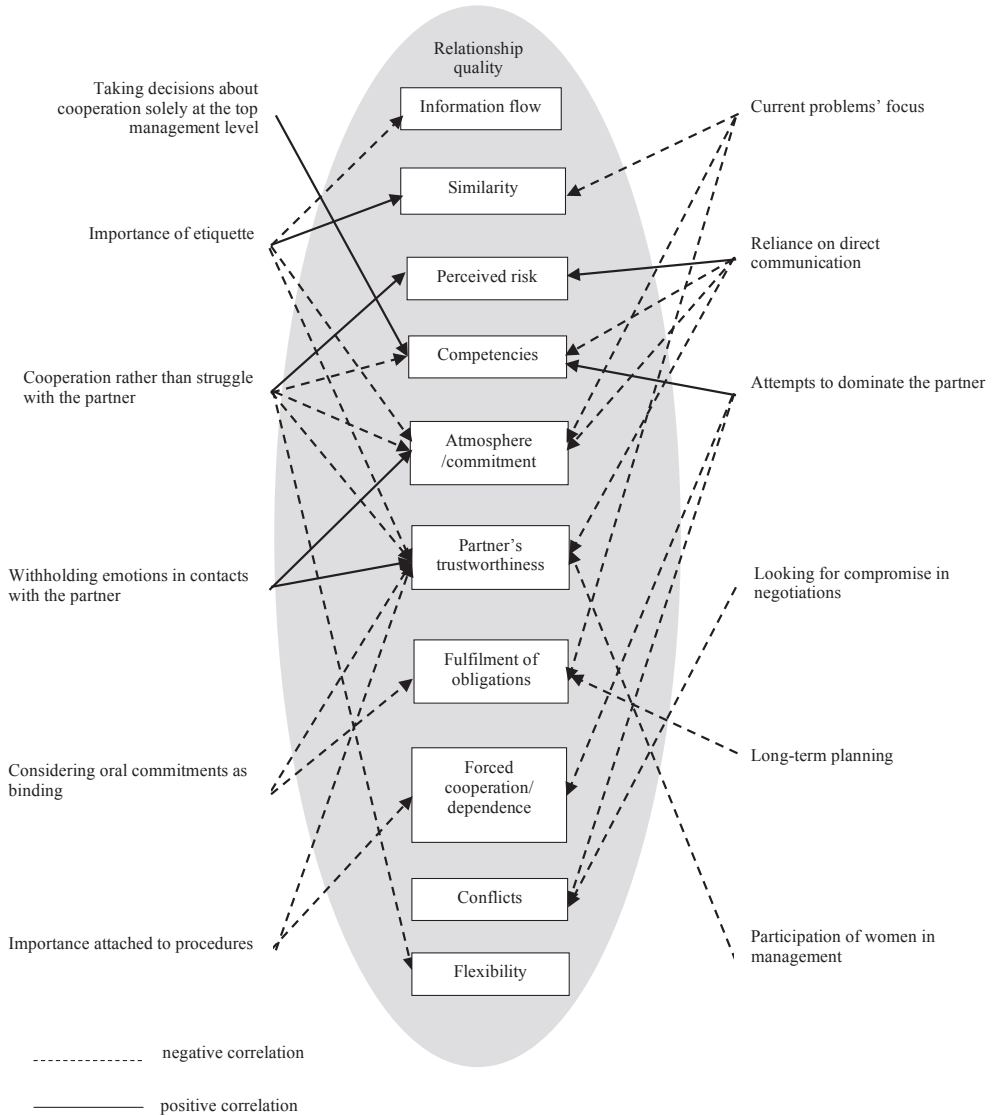
\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Source: own elaboration.

In the next step, a series of linear regressions were estimated with indicators of various aspects of cooperation practices used as predictors and indices of cooperation quality as outcome variables. This part of the analysis helped identify statistically significant relations between partner's cultural differences and perceived cooperation quality (see Figure 1). The parameters of statistically significant regression models are presented in Table 6.



**FIGURE 1. Statistically significant associations between partners' cultural differences and perceived relationship quality**



Source: own elaboration.

**TABLE 6. Characteristics of models obtained in linear regression analysis (the significance of the model and standardized/non-standardized estimates)**

Variables explained	Explanatory variables	Model	R2	Model estimate			Collinearity stats	
		F		B	SE	Beta	Tolerance	VIF
Information flow	Importance of etiquette	8.785**	0.094	-0.171	0.058	-0.306**	1.000	1.000
Similarity	Importance of etiquette	10.064***	0.176	0.482	0.116	0.422***	0.944	1.060
	Current problems' focus			-0.195	0.075	-0.264*	0.944	1.060
Perceived risk	Cooperation rather than struggle with the partner	12.193***	0.207	0.260	0.061	0.410***	0.992	1.008
	Reliance on direct communication			0.238	0.083	0.276**	0.992	1.008
Competencies	Cooperation rather than struggle with the partner	8.127***	0.249	-0.269	0.060	-0.424***	0.989	1.011
	Reliance on direct communication			-0.189	0.081	-0.219*	0.981	1.019
	Attempts to dominate the partner			0.145	0.069	0.198*	0.995	1.005
	Taking decisions about cooperation solely at the top management level			0.118	0.059	0.188*	0.989	1.011
Atmosphere / commitment	Cooperation rather than struggle with the partner	17.128***	0.484	-0.149	0.026	-0.462***	0.954	1.048
	Reliance on direct communication			-0.117	0.039	-0.266**	0.776	1.288
	Current problems' focus			-0.054	0.023	-0.194*	0.916	1.092
	Importance of etiquette			-0.082	0.034	-0.211*	0.790	1.266
	Withholding emotions in contacts with the partner			0.059	0.029	0.170*	0.889	1.124

Variables explained	Explanatory variables	Model	R2	Model estimate			Collinearity stats	
		F		B	SE	Beta	Tolerance	VIF
Conflicts	Attempts to dominate the partner	5.48**	0.094	-0.212	0.075	-0.295**	0.973	1.028
	Looking for compromise in negotiations			-0.134	0.062	-0.224*	0.973	1.028
Fulfilment of obligations	Considering oral commitments as binding	14.25***	0.316	-0.164	0.042	-0.370***	0.893	1.120
	Current problems' focus			-0.119	0.038	-0.286**	0.934	1.070
	Long-term planning			-0.155	0.072	-0.196*	0.952	1.050
Forced cooperation/dependence	Attempts to dominate the partner	5.461**	0.094	-0.171	0.059	-0.301**	0.972	1.029
	Importance attached to procedures			-0.117	0.057	-0.214*	0.972	1.029
Flexibility	Cooperation rather than struggle with the partner	10.379**	0.109	-0.186	0.058	-0.330**	1.000	1.000
Partner's trustworthiness	Considering oral commitments as binding	15.03***	0.536	-0.196	.051	-0.341***	0.702	1.425
	Importance of etiquette			-0.264	.066	-0.315***	0.891	1.122
	Reliance on direct communication			-0.142	.077	-0.149^	0.834	1.199
	Participation of women in management			-0.116	.036	-0.247**	0.952	1.050
	Withholding emotions in contacts with the partner			0.141	.053	0.209**	0.887	1.127
	Importance attached to procedures			-0.145	.055	-0.204**	0.916	1.091
	Cooperation rather than struggle with the partner			-0.133	.056	-0.210*	0.687	1.456

\* p < 0.05.

\*\* p < 0.01.

\*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: own elaboration.

In 12 out of 22 analyzed cases, perceived differences in conduct/attitudes between Polish enterprises and their foreign partners had a statistically significant influence on their cooperation, whereas partner's trustworthiness and atmosphere/commitment category depended on perceived differences to the biggest extend. In particular:

- information flow was negatively influenced by perceived differences in importance of etiquette;
- similarity was positively influenced by perceived differences in the importance of etiquette – and negatively by differences in current problems' focus;
- perceived risk was positively influenced by perceived differences in cooperation rather than struggle with the partner and reliance on direct communication;
- competencies were negatively influenced by perceived differences in cooperation rather than struggle with the partner and reliance on direct communication and positively – by differences in attempts to dominate the partner and taking decisions about cooperation solely at a top management level; atmosphere / commitment were negatively influenced by perceived differences in cooperation rather than struggle with the partner, reliance on direct communication, current problem' focus, importance of etiquette and positively by withholding emotions in contacts with the partner;
- conflicts were negatively influenced by attempts to dominate the partner and looking for compromise in negotiations;
- fulfillment of obligations was negatively influenced by perceived differences in considering oral commitments as binding, current problems focus and long-term-planning;
- forced cooperation / dependence was negatively influenced by perceived differences in attempts to dominate the partner and importance attached to procedures;
- flexibility was negatively influenced by perceived differences in cooperation rather than struggle with the partner;
- partner's trustworthiness was negatively influenced by perceived differences in considering oral commitments as binding, importance of etiquette, reliance on direct communication, participation of women in management, withholding emotions in contacts with the partner, and importance attached to procedures and cooperation rather than struggle with the partner.

In most of the cases the perceived differences negatively influenced the relationship quality indicators.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Although cultural differences between individual countries have been the subject of numerous studies, only a few of them discuss inter-firm cooperation in the context of countries' cultural differences.

The perceived differences described in this paper were bigger in the case of cooperation with Chinese partners, which conforms to the intuitive understanding of the research problem but cannot be directly compared to the results of previous studies on culture because of different research methodology and different study scope.

A survey of Polish exporting and importing SMEs cooperating with partners from China and Germany revealed that the differences between Polish companies and their German and Chinese partners, as observed by Polish managers, were distinct in the case of the following indexes: long-term planning, importance of punctuality, importance of etiquette, reliance on direct communication and looking for compromise in negotiations (the significance of this distinction was only on a  $p < 0.10$  level). Companies cooperating with Chinese partners ascribed these five characteristics to themselves, rather than to their partners. In the case of cooperation with German partners, it was just the opposite with the exception of looking for compromise in negotiations. However, most of indicators of perceived cultural differences between Polish companies and their partners were very low (with the exception of withholding emotions in contacts with the partner) and did not vary much, so the partner's country of origin has little influence on the perceptions of dissimilarities. It is probably that a culture of a lower order than national culture (organizational, individual) influences the partner's behavior. This comports with the McSweeney [2009] critique of using national culture to explain or predict behavior at levels lower than national.

The primary objective of the study was to examine whether and how perceived cultural differences of cooperating enterprises influenced the quality of their relationships. The study confirmed that all aspects of relations between the surveyed enterprises depend more or less on perceived cultural differences in partners' behavior. Perceived partner's trustworthiness and atmosphere/commitment depended on the perceived cultural differences to the highest extent.

It must be emphasized that not all perceived differences influence cooperation. Moreover, in most models that were developed the influence of perceived cultural differences on aspects of cooperation was negative, although the relation was positive in the case of:

- influence of perceived differences on perception of risk,
- influence of differences in importance of etiquette on perceived similarity,
- influence of differences in attempts to dominate the partner and taking decisions about cooperation solely at the top management level on perceived partner competencies,
- influence of differences in withholding emotions in contacts with the partner on cooperation atmosphere/involvement and partner's trustworthiness.

While this positive relation is self-evident in the perceived risk category (the bigger the differences, the stronger the perception of risk accompanying the transaction) other positive relations require a more detailed follow-up research.

The result of the study should be also discussed in light of the similarity-attraction theory [Byrne, 1971], according to which people like and are attracted to, others who are

similar to them. As Smith [1998, p. 17] has shown, similarities in work attitudes, sex and life stage “play some role in facilitating relationship management behaviors and thus, indirectly, the quality of buyer-seller relationships”. Although this study investigated different aspects of inter-firm cooperation than Smith [1998], it also revealed that many dimensions of relationship quality depend on perceived similarities/dissimilarities between partners.

The study draws attention to, and partially addresses an important gap in theory regarding cooperative ties between enterprises. A new factor (perceived differences in behavior) influencing relationship quality is identified with a strong managerial implications: relationship quality is better if decision makers perceive their business partners as similar to themselves in how they behave in their mutual business interactions (with the exceptions discussed above). Consequently, managers who are interested in establishing good relations with partners, have to get to know their partners better and modify their behavior accordingly. The results do, however, provoke a question: if similarity should be treated as one of the dimensions of relationship quality or rather as a factor influencing it?

By offering new insights into how to explain the relationship quality, this study also suggests new directions of research. As is often the case with exploratory studies, the current research seems to have generated several interesting and salient questions that call for further investigation. In author’s view, those that are particularly pertinent are: Will observed dependencies also occur in domestic cooperation (maybe it is not a question of cultural differences but differences as such)? How to explain them? Will the results remain the same if both parties are questioned? What are other determinants of relationship quality? Should further studies of the subject be undertaken, a longitudinal study of the influence of cultural differences on relations in diverse cooperation phases is recommended.

The study has some limitations. Most notably, only three of countries were studied, which limits the possibility of applying the survey results to enterprises from other countries. The fact that the survey was carried out only on Polish companies also affects the validity of the results. It would be interesting to study the mutual perception of both partners, analyze differences and investigate their relations from two points of view applying the dyadic approach proposed by Holmlund [2008]. Literature sources (e.g. Morgan and, Hunt [1994], de Burca et al., [2004], Holmlund [2008], Ulaga and Eggert [2006], Ashnai et al., [2009], Kim et al., [2010], Stępień [2011, pp. 83–94, 229], and Danik and Lewandowska [2013]) indicate the importance of trust for the course of the transaction; hence trust should be an essential part of further research. Moreover, the internal reliability of the perceived risk scale is acceptable but poor, which calls for an overhauled set of measurement items. Finally, one could argue that the study is devoted only to relations between exporters and importers. Other types of relationships should also be studied in the future. On the other hand, the study shows that this type of cooperation constitutes the majority of international cooperation and therefore is important for international trade. Consequently, studies on the subject should be continued (even if limited in the depth of relationship, comparing to other cooperation types).

It seems that both the proposed methodology and the obtained results are a starting-point for further, broader and deeper research. Although it was stated that perceived cultural differences are the determinants of relationship quality, the search for other determinants should be continued.

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