



This paper is taken from

*Citizenship Education: Europe and the World  
Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2006

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 899764 66 6

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***Fülöp, M., Sándor, M. (2006) Cross-Cultural Understandings from Social Psychology on Cooperation and Competition, in Ross, A. (ed) Citizenship Education: Europe and the World. London: CiCe, pp 75-88.***

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The rector and the staff of the University of Latvia
- Andrew Craven, of the CiCe Administrative team, for editorial work on the book, and Lindsay Melling and Teresa Carbajo-Garcia, for the administration of the conference arrangements
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement

## **Cross-Cultural Understandings from Social Psychology on Cooperation and Competition.**

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### **Cross-cultural research on competition and cooperation in the seventies**

Researchers started to study extensively cross-cultural differences in competitive and cooperative behaviour in the seventies. These were mainly laboratory experiments with different kinds of games or resource allocation tasks. The most often used assessment measures have been Madsen's (1976) Cooperation Board or the Marble Pull Game (Madsen, 1971). Researchers also used the mixed motive so called resource allocation games. That is, in some social interactions the participants must decide how to allocate resources among themselves and there may be individual differences in the specific allocations preferred. The Social Behaviour Scale (Knight and Kagan, 1977) was specifically designed to try to separate certain competitive and cooperative outcomes. This is a four-alternative choice card in which the alternatives differ in the outcomes they provide and the motives they probably satisfy. Based on the choices the researchers differentiated among five different strategies:

- Altruism – obtaining absolute gains for others,
- Group-enhancement – obtaining joint gains,
- Equality – avoiding relative gains for self and others,
- Superiority – obtaining relative gains for self,
- Rivalry – avoiding absolute gains for others.

The Maximizing Difference Game (McClintock et al, 1970) is also a Prisoner's Dilemma Game for Children. It is a 2x2 matrix that displays four different outcomes corresponding to the two choices the child and another player could make.

These methods were the main sources of information for researchers about how competitive and cooperative choice behaviour develop in different cultures in childhood.

### **Comparisons**

Many of the studies in the seventies compared Anglo and Mexican American children. The results have consistently demonstrated an Anglo-American/Mexican-American difference in preference for competitive and cooperative outcomes, showing Anglo-American children to be more competitive and Mexican and Mexican-American children more cooperative (Avellar and Kagan, 1976, Kagan and Madsen, 1972). Most of the studies concerning Anglo-Americans, Mexican-Americans, urban Mexicans, and rural Mexicans show fairly consistent replication of this trend. American children apply the 'rivalry' distribution strategy more often, meaning that the focus of the distribution is their adversary getting less reward even if it results in less gain for them too. Mexican-American children however make more equality choices (Knight and Kagan, 1982).

This paper is part of *Citizenship Education: Europe and the World: Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A, published by CiCe (London) 2006. ISBN 1 899764 66 6; ISSN 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

School achievement is positively related to competitiveness among the Anglo-American children but not among Mexican-American children (Knight et al, 1982). Similar results appeared in the comparison of Afro versus Anglo-American children (Richmond and Weiner, 1973).

While US American children consistently proved to be the most in favour of competition (Toda et al 1978) comparing Belgian, Greek, Japanese, Mexican-American and Anglo-American boys found that Japanese were the most competitive among all, more competitive than their Anglo-American peers. Flemish-Belgian boys however proved to be the most cooperative.

Another line of research was done in Israel. Children raised in the kibbutz, where there is a strong ideological basis for cooperative and socialist ideas, proved to be more cooperative in the studies than Israeli city children (Argyle, 1991). Madsen and Shapira (1977) studied 8 year old children from the United States, West Germany, kibbutz children in Israel, and urban children in Israel. Kibbutz children were the most cooperative and American children the most competitive. Children and adolescents of Middle-Eastern Jewish origin also proved to be more cooperative than Israeli children with Western Jewish origin (Eliram and Schwartzwald, 1987).

It was also consistently found that it is not only ethnicity that can be responsible for differences in cooperative and competitive behaviour but also ecological differences within culture. In several cultures rural children were more cooperative than those from an urban environment. The experience of living in cities seems to enhance competitiveness (Argyle, 1991).

Another line of research called attention to the importance of acculturation, a change towards the norms and expectations of the majority or host society in terms of competitive and cooperative behaviour. For example, third generation Mexican-American children have been found to exhibit less cooperation than second or first generation children (Knight and Kagan, 1977).

Ethnicity and the effects of ecology are also intertwined and there is an acculturation process going on not only towards the majority culture, but also towards the ecological context. Eliram and Shwartzwald (1987) found that children of Middle Eastern Jewish origin living in cities of Israel are more competitive than their counterparts living in rural areas, while both Middle Eastern groups are more cooperative than Western Jewish origin children.

The cross-cultural differences were thought to arise from underlying distinctions in socialisation processes and in family structure and relationships: the degree of family interdependence and familial delegation of autonomy.

### **Limitations of cross-cultural research with children**

Although much work has been done, the true extent of knowledge about cultural differences in competition and cooperation is still quite limited because of theoretical and methodological limitations of the studies.

The interpretation of the existing data on cultural differences in competitive behaviour is somewhat questionable because the studies were mostly based on notions of culture and of the socializing forces that operate within cultures that are excessively simple and inconsistent with contemporary advances in theory building (Schneider et al, 2006). The above investigations were carried out at a time when the different cultural dimensions as interpretative frameworks for the existing cultural differences were still not available. Hofstede's famous study introducing individualism and collectivism was published only in 1980, and Triandis and his colleagues started their extensive studies only at the end of the eighties (Triandis et al. 1988). Another dimension to interpret cultural differences among children in cooperativity and competitiveness, the interdependent and independent self-concept was introduced only in the nineties (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Taking into consideration these two cultural dimensions it was postulated that children living in societies that promote individualistic values and socialize children to have an independent self-concept might be more competitive than children living in a society in which collectivistic values and the interdependent self-construal predominate.

Another limitation of the research was methodological in nature. The experimental method in the field of cross-cultural comparisons was criticized also because of its interpretation and hardly comparable results. The oft-used experimental methods can't distinguish the more fine grained differences between the meaning of competition, and they ignore the structural differences between the culturally different concepts (Smith and Bond, 1998). Also it was unclear what the underlying motivation was for a certain choice for instance: was it making a competitive choice just because it is fun, or making a cooperative choice, because it results in more gain for the individual i.e. being in fact an individualistic choice with no motivation to be cooperative. There was no interview data to assess which of the above motives were behind the children's choices; therefore it was problematic to generalize from this data (Shwalb, 1985). It was also considered a general weakness of game-theoretical methodologies that, by design, they demand minimal personal interaction. The researchers were too often left guessing: they had a number of alternative interpretation possibilities to cope with, principally around issues of motivational significance of the observed choices (Pepitone, 1980).

### **Theoretical paradigm shift**

Until the nineties, another problematic feature of cross-cultural research on cooperation and competition was a dichotomous way of thinking about these two interpersonal behaviours. Most of the studies were based on the assumption that cooperation and competition have mutually exclusive goals; if somebody is competitive then cannot be cooperative at the same time and if somebody is cooperative then cannot be competitive at the same time (Deutsch, 1949).

Around the end of the nineties a paradigm shift has taken place and cooperation and competition were no longer considered to be 'enemies' but partners (Van de Vliert, 1999). Several studies proved that highly competitive people can be highly cooperative at the same time (Carnevale and Probst, 1999). In addition to this, instead of a unidimensional concept of competition a multidimensional concept started to pervade (Fülöp, 1992, Tassi & Schneider, 2000). This means that competition was no longer investigated only by comparing it with cooperation, but also in itself. If a phenomenon is studied chiefly by juxtaposing it against another phenomenon, the features that differentiate the two are highlighted while other potentially important features may be obscured. In this way, the multidimensional nature of competition eluded researchers as qualitatively different processes get lumped together within a single and unidimensional construct of competition. It proved to be a more useful scientific strategy to first scrutinize the nature of competition in order to understand it thoroughly before dwelling on the ways in which it differs from cooperation. This research trend led to the notion of constructive competition (Fülöp, 1992, Tjosvold, Johnson & Johnson, 2003) and its differentiation from destructive competition.

In the nineties the researchers' attention turned more towards East Asia, also in connection with the new cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism and interdependent and independent self-concept. Domino (1992, 2000) compared mainland Chinese and American children. Chinese children chose more frequently the strategies which were based on equality or were more group centered. In contrast to this Americans showed more individualistic and competitive behaviors. However, Domino noted that despite of the striking differences, there were a considerable number of Chinese children who responded in a competitive (21%) and individualistic (17%) manner. He concluded that regardless of all cultural teachings a certain amount of competitive behaviour appears in each group of people. In another study Chinese children placed more emphasis on teamwork and helping than American. (Domino, 2000) The results were clearly in harmony with the individualism – collectivism construct.

As a contrast to these results Sparkes (1991) in his study comparing Taiwanese and American kindergarten age children in Madsen's Marble-Pull Game found a greater degree of cooperative behavior in the interactions of the American children and a greater competitiveness on the part of the Taiwanese. An explanation of the controversial results can be that the Taiwanese society has lived in the market economy for several generations which has not been the case in mainland China.

In addition to the dichotomic way of thinking about cooperation and competition it was also postulated that collectivistic cultures are characterized by cooperation, while individualistic cultures by competition (Hofstede, 1980). The Taiwanese and Japanese results (Toda et al, 1978) however showed that in culturally collectivistic contexts there can be a high degree of competition too. For example Japan was found to be a collectivistic society with much emphasis on cooperation and at the same time a highly competitive society in many aspects of her life, especially the school system.

Shwalb et al (1989) in their study found that cooperation, competition, individualism and interpersonalism coexist in the Japanese adolescents' personality and they are all strong

characteristics. Therefore they speak about a kind of unique Japanese blend of cooperation, individualism and competition (Shwalb et al, 1991).

Fülöp (2004) studied Hungarian and Japanese adolescents' and university students' concepts on competition. Her results revealed culturally different patterns of competitive processes between Hungarians and Japanese. The majority of young Japanese are able to integrate the two different expectations of their society i.e. being competitive and being cooperative, they are *able to combine interdependence with competitiveness* by considering competition self-improving and motivating serving the development of the individual, the group and consequently the whole nation, rather than a cut-throat social-Darwinist process. They consider their rival as a friend or as a person who, by his or her presence, motivates them and guarantees their self-development and growth. In this respect we can rather speak about competition under the umbrella of cooperation, meaning that the two processes do not exclude each other but work jointly.

Hungarians consider competition as a process that serves mainly selection and motivation; they consider their rivals as their enemies rather than their friends or motivators and they typically think about competition in a short-term winning-losing structure. In this respect the Hungarian concept of competition is much more in harmony with the traditional experimental psychological notion of competition of the seventies that considered cooperation and competition mutually exclusive and evaluated competition negatively.

These results clearly show that the impact of any stimulus situation depends upon the personal and subjective meaning that the actor attaches to the situation. To predict the behaviour of a given person successfully, we must be able to understand the actor's construal of the situation. Our results identified competitive processes containing a different degree of cooperation with and hostility towards the rival. Japanese typically compete with a high degree of cooperativity, but Hungarians with a low degree of cooperativity.

### **Hungary, Slovenia and the UK**

In our extensive research based on classroom observations, focus-group interviews with students and in-depth interviews with teachers we studied the role cooperation and competition play in the school context in three countries: Hungary, Slovenia and the UK. Based on previous research on cooperation and competition and related phenomena we can expect culturally different manifestations of these phenomena in the three countries.

#### **Hungary**

Hungary had gone through a more than four decade long socialist-communist period that was characterized by an emphasis on collectivism and a political ban on individualistic competition. Counter to expectations, Hungarians never proved to be collectivistic in spite of all the political efforts to change them.

Hunyady, who studied the Hungarian auto stereotype in 1973, asked respondents of a national representative sample about the good and bad qualities of Hungarians. He found

that among the positive qualities cheerfulness, cordiality and love of work were mentioned, but among the negative qualities individualism, envy and selfishness. Given the fact that in 1973 Hungary was a socialist country where people were not supposed to be individualists this research result anticipates what happened later after the political changes. Two years later in 1975, young and adult workers and intellectuals were asked to characterise Hungarians and cooperativity got the third lowest average among 20 characteristics (Hunyady, 1998). Therefore we can state that Hungarians were individualists and non-cooperative already during the socialist system, in the seventies.

Hollos (1980) investigated social-perspectivism (role-taking and communicative ability) and cooperation of two groups of Hungarian children who grew up in two different social environments: in a village attending a collective educational setting of a kindergarten and in a rural nuclear family. Six (kindergarten), seven (first grade) and eight year old (second grade) children participated in the study. Her idea was that children in Hungary had been trained from an early age for a collective existence in the educational institutions. For instance most of their activities were scheduled in groups, leaving little opportunity for individual free play; they were constantly reinforced for helping etc. Therefore she expected that those children who spent a significant amount of time in these institutions would have been more cooperative than those who were mainly in their rural home-family environment. She found that village children were more competitive in spite of the fact that they attended the kindergarten where according to Hollos they got a very much collectivistic education, with constant emphasis on prosocial behaviour. As she noted: *'Although activities are strictly scheduled and coordinated in the kindergartens and children are brought up with an ideology that stresses cooperation, this does not produce cooperative individuals (p.21)'* On the contrary these children were consistently competitive. Living in a farm household however required cooperation of all members and responsible action in carrying out tasks in order to contribute to the welfare of the group, therefore it was a better training in cooperation than the exposure to the ideology of collectivism. She concluded that true cooperation does not develop as a result of the learning of a collective ideology, but develops only where individuals assume a responsibility for their own performance and are able to perceive the relationship between the group's welfare and their own task performance.

### **The GLOBE Study**

The GLOBE study (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness) (House et al. 2002) compared middle-level managers in 61 culturally diverse countries, including Hungary, Slovenia and the UK, along nine cultural dimensions.

1. *Uncertainty avoidance* is defined as the extent to which members of an organization or society strive to avoid uncertainty by reliance on social norms and bureaucratic practices to alleviate unpredictability.
2. *Power distance* is the degree to which members of a society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared. Collectivism has two subcategories: Societal collectivism and in-group collectivism.

3. *Societal collectivism* reflects the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage or reward collective distribution of resources and collective action.
4. *In-group collectivism* reflects the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organisation or families.
5. *Gender egalitarianism* is the extent to which a society minimizes gender role differences and gender discrimination.
6. *Assertiveness* reflects assertivity, confrontation and aggression in social relationships.
7. *Future orientation* reflects engagement with planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification.
8. *Performance orientation* is the degree a society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.
9. *Humane orientation* is the encouragement of individuals being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring and kind to others. If we compare Hungary, Slovenia and the UK along these dimensions we get the following picture:

#### **Uncertainty tolerance and future orientation**

Hungarians tolerate uncertainty the best, they are the most accustomed to unpredictability, Slovenians are in the middle and English try to avoid uncertainty the most. Hungarians also have the shortest future time perspective; they do not plan ahead as much as Slovenians and again English have the longest time perspective (Bakacsi, et al, 2002; Ashkanasy, et al. 2002). These dimensions are related to each other. One basic motivation for human behaviour is the need for security. People want to 'know' what the future will be like in order to resolve uncertainty, and planning and committing to goals reduces uncertainty and anxiety with the sense of being able to control the future (Trommsdorff, 1994). However according to studies with Hungarian young people, those who had a well-structured plan for the future had – just on contrary to the expectations – higher levels of anxiety (Vári-Szilágyi and Solymosi, 1999). This can be explained by the characteristics of the society. If somebody plans well ahead in an environment that is rapidly and sometimes unpredictably changing then there is a high probability that his/her plans cannot come true, so there is a cause for worry. Short-term thinking is an adaptive reaction to a rapidly changing environment, in a situation where careful planning ahead would lead to frustration and not real control over the course of life (Fülöp, 2005).

#### **Power distance**

Power distance is also the highest in Hungary, Slovenia is in the middle and English respondents are the most egalitarian.

#### **Individualism - Collectivism**

In terms of institutional collectivism Hungarians are very individualistic (the second highest among all 61 countries) while Slovenia and England are close to each other being more collectivistic. Interestingly enough in terms of group and family collectivism Hungarians and Slovenians are closer to each other being relatively high in expressing



pride and loyalty towards their own family, while the English express less belonging to their group or family. This shows an interesting pattern. Hungarians are low in institutional collectivism and high in family collectivism. English are just the opposite; they are high in institutional collectivism and lower in family collectivism. Slovenians are high in both. They seem to be in favour of collective action both in case of institutions and family or in-group (Bakacsi et al, 2002; Askanasy et al. 2002).

### **Humane orientation and assertivity**

Hungarians are low in humane orientation while Slovenians and English are similar to each other and see that fairness, generosity and caring are more part of the human interactions in their country. In terms of assertiveness the situation is just the opposite: Slovenians and English are similar and indicate higher scores while Hungarians again stand alone and have relatively low scores.

### **Performance orientation**

Performance orientation (hard work) is the highest in England and the lowest in Hungary, Slovenians being in the middle again

According to the results *Hungary* is characterized by high uncertainty tolerance (one of the highest among all countries), by short-term perspective, big power distance, high institutional individualism and high family collectivism, low humane and low performance orientation. All these predict competitiveness with a lower degree of cooperativity.

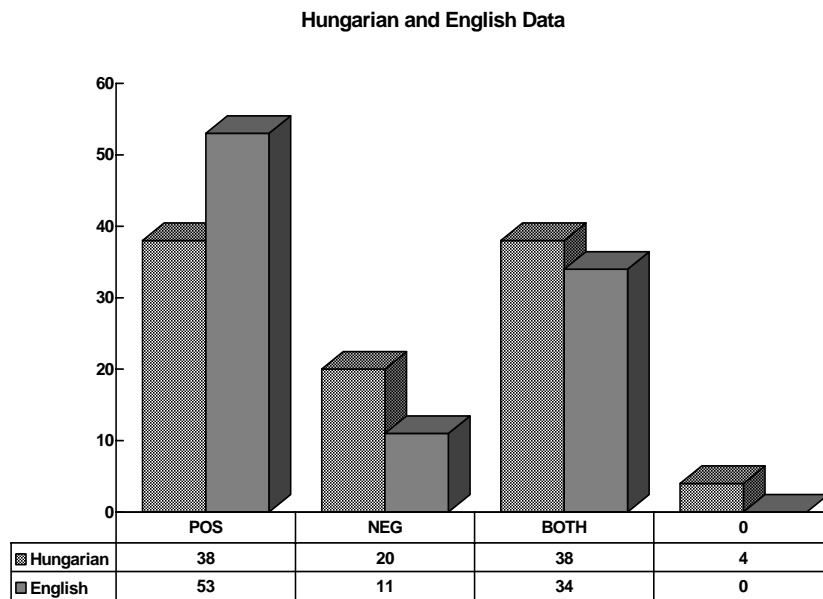
The *UK* is characterized by lower uncertainty tolerance, longer time perspective, lower power distance, high humane and performance orientation, high assertiveness and lower level of institutional individualism and lower level of family collectivism. All these predict competitiveness with a higher degree of cooperativity.

Hungary and Slovenia are both post-socialist countries going through profound social, political and economical changes. In the transition of post-communist states to a market economy, competition has become a key concept. A previously ideologically denied and banned phenomenon, it became a highly required and praised one at all levels of society, from politics to everyday individual life in Hungary and in Slovenia too (Fülöp, 2002, Fülöp, 2005, Kobal, 2004). The very fast transition going on at every segment of these societies required citizens to change their perception and understanding of competition and also to alter their attitude and values in connection with competition. However, based on the GLOBE study, Hungary and Slovenia do not show much similarity even if they are both post-socialist countries. Slovenians are just in between the Hungarians and English along several of the dimensions, like time-perspective, uncertainty tolerance, power distance and performance orientation. In other aspects they are more similar to English. For instance humane orientation, tolerance and fairness are equally important to Slovenians and English and less important to Hungarians. Slovenians are most unique in the fact that they are high in both types of collectivism, the institutional and the family/group, predicting a higher level cooperativity than competitiveness compared to Hungary or England.

**Competitiveness of adolescents and young people in Hungary, Slovenia and the UK**

Fülöp (2002) compared Hungarian and English 16-17 year old secondary school students' personal attitude towards competition and also their perception of the role competition plays in their respective society. The results show a significant difference in both cases. English young people are more comfortable with personal competition than Hungarians, (they give more positive answers and less negative ones than Hungarians, see Table 1) and they perceive the role competition plays in their society also much more positively than their Hungarian counterparts (Table 2). The most frequently described negative consequences of competition in society among the Hungarians are immorality, interpersonal conflict and aggression, and money-oriented people. According to adolescents Hungarians want to win at any cost (particularly in the material sense) and by any means (aggressive or immoral). In contrast to this the English had a less critical attitude towards competition

**Table 1. Personal attitude towards competition**

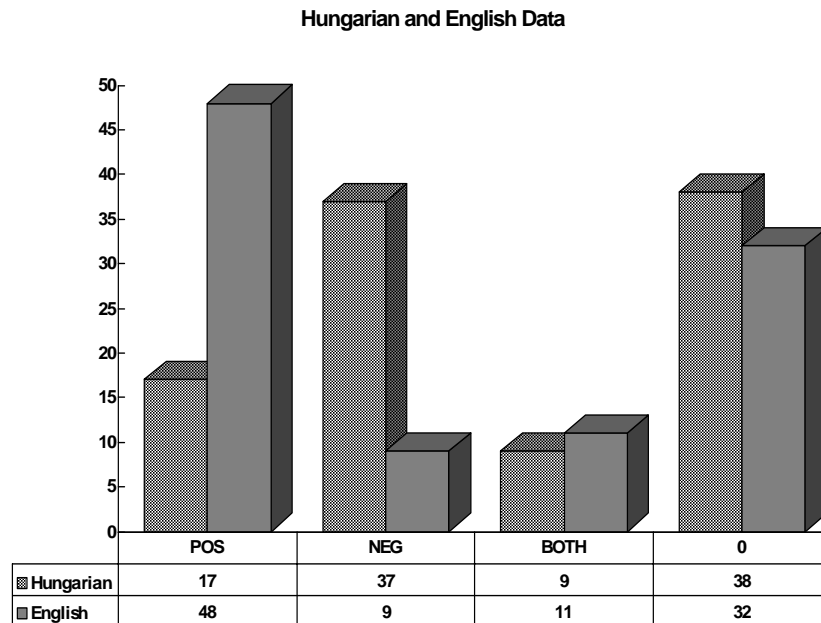


**Legend**

Percentage of Subjects  
 Chequered = Hungarian, grey = English

POS = positive                      BOTH = both positive and negative  
 NEG = negative                    0 = neutral

Table 2. The role competition plays in the society



### Legend

Percentage of Subjects  
Chequered = Hungarian, grey = English

POS = positive                      BOTH = both positive and negative  
NEG = negative                      0 = neutral

It is also interesting to look at the relationship between personal attitude and perception of competition in the society. While English people have almost the same proportion of positive answers in both cases, there is a clear difference among the Hungarian participants. Significantly more young Hungarians like to compete than those who think that competition plays a positive role in the society.

Kobal (2006) studied the self-concept of Slovene adolescents and also their attitude towards competition in comparison to Spanish and Serbian students. The participants were 19 year old, first year university students. She found that competitiveness as a personal trait was highest manifested in Serbian students, whereas hyper-competitiveness, that is the struggle to achieve the goal by applying all possible means, characterized the Slovene participants the most, although the difference was not statistically significant.

At the same time she found that there are differences among the three groups in terms of their self-concept too. The Slovene adolescents wish to be successful in studies so that they can get a good job; they have developed a plan for how to be as successful as possible in their studies; on average they wish to be promoted in their studies as well as later in work more than their Spanish and Serbian counterparts. In regard to motivation mutual help amongst the students in studying is the least important for the Slovene

students, the same goes also for providing help to other students; generally they do not care as much for the co-students as do their Spanish and Serbian counterparts. Therefore their social motivation is in general lower.

Kobal's results are somewhat contradictory to the GLOBE study results and indicate more similarities between Slovene and Hungarian attitudes than we would predict from the GLOBE study. Slovene young people did not demonstrate high cooperativity; instead they had higher level hyper-competitiveness scores.

Cross-cultural research on cooperation and competition has never been done in an educational setting based on classroom observations, interviews with teachers and focus-group interviews with pupils. Based on the previous research we can rightly imply that besides similarities we are going to find culturally ingrained differences among the three countries in comparison: Hungary, Slovenia and the UK.

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