



This paper is taken from

*Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World
Proceedings of the thirteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2011

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-02-7

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*Fülöp, M. & Szarvas, H. (2011) The cooperative competitive citizen, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.)
Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World. London: CiCe, pp. 1 - 11*

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Lifelong Learning Programme

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 therein.

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 CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

The cooperative competitive citizen

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Abstract

Society needs both competitive and collaborative initiatives and efforts and citizens must interact in both of these modes today and in the future (Pepitone, 1980).

Constructive competition contributes to the development of those involved and brings out the best potential, while keeping the rules and a respectful and cooperative relationship among participants. This is a significant requirement in a society that constructs competitive situations in many different realms from everyday community life to economics and politics. A competitive process can be characterized by the presence and degree of cooperation among the competing parties. Cooperative competition seems to be a process that is the most beneficial for the individual and society as well.

In our research we interviewed altogether 55 social experts in the Hungarian society to reveal their ideas on the potentials of cooperative competition in different social/professional areas and to collect examples of good practice.

Keywords: *cooperative competitive, expert interview, citizen*

Introduction

Cooperative and competitive activities are significant aspects of social behavior, and as such, should be an important consideration for educators, social theorists and those concerned with social and educational policy and citizenship. Citizens operate in social conditions of both cooperation and competition (Ross, 2008). While both of these behaviours are present and required in social interactions competition and cooperation have long been presented as dichotomous (e.g. Deutsch, 1949). In addition to this they were placed along a moral dimension and cooperation was considered moral and superior in comparison to competition that gained an immoral connotation, being a destructive force in interpersonal relationships and in society (Kohn, 1986). This has established the “Beauty and Beast” paradigm (Fülöp, 2008). However, from the beginning of 1990s, there has been a paradigm shift towards a less dichotomic concept of competition and cooperation, with cooperation and competition no longer seen as mutually exclusive. More and more research results have been accumulated proving that they can harmoniously coexist (e.g. Charlesworth, 1996; Van de Vliert, 1999; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Fülöp, 2004).

Parallel to the conceptual change of the relationship between cooperation and competition researchers started to call attention to the multidimensional nature of competition (Fülöp, 1992; 2001; 2004; Schneider et al, 2006) and identified qualitatively

different competitive processes. Based on their harmful or beneficial effects they were labelled constructive or destructive (Fülöp, 1992; Tjosvold et al, 2003). A competitive process is considered constructive if the competing parties are not enemies wanting to destroy the other, but opponents who establish respectful and correct relationships with the rival and who bring out the best from themselves and each other thus contributing not only to their own development but also to the development of the group and the society (Fülöp, 2004). Several studies showed that the most important condition under which competition can be constructive or destructive is its morality (Fülöp, 1992; Fülöp, 2001). Morality refers to several aspects of the competitive process: fairness of the rules (Tjosvold et al. 2003), clear criteria of evaluation (Fülöp, 1992), keeping the explicit and implicit rules of competition and in connection with this, the nature of the applied means in order to win. It promotes constructive competition if the rivals have similar chances to win (Fülöp, 2001; Tjosvold et al, 2003), if the rivals concentrate on the task or goal and not on proving their superiority over others (Tassi and Schneider, 1997), and there is a degree of respect among them.

Being pro-social and having the ability to cooperate effectively with fellow citizens are typically parts of the concept of the 'good citizen' (Davies, et al.,1999). The skill to be successful in a competitive world and compete constructively is traditionally not included into this discourse. In the citizenship discourse it seems to be difficult to reconcile the socially responsible, moral and cooperative citizen with the traditional liberal notion of the individual citizen living in a capitalist society who is free, selfish, follows his/her self-interest and is competitive (Fülöp, 2009). According to Ross (2008) the European Union is based on a creative tension between a competitive internal market and a social model that seeks to protect citizens from the potential harmful results of this competition.

Constructive competition is a process that can be a link and provide a solution to this tension. It contributes to the development of those involved and brings out the best potential, while keeping the rules and a respectful and cooperative relationship among participants. This is a significant requirement in a society that constructs competitive situations in many different realms from everyday community life to economics and politics (Fülöp, 2008). Therefore, in order society to function successfully it is imperative for citizens to be able to combine and integrate these commitments and interests, the public and the private and to be successful in both cooperation and competition with fellow citizens.

The notion of cooperative competition

Competition and cooperation can be found in different combinations in any kind of human interaction. They may be taking place simultaneously in the same activity (Ross, 2008). Therefore competitive relationships can be characterized also by the amount of cooperation among the competitive parties. The higher the cooperative element in a competitive process the greater the possibility that it is a constructive process. Cooperative competition refers to the type of constructive competition when individuals compete to improve their levels of happiness, but do so in a cooperative manner, joining forces to achieve a desired end and not violating each other's targets. They cooperate in

keeping the explicit and implicit rules of competition, they concentrate not only on their own goal achievement and development but also to their rival's. Winners are able to express solidarity with the losers and losers are able to acknowledge and support the winners, in other words winners and losers are not disengaged from each other (Fülöp, 2008). Cooperative competition can be also competition in cooperation and pursuing goals that are valuable to the society, serve public good and sustainable development.

The notion of cooperative competition emerged in writings on business already from the beginning of the last century (Cherinton, 1913). But it appeared in a very different context as well. Martin Luther King Jr. in one of his speeches entitled '*Cooperative competition*' (King, 1948-1954 in Carson et al, 2008) also called it noble competition: 'If you must use the power of competition, if you must compete with one another, make it as noble as you can by using it on noble things. Use it for fine unselfish things... Use it for human good. Who shall be the most useful.... Use it, but use it for higher and higher purposes...' (p. 583)

To express the interwoven nature of cooperation and competition in the business world a neologism 'co-opetition' was created (Cherinton, 1913). In nowadays business literature it mainly refers to companies being complementors in making markets and competitors in dividing up markets (e.g. Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1998). McGovern and Mottiar (1997) studied cooperative competition among firms and attempted to define the conditions that make possible this type of competition. They found that if no one firm or group of firms has the power to dominate, there is a power balance among them, and in addition to this co-operative competition develops as a norm. This norm is maintained by the social and commercial relationships formed and firms behave according to the established norm. They also emphasize the role of trust in cooperative competitiveness. They argue that those co-operations that depend solely on self-interest will not survive conflicts which inevitably arise in a competitive context. Frank (2004) in his book *What Price the Moral High Ground? Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Environments*, strives to demonstrate that cooperation isn't antagonistic to a self-interested view of human nature; people are driven by a combination of egoistic and altruistic motives. Policy makers by recognizing these complex motivations may encourage self-interested people to behave in a way that benefits both themselves and society. He calls the attention to the paradoxical phenomenon that people can often promote their own self-interest more effectively if they abandon the direct pursuit of it. Frank's analysis reveals that socially responsible companies can survive in competitive environments because social responsibility can bring substantial benefits.

'Responsible competitiveness' is an expression also appearing in the business literature (Zadek, 2006). It refers to companies that enhance productivity by shaping business strategies and practices, and the context in which they operate, to take explicit account of their social, economic and environmental impacts.

Tencati and Zsolnai's (2010) term is the 'collaborative enterprise'. In their recently published book *The Collaborative Enterprise: Creating Values for a Sustainable World* they argue that positive financial and competitive performance derives from giving strong attention to social relationships and effective environmental management.

At the field of psychology another concept expressing that cooperation and competition can be simultaneously present in the very same action is ‘competitive altruism’ (Roberts, 1998) that describes how being altruistic becomes a competitive advantage and pays off as a competitive strategy, how individuals may compete to develop reputations as the most altruistic. Hardy and Van Vugt (2006) found that altruistic individuals receive more social status and are selectively preferred as collaboration partners and group leaders and Iredale et al’s (2008) study revealed that males’ generosity is a competitive advantage as females are more attracted to them.

The goal of the present research

While to keep competition and cooperation/solidarity together is a crucial task of the globalised world, of world economy, of politics, of sustainable development, of countries in the EU, of multicultural societies and of any human group it is not clear how this happens, what conditions make it possible to be competitive and cooperative as well or at the same time, and when this is beneficial for the competing parties and the wider social context as well. Therefore in our research our goal was to reveal the potentials of cooperative competition in different social/professional areas and to collect examples of good practice.

The study

We interviewed altogether 55 prominent professionals in the Hungarian society (economists, legal experts, scientists, media personalities, sociologists, leaders of non-profit organizations, politicians). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were not anonym; the experts gave written consent that excerpts of what they said may appear in publications with their name. The analysis of the transcribed interviews is still ongoing so in this paper we report some examples of the experts’ ideas.

Preliminary results

At this point we present some excerpts from interviews that reflect in what way different experts conceptualize the relationship between cooperation and competition, their ideas on cooperative competition and their suggestions how to promote and socialize it.

1. Views about the relationship between the two phenomena: competition and cooperation

The overwhelming majority of our interviewees – in accordance with the present trend – think that it is possible and leads to social success if competition and cooperation are combined.

The mathematician and economic psychologist Prof. László Mérő (Eötvös Loránd University)

According to game theory both cooperation and competition has an optimal frame strategy and almost in each case the optimal is the mixed strategy, meaning that it is necessary that both competition and cooperation are present in the interaction. Their proportion may change though...

It is the individual interest of the baker that I have something to eat for supper. It is not his goodwill that guides him to provide me the supper, but he follows his selfish individual interest. It seems that there is a balance established among a lot of individual interests, and cooperation is established based on a lot of individual interests.

The cognitive ethologist Dr. József Topál (Institute for Psychology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences)

...we originate biologically from a cohort (the primates), in which the life of the different species is about competition. This should not be forgot when we interpret human behaviour; we are a biologically competitive species, but the basic behavioural change, the taxonomic shift during the course of evolution into Man, meant that the dominantly competitive type of behaviour for some reason (there are different theories about this) was replaced by a primarily cooperation based behaviour, while we kept those of our biological drives, our biological heritage, that are about competition. Therefore, we human beings are able to cooperate competitively, and compete cooperatively.

Representative of the European Commission in Hungary during the Hungarian presidency of the EU January – June, 2011, Dr. Tamás Szűcs

Cooperation and competition are not contradictory, they are strongly interwoven. ...there is a very complex dynamics in the EU, that is characterised by constant cooperation, but also competition, because each institution and each government obviously wants to represent its own interests, however they also try to harmonize this with the all-European interests.

We can exclude the possibility of the absence of combining competition with cooperation and vice versa, because the whole European integration is a continuous cooperation and competition among the countries and institutions and it usually ends with a compromise.

The economist and director of the Business Ethics Centre Prof. László Zsolnai (Corvinus University)

There is no competition in general and there is no cooperation in general. There is always competition at something and cooperation at something, somebody is always in competition with certain people and in cooperation

with others. We have to drop the dogma, that is prevalent among economists and among lay people as well that this is an either or question. This is not either or, this is a multidimensional phenomenon. We need to know among whom there is, and among whom there is not, in what dimensions and along what criteria there is cooperation and competition. The same people can cooperate in certain things and compete in others simultaneously.

2. Conceptualizations of the cooperative competition

Political scientist, Head of the International Department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Ádám Kéglér

Á.K.: A classical example. There are certain resources that are available for each member states. Obviously, there is competition for the resources, but everybody knows it very clearly that everybody gets from the resources according to its position. In case of the EU the netto payer countries are in a way in a much better condition, than those who do not pay, more precisely who take out more. So there is a kind of competition as everybody has to apply, but it can be seen that at the level of different quotas and numbers those countries that are bigger and have more influence can achieve way much better positions. Therefore there is competition but it is controlled.

I: Does this mean that there is a proportional distribution of resources? The one who puts in more is allowed to take out more?

Á.K.: Yes, but even that one gets something who has not contributed with anything. This is controlled competition. This is mixture of meritocracy and equality.

Founder of the Magnet Community Bank in Hungary Peter Korsch

There is a basic cooperation among the parties, but competition also appears. They share their market behaviour, their products and services to a certain extent, but they have an own functioning and within that they want to show themselves as good as they can. They have their own identity and competition goes on in that respect. They do not look at the other market participants as an enemy, or somebody who has to be pushed down, but as a real partner in the market. There is no adversity but there is cooperation among them. I don't think that cooperative competition is a 'standard' expression, but in my opinion the present economic life moves towards this. Especially as a result of the crisis.

In this type of competition it is acceptable that the rival also functions at the same area. In this case the competing parties do not want to take away from the existing cake, but want to increase the size of the cake as much

as possible. This type of competition opens up new markets, new areas, brings in new colours.

There is a need of change of the focus of present day economic competition. The focus of competition should be rather cooperation, the joint promotion of development of humankind into a positive direction. Competition should be in this area, this should be in the focus of competitive strivings, to do good to people and society.

3. Promotion of cooperation in a competitive setting

Our interviewees listed a number of ways they believe cooperative competition can be promoted. The most important ideas were the following:

- Innovation and creativity that creates resources in zero-sum situations, creating and finding a new niche
- Cognitive recognition of common goals, interests, interdependence and long-term consequences

Political scientist, Head of the International Department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Ádám Kéglér

If children start to fight in the sand pit instead of building the castle together, then obviously the nursery teacher goes there and says them: ‘if you build it together there is more chance that at the end there will be a castle, than if you quarrel about who will own the red spade and who the yellow bucket.

Representative of the European Commission in Hungary during the Hungarian presidency of the EU January – June, 2011, Dr. Tamás Szűcs

There is an interesting paradox here, because in principle it is easy to see, that there should be a stronger joining of forces in order for the EU to be able to be a match for China or Russia. This would be desirable from rational point of view. But unfortunately, not only this can be seen, but the individual countries try separately, led by their own inner political interests, to put forward their own interest, while in principle they all agree with the need of cooperation among all parties, because this is so clear.

- Established norm and moral expectation of cooperative competition and the existence of civil communities that are not only able to set up such norms but also monitor their members’ behaviour
- Fairness and keeping the explicit and implicit rules of competition

- Trust
- Winners and losers seeing themselves as interdependent
- Team sports
- Group projects
- Systematic socialization in schools
- Social skill training

The cognitive ethologist Dr. József Topál (Institute for Psychology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences)

We should not forget that human beings are characterized by exceptional flexibility in forming behavioural strategies and in the ontogenesis we are able to change these along a wide spectrum. No species in the evolution has such an open mind as humans. The more specialized a species is the more closed are its genetic programmes. Therefore it is not only possible, but also important to make certain techniques in a biologically relevant mode, by observation or in a more explicit way, be acquired. It is not enough to be aware of these processes of ours. It is one level, that we are able to act in a certain way, and it is another level, when we are able to teach it. This is possible, if I know why I act in a certain way. In this case there is a bigger chance that I can hand it on. The fact that human cooperation and competition have become during the development of humankind what they are does not mean that we have utilized optimally or maximally their potentials. By getting to know and making us aware of their processes, I believe, it would be possible to develop an optimal combination. Rules and techniques should be taught and learned in certain groups in order to function as human beings and society in a more effective way.

The mathematician and economic psychologist Prof. László Mérő (Eötvös Loránd University)

Within the same interpersonal relationship cooperation and competition are blended. In a certain situation I fully cooperate with a person and in another I fully compete. With the same person. The ability to change this attitude according to the needs of the situation should be educated and socialized.

Short summary

Our research has got only preliminary results at this stage. It seems that the intense presence of both cooperation and competition in social life is not questioned by any of our experts. Most of them believe that constructive or cooperative competition is a beneficial process and citizens should be encouraged and taught how to behave accordingly. The experts all have some more or less explicit ideas how to support this

and believe that democratic societies have a close and important role to play in the promotion of the cooperative competitive citizen.

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Acknowledgement

While writing this paper, the authors received support from the European Union and the European Social Fund to the project 'The Cooperative Competitive European Citizen' under the grant agreement no. TÁMOP [4.2.1./B-09/1/KMR-2010-0003](#). Márta Fülöp was also supported by the National Research Council (OTKA, K 77691).