What does it take to promote cooperative competitive citizenship in a community?

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Abstract

Each human group (a school class, a working team, a local community etc.) is a complex system of cooperative and competitive relationships. The goal of the present research was to identify those conditions and their interrelationship that may promote a beneficial combination of cooperation and competition i.e. cooperative competition. In addition we wanted to reveal how the potentials of cooperative competition may vary according to different life domains. In our study the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) was applied. The procedure was elaborated in order to examine complex interpersonal phenomena and to provide ecological validity. Altogether 431 stories recalling competitive relationships described by university students and primary and secondary school teachers were analysed. After free description of the 'story' participants answered specific questions to characterize the competitive event along different dimensions with a Likert-type scale. Applying factor analysis four different scales were constructed: the Relationship scale (cooperation, trust, communication), the Motivation scale (motivation, the importance of the goal, development, learning), the Rule keeping scale (rule keeping, no aggression, no manipulation) and the Enjoyment scale (enjoyment, positive stress). Correlational analysis revealed how these different scales relate to each other. Critical incidents were also content analysed and categorized according to the life domain in which the competition took place. The interrelation of the different relationship and situational variables with the life domain was also examined in order to reveal if in different life domains there are different potentials to form cooperative competitive relationships.

Keywords: cooperative competition, domains of competition, citizenship, community

Introduction

Cooperative and competitive activities are significant aspects of social behaviour, and as such, should be an important consideration for educators, social theorists and those concerned with social and educational policy and citizenship (Fülöp et al. 2007; Ross 2008; Fülöp & Takács, 2013). Each human group (a school class, a working team, a local community) is a complex system of cooperative and competitive relationships. These two interpersonal relations are intertwined; however it is not indifferent in what way and to what degree. It is a goal of each group to be able to establish a balance between them that contributes to the most constructive functioning.

Interpersonal cooperation and competition are ways citizens in a particular community relate to each other. Already in the ancient Athenian democracy debate and argument among citizens and group of citizens competing for getting through their - not rarely - opposing ideas about what the best is for their societies, constituted one basic element of democracy (Trapp et al. 2005). According to Heater (1999) citizenship is also a sense of identity in which one's attachments to a geographical or political or cultural group are emphasised and it involves a willingness and ability to act cooperatively for the public context.

However, a community has certain resources and access to these resources is not equal and there is a certain kind of competition that necessarily takes place to set up a dominance hierarchy that guides the access to these resources (e.g. Beacham, 2003). It is not indifferent though in what way and in what form this competition happens because the result of this competition may affect the development and growth of the individual member of the community and also the smaller or bigger community itself (Fülöp, 2008, 2009a). Oliver and Heater (1994) emphasize that citizens should be persons who want to behave in such a way that brings benefit to the community. 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) and the patterns of competition and cooperation may fundamentally influence the structure of the community. Therefore it should be important to bring up citizens who are competent to manage these two basic interpersonal relationships and processes (Fülöp 2009a).

Cooperative competition

The notion of "cooperative competition" emerged in writings on business from the beginning of the last century (Fülöp & Szarvas, 2012; Fülöp & Takács, 2013). To express the interwoven nature of cooperation and competition in the business world a neologism 'co-opetition' was created (Cherington 1913). Nowadays in business literature the expression "co-opetition" mainly refers to companies being complementors in making markets and competitors in dividing up markets (e.g. Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1998).

While in the business world such a notion has become widespread in relation to society and community the expression "cooperative competition" appeared very rarely. Martin Luther King Jr. in one of his speeches entitled *Cooperative competition* (King 1948-

1954 in Carson et al 2008) wrote: '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). He mainly defined cooperative competition by the content of the goal of competition i.e. to compete about or for bringing good to the community.

In a previous study (Fülöp and Szarvas 2011) prominent professionals (economists, legal experts, scientists, media personalities, sociologists, leaders of non-profit organizations, politicians) in the Hungarian society were interviewed about their views on the cooperative competitive citizen in order to reveal in what way different experts conceptualize cooperative competition. The overwhelming majority of the interviewees agreed that the combination of high degree of cooperation with high degree of competition i.e. cooperative competition leads to social success.

Another concept that can be related to citizens' behaviour in a community is 'competitive altruism' (Roberts 1998; Van Vugt et al. 2007) that describes how being altruistic and do good to others becomes a competitive advantage and pays off as a competitive strategy, how individuals may get ahead in the competition by developing 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.

In our definition cooperative competition refers to the type of constructive competition when individuals compete to reach their goals, but at the same time they cooperate in keeping the explicit and implicit rules of competition, they may share resources and help each other during the process, communication is open between them which makes knowledge transfer possible and they are able to maintain a trustful relationship. Cooperative competition can be also competition in cooperation and pursuing goals that are valuable to the society, serve public good and sustainable development (Fülöp and Szarvas 2012; Fülöp and Takács, 2013).

Goal of the research

While to keep competition and cooperation/solidarity together is a crucial task of the globalized world, of world economy, of politics, of sustainable development, of countries in the EU, of multicultural societies and of any human community (Fülöp & Takács, 2013) 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 the goal of the research presented here was to identify the critical requirements of cooperative competition in any life settings i.e. to reveal the conditions that influence how cooperation and competition are interwoven. The main focus of this paper is to reveal if there are differences in the probability of cooperative competition in relation to the area or life domain in which competition takes place.

Method

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In the present research, the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) was applied. It aims to collect direct observations of human behaviour that meet systematically defined criteria and it was developed to study complex interpersonal phenomena. In Flanagan's (1954) definition, an incident is an observable human activity that is sufficiently complete to permit inferences about the critical feature of the situation. "Critical" means that the incident is a clear example of the predefined situational characteristics.

Sample

The contributors of critical incidents included 31 MA students of education and 34 kindergarten and elementary school teachers who participated in an educational social-psychology MA course of a major university in Budapest, Hungary. There were 58 female and 7 male respondents of an average age of 29.4. The youngest respondent was 21 and the oldest 57 years old. Teachers and future educators were chosen because in an educational context there are many situations that bear an element of competition therefore they are familiar with competitive situations and are in the very position to make necessary observations and evaluations of others who are engaged in the given activity.

Procedure

Contributors were randomly assigned to describe some competitive incidents that met a particular criterion. As part of their course work, they generated altogether 481 critical competitive incidents and filled in the closed-ended questionnaire related to those. The critical incidents were classified along 9 dimensions and there were altogether 25 varieties of them. They derived from previous research indicating their role in the nature of the competitive process (Fülöp 1992, 2004; Tjosvold et al. 2003; Orosz et al, 2013). The situations to be described had to reflect 1. equal or unaequal chances; 2. Rules to be observed or transgressed; 3. relationship among the parties being hostile or friendly; 4. the goal of the competition being very important or non-important; 5. cooperation between the competing parties strong or being avoided; 6. intensity of competition being very intensive or non-intensive; 7. the reward of competition being big or small; 8. the time perspective of competition being short or long; 9. the focus of competition being on the self, on each other or on the other party.

The main goal of the study was to reveal the requirements of cooperative competition, therefore the majority of critical incidents were those in which the competitive process was characterized with high degree of cooperation among the parties (altogether 116). Another goal of the analysis was to reveal those life domains in which the different elements of competition point to more possibility of cooperative competition and in which they rather go together with non-cooperative competition.

The instruction asked the participants to report such incidents observed by them that involved behaviour that met the critical criterion. They could make a new observation with the critical feature in mind or recall an incident from memory. For example:
- *Please recall a competitive situation and describe it as precisely and detail specifically as you can in which the competitive parties STRONGLY COOPERATED with each other.*

- *Please recall a competitive situation and describe it as precisely and detail specifically as you can in which the competitive parties considered each other as ENEMIES.*

Furthermore, the contributors were asked to give a detailed description about the participants (age, sex, characteristics) about the physical and social environment, the antecedents and the consequences of the incident. The written critical incidents were approximately 2-3 page long descriptions.

Following the full account of the incident, similarly to Tjosvold et al (2003) and Orosz et al (2013), in our study the respondents had to fill in a closed-ended questionnaire that consisted of 23 aspects of the described situation. Contributors had to indicate their agreement on a Likert-scale (varying from 3 to 7 point). This enabled us to get information about all the relevant characteristics of the competitive situation irrespective of the critical feature placed into the focus of the description, while it also made possible the statistical analysis of the data (Fülöp & Takács, 2013). A principal component analysis was applied so as to make it possible to compose scales. Then a correlational analysis was conducted in order to reveal the interrelationships among the different variables and conditions of competition. The critical incidents were also content analysed and categorized in terms of the area/life domain, in order to reveal if the characteristics of the competitive relationship vary according to them.

Findings

In this chapter we briefly present the results of the principal component analysis and the scales that were identified and present the interrelationships of the different components of the competitive relationship and situation. A detailed analysis of the data and its implications can be found in Fülöp & Takács (2013).

As a result of the statistical analysis the following scales were set up: Cooperation Scale, Motivation Scale, Fairness Scale, Transparency Scale, and Enjoyment Scale. The *Cooperation Scale* consisted of six items that all characterize the relationship between the competitors: their relationship before, during and after the competition, the level of cooperation among them, the level of trust and the level of communication. The *Motivation Scale* consisted of four items that all characterize the personal involvement of the competitors in the competitive process: their level of motivation, the importance of the goal/victory, how much the competitive parties were able to improve due to competition, and how much they were able to learn due to participating in the competition. The *Fairness Scale* consisted of 3 items that characterize the way the competitors compete with each other: if they keep the explicit and implicit rules of competition, if the competitive parties applied any kind of aggression – verbal, physical or indirect one – against each other, and if the competitive parties applied manipulation strategies against each other. In this scale, aggression and manipulation were reverse scored. The *Transparency Scale* consisted of two items: firstly the clarity of evaluation criteria, that is: how much the competitive parties were aware of what decides who the winner or loser is and secondly the competitive parties' level of control over the competitive process i.e. how much the result of the competition was under their control, related to their own achievement. The *Enjoyment Scale* characterizes the competitive

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process in terms of emotions. It consists of two items: one is about how much the competitive parties enjoy the competition, and the other is about the level of positive stress, the level of positive arousal and excitement. The relationship of the scales with the different individual variables was also examined: *equality of chances,* the *intensity of competition*, the *clarity of rules*, the *amplitude of the reward*, the *scarcity of the reward*, the *level of stress caused by the competition.*

After establishing the scales their relationships with each other and with the variables that were not included in scales were examined by correlational analysis.

According to the results if the competition was more *fair*, more *enjoyable*, more *motivating* and the *rules* were more *clear* then the relationship between the competitors was more cooperative (the relationship between parties was better, more trustful and more openly communicative). In sum, cooperative competitive incidents were fair, more enjoyable and more motivating. However, the competition that was characterized by less cooperation was more intensive and more stressful (Fülöp & Takács, 2013).

The critical incidents were also compared along the rule keeping variable. Those critical incidents in which competitors observed the rules and those in which competitors broke the rules and cheated were compared. Competitive situations in which the competitors *observed the rules* were *more cooperative* and *more enjoyable* and slightly *more motivating* (Fülöp & Takács, 2013).

It was also revealed what variables influence the relationship among the competitors during and after the competition. It was found that the more the competitors cooperate, observe the rules and do not cheat, the more exciting the competition is the better the competitive parties' relationship will be during the competition. However, the more aggression the competitors apply, the more their relationship will worsen (Fülöp & Takács, 2013). In addition to these variables the relationship between the competing parties after the competition is also dependent on how much the participants experience that they improved as a result of the competition. Improvement improves the relationship as well, however high stress and manipulative techniques applied by the competitive parties deteriorates the relationship between them.

In sum, a cooperative, rule keeping, exciting and not aggressive competition after which the parties feel that they improved results in better relationship between those who compete, than their relationship was before the competition. And a cooperative, rule keeping, exciting competition, that doesn't cause much negative stress, and the parties does not apply manipulation does not destroy the competitors' relationship but improves it.

The chances of cooperative competition and different life domains

The next research question was to identify those areas or life domains in which cooperative competition is more probable to take place. First we categorized the critical incidents that were mentioned by the future and current teacher respondents (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The distribution of competitive incidents according to areas and life domains
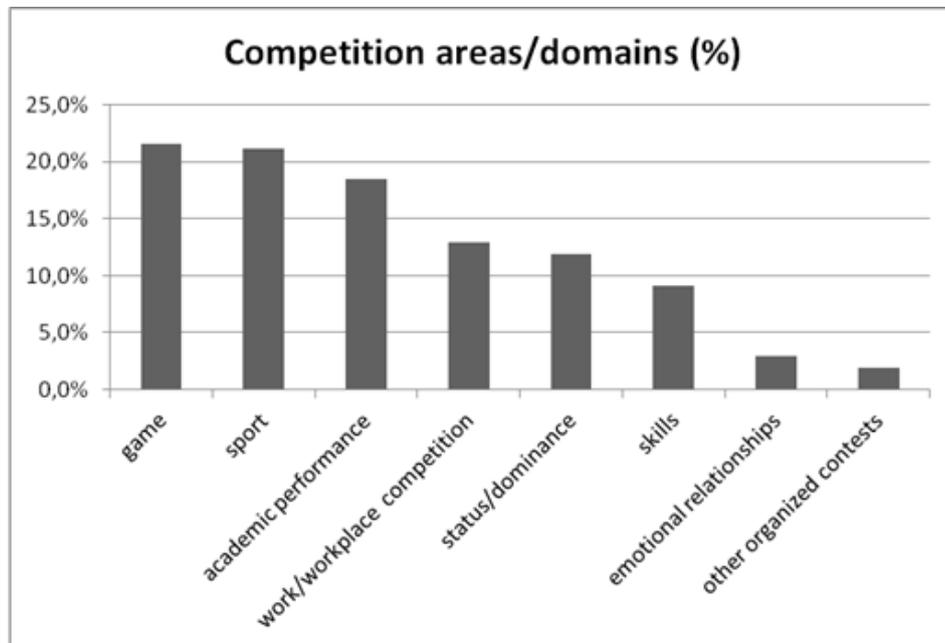

The most frequently mentioned area of competition was *games* (22%), followed by *sport* and *academic performance* (21% and 18% respectively). The second group of areas were competition in the domain of *work/workplace* (13%), at *status and dominance* (12%) and at *skills* (9%). The least frequently mentioned were *emotional competition* (love, parents' approval etc., 3%) and *other organized contests* (2%).

We examined how frequently respondents described cooperative competition at the different life domains and if there is a difference among the various life domains in terms of the kind of competition that is described. We carried out the Fisher-exact probe and it proved to be significant ($p = 0,001$), meaning that there was a significant relationship between the different dimensions and characteristics of the competitive incidents and the different life domains.

One aspect of cooperative competition is the *relationship between the competing parties*. Friendly relationship among the rivals was the most frequent in case the parties were competing about their different kinds of skills (25%), in sports (19%) and in status/dominance (19%). In case of competition over skills there was no critical incident described that referred to a hostile relationship between the competing parties. In contrast to this the rivals were described as enemies (which implies they do not cooperate) the most frequently in the area of work (35%). In this domain there were three times more critical incidents that described a hostile relationship between the parties than a friendly relationship. While competition over status and dominance was the second most frequently mentioned in case of a friendly relationship, it was also

second most frequently mentioned in case of a hostile relationship and competitions over status/dominance were somewhat more frequently hostile than friendly (24% versus 19%). (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. The relationship between competitors being friendly versus hostile and the different life domains
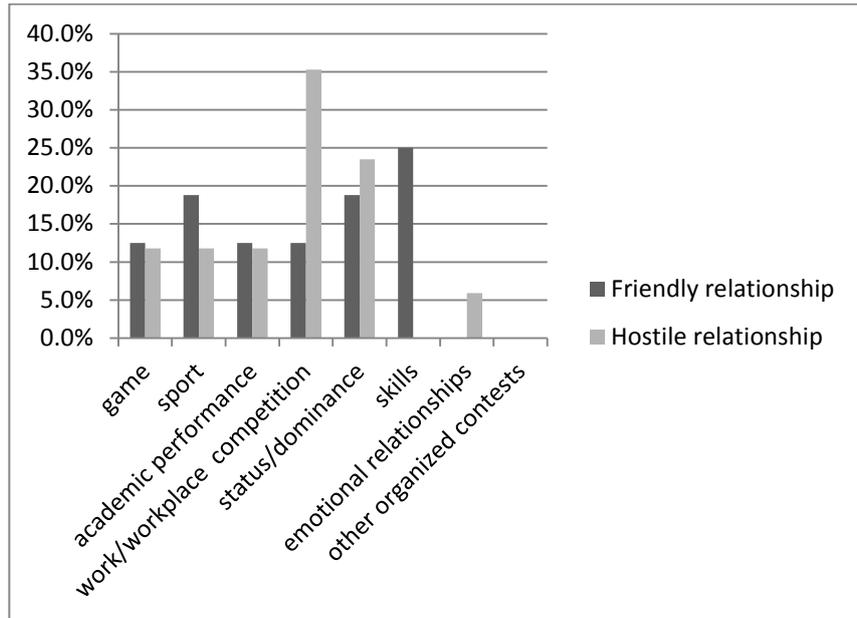

When we compared the critical incidents in which the *goal of competition* was very important with those in which the goal was non-important then there were again differences in terms of the different domains. In case of competitions at games the goal was mostly not very important (53%), however in case of competition at work the goal was always described as very important (20%) and there were no critical events mentioned in relation to work in which the goal was non-important. However, the respondents chose to describe more events in relation to both academic performance and sports in which the goal was very important (26% and 26% respectively), they also described competitions of sports and academic performace in which the goal was not important (20% and 7%, respectively). (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The relationship between the importance of the goal and the different life domains of competition.
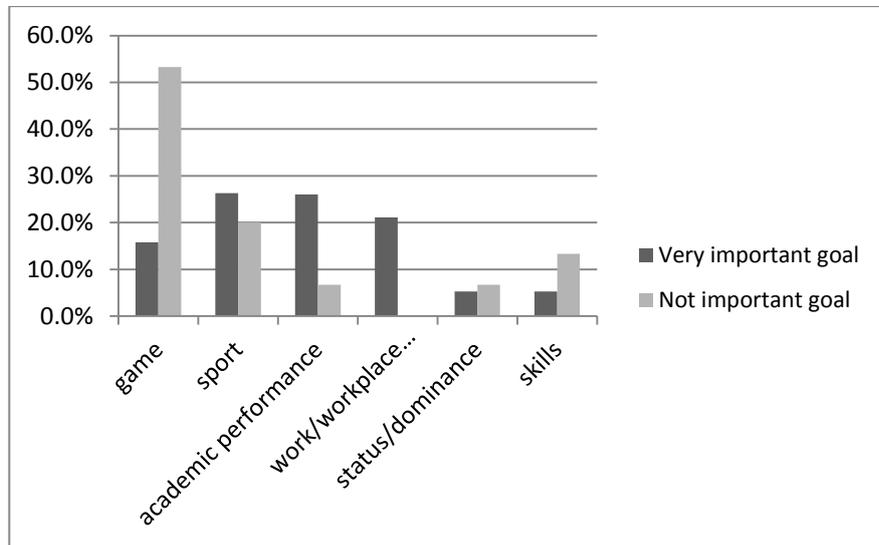
When we examined the *nature of the relationship between the competitors and the importance of the goal together* it was found that in spite of the high importance of reaching the goal of competition (i.e. winning) the competitors more often are described to have friendly relationship than hostile in the area of academic achievement (38% versus 11%) and sports (31% versus 17%), but their relationship is characterized as hostile more often than friendly in case of a competition in the area of work (28% versus 6%) and social status/dominance (17% versus 0%). (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. The relationship between the importance of the goal, the interpersonal relationship with the rival and the different life domains of competition.

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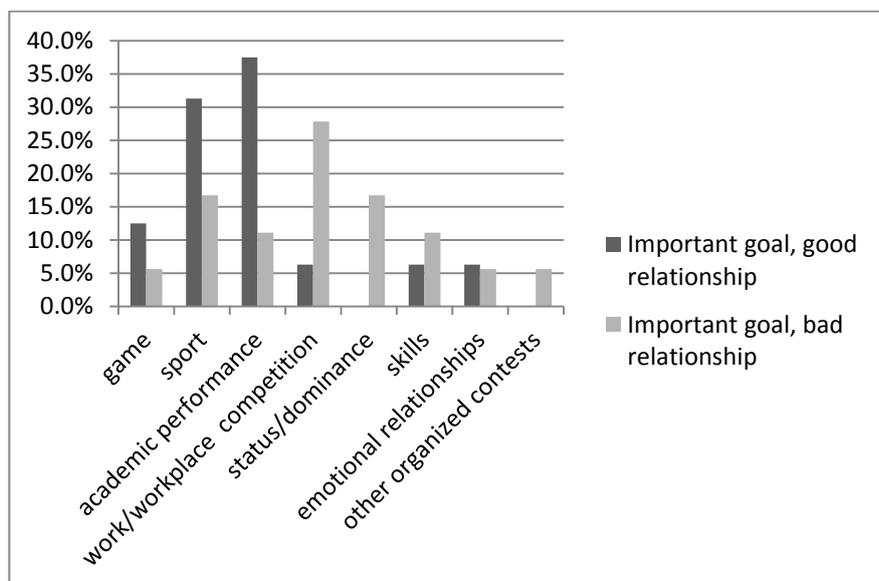
We also examined the *level of cooperation* among the competitive parties dependent on the different life domains. While in case of games (22% versus 11%) academic achievement (25% versus 17%) and sports (16% versus 11%) respondents described more critical incidents in which the parties cooperated with each other than those of in which they avoided cooperation, in case of status/dominance and work the response content was just the opposite (10% versus 28% and 12% versus 17% respectively). (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The relationship between the level of cooperation between the competitors and the different life domains of competition.
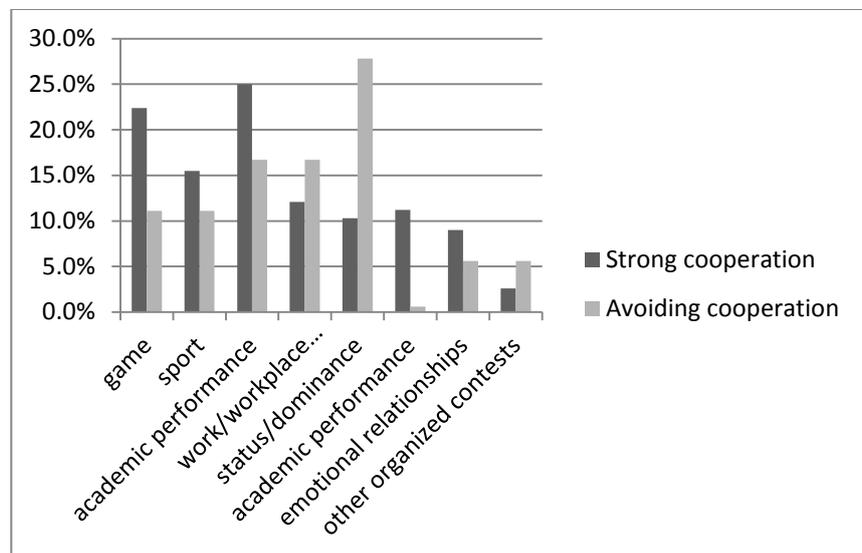
We also examined the critical incidents in terms of the *intensity* (very intensive, moderately intensive, not intensive) of the described competition in relation to the different life domains.

There were three life domains which were characterized by very intensive competition more frequently than by moderate or low intensity. These were the competition for status/dominance (28%) work (17%) and emotional (6%) competition. Games, sports and academic achievement competitions however were characterized by moderately intensive competition the most (11%, 22% and 22% respectively). (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. The relationship between the intensity of competition and the different life domains.
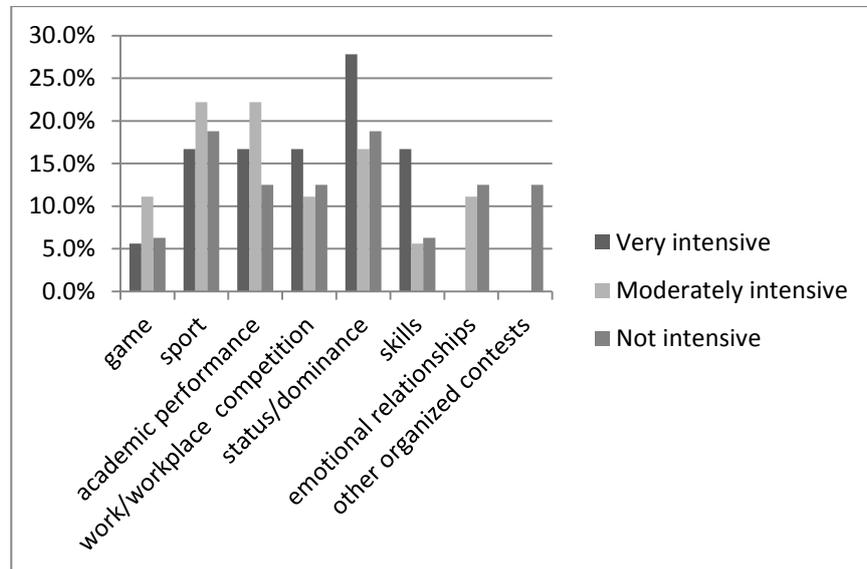
We also examined the *focus of the competitive* process in relation to different life domains. The means of competition can be directed to the self (by competition the competitor becomes more motivated, learns more or improves him/herself), to the competitive partner in a negative way (aggression, manipulation, antagonistic means) and mutually to the competitive parties (they improve, motivate etc. each other) (Fülöp, 2009b). (See Figure 7).

Figure 7. The relationship between focus of the competitive process and the different life domains.
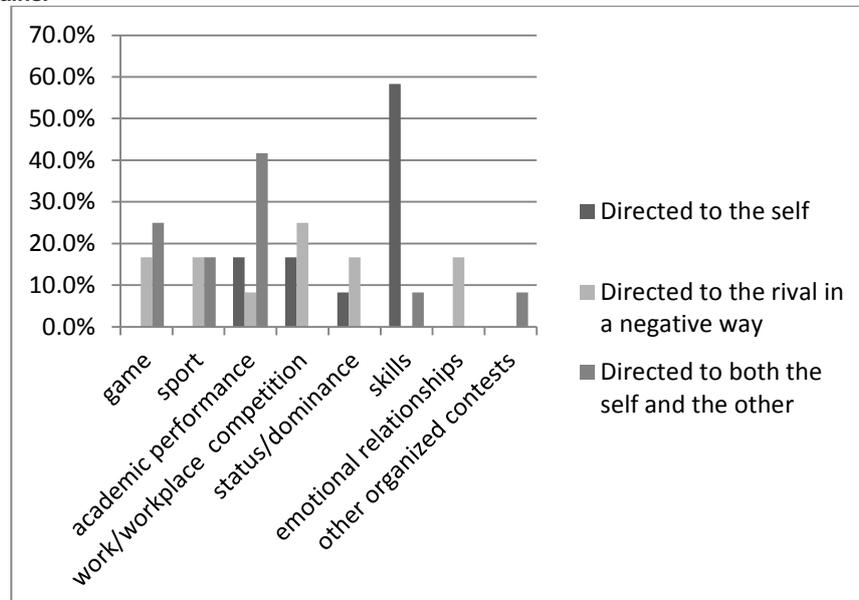
Competition is directed to the self (self-improvement, learning etc.) in the critical incidents the most frequently if the competition is in the area of skills (58%). Competition is directed to each other (mutual motivation, improvement) mostly in case of academic performance (42%) and games (25%). Competition is directed to the competitive partner in a negative way (manipulation, aggression etc.) more frequently than to the self or to each other in case of competition at work (25%), for status/dominance (17%) and for emotions (17%).

The different competitive domains clearly represented different probabilities of cooperative competition. Games, sports, academic performance and skills were mainly characterized by friendly and cooperative relationships between the competitors and in spite of the importance of the goal of competition (winning) the competitive parties were able to keep their good relationship and they either motivated themselves by competing (like in case of skills) or mutually motivated and improved each other (like in case of games and academic performance). In contrast to this, especially in case of work and status/dominance competition the relationship between the competing parties was rather hostile, they avoided cooperation with each other, the importance of the goal created bad relationship between them and the very intensive competition was rather directed to the competitor in a negative way than to the self or each other. In a more moderate and less elaborated form this was also true to competition for emotions.

Two examples of a critical incidents show these differences. The first example is a competition in the area of school/academic performance, while the second example is a competition in the domain of work.

Critical incident 1: strong cooperation within competition in the area of academic performance

In a fourth grade class, the arts and crafts teacher organized a competition and set the rules. The children had to work in groups and build a fictive village, design and prepare houses, trees, roads, etc. It was announced that at the end of the lesson the class votes for the most beautiful village. The most important rule was that each group has its own idea and should not imitate the other group. Two groups worked side by side in the classroom. When the children in group A noticed that group B stopped working since they had run out of ideas, they suggested a way forward for instance that they could set up a statue in the park. Members of group B happily accepted the advice and offered their set of coloured pencils in case Group A needs more pencils. Both groups concentrated on their own work, they were aware that they are in competition and wanted to build the most beautiful village but when the other group needed any kind of help, they still did help and did this in a cheerful and friendly way. Finally, Group A won the competition. They were proud of their achievement, because their classmates evaluated their work as the most creative. Members of Group B also acknowledged that Group A designed the most beautiful village.

Critical incident 2: hostile relationship and the avoidance of cooperation in the workplace

The observed situation took place in the dormitory of a secondary school between two teachers. This was a long process that consisted of a series of events. Teacher A is a young male person, who established very good relationships with students. He is confident, with a good sense of humour, very strong moral values represented in a straightforward way. Teacher B is a young female person who also has a good relationship with students. She always tries to put the students' interests forward and stands for those even if it takes to fight with the management of the school. Teacher A and B share a history of disagreement about several issues related to the students and dormitory life. This time the conflict arose around a 17 year-old male student who started to advertise openly racist and Fascist ideas among the students. Teacher A considered this absolutely unacceptable and suggested that the boy should be expelled from the dormitory. The school board tended to agree with this. However, Teacher B argued that instead of expelling the student, he should be provided with proper help and guidance. Both teachers tried to convince other teachers to support their views. As a result, the principal put the decision on hold. The two teachers competed around who is able to get his or her educational opinion through. The stake was what happens to the racist adolescent: whether he stays or leaves the dormitory. The teachers became enemies. They both tried to convince and manipulate others to be on their own side. What happens to the given student became no longer too important, instead who wins the competition of educational ideas was the big issue. One day Teacher A noticed that the student not only tries to distribute his unacceptable ideas among the students in the dormitory but also on Facebook. The instructor reported this immediately to the principal, who decided about the expulsion of the student. Teacher B learned about this after the decision was made. It had not been consulted with her and thus she became furious. All along this competitive conflict, Teacher A and B had never sat down to discuss the situation face to face, they only expressed their ideas to their fellow teachers and to the principal behind the other's back.

Discussion

The main goal of our study was to reveal what kind of requirements are needed in order competition be cooperative. It aimed at revealing the specific conditions that may contribute to have a high degree of cooperation included into the competitive relationship. The study showed that a high level of cooperation in the competitive process is the result of several interrelated characteristics of the relationship between the competitors, of their behaviour with each other during the competition of the emotions evoked by competition (Fülöp & Takács, 2013) and of the particular life domain that is involved in the competitive process.

The present study asked teachers and future educationalists to provide critical incidents of competition and did not specify the particular environment or life domain in which the described and observed competition should take place. The analysis of the incidents revealed that competition manifests itself in a different way in different life domains and the probability that competition is cooperative is partly dependent on the particular area of competition. If competition takes place in games, sports, in academic performance or at skills there is a bigger chance that the competitive parties are in a friendly cooperative mutually developing relationship as opposed to work, status/dominance and emotional

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competition. In the latter cases there is a bigger chance that competition takes a more hostile and negative form.

Because our respondents were teachers and future teachers many of the critical incidents they described were observed among their pupils (games, sports, academic performance). However the work, status/dominance examples came primarily from the adult world. This means that in childhood and adolescence the main competitive domains (games, sports, studies, skills) still offer more possibility for a cooperative competitive relationship between the rivals than the adult world in which the stakes of competition are more existential and severe. Work and workplaces are one of the main scenes of an adult citizen's life. It is not indifferent what kind of competition is constituted in this context. If in the work context citizens are more prone to hostile and destructive competition in which the competitive parties instead of concentrating on their self-achievement or their joint achievement are motivated to apply negative means against each other, then the potentials to develop individually and as a work unit are compromised. Similarly, if in a community status/dominance competition cannot be combined with cooperative elements that do not promote the development of that community.

To compete cooperatively in a conscious manner requires knowledge of how to be able to control the situation and how to influence or change the characteristics of the competitive process or relationship in different contexts. In most human communities resources are not abundant and each human community is more or less hierarchical with status and power differences. Therefore it is a challenge how to make the competition in these communities cooperative. Our study revealed some important elements of this. One is establishing clear norms of behaviour (rules) about the nature of competition that is acceptable in a community. If constructive and cooperative competition, non-aggressive and non-manipulative means of competition are the norm in a community then the group has formal and informal means to regulate those who deviate from this norm.

To be able to promote cooperative competitive citizenship citizens first have to be informed about the different forms of competitive relationships and the way they can be influenced by interventions. If they themselves are aware of these processes they can also clearly communicate this to their fellow citizens and can help them understand competition and cooperation in a more comprehensive framework. The present study shows that it requires complex forms of social skills to be able to compete and cooperate at the same time. Acquiring the skills necessary to compete effectively, constructively and cooperatively can be of considerable value. The present results may provide guidelines and contribute to set effective interventions to promote cooperative competitiveness among members of social groups. If those who are in the position to influence group processes are aware of the critical requirements for competition to be cooperative they can induce, monitor, control and regulate these processes.

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