

## **PERCEPTION OF COOPERATION AND TRUST IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION. A STUDY ON POLISH EXPORTERS AND IMPORTERS COOPERATION WITH PARTNERS FROM CHINA AND GERMANY**

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**Abstract.** Trust is a basic coordination mechanism in interfirm relations while lack of trust is perceived as a cooperation barrier. However, building trust across cultural or national borders can be difficult because of cultural differences between partners. This study presents the results of the research on 278 Polish exporters and importers cooperating with partners from China and Germany and proves that the general perception of cooperation with partners from a given country influences the trust level in the cooperation with a given partner coming from this country. This dependence is the weakest in case of starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation.

**Key words:** trust, international cooperation, Polish exporters and importers, culture

### **INTRODUCTION**

International interfirm cooperation differs from cooperating with domestic partners, since its conditions are much more complex. Both the macroenvironment and the microenvironment can be different from the domestic one. In highly complex and competitive conditions (i.e. also in international business conditions) the company's competitive advantage is based not only on in-house but also on network-generated resources [Castaldo 2007, p. 31]. The importance of relational resources has been discussed, i.a. by Dyer and Singh [1998], Morgan and Hunt [1999] and Castaldo [2007, pp. 30–36], but the knowledge about the relationship quality determinants seems to be still incomplete.

The literature devoted to international business (including handbooks) regards culture itself, cultural differences and single cultural aspects to be of crucial importance for the international business relations. Cultural distance is being presented as one of the

factors, of which a company must be aware, and which should be monitored and controlled [Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul 1975]. It is stressed that understanding partners' culture becomes critical for the expansion success [Czinkota and Ronkainen 2007, p. 53]. Cultural differences are being perceived to be international cooperation barriers [Arteaga-Ortiz and Fernández-Ortiz 2010, Leick 2011] and cultural similarity – to be one of the conditions of efficient cooperation [Stępień 2011, p. 229]. This study concentrates on the issue of the perception of cooperation with partners from a given country (including questions related to their business culture) and its influence on trust.

Trust, defined by Anderson and Narus [1990] as “the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm, as well as not take unexpected actions that would result in negative outcomes for the firm” is being perceived as one of the key attributes/components of the relationship quality [i.a. Morgan and Hunt 1994, Naudé and Buttle 2000, de Búrca, Fynes and Roche 2004, Ulaga and Eggert 2006, Holmlund 2008, Provan and Sydow 2008, Ashnai et al. 2008, Kim et al. 2010, Danik and Duliniec 2014]. Trust is also regarded to be one especially immediate antecedent of cooperation [Smith et al. 1995, Obodia 2008] and a basic coordination mechanism in interorganizational relations [Bachmann and Zaheer 2008]. Furthermore, lack of trust is being perceived as a barrier to both domestic and international cooperation [Nowak 2009, Danik and Lewandowska 2013].

The establishment and development of trust across cultural/national borders can be difficult. According to Bachman and Zaheer [2008], different trusting norms in partners' country of origin can raise problems for interorganizational relationships, e.g. resulting in misunderstandings, unfulfilled potential and lower cooperation potential. Child [2002, p. 250] also agrees that in case of international cooperation the development of mutual understanding and trust could be hampered by cultural differences.

According to Castaldo [2007, p. 193], the main trust's determinants are:

- 1) past experiences with the partner and relative level of satisfaction;
- 2) the trustee's perceived capabilities and competencies;
- 3) the partner's motivations to pursue joint goals without opportunistic behavior;
- 4) the trustee's perceived integrity and values.

However, the perception of partner's motives and/or competence depends not only on the structural and situational factors, but also on trusting person dispositional factors [Kee and Knox 1970, Sztompka 2007, pp. 142–143]. Kee and Knox [1970] claim, that both the structural and situational factors and dispositional factors are being influenced by the previous experience. This paper refers to Kee and Knox model [1970] arguing that trust to members of a given group depends on the general perception of this group. This perception/opinion depends not only on the experience but also on the knowledge and stereotypes regarding this group. According to Herz and Diamantopoulos [2013], country stereotypes are “stored beliefs about characteristics of a specific country which are socially shared. Country stereotypes are formed through direct experience or indirectly via education and/or media exposure and can evoke cognitive as well as affective processes”. Consequently the country perception and stereotypes can be interrelated as stereotypes influence country perception and they both base on knowledge and experience. In this study the term “perception” (perception of cooperation with partners coming from a given country) will be used as it is broader than the term “stereotypes”.

This paper presents partial results of the research project regarding dependencies between firm relationships and cultural differences carried out in January and February 2013 on Polish exporters and importers cooperating with partners in China or Germany. China and Germany as the partners' countries of origin were chosen according to their positions as Poland's trade partners [Rocznik statystyczny... 2012] and because of cultural differences between them and between them and Poland revealed in other studies [e.g. Gesteland 1999, House et al. 2004, Hofstede et al. 2010]. In author's previous study [Danik and Duliniec 2014] it was stated that most of the relationship quality factors do not differ significantly depending on the partner's country of origin, what indicates rather limited influence of "real" cultural differences on the relationship quality. The other author's study (under revision) confirmed that all aspects of relations between the surveyed enterprises depend more or less on observed cultural differences in the behavior of Polish enterprises and their foreign partners. This study aims to investigate whether the general perception of cooperation with partners from a given country influences the trust in the cooperation with a given partner coming from this country.

The study will answer following research questions:

1. Does the perception of cooperation with partners from China and Germany influence perceiving partner (coming from this countries) to be trustworthy?
2. Does the perception of cooperation with partners from China and Germany influence trusting partner (coming from this countries) from the beginning of cooperation?
3. Does the perception of cooperation with partners from China and Germany influence starting to trust the partner just after beginning the cooperation and being convinced that the partner is trustworthy?

The research questions apply to general trust level, trusting the partner from the very beginning and starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation as trust is a dynamic phenomenon and can change during the relationship [Gabarro 1978].

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The data was collected using the CATI method. A random-stratified sampling was applied. The entry frame (gross sampling) was  $N = 41,520$  records (firms dealing in industrial processing employing 1 to 249 employees). Eventually (net sample), interviews covered 280 SMEs operating in Poland and developing cooperation with partners in China or Germany. The response coefficient was 0.67%. The maximum standard estimation error was 0.058. Two companies were not taken into consideration in the final analysis as their employees' number exceeded the SMEs limit.

64 companies under study cooperated with partners from China as exporters, 84 companies were importers cooperating with Chinese partners, 83 firms exported goods to Germany, and 76 were importers from Germany, whereas some of them were both importers and exporters and/or cooperated with both Chinese and German partners. 239 companies had the Polish capital, 26 – mixed and 13 – foreign. Two thirds of the companies reached the 30% or higher share of exports in total sales over past three years, whereas in case of 54.1% of companies the share of imports in total supply over past three years was under 30%. 8.6% of the companies employed 1–9 employees, 38.5% – 10–49 and 52.9% – 50–249.

The respondents were employees responsible for the company's cooperation with foreign partners. The cooperation was defined as relationships lasting for at least one year and consisting in a regular, no one-time, completing the tasks by partners when the partners are independent, i.e. with no capital ties, or (if capital ties exist) none of the firms enjoys supervision powers over a partner [Stępień, Ed. 2011, pp. 15–33].

To measure the perception of cooperation with partners coming from a given country a scale was developed referring to cultural dimensions discussed in the literature. The present critique of the Hofstede and GLOBE studies on culture and especially the dimensions identified by them was taken into consideration by formulating the questions. However although not only the authors of those studies [Hanges and Dicskon 2004, pp. 99, 127, Minkov and Hofstede 2011], but also the other up-to-date literature emphasizes that the Hofstede and GLOBE studies refer only to the country level and one can

Table 1. Questions measuring perception of cooperation with partners coming from China/Germany

Cultural dimensions	Author	Questions referred to a given dimension
Approach to time, monochronism / polychronism, long- / short-term orientation	Hall 1959; Hofstede and Bond 1988; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997; Gesteland 1999; House et al. 2004	partners from China/Germany often do not meet deadlines (reverse scale) partners from China/Germany require meeting deadlines partners from China/Germany always think long term
Gender egalitarianism	House et al. 2004	men not women should negotiate with partners from this country (reverse scale)
Ceremoniousness	Gesteland 1999	partners from this country pay a lot of attention to business etiquette
Contextuality	Hall 1976	partners from China/Germany never say directly what they mean
Uncertainty avoidance	Hofstede 1983; House et al. 2004	one cannot trust partners from China/Germany in case of cooperation with partners from China/Germany one should take care of a contract as detailed as possible partners from China/Germany pay a lot of attention on formal aspects of the contract
Deal-focus / relationship-focus	Gesteland 1999	in order to be successful in cooperation with partners from China/Germany one have to meet their representatives in person partners from China/Germany take care of good relations during cooperation
Femininity / masculinity (assertiveness)	Hofstede 1983; House et al. 2004	partners from China/Germany are aggressive negotiators
Power distance	Hofstede 1983; House et al. 2004	mature and not young people should negotiate with partners from this country people who are high in the company's hierarchy should negotiate with partners from this country
Questions not referring to cultural dimensions		
partners from China/Germany look down on Poles		
one needs to become acquainted with the partner's culture before the cooperation		
the cooperation with a partner from this country is difficult		

Source: Own elaboration.

not transfer their results to the organizational or individual level [Bond 2002, Sousa and Bradley 2006, Brewer and Venaik 2012, McSweeney 2013], one can find such approach both in the research and in the teaching (see for example the research of Jin et al. [2008] or the academic handbook titled *International Management: Culture, Strategy and Behavior* [Luthans and Doh 2012], which is balancing between the country, organizational and individual level). Assuming that the “knowledge” presented in handbooks and research is shaping the perception of cooperation with partners coming from a given country one has to consider the dimensions of culture presented in the literature. In this part of the study no questions referring directly to the collectivism and individualism were asked, as this dimension relies more to intra- and not interfirm relations.

Three additional general questions about the cooperation with partners coming from countries under study were also asked (Table 1).

After the respondents were asked about the general perception of cooperation with Chinese/German partners a set of questions was asked regarding the cooperation with their most important partner from China/Germany. In order to examine the level of trusting the partner, a 5-point Likert type scale was applied (1 = absolutely disagree, 5 = absolutely agree). The respondents were asked to respond to following statements:

- partner is trustworthy;
- we trusted partner from the beginning of cooperation;
- we started trusting partner after the beginning of the cooperation, after we became convinced that we can trust this partner.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed that the general perception of cooperation with partners coming from China/Germany is correlated with trusting the most important cooperation partner. The most significant correlations were observed in case of perceiving partner to be trustworthy and trusting partner from the beginning of cooperation. The least (only two significant correlations) were stated for starting to trust partner after beginning the cooperation and being convinced that the partner is trustworthy. Both high contextuality, uncertainty avoidance, power distance ascribed to Chinese/German partners and the need to become acquainted with the partner’s culture before the cooperation were negatively correlated with the trust level, while gender egalitarianism, ceremoniousness, deal-focus and perceiving the cooperation with a partner from this country to be difficult were correlated positively with the trust level (Table 2).

A stepwise linear regression analysis of the partners country’s business culture perception indicators was applied in order to identify statistically relevant models which confirmed their influence on the trust to the partner coming from given country (listed in Table 3). Similarly as in case of the correlation analysis, most relationships were indicated for perceiving partner to be trustworthy, and least – for starting to trust partner after the beginning of the cooperation. A variable having negative influence on any trust indicator is high contextuality.

Table 2. Pearson correlation

Partner's country perception index	Perceiving partner to be trustworthy	Trusting partner from the beginning of cooperation	Starting to trust partner after the beginning of the cooperation
Monochronism/long-time orientation	0.009	-0.047	0.006
Gender egalitarianism	0.153*	0.136*	0.078
Ceremoniousness	0.240**	0.169**	0.093
High contextuality	-0.326**	-0.299**	-0.179**
Uncertainty avoidance	-0.205**	-0.170**	-0.108
Deal-focus	0.248**	0.288**	0.127*
Masculinity/assertiveness	-0.066	0.008	-0.011
Power distance	-0.170**	-0.185**	-0.099
Looking down on poles	-0.031	-0.022	-0.040
Need to became acquaint with the partner's culture before the cooperation	-0.201**	-0.076	0.021
Perceiving the cooperation with a partner from this country to be difficult	0.347**	0.276**	0.071

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Characteristic of models obtained in linear regression analysis

Variables explained	Explanatory variables	Model		Model estimate			Collinearity stats	
		F	R2	B	SE	Beta	Tolerance	VIF
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	perceiving the cooperation with a partner from this country to be difficult			0.145	0.037	0.222***	0.809	1.237
	deal-focus			0.257	0.063	0.221***	0.900	1.111
	high contextuality	17.20***	0.261	-0.095	0.039	-0.142*	0.800	1.251
	ceremoniousness			0.140	0.044	0.180**	0.845	1.183
	uncertainty avoidance			-0.162	0.059	-0.157**	0.828	1.208
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	need to became acquaint with the partner's culture before the cooperation			-0.075	0.036	-0.116*	0.891	1.122
	high contextuality			-0.169	0.054	-0.186**	0.850	1.176
	deal-focus			0.425	0.085	0.274***	0.977	1.024
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	perceiving the cooperation with a partner from this country to be difficult	22.00***	0.186	0.192	0.051	0.220***	0.861	1.161
	high contextuality	9.03**	0.032	-0.154	0.051	-0.179**	1.000	1.000

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Source: Own elaboration.

As significant differences in the trust level between the companies cooperating with Chinese or German partners were observed (Table 4) additional analysis was conducted in order to check, if there is no country moderation effect between the country perception and trust level. A two-way analysis of variance did not show any country moderation effect for any of the factors (Table 5). Therefore one can assume, that the effects observed do not depend on the partner's country of origin.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for independent samples

Effect	China		Germany		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	4.12	0.89	4.42	0.61	3.18**
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	3.61	1.12	3.98	0.91	2.92**
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	3.62	1.05	4.03	0.85	3.45***

\* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5. Partners country of origin influence on dependency between perception and trust level

Effect	F	p	Partners country perception index
	1	2	3
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	0.416	0.519	monochronism/long-time orientation
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	0.491	0.484	
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	0.064	0.8	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	1.674	0.197	gender egalitarianism
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	0.279	0.598	
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	0.436	0.51	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	0.09	0.765	ceremoniousness
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	1.421	0.234	
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	0.477	0.491	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	1.467	0.227	high contextuality
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	0.408	0.523	
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	0.024	0.876	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy	0.092	0.762	uncertainty avoidance
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation	3.778	0.053	
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation	0.043	0.835	

Table 5 cont.

	1	2	3	4
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy		0.004	0.947	
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation		0.018	0.892	deal-focus
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation		1.04	0.309	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy		0.31	0.578	
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation		0.985	0.322	masculinity/assertiveness
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation		2.206	0.139	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy		0.003	0.956	
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation		0.645	0.423	power distance
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation		0,000	0.985	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy		0.088	0.767	
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation		0.588	0.444	looking down on Poles
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation		0.266	0.607	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy		0.095	0.759	
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation		0.03	0.862	need to became acquaint with the partner's culture before the cooperation
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation		0.6	0.439	
Perceiving the partner to be trustworthy		0.575	0.449	
Trusting the partner from the beginning of cooperation		0.031	0.861	perceiving the cooperation with a partner from this country to be difficult
Starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation		0.128	0.721	

Source: Own elaboration.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Both the correlation and regression analysis revealed a relationship between trust level and opinions about the cooperation with partners from this country. The dependence was the weakest one in case of starting to trust the partner after the beginning of the cooperation, what leads to a rather obvious conclusion that the perception is of the higher importance at the initial stage of cooperation. Other factors (probably the experience in cooperation with a given partner) affect the trust level at the later stages.

A positive relationship of perceiving the cooperation with a partner coming from a given country to be difficult and the trust level is a bit surprising and should be carefully investigated in the future. However, one can suppose that perceiving the cooperation to be difficult can effect in more careful partner selection and more effort to maintain good relationship, what explains the higher trust level.

Although all the other positive and negative dependencies revealed in the study could be also intuitively explained (especially the uncertainty avoidance correlation with trust

level, as the uncertainty avoidance variable indicates, i.a. the uncertainty avoidance of respondents), the further research should give detailed explanation to the nature of this relationships.

The results of this study are limited only to Polish companies cooperating with partners from China and Germany. Research on companies coming from other countries could reveal other dependencies between trust and perceived partner's country business culture. However, the conclusion that the international business decision maker's perception of doing business with partners from a given country is one of the determinants of trust in international relationships is a contribution to the international business theory.

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## **POSTRZEGANIE WSPÓŁPRACY A ZAUFANIE WE WSPÓŁPRACY MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ. BADANIE WSPÓŁPRACY POLSKICH EKSPORTERÓW I IMPORTERÓW Z PARTNERAMI Z CHIN I NIEMIEC**

**Streszczenie.** Zaufanie jest podstawowym mechanizmem koordynującym relacje między przedsiębiorstwami, podczas gdy jego brak uznaje się za barierę współpracy. Budowanie zaufania we współpracy międzynarodowej może być trudne ze względu na różnice kulturowe między partnerami. Artykuł prezentuje wyniki badania 278 polskich eksporterów i importerów współpracujących z partnerami z Chin i Niemiec. Badanie wykazało, że ogólne postrzeganie współpracy z partnerami z danego kraju wpływa na poziom zaufania podczas współpracy z konkretnym partnerem pochodzącym z tego kraju. Zależność ta jest najsłabsza w przypadku, gdy zaufanie pojawia się dopiero po rozpoczęciu współpracy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zaufanie, współpraca międzynarodowa, polscy eksporterzy i importerzy, kultura

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