

Combining Korean Confucianism with European Values to Build Successful Business Relationships

Dr. Alison Pearce, Associate Professor in Strategic Entrepreneurship

alison.pearce@northumbria.ac.uk

Newcastle Business School, New Bridge Street, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK

Dr. Alison Pearce is Associate Professor of Strategic Entrepreneurship at Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University, UK, Affiliate Professor at Grenoble Ecole de Management, France and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. One of the original cohort of British Erasmus students sent abroad in 1987 she spent 15 years living and working internationally in marketing, design and product development in blue-chip companies culminating in Head of Innovation and Business Development and running her own marketing & design consultancy. Over another 15 years in academia she has led the development of student exchanges, been nominated for a national Teaching Fellowship, obtained an action research doctorate in strategic entrepreneurship in international mobility, developed a university-wide strategy for international staff mobility and participated in numerous international collaborations. She teaches in France and Slovenia. She is the convenor of a faculty Research Interest Group and her work has been published in academic journals, industry magazines, books, blogs and news media. An original member of the SAIPEKS, KEUDOS and GETM3 teams, Alison led the team writing the GETM3 funding bid and now leads the project's overall implementation.

Dr. Katarzyna Dziewanowska, Assistant Professor in Marketing

kdziewanowska@wz.uw.edu.pl

Faculty of Management, Szturmowa 1/3, University of Warsaw, 02-678 Warszawa, Poland

Dr. Katarzyna Dziewanowska is Assistant Professor in Marketing at the Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw, Poland. She is a member of the European Marketing Academy and Polish Scientific Association of Marketing. She received her PhD in marketing from the University of Warsaw. She was a visiting researcher at Centre for Studies on Higher Education at University of California, Berkeley, and holds position of visiting fellow at Northumbria University. Her research interests focus on consumer behaviour, value co-creation, consumer experiences and experiential marketing, as well as customer satisfaction, loyalty and relationship marketing. Katarzyna was an original member of the SAIPEKS, KEUDOS and GETM3 project teams, collaborated on the GETM3 funding bid preparation and leads the research workstream focussed on young people.

Dr. Rose Quan, Associate Professor in International Business

rose.quan@northumbria.ac.uk

Newcastle Business School, New Bridge Street, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK

Dr. Rose Quan is originally from China and is Associate Professor in International Business and Strategy at Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University, UK. Her research interests include international entrepreneurship, international student and staff mobility and international market entry strategy for MNEs and SMEs from both developed and developing countries. Her scholarly work has appeared in *International Business Review*, *Teaching in Higher Education*; *European Journal of International Management* etc. She has been responsible for the development of UK-Chinese partnerships in higher education. Rose is co-lead of the GETM3 workstream managing networking, communication, dissemination and training activities in the project and, as such, has oversight of the quarterly 'sandpit' events circulating around 5 countries.

Professor Il-sang Ko, Professor of Information Systems

isko@chonnam.ac.kr

College of Business Administration, Chonnam National University, 300 Yongbong-Dong, Buk-Gu, Gwangju, Republic of Korea

Professor Ko Il-sang is a Professor in the College of Business Administration, Chonnam National University (CNU), South Korea. He has an MBA from the University of Pittsburgh, PA and a PhD from the University of Colorado, USA. His research

interests are B2B electronic commerce, global collaboration, and firm's capacity and capability of IT applications. His research work has appeared in *the International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, *International Journal of Information Management*, *International Journal of Electronic Collaboration* and *Journal of Knowledge Management*. Il-sang was an original member of the KEUDOS and GETM3 project teams, leads the participation of CNU in the latter and ensures implementation of the project activities there, including chairing the International Conferences on Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management & Social Collaboration.

Abstract

Confucian and Buddhist influences in Korea combine to create a paradoxical culture in which different ideas work together harmoniously. Confucian philosophy's legacy in Korea remains strong compared to China, for example. Meanwhile, European values, rooted in Aristotle, have developed in a different direction. With increasing opportunities and collaborations between European Union (EU) countries and Korea, developing enduring and successful business relationships has become imperative. This paper addresses the lack of focus on Korean Confucianism and its effect on relations with Europe. It emerges from the unique opportunity to evaluate a series of highly successful EU-Korean collaborations conducted over a period of 11 years in higher education institutions and commercial industries. Using the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 'critical cases' on both sides, our findings show that the influence of Korean Confucianism is established as a major positive influence on the ability to initiate and develop sustained working relationships to achieve increasingly complex and ambitious aims. It is posited that a combination of Korean and European values might be ideal as Korean society undergoes rapid change and Europe faces political upheaval. Finally, we find that the right level of value adjustment from both sides is essential for a successful business relationship and a new framework of approaches to this process is proposed.

Keywords: Korean Confucianism, European values, successful business relationship

1. Introduction

Most studies of cultural values and their impact on business practices, especially in the comparison of Western and Eastern culture, have focused on China rather than South Korea (Fu, Christine & Lamming, 2016; Liang, Wu & Zhang, 2018). European reaction to South Korea's emergence was originally characterised by ignorance and confrontation rather than co-operation (Bridges, 1992) and education in Korea has been more connected to the US than Europe (Bridges, 1986). However, in 2010, the EU and South Korea upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership, ensuring a high level of commitment from both sides to strengthened co-operation on major political and global issues. This over-arching agreement has a legal link to the EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreement, provisionally applied since 2011 and formally ratified in 2015. This in turn goes further than any previous agreements in lifting trade barriers and it is the EU's first trade deal with an Asian country (EU Commission, 2019). This rapid political change makes the ability to build successful Korean-European collaboration and partnerships particularly important today and in the future.

Numerous Western and Eastern researchers have examined the influences of Confucianism on business practices (Ip, 2009; Liang, Wu & Zhang, 2017), but few studies focus on Korean culture (Yu, 2006). Little attention has been paid to the development of Confucianism in Korea (Levi, 2013) and studies are still rare (Greif & Rošker, 2014). According to Huang (2014), one can better appreciate the diversity and variety of East Asian Confucian traditions when they are studied in context. This is particularly important for Korea, where modifications diverged from Neo-Confucian philosophy due to factors such as political struggles, language differences and historical developments (Greif & Rošker, 2014). Korean culture has emerged as a combination of Confucian and Buddhist values (Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005) which might seem contradictory in some ways. But Pearce & Quan (2015) have already established that the paradoxical behaviour prevalent in various cultures (Fang, 2008) can be used to support the entrepreneurial traits underpinning international working. Korean Confucianism remains a strong influence on a society that has not undergone the root and branch reform of a cultural revolution like that in China (Jang, Lee & Lockhart, 2017).

Given the lack of studies of the integration of Korean and European cultural values and its impact on business relationship building, this paper evaluates a series of highly successful EU-Korean collaborations conducted over a period of 11 years – and ongoing - in higher education and commercial industry. From origins in an experimental and small-scale student mobility co-operation of 7 partners, this loose network has developed and expanded into a 16-partner consortium running a complex research mobility project involving over 100 people. In this 11-year period, a unique network of personal and professional relationships has developed between individuals operating in these regions where historically “*geographical distance has been compounded by psychological distance*” (Bridges, 1986; p.21). Total funding from the European Union and Korean Research Foundation exceeds €4 million and five increasingly large and complex projects have been established from within the same ‘squad’ of participants. We use this record to claim the relationships – individual and institutional - are successful. The case we examine in this paper reveals a successful, long-term pattern of relationships between the EU and South Korea, combining Confucian and European values. This contributes to understanding the sustainability of relationships from a cultural value perspective (Alon et al., 2016) and builds on the dominance of personality factors concluded by Dziewanowska et al. (2019).

To interact effectively across cultures is of paramount importance for developing a successful business relationship and yet it can be challenging (Alon et al., 2016). The theoretical foundation for our paper is a combination of Hofstede’s national culture difference (1980) and value-belief theory (2001), and Alon et al.’s (2016) business cultural intelligence quotient (BCIQ). Based on these theories, we aim to investigate how the values held by South Koreans and Europeans influence their collaborative behaviour and the process of value and cultural adjustment required to build these business relationships.

By investigating the extent and nature of the influence of Korean Confucianism and European values on relationship building, a new framework of approaches to combining these values is developed. Our findings demonstrate that cultural values lead to different behaviours, and influence cross-cultural relationship building, which is consistent with Hofstede’s (2001) value-belief theory. In addition, we extended Alon et al.’s (2016) BCIQ literature in the specific context of successful Korean-EU relationships by claiming that the right level of balanced adjustment of a national value system is essential to build a successful business relationship. Our study provides insight into how the similarities and differences are

exploited and overcome as stereotypical notions of ‘culture’ are gradually replaced by genuine personalities and rapport.

The paper starts with a review of Confucianism’s influence on Korean culture and the development of European values and to what extent these are shared. We review cultural intelligence and touch on sustaining business relationships. The Methodology describes the research context and sets out our critical case sampling through in-depth interview. Our Findings are then described in four meta-theme sections, with themes set out in a table. The Conclusion sets out our recommended approaches to combining values in order to build successful business relationships and acknowledges the limitations of this study along with suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Confucianism and Korean culture

Confucianism is defined as an ideology, a worldview, an ethical system and a scholarly tradition (Goldin, 2011) developed from the teaching of Confucius. Confucius (also known as Kong Fu-Zi), a Chinese philosopher, educator and a moral exemplar born in 551 BC, started a humanist philosophy that is oriented towards people, their interests and their achievement (Ha, 2018), further developed by his disciples such as Mencius (Levi, 2013). The five cardinal virtues, or ‘constants’ of Confucianism are humaneness, righteousness, proper rites, knowledge and integrity. These are accompanied by the values of loyalty, filial piety, contingency, honesty, sense of right and wrong, bravery, kindness, respect and modesty (Runes, 1983). This ideology, as an important element of Asian culture, spread from China to other Asian countries, including South Korea (hereinafter Korea), Japan, Singapore and Vietnam (Liu, Meng & Wang, 2013). The exact date of introduction of Confucianism to Korea is unknown, although it is believed to have been brought to the kingdom of Koguryo in the fourth century. It later developed into Neo-Confucianism and was adopted by the Choson Dynasty (1392-1910) as a national ideology in the 15th century (Levi, 2013). According to Yi (2011), the influence of Neo-Confucianism on the Choson Dynasty was stronger than in China and Japan. Although China’s neighbours – including Korea – absorbed and adopted Confucianism, they developed their own versions of the ideology. In Korea, this resulted in societal reform (Park, 2014). It further diverged along with a different approach to modernisation taken by each of the countries (Smith 1996; Kim, 2009).

Nowadays in Korea, the majority of the population is atheist (46.5%), about 30% follow Catholicism and Protestantism and 23% of Koreans believe in Buddhism (Ha, 2018). While less than 2% of Koreans choose Confucianism as their path, most of them have embraced it as a traditional culture which has influenced the people’s lifestyle more than any religion (Kim 2009, Ha, 2018). According to Koh (1996), the predominance of Confucianism in Korea results from its persistent reproduction through various forms of social practice, rather than from being upheld as a personal value by individual people. Buddhist values are individual, however, and advocate the samsara, a cycle of reincarnation (e.g. birth, living death and rebirth). Although Confucianism and Buddhism seem different, they have worked together harmoniously. Thus, Korean society’s philosophical values combine Buddhism and Confucianism (Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). For more than one thousand years, Buddhism and Confucianism are considered to have contributed co-operatively to the development of Korean society (Yoon, 1994).

Koreans value harmony, respect age and seniority, as well as interpersonal relationships (Kang, 2012). They believe that each individual has his/her own place to fit into a hierarchy of relationships. Helping friends within a network is a moral and social obligation in Korea

(Huang, 2001; Kim, et al., 2007). In a business context, the influence of Confucianism is visible. For example, the organisation of companies is highly hierarchical so that differentiation between ranks is clear and decision making is centralized (Ungson, Steers & Park, 1997) with a top-down communication style (Chung, Lee & Jung, 1997). Studies also show that over 40% of top Korean chaebols' (business conglomerates comprising large companies and typically owned and managed by family members and relatives) stock is held by families (Lee & Li, 2009). This is attributed to Confucian family values. Moreover, the Korean management style is paternal and familial with the head of a chaebol considered a father figure (Ungson, Steers & Park, 1997). Connections in Korean society and business are not limited to blood, they also extend to education. The managers of the major chaebols graduated from a few top universities (Chang & Chang, 1994). In Confucianism, education means not only the accumulation of knowledge, but also self-cultivation of morality. Having a degree brings honour for the kin, as well as leverage for '*management and expansion of kinship property*' (Kim, 2002, p. 79). Also, there is a close collaborative relationship between the academic profession and the government. University professors are routinely appointed ministers or members of the National Congress (Kim, 2001).

National cultural differences have been historically studied to explain country variances in the rate of business activities (Hofstede, 1980; Laurent, 1983; Thomas & Mueller, 2000; Schein, 2004). Building on Hofstede's pioneering culture and management studies (1980; 1991; 2001), the area of culture and management has been examined in the contrast of Western world and in Asia, Africa and Middle East (Browaeyns & Price, 2015). Also, various studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between Confucianism and its impact on society and business management (e.g. Alon et al., 2016; Cheng, 1972; Ha, 2018; Hwang, 1999; Liang, Wu & Zhang, 2018; Jang, Lee & Lockhart, 2018). It is imperative to understand the culturally driven ethical-value understanding of management processes (Roy, Paul, Roy & Mukhopadhyay, 2018), especially now that fast change and economic growth in East Asia mean some cultural values are interpreted differently. The traditional emphasis on family, relationships and social harmony gradually develop new meanings (Fang, 2008; Pearce & Quan, 2015). Although Confucian visions do not seem fully compatible with the modern world, many Koreans express their disappointment with Western values and return to their roots, i.e. the Confucian model (Tamari & Lee, 2002). Also, rapid technological development over the last three decades has not led to a departure from Confucian traditions even though younger generations bring new developments and indirectly cause changes (Śledziak, 2013).

2.2 Cultural values in Europe

According to the Treaty of Lisbon (signed 2007), the European Union shares fundamental values that unite all the member states. They include a respect for human dignity and human rights, democracy, freedom, equality and the rule of law. One goal of the EU is to promote peace and the well-being of citizens, as well as to defend these values. However, a study of the European value system reveals that while 53% of Europeans think that EU countries are close, 41% believe they are distant (Eurobarometer, 2018). This latter group has grown from 34% in 2012. (Eurobarometer, 2012). The perception of closeness is more likely to be expressed by young people who are better educated, positioned towards the top of the social scale and more interested in European politics. There are also national differences, with the Irish and Polish expressing the highest belief in the closeness of shared values (77% and 69% respectively). Asked about the most important values, Europeans first list peace (45%) and human rights (42%), followed by respect for human life (37%), democracy (27%), individual

freedom (24%), and equality (21%). Less frequently mentioned are the rule of law (18%), tolerance (16%), solidarity (16%), self-fulfillment (9%), respect for other cultures (9%) and religion (5%) (Eurobarometer, 2018).

Despite the presence of shared values in the European Union, there are differences between countries and regions. On the basis of three bipolar dimensions of culture, i.e. embeddedness vs. autonomy, hierarchy vs. egalitarianism, and mastery vs. harmony, Schwartz (2006) drew attention to distinctions between Western and Eastern Europe. There is a significant difference in embeddedness and hierarchy, with Western Europe being lowest on these orientations on a global scale and Eastern Europe higher than the West but lower than other regions (Africa, Asia and Middle East). In turn, Western Europe puts much greater emphasis on intellectual autonomy, egalitarianism and harmony. Schwartz also distinguished two cultural sub-regions in Eastern Europe (i.e. Baltic and East-Central states vs. the Balkan and more Eastern states) (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007). Cultural values can be significantly different between countries from the same geographical and cultural region (e.g. Western Europe) and negligible between countries from different regions (e.g. Eastern Europe and Asia). This is the case in the countries in our analysis, i.e. the UK, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia and South Korea. In terms of Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural dimensions, two countries, sharing much history and a language, i.e. Ireland and the United Kingdom, score close on power distance (35 and 28), masculinity (66 and 68), uncertainty avoidance (35 and 35) and indulgence (69 and 65). In terms of long-term orientation, the UK is more similar to Slovenia (51 and 49), and on the individualism dimension Ireland shows more similarity to Poland (70 and 60). South Korea scores the highest in long-term orientation (100) but in other dimensions, there is a lot of similarity between Poland, Slovenia and South Korea (power distance (68; 71; 60), uncertainty avoidance (93; 88; 85) and indulgence (29 for both Poland and Korea).

2.3 Cultural intelligence (CI) and building enduring business relationships

Building on value-belief theory (Hofstede, 2001), Alon et al. (2016) state that *'the values and beliefs held by the member of a culture will influence how individuals, groups, and institutions in that culture behave and the degree to which their behaviour is viewed as legitimate, acceptable, and effective (p.323)'*. Confucian culture focuses on building relationships: not just establishing them but also how to make them last. (Arias, 1998; Leung, Lai, Chen & Wong, 2005). Business relationships provide an opportunity for social interaction. Positive business networks (either social bonding or professional relationships) and efficient cross-cultural communication can reinforce commitment and trust between business partners (Ajmal, Helo & Kassem, 2017). Trust in cross-cultural communication is essential for establishing and maintaining business relationships. Trust in business relationships, according to Chai & Dibb (2018), can be classified as interpersonal trust and cognitive trust. Interpersonal trust refers to interpersonal likability, and cognitive trust implies that trustees are confidence or willing to rely on the partner's competence and reliability (Chai & Dibb, 2018).

Building upon Sternberg & Detterman's (1986) framework of the multiple foci of intelligence (multidimensional perspective of intelligence), Earley & Ang (2003) explored that cultural intelligence (CI) reflects the capability of an individual to engage others and to act in accordance with cognition and motivation in diverse cultural contexts. In their five-country study of CI, Alon et al. (2018) advocate that individuals' cultural experience in foreign countries can improve their cultural quotient (CQ) and help them to learn how to develop their cultural intelligence, for instance learning a foreign language - *'Learning a*

foreign language involves a certain exposure to the culture where the language has developed' (p.239). Language reflects traditions, cultural values and the assumptions of a nation. Other international researchers (eg. Ott & Michailova, 2017; Daly & Davy, 2018) support Alon and his colleagues' findings, and believe that learning a new foreign language can benefit individuals by enhancing cultural knowledge and intercultural skills. It is apparent that effective cross-cultural understanding and communication is vital to build trust and enduring successful business relationships. Alon et al. (2016) measured CI in five countries by comparing four factors including 1) motivation regarding new experience and diversity; 2) cross-cultural listening, communication, and adaptation; 3) cognitive preparation and learning behaviour when encountering new cultures; 4) and finally global knowledge. Their findings indicate that developing cultural intelligence in business professionals is extremely important.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research Context

In 2008, the first projects were awarded funding by the 'Industrialized Countries Instrument – Education Cooperation Programme' (ICI-ECP), launched to support joint mobility and degree opportunities between the EU and Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea. This fund started a remarkable series of increasingly complex and ambitious collaborations between universities and their industry partners centred on Daegu in the south east of South Korea (SK), Gwangju in the south-west and a variety of European universities in Poland (P), Slovenia (SLO), the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland (RoI) and others (Table 1). The catalyst resided in the International Office of a Daegu university: a British national, married to a Korean-American, who had lived and worked in Korea for more than 20 years.

Table 1: Collaborative projects generating research data

Dates	Proj-ect	Fund €	Funder	Aims	No of partners in each country					
					SK	P	SLO	UK	RoI	Other
2008-11	A	700k	ICI-ECP	Study & internships	3	1	1	1	0	1
2009-12	B	640k	ICI-ECP	Internships	3	1	0	0	0	3
2013-17	C	750k	ICI-ECP	Double degree	2	2	1	1	0	1
2016-20	D	1000k	H2020	Research & innovation staff exchange	3	4	3	3	3	0
2016-20	E	1000k	Erasmus+	Innovation capacity	1	0	1	0	3	6

3.2 Research method

Given the relatively poorly explored influence and management implications of Korean Confucian values on international projects and cooperation, an exploratory research design was deemed appropriate. Thus, a qualitative approach was taken (individual interviews) allowing for in-depth understanding of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of this phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as well as allowing the respondents to share their views and experiences freely (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

We used a semi-structured interview scenario, which was divided into three broad themes: the origin of the international cooperation (motives, circumstances), cultural values and their influence on the cooperation and personal experiences (critical incidents). This provided necessary formality while also allowing us to build greater rapport with the

respondents and dealing effectively with the emergence of unexpected issues during the research (Seidman, 1998, Wengraf, 2001). The interviews were conducted by asking open-ended questions whenever it was possible. The researchers then seized opportunities to follow potentially worthy lines of inquiry to encourage elaboration (Lindolf, 1995). The interviews took place at times and in locations convenient for the participants and were conducted by two authors, typically lasting between 40 and 120 minutes. Due to wide geographic distribution of the participants, six interviews were conducted face-to-face and eight via Skype. All interviews were in English, as all our respondents have a sufficient level of English.

A critical case sampling strategy is adapted by targeting participants with high interest in this research and the project (Engström & Elg, 2015). Our respondents were ‘knowledgeable agents’ due to their personal and work-related experiences (Gioia et al., 2013). Ages range from 30 to 69, which reflects the age range of knowledgeable agents in a typical professional lifespan. The sample comprised fourteen respondents of six nationalities (British, Chinese, Irish, Korean, Polish and Slovenian) employed at six universities in five countries (the UK, Ireland, South Korea, Poland and Slovenia). Eight of the respondents were female and six were male. Five of them held administrative positions while the remaining nine were academics. All of the respondents were actively involved in international cooperation and international projects (education and/or research) carried out by Korean and European partners. Detailed respondents’ characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The profile of the interviews

ID	Sex	Nationality	Age*	Exp	Projects	Role & responsibilities	Interview
R1	F	British	50-54	15	A, C, D	Academic staff involvement and coordination of international education and research projects	Skype 55 mins
R2	F	British	55-59	18	A, B, C, D, E	Administrative and academic staff involvement and coordination of international education and research projects, responsible for maintaining and development of relationships with international partners	In Person 84 mins
R3	M	British	50-54	10	D	Academic / managerial staff	In Person 67 mins
R4	F	Chinese	50-54	15	D	Academic / managerial staff involvement in international education and research projects	In Person 45 mins
R5	M	Irish	45-49	7	D, E	Academic / managerial staff involvement and coordination of international education and research projects	Skype 42 mins

R6	F	Korean	30-34	3	D	Academic staff Involvement in international research projects	In Person 50 mins
R7	F	Korean	35-39	5	C	Administrative staff Work at international relation office, responsible for relationships with European partners, coordination of international student exchange	Skype 54 mins
R8	F	Korean	35-39	10	A, B, C, E	Administrative staff Work at international relation office, coordination of international student and staff exchange	Skype 30 mins
R9	M	Korean	30-34	7	C	Administrative staff Work at international relation office, coordination of international student and staff exchange	Skype 30 mins
R10	M	Korean	50-54	5	D	Academic staff Involvement in international research projects	In Person 40 mins
R11	M	Korean	40-44	6	C, D	Academic staff Involvement in international education and research projects	Skype 52 mins
R12	M	Korean	65-69	15	D	Academic / managerial staff Involvement in international education and research projects	Skype 60 mins
R13	F	Polish	40-44	11	A, C, D	Academic staff Coordination of international exchange (faculty level), involvement and coordination of international education and research projects	Skype 50 mins
R14	F	Slovenian	65-69	25	A, C, D, E	Managerial staff coordination of international education and research projects, responsible for maintaining and development of relationships with international partners	Skype 50 mins

*Uses Western method for calculating age where people reach age of 1 only after a year and their age advances on the anniversary of their actual date of birth

The interviews were recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Also, the researchers took notes during the interviews, and the recording was

replayed against these notes to ensure correct interpretation. A thematic analysis approach was employed to discover the emerged themes, patterns and deviations from these patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded in an iterative manner to accommodate emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The initial coding and thematic mapping were developed by one of the researchers and then reviewed by the other two. The analysis comprised close reading of the text, coding meaningful fragments and framing codes into themes and subthemes. Indicative quotes were assigned to each subtheme. Tables such as Table 3 below were the basis for further reporting on the findings.

Table 3. Example of analysis framework

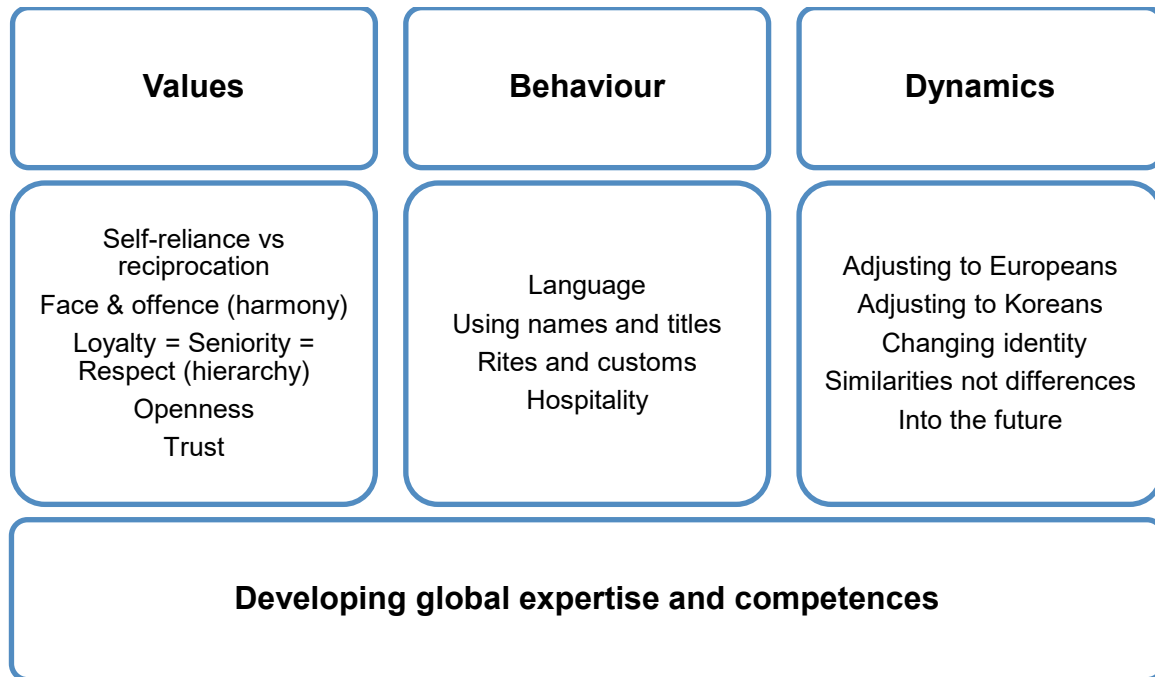
Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quotes
Values	Hierarchy	<i>“Koreans first try to figure out how old people are. They first ask some questions such as ‘which high school did you graduate from? And which year? Which year are you in at college or university?’ (R12)</i>
Behaviour	Language	<i>“I feel way more comfortable talking to Slovenians than the British, I simply get what they mean when they say it. But it’s different with British people I know, we actually share some expressions and jokes which are probably incorrect, but we get them” (R13)</i>
Dynamics	Similarities not differences	<i>“I expected cultural differences before I came to Europe. But after 10 years I actually realised quite recently that it’s all the same [...] There is etiquette in Europe too – maybe slightly different – the fundamental manners and values are the same [...]” (R6)</i>
Developing global expertise		<i>“It’s important to actually recognise what certain people cannot do or do not want to do. And there are some things that X will do easily and perfectly well, and there are some things he will not do. So knowing this, this is the learning process. We learned that, let’s say, he does not answer his emails. But his secretary does. So you learn the proper channels of communication. And then you learn how to get things done” (R3)</i>

4. Findings

Derived from our analysed thick, rich and in-depth interview data, four meta-themes emerged: ‘Values’, ‘Behaviour’, ‘Dynamics’ and ‘Developing global expertise and competence’. Here we define ‘values’ as certain invisible principles of what to do, ‘behaviours’ as visible manifestations of values and ‘dynamics’ as forces producing changes in the project and its participants. In turn, ‘developing global expertise and competence’ reflects a learning process of project participants based on their experiences and observations.

Each of the meta-themes (except ‘developing global expertise and competences’) comprises a number of subthemes that are presented in Figure 1. All of them are discussed in turn in the following section of the paper.

Figure 1. Map of meta-themes and attendant subthemes



4.1 Values

Analysis of data lead to the identification of five concepts that strongly correspond with Confucian values and cultural dimensions. These are self-reliance versus reciprocatation (which addresses the collectivism-individualism spectrum), face and offence (harmony) and hierarchy that are among virtues valued in Confucianism (Kim & Kim, 2019). The remaining two concepts that emerged are openness and trust. Although they cannot be classified as either values or cultural dimensions, they transpired to be instrumental in successful co-operation among many nationalities and cultures throughout the projects.

4.1.1 Self-reliance vs reciprocatation

Koreans rely on connections with others in order to function effectively and this can manifest itself both in an apparently unconscious set of impulses or instincts and as a deliberate strategy of implementation. Koreans value themselves according to how they are seen by others (respects by others) (Kim et al., 2007). This can be viewed as a weakness, even by Koreans themselves, who consider a European’s readiness to operate alone as a strength. It appears to them that Europeans need no help, which is not necessarily the case. Individualism is a formally established value of the European Union (Browaeyns & Price, 2015). At times and at first, the Korean dependence on their international colleagues is regarded as a burden or imposition, but it becomes clear over time that it is a worthwhile effort to support them. Indeed, European colleagues start to use this strategy of reciprocatation to improve their own effectiveness in Korea, confident in the knowledge that the return on investment is high. The

effect is to deepen and strengthen the long-term network of relationships between Europeans and Koreans, ensuring, once established, that it is sustained (Ajmal, Helo & Kassem, 2017). Considered initially to be expedient, the habit of give and take develops into genuine appreciation. However, younger Koreans enjoy the ‘freedom’ apparently afforded by self-reliance and can strive for independence from a system and culture of reciprocation. It is unclear whether they suffer the disadvantages of such an approach. The following quotes illustrated the facts of self-reliance and reciprocation:

“Westerners can come to Korea alone and try to find their way by maps or geography, but usually oriental people are very dependent on each other. [...] Koreans when they travel to Western society they want to find a good friend, even in business. [...] A UK person comes to Korea just with his namecard and walks into the building and says ‘hello’. Koreans try to organise their schedules very well the first time and he tries to find a ‘good guy’ to introduce him or her to the company.” (R12, Korean)

“My parents do not understand my life and so I have to decide every single thing by myself. That makes me feel free. It’s not easy to be independent but I feel really strong” (R6, Korean)

4.1.2 Face and Offence

Our findings show that one of the most challenging aspects of Korean culture for Europeans is the extreme indirectness of communication common in high-context cultures (Hall, 1976). A sophisticated ability to anticipate the likely answer to a question or request characterises Korean discussion. This is used to avoid putting a colleague into a position in which they must refuse or deny, thereby risking humiliation and a disruption to harmony (Ha, 2018). At the same time, an equally sophisticated ability to ‘read between the lines’ or even ignore words and instead read subtle gestures, allows Koreans to understand meaning beyond or even different to what is being said. The maintenance of harmony again provides fertile ground for developing relationships but also makes it difficult to clarify issues or establish facts in international collaborations. A European’s search for truth, based on Aristotelian concepts of ‘reality’ and ‘fact-based thought and perception’ (Schwartz, 2006), can clash with a Korean’s avoidance of dispute, especially in implementing plans and managing projects (Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). However, significant differences in European cultures can see the British, for example, cope more easily with a lack of direct communication, or at least appreciate the benefits. These differences in directness can cause equal discomfort for both sides and cause real problems in co-ordination of activities and achievement of targets. The following selected quotes reflected the above discussions:

“Koreans don’t like to say no. Sometimes I can’t understand if someone wants to say no. Sometimes I find it difficult to understand if I’ve asked someone a difficult question” (R1, British)

“If a Korean has to say no he feels he is humiliating someone. Among Koreans he will never ask a straight or direct question if they expect a negative response. He will try to figure out the other person’s feeling in an indirect way. In Confucianism, for harmony among neighbours you do not offend” (R12, Korean)

“For me, British people are quite indirect compared to Americans” (R12, Korean)

4.1.3 Loyalty = Seniority = Respect

Perhaps the strongest influence of Confucianism are the connections made in Korea between loyalty, seniority (often lent by age) and respect (Huang, 2008). Linked to indirect communication, Koreans will always establish age in roundabout ways such as asking about graduation dates. This functions in a society in which people live ordered lives. The Korean esteem for loyalty to those in senior positions – king (historically), parents, CEO – is not always shared by egalitarian Europeans who favour the right of the individual to self-determine. Deference to authority can be viewed with suspicion in Europe and respect is earned by an individual, not bestowed by the hierarchy. Again, significant differences between European cultures make generalisations difficult and dangerous. However, rigid hierarchy and associated etiquette is a well-known stereotype of Korean culture and so Europeans strive to adapt, a courtesy returned by a Korean tolerance for a European’s apparent lack of explicit concern for hierarchy. This is sometimes overdone as discussed in sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2.

“Seniority is very related to Confucianism. If someone is older than me I should show some respect. If they are younger, I should try to get some respect from them. Loyalty in business means a younger person cannot be at the top of the system. Seniority is very important and this is against efficiency in economic terms. Even if a young person has many talents he cannot be the manager” (R12, Korean)

“Koreans first try to figure out how old people are. They first ask some questions such as ‘which high school did you graduate from? And which year? Which year are you in at college or university?’” (R12, Korean)

“I find it very difficult to judge the age of a Korean person. They look young: their skin is very smooth and they are slim.” (R1, British)

Another issue that emerged deals with the consequences of hierarchy and seniority for actual organisational performance. Often high positions are held by the eldest, not the most accomplished or capable (Oldstone-Moore, 2012). That, combined with frequent rotation of people in executive positions (e.g. Deans) in Korean universities leads to certain difficulties, such as little knowledge about the project at the top of an organisation, lack of decision-making power at the bottom and excruciatingly long decision-making times.

“There is very clear hierarchy structure in in Korean universities where people who do the actual interface don’t have any decision-making power at all. And this is why things always take much longer. And as it goes further up the line people know less about the project. And they know less about why certain decisions have to be made. So, it’s quite difficult” (R2, British).

4.1.4 Openness to new experience and diversity

Generally, those involved in the successful projects that form the case study in this paper are primarily motivated by curiosity, novelty and the challenge of working internationally. The experience and ‘journey’ is reward enough, without any particular achievement at the end. Such an ongoing commitment and enjoyment of the process accidentally coincides with the long-term familiarisation process preferred in Korean culture (Leung et al, 2005). There have been several examples of individuals failing to achieve short-term objectives and alienating those around them in the process. Those clearly wishing to ‘exploit’ the opportunity for their own ends or impatient to impose their own agenda are considered ‘outsiders’. The effect is to bring others closer together, sensing more strongly their underlying similarity.

“I wanted to go somewhere else, outside Korea, and after a year in the US, it just ignited this idea. I wanted to have adventures and I thought Korea was too small for me.” (R6, Korean)

“Korea has a very one culture just the one concern is that we don’t have a diverse culture. I wanted to expose myself to different cultures. I wanted to learn about many aspects of the other countries” (R11, Korean)

4.1.5 Trust

Clearly, trust helps in successful cooperation, especially when unforeseen events take place and all partners have to make a leap of faith (Chai & Dibb, 2018). However, trust has to be earned and the process is slow. It takes getting to know people better, building relationships with them, and especially in such multicultural context understanding what they say and what they do not. Trust is between individuals, not institutions, and cannot be simply transferred (Ajmal, Helo & Kassem, 2017). In the case of this project, a group of core people can be identified. They have worked together for many years and reached an all-compassing understanding in many aspects. They are instrumental not only for seamless cooperation but also they introduce new members who benefit from this existing umbrella of ‘swift trust’.

“I think the longitudinal relationship helps, I think it would have been very difficult without it... There is a central group of people who’ve worked together for a long time. And I think that helps. There is certain honesty because we’ve worked together for a long time, there is an openness and transparency to everything” (R3, British)

“People don’t appreciate that the trust develops between individuals, and it can’t be transferred from one individual to another, except that if you’re introduced by somebody who you trust” (R14, Slovenian)

4.2 Behaviour

This theme comprises of four concepts that emerged from the analysis of the data and they refer to actual behaviour. These are language, using names and titles, rites and customs and hospitality.

4.2.1. Language

English has become a *lingua franca* in the contemporary world (Komori-Glutz, 2018). Almost everywhere we go, we can communicate and get things done with even a limited command of English. The more complex the setting and the more diversified groups of participants are, the more challenging this communication becomes. In this case study, there is quite a diversified mix of national languages comprising two varieties of English (British and Irish), Polish, Slovenian, Korean, Chinese, Spanish, and German among others. There are two major issues with communicating in English arising from data analysis. One is the proficiency level that was mentioned as a barrier only by non-native speakers. They were often very much aware of their limitations in communication resulting from insufficient vocabulary or grammar. This in turn occasionally led to them to say nothing, rather than saying something incorrectly. The other issue concerned communication patterns resulting from culture (such as indirectness) or language syntax (Alon et al., 2018). People sharing similar patterns (e.g. Polish and Slovenians) felt they could understand each other much better than when talking to English native speakers or other nationalities. These differences, although important, are strongly mitigated by the length of co-operation. With time, new patterns are created, common vocabulary is established, and communication becomes seamless.

“When we first met the Korean partners were really astonished by the level of English that they had. And it turns out as a culture there is a lot of English, both in the universities in terms of courses but also just industry you could get by with some English and it's very Americanized” (R5, Irish)

“Koreans have fear of speaking English... especially in Korea, people don't want to speak English in front of Korean people. [Why?] Because accuracy is really important here. Fluency. When I say something, I start to worry about my grammar” (R7, Korean)

“I feel way more comfortable talking to Slovenians than the British, I simply get what they mean when they say it. But it's different with British people I know, we actually share some expressions and jokes which are probably incorrect, but we get them” (R13, Polish)

4.2.2 Using names and titles

Much respect is shown through the use of titles and names in both Europe and Korea. This particular minefield is navigated by both sides, firstly through being cautiously conservative and secondly through mimicry. Closely observing and copying others is a simple start to learning culturally appropriate behaviour (Alon et al., 2016). Erring on the side of caution by, for example, using titles rather than names avoids offence. However, as relationships progress, confidence and familiarity grow, and people relax.

“It’s difficult to show respect in the English language as we have no language to show respect easily like in French ‘tu’ and ‘vous’. I think it’s similar in Korean” (R1, British)

“I always use people’s titles in Korea (like Professor) - I feel more comfortable as everyone does it - whereas we use other people’s given names. No-one calls me ‘Professor’. People change the way they talk to Korean people” (R1). “That is because of X – she always tells people to do that as Koreans like an official title, but no Korean expects that kind of title from Western People” (HA). “That’s true – we are copying her because we don’t really know how to behave and suddenly the whole group is doing that and it becomes normal” (R1, British).

“When I write an e-mail in Korean I use the old traditional ways of showing respect, but when I write in English I call people their first names” (R6, Korean)

4.2.3. Rites and customs

When travelling to a foreign country and working with people of various nationalities one can observe that things are done differently. Initially it causes a certain amount of confusion, but with time, it becomes a natural and enjoyable course of action. We learn to bow to Koreans, shake hands with Europeans, kiss cheeks the right number of times, exchange gifts. Occasionally, certain experiences may be quite upsetting for some people, such as a visit in a pub or a *norebang* (Korean karaoke). It turns out that such occurrences may even lead to dissolution of existing relationships, especially weak ones.

“I was told I need to have plenty of business cards when I went first time to Korea. It was the first time I actually used them” (R13, Polish)

“I appreciate the way the project people try to be really polite” (R6, Korean)

“We had an experience of some team building and went to karaoke. It was assumed that this is something that lecturers will be very much able to do, because they are outspoken, etc. However, this caused an issue with one of the lecturers who not only didn't like it, but effectively sat there and looked extremely annoyed and felt very uncomfortable. And as a result, their involvement in the project from that moment on effectively died” (R5, Irish)

4.2.4 Hospitality

Part of reciprocity is delivered through hospitality which in Korea can be generous to the point of stifling. Again, a European’s self-reliance leads them to assume they will need to be independent sometimes during a visit and Koreans can over-estimate how difficult Korea is for a European to manage alone, based on their instinct to rely on others. However, there is an additional aspect to this welcome: compensating for a Korean’s inability to maintain their status while abroad which reflects the Korean cultural value of ‘status’ (Choung, 2016). This can be due to the language barrier and other contextual factors (Alon et al., 2018; Ott & Michailova, 2017), showing visitors lavish hospitality and careful concern when at home is a way to rebalance a status deficit. In Europe, dealing with a visitor’s needs might be regarded as a distraction from the important business of the day, in Korea it is the highest priority. This initiates a virtuous circle of goodwill, which accelerates relationships and facilitates co-operation. Three participants recalled:

“According to Confucius, even if you don’t have enough to eat for the day, you should treat your guests to food and have the remains for your family” (R12, Korean)

“I think the main thing that has surprised me positively is the willingness of our Korean hosts to be so hospitable” (R3, British)

“He will want to show how powerful, rich and well-connected he is by looking after guests extremely well. Especially if he has not been able to do this while in Europe” (R10, Korean)

4.3 Dynamics

The third theme that emerged referred to the continuous changing of the people involved, their relationships and intercultural expertise. The concepts that arose from data analysis include adjustment processes, changing identity, focusing on similarities and future change. It was also observed that certain countries, such as Korea and Great Britain, are undergoing rapid changes of cultural, social and political nature that influence the future of our relationships and cooperation.

4.3.1 Adjusting to Europeans

It is interesting to note that Koreans use the terms ‘European’ and ‘Westerner’ interchangeably, as well as sometimes generalising about themselves, Japanese and Chinese, as Confucian societies. In order to avoid taking offence or being disappointed at European behaviour they simply adjust their expectations. Because of the motivations described above (Section 4.1.4) they enjoy the difference and are curious. However, genuine adaptation comes only with experience. Certain habits, such as physical proximity, are never really adopted. This adaptation is enhanced by the fact that it is a typical Confucian attitude to a challenge (Liang, Wu & Zhang, Jiang, Lee & Lockhart, 2018). Koreans regard Europeans as confronting problems unnecessarily, when they prefer to adapt to them. Some participants claimed:

“Confucianism is only among Koreans, or between Koreans and Japanese, but normally we do not expect any Confucian treatment from Europeans. No expectations equals no disappointment. We have no expectations of foreigners” (R12, Korean)

“Koreans are easily able to adjust to dealing with Europeans, but it takes experience to do that well” (R1, British)

“A very big difference between Koreans and Europeans is that Europeans want to conquer difficulties, to challenge or defy them. Oriental persons try to adapt to challenges or difficulties.” (R12, Korean)

“I have been here [UK] so long, sometimes the way I behave surprises Korean people” (R6, Korean)

4.3.2 Adjusting to Koreans

Europeans are generally very concerned to avoid offence when in Korea or with Koreans and do not account for the adjusted expectations of the Koreans. Further, they overestimate the rigidity and complexity of Korean hierarchy and social mores, fascinated by tales of

hierarchical seating orders and birth order names. Koreans appreciate this concern, while largely unnecessary. Their understanding of ‘face’ means they would hide their offence from Europeans to preserve harmony (Choung, 1993). These are consistent with finding previous literature, indicating the importance of maintaining social harmony and family culture (Kim & Kim, 2019).

“We understand about Korean culture, but we can’t do it naturally. It’s not obvious to us so we are always nervous. We are trying not to upset people. We are trying to behave properly but we don’t really know how what we are supposed to do and not do and how to pay respect to people” (R1, British)

“Even Western people after 2 or 3 days can try to adapt – this means that you artificially or intentionally do not try to offend the other person. Even if they have some small feeling of anger, they do not discuss that as in European society. They just try to mimic the Asian behaviour” (R12, Korean)

“It’s very interesting to see that the non-Korean members of the project are so respectful, and they try to understand Korean culture more than the Koreans. They put much more effort in than I do as a Korean living in Europe. [...] Westerners try to be too formal and that’s the safe thing to do as there’s nothing bad about it” (R6, Korean)

4.3.3 Changing identity through international experience

Our findings show that individual identities change and develop through their exposure to working internationally and over prolonged periods, sometimes involving their families and living in a foreign country. This serves to distance an individual from their ‘home’ culture and establishes novel connections between individuals, superseding nationality.

“The British are halfway between Americans and Koreans. We have more in common with Koreans than we think – we are more similar than we think” (R1, British)

“I get a culture shock whenever I go back to Korea. Whenever I go back I feel more shocked than when I moved to Europe. Even with the younger generation. I can completely see the difference between me and my friends. I feel more comfortable when I speak to someone with the same experience, Korean or not” (R6, Korean)

“Two days ago I was talking to [X] that the fact that he came to Korea on those projects, that he’d spent time there completely changed the relationship between him and myself. (R2, British)

4.3.4 More similarities than differences

Differences appear to be more in the stereotypical assumptions made in advance of relationships than in the actual experience of those relationships. The differences are exaggerated by the way people anticipate them and then adapt their behaviour to a stereotype rather than the reality. The adjustment required is more from the stereotypical assumption to the lived experienced than from one supposed culture to another. Our findings suggest that truly understanding cultural differences is an important aspect of intercultural intelligence (Alon et al, 2016). Assumptions are strengthened or undermined by early encounters when it is almost impossible to tell what is driven by individual personality and what by collective culture.

“I expected cultural differences before I came to Europe. But after 10 years I actually realised quite recently that it’s all the same [...] There is etiquette in Europe too – maybe slightly different – the fundamental manners and values are the same [...]” (R6, Korean)

“That sounds extremely like Professor X. If you said that to Professor Y he would accept that naturally. That’s not about Korean culture. It’s about the person” (R6, Korean)

“When I’m with my Korean colleagues, we suddenly find our similarities when we are both or all in a foreign country. Travelling together accelerates the relationship” (R1, British)

4.3.5 Into the Future

It is almost impossible to generalise about Korean society so rapid is the change. Indeed, many observe that the differences between generations in Korea are greater than the differences between Koreans and Europeans. The change appears to be a move away from Confucianist notions of respect and seniority, with a desire for individualism and independence. This means different dealing with different cultures. The quote below reflects the concept that culture is changeable and is embedded in the social context (Hofstede, 2001; Zhang, 2015).

“With Korean society changing so fast, even values have changed. There is a huge cultural difference between the generations. I do understand my parents, but I don’t understand their values because society has changed so fast. The values I am linked with are completely different. [...] My parents do not speak English and they don’t understand my life. I told them I am going to be the first person in our family who will be an immigrant. When I left, I told them really clearly ‘I’m not coming back!’” (R6, Korean)

4.4 Developing global expertise and competences

The above concepts within the ‘dynamics’ theme contribute to a learning process that leads to development of cultural global expertise and competences. Those who work in international environment improve their cross-cultural understanding and communications skills and move from ‘tolerance’ to actual ‘acceptance’ of diversity (Browaeyns & Price, 2015; Hall, 1997). This process may occur naturally and incrementally, but it can be accelerated by person’s openness and appreciation for the culture and opportunities resulting from such cooperation (Alon, et al., 2016). Learning takes place on many levels: cultural, institutional and last, but not least, individual (Kim & Kim, 2019). Experiences described by our respondents also show that after some time and a certain number of interactions, everything comes down to people dealing with people and cultural differences become almost irrelevant.

“It's reminded me that I can actually tell the difference between me and my other colleagues at home and seriously we are just miles ahead of other people in this process whatever it is because some of my colleagues just go crazy about they're just totally angry and frustrated and they go immediately to kind of criticizing and condemning people” (R1, British)

“With younger Korean people and academics – they have international experience and are more open-minded” (R6, Korean)

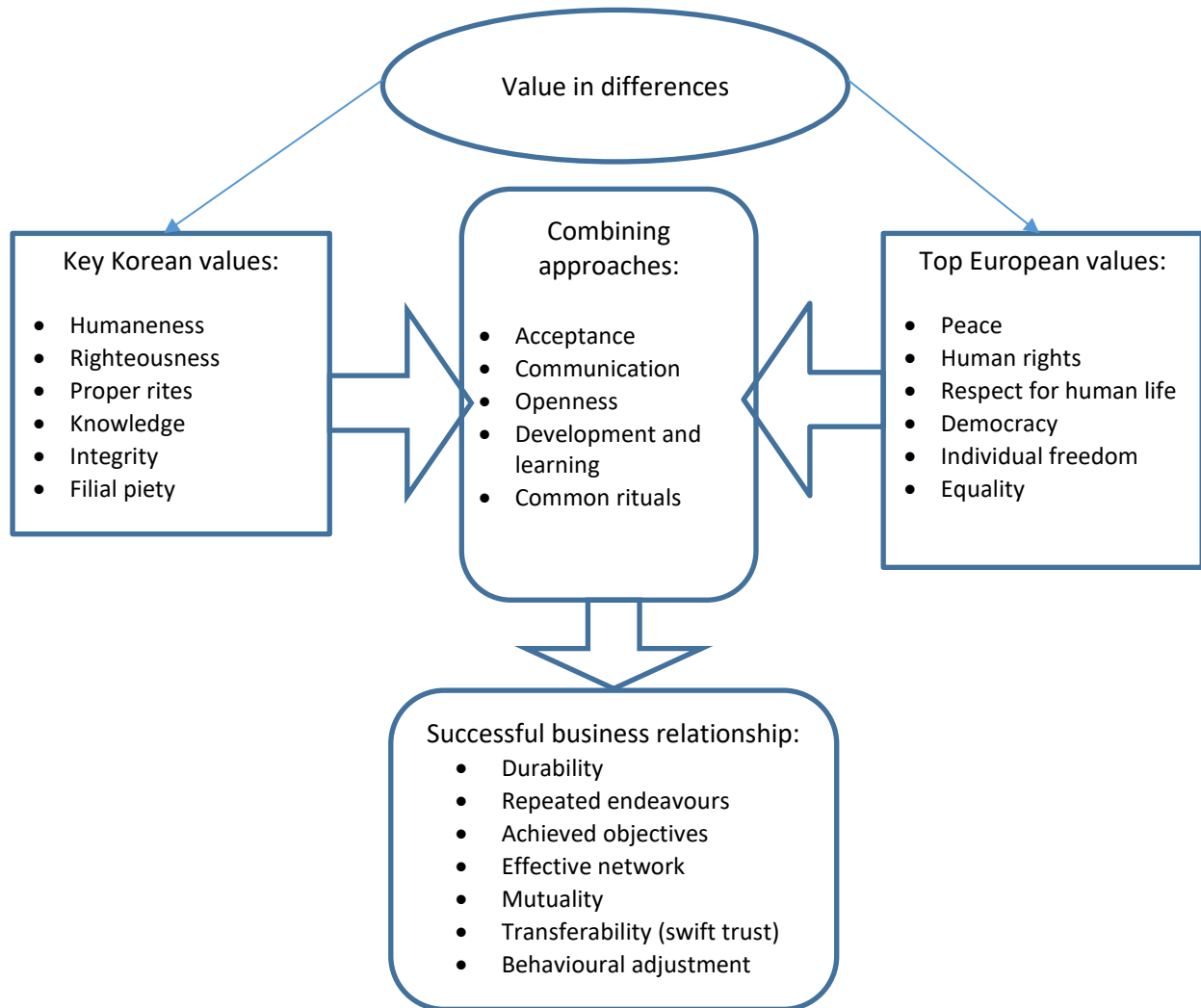
“It's important to actually recognize what certain people cannot do or do not want to do. And there are some things that X will do easily and perfectly well, and there are some things he will not do. So knowing this, this is the learning process. We learned that, let's say, he does not answer his emails. But his secretary does. So you learn the proper channels of communication. And then you learn how to get things done” (R3, British)

“It's a very big challenge for me to deal with all these different cultures. Managing this project I need definite information and I need to ask direct questions and get direct answers. It's very interesting but I need the help of everyone to understand all these different cultures” (R1, British)

5. Conclusion

Although much academic literature explores the importance of cross-cultural intelligence, there are limited discussions pertaining to Korea and Europe. This research begins to explore how values can be shared and successful relationships developed in the context of collaborations in Korean and EU cultures. Figure 2 illustrates our key findings in a new framework.

Figure 2: Approaches to combining Korean and European values for successful business relationships



Source: Devised by the authors

Our study demonstrates that people from different cultural backgrounds yet working in the same projects still prize their ‘normative cultural value’ (Alon et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a successful business relationship is driven by combined and balanced values between Korean and EU partners (see Figure 2). Significant differences in cultural values exist between Korean and European participants. As Huang (2008) and Wang (2003) state, influenced by Confucian ideology, Korean people give particular emphasis to the relationship between human beings and social harmony. As confirmed by the participants, seniority and hierarchy still dominate Korean culture and influence Korean business decision making (Ungson et al., 1997; Kim, 2002). This distinguishes it significantly from key European values including individual freedom and equality (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007). Our findings show that combining values from both sides is essential in order to build a successful business relationship, which we define in Figure 2 to include durability, transferability and mutuality.

We found that harmony is maintained by adjusted expectations of behaviour on both sides through learning, communication and adaptation (Alon et al., 2016). Stereotypical notions of each other’s cultures, transferring generalisations onto individuals and erring on the side of caution to avoid offence, govern the initial exchanges between Koreans and

Europeans. Motivated by curiosity and the enjoyment of diversity, certain individuals persevere with the collaboration and so start to benefit from Confucian reciprocity, which accelerates personal relationships. Evidently, self-reliance and independence drive the achievement of short-term, measurable performance required by European-funded projects. Paradoxical Korean Confucianism, tempered with Buddhism, is still strong enough to prioritise longer-term development of personal, trusting relationships and reciprocity (Pearce & Quan, 2015; Ha, 2018). When working with multiple partners to fulfil a large-scale project, managing the relationship and collaborative activities emerge as a major challenge. For example, it is important to consider how to build trust, empathy and reciprocity to ensure a mutually beneficial and successful cross-cultural relationship between Korean and Western partners. A combination of Korean and European values, facilitated by the motivation to adapt and accept others (Alon et al., 2016), is the foundation of these ongoing successful collaborations.

Our research findings also confirm Browaeys and Price's (2015) intercultural competence concept that the 'third culture' (adjusted between EU and Korea) is stronger than national culture in a limited group of people. It is more relevant to the implementation of EU-Korean projects and sustainable in an environment of societal change and political upheaval. However, we propose that the level of adjustment should be 'balanced' on both sides. Many existing studies in the research areas of cultural value (Hofstede, 1980; Lee & Lockhart, 2018) and intercultural competence (Alon et al., 2016) highlight the differences between value systems. We found that 'seeking more similarities than differences' (Section 4.3.4) can develop better relationships. This notion echoes the ideal of not over-estimating value differences as globalisation has prepared people involved in international projects through '*the self-study of appropriate cross-cultural behaviour business practices*' (Alon et al., 2016, p.240).

Our findings have practical implications for people either managing or participating in international projects at both individual and institutional levels. To develop durable, transferable and mutually beneficial business relationships (our definition of a 'successful' business relationship) especially in the context of Korean-EU collaboration, both individuals and institutions should focus on combining seemingly opposing values. This can be achieved through collaborative dialogue in a balanced way (i.e. not over emphasising 'differences' and to the right level of adjustment). Our results suggest that individuals, working in international teams, should be aware that a multi-cultural working experience is beneficial for increasing cultural quotient (Alon, et al., 2018). Intercultural intelligence is essential for building a successful business relationship. At the institutional level, our findings indicate that any institution (e.g. private and public sector) that intends to build durable and successful business relationships with their international partners should consider how to customize their employee development to address cultural intelligence and value creation issues. In those institutions that involve international projects and collaboration between Korean and European companies, tailored training programmes can be developed to ensure the success of their international business.

6. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study result from the method used, context of the projects and individuals concerned. These qualitative data are not generalisable and instead presented alongside context information sufficient for the reader to judge trans-contextual credibility (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) and transferability (Herr & Anderson, 2005) of the findings.

This is particularly important in transferring data between industries eg education to commerce.

Firstly, we are aware that the use of English for data collection (in most cases) might create language bias and the lack of participants' confidence in a non-native language affects their ability to express themselves (Harzing et al., 2005). Secondly, building trust is a key skill in O'Leary's (2005) 'real-world' research, where she recommends avoiding "patronizing organisational rhetoric" (p.67). We have built trusting relationships with the participants involved in this research project. Theroux (2005) describes our concern perfectly: "in reporting these stories over the years, maintaining relationships partly out of genuine affection and partly out of the vanity of wanting to generate some new material for a programme or a book, I realized I too had created a tiny off-beat subculture, with its own sincerity and its own evasions" (p.287). Finally, doing research in our own network (in these projects) meant that respondents were aware of our interests and this might have affected their responses. 'Getting the full story' is how O'Leary (2005) succinctly combines her recommendations regarding hearing "silenced voices" (p.65) and incorporating "alternative and pluralistic viewpoints" (p.65). Several members of staff who had previously participated in projects did not continue these activities. They might form the 'deviant cases' (Silverman, 2010). For future research, it would be equally useful to interview those who had never crossed the EU-Korea boundary or had failed to develop relationships in the project, in order to understand why and help hone the reasons for success.

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