Cooperation process: what motivates individuals to participate in a cooperative?

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Abstract: Setting out from the relevance of cooperatives worldwide and their important economic and social role, this research aims to understand what motivates cooperators in different segments to be part of a cooperation process with a cooperative. To do so, an exploratory and qualitative study was carried out following the multiple case study method. For data-collection, ten semi-structured interviews were held based on a previously defined script. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by content analysis through codification and categorisation. From analysis of the interviews, 37 variables motivating members to participate in a cooperative were identified, with these being grouped according to their similarity in five categories: (1) external influences; (2) characteristics of the cooperative; (3) socio-psychological; (4) relationships; and (5) benefits. Some implications for theory and practice and suggestions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: cooperative; cooperator; motivators; cooperation; Brazil.


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1 Introduction

Owing to economic and financial crisis, in many European countries and elsewhere great interest has been shown in studying cooperatives, since this particular form of cooperation seems more resistant and able to reach better performance than capitalist organisations, especially at times of prolonged crisis (Delbono and Reggiani, 2013), such as the one experienced recently.

Indeed, cooperatives are considered a specific form of cooperation, which goes far beyond mere economic reasons. Based on a set of universally accepted cooperative principles, this form of organisation/cooperation is marked by promotion of equality, community development and the well-being of its members/cooperators.

In this context, cooperatives are defined by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) as an autonomous unit of people, united voluntarily to satisfy economic, social and cultural aspirations and needs, through joint ownership of a democratically managed firm (Couderc and Marchini, 2011). According to this international organisation, cooperatives respect a set of fundamental principles in relation to the basic values of self-help, democracy, equity and solidarity (Oczkowski et al., 2013; Namorado, 2013).

The Global Census on Cooperatives (Grace, 2014), carried out in 145 countries, revealed there are around 2.6 million cooperatives, together accounting for assets of approximately US$20 trillion and employing almost 12.6 million people, or about 0.2% of the world’s population. This reinforces the importance and impact of these cooperatives for the world economy. Indeed, Goel (2013) considers that cooperatives are a global economic and social force. Puusa et al. (2013) point out that the aim of cooperatives is to promote the development and sustained well-being of their members. Cooperatives can therefore be considered as disseminating the cooperation process between cooperators and the cooperative.

Following this line of research on cooperation, various studies have attempted to understand the motivations in the cooperation process between firms (e.g. Human and Provan, 1997; Cruz and Segatto, 2009; Bortolaso et al., 2012; Mazzarol et al., 2013; Balestrini et al., 2014; Franco and Haase, 2015; Harms et al., 2015). However, in this context, few studies seek to understand the cooperation process between cooperatives and their cooperators. One of them was the study by Power et al. (2014), which tried to understand the motives leading cooperators to take out loans from cooperatives rather than conventional banks. Carvalho et al. (2015) investigated the perceptions of members of a cooperative of clothing shopkeepers and Rosalem et al. (2010) analysed the vision of cooperators in relation to management action in a poultry-rearing cooperative.
Therefore, the objective of this research is to understand what motivates cooperators in different segments to be part of a cooperation process with a cooperative. The research is relevant, firstly as it is a field of research that is little studied and considers cooperators from different segments, and secondly, as this public represents around 1 billion associates/cooperators in the 145 countries studied (Grace, 2014). This study is of major importance for advancing knowledge about cooperatives, in particular, understanding what members think and how they feel about the cooperatives they belong to. Consequently, development strategies for this sector can be defined to promote the sustainability of these organisational forms.

It is hoped that in practice this investigation can be used by diverse cooperative firms, in order to better understand what motivates people to join and remain members of a cooperative, and find out the variables with greatest impact in this process. That will allow cooperatives to improve their management, attract new members and retain current ones.

In terms of theory, this research aims to contribute to studies on cooperation by filling a gap identified in the literature concerning what motivates individuals to participate in a cooperative and in a cooperation process. Another contribution lies in better understanding of how cooperatives’ functioning and organisation in the economic and social sphere can help the emergence and reinforcement of economic models which, despite operating in capitalist markets, are not subject to their laws, using them only as a way to fulfil their social and economic mission of creating well-being for their members and communities.

To attain the research objective, first a literature review was carried out on motives for cooperation. This was followed by exploratory and qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews, in order to understand what motivates individuals to participate in a cooperative. Then, the interviews were transcribed and analysed. The final discussion and conclusion is that diverse variables tend to motivate members to become part of a cooperative.

2 Literature review

As the study is exploratory, this topic will focus on presenting motivations for cooperation, first presenting the literature on what motivates firms to cooperate with each other, so as to determine whether the same motives can then be identified in the relationship between cooperatives and members. Finally, the existing literature on what leads members to be part of a cooperative will be presented, although consistent literature on this subject has not yet been identified.

2.1 Motivations for cooperation between firms

According to Danik and Lewandowska (2013), study of the motives favouring cooperation between firms has aroused researchers’ interest, as to manage this process successfully, it is important to know the motives and interests of firms that cooperate with each other. In recent decades, various studies have been carried out with this objective. Among them, Olleros and MacDonald (1988) found that firms can cooperate with the aim of innovating, or according to Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) they strengthen their strategic position. Danik and Lewandowska (2013) concluded that the
possibility of market access, improvement in product quality and the production process were the motives leading Polish engineering industries to cooperate with each other.

For Verschoore and Balestrin (2008), the motivations for cooperation were the opportunity to learn and innovate, increase production capacity and market access. The motives identified in the study by Mazzarol et al. (2013) reinforced that trust and a common purpose were fundamental in the cooperation process. Goel and Roessl (2015) concluded that respect for the individuality of each firm, in relation to its history, tradition and culture, is of major importance, even when they use common norms in the cooperation.

Feijó and Zuquetto (2014) found that the benefits obtained by firms through cooperation were the opportunity to exchange information with other firms, cost reduction, greater negotiating power with suppliers and becoming more competitive in the sector.

The study by Human and Provan (1997) identified the benefits achieved by cooperation networks of small and medium-sized manufacturing firms in the USA as being exchanges in terms of operations, relationships of friendship and information, increased credibility for the organisation, access to new resources and improved financial performance, these being possible motives for cooperation. Another study of small and medium-sized firms was made by Ussman and Franco (2000), finding that trusting relationships and good communication tend to be fundamental in the process of cooperation between firms. A summary of the variables motivating cooperation between firms is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>Olleros and MacDonald (1988); Verschoore and Balestrin (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic positioning</td>
<td>Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market access</td>
<td>Verschoore and Balestrin (2008); Danik and Lewandowska (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved product quality</td>
<td>Danik and Lewandowska (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved production process</td>
<td>Danik and Lewandowska (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Human and Provan (1997); Verschoore and Balestrin (2008); Feijó and Zuquetto (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased productive capacity</td>
<td>Verschoore and Balestrin (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Ussman and Franco (2000); Mazzarol et al. (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for the individuality</td>
<td>Goel and Roessl (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost reduction</td>
<td>Feijó and Zuquetto (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased negotiating power</td>
<td>Feijó and Zuquetto (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater competitiveness in the sector</td>
<td>Feijó and Zuquetto (2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be observed, little research has been carried out regarding the motives leading individuals to participate in a cooperation process with a cooperative, and this will be dealt with in Section 2.2.
Cooperation process

2.2 Cooperators’ motivations to cooperate

According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), a cooperative can be regarded as an association of autonomous people aiming for the common good, considering economic, social and cultural needs. Also for the ICA, cooperatives’ values are based on: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, transparency, social responsibility and looking after others. Their seven cooperative principles are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Cooperative principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Voluntary and Open Membership</td>
<td>Cooperatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Democratic Member Control</td>
<td>Cooperatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and cooperatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Members’ Economic Participation</td>
<td>Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Autonomy and Independence</td>
<td>Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Education, Training and Information</td>
<td>Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public – particularly young people and opinion leaders – about the nature and benefits of cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cooperation among Cooperatives</td>
<td>Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Concern for Community</td>
<td>Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) (2017)

Therefore, to be able to perform their economic, social and cultural role and put into practice cooperative values and principles, cooperatives must capture, hold on to and deal with the needs of their members, who according to data from the Global Census on Cooperatives (Grace, 2014), number around 1 billion individuals. So in the same way as
diverse research has been carried out by firms towards their consumers (Dagher and Itani, 2014; Colaferro and Crescitelli, 2014; González et al., 2015; Nikolova and Inman, 2015), it is up to cooperatives to understand their members’ motivations to keep cooperatives’ activities operational.

Given the importance of cooperators, Rosalem et al. (2010) tried to understand their vision of the organisation’s management, and concluded that members consider it important to invest in cooperative education, for everyone to understand its role, as well as enabling the cooperative’s management and staff; improve communication; reaffirm cooperative culture; work for the good of all cooperators and not benefit only some people in the group, and strengthen members’ union and commitment.

Carvalho et al. (2015) made a study of the Economic and Mutual Credit Cooperative aiming to analyse members’ perception of motivation in relation to products and services supplied, team commitment, staff creativity and initiative and communication. In this case, the following results were obtained: 52% stated they were motivated by the products and services supplied, 70% said there was team commitment, 52% considered staff were creative and had initiative, and finally, 69% said that communication was appropriate.

Jordan et al. (2016) sought to analyse the spontaneous cooperation process. This type of cooperation occurs when individuals do not measure the potential benefits or associated costs. These authors also identified that the reciprocity, trust and reputation generated by cooperating are very important factors for the individual to participate in spontaneous cooperation. Other authors who addressed the importance of reciprocity in the cooperation process were Fehr et al. (2002).

Another study was that of Power et al. (2014), which investigated what motivated members to take out a loan from a credit cooperative rather than a conventional bank. That study identified four factors motivating cooperators to prefer the cooperative: (1) the cooperative system itself; (2) the relationship with the cooperative; (3) social and psychological aspects; (4) material benefits, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3  Factors motivating cooperation between members and the cooperative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systems</td>
<td>Being a cooperative; Knowing the leadership; Feeling part of the group;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less bureaucracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational factor or</td>
<td>Relationship with cooperative management/leadership; Friendly staff;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalisation of the Service</td>
<td>More personal and accessible service; Personalised service; Service with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>respect; Polite service; Access to the manager; Face-to-face contact;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication/facility; Ease of access to credit; Flexible timetable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-psychological Factor</td>
<td>Affinity with the term cooperative; Perception of the difference in relation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to other banks; Loyalty to the cooperative; Family influence and recommendation; Trust; Emotional link to the cooperative; Gratitude for what the cooperative has already done; concern about members’ individual and collective interests; Image of the cooperative; Sense of union/being a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Benefits</td>
<td>More accessible interest rates; Insurance benefits; Benefits of discounts on interest paid on loans; Security; Flexibility; Transparency in presenting proposals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Power et al. (2014)
Finally, understanding how members analyse their relationship with the cooperatives they are part of is indispensable for cooperatives to hold on to their members in this scenario of intense competition.

3 Methodology

The research method here was inductive, exploratory and qualitative, through multiple case studies, focusing on deep understanding of the phenomenon of what motivates individuals to participate in a cooperative. The target population of this research was Brazilian individuals/cooperators belonging to a cooperative. To make up the sample, members of different Brazilian cooperatives and different levels/tiers were chosen, aiming to understand the motives of individuals belonging to different segments/sectors, so as to identify cooperative members in general rather than in a specific branch.

These Brazilian individuals belonging to a cooperative were contacted by telephone and e-mail. Thereafter, the aim of the research was explained to each of them, that the interviews would be recorded and that part of the interview reports would be used and inserted in this research. It was also explained that the following personal data would be used: age, gender, education, profession, time participating in the cooperative and cooperative segment a member of, but that names would not be identified. After being made aware of the research objectives and agreeing to participate.

In order to preserve confidentiality, after agreeing to participate in the research, the interviewees were identified from C1 to C15 (see Table 4). The 15 cooperators interviewed are aged between 29 and 57, eight of them being female and seven male. Their level of education and occupations are diversified and the length of time they have belonged to the cooperatives ranged from 3 months to 17 years. As to the cooperative sector, there is some heterogeneity, since they include credit cooperatives, rural producers and worker cooperatives such as agro-business, health and education. The great majority of cooperatives selected for this study are classified as higher level entities (1st level), i.e., their aim being to provide members with services. Table 4 presents the profile of the cooperators participating in the research.

After being made aware of the research objectives and agreeing to participate, the interviews were held face-to-face, via email and Skype, and recorded. The interviews via Skype or face-to-face took the form of an informal conversation (Patton, 1995), with individuals firstly giving their personal information and about the type of cooperative they belonged to. The interviewees who answered by e-mail were sent the interview guide.

In the face-to-face and Skype interviews and by e-mail, a semi-structured script was used through which the interviewees were encouraged to relate the following situations: (1) Their past as a member; (2) The motives leading them to participate in a cooperative; (3) What they consider fundamental in a cooperation process; (4) The benefits obtained through cooperation, and (5) What they consider relevant in participation in a cooperative.

The 15 interviews were held between 10 April and 7 July 2016. Afterwards, the recordings were transcribed and analysed individually in order to identify individuals’ motivations regarding the cooperation. The results of the analysis are presented and discussed in Section 4.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cooperator</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Time participating in the cooperative</th>
<th>Level of cooperative</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Cooperate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Environmental consultant</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Credit 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td>C15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Teacher and Rural Producer</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Rural producers 1st Level</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>C13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Credit 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td>C14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Rural Producer</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Agro-business 1st Level</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td>C8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Basic Education</td>
<td>Autonomous transport secret</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Autonomous transport sector</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>C11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Credit 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td>C10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Business-woman</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Credit 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td>C8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Education 1st Level</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td>C7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Education 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td>C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Business-woman</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Agro-business 1st Level</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>C11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Environment &amp; Community</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>C11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Basic Education</td>
<td>Business-woman</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>C11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Education 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td>C8</td>
</tr>
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<td>C14</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>17 years</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td>C7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Basic Education</td>
<td>Rural Producer</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Credit 1st Level</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td>C15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Data analysis and findings

After reorganisation of the notes and transcription of the interviews, reduction of the data into categories/themes was performed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). More precisely, the process of data analysis followed an approach consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994). For this purpose, we demarcated segments within the transcribed text, codifying the relevant information phrases/excerpts.

Thus, based on these procedures and from content analysis of the interviews we identified 37 variables motivating members to become part of a cooperative, and these variables were grouped in five factors using the statistical analysis provided by the NVIVO tool. Analysis of these groups is presented below.

4.1 External influences

The first group was composed of external influences and included two variables: Family influence in participating in the cooperative; being invited to participate in the cooperative. The first variable, family influence, was previously identified in the study by Power et al. (2014) and in this research was shown in the statements by C1, C2 and C3, with C1 saying: “...In my case, it was my sister, she works in the cooperative bank, and she presented me with the advantages, the conditions, she assured me that I would have easier access, and this really was what happened. In my case, I entered through her, who works there”. The second variable of this factor strengthens the importance of the cooperative inviting the member to become part of it, and this is shown in the statement by C4: “…I was invited to be part of the cooperative by the manager” and in that of C10 “I was invited to be part of a cooperative”. These statements show that members can be motivated to join a cooperative when indicated by the family, or by the manager, or some element of leadership can also motivate joining through a simple invitation.

4.2 Characteristics of the cooperative

The second factor concerns the characteristics of the cooperative itself and is composed of four variables: voting rights; quality of the products and services supplied; transparency; and being an owner. The first variable emphasises that members tend to be motivated by the characteristics of the cooperative itself, and among them, having voting rights, as shown in the statements by C5: “…as a member, I have the right to vote, within the cooperative it doesn’t matter how much you own, you all have the same rights... my vote is the same as everyone else’s, equally...”. Cooperator C3 highlighted she was motivated to join the cooperative due to the quality of products and services it supplies and that makes all the difference for her as a member.

Besides voting rights and quality, the transparency of the cooperative’s action was mentioned by C3 and C5, a variable also identified by Power et al. (2014). The last variable in this factor emphasises that many members are motivated to participate as they feel they are owners of the cooperative, as stated by C5 “…really, when we speak about cooperators and cooperative, we’re almost speaking about the same thing, cooperators are part of the cooperative and the cooperative is part of the cooperators. In fact, it’s something very close, that is, the cooperative is also mine, it belongs to me, and to all members, it’s a good relationship”. Interviewee C8 corroborates this by saying: “I feel
I’m one of the owners of the cooperative”. It is therefore seen that the cooperative’s characteristics also motivate members to join.

4.3 Socio-psychological

This factor was composed of eight variables: Trust; Being part of a group; Gratitude; Equality; Changes in the life of members; Personal fulfilment; Respect; and Feeling of concern. The trust variable was highlighted by C1 “...I trust more in the credit cooperative, for me it’s an exchange of trust, they trust me and I trust them, for example, when they give me credit, I know that other banks would not do so, but as a matter of trust, they do it for me, I think it’s an exchange of trust, and that makes all the difference”. Other cooperators also emphasising the trust factor were C5, C6, C7, C8, C12 and C14. The trust variable, already highlighted as of major importance in the cooperation process between firms (Ussman and Franco, 2000; Mazzarol et al., 2013), also applies between members and the cooperative (Power et al., 2014).

The feeling of belonging to a group was expressed by C5 “... when you think as a group, the group is always stronger than one person alone, so when the group is united, with the same objective, everyone looking in the same direction, then everything becomes easier”. This was also shown by C14 when stating: “...the challenges made us experience times of crisis and believe that together we are stronger.” Besides the feeling of belonging to a group, the feeling of gratitude identified in the study by Power et al. (2014) was also expressed by C5 “...I’m grateful to the cooperative because it gave me the possibility to enter a market, which perhaps I couldn’t have done alone. I think there’s a feeling of gratitude, because I was very well received, I was accepted, I could start to be part of assemblies, meetings. What matters in cooperatives is that the decisions are in fact made by everyone, in fact I feel grateful for being able to enter and participate in the cooperative”.

Members can also be motivated to join a cooperative by the feeling of equality, as presented by C1 “...we all benefit, and not all those belonging to the group have the same income, the same conditions, but they look at the individual condition of each one to be able to help, in certain financial institutions the customer in a better financial situation is treated differently, paid more attention, and in cooperative banks this does not happen, the less fortunate have the same privileges, each situation is analysed”. C5 corroborates this evidence “I have a feeling of equality, as in cooperatives it’s different from capitalist firms, for example, if someone has 30% or 50% of the capital, he’ll have more power in decisions. In cooperatives that doesn’t happen, one’s word, one’s vote is worth as much as that of someone who may have been much longer in the cooperative, have more money and/or more cars than me...”.

The changes in members’ life were also mentioned by C5 “...the member becomes a better person, a more cooperative person, more concerned about others and about society, as cooperativism also has this function, as when cooperativism is born, it arises from difficulty, it was created when a group had difficulties and this is still true today, I think that anyone who joins and becomes part of a cooperative, he improves, becomes more human in his relationships”.

The cooperative can also provide members with personal fulfilment, as shown by C5 “I feel good, I feel fulfilled, I’m not part of just one cooperative, but I belong to two, more frequently a school transport one, where in fact I work, and the other is a credit cooperative, where I’m on the board. I feel good, I feel fulfilled, I know that I produce
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more in a group than if I was alone”. C13 corroborates this statement by saying: “my ideas about life agree with cooperative practices. I believe that’s the most important factor in belonging to a cooperative”.

Two other feelings expressed were the respect and care existing in this relationship, as stated by C1: “...there is respect between members and the cooperative, as the cooperative exists with the aim of helping the members and the group...” also C1: “the cooperative does not exclude you, they take great care of me today. If I was with any other bank, I would be turned away because of my financial situation and I’m not turned away by them, I still have the same benefits, within my possibilities, perhaps that’s the great difference for me”.

4.4 Relationships

From the interviews, it can be perceived that the relationship between cooperative, members and society was also highlighted by the interviewees, and in the statements, 11 variables were identified, these being: Mutual help; Analysis of members’ past; Dealing with members; Family-inclusive events; Ease of accessing the cooperative; Changes in society; Negotiation; Participation in decisions; Personalisation of services; Rapid responses; Feeling of partnership.

Member C5 stressed mutual help as a motivation to join, as shown in his report: “...in some situations, we become one big family, you end up getting to know each other, helping each other, there’s no rivalry between people, there’s help for each other”. Besides the relationship of mutual help among members, the feeling of partnership was highlighted by C10 when saying: “...there’s a partnership relationship between members and the cooperative”, and by C1 saying: “...cooperatives are closer, they’re much more receptive, they see me as a partner, I’m not just a customer, I’m a partner”. Besides the partnership, C1 also emphasises that the cooperative makes a complete analysis of the member’s past, by saying: “...they (referring to cooperatives) analyse each one’s situation, you have a past with them too, today you’re in a difficult situation, but at one time you weren’t, there’s all that past they take into consideration, they don’t just assess you on what you are today, but on what you were before and what you may become”.

Members also underline that the service cooperatives provide is a differentiating factor, being highlighted by C1, C3, C4 and C6. Besides the service, members perceive personalisation, as stated by C1 “they (referring to cooperatives) go by a person’s identity, what the person represents for them in the cooperative bank, different from other banks that only go according to specific SPC (Credit Protection Service) data and so on, and the credit cooperative has this differential, if you’re a member it’s easier to get something from them.....and, then you can explain your difficulties to them, and they make an analysis within the system, if they can help you and don’t put you out the system, as I’ve come through difficult situations and this was a differential for me...”. The variable of cooperative service was identified by Power et al. (2014).

As well as service, member C1 also highlights that cooperatives are quicker in their responses to members, stating that: “…the cooperative has a quicker response about granting credit or not, in other banks it takes longer”. Another motivator is access to the cooperative, also reported by C1: “…one characteristic that stands out is the access people have to the cooperative...more accessible”. C12 corroborates this speed of response and accessibility by saying: “…the member’s opportunity is to have a closer relationship and access to the cooperative administration, thereby solving the processes
in question more quickly”. In addition to accessibility, ease of negotiation is also emphasised by members, as shown in the statement of C4: “As a member, I have greater negotiating power with the cooperative”. Members also point out that in cooperatives the opportunity to participate in decisions is another differential, according to C5: “...I could begin to be part of the assemblies, meetings, what matters in cooperatives is that decisions are in fact taken by everyone...” and C12: “joint decision-making power”.

The relationship established between the cooperative, members and their families is also a major differential, according to the statement of C5 “...yes, certainly, what is emphasised in the cooperative, participation not only by members, but members’ families are also part of the cooperative’s life. In this case, at least once a year the cooperative holds a meeting where there is that interaction between members and their families. For me as a member, this makes a difference, without a doubt, the family itself has this feeling of belonging, that they are also part of the group...”.

Besides this interaction between members’ families and the cooperative, member C5 underlines the changes effected in society through cooperatives, and this was shown in his report: “That is also very good, it is interesting in that where cooperatives work, society itself improves, it develops better...I think that cooperativism also has a very good principle, which is the seventh principle, interest in the community, because cooperativism also has that, not just looking at the group, the members, but also making a difference in society, when someone joins the cooperative, he changes to some extent, he embraces the idea, the cooperative is interested in the community, helps to promote some actions, cooperates with society, in the area of health, it helps some institutions, when a person is part of a cooperative, they improve in this area, they are not only concerned about themselves and other members, but also about society in general, I think that’s good in the cooperative...” and interviewee C12, “I belong to this cooperative because I believe in cooperativism and know that its principles make a difference in society as a whole”.

4.5 Benefits

The last factor was composed of12 benefits motivating members to be part of a cooperative. Members showed that access to credit is made easier, a variable identified previously by Power et al. (2014), and reported by C4: “...first because I’m able to buy more cheaply as a member, and another thing is that I have a greater possibility to obtain credit to make purchases”.

Besides credit, market access was a variable already identified as motivating cooperation between firms (Verschoore and Balestrin, 2008), and in the context of cooperation between a cooperative and members this was also shown by C2: “...and I had great difficulty in selling my products, the cooperative helped me to sell my products...”, and C5 corroborates this evidence “...I didn’t need to make a bid, the cooperative did this for me, it put forward the bid and won, the only thing I had to do was become a member and buy the car, if I was to go into this branch of transport alone, setting up a firm, managing to enter the market, which isn’t such an easy market to enter, very competitive, it would be much more difficult... First of all, I think this possibility of participating in a bidding process where a lot of cars are necessary and I alone would not be able to gain access to this market.” C11 corroborates this evidence, saying: “being a member of a cooperative I have a greater number of patients who seek out my medical
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services. The cooperative also does the marketing part” and C15 stated that “access to the market and working knowing from the outset that the sale of my agricultural production is guaranteed.”

As well as easy access to credit and the market, the cooperative also provides members with access to training, as according to C1 “... the cooperative offers training and members are invited to participate, these things make a difference in being a member”. For C2, innovation is a benefit obtained through the cooperative, as she says “...members have the opportunity to acquire new things for the field of work, all this is easier to obtain as a group”. The innovation variable was presented in the study by Olleros and MacDonald (1988) and Verschoore and Balestrin (2008) as a motivation for cooperation between firms.

Another report underlines that the cooperative provides members with greater competitiveness in the sector, as shown by C2 “...as the producer is part of a market where there is great competition, and when you are alone things become more difficult...” and C5 corroborates “First, I think this possibility of participating in a bidding process, where many cars are needed and I alone couldn’t manage this, the group becomes stronger and more competitive...”. Competitiveness was also identified previously in the study by Feijó and Zuquetto (2014) as a variable motivating cooperation between firms.

The opportunity to make collective purchases was also highlighted by C5 “...you manage to get vehicles at a better purchase price, as you buy more vehicles, there’s also the matter of buying parts, fuel and maintenance, the fact of being several people, you get this type of benefit and other benefits as well, and you end up paying less than if I had a business on my own”. Besides collective purchases, the interviews allow the perception that the cooperative also facilitates the matter of logistics for disposing of rural production, as mentioned by C2: “Principally the matter of logistics for disposing of my production”.

The opportunity of members’ growth through participation in a cooperative was also mentioned by C5. Other benefits, such as participating in profits and capital were reported by C1 “You have a certain participation in the profits”. According to C12, “...being able to participate in the profits is a benefit of participating in the cooperative...” and for C4, “as a member I accumulate capital value and that’s a great differential”. Cooperator C3 underlines the profitability of the invested capital, stating: “...as a member, I have good return on the capital applied... I have financial gains”.

Also from the interviews, for cooperator C1, the matter of access to car insurance and reduced rates are two benefits provided by cooperatives, C1: “...in the cooperative, my car insurance is facilitated, that’s a great benefit for me...” and also C1 “...I think the rates, everything is lower...”. The interest rate was a benefit for members in the study by Power et al. (2014).

5 Discussion, conclusions and implications

Analysis of the interviews showed 37 variables motivating cooperation between members and the cooperative. These 37 variables were grouped in five factors: (1) External influences; (2) Characteristics of the cooperative; (3) Socio-psychological; (4) Relationships; and (5) Benefits, as presented in Table 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Members quoting</th>
<th>Number of variables</th>
<th>Number of variables (%)</th>
<th>Total quotations by factor</th>
<th>Total quotations by factor (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External influences</td>
<td>Family influence to participate in the cooperative; Being invited to participate in the cooperative.</td>
<td>C1, C4, C5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of the cooperative</td>
<td>Voting rights; Quality of products and services supplied; Transparency; Being an owner.</td>
<td>C1, C3, C4, C5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio psychological</td>
<td>Trust; Being part of a group; Gratitude; Equality; Changes in the life of members; Personal fulfilment; Respect; Feeling of concern.</td>
<td>C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C12, C13, C15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Mutual help; Analysis of members’ past; Dealing with members; Family-inclusive events; Ease of accessing the cooperative; Changes in society; Negotiation; Participation in decisions; Personalisation of service; Rapid responses; Feeling of partnership</td>
<td>C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C12, C13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Easier access to credit; Market access; Access to training; Collective purchases; Members’ growth; Innovation; Logistics; Greater competitiveness in the sector; Participation in profits and capital; Profitability of the capital invested; Easier car insurance; Reduced rates.</td>
<td>C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C11, C12, C15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>37 variables</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>105 quotations</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From observation of Table 5, the first factor highlights that members tend to be motivated by external influences, being composed of two variables and mentioned by three members with a total of seven quotations. The second factor represents cooperatives’ characteristics, and according to members these also tend to motivate cooperation, this factor being mentioned by four members, with 13 quotations and being formed of eight variables. The third factor, the socio-psychological aspect, was indicated by all members, with 19 quotations and being a group of eight variables.

The fourth factor refers to relationships formed between cooperatives, members and society. This factor grouped 11 variables, mentioned by all members, and was the factor with the greatest number of quotations by members, 28. Finally, the fifth factor presents 12 variables related to the benefits motivating members to participate in a cooperative. This was mentioned by all members and had 26 quotations. It is therefore seen that the relationship and the benefits were considered the two most motivating factors for members to participate in a cooperative.

This study aimed to identify what motivates cooperators in different sectors to become part of a cooperative. It concluded that 37 variables tend to motivate members to join a cooperative, and these were grouped in these five factors (External influences; Characteristics of the cooperative; Socio-psychological; Relationship; and Benefits). The results indicate that the factors considered most relevant in motivating members to participate in a cooperative were the relationship between members and the cooperative and the benefits provided by cooperatives.

Cooperatives’ principles and values are fundamental factors to consider in current cooperatives’ functioning. Despite all of them being important, the evidence obtained highlights three as essential: democratic control by members, members’ economic participation and concern for the community. These results reveal that despite the pressure from markets and changes, including legislative ones, that has been felt, the basis of these organisations cannot be forgotten. These principles distinguish cooperatives from other types of association and seem to please their members. They see much more than a merely economic connection in cooperatives, sharing values and principles that differ from those shared by commercial firms whose main objective is profit and to reward their shareholders.

These cases studies present several theoretical and practical implications. In terms of theory, this article aims to contribute to advancing studies about cooperation, specifically what motivates cooperation between members and a cooperative, a subject still little explored in the literature (Power et al., 2014; Carvalho et al., 2015; Rosalem et al., 2010).

In practice, these cooperatives can use the variables and factors identified in order to analyse what motivates members, as well as members’ perception of the services and products supplied by cooperatives and which tend to influence them. Cooperatives can also use this information to plan their future action regarding improved management, innovation in dealing with members and the services and products supplied. With this information they can become even more competitive by understanding what motivates members to be part of a cooperative. Furthermore, the information can be used in future communication projects to gain and retain members.

This study also lets us indicate directions and define strategies for the cooperative sector, of growing importance, not only in developing and underdeveloped countries, but also in countries with high development indices. More precisely, by trying to understand the motives with greatest influence on the decision to join a cooperative, it contributes to understanding what really interests cooperators, which, ultimately, means understanding
how to sustain and capture added value for members and their communities. The results indicate that the motives associated with the choice of cooperatives, as a particular form of cooperation, should always bear in mind and set out from their underlying cooperative principles and legal aspects.

This study presents some limitations and opportunities for development in future research. As limitations of the study, it stands out that there may be other variables motivating cooperation between members and cooperatives which may not have been revealed by the interviewees. In addition, as it was not possible to use a more representative number of cases, the conclusions cannot be generalised to the whole cooperative population. However, this does not invalidate the analysis made or limit its usefulness for cooperative practice.

Another limitation concerns the context, as here only members of Brazilian cooperatives were studied. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to other geographical and cultural contexts. It is suggested that new research is carried out in other cultures to assess how the motives identified here influence the cooperative relationships. It would be particularly interesting to study motives for cooperative relationships formed by individuals originating in different cultures.

Regarding suggestions for future research, this study can be replicated in other countries, in order to analyse what motivates cooperators in other economic, social and cultural contexts. Another suggestion is to ascertain whether there are different motivations for participation according to gender, i.e., do men and women have different reasons for joining a cooperative? A final suggestion is that the factors and variables revealed in this study should be validated through elaboration and validation of a scale measuring the motivations for cooperation to be subsequently tested empirically through quantitative research.

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