The collection of papers in this volume cover the gamut of topics in the ever-growing field of inquiry on cooperative strategies. That, in itself, is an impressive task, as the editors duly note in their introductory chapter to this collection of 16 essays on cooperative strategy. The list of contributors to the collection is formidable. Names like Alan Rugman, Peter J. Buckley, Yves Doz, Jeffrey Reuer, Ranjay Gulati, Stephen Tallman, Mitchell Koza, Barbara Gray, Andrew Inkpen, Edward Zajac and John Child would catch the eye of anyone who has even a passing interest in international business and cooperative strategy research. As with the range of papers, collecting a series of original works by these authors is likewise an accomplishment that augers well for the potential contribution of this book.

When viewing this list of contributors, one naturally wonders, or at least I did, how this collection of papers was assembled. Typically, such a collection is the end product of a conference attending to the topic of cooperative strategies. Examples of these are the ground-breaking collection of papers edited by Contractor and Lorange (1988), and the equally impressive, but yet to be time-tested, three volume set edited by Beamish and Killing (1998a, b, c). Unfortunately, no clue is provided in the volume as to its conception. While such matters might easily rest in secret in human affairs, for the curious, it is a question that remains at large and annoyingly in the background when reading the contributions in the volume.

The contributions themselves, as the names cited above suggest, form a vast array of approaches to the topic of cooperative strategies. Transaction cost approaches are raised in two separate chapters by Anoop Madhok and Stephen Tallman. Game theory is melded with learning in alliances in a chapter by Kofi Nti and Rajesh Kumar. Later chapters explore such various forms of alliances as R&D co-operatives (Doz and Baburoglu), technology outsourcing (Kern and Willcocks) and even acquisitions (Pitkethly, Faulkner and Child).

The editors put an impressive rein on what could be a run-away cart of essays by restraining these cited topics within the confines of three broadly defined areas of research. These areas --Part II. The Rationale for Cooperation, Part III. The Process of Cooperating, and Part IV. Cooperative Behavior -- are themselves bounded by an introductory part on Perspectives on Cooperative Strategy, and a concluding part on Cooperative Strategy: The Future.

The restraint imposed by the structure of the book is usefully reinforced by the first essay, written by the editors. This essay defines the logic for the definition of the three parts, resorting to the definition of lenses and elucidation of conceptual and empirical developments within each lens, as support for the logic. For just Part II. The Rationale for Cooperation, the review of research on cooperative strategies in such streams of research as strategic management theory (or its sub-topic, market power theory), transaction cost theory, the resource-based view, agency theory, game theory and real options theory is necessarily compact, without necessarily imparting information impactedness. Moving beyond economic perspectives on rationales for cooperation, the review in the
first chapter covers other explanations of rationales for cooperative strategy, including resource dependence theory, organizational learning, social network theory, the ecosystems view and structurationist perspectives. Each of these are well-developed lines of theory that include varying depths of sub-texts of inquiry into cooperative strategies. The descriptions on Parts III and IV involve less compact and less well-defined theoretical bases for structuring inquiry into the processes underlying, and behaviors within, alliances. Perhaps for that reason, the editors note that studies on process and behavior in alliances are less common than those on the rationales for forming alliances.

With such an imposing task as trying to summarize more than a baker’s dozen of theories of cooperative strategy in less than three dozen pages of text, the introductory chapter necessarily falls short of providing a comprehensive and complete review of the literature in each area. It does, however, effectively situate the chapters in Parts II, III and IV, within the recent developments in the appropriate literature. As part of the build-up to recent developments in a field, the editors frequently provide brief synopses of the conceptual underpinnings of several of the theories. This could be appreciated on two fronts. For the novice reader on cooperative strategies, appreciation comes from a Coles Notes presentation of terminology and relationships in streams such as transaction cost theory and market power theory. For the experienced reader on cooperative strategies, appreciation comes from the familiarity that breeds increased reading speed for the 32 pages of introductory text.

Although speed might be a by-product of the format of the introductory chapter, to apply such speed to the 14 chapters in Parts II, III and IV, is to miss many of the exciting ideas on cooperative strategies raised by leading scholars. Removed from the straight jackets of academic journals, the intellectual musings of the writers are thought-provoking and challenging, and anything but irrational. For researchers in the streams in which these chapters are situated, these are necessary reading. As an example, for a scholar who would like to explore the outcomes of organizational collaboration, Gray’s chapter on multiple approaches to alliance success, and Reuer and Koza’s chapter on joint venture instability provide needed critical insights into the problem of assessing a collaboration’s performance. Although the eclecticism of the topics in these chapters prohibits a review of each in this forum, as mentioned earlier, the editors provide the needed review in the first chapter.

For someone considering reading this book, the appropriate question is not, ‘Is there something for me (a person interested in the topic of cooperative strategies) in this collection of papers?’ There will be. The appropriate question is how many of the papers will I find relevant, exciting and challenging? That is the challenge of an eclectic series of papers on cooperative strategies. In the emergence of this field, such eclecticism was warranted. The papers in Contractor and Lorange (1988) have been, and continue to be, among the most well-cited in the field of cooperative strategy research. The papers in Beamish and Killing (1998 a, b, c) necessitated three volumes, and even then ended up short of capturing all possible developments in a completely satisfactory manner. The papers in this collection, while each valuable in themselves, fail to have a cohesiveness that could distinctly attach an identity to the book itself.

To give an example, Rugman’s and D’Cruz’s treatise on the flagship firm (originally published in European Management Journal) could stand as an effective guidepost to the integration of research on multinational strategy with that on networks. The volume itself, however, lacks such a distinctive identity. No longer is the field of cooperative strategies at a stage where a single tome, however compendious, can capture all. The vast amount of literature reviewed in the first chapter attests to this, as does the lack of a satisfactory conclusion to the papers and directions for future research in the last two chapters.
Hence, while there is cohesion in the volume, the cohesion is between the nexus, the introductory chapter, and each individual chapter. Linkages between chapters, which would strengthen this array of material, are notably absent. If they were there, such linkages would, as some brothers know, create a strength to the volume which is greater than the sum of its parts. As it is, the chapters, while gathered together in one volume, stand alone in their contributions.

Perhaps this in itself might be the biggest single contribution of the collection. It marks the maturation of research on cooperative strategies, such that one volume can no longer effectively encapsulate all, and have material that uniformly holds appeal to all. Much as one today would be hesitant to edit and publish a collection of papers on such broadly defined areas as strategy, marketing, economics or finance, it might now be the time for edited volumes to move from diverse collections of papers on cooperative strategies to focussed volumes on the specific areas of cooperative strategies so effectively outlined in this work on cooperative strategy.

References


