

Leadership in Austria: A comparison between managing in the Netherlands and Austria

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study focused on how Dutchmen experience the relationship between managers and subordinates in Austria, and to what extent this supports Hofstede's claim that power distance in Austria is lower than in the Netherlands. After conducting five interviews, the results show how Dutchmen experience the cross-cultural differences in leadership between the Netherlands and Austria. This study shows that there are some serious issues concerning the reliability of Hofstede's model. The Austrian scores in Hofstede's research concerning Power distance and Masculinity are not at all in line with the real work floor situation as experienced by the Dutch interviewees. The outcome is not confirming Hofstede's theory but ultimately leads to a more complex conclusion, because Hofstede's research was conducted only among Austrian citizens. Therefore, it can be stated, that Austrians perceive themselves as not status and power oriented, and thus differently from what the Dutch experience in Austria, regarding power distance, hierarchy, status, and masculinity.

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Keywords

Austria, Culture, Geert Hofstede, Leadership, Masculinity, Netherlands, Power Distance

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

Internationalization and globalization have become a very important aspect of our society and daily lives (Thomas, 2010). Doing business in a global economy, nothing is certain except for the aspect of cross-cultural differences (Steers, 2010).

Most managers, even the managers who are greatly culturally acquainted, who travel a lot, who have been travelling for a long time and have spent a considerable amount of time living/working abroad, do not have or only have a few strategies for dealing with the cross-cultural challenges and complexity that affects the manager's organizational effectiveness (Meyer, 2016).

Internationalization and globalization can cause problems, such as conflicts with partners, suppliers, distributors, bilateral distrust, ceaseless delays, political and economic difficulties, personal stress and in some cases loss of careers. All this is due to misunderstanding because of cross-cultural differences, concerning influences and challenges between individuals from different cultures (Steers, 2010).

This study focuses on the specific challenges for Dutchmen, that are going to work in Austria, concerning cross-cultural differences in leadership between the two countries. The latter have been described by various authors.

There is a lack of studies concerning the comparison of the Austrians and the Dutch leadership style, perceived from a Dutch perspective.

Studies comparing Austria and the Netherlands exist, but they have been mostly quantitative, hence there seems to be a scarcity of research regarding exploring cultural differences and leadership styles from a qualitative perspective. Such qualitative perspectives allow exploring nuances and insights that would be lost through a quantitative approach, hence it allows for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under consideration.

A number of scholars have indeed described cultural differences by using quantitative methods. Hofstede (2010) has distinguished six cultural dimensions to explain the differences between national cultures.

One of the most important dimensions Hofstede uses is 'Power Distance', which can be defined as: "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally." According to Hofstede, Power Distance in Austria (11) is lower than in the Netherlands (38) (Hofstede, 2022). This would mean that the attitude of the Austrians is even less acceptant towards inequalities than in the Netherlands. This should result in for example, significant more independence on the work floor in Austria, more equal rights and that power is even more decentralized in Austria than it is in the Netherlands.

Considering that the Netherlands is seen as one of the most egalitarian countries in the world according to Human in Progress (2022), and that Austria is the heir of the very hierarchical Habsburg Empire, this score of Hofstede's research looks rather odd. Although Hofstede's results are based on large-scale quantitative research, one might doubt whether this conclusion/statement is right and reflects real-life on the work floor.

According to Brodbeck (2000), there is a preference for a coaching leadership style in the Netherlands and for a more directing leader in Austria. This does not seem to support the lower power distance which Hofstede claims for Austria. Additionally, the high level of equality and participation among Dutch managers, found by Brodbeck, indicates a preference for

involvement with subordinates, whereas it has been shown that Austrian managers prefer to rely on their senior executives (high in the hierarchy), concerning responsibility and decision making (Brodbeck, 2000).

1.2 Research questions

The aim of this research is to find out to how Austrians and Dutchmen see the relationship between managers and subordinates in their country, and to what extent this supports Hofstede's claim that power distance in Austria is lower than in the Netherlands. Therefore, the following overarching research question is formulated:

- *How do Dutchmen experience the cross-cultural differences in leadership between the Netherlands and Austria?*

To address the above research question, some more detailed sub-research questions are elaborated:

- *What are the most important differences in managing between the Netherlands and Austria?*

- *To what extent is power distance in the Netherlands higher than in Austria?*

- *How do Dutchmen cope with these differences?*

1.3 Academic relevance

The Netherlands has always been perceived as an egalitarian focused country (Human in Progress, 2022), whereas the Austrians are said to be even more egalitarian than the Dutchmen (Hofstede, 2010), but it is unclear whether the Dutchmen actually see it in that specific way.

Therefore, this thesis extends current knowledge on cultural differences, by exploring the Austrian leadership style as perceived by Dutchmen.

Hofstede claims, with his renowned dimension model and theory, that the power distance in Austria is lower than in the Netherlands. However, for various reasons, that seems to be unlikely. The scant existing literature about management and leadership does not support Hofstede's claim.

So, these aspects seem to contradict Hofstede's statement that power distance is lower in Austria than in the Netherlands. Does this show that Hofstede's theory is not correct and his method valid? Or are there other explanations for this contradicting evidence, such as a different definition of what a low or high power distance means.

1.4 Practical relevance

The results of this thesis can give future Dutch managers and employees working in Austria a better understanding and a more complete picture of the perceived Austrian leadership they are going to meet. This will help Dutch managers and employees to gain insight of the Austrian leadership style and therefore to better react and act upon perceived difficulties and problems when working in Austria as a Dutchmen. With this study, Dutchmen will know better where possible frictions, collisions, and differences can occur. This research will indicate, how Dutchman can best deal with those frictions, collisions, and differences, learning from the experiences of the Dutchmen interviewed for this study.

2. LITERATURE

In this theoretical framework section, the key concepts, aspects, and literature relevant for this research will be discussed.

2.1 Hofstede's dimensions

In many studies on cross-cultural differences the result of Hofstede's research on cross-cultural differences are used. The model he established is most prominently used by business

managers and leaders to improve communication with their employees, to improve the understanding of employee behavior, to gain knowledge of how organizational structure and culture interact, to improve organizational transformation projects' effectiveness, to create suggestions for enhancing the organization, and the most important aspect, to work more productively in a global environment. To analyze the cultures, he distinguishes six different dimensions. As can be seen below in figure 1, three out of the six dimensions show significant differences between the Austrians and Dutchman.

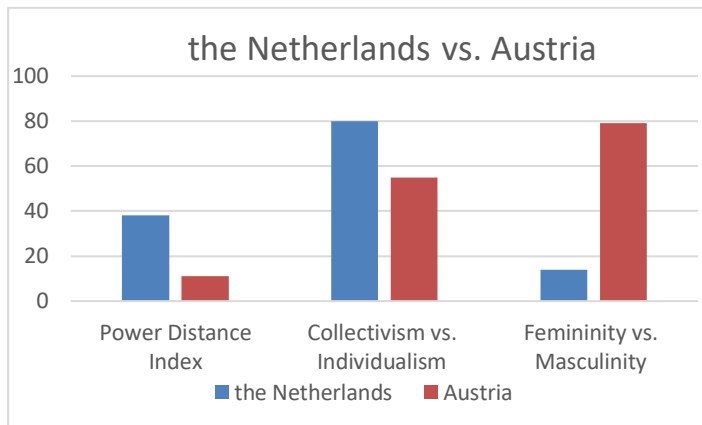


Figure 1: A comparison between the Netherlands and Austria, concerning 3 dimensions defined by Hofstede (2010). With a score of 0 being the lowest, and a score of 100 being the highest score.

Figure 1 shows the three different dimensions with different scores for the Netherlands and Austria, which indicates a countries' performance on the different dimensions. A low Power Distance Index indicates an egalitarian culture and a high Power Distance Index indicates a culture which embraces hierarchy, where the Netherlands scores 38 and Austria scores 11. A low score on the Collectivism vs. Individualism dimension indicates a culture which lays the emphasis on collectivism and for a high score the opposite (individualism) is true, where the Netherlands scores 80 and Austria scores 55 (Corporate Finance Institute, 2022). A low score on the Femininity vs. Masculinity dimension indicates, according to Hofstede (2010), a feminine society, where the quality of life is the sign of success and standing out from the crowd is not admirable, whereas the dominant values within a feminine society are caring for others and family life. A high score indicates that power could be important (masculinity). In this dimension, the Netherlands scores 14 and Austria scores 79 (Hofstede, 2010).

2.2 The empirical findings of Steyrer (2006)

Another analyzation of the Austrian culture are the empirical findings of Johannes Steyrer. The research and the analysis of Steyrer (2006) can also be used by managers and leaders of different countries to overcome the same difficulties as Hofstede's model could. Steyrer (2006) has done an analysis of the existing empirical findings in several countries among which Austria. Despite the scarcity of empirical studies on leadership in Austria, a very small number of studies stated that the typical leadership style of an Austrian manager is very consensus oriented. Consultation and group decisions are common among Austrian managers. The focus on consensus is a very typical Austrian characteristic, as is the tendency to avoid conflict. Almost all levels of society are characterized by this quest for consensus. A saying from Austria goes; "durchs reden kommen d'Leut z'samm". Which means "talking brings people together".

This concept pertains to everyday life on both an individual and corporate level, as well as to the political sphere (Steyrer, 2006, p. 8).

2.3 Characteristics of Austrians

Krejci (2011) devoted a relevant section of her book to doing business in Austria. In one's job there is an emphasis on doing the 'right thing', which means acting in a way that serves the greater or common good. The greatest difference for foreigners (such as Dutchmen) is, as quoted "that what you know does not count as much as who you know" (Krejci, 2011, p. 240). This indicates that relationships are a strong element in the work environment. Other characteristics are for example that the boss demands respect and is treated with respect. The formality can be stifling. Krejci's description does not seem to indicate a low power distance. There is not much laughing or joking around at work. Colleagues do not normally socialize after working hours. Also, the higher placed ranks (managers) can also be very aggressive against equal or lower ranks to protect their position within an organization. It is also stated that once having a job only a few will change their jobs in the future.

Steers et al. (2010) state that managers in the Netherlands showed more overall drive than managers in Austria. With drive is meant having a lot of energy and determination. Additionally, of the questioned Austrian managers, 54% found that managers are willing to delegate, while 61% of the questioned Dutch managers found that they are willing to delegate. Based on the data from the World Value Study Group, of the questioned Austrian individuals, 32% found that people could be trusted, while 54% of the questioned Dutch individuals found that people could be trusted.

The percent of employees reporting high job satisfaction is in Austria 92.9%, where the percent of employees reporting high job satisfaction in the Netherlands is 91.9% (Hammermann, 2017). So, it seems that whatever the differences, the Austrian employees are equally highly satisfied with their job as Dutchmen.

All together this shows that the few studies that exist, do not seem to support the results of Hofstede that in Austria there is a lower power distance at work than in the Netherlands. Therefore, we will use a qualitative approach to study this discrepancy in more detail.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this methodology section, the research design, the data collection, the research instrument, and the data analysis will be discussed.

3.1 Research design

For this research, an inductive qualitative approach is used. This is more fit for detailed descriptions of subtle cultural phenomena. An inductive approach to research focusses on gaining an understanding of the meaning humans attach to events, a close understanding of the research context, the collection of qualitative data, and a flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses (Saunders, 2009). Using inductive qualitative research, a target group's attitudes can be tracked. When collecting qualitative data, a researcher can be much more speculative about the subject areas they choose to investigate. By using inductive qualitative approaches, asking "how" and "why" can be incredibly insightful (Vaughan, 2021).

3.2 Data collection

The interviewees were contacted through social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Data is collected by means of recorded interviews with five Dutch employees and managers living and working in Austria. This had as a result to gain a better

understanding of the cross-cultural leadership differences between the Netherlands and Austria. These Dutch employees and managers must have met several requirements, for example that the Dutch manager/employee has been working in Austria for at least six months. The Ethics Committee BMS from the University of Twente gave approval to process the interviews. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed.

3.3 Research Instrument

The research instrument was by conducting five semi-structured interviews. According to Adams (2016), semi structured interviews are labor intensive, time consuming, and require interviewers to be sophisticated. An advantage, especially when many of the open-ended questions need to be followed up with follow-up questions, semi-structured interviews are ideally suited for several valuable tasks. The interviews were conducted online, and it was in the form of open-ended questions. Although it was intended for the interviews to last between sixty and ninety minutes, they lasted an average of fifty-five minutes. By asking open-ended questions, a lot more can be learned about the managers'/employees' logic, thoughts, language, and culture (Adams, 2016). To provide an accurate transcription of the conducted interviews, the Amberscript Software and the built-in transcription software of Microsoft Teams was used.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed with the emphasis on critical incidents, and the Thematic analysis.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was developed by an American researcher in the field of occupational psychology, named John Flanagan (1954) (Lipu, 2007). The CIT is defined by Flanagan as: "a set of procedures for collecting direct observation of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (Fiedler, 1971, p. 97). This technique provides a practical step-by-step approach for collecting and analyzing data about an individual's activities and their importance/significance to other individuals who are involved (Lipu, 2007). Therefore, this approach could be described as a well-established qualitative research approach (Fitzgerald et al., 2008). The critical incidents are collected by asking and interviewing individuals to characterize some specific intercultural occurrences that made a significant difference in their behaviors and attitudes towards the individuals of the respective other culture (Fiedler, 1971).

The corrected texts are subjected to Thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is defined by Braun & Clarke as: "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Passages in the text that deal with themes relevant to answering the research questions are coded. All coded passages were grouped according to the theme they describe. Afterwards, it was checked whether some themes can be brought together in overarching themes. This analysis technique involves going over a data set (such as a transcript of in-depth interviews) to identify patterns in meaning across the data (Delve Tool, 2022). The conclusion section of the thesis will present these findings and make a significant conclusion about the findings.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Nepotism / Favoritism

Adjusting to the Austrian working environment was very difficult for all interviewees, for several reasons. If you are not an Austrian, you will not easily be fully included in the business. You must be a friend or family of specific persons and then you belong to a specific business organization or social group of

friends. Nepotism and favoritism predominate, according to the Dutch interviewees. There are several examples to illustrate this. One example concerned a colleague of an interviewee: the colleague was not good at her job, but this person just was continually being promoted within the company. There is only one overarching word that can describe this phenomenon, and that is: favoritism. If you do not know someone, or you are not friends of the other person, you can forget about a promotion, in terms of your career for example. One respondent said: "forget about wage raise if you are not friends with the management, but if you are friends, then the sky the limit". That is what is meant by the term *freunderlwirtschaft*. Some interviewees thought it was strange that someone who is not related to the family will not be granted a leadership role. An interviewee spent five years at the same job at an Austrian company and witnessed the steady advancement of friends of the family that owns the business. While that interviewee performed better than the other coworkers in terms of test scores, results, and customer ratings. It implies that Austrian leaders are solely in charge to uphold the "family/friend society" within the organization. One interviewee claimed that "Austrian leaders are never going to help you grow in a company, never". The impression is created that it is more about the advantage Austrians have gained over their family and friends. Regardless of whether they like the position/job or not, that is where they go and what they must do and carry out.

*"It is not about the
competencies you have,
but who you know"*
Interviewee 5

An important element of the nepotism/favoritism concept is the social integration. Another reason, which most interviewees struggled with for adapting to the Austrian work environment, is if you are not Austrian, then you just do not quite fit in socially. It appears that it would be challenging for an outsider to fit in the circle of Austrian friends. One interviewee said, "most friend groups, you really notice that they have already been formed in *kindergarten* and it is very tough to integrate". With *kindergarten*, a classroom or school for young children, often aged four to six is meant. Additionally, in smaller villages they mainly speak dialect. When some interviewees initially went to Austria, the Austrians advised them to learn the local dialect because if they didn't, they would have to find employment elsewhere. According to an interviewee, "the bar for assimilating into society in Austria is hundred times greater than it is in the Netherlands".

*"You must adapt,
because Austrians do
not"*
Interviewee 4

4.2 Loners

When asked interviewees about their interactions with Austrians, they tended to describe them as genuine “loners”. According to the interviewees, Austrians lead independent lives and rarely pay attention to other people. The impression is created that Austrians are highly individualistic, which means that they are more concerned in individuals than in society. All interviewees have experienced this, especially at work. An interviewee narrated a tale about a manager who despises team sports and never wants to plan a team-building activity for his employees. The impression is created that Austrians have very strict rules, that you must work within those boundaries, because that is what the rules are. But within those boundaries Austrians try to do it the way they think it is right. An interviewee also provides an example of this person's acquaintances and relatives. Despite being able to see the in-law's house from her kitchen, the interviewee hardly ever sees the Austrian life partner's family. This interviewee sees her Dutch relatives more frequently than the partner's family. It is also clearly emphasized that some families do not share a meal at all; instead, they all prepare their own meals and eat separately even though they share a home. Some interviewees claim, “you will never see that in the Netherlands”. It can be assumed that Austrians do not truly care about other people's life and behavior. When asked a Dutch interviewee about the level of individualism among Austrians; “Yes, they are very individualistic but not if there is a chance that a friend of a friend could get promoted, then the war is closing in”. Which means that if Austrians could help a friend to get promoted, they'll do anything in their power to make that happen.

4.3 Feedback

All interviewees mentioned the manner an Austrian boss provided and received feedback when asked about differences in leadership styles between the Netherlands and Austria. According to one interviewee, “a lot has to be done if that Austrian executive is to ever get away from the lowest spot of worst chefs.” This was primarily due to the manager's lack of coaching, feedback, and communication, as well as the fact that he showed no interest at all in what was happening within the business. The management in the Netherlands reportedly sought the opinions of its workers, according to each interviewee. That is not the case in Austria. According to several interviewees, only negative feedback is given, never positive feedback. The other respondents claim that although the executives attempted to solicit feedback, they did so incorrectly by indirectly asking what their employees thought about their executives and the company. Asking feedback via one or more intermediary individuals is meant with indirectly. It can be stated that neither performance reports nor feedback are given at all. According to a respondent, “Austrians never tell the truth concerning honest feedback. You never genuinely receive honest criticism because it is always distorted”.

4.4 Self-involved Behavior

When inquired about how Austrian leaders and people in general respond to criticism, it was often replied that they do not. Austrians lose it in a fit of rage, they blow up, or someone else exposes you to the problem. Austrians have a very difficult time with the directness that the Dutch display. There is a straight line between A and B for the Dutch, and Austrians frequently struggle to deal with that. Austrians are sensitive to criticism. They perceive it as detrimental (very frustrating, dispiriting, and abusive). It appears that Austrians do not always have their opinions ready. According to one respondent, “Austrians talk a lot, but they can have very little criticism”. It can be assumed that Austrians are therefore inadequate at accepting criticism. One

respondent claimed that when you make a mistake, the boss approaches you and occasionally offers advice, but that is more for the boss his own benefit. The perception that Austrians respond a little more fiercely and cannot take criticism well is also emphasized, and some interviewees have had that experience with their employer.

“When criticizing a co-worker, that is like saying his firstborn child is ugly”

Interviewee 2

Collaboration is always the result of conflicts and disputes that are addressed amicably. Conflicts, though, may be either professional or emotional. An interviewee claimed that topics of conversation or the infinity you have with Austrians are frequently taken very personally. “Everyone in the lower levels of the company is always upset, so if you disagree with Austrians, it is also perceived as a personal attack”, he claims.

“The relationship with my manager? Great because it is not an Austrian”

Interviewee 5

4.5 Underhanded / Conniving

Austrians are not trustworthy, according to most interviewees. Nearly every respondent had a tale about Austrians talking behind their backs and attempting to extort them. One interviewee recalled, “they talked about me once, about the email, but then the email redirection was on me, so I could read everything”. The impression is created that Austrians are very underhanded and conniving. Email is used for practically all communication concerning work. However, the Austrians do not individually approach you and have a lengthy conversation with you in private. According to one interviewee, the Austrian leaders will try to help you if you have a serious question, but they could also make fun of you if you do not know what to do. It appears that political games are performed by the leaders considerably more frequently in Austria than they are in the Netherlands.

“How Austrians react to criticism? With a dagger in your back”

Interviewee 5

4.6 Hierarchical Organizations

All Dutch interviewees are unanimous in their belief that there is a significant hierarchy in Austrian organizations when asked about it. This is brought forward several times by all persons and illustrated with several examples. The boss and his sons typically held the position of leadership in most businesses. Simply put, employees are unable to criticize their employers, and there is nothing you can do about it. Unlike the Netherlands, where both leaders and personnel frequently change their minds. When it comes to Austrian leaders, you simply must keep your mouth shut once they say something. All interviewees indicated that employees in Dutch firms have substantially greater potential for contribution. In Austria, the boss makes all the decisions. You need to have excellent justifications before you go to the highest boss. Additionally, they frequently do not want to be bothered by trivial matters because they do not wish to get involved in them. If you want to express your opinion about a situation at work, you must first navigate through a sizable number of levels in the hierarchy before finally getting to the boss. According to one interviewee, hierarchy is also crucial to daily living. This person believes that Austrians and hierarchy are related in any way. For instance, Austrian citizens must submit numerous documents and stamps to handle the problems they experience daily. Many large companies based in the Netherlands have five to seven management layers, but according to an interviewee: "in Austria, if you are under twenty layers of management than, it is a small company. It is unbelievable, so many layers of management, so much hierarchy, so many functions and roles and processes that no one can explain". Austrians are perceived as managers who simply "obey" and sit there for themselves before claiming: "I too got the job from my boss," in response. In Austria, hierarchy is a lifestyle, one interviewee argues. The demands made of the leaders may not always be important, all that matters is that the workers comply and accept the demands. Therefore, all the managers and staff must follow whatever instructions are given to them from above.

The following narrative is a description of the interviewee's many Austrian organizations for which he has worked. Which summarizes a typical Austrian organization.

"The boss wants something, so it moves down the hierarchy through all 20 layers. Half of all those layers try to sabotage because the employees are frequently forced to do something new. So that it suits them, so that what the boss wants is only partially implemented. So, the boss gets half of what he wants, and the other half ends up somewhere else in the company".

*"I have never seen
woman in top positions
here in Austria"*
Interviewee 4

In Austria there are many more men, with the function of team leaders than women. There are also more men at the top of the organization than women in Austria. This is confirmed by all interviewees in each interview. Which could be seen as a bit strange in this western society.

4.7 The Boss Decides

It appears that Austrian management is very *beratungsresistent* (resistant to consultation). At the same level, thoughts about how the company should operate are discussed, but if you are placed at a lower level, it is pointless. People at the same level of the hierarchy can converse about decision-making and other topics, but those at lower levels are excluded. Therefore, only those in positions of authority make decisions. Lower 'ranks' are not included in the deliberations and group decisions, the highest ranks are, and then you will be told what they have decided. Managers do everything themselves as much as possible. Regardless of consultation or group decisions, the boss is always in charge, and the staff simply must comply. Some respondents do not concur with this assertion, however this is more likely due to the non-Austrian company they work for. Another interviewee claimed that the company where this person works consults with each other and makes decisions collectively. However, it must be stated that this is a relatively small company. In meetings, the same individuals frequently speak. Also, if we look at the cultural standard of hierarchy, the boss determines. It makes no difference whether it is a good or bad idea, if the boss wants it to happen it just happens.

4.8 Introvert / Closed Personality

"Austrians are very closed off," was the unanimous response when asked how Austrians and Austrian leaders act in everyday life and at work. The Dutch, according to all interviewees, are open-minded. In contrast to Austrians.

The Dutch are very open-minded people, which means that they are willing to incorporate new ideas. For instance, when the interviewees first arrived at their jobs in Austria, they hardly ever took part in group discussions. And although they wanted to, they couldn't since they were barred out. Furthermore, wages are not mentioned in Austria. The individuals being questioned are unaware of their coworkers' salaries. Which is the result of mutual suspicion and jealousy. It appears that the Austrians are unconcerned about that. That somewhat also applies to maintaining appearances. Because if the Austrian does not disclose to the other how much they make, the other will remain in the dark. Additionally, the person is unaware of your activities and lifestyle, which leads to holding up the ideal image. "You only manage to have a chat with an Austrian person in the pub after the fifteenth time. In the Netherlands, when you walk into the pub there, you have a chat with the first person you address. In Austria: Not done!", according to one interviewee. This reveals a lot about Austrians' introverted and private nature.

Austrians' distinct separation of their personal and work lives might be viewed as a component of their introverted/closed nature. It appears that there is a clear distinction between business and personal life in Austria. "When working in Austria you will be treated as a colleague. It is important to remember that coworkers are not always the same as friends", as explained by one interviewee. Private matters are not discussed at work, which all interviewees believed to be a notable distinction between the working environments in Austria and the Netherlands. All interviewees agreed that your circle of friends is made bigger by colleagues in the Netherlands. The opposite is true in Austria, colleagues are certainly not seen as friends.

*"They are not my friends.
Nor they will ever be"*
Interviewee 1

In Austria there is a concept, which is called *sudern*: every little problem deserves a few hours to complain about, and that is always extremely negative. Austrians are perceived by the Dutchmen as very negative people. As stated by one interviewee: “When Austrians say something, it is often negative, about themselves, about another person, about the weather about company, about work, about the customer, about everything. It is not often that you hear something positive. They are really nagging people.”

4.9 Performance / Status Oriented

For certain Austrians, having status and authority is crucial to their functioning. The titles and degrees that Austrians have earned are what really excite them. Some of the interviewees' coworkers insisted that they display all their titles on the door, list them next to their names, and include them in every email. This can be a reference to the *bildungsadel* phenomena. When interviewees heard so many abbreviations in a sequence, they began to wonder, "what do all these abbreviations actually mean?" They enjoy doing that and enjoying having that title used to refer to them. Then, instead of just "Sir," it is "Mein Herr," "Professor," or "der Direktor." All interviewees found the questions pertaining to performance and status to be really fascinating because it was obvious that Austrians desired to attain a particular status and have a particular title hanging on their door. Even so, Austrians frequently deny wanting to rise to such a position of authority, according to several interviewees. People in Austria dislike being addressed personally if they are higher up the hierarchy. Additionally, you may only address someone by their first name if they had given you permission to do so. Only then could the employee do it; otherwise, they would consider it to be extremely rude. "All of those powerful men were dressed nicely and behaved like the director. They do not really mean much, though. They may act normally since you are only the team leader", a respondent in the interview said. Austrians frequently discuss their academic accomplishments, future educational goals, and desired place in society. Promoting yourself was central to everything. Furthermore, it appears that Austrian executives are not flexible either.

*“Austrians are really
power-hungry”*
Interviewee 4

To substantiate this result, an example is given of an interviewee who experienced the subject about status and power. An interviewee did an internship, and during that internship they were once asked to put twelve concepts in order of importance for that specific person. Power and status were two of those concepts. The results were that Austrians themselves had placed those two concepts almost at the bottom of the list.

“Especially in the working environment, I thought it was quite contradictory, because everyone says yes, I want that to achieve this... I want to learn more about that subject and to become higher in the organization and to become better and I want to have titles and I know what more... But if you ask the Austrians yourself what they want to achieve in live; power and status are not important at all, however that is not truly reflected in business live” according to the interviewee.

4.10 Provenance

Provenance could be explained as the place of origin of people. According to several respondents, it matters where an Austrian is from, whether it be a large town or valley. It is repeatedly highlighted that behavior of Austrians in general and of Austrian leaders relies on where they originate from. Most often, people from remote villages are characterized as being quite confrontational and noisy. where residents of larger cities are more obedient and understanding. A respondent works and lives in a tiny village of fewer than two thousand people. It takes forty-five minutes to reach the closest city. When this person moved to Austria and settled in this small village, she noticed that the Austrians there were always talking behind someone's back and attempting to harm the reputation of others. Provenance can be linked and may even be the result of being underhanded/conniving, which is another cultural dimension.

The impression is created that work culture and social culture differ greatly across provinces. Smaller towns and valleys are much more progressive. “It is what we have seen with covid deniers, for example. Covid simply did not exist in remote areas. The suspicion of people and how misinformed people are. And it is more that a charismatic person shouts something and everyone just runs after it. And then of course you relate it to the war because that is exactly what happened there... (Hitler)”, according to one interviewee. Therefore, it seems that there are numerous isolated communities that are extremely close to one another in terms of socialization. An interviewee claimed that no other country had as many associations per village as Austria. The impression is created that if you do not join certain social institutions, like the volunteer fire department, you will not ever feel like you belong and will not ever be a part of a community.

*“Mann kann sehen der
kommt aus das und das
tal”*
Interviewee 3

This quote indicates that it is very clear, in a person's behavior and statements, where someone in Austria comes from. This could explain, for example, the *loner*, *introvert/closed personalities*, and the *underhanded/conniving* behavior of certain Austrians. “Unknown is unloved”, according to one interviewee, is a significant behavioral characteristic in Austrian society.

4.11 Conflict Avoidance

Circumventing the subject and avoiding the conflict are characteristics experienced by all interviewees. The dialogue about the bad news is avoided, the decision is postponed, or multiple outside consultants are consulted. These statements refer to the concept of conflict avoidance. According to one respondent, “some managers within the company who are hierarchically higher than certain employees, who do talk about certain things directly with some other colleagues, except you. The specific manager then goes to the boss, to avoid the conflict with you”. The impression is created that managers are not always immediately available. Avoiding feedback or performance reviews can also be interpreted as conflict avoidance. Foreigners must avoid being too direct in their criticism or opinions towards Austrians because this will force managers into the conflict, which they do not want. To exemplify

this, an interviewee provides a good example in which a situation is indicated. Where the organization's manager refuses to assist the employee or provide feedback, while the interviewee requests feedback. "No, I do not do that because then I have to say things that you do not do well, and I do not feel comfortable with that at all", had said the interviewees' manager. All interviewees prefer Dutchmen over an Austrian to work with, mainly because of the conflict avoidance of Austrians. Employees and managers in Dutch organizations are much more direct, and you should address colleagues about their behavior and attitude. The conflict is quickly resolved, and the employee and manager are back on track. Some interviewees have never had this experience with Austrians. This analysis of conflict avoidance may explain why managers are hesitant to provide *feedback* to their employees. This analysis may also explain why managers have such an *introverted and closed personality*, as well as why *personal and professional lives* are separated.

4.12 Answering Research Questions

By analyzing the findings, this thesis extends current knowledge on cultural differences, by exploring the Austrian leadership style as perceived by Dutchmen.

The most important differences in managing between the Netherlands and Austria are the *nepotism/favoritism* aspect, which indicates that relatives and friends are granted in various fields, such as the business environment. The *loner* aspect, which indicates that people like to think and do things in their own way. The *feedback* aspect, which indicates that an Austrian leader is not giving or not giving decent feedback to co-workers or employees. The *self-involved behavior* aspect, which indicates the need for admiration, disregard or other's feeling, inability to handle any criticism, and a sense of entitlement. Criticism is seen as a personal attack. The *underhanded/conniving* aspect, which indicates that people are getting discredited. People are ridicule afterwards. The *hierarchical organization* aspect, which indicates a hierarchical organization, where all entities of the organization are subordinate to one other entity. The *boss decides* aspect, which indicates that decisions are being made individually, by the higher placed people within an organization. Lower ranks are not included in decision making. The *introvert/closed* personality aspect, which indicates that people rather than focusing on what is happening externally, people prefer to concentrate on their inner thoughts and ideas. The *performance- and status-oriented* aspect denotes the quest of power and status through performance optimization. Some of the most important differences in managing between the Netherlands and Austria, could be explained by a deeper analysis of the behavior of the Austrians, as perceived by the Dutch interviewees. One of which is the *provenance*, and the other is *conflict avoidant behavior*.

The Austrians are perceived as being extremely hierarchical by the Dutch interviewees. If the position of the team leader is respected in the Netherlands, the team leader will direct their subordinates. However, if people do not agree with the company's decisions and vision. The employees can then ask questions and share their findings with their team leader to achieve the best possible outcome. So, in the Netherlands everyone is more on the same level. Companies in the Netherlands are also frequently very flat, with three to five management layers. And because that is different in Austria, so is the management. As a result, employees and managers serve as more of a conduit. Employees in Austria receive orders from above, even from very high up in the hierarchy, and they must carry them out without being able to respond. Where in the hierarchical organizations, decisions are being made by the higher placed people within the organization and where lower

ranks are not included in the decision-making process. Additionally, the pursuit of power and status is very important for Austrians, according to the interviewees. So, as being perceived by the interviewees, the power distance in Austria is not lower than it is in the Netherlands. The impression is created that it is might even be higher than it is in the Netherlands.

Each interviewee approaches the differences between Austrians and Dutchmen differently, both personally and professionally. Overall, it is safe to say that social and professional integration are important in Austria. Joining organizations such as the volunteer fire department can be extremely beneficial. Like actively engaging with the community has numerous advantages. What all interviewees did agree on are two aspects, one of which is that people should be prepared for the underhanded aspects that Austrians have and the underhanded aspects that happen in Austrian organizations. Furthermore, it is quite normal for the boss in the Netherlands to listen to employees and try to find a solution together. Some of the interviewees made the mistake of speaking up to their boss. And they have suffered the consequences of that. Then, because the boss in Austrian organizations wields so much power, the boss ensures that the other employees no longer like you. Accepting the established order within the organization may thus be critical to your career.

So, how do Dutchmen experience the cross-cultural differences in leadership between the Netherlands and Austria? To begin with, if you are not Austrian, you simply do not fit in in terms of work relations. You must be a friend/family member of a specific person before you can join their social group or company. It is heavily influenced by nepotism. If you do not know someone or are not friends with the other person, you should not expect a promotion. The bottom line is, it is not about the competencies you have, but who you know. Austrian leaders are never going to help you grow in a company (which can also be seen as highly individualistic). Secondly, outsiders adapt, because Austrians do not adapt. Austrians are very individualistic and are described as real 'loners'. Thirdly, Austrians have a terrible attitude toward criticism. Austrians react more aggressively and are thus less adept at handling criticism. What Austrians struggle with the most is the directness that the Dutch have. Austrian leaders and individuals in general are very *beratungsresistent* (not willing to consult). The infinity you have with Austrians or a point of discussion, is often taken very personally. Fourthly, Austrians do not confront someone with something, but rather speak behind his back. Email is almost exclusively used for communication on the work floor. The Austrians do not approach you and take you aside to talk things out. Fifthly, an enormous hierarchy rules in Austria. Most of the time, the boss and his sons are in charge at the top. Employees simply cannot speak out against this, and you are powerless to intervene. It is impossible to argue with. The authority must be accepted. Sixthly, aspects are discussed at the same level, but if you are below that, it is useless. Consultations are held, but they do not have any impact. The decisions are made by higher-ranking individuals. Deliberations and group decisions are not involving the lower ranks, only the highest ranks are, and they will inform you afterward. Seventhly, Austrians are very closed-off and wages are not discussed in Austria. The directness of the dutchmen has also had to be unlearned by several interviewees. Additionally, in Austria a distinction is being made between work and private life. Eighthly, for certain Austrians, status and power play a crucial role in how they function. The titles and degrees that Austrians have earned are what really excite them.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical implications

According to Hofstede's research (Hofstede, 2010), Austria (11) has a lower Power Distance Index score than the Netherlands (38). People in low Power Distance cultures expect to be involved in decisions that impact them and openly challenge authority. However, the findings show that the opposite is described by the Dutch interviewees. The findings show that the Austrians are not working independently and huge hierarchy within organizations is the overall norm. Additionally, there are no equal rights for men and women in top positions within Austrian enterprises, and the company's management levels do not empower and facilitate them. The most important aspect to be discussed is that managers do not rely on the expertise of their team members and do not decentralize their power. All the stated characteristics as a result of the findings do not indicate a low power distance within Austrian companies.

Austria (55) has a lower individualism dimension score than the Netherlands (80). Which indicates an individualistic society for Austria (Hofstede, 2010). The degree of interconnectedness a society maintains among its members is the key issue this dimension attempts to solve. People in individualist society are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate family, according to Hofstede. These characteristics seem to corroborate with the findings as Austrian companies/society have a loosely knit social structure where people are solely expected to care for themselves and their immediate families. Additionally, the employer/employee relationship seems to be a contract based on mutual advantages (Hofstede, 2022).

With a higher score for Austria (79) on the Masculinity dimension, than the Netherlands (14), Austria is perceived as a masculine society (Hofstede, 2010). What drives and motivates people is the key concern of this dimension. Geert Hofstede states that Austrians have a desire to excel (Masculinity). Austrians "live in order to work", where managers are expected to make quick decisions and performance is prioritized over equity and competition. The findings seem to corroborate these statements. Performance and status are very important for Austrians, as perceived by the Dutch. On the other hand, conflicts are resolved by fighting them out, according to Hofstede. This is not in line with what the Dutch interviewees experienced. They perceived the Austrians as highly conflict avoidant.

According to the empirical findings of Steyrer (2006), an Austrian manager typically leads in a very consensus-oriented manner. Austrian managers frequently consult with one another and make decisions as a group. Both the emphasis on consensus and the propensity to avoid conflict are distinctly Austrian traits. Based on the findings, Austrians manager will not typically lead in a very consensus-oriented manner, as Austrian managers are being perceived as individual decision makers. Austrian managers seem to not frequently consult with one another. The boss decides what decisions to make. On the other hand, the statement that Austrians are being conflict avoidant is corroborating with the findings.

"That what you know does not count as much as who you know" (Krejci, 2011, p. 240), referred to in the findings as *freunderlwirtschaft*, fully concurs with this quote. As perceived by the interviewees, it is very much the tendency that you must be a certain person's friend or family member before you may join that person's business organization or social group of friends. Additionally, as stated by Krejci, the boss of an Austrian company demands respect and is therefore also treated with respect. This is also stated in the findings as Austrians seem to be accepting the authority and are treating the boss and managers with respect. There is not a lot of joking or laughing at work.

After hours, coworkers typically avoid socializing (Krejci, 2011). Additionally, to maintain their position within an organization, managers and other higher placed ranks may act aggressively toward equal or lower ranks. These statements made by Krejci, are confirmed by the findings. As for example stated in the findings, the private matters are not shared at work and the higher placed ranks may act aggressively or underhanded to the lower ranks to protect their family and friends within the company but also outside the company.

Based on data from the World Value Study Group (Steers et al., 2010), it can be determined that 32% of Austrian respondents believed that people could be trusted, compared to 54% of Dutch respondents. As Austrians are being perceived by the Dutch interviewees as underhanded, the findings seem to be in line with this data, although the difference is not very big.

Historically, the Netherlands have been the epitome of equality (Human in Progress, 2022), whereas the Austrians have been thought of as even more egalitarian than the Dutch (Hofstede, 2010). According to the interviewees, the Austrian organizations and the Austrian community are seen as enormously hierarchical. Leaders are highly individualistic and will often make decisions on their own without the involvement of lower ranks. Austrian leaders also do not take criticism well and take it as a personal attack. The most important fact is that Austrians, according to the interviewees, strive for power and status. Titles and diplomas are seen as very important. The power distance in Austria is therefore certainly not considered lower by the interviewees than it is in the Netherlands. So, this is clearly inconsistent with the low score on power distance for Austria which resulted from Hofstede's research.

This study shows that there are some serious issues concerning the reliability of Hofstede's model. The Austrian scores in Hofstede's research on Power distance and Masculinity are not at all in line with the real work floor situation as experienced by the Dutch interviewees. However, Hofstede asks the Austrians about power distance in Austria and the Dutch about power distance in the Netherlands. So, people of each country fill in their perception of power in their country, which leads to distortion. The question remains therefore whether all scores obtained for different countries could be compared.

Therefore, an answer for the discrepancy can be, that Austrians do not see themselves as hugely seeking for power and status. Austrians themselves do not consider power and status important for the functioning of those persons. Austrians themselves do not see the enormous hierarchy that prevails in Austrian organizations. Even though, this is experienced by all interviewees. Therefore, the impression is created that the Austrians and the Dutchmen have a different meaning for power distance and egalitarian relationships

5.2 Practical implications

Thanks to the results of this thesis, in the future, Dutch managers and employees working in Austria may be better able to understand the Austrian leadership that they are likely to be dealing with. Managers and employees from the Netherlands can gain insights into Austrian leadership style and be more able to react to perceived difficulties and problems while working in Austria. The findings show that Dutchmen have a difficult time adjusting to Austria's enormous hierarchy. The results also demonstrate that Dutchmen find it difficult to adapt to Austrians' conflict avoidance behavior and the local dialect in which they live and work. It is therefore suggested that Dutch managers and employees, who are going to work in Austria, receive cultural differences training, language lessons or a workshop especially focused on hierarchy. As a result, they will be aware of how these factors can affect their performance.

5.3 Limitations & Future Research

Within this research there are some potential limitations. The main limitation of this research is its sample size. With only five people interviewed, this research is limited. A larger sample might lead to slightly different results. Research on the aspects discussed in this study could be conducted in more depth in the future, because of this. The results are not representative and cannot be generalized because of the small sample size. A larger sample size of about sixty participants would have made the results more representative (Faber & Fonseca, 2014, p. 28).

A second limitation is the absence of a second coder. To increase the variety of concepts that are formed and the understanding of their features and interactions, many coders can contribute to analysis by viewing the data from a number of angles and interpreting it in various ways. It might also be helpful to compare interpretations to the data using several coders. Multiple coders may be able to help avoid this perspective from obscuring participant perceptions and meanings even though each researcher interprets the data through the prism of their own expertise and experience. In this research the interpretations and the knowledge of one single coder is used. Therefore, multiple coders could be used in future research to complement each other's analysis and the prevention of problems.

A third limitation is that this research could be more diverse in terms of the characteristics of the interviewees. Most interviewees worked in relatively large companies with many employees and limited freedom within the company, for example. What may also be of interest are the regions from which the interviewees come. It may be the case that different persons from different regions have different opinions on certain issues. In the future, these characteristics should be considered, and more persons should be interviewed coming from different environments, concerning work and social life.

6. CONCLUSION

This research shows the impression of the Austrian work floor as perceived by Dutchmen working in Austria. The most important differences are nepotism/favoritism factors, individualistic behavior, not giving sufficient feedback, self-involved behavior characteristics, underhanded/conniving behavior on the work floor, an extremely perceived hierarchical organizational structure, decision-making by the leaders, introvert/closed personality of the colleagues, an extreme hunger for power and status, conflict avoidant behavior, and provenance.

Performance and status are very important to Austrians. Contrarily, conflict resolution according to Hofstede involves talking conflicts out. This does not match the experiences of the Dutch interviewees. They thought the Austrians were quite adept at avoiding conflict. This shows that the masculinity-femininity dimension does not adequately describe the behavior on the Austrian work floor.

The results of this study do not support the low power distance score of Hofstede's dimensions. Dutchmen unequivocally pointed to a far stronger hierarchy with many more layers, more decision power of the manager, less consultation of subordinates and a stronger desire to show status than they were used to in the Netherlands. The interviewees indicated with various examples that this turned out not to be the case. However, Hofstede's theory and this research, could not totally be compared on an equal footing. Hofstede only questioned Austrians about power distance in Austria; he did not inquire about how outsiders perceive Austrians.

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9. APPENDIX

9.1 Interview questions

Inleiding > paar korte inleidende vragen

1. Hoe lang werkt u al voor dit Oostenrijkse bedrijf? Wat voor werk doe je?
2. Hoe lang woont u al in Oostenrijk?
3. Waarom besloot u naar Oostenrijk te emigreren?
4. Ik begrijp dat u regelmatig contact hebt met Oostenrijkse collega's. Hoe vaak gebeurt dit? Waaruit bestaat het contact (telefoon, e-mail, persoonlijk)?
5. Wat is uw functie en kunt u een paar functies noemen van Oostenrijkse collega's (personen) (rang, taakverdeling)?
6. In welke taal spreekt u met de Oostenrijkse collega's?
7. Hoe vindt u de sfeer in uw Oostenrijkse organisatie? Anders dan in Nederland? Kun je een voorbeeld geven?

Ervaringen met Oostenrijkers

1. Hoe zijn uw ervaringen met Oostenrijkers in het algemeen? Heeft u problemen gehad met het aanpassen aan de Oostenrijkse werkomgeving?
2. Wat vond je het moeilijkste in de omgang met een Oostenrijkse manager/medewerker (had je problemen/conflicten)? Kun je een voorbeeld geven? Hoe heb je dit probleem opgelost?
3. Heeft u werkervaring in Nederland? (indien ja) Heeft u verschillen ervaren in de Oostenrijkse leiderschapsstijl ten opzichte van Nederland? Zijn er veel verschillen in het functioneren van managers hier en in Nederland? Heb je een voorbeeld dat dit kan illustreren?
4. Bent u wel eens verrast door het gedrag van Oostenrijkse collega's?

5. Heeft u ooit een meningsverschil/conflict gehad met uw Oostenrijkse collega's?

6. Heeft u ooit andere problemen gehad met Oostenrijkse collega's?

(Als hij/zij een concreet voorbeeld geeft van iets dat op de werkvloer speelt, namelijk een kritiek incident) > Vragen 4/5/6

1. Hoe is dit gebeurd? (gedetailleerde beschrijving van de omstandigheden)
 2. Vond je het leuk of niet? Waarom?
 3. Hoe heb je gereageerd?
 4. Hoe is het afgelopen?
 5. Waarom denk je dat de Nederlandse collega zich zo gedroeg?
 6. Heb je nog meer vergelijkbare voorbeelden?
 7. In hoeverre kunt u zeggen dat u afhankelijk bent van anderen binnen het bedrijf? Zijn leidinggevers bereikbaar? Machtsafstand
 8. Hoe belangrijk is hiërarchie in het bedrijf waar u werkt? Machtsafstand
 9. Zou u de organisatie waar u voor werkt omschrijven met een hiërarchie of een platte organisatiestructuur? Machtsafstand
 10. In hoeverre is macht belangrijk voor Oostenrijkers? Machtsafstand
 11. Hoe zou u de communicatie binnen het bedrijf omschrijven? In termen van directe communicatie of participatieve communicatie? Machtsafstand
 12. Worden bij het nemen van belangrijke beslissingen alle meningen in overweging genomen of alleen die van de leiders? Worden medewerkers betrokken bij het proces? Machtsafstand
 13. Hoe zou u uw leidinggevende omschrijven? Coachend of regie in handen nemend? Machtsafstand
 14. Hoe belangrijk zijn gelijke rechten binnen het bedrijf waar je werkt, qua rang, salaris, besluitvorming > kun je daar een voorbeeld van geven? Machtsafstand
 15. Een fundamenteel vraagstuk hierbij is wat mensen op de werkvloer motiveert. Wilt u de beste zijn of vind u het leuk wat u doet? Hoe zit het met de Oostenrijkers? Mannelijkheid
 16. Volgens onderzoek zijn Oostenrijkers erg individualistisch. Merk je dat op de werkvloer en in het dagelijks leven? Kunt u een voorbeeld geven? Individualistisch
 17. Hoe zou u uw relatie met uw leidinggevende omschrijven? & Uw collega's in het algemeen? Oostenrijks kenmerk
 18. Zijn overleg en groepsbeslissingen gebruikelijk onder Oostenrijkse managers? kun je hier een voorbeeld van geven? Empirische bevindingen
- Afsluitende vraag
19. Is er iets dat ik niet heb genoemd, maar dat u wel zou willen toevoegen of bespreken in termen van de verschillen tussen Oostenrijkers en Nederlanders?