

Master Thesis Research

Cultural differences experienced by Dutch employees working in Belgium

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Abstract

In a world that becomes smaller day by day, due to the internet, social media, and dozens of chat and video applications, encountering people from different cultures has become more of a standard than an exception. Since the Schengen treaty was signed, European cross-cultural collaborations have become more present than ever. However, these cross-cultural interactions could lead to behaviour that is misunderstood, or to problems and misinterpretations in communication.

Therefore, this research zooms in on Belgian culture, identifying so-called cultural standards, or typical Belgian behaviour, seen from the perspective of the Dutch. This research provides the reader with a thick description of the cross-cultural incidents between the Dutch and the Belgians, predominantly on the work floor, and a thick description of why Belgians behave in a certain way. The following research question has been developed: *In what situations do the Dutch and the Belgians experience problems/frictions in communication and collaboration on the work floor?*

This study made use of an inductive qualitative research method, based on conducting sixteen semi-structured interviews, with Dutch participants who had at least six months of work experience in Belgium. Participants were questioned about cultural clashes they had experienced between the Dutch and the Belgians. These cultural clashes are also known as critical incidents, and they have been collected, coded, and the results have been analysed using the Thematic Analysis Method.

To conclude, twelve cultural standards have been identified and by conducting a thorough analysis of these cultural standards, three underlying values have been found. The underlying values are: Authority, Friends & Family, and Cunning. These underlying values explain why Belgians behave in a certain way. Each underlying value is supported by typical Belgian terms or sayings, extracted from the literature regarding Belgian culture. The findings in this research could help to get a greater understanding of Dutch-Belgian cultural differences. This study could also help (future) Dutch ex-pats or Dutch people who do business with Belgians, to recognize cultural differences and to understand why Belgians behave in a certain way, thus decreasing the risk of cultural misunderstandings, and decreasing the risk of cultural friction.

Keywords: Belgian cultural standards, Belgian culture, Belgian values, Dutch cultural standards, Dutch underlying values

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1 Research goal and research questions.....	7
1.2 Academic relevance	8
1.3 Practical Relevance	8
2. Theoretical Framework	10
2.1 Defining Culture, Cultural Values and Cultural Standards	10
2.2 Different Approaches to Researching Cultural Differences	10
2.2.1 ETIC Approach	11
2.2.2 Emic Approach	15
2.3 Belgian Cultural Values.....	16
2.4 Dutch Cultural Values	20
3. Methodology.....	25
3.1 Research Design.....	25
3.2 Data Collection.....	25
3.3 Research Instrument	26
3.4 Data Analysis.....	28
3.5 Feedback from the Expert	30
4. Results	31
4.1 Belgian Cultural Standards	31
4.2 Underlying values	48
4.3 Expert Feedback regarding the Results.....	55
5. Discussion and Conclusion.....	57
5.1 Belgian Cultural Standards as Perceived by the Dutch	57
5.2 Academic Relevance	58
5.3 Practical Relevance	61
5.4 Limitations and Future Research	61
5.5 Conclusion	63
6. References.....	64

1. Introduction

With the removal of national borders of European countries due to the signing of the Schengen agreement in 1985, trade barriers and controls of the internal borders got lifted and uniform standards were introduced, thus creating a big common European market (Schengenvisainfo, 2022). However, even though the European Union could be considered a big economic block, it has a disadvantage compared to alternative great economic blocks, such as China and the USA, namely linguistic and cultural differences between the countries of the European Union. Therefore, researching cultural differences within the European Union could be valuable, because it could help to enhance business relations between constituent nations and thus possibly boost collaboration and trade within the EU.

Both The Netherlands and Belgium are part of the European Union and they have long-standing business relations. Belgium is the second most important trade partner of The Netherlands. According to the official website of the Dutch government, 44 billion euros worth of goods has been exported to Belgium and 37 billion euros worth of goods has been imported from Belgium in 2015 (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2017). Besides a significant amount of goods travelling between countries, a substantial of employees/ex-pats cross the border between Belgium and The Netherlands. According to a study by Vanderbiesen et al. (2017), 38.000 employees from Belgium worked in The Netherlands in 2014 and 10.000 employees from The Netherlands worked across the border, in Belgium, in 2014.

However, collaboration between sites of production, business associates, or colleagues does not always go smoothly, perhaps due to cultural differences, which could have an impact on productivity and profitability or communication between associates. Dutch and Belgians have a lot in common culturally, but there are a number of points where they differ, and this study aims at mapping these differences. A more detailed description of the studies below and a short overview of the results of the conducted studies can be found in the Theoretical Framework.

Some studies on the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians use quantitative models. For instance, the study by Gerritsen (2002) uses the Hofstede model to describe the cultural differences between The Netherlands and Belgium and his study reports a higher

score in some dimensions for the Belgians. In another study, the same author researched the differences in culture between the Dutch and the Belgians, with a specific focus on the differences between the Dutch and the Flemish, using a combination of different models (Gerritsen, 2014). The author states that the Dutch do not truly understand the Belgians. The author attributes this lack of understanding to the cultural differences that exist between the Dutch and the Belgians, e.g., differences in power distance, masculinity, and particularism. In another quantitative study, Jansen-Verbeke (1996) explored two international hotel companies (Hilton International and Holiday Inn) in The Netherlands and Belgium to figure out whether the two nations could be considered one cultural area. The study by Jansen-Verbeke (1996) researched the day-to-day practices of hotel managers. The study showed minimal differences in practices, and the differences that were present could be attributed to organisational culture instead of national culture. The study also reported minimal differences in masculinity, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance between The Netherlands and Belgium. The above-mentioned quantitative studies predominantly describe the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians using the Hofstede model, or a combination of this model, but barely provide experiences from people on the work floor, which could show how these cultural differences affected the Dutch in communication and collaboration with the Belgians. The study by Jansen-Verbeke (1996) only researched the managers of these hotels and did not map experiences regarding cultural differences between Dutch employees and Belgium employees on the work floor, and how these differences caused friction and impacted communication and collaboration. Both quantitative studies also not explained why Belgians behave in a specific way and what the reasoning behind their behaviour is.

Besides quantitative studies, a couple of qualitative studies, which researched the Belgian culture, have also been conducted. The qualitative study by Wouters (2005) could be regarded as anecdotal, because of the use of personal experiences and observations of the author. This study stated that Belgians have a different way of communicating than the Dutch, and this could sometimes lead to misunderstandings. The study by Enklaar (2007) is a qualitative study and his research describes the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians from the perspective of a Belgian author, and he uses Dutch values to show how both cultures differ. However, the study by Enklaar (2007) does not provide specific Belgian cultural

standards and the qualitative study by Wouters (2005) does not provide the reader with a detailed explanation or thick description of why Belgians behave in a specific way and what the motivations for Belgians behaviour are. In other words, it is not always clear why Belgians behave in a specific manner in a specific situation.

Therefore, this research intends to study and describe concrete situations in which the Dutch and the Belgians faced problems in collaborating and communicating on the work floor due to these cultural differences, and this study intends to give a detailed explanation of why Belgians behave the way they behave. This study will follow the methodology of Thomas et al. (2010), which is a methodology that helps the researcher to identify how these cultural differences led to critical incidents, and what cultural standards could be attached to these incidents. Following the methodology of Geertz (1973) a thick description is made to identify the cultural reasons behind these incidents and why Belgians behave the way they behave. Both methodologies should help to make it possible to get a much more detailed insight into Belgian culture, as seen from a Dutch perspective, compared to previously mentioned studies. To conclude, cultural standards are deduced from the critical incidents, which are caused by cultural differences and the reasoning behind Belgian behaviour is called underlying values. The insights of this study could help to fill in the research gap and could provide managers and Dutch ex-pats with the necessary information to bridge the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians.

1.1 Research goal and research questions

The goal of this research is to uncover in what situations the Dutch and the Belgians experience problems in communication and collaboration and to uncover what the cultural reasons are for these frictions. Furthermore, this research strives to describe how the Dutch and the Belgian side cope with these cultural differences. The results of this research should present the reader with a thick description of Belgian culture and a detailed explanation of why Belgians behave in a specific way. This should help the reader with understanding Belgian behaviour, which could improve the communication and collaboration between the Dutch and the Belgians. This led to the creation of the following research question: *In what situations do the Dutch and the Belgians experience problems/frictions in communication and collaboration on the work floor?*

After designing the main research question, the following sub-questions have been created:

RQ1. What are the Belgian cultural standards from a Dutch perspective?

RQ2. What is the cultural logic behind the Belgian cultural standards?

RQ3. *How do the Dutch cope when faced with cultural differences?*

1.2 Academic relevance

This research is part of a bigger project called 'One market, many cultures'. This bigger project identifies, describes, and analyses the cultural differences in Europe in an interpretative and qualitative manner and the methodology of Thomas et al. (2010) was used in this specific research to provide the reader with clear instructions on how to act in everyday situations. This research also contributes to the already existing literature about the differences in cultures within Europe and how these differences create friction. More specifically this study helps identify the cultural differences that exist between the Dutch and the Belgians, and this study helps in finding out why Belgians behave in a specific way. The cultural differences between the Belgians and the Dutch have been studied a few times, such as the study by Gerritsen (2002) and the study by Wouters (2005). However, these studies are predominantly quantitative or anecdotal and do not provide practical work floor examples or explanations of why Belgians behave in a certain way. This research builds further on previous studies by studying literature regarding Belgian culture and by conducting interviews with Dutch workers in Belgium, to get a better understanding of typical Belgian behaviour and how this affects communication and collaboration between the Dutch and the Belgians.

1.3 Practical Relevance

The relationship between the Dutch and the Belgians could be considered a relationship with ups and downs. Both nations have been at war with each other, formed one single nation in 1815, and eventually split up after the Belgian revolution in 1830 (Historiek, 2022). This war indicates that connections and relations between the Dutch and the Belgians were not always optimal. Nowadays there are numerous business connections between the Dutch and the Belgians and the relationship between these two nations could be considered healthy (Stein-Heddam, 2022). Dutch businessmen, managers, and ex-pats who are working regularly with colleagues in Belgium can profit from the knowledge this research generates regarding cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians. At first sight, the differences

between the Dutch and the Belgian mindset, especially between the Dutch and the Dutch-speaking Belgians might not be apparent. However, spending a longer amount of time in a foreign country, in this case, Belgium might magnify the cultural differences that were not apparent in the beginning. This research might support Dutch employees or Dutch managers in Belgium to optimize collaboration between the Dutch and their Belgian counterparts, which in turn could improve productivity. Furthermore, this research could help Dutch ex-pats to feel more at ease or more at home when interacting with people in Belgium because the results of this research might help ex-pats to better understand how Belgians think. Businessmen who are interested in trading with Belgium might be able to build a relationship more easily with partners from Belgium and avoid cultural pitfalls using the insights from this study. A culture assimilator might be constructed with the help of the critical incidents, or cases mentioned by the interviewees. This assimilator could be used as a tool for the Dutch who work or want to work in Belgium.

2. Theoretical Framework

The first section is devoted to defining culture, cultural value, and cultural standards. Secondly, a short overview is given of two classic approaches to researching cultural differences, including a more detailed description of their studies. Thirdly, an overview is provided of Belgian cultural values, which have been acquired from different types of literature. To conclude, an overview of the Dutch cultural values could be found in the last section of this chapter.

2.1 Defining Culture, Cultural Values and Cultural Standards

Enklaar (2007) provides the following definition of culture: A culture is defined as a system of values, values that adhere to a person or a group of people. Cultural values in certain cultures are accepted by society, and the opposite of these values are unwanted. Values that are accepted in a certain culture do not need to be defended or do not need an explanation. Thomas et al. (2010) defined culture as an 'orientation system', which gives structure and sense to men's environment. This sensemaking structure takes shape in a number of 'cultural standards' that are behaviours that are considered to be normal, and typical for a specific country. According to Thomas et al. (2010), cultural standards could be defined by looking at the five different indicators below:

1. Cultural standards are forms of judgement, thought patterns, perceptions, and interaction that are shared by a big slice of a group of members of a specific culture, who believe their behaviour is normal.
2. Unknown behaviour is regulated, changed, and judged on the basis of a particular standard.
3. A regulatory function could be provided by cultural standards and could help with dealing with people in a specific situation.
4. A group and individual-specific way of applying cultural standards to change behaviour could fluctuate within a tolerance range.
5. Types of behaviour that exceed the range of tolerance will not be accepted or will be sanctioned by the respective collective (Thomas et al., 2010).

2.2 Different Approaches to Researching Cultural Differences

The following chapter discusses two traditional research approaches to studying cultures, namely the ETIC and the EMIC approach. This section discusses what these approaches are

and which studies regarding Dutch-Belgian culture have used the ETIC or EMIC approach. Lastly, a conclusion regarding the approaches and their studies is also provided.

2.2.1 ETIC Approach

The ETIC approach to cultural differences is the first approach which is discussed. According to Helfrich (1999), ETIC refers to the type of study that researches cross-cultural differences. An ETIC approach is an approach that tries to find common phenomena across different cultures in order to create a range of universal phenomena across these different cultures. The model of Hofstede (2011) is an example of an ETIC approach to map cultural differences by analysing these cultures by looking at six dimensions of culture, namely power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. The following section discusses the studies which have used an ETIC approach to study culture.

Whereas the section above named six dimensions of Hofstede, the study of Gerritsen (2002) only studied four dimensions because his study used older literature. Gerritsen (2002) used the following four dimensions, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and individualism (Hofstede, 1984), to show which cultural differences exist between the Dutch and the Belgians. His study confirmed the higher score in power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance for the Belgians, by sending questionnaires to Belgians and the Dutch and by using other literature to check whether the findings of Hofstede (1984) are still valid. Table 1 shows the four dimensions Gerritsen (2002) used to check whether the results of Hofstede (1984) were still valid.

Table 1

Scores Cultural Dimensions of the Netherlands and Flanders according to Hofstede (1984)

Dimension	The Netherlands	Flanders	Difference between the Netherlands and Flanders
Power Distance	38	61	+23
Uncertainty Avoidance	53	97	+44
Masculinity	14	43	+29
Individualism	80	78	-2

The study of Jansen-Verbeke (1996) focused on questioning hotel managers in two big hotel chains, in The Netherlands and Belgium, in order to be able to fill in the scores for the four

dimensions of Hofstede (1984). These managers were questioned about their hotel practices to discover how much of the differences in hotel practices are a result of differences in culture. As depicted in table 2, very few differences in value scores between the different dimensions could be noted. According to this research, the Dutch and the Belgians score almost identical on individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. According to Jansen-Verbeke (1996), the differences in hotel management practices between Dutch and Belgian hotel managers are very small. The analysis of the research also shows very few differences in the practices of hotel managers in The Netherlands and Belgium. Organizational culture seems to influence procedures and practices, e.g. all Hilton managers use a very formal way of providing feedback, thus overruling the Dutch national culture which generally scores very low on power distance, and which is more informal than formal.

Table 2

Scores Cultural Dimensions according to Jansen-Verbeke (1996)

Index	Belgium	The Netherlands
Individualism-Collectivism	40.27	42.2
Power Distance	13.06	13.66
Uncertainty Avoidance	26.23	26.03
Masculinity-Femininity		
Male	548.94	564.74
Macho-ism	11.46	9.96

The study of Gerritsen (2014) used a combination of several different models to compare the cultures of the Dutch and the Flemish. The author builds this study on his previous study in 2002, by looking at six basic values, of which four basic values can be divided into sixteen sub-values, instead of just looking at the dimensions of Hofstede (1984), as Gerritsen did in 2002 (Claes & Gerritsen, 2013, as cited in Gerritsen, 2014). The author uses the Hofstede model, the Trompenaars model, the Schwartz model, and the Hall model. The author uses this combined model to identify differences between the Dutch culture, Flemish culture, and European cultures. An overview of the values, which are a result of combining these four different models, could be found in figure 1. Among other differences, Gerritsen (2014) shows a difference in the value 'nature of the human being', where the Dutch believe more than the Flemish that people are capable of changing. Furthermore, the Flemish score higher in power distance, particularism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance, and have a higher polychronic score. The higher polychronic score means that the Flemish are generally more flexible and

better at multitasking than their Dutch counterparts. The Flemish also have a higher score in particularism, which means that they interpret rules and laws more loosely than the Dutch.

Figure 1

Cultural values used by Gerritsen (2014) to identify differences in culture

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1. What is the nature of a human being?</p> <p>2. What is the relationship between human to human?</p> <p>a. Collectivism versus individualism *</p> <p>b. Power distance</p> <p>c. Particularism versus universalism</p> <p>d. Neutral versus emotional</p> <p>e. Performance versus attribution *</p> <p>3. What is the driving force behind human action?</p> <p>a. Femininity versus masculinity</p> <p>b. Uncertainty avoidance</p> <p>c. Enjoying as much as possible is allowed vs. limited enjoyment *</p> | <p>4. What is a human's view of the space around him/her?</p> <p>a. Personal space</p> <p>b. Private territory</p> <p>c. Specific versus diffuse</p> <p>5. Which time orientation do humans have?</p> <p>a. Polychrony and monochrony</p> <p>b. Past, present, future</p> <p>c. Forward planning *</p> <p>6. What is a human's relationship to nature and the supernatural? *</p> |
|--|--|

The studies above either use the four-dimension model of Hofstede, a combination of the Hofstede model with other models, or a Hofstede model which only looked at the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Flemish. Therefore, the newer six-dimension model of Hofstede is added to this section to check the current cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians. As table 3 shows, the score for power distance is higher in Belgium than in the Netherlands, which indicates that less powerful members of Belgian society have a higher acceptance of unequally distributed power than the Dutch. Furthermore, a difference in masculinity scores could also be seen in table 3. Belgium has a higher score for masculinity, while the Netherlands have a lower score for masculinity, indicating that the Netherlands has a more feminine culture. A high score for masculinity indicates that society is driven by achievements, toughness, and material rewards for success. A higher score for uncertainty avoidance for Belgium could also be seen in table 3. A higher score for this dimension indicates that people in Belgian society are less capable of coping with anxiety, and therefore, they will often try to make life controllable and predictable (Hofstede Insights, 2022). Furthermore,

table 3 also shows less significant differences in scores for the indulgence and individualism dimensions.

Table 3

Six dimensions of Hofstede (2022)

Dimension	Belgium	The Netherlands
Power Distance	65	38
Individualism	75	80
Masculinity	54	14
Uncertainty Avoidance	94	53
Long Term Orientation	82	67
Indulgence	57	68

2.2.1.1 Conclusion Etic Approach and its Studies

The studies mentioned above use an ETIC approach to research culture. These studies have made a great effort to contribute to the literature regarding cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians. However, these studies do have a couple of limitations. The study of Gerritsen (2002) does not provide practical examples of the cultural differences that exist, and his study does not provide an explanation of Belgian behaviour. Furthermore, it must also be noted that Gerritsen (2002) only researched the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Flemish. The study of Jansen-Verbeke (1996) has the limitation that this study only studied hotel managers of two hotel chains in the Netherlands and Belgium to fill in the scores for the Hofstede dimensions, and thus organisational culture, instead of national culture, could have had a big influence on the results of this study. Lastly, the study of Gerritsen (2014) has the same limitation as Gerritsen (2002), namely the fact that they do not include research in all Belgian regions, because research only focused on the cultural differences between The Netherlands and Flanders. However, Belgium consists of multiple regions, namely Flanders, Wallonia, the Brussels-Capital Region, and the German-speaking part (Belgium, 2022).

Although the models that are used in these studies, which follow an ETIC approach, are useful to quickly check the differences in culture between different nations, they do not provide concrete clues on why people behave in a specific way. When studies follow an ETIC approach, they do not look at how work identities or perceptions are formed or how these things change (Lauring, 2008). The models used in an ETIC approach are too abstract, produce the most cultural generalisations and are not precise enough for practical use. However, these models do give a researcher the possibility to relatively quickly check what a culture roughly looks like.

2.2.2 Emic Approach

To bypass the limitations the ETIC approach has, researchers could choose to use the EMIC approach to study culture. An EMIC approach is an approach that refers to a type of research that has no cross-cultural focus and is fully focused on studying one culture or two cultures (Fetvadjev & van de Vijver, 2015). The EMIC approach is focused on studying behaviour in cultures. Furthermore, according to Helfrich (1999), human behaviour cannot be seen as independent of its cultural context and this behaviour needs to be understood through the eyes of the people that are researched. Two studies which use an EMIC approach to research culture can be found below, including a more detailed description of their findings.

The qualitative study of Enklaar (2007) described how the Dutch and the Belgians differ culturally and how these differences are perceived from a Belgian perspective. The author states that the value of 'agreement' is different because the Dutch appreciate agreement. The Dutch like to prevent conflict and usually try to reach a compromise. The Belgians score lower on self-determination because they believe that parents, teachers, directors, and the government have the authority, contrary to the Dutch who believe authority lies in the hands of the child, the student, and the employee. The author does mention the differences in agreement, self-determination, etiquette, directness, etc.

The qualitative article by Wouters (2005) could be regarded as anecdotal, because it describes the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians, by using the personal experiences of the writer. According to the personal perspective of Wouters (2005), communication between the Dutch and the Belgians might not always be optimal, due to the differences in vocabulary. This could cause confusion in communication between the Dutch and the Belgians.

2.2.2.1 Conclusion EMIC Approaches and its Studies

Both the study by Wouters (2005) and the study by Enklaar (2007) use an EMIC approach to research culture. Both studies have made great additions to the literature regarding Belgian culture. However, both studies have their limitations. The study by Wouters (2005) only provides the reader with his experiences regarding Belgian culture. Furthermore, the study of Wouters (2005) does not provide further explanation of Belgian behaviour, nor does this study explain why Belgians behave the way they behave. The study by Enklaar (2007) provides

examples of how the Dutch and the Belgians differ, but this study does not identify specific Belgian cultural standards.

The studies mentioned above are not rigorous enough to fully understand Belgian culture and Belgian behaviour. To get a detailed description of Belgian culture and to identify why the Belgian culture clashes with the Dutch culture, an EMIC approach in combination with the methodology of Thomas et al. (2010) is needed. The Critical Incident Technique by Thomas et al. (2010) helps with identifying how cultural differences lead to incidents, and this technique helps with identifying cultural standards, which are deduced from these incidents. Furthermore, using the methodology of Geertz (1973) it is possible to create a thick description of Belgian behaviour and this should help to identify why Belgians behave in a specific way in specific situations.

2.3 Belgian Cultural Values

This section will focus on mapping Belgian cultural values. Since no scientific study could be found about Belgian culture, with the exception of the studies that mention Hofstede, this section is made up of different cultural values, extracted from internet articles and books. After introducing each value, a description of the value is provided, thus making the value more concrete.

Authority

The study by Harremeijer (2010), researched cultural differences between Dutch employees and Belgian employees at a medical organisation. According to an interviewee of this research, Belgian employees communicate with their bosses more formally, using words such as 'u'. In Belgium, it is normal for subordinates to listen to the orders that are given from above. A Belgian manager tells his employees what they have to do, and the employees follow his commands. A popular saying in Belgium is: Le patron c'est le patron. This translates into: The boss is the boss. According to a different article, Belgians consider their manager to be their boss. In Belgium, it is considered to be normal that someone with a higher hierarchical position has more privileges, compared to their subordinates. Titles in Belgium also carry a lot of weight. Titles such as professor or manager mean a lot in Belgium, and communicating with people in a higher position may only occur in a formal manner. Using words such as 'Je, jij, gij',

is out of the question, unless the Belgian person states that it is fine to say 'jij', instead of 'u' (Nkvk, 2022).

Flexible

An interviewee in the study of Harremijer (2010), describes the flexibility of Belgians, with regard to following the rules. According to this interviewee, it is normal in Belgium not to completely obey the rules. They often try to work their way around it and try to bend the rules to their liking or modify the rules so it fits their way of working. In Belgium, this is also known as 'Plantrekkerij' (Vlaamswaardenboek, 2021). Foefelen is another well-known term in Belgium and it is a synonym for tampering or fraud. Foefelen is considered to be a national sport, and it is a synonym for cheating or committing fraud. Belgians often pay most of their bills with 'dirty money', and they do not pass on all of their income to the tax authorities. Belgians 'foefel' because they distrust their government. Belgians often ignore procedures and rarely have all the correct permits to renovate their homes. Belgians consider most rules to be complete nonsense and are rarely reprimanded by the government for working around the rules. Furthermore, Belgians will also not reprimand each other for breaking the rules. Often, when new taxes or legislations are announced, Belgians will try their best to find loopholes (Vanacker & Puymbroeck, 2020). An interviewee, in the study of Harremijer (2010), provides an example of working around rules or procedures: A template had been made, which had been sent to Belgian managers. Instead of using this template, the managers systematically refused to work with this template and tried to modify it. The article of Gerritsen (2014), confirms the idea of Belgians trying to work their way around rules. Belgians have a more flexible way of interpreting rules and regulations, compared to surrounding countries. An example of this is: A Belgian detainee, who was detained in the Netherlands, because the Belgian prison system was overcrowded, complained about the fact that everything in the Netherlands has to go by the book. No exceptions are made, not even for special circumstances. A different example is: A person who got into an accident because that person was drunk driving. The Belgian police officer did not issue a ticket, because nobody got hurt. Instead, the police officer made the person who got into the accident promise that it would never happen again (Nieuwsblad, 2005).

Privacy

According to the study of Gerritsen (2014), the physical private territory and the psychological private territory are quite big. The Belgians consider their house as a private area. Belgians cover up these private areas with shades and curtains. This is especially noticeable in the evening when walking down a Belgian street, most windows are covered with blinding film, to prevent people from luring into their private area. In the countryside, Belgians often build big walls or plant thick hedges so they can roam around in peace, without getting disturbed by peeping Toms (Vanacker & Puymbroeck, 2020). Furthermore, inviting people over, with whom they do not have a close relationship, rarely happens. A Dutch person living in Belgium stated that he found it very weird that people can be very friendly towards each other, but getting invited over into a Belgian private area for a drink, does not happen (Gerritsen, 2014). According to Vanacker and Puymbroeck (2020), Belgians are more likely to invite people, whom they do not have a close relationship with, over for a drink at a bar or a restaurant. According to a different article, to protect and respect the privacy of employees in Belgium, a new law has been passed. Work and private life have to be completely separated, therefore, according to this new law, employers are not allowed to email employees about work, outside of working hours (Lustgraaf, 2022).

Closed/Group culture

Belgian behaviour, towards people they do not have a close relationship with, could be considered closed, and conversations with strangers are usually restricted to small talk. When a Belgian does not want to answer a question or discuss a certain topic, their response is usually: Busy, busy, busy (Vanacker & Puymbroeck, 2020). The first couple of years could be very difficult for outsiders when they come to Belgium. Belgians are considered to be very closed and they do not like to open up to strangers. Belgians do not even greet each other when walking down the street. However, after a Belgian starts to trust an outsider and starts to 'unfreeze', that outsider will become an insider (Nieuwsblad, 2005). This closed behaviour of the Belgians is also mentioned in another article, which states that Belgians are more closed and more difficult to make friendships with. Most Belgian friendships are made a long time ago and new friendships are usually made with the help of other people they trust (EenVandaag, 2018). A lot of Belgians are members of youth movements, such as the scouts. Many of these Belgians are active in these movements for a long time. Belgians are very

attached to friends, which they have met in their younger years, usually in these movements. Many of these friends become long-life friends and socialise with each other in these groups. It is easier for Belgians to behave more openly and freely when they are around friends they have known for a long time. Belgians become very loyal after they fully trust a person, but for outsiders, it will take time before the group can be penetrated (Vanacker & Puymbroeck, 2020).

Burgundian

Belgians are considered to be epicureans or people who try to enjoy life as much as possible through eating and drinking. This Burgundian value translates into Belgians spending a lot of their money on eating and drinking in restaurants. Oftentimes, Belgians can be found eating sushi and drinking champagne in local markets and serving beer in plastic is considered to be a no go in Belgium (België voor beginners, 2019). Another article states that lavish lunch breaks are part of the Belgian culture because business relations are forged during these lunches. Belgians use these lunches as a way to win someone's trust and build relationships (Munck, 2021). According to Vanacker and Puymbroeck (2020), Belgians truly enjoy life and going out for a lavish dinner is part of that life. Food is one of the favourite talking points of Belgians and they could spend hours discussing their favourite dishes. Belgians do not mind if food costs a lot, but they will not shy away from affordable restaurants. Both the Dutch-speaking Belgians and the French-speaking Belgians live to eat and share a delight in food. This is especially noticeable when visiting Brussels, home to over 3000 restaurants (Mason, 2009). Belgians will also not shy away from drinking alcohol during the day, or on their commute to work. However, drinking is mostly focused around eating according to Mason (2009). French-speaking Belgians will even take their time eating and drinking before they go to work (Mason, 2009).

Church tower mentality

Most Belgian people can often be found in or around the municipality they grew up in. Belgians often only visit other cities or villages to meet with friends or show the area to visitors who came from abroad. A lot of times, Belgians only know the area they live in, and rarely know their way around in neighbouring cities. Belgians are prouder of the municipality, village, or neighbourhood they grew up in than of their country. Every Belgian region has its

reputation and its dialect. Many Belgians are convinced that every city or region has its own unique culture. According to Belgian stereotypes, West-Flemish people are considered to be hard-working and people from Antwerp are considered to be arrogant (Vanacker & Puymbroeck, 2020). This church tower mentality is also visible when looking at Belgian students. Belgian students who study abroad or do not live at home, return to their parental home as often as possible because that is where they have their social life. Belgian students do not bring their social life with them to another city but instead come back to their parental home to socialise with their youth movement friends (VRT, 2020).

Indirect communication

Saying 'Ja' or 'Oui' in Belgium does not always mean yes. Belgians have a rather indirect way of communicating and they often mean the opposite of what they say. Belgians could respond to a question with yes, but act as if they have said no. Rejecting proposals is a rare occasion and Belgians would rather say something like: I will think about it. Or Belgians would say yes, but in a hesitant manner, which often means: Maybe. In Belgium 'maybe' often means no. However, the French-speaking Belgians use 'No maybe', as definitely. Belgians will also not say in a direct manner if they are angry or upset, and Belgians will rather walk away frustrated. Belgians are also likely to give criticism or feedback to other people because they are afraid that it could be considered rude or inappropriate. Asking something in public after a presentation, or in a meeting rarely happens. Belgians would rather discuss things afterwards (Vanacker & Puymbroeck, 2020). An overview of how the Dutch expect people to behave in certain situations, and what values are important in Dutch culture can be found in the next section.

2.4 Dutch Cultural Values

This section will focus on mapping Dutch cultural values. These Dutch cultural values have been taken from a qualitative study by Enklaar (2017), and his study looks at what values and behaviour could be considered typically Dutch. However, the last three values, Salvation, Charity, and Truth, are values that are shared in other Christian nations as well, but are very dominant in Protestant countries, such as the Netherlands. Therefore, the last three values are also discussed in this section. After introducing each value, a definition of the value is

provided, followed by an example of certain behaviour that belongs to this value, in order to make the value more concrete.

Utility (Nut)

‘Everything a person does should have merit and should not be just for pleasure’. Dutch people find happiness by getting good deals or shopping at low-budget supermarkets. Things should not cost too much and getting the most out of your budget is rational behaviour in the Netherlands. An example is the ‘Drie dolle dwaze dagen’, an event organised by ‘The Bijenkorf’, a famous Dutch store. This event is packed with good deals and a lot of Dutch people go to this event because you can get a lot of products for a ‘low’ amount of money, thus seeking maximum usefulness. Furthermore, when a Dutch person earns a lot of money, it is considered to be a waste to spend this money on things that do not pursue usefulness. People that do spend money on things that are just for fun are considered to be irresponsible. The Dutch also look at how they can benefit from something and whether there is a more efficient way of working towards a goal (Enklaar, 2017).

Equality (Gelijkheid)

‘You should not assume that you are better than anyone else’. In the Netherlands, people need to justify the fact that they live in a big house or a posh neighbourhood. Earning a lot of money and spending a lot of money is not considered to be something ‘Good’. The Dutch see differences in wealth as something unjust. This stance on value distribution is related to the value of equality. An example of the equality value: The mayor of Rotterdam had to resign after it was discovered that he used expense claims for his profit. When people in office think they stand above the law and the common folk, they will anger the populace, because they attack the value of equality (Enklaar, 2017).

Order and cleanliness (Orde en netheid)

‘You must have your own business sorted out’. The Dutch value rules and order, and the example of the resigned mayor of Rotterdam also indicates this. Handling expense claims in the wrong way, or in a way that is against the rules, instigates anger. Exceptions for following these rules should not be made for anyone. The Dutch often use public and formal rules, such as tolerance rules (Enklaar, 2017).

Self-determination (Zelfbeschikking)

‘Everyone should know themselves what they want to do, as long as it does not negatively impact me’. The Dutch have a direct way of communicating and posit their statements as facts. An average Dutch person announces their opinion when they want to, and they always have an opinion on a lot of subjects. Having different opinions is considered to be normal and is deeply rooted in Dutch society. For example, it is possible in the Netherlands to not vaccinate your kids or keep the shops closed on a Sunday because it is considered to be a resting day (Enklaar, 2017).

Agreement (Overeenstemming)

‘You must reach a compromise together’. The Dutch lean towards finding general agreement and would rather avoid discussions about fundamental differences. The Dutch detest conflicts and problems need to be resolved right away because problems or arguments are not productive. Everyone needs to compromise to find the middle ground. This is especially noticeable when looking at how the Dutch parliament operates. It is allowed to disagree on topics but it is important to stay polite (Enklaar, 2017).

Trustworthiness (Betrouwbaarheid)

‘You must keep your promises’. There is mutual trust among the Dutch because they have created an orderly, safe, and risk-free society, where keeping promises are very important. Promises need to be kept by all organisations or entities in Dutch society, such as the government (Enklaar, 2017).

Moderation (Matigheid)

‘You must contain yourself’. The Dutch believe that everything should be done in moderation, otherwise it could create problems. Be patient and have control over yourself. Uncontrolled behaviour is considered to be immature (Enklaar, 2017).

Guilt

‘You must take responsibility for your actions’. Everyone is responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions. Walking away from responsibility or walking away from mistakes that were made under someone’s responsibility is not the right way, but

acknowledging the mistakes that were made is the correct way. This is the only way that peace could be made and someone could be trusted again. The Dutch want to know exactly what went wrong and who is responsible. It has happened that politicians resign after an incident in their department, even if they are personally not guilty of what happened, but they could take responsibility (Enklaar, 2017).

Labour

‘Working is good’. While working is considered to be good, doing nothing is considered to be not good. Working hard and making sure the work that has been done is up to par, is also considered to be important. The Dutch derive their self-esteem from their satisfaction with work. Work is a medium to show what the Dutch can do and is the source of status and pride. If personal goals are not being met, it could lead to extra stress (Enklaar, 2017).

Salvation

‘If we keep making the right choices, the future will smile upon us’. The Dutch believe that everything could be improved and all problems could be solved, either in the short term or in the long term. The issues could be solved by scientific discoveries, better education, new laws, more money and new plans. In short, by believing in the fact that everything in the world could be fixed, if people believe in progress. Standing still is considered to be the opposite of making progress. An example: Convincing a Dutch person to accept your view on a specific topic, is barely possible if arguments are used like: ‘We have always done it that way, or it is a tradition’. It is easier to convince a Dutch person by using arguments like: My view on a specific topic is something new, while yours is old and conservative (Enklaar, 2017).

Charity

‘If you do not wish anything bad to happen upon you, do not wish it upon other people’. The Dutch believe that helping the weak, the people in need, and each other is important. People that need support ought to be supported. This way of thinking translates into behaviour like, sharing things and showing compassion. Being called egocentric is one of the most insulting things someone could say. Thinking about someone else’s needs and feelings is normal for a Dutch person. This value translates into avoiding behaviour from the Dutch. The Dutch will try to evade situations that could harm other people because they wouldn’t like to be in such a position. On the work floor, in political negotiations, or meetings, the Dutch expect others

to empathise with the problem at hand and to work hard to solve a problem together. Both parties have to give in a little bit, in order to reach a middle ground. Not being willing to give in, is considered to be unreasonable (Enklaar, 2017).

Truth

'You must always speak the truth, even if it hurts'. The Dutch believe it is better to be open and honest than to keep something to yourself and possibly be caught lying. Honesty is better than stirring around the pot and avoiding painful situations. This value translates into behaviour like, having a very open and direct communication style. The Dutch are more likely to say what they think about something or someone, before even introducing themselves. This behaviour is also expected from employees when they are communicating with their boss or manager. Furthermore, the Dutch are more inclined to say that they do not have an answer to a question or to say that they made a mistake. The Dutch are also more inclined to be honest when they know their honesty will not hurt the other person or when their honesty is based on substance. Honesty is in these cases appreciated (Enklaar, 2017).

3. Methodology

This chapter will focus on explaining the methodology of the research. The methodology chapter is divided into four sections, namely research design, data collection, research instrument, data analysis, and feedback from experts.

3.1 Research Design

This research makes use of an inductive qualitative research method since the main focus of this study lies in researching and analysing people's experiences with regard to cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians. According to Azungah (2018), the inductive approach is focused on studying and analysing the experiences of the interviewees. The analysis of this research is based on results, which are directly derived from the interviewees. The inductive approach uses an array of data collection methods and an array of methods for analysing the raw data, with the goal of deriving themes or concepts from this raw data. An inductive qualitative research method could therefore help to map cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians, and this method could help to gain more insight into how cultural values are perceived and what the experiences of the participants are (Al Busaidi & Zakiya, 2008).

3.2 Data Collection

Based on purposive sampling, interviews with sixteen Dutchmen living and working in Belgium provided the researcher with the desired data. Purposive sampling is a method often used in qualitative studies in which the researcher is responsible for selecting the type of people and the number of people from which information needs to be extracted, through knowledge and experience (Etikan, 2016). The reason why sixteen interviewees have been chosen to participate in this study and not a much lower or higher number of interviewees lies in the fact that data saturation occurs after twelve interviews have been conducted (Guest et al., 2006). Data saturation is reached when no novel information is discovered in the dataset (Guest et al., 2006). According to the study by Hennink et al. (2016), no new themes were discovered after conducting nine interviews and at least sixteen interviews were needed to be able to fully comprehend the information in the dataset. Therefore, this study has chosen to conduct sixteen interviews to make sure saturation is reached. Following purposive sampling, interviewees were searched online, with the main focus on LinkedIn, ex-pat websites for Dutch people working in Belgium, Facebook, and Twitter. To make sure there is

variation among participants, demographic data, such as gender, age, and profession were taken into account in the selection of the interviewees. Furthermore, participants should have at least 6 months of work experience in Belgium. According to Bhawuk (1998), the so-called honeymoon period is over after spending 6 months in a different culture. After these 6 months have passed, more of an effort has to be made by the person to achieve cultural integration. To conclude, participants who work in a higher career segment and are in frequent contact with their Belgian counterparts were favoured to participate in this research since they might be more likely to present examples in which cultural differences led to conflicts. An overview of the characteristics of the interviewees could be found in table 4.

Table 4

Characteristics of interviewees

Interviewee No.	Gender	Age	Duration of time working in BE (years)	Location of work in BE	Manager/Supervisor
1	M	53	18,5	Brussel	No
2	F	55	12	Brussel	No
3	F	37	9	Antwerpen	No
4	F	26	2	Brussel	No
5	M	71	24	Brussel	Yes
6	F	29	5	Zoersel	No
7	F	40	1	Hasselt/Leuven	No
8	F	43	2,33	Gent	No
9	F	38	4	Leuven/Hasselt	No
10	M	33	4	Gent/Brussel	No
11	M	46	5	Brussel	Yes
12	F	48	11	Antwerpen	No
13	F	27	1	Gent	Yes
14	F	32	1,5	Brussel	Yes
15	M	50	8	Brussel	Yes
16	F	29	6	Antwerpen	No

3.3 Research Instrument

The semi-structured interviews with the Dutch participants provided data regarding their experiences working and communicating with their Belgian counterparts. More specifically, the focus of these interviews lay in mapping critical incidents, in other words, examples of cultural friction. The participants were questioned about their experiences in communicating and working with the Belgians. The interviewees were specifically asked to think of typical examples (critical incidents) where cultural things went differently from what Dutch people are familiar with. The semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with interesting data since participants might give a more detailed description of their experiences, regarding critical incidents than would be possible using a questionnaire or a structured interview

(Carruthers, 1990). The advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews is that it could help to understand the meanings and arguments behind the statements of participants regarding various phenomena because the interviewer has the option to ask follow-up questions, which could help to get to the core of the critical incident (Saunders et al., 2009). However, conducting semi-structured interviews could impact the amount of data and the quality of data that can be gathered, because the quality and quantity of the data are dependent on the questions asked and the skills of the interviewer to ask the correct questions, which are needed to dig deeper into the matter and to fully understand the incidents (Adams, 2015). Since the interviewees are scattered across Belgium, the researcher chose to conduct the interviews online, using Zoom or Teams, because this would save a lot of travel time. The researcher prepared questions beforehand, but also left some room for follow-up questions, to counter vague critical incidents. Both the interviewer and the interviewee are Dutch, and it could be easier to express feelings and opinions in the mother tongue, therefore, to optimize communication between the interviewer and the participant, the interviews were conducted in Dutch. The sixteen interviews have a similar structure, starting with an introduction to explain the research, the goal of this research, and the expected duration of the interview. Furthermore, after the introduction, the main body of the prepared questions follows, including the follow-up questions (Adams, 2015). The interviews take approximately 75 minutes each and are transcribed using Amberscript. After the transcriptions were completed, the relevant quotes were translated into English. Beforehand, the interviewees were asked for permission to record the interview, because recording the interviews helps the researcher in the transcription process.

According to Beck (1993), credibility in qualitative research is assessed in a specific way. Since this study is a qualitative inductive research, credibility could be measured by looking at the description of the phenomena, or critical incidents in the case of this study. The descriptions of the different phenomena should be vivid and described in detail, in order for the reader to fully understand the phenomena and to give the reader the ability to identify themselves with these phenomena or critical incidents (Beck, 1993). In other words, the reader has to be provided with rich excerpts from the transcripts (Beck 1993). As mentioned before, in this study, the critical incident technique of Thomas et al. (2010) is used to establish the Belgian cultural standards, from a Dutch perspective, by analysing the critical incidents mentioned by

the interviewees. Furthermore, to provide the reader with an explanation of why Belgians behave in a certain way, the methodology of Geertz (1973) is followed to create a thick description of Belgian behaviour (Underlying values). Thomas et al. (2010) used the Critical Incident Technique to locate where the cultures of two different nations clash and with the help of these critical incidents he tries to deduce the cultural standards that conflict between both countries. Fink et al. (2014) give a clear example of a critical incident, in a Hungarian-Austrian context, regarding the cultural standard 'Way of giving criticism', in order to make this phenomenon more concrete. It is normal in Austria to give criticism in a more direct way while giving criticism in Hungary happens more indirectly. Not losing face and honour plays an important role in how criticism is voiced in Hungary. An unprepared Hungarian employee could perceive the Austrian way of providing criticism as offensive or harsh. An Austrian manager could therefore unintentionally discourage its Hungarian team members. Looking at this incident from another perspective, the Hungarian style of giving criticism could be perceived as a waste of time and as inefficient to the Austrian managers.

3.4 Data Analysis

The Thematic Analysis methodology has been used to analyse the results of the semi-structured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is used to uncover, analyse and report patterns in the data that is gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By following the steps of this analysis, the collected data are described in rich detail. However, the collected data must also be organised and in order to organise the data, the model of Gioia et al. (2012) is used, which is a model that consists of 1st order concepts, 2nd order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) consists of six phases for analysing and coding the data set. The first phase is familiarizing with the data, by transcribing and looking over the results. The second phase consists of the generation of initial codes, by which interesting features of the data set are coded, and related data are connected to a specific code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase of the Thematic analysis could also be perceived as the first step of the model of Gioia et al. (2012), namely the 1st order concepts. The 1st order concepts are the critical incidents that are extracted from the interviews. The third phase in The Thematic Analysis is searching for themes, by which related codes are categorized into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third phase looks a lot like the 2nd order themes of Gioia et al. (2012), which are similar to the cultural standards in this research. The fourth phase is reviewing the potential themes and checking the relation of the

themes to the extracted codes. The fifth phase is defining the themes and naming them, which also includes continuously analysing the data to refine the specifics of the themes and generate understandable names for these themes. The sixth phase is producing the report, which includes the selection of vivid extract examples and analysis of these extracts, relating to the research question and literature, to produce a scholarly report based on the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Connecting the Thematic Analysis to this study, firstly the transcripts of the sixteen interviews have been made and scanned. Secondly, by open coding, the critical incidents were categorized according to the specific topics they refer to. Thirdly, the topics were attributed to a more limited number of cultural standards. In other words, after the critical incidents are attributed to cultural standards, these cultural standards are organised in an Excel sheet, to create a clear overview of the quotes, which are derived from the interviewees. Fourthly, to make sure the quotes and the cultural standards match, feedback has been requested from dr. A.H. Enklaar. Fifthly, constructive feedback has been used to improve the cultural standards, which led to well-defined cultural standards and matching quotes. To conclude, after establishing the cultural standards, the cultural logic behind this behaviour was identified as well by using possible clues in the interviews and by consulting relevant (Belgian) studies. All of this resulted in an understandable description of the cultural standards where two countries differ, displaying the sensitive points in interaction, and providing a clear catalogue of concrete situations which illustrate cultural frictions. Sixthly, the identified cultural standards and the cultural logic behind these standards have been sent to an expert in Belgian culture, to see whether the expert recognizes the findings and to check for possible misunderstandings. This research also tries to identify why Belgians behave the way they behave, and to fully understand the reasoning behind their behaviour, the model of Gioia et al. (2012) looks at the aggregate dimensions, which is similar to the underlying value, or the cultural logic behind the behaviour of Belgians. As has been mentioned before, the cultural standards are clustered under an underlying value, which explains Belgian behaviour. However, it is also possible that an underlying value consists of only one cultural standard, if that cultural standard cannot be clustered with other cultural standards, and if the expert in Belgian culture truly recognises the cultural standard. More information about the single cultural standard can be found in section 4.2.

3.5 Feedback from the Expert

Everything in the results chapter, including the definitions of the standards, the cultural standards, the quotes of the interviewees, the clashes with Dutch values and the results regarding the underlying values, has been presented to the expert for feedback. The expert was someone who was born and has grown up in Belgium and as soon as he was grown up moved to the Netherlands to work. This person is considered an expert because he has lived for a substantial amount of time in both the Belgian and the Dutch culture. The expert has been asked whether he had remarks regarding the results and whether there were improvements to be made in the results chapter. Adjustments to the results chapter, based on the feedback from the expert, could be found in section 4.3. Furthermore, asking for support from professionals is a strategy that could improve the credibility of the research and the quality of the findings. To conclude, the researcher requests the help of a professional, to gain a different perspective and to receive constructive criticism, which in turn could improve the quality and credibility of the report (Bitsch, 2005).

4. Results

This chapter will focus on presenting the results of this research. This chapter will start with a table of the Belgian cultural standards, that have been identified during this research. The Belgian cultural standards are described by a definition and by using quotes from the Dutch interviewees. Furthermore, a closer look is taken into how Dutch Cultural standards may clash with Belgian cultural standards. Secondly, an overview is given of the Belgian cultural standards, which are grouped, based on underlying values. Thirdly, the last section will provide an overview of the changes that have been made in the results chapter, based on the feedback of the expert.

4.1 Belgian Cultural Standards

After conducting, transcribing, and coding 16 interviews, a total of 12 Belgian cultural standards have been found. An overview of these standards is presented in table 5.

Table 5
Overview of Belgian cultural standards

Cultural standard	Definition	Mentioned by #interviewees
Indirect communication	Feedback and opinions are not openly and directly communicated.	14
Decision	Decision-making takes place in the top layer of an organisation.	13
Hierarchy	People with authority are respected.	10
Closed	Behaviour towards people they do not have a close relationship with is distant.	10
Work-Life separation	Relationships between colleagues are strictly professional.	8
Flexible	Rules, procedures or deadlines are not always followed.	6
Avoiding open discussion	People try to evade open discussions.	6
Service	Giving good service is not a priority.	6
Group culture	People prefer to move and socialise within their group.	4
Distance manager and employee	Employees avoid informing managers.	4
No initiative	Waits until further instructions are provided.	3
Work-to-Live	A lot of time and money is spent on socialising with people they are closer to.	3

The following section will introduce the Belgian cultural standards, as seen from a Dutch perspective, with a more detailed description of the standards, which is followed by two quotes from different interviewees. In these quotes, Dutch interviewees describe a situation where they experienced a particular cultural standard. After the quotes have been presented, it will be shown how these Belgian cultural standards clash with Dutch cultural standards.

Indirect communication

Feedback and opinions are not openly and directly communicated to each other in Belgium. According to the interviewees, this indirect manner of communicating takes place in and outside of the Belgian working environment. Belgians use words such as ‘could you please, maybe, it would be much appreciated’, if they ask or need something from someone. Communication is more subtle in Belgium than in the Netherlands, and if they say something it does not always mean they truly mean it. Furthermore, Belgians would sometimes use a middleman instead of speaking directly to the person in question. The interviewees have mentioned the fact that they sometimes hear from a colleague or a manager what another colleague wants or has said about them, instead of letting the interviewees know directly.

Quote 1: *“I have had some interesting experiences with professionals outside of the company. I had sent a message to a Belgian police chef, with the request to send me information. They did not want to send me the information, so I kept urging them that I needed this information. They were not amused by my constant requests for information and instead of telling me this, they went to the Ombudsman to complain about me. I was supposedly too rude or too straightforward. This was very interesting because what I did is probably something Dutch. Something you cannot do in Belgium (Interviewee 4).”*

Quote 2: *“I have had some difficulties with my manager in the beginning. It did not really feel good, but I never understood why. I always felt a bit of tension between us. In the end, I left the company, because I was not enjoying myself there. Eventually, after dinner with a former colleague, my ex-manager told my ex-colleague she was bummed out that our collaboration did not really work and that she may have handled me too firmly. My ex-colleague told me some more things about what my ex-manager said and I thought to myself: Yes, but why did she contact my ex-colleague about this and why have we never spoken about this (Interviewee 6)?”*

The Dutch cultural value of 'Self-determination', among other things, makes the Dutch easily express their personal opinion and speak in a direct manner. This leads to a direct communication style, where the Dutch do not shy away from announcing their, sometimes sharp, opinion on how they feel about certain things. This is the exact opposite of the indirect communication style of the Belgians. This difference in communication could be perceived as blunt and rude by the Belgians. This difference is a great cause of critical incidents because Dutch people are often oblivious to how extremely direct their communication style is experienced in the eyes of the Belgians. Furthermore, if a Dutch person says yes, he means yes, while Belgians would often say yes, but mean no. This difference led to the Dutch distrusting Belgians because the Dutch felt like it is never certain whether a Belgian speaks the truth while speaking strictly the truth is very important according to the Dutch value of Truth.

Decision

The cultural standard 'Decision' revolves around the decision-making process of the company, which takes place in the upper layer of an organisation. Often mentioned by interviewees, is that during meetings it is highly unlikely that the management asks for the input of employees. In the rare occasions that input is asked, it is unlikely that this input will be taken into consideration. Furthermore, it is often mentioned that everything has already been decided by the management before the meeting has even started. Some interviewees believe that input from employees is only asked to pretend that employees have a say in the company. Decisions made by the management are also rarely challenged by employees.

Quote 3: "I think it is a bit more hierarchical in Belgium than in the Netherlands. The meetings I have attended, while I was still working at the university, were quite hierarchical. As an assistant, you are supposed to sit there and provide background information, but only if they asked. You were not supposed to provide solutions during these meetings, because they had already come up themselves, or will come up themselves with a solution. The structure in Belgium usually is: One person will come up with a solution and will discuss this solution with the other managers that are present, to see whether the solution is a good idea or not (Interviewee 10)."

Quote 4: *"I think that we had the impression that we had a say in what will be decided in the organisation. However, everything was already decided by the management and presented to us in a nice manner. I do not think we had a lot of influence in the decision-making process. If something was decided by the management, it was decided and that is the end of it. In the end, I cannot remember that our opinions were used(Interviewee 12)."*

In Belgian companies sometimes managers ask for input from employees, but employees often stay quiet, because they do not dare to challenge the decision-makers. This could clash with the Dutch value of self-determination, which states that everyone should know for themselves what they do, thus giving the Dutch more autonomy in carrying out the work and bringing forward solutions. However, when the interviewees proposed alternative ideas or solutions, it was not appreciated, which frustrated the Dutch, because they felt like they were not given enough say in the decision-making process. This is an example of how these cultural differences led to friction on the work floor. The value of Truth is a value cherished by Christian nations, including Belgium and the Netherlands. However, the Dutch are heavily influenced by the Calvinist protestant religion, and the Dutch take the obligation to speak the truth very literally. If a person's deeds do not match his words, the Dutch quickly consider that person unreliable and untrustworthy. This value could therefore clash with the Belgian standard of Decision. This value states: You always have to be honest, even if it is painful. This translated into Dutch interviewees clashing with Belgian managers, because Dutch employees straightforwardly tell a manager, that what he is deciding, or what he is saying, is nonsense. Belgian managers do not always appreciate the straightforwardness of the Dutch and some Dutch interviewees even mentioned getting reprimanded for opening their mouths. This is a clear example of friction, caused by differences in culture.

Hierarchy

The Belgian cultural standard 'Hierarchy' revolves around how employees behave when a person with a higher position or status is in their presence. People with a higher position or people with authority are respected. This means that employees behave in a more respectful, formal, and submissive manner, towards people with authority. Contact between people with authority and employees should always follow a formal way, such as Email. Formal titles are also used in the Belgian working environment, such as 'Professor, Doctor, or Sir'. Some

interviewees also mentioned that Belgian employees make themselves very small and look with admiration to people with authority and say things like: I could learn so much from him!

Quote 5: *"I have noticed in Belgium that hierarchy is really present, more than in the Netherlands. You notice it when you talk to someone. You have to use their formal title, such as professor, and you could only communicate with them using formal communication methods, such as Email. I have got a strange example. One time, my colleague and I had some problems regarding time, because the workload was very high. At the time, a new course had started and with the creation of this course, a new course committee had to be assigned. All tasks regarding setting up this course came on our plate. These are tasks such as, organising the committee, preparing everything, and writing the minutes of the meetings. I wanted to prevent that we had to write the minutes and told my colleague: Well, there are a lot of professors on that committee and they have all completed a study, so one of them could write the minutes. It is not that difficult? My colleague froze and I noticed I said something incorrect. She did not understand that a professor could write their own minutes. It is not possible, because they have a much higher position! I found that surprising because I think it wouldn't have been a problem in the Netherlands (Interviewee 8)".*

Quote 6: *"This top-down behaviour in Belgium is something I have really noticed. If you want something from a colleague, boss, order of lawyers, or a judge, then you have to act in a submissive manner. You should not act as a smart ass and you should not go to them with a cocky mindset like: Hello, we will do it this way or that way. You can forget it if you act like that. This is difficult for a Dutch person, because hierarchy is less apparent in the Netherlands. A manager in Belgium can also be very kind to you on day 1 but can act like a "boss" on another day and force you to figuratively go on your knees and ask him to take care of something. In Belgium, you cannot just come up with a proposal and ask if we can discuss that proposal. It just does not work that way over here (Interviewee 3)".*

In Belgium, respect for people with a higher function in the hierarchical chain, or respect for people with authority, is very apparent. This respect for authority is contrary to the Dutch cultural value of Equality, which is an important value in Dutch culture. The equality value indicates that everyone in the eyes of the Dutch should be treated as an equal. Nobody stands

above the law or should look down on other people, e.g. people with a lower hierarchical status. This value makes it easier for the Dutch to have relaxed and informal contact with someone higher up in the chain, compared to the Belgians, who face difficulties in communicating when someone with authority is present. These cultural differences could cause friction, because a Dutch employee might refuse to show the same amount of respect a Belgian employee would show to his Belgian manager, thus possibly creating a conflict with his superior.

Closed

Belgian behaviour towards people they do not have a close relationship with or do not fully trust is cold and standoffish. Belgians try to keep their distance from others and this behaviour is apparent in and outside of the working environment. Not greeting each other, not making small talk while walking around in the supermarket, not actively participating in conversations, and not expressing emotions, are examples of how Belgians behave towards people they do not have a close relationship with. Belgians could become very trustworthy friends, but it takes time before they open up. Some interviewees mentioned it could take up to several months before Belgians open up, while other interviewees state that Belgians never open up at all. Dutch interviewees have often stated that Belgians carefully scan people and rarely initiate contact which could lead to the creation of a friendship.

Quote 7: "We have been living in Antwerp for a few months now, but I feel like it is a bit lonely or something. People do not easily contact you. When you are in a supermarket, in the Netherlands, it is normal to make small talk with someone, but in Antwerp, this is rarely the case. I do not know if that has something to do with trust or with something else. This is something my colleagues have told me as well. They are very honest and say: Yes, Belgians act more in the background. I have not really noticed this myself, but I do notice that people look at me when walking down the street, but they do not talk to me. They observe you, but it is like they are too scared to interact (Interviewee 7)".

Quote 8: "I have completed my international master's degree. While studying, I have discussed with many people of different nationalities how they view the Belgians. Most of them said that it is very difficult to become friends with them and join their inner circle. This is especially the

case in the first few months of contact, but when you finally find a way in and won their trust, they become friends for life and will be very loyal. In the beginning, most Belgians wait and scan you, and that is something I have noticed myself as well. When you go to a Dutch bar, everyone is talking and cheering with each other, but in Belgium, you have to work extra hard to achieve that as a foreigner (Interviewee 9)’’.

Interviewees often think the closed attitude has something to do with either distrust or the fact that Belgians are more distant people in general compared to the Dutch. The Dutch have stated that they found it difficult to get used to the closed and distant character of the Belgians because the Dutch strongly feel the need to make contact, in and outside of the working environment, to create ‘gezelligheid’ or cosiness, and to create an amicable environment. This need matches the Dutch value of Agreement, which among other things, states that a friendly environment without hostility should be maintained. This difference in culture led to situations where Dutch people, especially in the beginning, tried to create a more personal relationship with Belgians, but often found that these attempts proved to be futile. These futile attempts of the Dutch to get closer to the Belgians might lead to friction, because the Dutch might feel unwanted or not at ease, because their wanted amicable environment could not be created, due to the reservedness of the Belgians.

Work-life separation

Belgians like to keep their private life completely separate from their work environment. Relationships between colleagues remain professional and rarely evolve into more personal relationships. Since private life and work life are separated, discussing private matters with colleagues or sharing personal information, in a work environment, is most of the time out of the question. Belgians rarely give colleagues insights into their private life and rarely invite colleagues over to their houses for a drink or dinner.

Quote 9: “I have got a good relationship with one Belgian colleague, but it is more difficult to get to know the rest of the team, because there is very little room to talk about our private life. I do not even know if most of my colleagues have children, for example. I do not need to know all the ins and outs of someone’s life, but these are things that could influence work, such as

your availability. This kind of information is very difficult to share, which makes it very difficult to find similarities in our life, to build a personal relationship (Interviewee 14)''.

Quote 10: "I'm sometimes in the middle of a conversation when I try to steer it to a more human-like conversation. It is difficult to judge if this is welcome or not, but I feel like they are more formal and feel less of a need to make social chit-chat. I have to ask very specific questions if I want to get to know them better, but they barely respond or steer the conversation towards work. Conversations with Belgians feel less personal. The Dutch usually socialise for a bit, before they start talking about work (Interviewee 9)''.

According to the interviewees, it is difficult to create a relationship with colleagues, which goes beyond a distanced colleague-colleague relationship. Belgians tend to keep private matters and private personal relationships in their private environment, while Dutch interviewees have stated that in the Netherlands, relationships with colleagues are more personal. Relationships in Dutch companies are more personal because it matches the Dutch value of Agreement, which states that a friendly environment should be maintained and just formal relationships between colleagues are not favoured. The Dutch reported that while working in the Netherlands, it was completely normal to have a drink with colleagues after work hours, have dinner at a colleague's house, or discuss private matters, such as ambitions, pregnancies, or anything that is considered to be more personal. Belgians keep a more 'professional' distance and try not to involve colleagues in their private life. Interviewees mentioned that this cultural difference led to friction, which in turn led to problems in collaboration. Since the Belgians rarely inform the Dutch if something is wrong in their private life, the Dutch are often left wondering why their Belgian colleague missed a deadline, is not available for work tomorrow, or is keeping more distance than usual, which in turn impacted collaboration between the Dutch and the Belgians.

Flexible

This cultural standard refers to how people behave when rules or regulations are present. Belgians do not always follow the exact rules prescribed by the government or by their organisation. According to the Belgians, rules, procedures and deadlines are present, in order to be able to bypass them. Belgians try to work their way around these rules and deadlines

and they could be very effective at doing so. Belgians will not defy these rules head-on, but they will try to find a more subtle way.

Quote 11: *“One time, we had some problems with our servers, and we tried to fix these problems. We did not fix these servers by following specific rules, but we tried to fix the problem so everything would be running again. This would be unimaginable in the Netherlands because you would have to follow specific procedures and you would have to ask for permissions. Belgium has a mentality of: Let’s try to fix it first and we will look later at what the damage will be. I do not see this happening in the Netherlands with all the different procedures they have (Interviewee 1)”.*

Quote 12: *“At one moment in time, I needed a special camera and I had to ask the director to receive this item. Usually, we have special procedures for such things in place, but my colleague told me it would be fine if we just take it, so we took it. These things do not really matter. I have got a different example. Officially, you would have to wait for permission if you want to send an item or a story to the news channels. However, we just set everything up and did everything without permission. You got a little more room to do these kinds of things in Belgium (Interviewee 4)”.*

The Dutch interviewees stated there is more room to work around procedures and not do everything according to the rules, contrary to the Dutch way of working. The Dutch culture has a value called ‘Order and Cleanliness,’ which indicates that following and obeying rules is in general very much valued in Dutch society. Exceptions should not be made. The Belgian cultural standard, flexible, could therefore clash with the Dutch value of order and cleanliness because a Dutch employee might not want to bend the rules, or may choose to follow specific procedures, while the Belgians will try their best to bend the rules in their favour. Therefore, this difference in interpreting rules could be a cause of possible friction when the Dutch and the Belgians have to collaborate.

Avoiding open discussion

Belgians try to evade having discussions in the open. This standard translates into Belgians avoiding potentially painful situations and embarrassments, both on the work floor and

outside of the working environment. Belgians are careful in what they say and how they operate. If there is an option to bypass a confrontation with a person they are not close with, a Belgian would take that option. One interviewee heard from her manager that a colleague had a problem with her. When the interviewee confronted the colleague by immediately calling him, the colleague stated: Oh, no! That is not true! This is a clear example of how Belgians deal with confrontations or open discussions.

Quote 13: *“Conflict-avoiding behaviour is very normal for the Belgians. One time, a colleague of mine had to be confronted about his behaviour, and it took forever before this actually happened. They kept beating around the bush. As I said, this did not happen, which led to my colleague still behaving in a bad way, even though I have confronted his manager three times and he promised me three times that he would resolve the problem. Let me tell you exactly how it went. We have a large number of offices spread in the region and these offices sold my product. One person worked at one of these offices but did not follow the exact rules. He reported the number of products sold in a specific way, but it had to be done in another way. I have contacted his manager about this problem and this manager, officially does not answer to me, but to another director. He promised me that he would fix the issue, but months went by before the manager acted, thus increasing the damage that has been dealt by the ‘bad’ employee. He kept doing things on his own and it took a while before he was confronted. To make matters worse, other people started copying his behaviour (Interviewee 15)”.*

Quote 14: *“During my studies, we had a group project with all Belgians. I was the only Dutch person in that group. At one point, one of my groupmates said she wanted to do the editing of the report and nothing more. I said: Well, but I do not think that is really a good idea, because I think we do expect a little more from you. I didn't really get a response at the time, except that she indicated it wasn't a problem. After this incident, apparently, a second WhatsApp group was created, without me, in which they said: If you just want to do that editing, that is fine, because it is definitely an important task. Everyone agreed with that. I thought to myself: Did you guys seriously create a separate group to talk about that (Interviewee 16)”?*

The Dutch cultural value of ‘Truth’ indicates that the Dutch find it important to speak the truth, to be open, and to be honest, whatever the consequences may be. This value translates into

an open communication style, where stirring around the pot and trying to evade potentially painful situations is uncommon. Furthermore, according to the Dutch value Self Determination, the Dutch are also more inclined to express confronting opinions and are more open to discuss them. The Dutch like to discuss these confronting opinions because these discussions could help to find common ground in a consensus-seeking process that could follow and reach an agreement, which corresponds with the Dutch value of Agreement. These Dutch values, which are important in Dutch culture, are the exact opposite of how Belgians operate, collaborate and communicate when it comes to open discussions or expressing confronting opinions. Belgians would much rather stay quiet and keep their opinion to themselves, or discuss their opinion with someone they are closer with, instead of directly confronting the person in question. Whoever does loudly express their opinion, what Dutchmen often do, could be considered arrogant and rude in the eyes of the Belgians. These cultural differences could cause friction between the Dutch and the Belgians, because the Dutch might start distrusting Belgians if they are not honest and open, and discuss the matter among themselves, as could be seen in quote 14, instead of talking over differences of opinion and trying to reach common ground together.

Service

This cultural standard refers to how Belgians behave when they have to provide a service to people they do not know. Belgian employees rarely greet customers, rarely make small talk with customers, and rarely put in extra effort to help customers they do not have a close relationship with, according to the interviewees. In addition, the way Belgians provide a service has led to behaviour such as yelling at customers, being put through several times when on the phone with customer service, and receiving little to no assistance when help was requested.

Quote 15: "Oh, I'll tell you about customer service here. It is terrible and it has improved a little bit, but when I came to Belgium fourteen years ago, it was very bad. Back then I lived in a part of Belgium where only French was spoken. My French wasn't very good and I really did have communication problems in stores, for example. People are very rude to you. They are not customer-friendly, although that has improved a bit now. I had bought something at a chain store and I wanted to return the product to another store of the same chain. You could tell

right away that they do not feel like talking. The saleswoman said to me: No, you cannot return the product here. I then asked why that wasn't possible, since you are from the same chain of stores, aren't you? She repeated that it was not possible. I asked if she could call her manager. The manager then indicated that it was possible and that there wasn't any problem. The store employee got so angry that she threw the garment at my head (Interviewee 2)''.

Quote 16: *"At the time, I was working a lot on the new website and I was very dependent on input from other colleagues or officials from other departments, and that didn't always go smoothly. They were always busy and had little time, and for them my problem was not relevant. My Belgian colleagues from communication knew the colleagues from other departments a lot better and therefore went to talk to those colleagues from the other departments, asking if they could help me. My colleagues said something like: Hey, she really needs that information so can you speed it up a little bit (Interviewee 6)''?*

The value of Guilt indicates that everyone is responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions. This Christian value is present in the Belgian and the Dutch culture. However, as a result of the Dutch Calvinist protestant religion, the Dutch put more value on responsibility than the Belgians. The high degree of responsibility is also noticeable in the working environment, specifically in the service industry. If a task is assigned to a Dutch person, the Dutchmen will try to carry out this task as well as possible, whoever the client is. People with high responsibility have a high status in Dutch society. Furthermore, the Dutch value of Labour states that the Dutch attach a lot of value to their work and that they are proud when their job or task is fulfilled correctly. These Dutch cultural values match with the statements made by the interviewees, who stated that the Dutch are much more focused on providing a pleasant experience to customers than the Belgians. According to the interviewees, Dutch employees in the service industry actively try to help customers, initiate contact, and make small talk. The Belgians are more focussed on doing their job, instead of focusing on customer service. This cultural difference could lead to friction. One interviewee stated that a piece of clothing was thrown in her face by a Belgian employee because the interviewee tried to return an item, thus leaving the Dutch person in shock. Another interviewee mentioned that a civil servant refused to help, but instead kept forwarding her to other civil servants, thus causing great frustration and anger on the Dutch side, while at the

same time the Belgian civil servant might have perceived the Dutch interviewee as rude and too pushy. It should be mentioned that the intercultural expert who was consulted did not quite recognise this cultural standard.

Group culture

This cultural standard describes how Belgians like to stay within their small social group. These groups are usually created in primary school or high school and these groups usually consist of people they have known for a very long time, either long-time friends or family members. They do a lot of things in their groups as well, so they are very socially active. They go out together, have parties together, drink together, and spend a lot of free time together. However, these groups are very difficult to 'infiltrate' as an outsider. Belgian people tend to be very distant towards people they barely know, do not trust, or do not have a close relationship with. However, Belgians tend to be less open and warm towards people they do know and trust. Trusting people in Belgium usually takes a substantial amount of time. Therefore, the people that Belgians hang out with, are usually people they have known for a substantial amount of time. Belgians and their long-time friends, or confidants, usually end up in cliques and rarely give outsiders a chance to be part of this clique.

Quote 17: "Well, I think that Dutch people are much more individualistic and show more initiative, while a Belgian feels wonderful in his own family, in his own group especially. They feel wonderful with people they have known for a long time and are not so quick to make new acquaintances or friends, while I think in the Netherlands it is often the other way around. Going out alone, doing things alone, travelling alone. You often see Belgians with three generations together in the city centre, for example. They are very much family-oriented and hang out with friends they have known for an incredibly long time, since kindergarten perhaps (Interviewee 5)".

Quote 18: "You noticed a bit of camp forming, so the Walloons sit with the Walloons and the Flemish sit with the Flemish, and that really goes way back. Usually, people sit together who used to go to school together. They also favour each other and are often in cliques. The formation of cliques is considerable in Belgium and that does not really promote cooperation. It doesn't feel like 1 team but like all these little individual groups. They also only want to speak

in their own language. As a Dutchman, you do not really belong anywhere. I can still remember, when I was just appointed to my position, I was invited to someone's home in Wallonia. This was already a surprise for me because that doesn't happen often. A really huge dinner was cooked and at this party, I saw all kinds of colleagues, of whom I had no idea at that moment what their relationship was with the colleague who had invited me. Apparently, they had all studied at the same universities. So there were only people he had known for a long time (Interviewee 15)'".

The Dutch strongly feel the need to socialise with people in a working environment and public places, in order to create a more friendly atmosphere. Since the Dutch feel the need to create an amicable environment, this often resulted in the Dutch being very open, social, and easy to make friends with. This strive for cosiness derives from the Dutch value of Agreement. Some interviewees stated that they wanted to socialise with the Belgians, but the Belgians distanced themselves. This difference between the Belgians and the Dutch could cause possible friction. Multiple Dutch interviewees mentioned that they struggled to interact with Belgians since they were not part of their regular social groups because they were considered to be outsiders, which in turn led to cold behaviour from the Belgians. Belgians could view these attempts of the Dutch to 'infiltrate' their group as pushy and intrusive, while the Dutch might feel unwanted, unaccepted, and not welcomed by the Belgians, which could lead to problems in collaboration.

Distance manager and employee

This cultural standard describes how Belgians deal with people in a higher position. As the name of the cultural standard indicates, there is a great (psychological) distance between employees and managers in Belgium companies. This distance translates into employees finding it difficult to communicate with managers. Belgian employees avoid sharing information with managers or letting managers know that something is wrong. This lies in the fact that Belgians have respect for authority and look up to people who are higher in the hierarchy chain. This admiration for people with status and respect and fear for authority, translated into obedient and distant behaviour from Belgian employees. As one interviewee mentioned, their company created an extra layer between the management and the

employees, because the leadership noticed that a lot of things were happening in their team, but managers were never informed of what was going on.

Quote 19: *“The reason for creating the new position in the company, which I had been given, was that within the company there were all sorts of things going wrong in the dynamics, communication and operation of certain systems. Between the manager and the underlying colleagues, there is always a very large distance. There were a lot of things going on within the team, that managers were not told about. So management thought that if they created an intermediate layer between management and colleagues, then colleagues would be more likely to indicate whether things could be done differently or to challenge management decisions. This way, they wouldn't have to take that big step directly to the manager (Interviewee 16)”*.

Quote 20: *“If I think something is not working out in terms of timing, I just say it to my manager. If I'm in a conversation with an equal colleague and we're making plans and it doesn't work out, they also speak up, but if they receive instructions from a superior, people double-fold themselves 600 times to carry out the given task (Interviewee 14)”*.

Belgians do not like to speak up to their manager, rarely inform managers, and rarely communicate with the management, in a way that is considered to be normal in the eyes of the Dutch. The Dutch value of Equality states that no one is better than someone else. Everyone is created equal. Therefore, the Dutch find it easier to communicate with managers, because looking at managers from a Dutch perspective, they are equal, and they only have different tasks. This difference in culture could lead to friction. Dutch managers working in Belgium companies might start distrusting Belgian employees because the Belgians might not fully inform the manager, because they do not feel comfortable sharing information with someone higher up in the chain. This failure to inform the Dutch manager could lead to trust issues from the Dutch side and thus negatively influence collaboration.

No initiative

This cultural standard describes how Belgians prefer to wait for instructions. Belgians will not act on their own and will wait until instructions are given. This lack of initiative is especially apparent in a working environment, where a manager or someone higher up in the organisation has to sit on top of things, to make sure employees receive their tasks. As has been mentioned in the 'Decision' section, it is normal in a Belgian working environment that decisions are made by the management. The management decides what will be done, when it will be done, and who is responsible for carrying out the task. Belgian employees have very little to say in the processes of decision-making. Belgian employees are less inclined to take the initiative because they are used to the fact that most decisions are made in the upper layer of the organisation. Belgians also have a lot of respect for authority and they often think the manager knows everything, so there is no need to take the initiative.

Quote 21: "Belgians will not take much initiative themselves. You really have to give them an assignment, because they do not really take the initiative to solve a problem themselves. So in that respect, as a manager, you often have to be on top of things, while my Dutch employees are more spontaneous and come to you and say: I have this and that problem, how can we solve it? (Interviewee 5)".

Quote 22: "People felt a bit powerless when decisions were made by the management. At one point, some people were moved. This was then communicated and it was a fact. In my office, someone had to move to an office 30 kilometres away, while she had children who were in school in this area. So this relocation would not fit into her life at all. I saw that she found it very difficult to talk about it and bring this up. Eventually, she also fell ill and is now working somewhere else (Interviewee 12)".

The Dutch value of self-determination, which among other things, states that respect for authority is almost non-existent, which is the complete opposite of how respected authority is in Belgium. The Dutch do not believe that managers know everything and the Dutch want to have freedom of action, without too much interference from above. This cultural difference could clash with the Belgian cultural standard of initiative because Belgian employees only work when they have been given direct orders, while the Dutch work on their own, and expect others to work on their own as well. This difference could cause friction because Dutch

employees often describe Belgian managers as very controlling, and Dutch employees sometimes feel like their hands are tied. On the other hand, Dutch managers working in Belgium companies might feel like they have to constantly stay on top of things when working with Belgian employees because they rarely work on their own.

Work-to-live

This cultural standard describes how Belgians like to spend their time during breakfast, lunch, or dinner. In Belgian culture, it is considered to be 'normal' to have lavish lunch breaks. Interviewees have often mentioned that Belgians like to spend a lot of time and money going to restaurants or bars, during and outside of working hours. Belgians try to maximally enjoy their meals, whereas the Dutch eat and drink because it is a necessity. However, Belgians only invite people over with whom they have a closer relationship, either for lunch or dinner at a restaurant or for drinks at a bar.

Quote 23: "Belgians can be very sociable and can also be a little less serious. A good experience here is: I was once invited by a Walloon professor. We were visiting a university. In the morning I attended his class and in the afternoon I would give a guest lecture myself. In the Netherlands when you have a break you go in pairs or threes to the canteen to get a sandwich and then you go back to work. In Belgium, we had booked a restaurant and had a nice two-and-a-half-hour meal and we also had a glass of wine. I had to give a guest lecture afterwards. Then I thought to myself: You would never see this in the Netherlands! I didn't necessarily have to, but I actually still needed time to prepare the lesson. If I had said in the Netherlands that I needed to go through my notes, that would have been fine. Here in Belgium they said: No, it will be fine. Sit back and relax (Interviewee 10)!"

Quote 24: "I had a very nice office event early in my career. It was a kind of open-door evening, which by the way was very positively received by clients. Such an evening is organized to retain clients. There was a lot of food and especially a lot of drinks and it was all incredibly lavish. In the Netherlands, if you had a reception in the company, you would get a glass of milk at lunch hours. In this company, I got alcoholic drinks in the afternoon. I had never experienced that before (Interviewee 12)!"

Spending a substantial amount of time in restaurants and spending a substantial amount of money on food and drinks, may clash with the Dutch value of moderation, because this value

states that everything should be done in moderation, otherwise it could create problems. This Dutch value also states that nothing should be exaggerated and one needs to control itself. This cultural difference could cause friction, because in the eyes of the Dutch, spending so much time in restaurants and money on food and beverages, could be considered uncontrolled and immature behaviour. Furthermore, the Belgian cultural standard of Work-to-Live could also clash with the Dutch value of Utility. The Dutch seek maximum usefulness and efficiency and spending a lot of time in restaurants could be considered as not useful or as inefficient for their work. These cultural differences could therefore lead to friction, because the Dutch consider spending money solely on pleasure as irresponsible, and they might therefore not appreciate if their Belgian colleagues decide to have 2.5-hour lunches on a work day.

4.2 Underlying values

Besides identifying the cultural standards, another goal of this research was to identify the so-called 'underlying values'. An underlying value is a value that explains why Belgians behave in a specific way. These values could be seen as moral principles that belong to a specific group of people or community, which use these values to justify their behaviour. It is not possible to directly deduce the values from behaviour, therefore these values are derived from literature and statements made by the interviewees. Typical Belgian sayings or terms are connected to each underlying value, which should help to describe how Belgians think. Some Belgian cultural standards cannot be seen as independent of each other, and share the same underlying value. The Belgian cultural standards that share an underlying value are therefore grouped and statements from interviewees and information extracted from the literature are used to link the cultural standard to the underlying value.

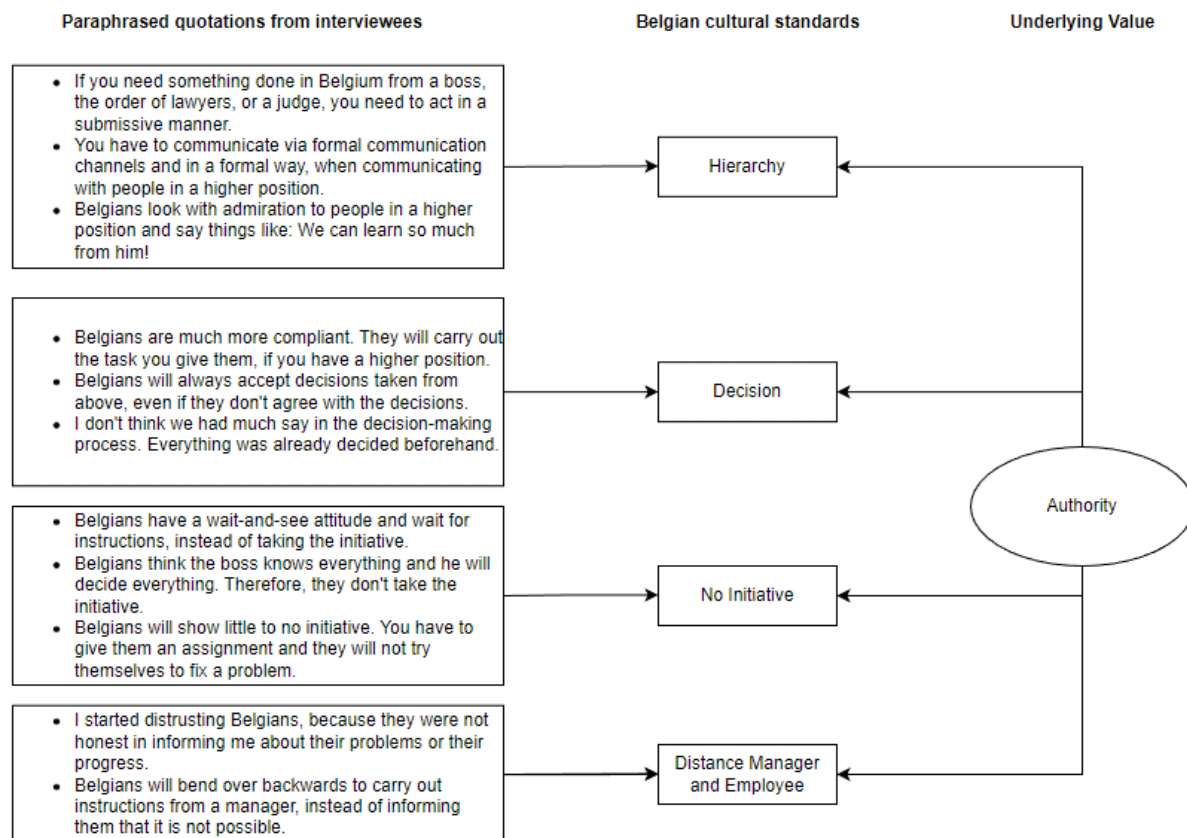
Authority

Managers know best what to do and therefore it is important to follow their direction and respect their leadership. Respect for authority is highly present in Belgian culture. People who have a high position in the hierarchy chain or people who have a substantial amount of authority are people who have a high status and are very much looked up to. This respect for authority is sometimes combined with fear. The first underlying value that has been identified is called 'Authority'. This value describes how much importance is attached to high

positions/authority in Belgian society, and how people with a lower position behave and communicate when someone with authority is present.

Figure 2

The underlying value of Authority



In essence, the four cultural standards above are linked to each other based on respect and fear of authority. The Belgian cultural standard Hierarchy indicates that people with a higher position in the hierarchy are respected and sometimes even feared. People with a lower status or a lower ranking look up to managers and act submissively when someone with a higher position is present. Therefore, it is normal in Belgian society to only communicate with managers in a formal way, using words such as sir, ma'am, professor, or doctor. *'Daar dienen geen twee hanen op één mesthoop- There can only be one boss'*. This Belgian saying fits the cultural standard 'Hierarchy' because it indicates that there can only be one boss present, just like in an organisation such as Tesla, which has Elon Musk as its CEO, whom employees very much look up to. This respect for people with a higher position is also noticeable in the decision-making process, the second Belgian cultural standard. This process predominantly takes place in the upper layer of an organisation and decisions are made without the feedback

of employees. However, even though decisions are made without considering the opinions of employees, it is highly unlikely that decisions are challenged, due to the high respect and sometimes fear employees have for managers and people with a higher position. Some interviewees even mentioned getting reprimanded for challenging a decision in a meeting. '*Le patron c'est le patron- The boss is the boss*'. This Belgian saying fits the Belgian cultural standard because it indicates that whatever the boss decides, it will be accepted. After all, the boss is the boss and he is whom we look up to. This high respect for authority also translates into employees not taking the initiative, which is the third Belgian cultural standard. Belgians believe that managers or people with authority know what they are doing, and employees are therefore less inclined to take the initiative and work independently. Instead, Belgians would rather wait for instructions, because 'the manager knows everything and we look up to him so much, so why would we work on our own'? The high respect for authority is also noticeable when looking at the communication between manager and employee. Belgians find it difficult to communicate with people in a higher position because they respect them and sometimes fear their authority. Due to the high respect employees have for their managers and because employees do not consider themselves to be equal to managers, employees find it difficult to talk to their managers, and information with the management is therefore rarely shared.

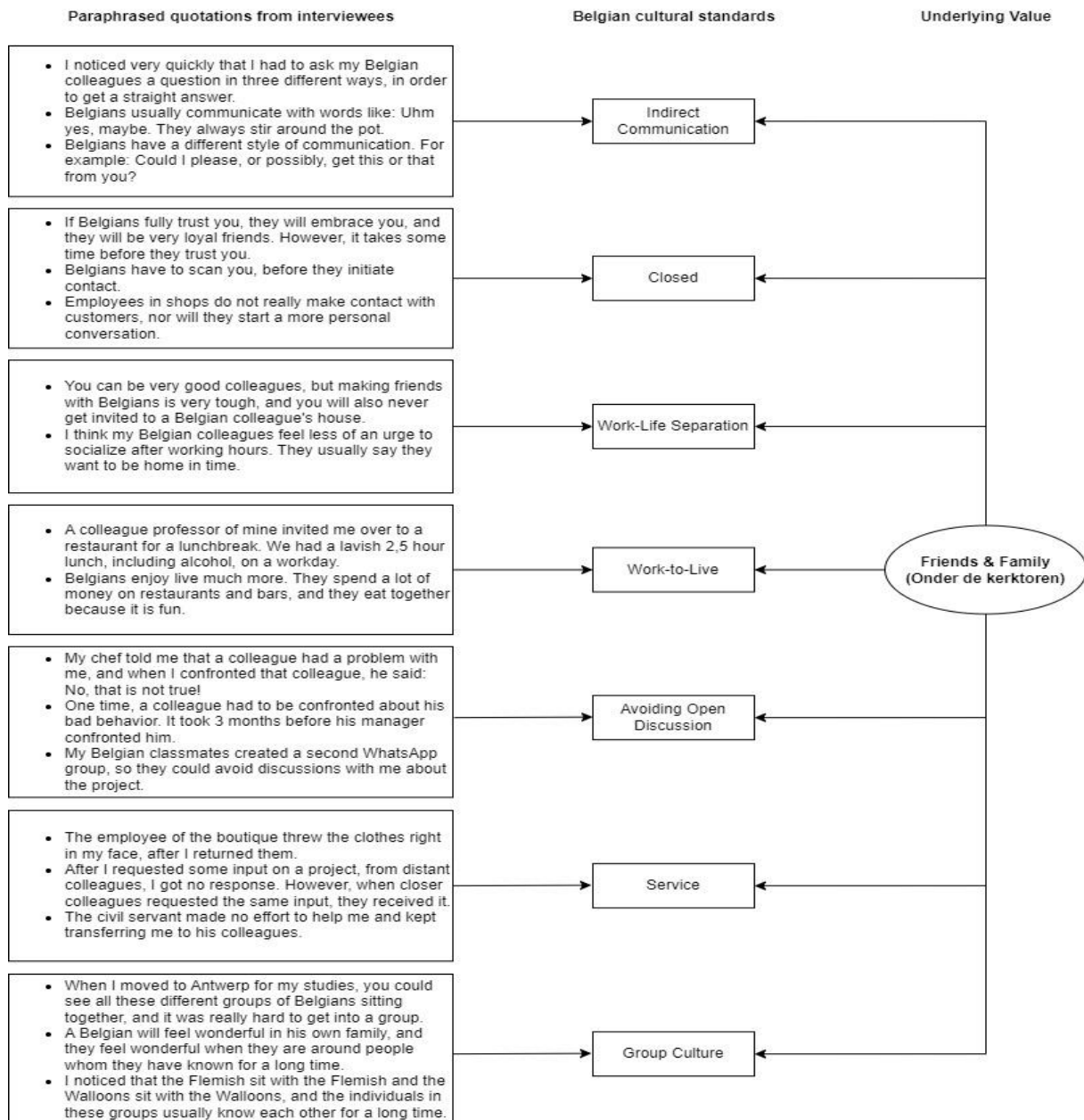
Friends and Family (*Onder de kerktoeren*)

Life revolves around family and friends, and one must be cautious of everything and everybody beyond this circle. In Belgian culture, a strong distinction is made between ingroup and outgroup. Family and friends or other people Belgians are very close with usually belong to the ingroup, while everyone else falls into the latter. When family members or good friends are present, it is easier for a Belgian to behave more openly, because they know that friends or members of the family (ingroup) can be trusted. Furthermore, it is also important to note that Belgians are quieter and more cautious when members of the outgroup are present because Belgians do not want to hurt each other, since if you hurt a person, that person might hurt you back later on. Belgians usually prefer to stay in the environment they grew up in and they prefer to socialise with people they trust, usually friends they have known for a very long time, or family members. In Belgium, this phenomenon is also known as '*onder de kerktoeren*', or church tower mentality, which refers to the small familiar area a Belgian grew up in.

Everything ‘under the church tower’ (in the same village) can be trusted, and everything outside of that area is tricky, because it is not clear what the interests of outsiders are.

Figure 3

Underlying value Friends & Family (Onder de kerktoren)



In essence, all these cultural standards above are linked to each other based on trust or distrust. Friends and family can be trusted and are treated in a different way than people who belong to the outgroup since they cannot be trusted because it is not clear what the intentions and interests of these people are. The cultural standard of Indirect Communication provides

a clear example of how Belgians communicate with people who are in the outgroup, usually strangers and people who do not have a close relationship with a Belgian. The Belgian communication style towards members of the outgroup is cautious and indirect. Sometimes a question has to be asked in several different ways, to receive a straightforward answer. Belgians also use words such as: Maybe, could you please, could you possibly do this for me? Trust in a Belgian relationship starts at zero, and it takes a substantial amount of time before these trust issues are resolved and Belgians will feel comfortable enough to communicate more directly, as they do with their friends and family. These trust issues with people who do not belong to the inner circle or ingroup of a Belgian are also noticeable when looking at Belgian behaviour. Belgians show a more closed attitude towards people who are not friends or family. Again, it takes time before Belgians trust people, and open up to them. However, when a Belgian fully trusts a person, the person in question is more likely to get access to the inner circle of a Belgian, and he is more likely to enjoy the same benefits a friend or a family member has. However, until this trustworthy relationship is established, a Belgian's attitude towards someone who is not a friend or family will remain cold and distant. Furthermore, it must also be noted that this cautious and indirect communication style and closed attitude of the Belgians are also caused by vulnerability. Belgians do not like to hurt other people and are therefore very cautious in what they say when someone is present with whom they do not have a close relationship.

In general, colleagues are not considered to be part of the ingroup of a Belgian. The behaviour of Belgians towards their colleagues can therefore be characterised as distant, or purely professional, except for the case that a colleague is a personal friend. This distant behaviour translates into Belgians rarely involving colleagues in their private life, or discussing private matters with colleagues. If a more personal topic emerges during a conversation, a Belgian would usually try to change the topic to something about work. Again, this behaviour can be explained by the fact that generally speaking, colleagues are not considered to be friends or family, and therefore it is not clear what their intentions or interests are. Consequently, due to this distrust, a professional distance is maintained between colleagues, because a more personal relationship cannot be developed without trust. Often mentioned by interviewees is that Belgians also rarely invite colleagues over into their houses, which Belgians consider to be a private area. A Belgian would only invite a colleague over if they consider them to be

friends or part of the ingroup. Socialising with colleagues during or after working hours is usually out of the question because Belgians would much rather do this with friends and family because these people are considered to be trustworthy. However, as the cultural standard Work-to-Live has shown, Belgians can create a more personal relationship with colleagues, but this takes a lot of time and effort. Belgians love to spend a lot of time in restaurants, eating and drinking, even on workdays and during working hours. Going out to bars and cafes, or 'op café gaan' is a typical Belgian saying. Belgians do not mind spending hours on lunch breaks, but only with people they are close with and trust, usually family, very close friends, or colleagues they consider to be friends.

As has been mentioned in the explanation of the underlying value, everything under the church tower can be trusted, and everything outside of this area cannot be trusted. Belgians will rarely pursue an open discussion with people whom they do not consider to be friends or family because these people are not part of their inner circle, and Belgians will therefore act very carefully. Belgians avoid open discussions because they are not sure how a member of the outgroup will act or what a stranger will do with the opinions that are expressed during such an open discussion. Therefore, Belgians will try their best to avoid possible confrontations or discussions with people they are not close with, by changing the subject, by not expressing their opinion, or by simply denying that something could be wrong. '*De waarheid kan niet altijd gezegd worden- Sometimes you cannot say the truth*'. This is a popular Belgian expression, which fits the Belgian cultural standard of Avoiding Open Discussion, because not expressing your opinion to people that cannot be trusted (outgroup) could avoid problems from emerging. *La parole est d'argent, le silence est d'or-Speech is silver, silence is golden*. This saying also matches the Belgian evasive behaviour in communication. Towards people they are not close with, it could be better to be quiet and cautious because strangers cannot be trusted with your opinion. The Belgian cultural standard Service is also connected to the previously mentioned cultural standards. Providing a good service might not be a priority in Belgium. The lack of motivation to provide a good service possibly lies in the fact that Belgians are less willing to go the extra mile for members from the outgroup, while Belgians would be more willing to help friends, family, or people they are closer to. The possible reason why Belgians are willing to go the extra mile for friends and family lies in the fact that friends and family expect these favours, and it is also expected that these favours are

returned and help is offered when requested. *‘Het hemd is nader dan de rok-The shirt is nearer than the skirt’*. The meaning of this saying is: Family and friends come before people who are less close. The interests of the people with whom Belgians do not have a close relationship are unclear and therefore less important than the interests of family and friends.

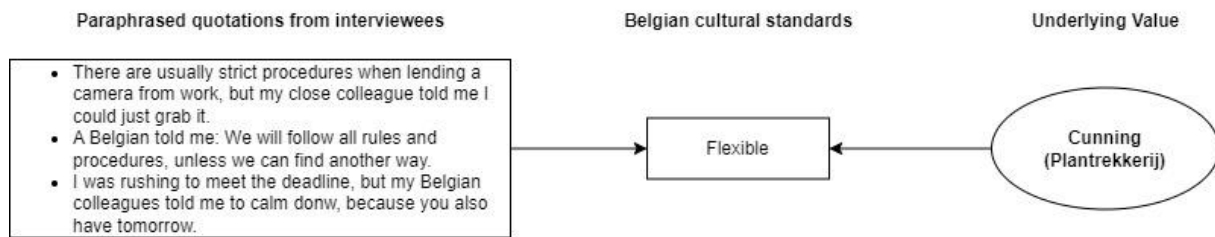
The Belgian cultural standard Group Culture is closely related to the cultural standard Closed. This cultural standard indicates that Belgians love to socialise and go out to have fun, but they predominantly socialise with the same intimate group of people. These are usually friends they have known for a long time, either since the scouts, since primary school, or since secondary school. After such a long time, these people are usually deemed to be trustworthy according to the Belgians. Penetrating a Belgian friend group as an outsider is very difficult because Belgians only let a person join the group if the person is considered to be trustworthy, which again, usually takes a lot of effort from both sides. According to some interviewees, penetrating a Belgian group of friends could take up to several months, because friendships in Belgium are predominantly forged on the basis of trust.

Cunning (Plantrekkerij)

If there is an option to work around rules and procedures, without getting caught, a Belgian would heavily consider choosing this option. The third underlying value that has been identified is called Cunning. This underlying value consists of one Belgian cultural standard, namely Flexible. The fact that only one cultural standard is attached to an underlying value is unique. This cultural standard does not cluster well with the cultural standards that are clustered under the underlying value of Authority. However, some sources, including the expert, think that Belgians are cunning because they try to avoid the rules and regulations that are imposed from above because they experience these regulations as high pressure. Even though this statement could be true, looking at the quotes of the interviewees, it cannot be stated with 100% certainty that the only reason Belgians are cunning, lies in the fact that is mentioned above. As the quotes have shown, Belgians could also be flexible because it makes things easier, procedures more efficient, or because it benefits them in any other way.

Figure 4

Underlying value Cunning (Plantrekkerij)



The Belgian cultural standard Flexible indicates that Belgians are less strict about following rules, deadlines, and procedures. According to the interviewees, it was completely normal to finish projects after the deadline has passed. Belgians also have a more liberal interpretation of the law, the rules, and the procedures that exist. Belgians will try to bend or modify rules/procedures, to gain an advantage or to benefit from them. This is also known as 'Plantrekkerij'. As has been mentioned in the underlying value of Authority, hierarchy is still very apparent in Belgium, and a lot of pressure is exercised from above, e.g. the government or the management in an organisation. Even though Belgians respect this authority, Belgians will often try to circumvent the rules and regulations imposed from above, because Belgians perceive these rules and regulations as pressure. As one interviewee mentioned, a Belgian employee decided to fix a couple of broken servers, without following the correct procedures, because it would save time and money. However, even though Belgians like to bend the rules to their liking, they will not bend rules, break laws, or work around procedures, in the open. Belgians will try their best to find loopholes but will try to do this in the background, which could be considered cunning behaviour. A common Belgian word for this behaviour is 'foefelen', which translates to 'cheating', which is exactly what Belgians do because they try to cheat the system by working around rules and using loopholes, in order to benefit from them, but Belgians would only do this in a non-obvious and cunning manner.

4.3 Expert Feedback regarding the Results

Using the feedback from the expert, a couple of adjustments have been made in the results chapter. Overall, the expert was pleased with the findings of this study, because as a Belgian who has lived and worked in the Netherlands for the past six decades, he recognized a lot of the cultural differences mentioned by the Dutch interviewees. However, regarding the underlying value of Friends and Family and its corresponding cultural standards, the expert noted that a feeling of vulnerability also plays a role in the closed and cautious attitude of the

Belgians and their indirect communication style. Belgians are cautious towards people they do not have a close relationship with because it is not clear how a person with whom you do not have a close relationship would react to a remark or opinion. This person might feel offended and hurt by something that has been said, and Belgians would rather avoid these kinds of situations, just as they themselves fear being offended and hurt by others. Furthermore, a connection has been made between the cultural standard Flexible and the underlying value of Authority. Even though Belgians have a lot of respect for authority and most decisions, including rules and regulations, are made higher up in the hierarchy chain, Belgians will try to evade these rules and procedures by making their plans because Belgians experience these rules and regulations as a high amount of pressure from above. To conclude, the cultural standard of Service is questioned by the expert, because the expert noted that he did not notice a difference in customer service between the Netherlands and Belgium. As someone who has lived in both countries, he could not identify himself with the critical incidents mentioned by the interviewees, regarding this cultural standard.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter will discuss the implications of this research. This chapter also intends to answer the research question, including all sub-questions. Firstly, this chapter starts with an overview of the Belgian cultural standards, perceived from a Dutch person's view, thus answering the sub-question: *What are the Belgian cultural standards from a Dutch perspective?* Secondly, an overview of the underlying values is provided, thus answering the second sub-question: *What is the cultural logic behind the Belgian cultural standards?* Thirdly, the academic relevance and practical relevance of this study are described, which in turn will also provide an answer to the sub-question: *How do the Dutch cope when faced with cultural differences?* Fourthly, the limitations of this research, including some ideas for future research, are discussed. At last, a conclusion is provided, which also includes an answer to the main research question.

5.1 Belgian Cultural Standards as Perceived by the Dutch

The goal of this research was to identify these Belgian cultural standards, as seen from a Dutch person's view, thus answering the first sub-question: *What are the Belgian cultural standards from a Dutch perspective?* The twelve Belgian cultural standards that have been discovered, are described in detail in section 4.1, and a list of the standards is provided below, sorted by highest to the lowest (Times mentioned by interviewees).

1. Indirect communication
2. Decision
3. Hierarchy
4. Closed
5. Work-Life separation
6. Flexible
7. Avoiding open discussion
8. Service
9. Group culture
10. Distance manager and employee
11. No initiative
12. Work-to-Live

Section 4.2 researched the underlying values of the cultural standards that have been found. These underlying values explain why Belgians show a specific kind of behaviour. Three

underlying values have been discovered during this research, namely Authority, Family and Friends, and Cuning, thus answering the second sub-question: *What is the cultural logic behind the Belgian cultural standards?*

5.2 Academic Relevance

The academic contribution of this research lies in the addition of knowledge, regarding Belgian culture as seen from a Dutch perspective to the existing literature. Most studies described the cultural differences between the Belgians and the Dutch using quantitative models, such as the Hofstede model, which describes a culture using six dimensions. Instead of using the model of Hofstede Insights (2022), or the model of Hofstede (1984), this research identified cultural standards, which are deduced from critical incidents, which in turn are extracted from the interviewees. Furthermore, this research also identified the reasoning behind Belgian behaviour. In other words, this research explains why Belgians behave the way they behave.

First, the results of this study are compared to the results of studies which used an ETIC approach. The study by Hofstede (2022), which looked at the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians using six dimensions, showed a higher score for the Belgians than for the Dutch for the Power Distance dimension (Hofstede Insights, 2022). The high score for the Belgians for this dimension matches the cultural standards which have been deduced from the critical incidents in this study. The cultural standards of Hierarchy and Decision match the high score for Power Distance because these standards indicated that Belgians have a lot of respect for authority and Belgians are less likely to challenge decision-making by the management. This lies in the fact that Belgians accept and respect these people since they possess authority and power. The study by Hofstede Insights (2022) also showed significantly higher scores for the Belgians for the following dimensions: Masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. However, cultural differences regarding these dimensions have not been discovered in this study. Furthermore, the lower score for the Belgians for the individualism dimension indicates that Belgians have more of a collectivistic society, where people live in groups, take care of each other, and are loyal to each other (Hofstede Insights, 2022). The low score for this dimension matches with the underlying value of Friends and Family, which indicates that Belgians prefer to move and socialise within a small group, which usually consists of family members or friends they have a close relationship with because these people are considered to be trustworthy and loyal. When looking at the study

of Jansen-Verbeke (1996), no major differences between the Dutch and the Belgians have been found in the scores for the following dimensions: Individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. Cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians barely seem to exist, according to the results of Jansen-Verbeke (1996), while this thesis has been able to identify cultural differences in the shape of twelve cultural standards.

Besides differences in the results of this study and the results of previous studies that have used an ETIC approach, a major difference in the scope of these studies has also been identified. Both the studies by Gerritsen (2002) and Gerritsen (2014), have only researched the differences between the Dutch and the Flemish, leaving out the populace of the other two main regions of Belgium, namely Brussels and Wallonia. However, this study researched a broader populace, because, besides the populace of Flanders, this study also included the populace of Brussels. Furthermore, the scope of Jansen-Verbeke (1996) is quite narrow, since this study only researched managers in two major hotel chains, while this thesis has researched sixteen Dutchmen who work or have worked all over Flanders and Brussels. Furthermore, this study extends the knowledge regarding cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians by identifying twelve cultural standards. Besides identifying these cultural standards, this research also describes and explains why Belgians behave in a specific way in a specific situation, in the form of underlying values, thus going a step further than previous studies.

Second, the studies that used an EMIC approach and this study are compared to each other. The study of Wouters (2005) used an EMIC approach to research cultural differences and the author predominantly uses his own experiences to discuss the cultural differences that exist between the Dutch and the Belgians. A big similarity in the results of the study of Wouters (2005) and this thesis lies in the fact that both studies show that Belgium has more of a 'we' society than the Netherlands. Groups in Belgian society are important because these people can be trusted and therefore Belgians choose to move within these small groups. The results of the study by Enklaar (2007) show similarities with the results of this thesis because his study showed that Belgians are extremely distant, distrusting, and much less inclined to speak their mind, compared to the straightforward Dutch. These results are similar to the cultural standards of indirect communication and closed, which have been found in this research. However, the study by Enklaar (2007) also states that Belgians are more inclined to be at each

other's throats, while the Dutch are more careful in what they say because the Dutch detest conflicts. This is different from avoiding open discussion, a Belgian cultural standard which has been identified in this study. This standard indicates that the Belgians are very careful in voicing their opinion. In other words, regarding straightforwardness and avoiding heated discussions, the results of both studies are different. Furthermore, the studies by Enklaar (2007) and the study by Wouters (2005), do not provide specific Belgian cultural standards, nor does the study by Wouters (2005) give a detailed explanation of the reasoning behind Belgian behaviour. Therefore, with the help of the methodology of Thomas et al. (2010), it was possible to identify the cultural standards, which are deduced from critical incidents, which are extracted from the sixteen Dutch interviewees, and a more detailed description of the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians could have been created. Furthermore, following the methodology of Geertz (1973) by adding underlying values, a thick description of Belgian behaviour was presented, uncovering why Belgians behave the way they behave. This step is absent in previous studies of Thomas and his followers. Explaining why Belgians behave in a specific way and how these cultural standards are connected to each other by an underlying value, is the added value of this study since such a study has not been conducted yet. The differences in the results of this study and previous studies could be explained by the differences in methodology. According to Leeuw (2012), each research method has its drawbacks. A con of using a self-administered questionnaire is the fact that the researcher is not present when the questionnaire is filled in. This could lead to situations where respondents do not fully understand some questions, which could lead to respondents filling in a response which does not answer the question. Furthermore, without the researcher present, it is not possible to ask follow-up questions to get a full understanding of their answers. However, having a researcher present is not always an advantage. According to Leeuw (2012), the presence of a researcher during an interview could lead to respondents being hesitant in answering sensitive questions, which in turn could lead to respondents answering a question in a more desirable way. This phenomenon is also known as response bias (Saunders et al., 2009). To conclude, each methodology has its drawbacks, and these drawbacks could influence the outcome of a study, e.g., misunderstood questions in questionnaires could lead to unsatisfying answers, and social desirability could lead to receiving dishonest answers during interviews.

5.3 Practical Relevance

This section starts with providing an answer to the third sub-question: *How do the Dutch cope when faced with cultural differences?* The Dutch interviewees have often noted that they do not understand why Belgians behave in a certain way, and since this is unknown, the Dutch interviewees respond to Belgian behaviour differently. Generally, the Dutch mentioned they felt like outsiders, because, especially in the beginning, the Dutch behave in the same way as they did in the Netherlands, which was not always appreciated by their Belgian counterparts. However, with time, most of the Dutch interviewees stated that they tried to adapt to the locals in order to not stay in the outgroup, and continue to feel lonely. Some Dutch interviewees even mentioned the fact that after living in Belgium for such a long time, they got used to the cultural differences and sometimes even started to appreciate Belgian culture over Dutch culture. These interviewees mentioned that they are 'Verbelgd', or pretty much took over Belgian behaviour. However, not all interviewees deal with these cultural differences in a more assimilating way where Belgian culture is (fully) embraced. Some interviewees continue to not appreciate Belgian behaviour and the Dutch therefore keep acting the same way as they did in the Netherlands, such as challenging management decisions in meetings, openly confronting Belgian colleagues in case of problems, and communicating directly and straightforwardly with their Belgian counterparts.

Identifying the established 12 Belgian cultural standards, as seen from a Dutch perspective, and identifying their underlying values, which in turn explain the behaviour of the Belgians, is part of the practical contribution of this research. This study could give the Dutch a better understanding of why Belgians behave in a certain way and gives someone who works or wants to work in Belgium a better understanding of these cultural differences. Therefore, it is recommended that Dutch ex-pats, Dutch managers, or Dutch employees who work or have to work with Belgians consult this research, since, with the knowledge that could be extracted from this study, Dutch professionals could be better prepared for the differences that exist, and this knowledge could help to minimise frictions that are caused by these differences in culture, and thus improve cooperation between the Dutch and the Belgians.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is the fact that interviewees might not be completely honest or open while answering the questions during the interviews, and this phenomenon is called response

bias (Saunders et al., 2009). While conducting these interviews it did sometimes occur that interviewees were not willing to give the full story about a specific incident. Therefore, it was important to implement some measures and counterbalance potentially biased answers to retrieve complete and honest stories. For example, the study by Adams and Cox (2008) indicated it is important to explain to the interviewees that the interviews are anonymous and statements made in an interview cannot be traced back to a specific person or organisation. Furthermore, giving the interviewees background information about the study could also help to contextualise the research (Adams & Cox, 2008). Hence, future studies may prevent response bias if the above-mentioned measures are implemented.

Secondly, another limitation is the fact that this study only studied the cultural differences from a Dutch perspective. Since the cultural differences have only been studied from one perspective, the cultural standards are also described from only one perspective, namely the Dutch perspective. However, this could mean that looking at Belgian culture from another perspective, e.g. a German perspective, the results could be different. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise the results of this study. Indeed, cultural frictions between the Dutch and the Belgians, as seen from a Belgian perspective, have not been taken into account in this research. Therefore, it could be possible that Belgians perceive something as cultural friction, while the Dutch do not perceive a specific situation as cultural friction. It is highly recommended that these cultural differences, perceived by a Belgian, are also researched. This can give a more complete picture of the cultural friction between the Dutch and the Belgians.

Lastly, it is important to note that all of the participants have either worked or still work in Flanders or Brussels. No Dutch people working in Wallonia have been interviewed during this study. Therefore, even though no major cultural differences have been identified between Brussels and Flanders, it could be interesting for future research to see whether there are any regional differences, as perceived by the Dutch, by interviewing Dutch ex-pats who have worked or are still working in Wallonia. Research into Wallonia might give more insight into Belgian culture, uncover additional cultural differences between the Dutch and the Belgians, and thus create a more complete picture of Belgian culture.

5.5 Conclusion

The focus of this study was to answer the main research question: *In what situations do the Dutch and the Belgians experience problems/frictions in communication and collaboration on the work floor?* This research question is answered, based on the statements made by the sixteen interviewees, who provided the researcher with dozens of critical incidents, regarding cultural differences. Every situation, or critical incident, in which the Dutch experienced problems in communication or collaboration has been linked to a cultural standard. These cultural standards are Hierarchy, Decision, Distance Manager and Employee, No Initiative, Indirect Communication, Closed, Work-Life Separation, Avoiding Open Discussion, Service, Group Culture, Work to Live, and Flexible.

Furthermore, to fully understand why these problems in communication and collaboration arise, it is important to figure out why Belgians show a specific kind of behaviour. Therefore, besides identifying the Belgian cultural standards, as perceived from a Dutch perspective, three underlying values, which describe why Belgians behave in a specific way, have been identified as well. These underlying values are:

- **Authority:** Hierarchy, Decision, Distance Manager and Employee, and No Initiative.
- **Friends & Family (Onder de kerktoren):** Indirect communication, Closed, Work-Life Separation, Avoiding Open Discussion, Service, Group culture, and Work to Live.
- **Cunning (Plantrekkerij):** Flexible

This study is the first study that has described the Belgian culture, as seen from a Dutch perspective, in detail, thus making a comparison with other studies difficult. However, comparing this study with the results of the study by Hofstede (2022), some similarities were found. For example: The high score for Power Distance could also be seen in the often-mentioned critical incidents, regarding the cultural standards under the underlying value of Authority. However, this study provided a more detailed description of the cultural differences, as seen from a Dutch perspective, and this study also provides a thick explanation of why Belgians behave in a specific way. The strength of this study lies in objectively and systematically collecting empirical data on critical situations between the Dutch and the Belgians and providing it with a description of the cultural logic that explains these typical Belgian behaviours.

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