

Cultural differences between Dutch and Austrians on the work floor

by

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Abstract

Today's global marketplace makes it easier for people to work in foreign countries and for organizations to send employees abroad. A challenge that comes with this globalization is the need for people to adapt to cross-cultural differences. Cross-cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. As a result, there is a significant value in identifying cultural differences. This study focuses on conducting a comparative analysis of the Dutch and Austrian cultures, from a Dutch perspective. The primary objective is to uncover the underlying values that drive Austrian cultural behavior. Therefore, the research question of this study is as follows: "What cultural differences between Austria and the Netherlands are perceived by Dutch employees in the Austrian workplace?"

An emic qualitative methodology was used, which included interviewing sixteen Austrian individuals who experienced living and working in Austria. The approach adopted for this study was the Critical Incident Technique. During the interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on instances where the Dutch and Austrian cultures encountered conflicts. These instances, referred to as critical incidents, were analyzed using the Thematic Analysis method.

A total of sixteen cultural standards were identified, together with three underlying cultural values: *Rangordnung*, *Privatsphäre*, and *ein gutes Leben*. The cultural standards and underlying values create a thick description of the Austrian culture, as perceived by the Dutch. The insights serve as valuable tools for understanding and dealing with the actions and conduct of this culture. Ultimately, the insights have the potential to circumvent any misunderstandings and conflicts that might otherwise arise within the workplace setting.

1. Introduction

The establishment of the EU in 1993 can be considered a big step towards economic integration. It led to a unification of goods and capital markets (Gurgul & Lach, 2014) and made it easier for people to work abroad and for companies to do business with other countries in the union. However, there are a lot of cultural differences between EU member countries, and unification will likely not occur in the future. This can cause problems in communication and understanding during cooperation between people from two or more cultures.

Two countries that have a long-standing business relationship are Austria and the Netherlands^{1,2}. Around twenty major Dutch firms, mostly within the chemical-, energy-, or food industry, are located in Austria. From a geographical perspective, Austria is interesting for these Dutch companies in that it acts as a bridge between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, Austria also benefits from these Dutch companies, as some of these belong to the top 10 most profitable foreign organizations in the country. It is therefore useful to study the fine cultural differences in the workplace between Austria and the Netherlands.

There are different methods to study cross-cultural differences between countries. However, this research often takes place between countries that are far away from each other in terms of geography, mostly countries from different continents: Chatterjee et al. (2021) studied the cultural differences between customers in India and the UK, Jun et al. (2022) looked into cross-cultural differences among nurses in Korea and the US and Schirmbeck et al. (2022) studied the differences of Executive Functions in German and Hong Kong cultures. Because the cross-cultural differences between these countries are relatively large, they are easier to detect. This may result in smaller but still significant cross-cultural differences having the chance of being neglected.

For example, in a study by Ronen & Shenkar (1985), Switzerland, Austria, and Germany are considered as one group, called Germanic Countries. In that way, they are considered to have more or less the same culture and as a result, the marked cultural differences between them are therefore underexposed.

In the same way, the Netherlands is assigned to the Nordic group. While the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries indeed have some similarities, they also have some differences. For example, Scandinavian countries do not possess the Dutch value 'zelfbeschikking' (Enklaar, 2007): claiming a strong autonomy in carrying out their work and having their own opinion at any time.

1: <https://www.cargorilla.nl/>

2: <https://www.rvo.nl/>

At the same time, the Netherlands shows more similarities with Switzerland, a Germanic country. This proves that this grouping of countries into cultural groups can lead to crude and distorted results. It is therefore important to look more closely at individual countries and to use finer tools such as the critical incident technique (Kainzbauer & Brück, 2000) to identify cross-cultural differences between countries more precisely.

Brück (2002) was able to identify cross-cultural differences between countries in the Germanic group: Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. His research was based on a qualitative method using the Critical Incident Technique. He searched for cross-cultural contacts which are perceived as problematic or awkward, so-called critical incidents, to extract the cultural standards that are clashing (Kainzbauer & Brück, 2000). Cultural standards are defined by the social psychologist Alexander Thomas (1991; 1996; 2003) as ways of perceiving, behaving, and judging that are shared with most others from the same culture (Thomas, 2010).

Until now, cross-cultural differences between the Netherlands and Austria based on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) have not yet been identified. Next to that, current research in cross-cultural differences like Kainzbauer & Brück (2000), Brück (2002), and others that use the German scholar (Thomas, 1991; 1996; 2003), mostly use a thin description of the culture. A thin description means no differentiation is made between cultural behavior and the underlying cultural logic.

This qualitative study used the CIT to determine the cultural differences between Austria and the Netherlands by establishing the Austrian cultural standards from a Dutch perspective. In addition, this study aims to go further than Brück and other scholars using CIT: not only identifying cultural standards but also the underlying cultural logic, so that this study creates a thick description of the cultural differences.

Therefore, the research question is as follows:

What cultural differences between Austria and the Netherlands are perceived by Dutch employees in the Austrian workplace?

Sub-questions:

1. What critical incidents occur in the interaction between Dutch and Austrian workers in the Austrian workplace?
2. What cultural standards (from a Dutch perspective) can be identified in these critical incidents?
3. What is the underlying cultural logic for those cultural standards?

1.1 Academic Relevance

Many cross-cultural studies use a quantitative model, like Hofstede's model (1980), to compare cultures. However, these models turn out to be too rough and they are not able to show correct results. Instead, qualitative models like Thomas' method (1991; 1996; 2003), who uses CIT, are able to show more detailed and more reliable cross-cultural differences. But when using this model in practice, a clear differentiation between cultural behavior and the explanation for that behavior: the underlying value, is often not made. To create a thick description of the culture (Geertz, 1973), it is necessary to not only look at the observed behavior but also take into account the underlying cultural logic. This study aims to improve the method used by Thomas (1991; 1996; 2003) and apply the method to the cultural differences between Austria and the Netherlands, which have not yet been studied using CIT.

1.2 Practical Relevance

Dutch businessmen, managers, and expats working and interacting with Austrians can benefit from the insights that are obtained from this study. A better understanding of the Austrian cultural standards can overcome considerable difficulties when it comes to understanding each other. Next to that, by exploring the cultural values of the Austrian culture, communication tools can be provided that support a successful collaboration and avoid clashes between Dutch and Austrians based on cultural differences.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current field of research of cross-cultural studies consists of two distinguishable research streams. First is the functionalist or positivist paradigm. This approach uses etic quantitative methods to “explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Donaldson, 2003). These regularities are transformed into laws and predictive models, like dimensions (Romani et al., 2014). Such dimensions allow for an objective comparison from a cross-cultural perspective. Examples of positivists are Hall (1990), Hofstede (1980), Meyer (2014), Schwartz (1992), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). Etic quantitative research will be explored more in-depth in the next paragraph.

Second is the less dominant interpretative approach, which places itself on the subjective, emic, qualitative side (Barmeyer et al., 2019) by aiming to understand the motives, or values, that lead to differences in behavior (Enklaar, 2022). The interpretive approach does not consider the researcher as an observer but it focuses on the perspectives of individuals involved in the study (Barmeyer et al., 2019). The outcome of such research is called a thick interpretation (Geertz, 1973), which goes more into detail compared to quantitative positivist studies and looks for the cultural logic behind typical behavior. Such a thick description is what differs emic qualitative interpretive research from etic quantitative positivist research. Emic qualitative research will be explored more in-depth in Chapter 2.2

2.1 Cultural differences between Austria and the Netherlands based on etic quantitative methods

As mentioned in the previous section, one way to approach cross-cultural differences is the quantitative positivistic method. In their study, positivist scholars use an etic perspective, which views a culture from the outside. In an article published by anthropologist Kluckhohn (1962), it is argued that culture should have universal categories. Such a perspective on culture makes it easier to compare cross-cultural differences between countries.

Hofstede (1980) used this etic approach and came up with a model containing six dimensions to compare countries' cultures. These are:

1. **Power Distance:** Related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality
2. **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future
3. **Individualism versus Collectivism:** Related to the integration of individuals into primary groups
4. **Masculinity versus Femininity:** Related to the division of emotional roles between women and men
5. **Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation:** Related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and the past
6. **Indulgence versus Restraint:** Related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life.

Next, the culture of Austria and the Netherlands will be compared across the six dimensions of Hofstede, as is visible in Figure 1: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Orientation, and Indulgence.

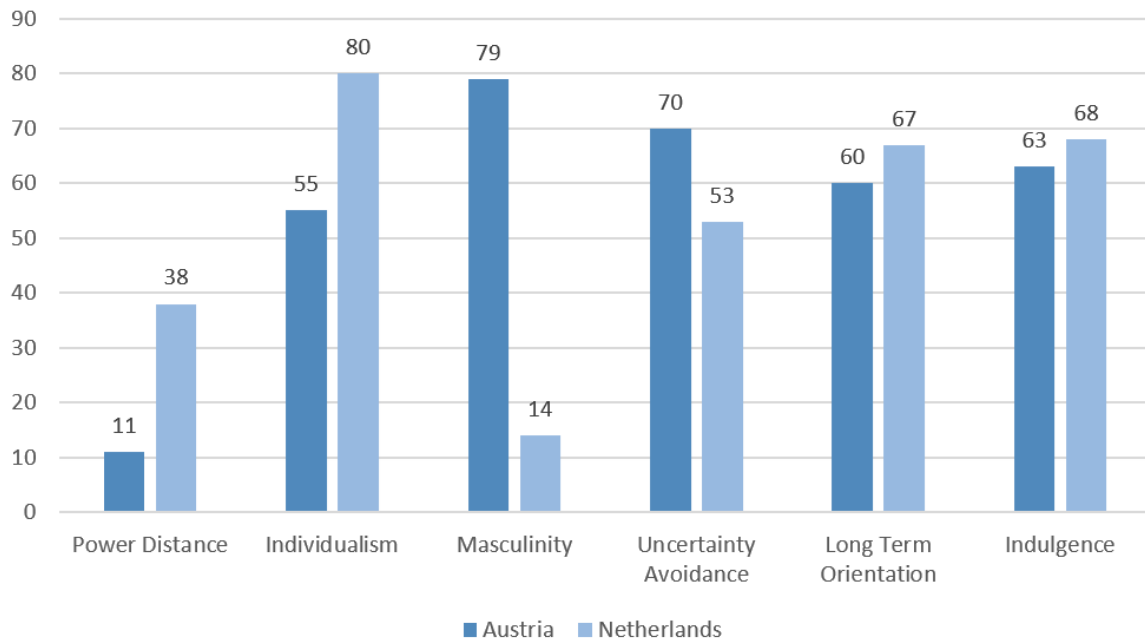


Figure 1: Cultural differences between the Netherlands and Austria (Hofstede-Insights, 2023)

As is visible from Hofstede's six dimensions in Figure 1, two dimensions of both countries differ a lot: Power distance and Masculinity.

Power distance

In both cultures, independency and the avoidance of a hierarchy are valued. On top of that, control is disliked and attitude towards managers is informal. According to Hofstede, Austria scores much lower than the Netherlands on Power Distance, which means that the Austrians have more independency, less hierarchy, and more informal attitudes than the Dutch.

Masculinity

Masculinity is described as the drive for competition, achievement, and success. A low score, on the other hand, means that quality of life and caring for each other are at the center. This is also called femininity. According to Hofstede, Austria is very masculine. Here, the focus is on success, and managers are expected to be decisive. The Netherlands, on the other hand, is very feminine. Here, work and life are well-balanced. Managers are supportive, involve employees, and equality is valued.

While a quantitative analysis of cross-cultural differences makes it easy to compare two or more cultures across several dimensions, it only defines the typical behaviors of the people belonging to a culture.

This is also referred to as a thin description. On top of that, defining a culture based on six dimensions could lead to simplifications and distortions of the culture. The quantitative scores in Hofstede's model do not tell the reader how to understand and effectively interact with a person belonging to a culture. For this, a more in-depth, thick description is needed to understand the values from which the typical behavior arises. It is also important to point out that the scores are based on individuals scoring the dimensions of their own culture. This means that the scores are relative and therefore harder to compare on a cross-cultural level. For example, Hofstede presents a higher score on power distance for the Netherlands compared to Austria. Nevertheless, Dutch workers in the Austrian workplace perceive a higher power distance in Austrian compared to their own culture (Wensink, 2022). The masculine dimension presented by Hofstede can also be questioned. Looking at the masculine scores for both countries, the question here is whether or not Austrians are focused on success relative to the Netherlands. This all shows that the etic approach is not always reliable in a cross-cultural setting.

2.1.1 Studies on Austrians work culture

In their book, Roraff and Krejci (2011) write about business customs in Austria. In this chapter, an emphasis is placed on doing the ‘right thing’. For people from another culture, this could strike as a rather uptight and strict atmosphere. Such strictness also becomes apparent in meetings and appointments in the workplace, which are always formal and to the point at hand. The Austrians often make use of titles, a habit that was handed down by the Habsburgs (Roraff & Krejci, 2011). The intention of the Austrians to use titles is to both show status and flatter people from whom a favor is needed. Another reason for using titles or referring to others by their last name is to keep relationships, and the environment at work as a whole, formal. Here, an important differentiation is made between the formal ‘you’ (*Sie*) and the informal ‘you’ (*du*). People of older age or people of a higher position in the hierarchy, like a manager, are referred to by using the formal ‘you’ (*Sie*). In contrast to Hofstede’s Insights (Hofstede, 1980), this refers to a relatively high Power Distance. These habits in the Austrian workplace are used to not mix work and social time to protect employees’ private sphere and keep working relationships simple.

Steers et al. (2013) analyzed the results of both Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993) and the World Value Group (2000). Both surveyed trends on the workplace across different countries. The scores are a percentage of agreement with the statements

	The Netherlands	Austria
Manager’s sense of drive and initiative	67	63
Manager’s willingness to delegate authority	62	54
People can be trusted	54	32

Table 1: Survey results from Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (1993) and the Work Value Group (2000)

Table 1 shows a clear difference in the existing trust on the workplace in both countries. According to the survey results, the trust in people on the Dutch workplace is much higher than the trust in people on the Austrian workplace.

2.2 Emic (qualitative) research into cross-cultural differences

Instead of the etic quantitative approach, a qualitative emic approach is used in this research. While an etic approach focuses on describing cross-cultural differences in terms of general standards, also called the outside perspective, an emic approach is interpretive and gives an inside perspective by describing a particular culture in its own terms (Galperin et al., 2022). With regard to current qualitative research into cross-cultural differences, many studies fail to make a clear distinction between a culture's typical behavior and its underlying cultural logic. This research focuses on defining typical behavior that is linked to a culture and interpreting the cultural logic that explains the typical behavior.

2.2.1 Austrian culture based on qualitative research

Dunkel and Meierewert (2004) interviewed a total of 201 Austrians, Spaniards, Germans, and Hungarians in order to identify the typical behavior of each of the cultures. They observed three typical behaviors among Austrians. All three relate to the same cultural standard: Having respect for achieved positions. Austrians use the formal *Sie* and their titles to address people they first meet and to indicate the hierarchy that exists between people and on the workplace. The use of titles also makes sure that social conflicts are avoided and people's positions are acknowledged. Once the emotional distance between individuals is reduced or they interact with individuals of the same status, the informal *du* is used during such interactions. However, misusing *du* in interactions during which formality is demanded, can be interpreted as a lack of respect by the other person and it can be experienced as a threat to the position within the system (Dunkel & Meierewert, 2004).

2.3 Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique is one of the methods for qualitative cross-cultural research first used in the United States (Fiedler, Mitchell, Triandis, 1971) and further developed by the German scholar (Thomas, 1991; 1996; 2003). Thomas defines culture as an orientation system, which enables us to give meaning to the objects and people around us (Enklaar, 2022). According to him, a culture consists of cultural standards, which are shared ways of perceiving, behaving, and judging. To identify these cultural standards, Thomas analyzes critical incidents by interviewing people of one culture about recurring situations in the interaction with people of another culture that are unexpected, irritating or painful (Thomas, 2010,22).

At this point, a difference is made between thin descriptions and thick descriptions. Thin descriptions only describe concrete behaviors of people belonging to a culture while thick descriptions explain the meaning of these behaviors and their underlying values. These underlying values represent the cultural logic, which explains the cultural standards. Many studies, like Brück (2002), fail to explain the cultural logic of the cultural standards they found. Fischer et al. (2007) define cultural standards in Poland by differentiating role patterns between men and women and the way of addressing each other in Poland. This cultural standard, 'Status and Etiquette', without its underlying logic, represents a thin description of the culture in Poland. On the other hand, Schroll-Machl (2000) describes the different psychological needs and cultural logic of Germans and Czechs, creating a thick description of the culture.

By using CIT throughout this study, the interpretation of culture is more objective as it is based on grounded data: the cultural standards (Enklaar, 2022). This lowers the chance of biases from the researcher coding the interviews.

2.3.1 Austrian cultural standards based on CIT

Brück (2002) used CIT to determine the Austrian culture from a German perspective. In his study, 24 people were asked about critical incidents on the workplace. From the critical incidents he collected, he could derive six Austrian cultural standards from a German perspective.

While Germans are considered as direct (Brück, 2000), Austrians tend to avoid conflicts (*Konfliktvermeidung*), which showed to be a cause for miscommunication between employees. Here, *Neutralitätspolitik* (Neutrality politics) is a result of that: try to be friends with everyone.

Austrian individuals, in this case employees, tend to be very indirect instead of saying what they think. They do not tend to say *was Sache ist* (What's the case). This means that in situations Austrian dislike something, they don't make that clear directly. On the other hand, they often feel attacked by more direct people, like Germans. In Austria, it is expected that everyone treats each other politely and you can expect this from your Austrian colleague. Criticism is sometimes even brought in a positive way (*Es ist nicht schlecht* – It is not bad) instead of a negative way (Brück, 2000).

Performance (*Leistung*) is considered way more important to Germans than to Austrians. Other than in Austria, the German individuals that perform are valued. Even though on the workplace Austrians try to distinguish themselves based on performance, social skills are what distinguishes one employee from the other. Social relationships, i.e. relationships with colleagues, are considered very important on the Austrian workplace.

In Germany, the hierarchy is less present than in Austria. In the latter, communication happens in a formal way and titles are more often used than in Germany. Using titles on the workplace (e.g. *Frau Cheffin*, *Herr Magister*) shows the hierarchical layers for the persons taking part in the conversation. The advantage here, by using such titles, is that conflicts due to misunderstanding are avoided. On the other hand, this cultural standard sharply contrasts with Austria's low Power Distant dimension suggested by Hofstede.

Germany and Austria also differ with regard to the rules that are imposed on them. Germans are known to be very loyal and strict to the rules. Austrians, on the other hand, consider rules as guidelines. They tend to follow the rules, only if they do not differ too much from their own interest. An often-used example is the behavior of pedestrians. When the traffic light is red, Austrians still cross the street when they consider their own interest, to get to the other side of the street, more important.

While the above six cultural standards are found by using CIT, they are a good example of the blurry line between cultural standards and the cultural logic from which they derive (Enklaar, 2022). The study by Brück (2002) fails to differentiate between concrete behavior and values, therefore not meeting the standards of a good interpretive study (Enklaar, 2022). This study, on the contrary, aims to clearly distinguish concrete behavior as cultural standards and values as cultural logic.

2.4 Dutch cultural values

In the past, research has been conducted to learn about the Dutch cultural standards from the German perspective (Rosemann, 2021). There is, however, no literature about the Austrian culture from the Dutch perspective. Even though many believe that the culture in Germany and Austria are similar, it would be biased to consider the study by Rosemann (2021) in this case. Therefore, the twelve cultural values according to Enklaar (2007), together with their origin, will be analyzed to get to know the Dutch cultural values.

Value	Origin
Salvation (Heil)	Christianity
Guilt and remission (Schuld)	Christianity
Charity (Naastenliefde)	Christianity
Truth (Waarheid)	Christianity
Work (Arbeid)	Protestantism
Order and Neatness (Orde en Netheid)	Protestantism
Utility (Nut)	Protestantism
Reliability (Betrouwbaarheid)	Protestantism
Moderation (Matigheid)	Protestantism
Consensus (Overeenstemming)	Holland
Equality (Gelijkheid)	Holland
Self-determination (Zelfbeschikking)	Holland

Table 2: The twelve Dutch cultural values (Enklaar, 2007)

Since Austria is Christian as well, the values Salvation, Guilt and Remission, and Truth are the same as in the Netherlands. The remaining eight values will probably be different based on Protestantism and the mentality of Holland province.

Work means that being productive is considered as good while doing nothing is seen as useless. It is therefore appreciated when someone works hard.

Order and neatness provides a well-organized life in that it strives for tidiness, rules, and tight planning. People want to live in an ordered environment.

Utility links to work in that everything that is done should be useful or provide something. While working hard is appreciated, if it leads to nothing it is considered a waste of time.

Reliability stands for the commitment to agreements that are made. Once something is promised, you have to commit, otherwise you are unreliable.

Moderation is about being in control of yourself and being patient instead of over-doing something. Here, uncontrolled behavior is seen as immature.

Consensus strives to peacefully resolve opposing opinions. It is expected that hear someone out and come to an agreement instead of being aggressive or offending the other person.

Equality means that every individual should be considered and treated equally, including yourself. It is not appreciated if you consider yourself better than someone else or favor one person over the other.

Self-determination is a value that considers everyone to be independent and free. Each person should be able to act freely, without the burden of others taken into account. This means that other people can't force you to do something against your own will.

These eight values give a good insight into Dutch cultural values. However, this method does not show an underlying logic explaining the values, which is necessary for creating a thick description. The cultural values by Enklaar (2007) are based on literature instead of empirical research. CIT is a good method to study cultural differences in an empirical way, which is done by Thomas (1991; 1996; 2003,) and Kainzbauer and Brück (2000). However, they only look at cultural standards while neglecting the underlying cultural logic. The cultural standards they present are a mix of concrete behavior and cultural values. This study aims to fill the lack of differentiation by applying a methodology using Gioia's (2013) way of structuring the data, where a clear distinction is made between first-order concepts (interviewee quotes), second-order concepts (cultural standards), and third-order concepts (cultural values).

3. Methodology

The methodology of this research is divided into two parts: First is the collection of the data and second is the analysis of the gathered data. This study is part of the project ‘One market, many cultures’, which is an initiative of the European Institute for Cross-Cultural Studies (CROCUS) and the section of Change Leadership and Organization Behavior (CMOB) at the University of Twente.

This study explores Austrian cultural standards by investigating concrete situations on the work floor during which Dutch employees encountered communication problems with Austrians due to cultural differences. Researchers who study qualitative phenomena look for context, explanations, and interpretations, in contrast to quantitative researchers who seek causation, predictions, and generalizations (Hoepfl, 1997). Therefore, it is most appropriate to employ a qualitative approach for this type of empirical research, as it is concerned with people’s lives, beliefs, experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings, as well as organizational functioning, cultural phenomena, and relations between nations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3.1 Data sample

In line with the Critical Incident Technique, data is collected through semi-structured interviews. Attention is paid to recurring situations in the interaction between the Dutch interviewee and an Austrian colleague that are unexpected, irritating, or painful (Enklaar, 2022). Before the interview took place, each participant received an e-mail that informs the participant what data is retrieved and how their data is processed. Right before the actual interview started the participant was informed again regarding informed consent and how the data will be treated.

16 Dutch individuals were interviewed to acquire data, since saturation is more likely to occur after 11 interviews (Thesing, 2016). To begin with, the participants should have worked in Austria for at least 6 months, so that they are already aware of the cultural differences (Pedersen, 1995). Second, the participants have to be wholly integrated and collaborate with Austrian colleagues to guarantee the discovery of cultural differences. Third, the job position of the participants should preferably be varied.

Interview #	Age	Gender	Job title	Region
1	30-40	Male	Productmanager	Villach
2	30-40	Male	Constructor	Burgenland
3	20-30	Female	Regional Supply Planner	Salzburg
4	30-40	Female	Teamlead	Vienna
5	20-30	Male	PhD	Styria
6	20-30	Male	Store Design Engineer	Vienna
7	20-30	Female	Scientist Microbiology	Vienna
8	30-40	Female	Office Assistant	Vienna
9	20-30	Male	Business Developer	Vienna
10	20-30	Male	Category Lead Packaging	Upper Austria
11	40-50	Male	Head of Product Management	Styria
12	30-40	Male	Finance Director	Vienna
13	30-40	Male	Head of Strategic Sales	Upper Austria
14	30-40	Female	Scientist	Vienna
15	20-30	Female	Intern	Vienna
16	20-30	Male	PhD	Vienna

Table 3: Demographics of Dutch interviewees

Before the interviews were held, interviewees were asked for their consent to be recorded. In addition, interviewees were reminded at the beginning of the interview that the interviews were recorded. The interviews were held and recorded through the online video conference software Teams in the interviewee's native language: Dutch. The reason for this is that people can express themselves better in their native language.

All questions asked during the interview should stimulate the interviewee to talk about Critical Incidents they experience on the Austrian workplace. Because of that, an interview guideline was followed that focuses on questions relating to interactions with Austrians. An English translation of the guideline can be found in Appendix A. The goal here is to collect as many detailed stories as possible about the Austrian behavior from the Dutch perspective. An important element to take into account is that the interviewee should be prevented from generalizing about the incidents. Instead, stories should be extracted that exactly describe what happened, how it started, who was involved, how they reacted to the situation, and what the outcome was. Another important element when conducting the interviews is confirmation bias, which is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior values (Nickerson, 1998). Next to that, it could be possible that participants give non-desirable answers by only providing incomplete or generalized stories. In such cases, the answers can't be analyzed in the next step. Lastly, there is the social desirability bias. The social desirability bias is the general tendency of research subjects to choose responses that they believe are more socially desirable or acceptable instead of responses that reflect their true thoughts or feelings. Social desirability bias may become an issue when research involves collecting data on personal or socially sensitive issues (Grimm, 2010).

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed into written text with the help of the recordings. The next step was to translate the relevant quotes and parts from Dutch into English.

3.2 Data analysis method

During the data analysis of this study, a Thematic Analysis was conducted, since it provides a thorough explanation of data by identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The gathered data was organized by using first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions according to Gioia's method (Gioia et al., 2012).

According to the thematic analysis, it is first important to get familiar with the data by going through the gathered data. Next, codes are created by pointing out the critical incidents. These are the first-order themes according to Gioia's method. Step three represents the search for overlapping themes, which is accomplished by comparing the first-order themes and finding similarities between them to come up with second-order themes. During the fourth step, the second-order themes are reviewed relative to the transcripts to create hypotheses. Lastly, the aggregated dimensions are created based on the second-order themes.

3.2.1 Interpretation

The second step was to create a thick description, to explain the cultural standards by linking groups of cultural standards to an underlying value based on an interpretation. Finally, this research on Austrian cultural standards perceived by Dutch workers on the workplace is compared with the research by Brück (2002) about the Austrian cultural standards from the German perspective, and with other research on the Austrian culture. Using this approach, it can be evaluated whether earlier conclusions about the Austrian cultural standards still hold or whether it leads to a more accurate description.

4. Results

This section presents the results that were found during the interviews. A description of each Austrian cultural standard is presented first, along with quotes that come from the interviews. After that, these cultural standards are linked to cultural values.

4.1 Austrian cultural standards

After conducting the sixteen interviews, a total of sixteen cultural standards are identified, which are listed in the table below. The table does not include cultural standards mentioned by fewer than three interviewees, as these are not considered typical behavior .

Cultural Standards	Description	Mentions
Formality	Adressing and interacting with colleagues in a formal and polite way	11
Authority	The person with authority decides what will be done and how	10
Reticence	Showing a reserved behavior towards strangers	10
Indirectness	Avoiding sharing feedback and opinions openly	9
Adhere to rules and structures	Everything is covered and grounded by rules	7
Epicureanism	Enjoying life is more important than work	6
Conservatism	Sticking to what worked in the past	6
Aversion gegen Fremden	A distant stance towards people deviating from traditional Austrian standards and customs	5

Zuständigkeit	Focusing exclusively on the tasks one is responsible for	4
Titles	Addressing every person with the appropriate professional title	4
Hierarchy	Keeping a clear distance between the ranks of the hierarchy on the work floor	4
Negativity avoidance	Avoiding all negative issues in the interaction with colleagues	4
Obedience	Always follow the instructions of superiors	4
Grant	Unfriendly and uninterested towards strangers	4
Carefreeness	Taking it easy with planning and carrying out tasks	3
Punctuality	Being strictly on time for meetings	3

Table 4: Austrian cultural standards

In the next section, a description of all the cultural standards perceived by the Dutch is given. First, a neutral description of the cultural standard is given, followed by some quotes from interviewees. In the end, there is an explanation of why the Austrian cultural standard can conflict with Dutch cultural standards.

Formality

Austrian employees tend to uphold formal relationships on the work floor, emphasizing a sense of professionalism and maintaining a certain level of distance. The Austrian work floor is therefore characterized by a culture of maintaining formal behavior during interactions with colleagues. This includes adhering to specific protocols such as using titles like *Herr* (Mr.) and *Frau* (Mrs./Ms.) followed by the individual's last name or title when addressing colleagues and managers, or using formal language only (i.e. not making jokes). Using someone's first name or even the informal *du* (informal 'you') without permission is considered too informal and can even be deemed disrespectful. On top of that, personal information is generally not shared with colleagues, reserved instead for family and close friends only.

Quote 1: *“I think most Austrians are a bit more **distant**. Also, Austrian colleagues among themselves who only say ‘Sie’ for example. That’s really a difference in distance and also **not too desirable to build a friendly relationship** so to speak.”* (Interviewee 4)

Quote 2: *“That is actually very lived in our company, that we do everything with ‘je’, so we have a ‘du’ culture. And I think that’s a real contrast with Austrian society, which as far as I’m concerned is still very much...yes I don’t want to say that it’s necessarily polite, but people think it’s really important that they are addressed with ‘Sie’ and even with their title. And we don’t have that within the company and I never really got that in the Netherlands either, but people really pay attention to the fact that you use Herr Dokter or Frau Dokter. And that people also really just get **offended** or don’t even want to respond the moment you don’t do that actually. But it does seem that Austrian people really insist on that. Probably because people feel that it either gives them a little bit more prestige or also recognition for apparently having a certain education or a certain direction.”* (Interviewee 12)

Quote 3: *“Yes I have had a lot of contact with Austrian agencies at work, for example municipalities, police, hospitals. And one big difference I did notice is the degree of politeness that is expected in communication on the phone and e-mail. You have to address people by their title, **you have to be very careful what you say**. Being very polite, because if you were to deal with Austrians in a quasi-Dutch way, i.e. a bit less hierarchical, that would not be appreciated.”* (Interviewee 15)

The Dutch culture values informality since the ideal is that individuals are treated as equals, regardless of their social status or professional position. While the Austrians show respect through the use of titles and formal, polite language in order to follow hierarchical structures, the Dutch culture has a flatter hierarchical structure in which titles are often skipped to treat everyone the same. The Dutch see Informality and straight, non-polite speech as a way to foster open and honest communication, reduce barriers and promote a sense of equality among people.

Authority

Austrian employees are used to getting told what to do by their managers, instead of coming up with their own way of working. This hierarchical structure is characterized by the managers and people with more experience or years of service having significant power and making decisions without input from subordinates. With authority comes top-down communication with no opportunities for open conversations between managers and employees and questioning decisions. At the same time, employees expect a certain degree of directive style from their managers. This behavior acts both as guidance for employees, as they are told by their managers what to do. It also acts as a confirmation for employees, as their actions can be justified by the manager’s directive approach.

Quote 1: “*Actually the person in charge or the person who was **the oldest** or **had the biggest mouth**, or of course that’s also possible, said it had to be that way. It was like that, and after that, there was no more talk about it, and with different people, younger people in this case, of course, there was some talking like “yeah hey, such things can’t be done anymore, we don’t do it that way nowadays.” But it was also said, you know, with those people you don’t stand a chance. You can try but you are talking to a wall.*” (Interviewee 2)

Quote 2: “*I believe that in Austria it is expected that you are a little more directive, that you at least communicate a clear message of how we are going to do it, this is how I expect us to do it. And now it’s up to you to turn that around and then again to give people the freedom and opportunity to do it themselves.*” (Interviewee 12)

In the Dutch culture, there is a strong presence of *zelfbeschikking* (self-determination), which gives the Dutch employees freedom in carrying out their tasks without much guidance or authority from the manager. As a result, decision-making is not centralized but involves the employees as well. While Austrians expect clear lines of authority and decision-making by superiors, the Dutch value participation, encouraging input from all employees, regardless of their position in the organization.

Reticence

Austrians exhibit a reserved and cautious nature in their social interactions, particularly when meeting new people or engaging in small talk. They place a high value on privacy and tend to keep personal matters to themselves, avoiding unnecessary conversations. It is important to note that this reticence behavior does not reflect unfriendliness but rather reflects a need for defending personal boundaries.

Due to this respect, Austrians try to avoid approaching individuals they are not familiar with. At the same time, if approached by others, they tend to circumvent personal contact by refraining from sharing private information with strangers.

Quote 1: “*The atmosphere is good. But in the beginning, especially as Dutch people, I thought oh, it’s a bit more reserved. So people are a little more reserved and cautious. In the beginning, you think, well, what a deadbeat sometimes. It has a lot to do with respect, so they are more reserved at first. Maybe see a little bit how the wind blows, but also keep an eye on what kind of position you have.*” (Interviewee 8)

Quote 2: “*Ordinary people in the Netherlands are much more open and much easier to have a chat with, just about small things. But I have a colleague, for example, we get on well together, but I don’t know anything about him or his private situation or anything like that. And I think I would not have that situation in the Netherlands.*” (Interviewee 8)

The Dutch culture places a high value on creating an open and friendly atmosphere, in which personal and private information is shared with colleagues to get to know each other better. The Dutch believe in the importance of self-expression, speaking up and actively participating in discussions. They may interpret the Austrian reticence as disinterest, passivity, or a lack of engagement.

Indirectness

Austrians tend to not give their opinion or feedback to others to avoid embarrassing confrontations. This indirect behavior is particularly evident when dealing with strangers or individuals with whom they have a formal work relationship. For instance, Austrians may refrain from outright saying “no” if something is not done according to their standards or wishes; instead, they may opt to offer positive remarks such as “it is partly done well”. It is crucial to recognize the underlying message conveyed through such indirect language.

At the same time, the cultural norm in Austria discourages the practice of providing direct feedback to colleagues. Instead, in case of conflicts or disagreements, employees approach their manager or superior, who will address the issue with the corresponding person. Offering constructive criticism or pointing out mistakes openly is generally seen as embarrassing and unacceptable. As a result of that, Austrians tend to rely on subtle cues and indirect communication to convey dissatisfaction or corrective suggestions.

Quote 1: *“They’d rather escalate a confrontation over the manager than try to talk it out with you themselves first. I had a colleague the other day who came from procurement and went to another department and he then ordered a coffee machine, and we have to put everything we order into a system. And he didn’t do that and there came the bill. Then I angrily sent him a message that he was in the purchasing department, and he should know how it works. And then I get told by my manager like hey, you can’t treat people like that anymore. And then they talk about manners and respect and everything.”* (Interviewee 10)

Quote 2: *“If you didn’t meet your goal, you get, say, 10 minutes of an introduction to the topic and then blah blah blah. And then at the end, you get told by our supervisor “Maybe next time you can do it this way and that way, so then maybe you can do it better.” And as a Dutchman, you just go into it like yes, you didn’t achieve your goal. What are we going to do so you can do it better next time? And I have had problems with that sometimes with colleagues, that I reacted a little too directly.”* (Interviewee 10)

The Dutch culture values open, plain and direct communication without polite phrases. Dutch people tend to be straightforward, honest, and explicit in expressing their thoughts and opinions. They appreciate clear and concise communication,

focusing on the main point without beating around the bush. This directness in the Dutch culture is seen as a sign of respect, efficiency, and transparency, whereas indirect messages tend to lack clarity or sometimes go unnoticed.

Epicureanism

Austrians have a strong prioritization of their personal life. This emphasis is reflected in their approach to work, where they strive to avoid allowing work to dominate their lives. Instead, Austrians value taking time for leisure, family, and personal well-being. Several factors on the Austrian work floor highlight this emphasis on an Epicurean lifestyle. Firstly, the start of the weekend every Friday at 1 pm. Additionally, Austrians appreciate the tradition of having a warm lunch with colleagues, whether it be at the workplace or in a restaurant. For Austrians, this is a sign that everything in life is going well.

Quote 1: *“And here in Austria, and this is another difference from the Netherlands. On Fridays after 1 pm you don’t reach anyone anymore. Everyone is on their weekend then. I remember, for example, getting meetings from my colleagues from Germany on Friday afternoons at 4 pm. And I thought bye-bye at 4 pm Friday afternoon. I’ll already be in the weekend. And then I just did those on decline.”* (Interviewee 3)

Quote 2: *“You sometimes agree with people to meet in the afternoon. And if I mention a time, I often say half past one or two, or something like that. But I’m not going to suggest, between 12 and 2 to schedule something with someone.”* (Interviewee 5)

Quote 3: *“And also lunch is really a thing here. In Austria, a lot of people have a warm lunch. So for example, if you haven’t brought your own lunch, you might want to suggest to a colleague to go to a restaurant around the corner and get something together. For me, that was a big step because in the Netherlands it’s often just a sandwich with cheese and you go on.”* (Interviewee 6)

Quote 4: *“After work, they often go to eat something, or have drinks. At lunchtime too, so that’s a big difference. And in the Netherlands, everyone usually brings their own lunch. I think that’s nice here, the mentality of Austria is enjoyment. Besides hard work, a lot of fun things are done.”* (Interviewee 8)

In the Dutch workplace culture, it is sometimes expected that private life should make way for work-related responsibilities. In such a strong work ethic, more emphasis is placed on productivity, efficiency, and getting the job done. Dutch employees often prioritize work and may have a greater focus on achieving professional success, rather than focusing on elements like leisure, lunch, or socializing. They value efficiency and dedication to work responsibilities. As a result, Austrians value leisure time more and will take more breaks from work to enjoy life than the Dutch.

Conservatism

The Austrian work floor is characterized by a conservative approach that values traditional methods and practices. This conservative mindset has a deep respect for established norms and a resistance to change that might disrupt these traditional approaches. Austrians value stability and reliability, which leads them to be cautious in adopting new methods or ideas. By adhering to familiar or proven practices, Austrians aim to mitigate potential uncertainties and maintain a sense of control over their work.

Quote 1: *“If you stick to what worked before, it will go well this time too. The disadvantage is, that way you always stay as it was. And I’ve also noticed that at this company, and also with younger colleagues who also learned things differently in school. But something new is of course also a risk, is of course uncertainty for people who are no longer open to that, or are just very strict about what they used to learn. If you have to step away from that, develop further, and learn things now... yes, then it may become vulnerable for such a person who is a bit older... Yes very difficult, because yes, you are walking on thin ice and you don’t want that, do you? Then those younger persons can kick you off your position. Yes, people have that feeling then I think.”* (Interviewee 2)

Quote 2: *“I think there is a lack of digitization. So that for a lot of things you actually still have forms, papers, and communication with the Behörden (authorities). The Behörden, that’s a word. The Behörden is just something, you have to do that, you have to go to the Behörden to arrange your things. So unlike in the Netherlands where you have a portal for everything to organize your things. No, you have to go to the provincial city and physically arrange it there.”* (Interviewee 13)

While the Austrians have a preference for stability, order, and preserving established processes, the Dutch value progressiveness and openness to change. Therefore, the Dutch tend to have a higher acceptance of change, and there is a greater emphasis on personal choice instead of having to stick to procedures, rules, or habits from the past. In the Dutch culture, aversion to change and sticking to the same procedures for years is considered inefficient, as was pointed out by multiple interviewees.

Aversion gegen Fremden

Austrians have a clear traditional background with their own norms and values. They take a distant stance towards people that do not fit within these norms and values, because they have a different culture, different habits or lifestyles. These people are often looked upon, sometimes in a negative way. However, an outcome of this behavior is that Austrians may exhibit a bias towards their fellow compatriots over individuals from different nationalities (*Fremde* in German). This preference for their own nationality can potentially be perceived as a form of prejudice or even racism.

Quote 1: *“Part of my work at the Dutch embassy was to visit Dutch detainees in prisons. Yes, it’s a very specific sector of Austria of course. But people who work in that range, prison staff, if they had a Dutch detainee in their prison and he was of Turkish or Moroccan descent, they were treated differently than other detainees. For example, they were refused halal food or not allowed to go outside as long as other prisoners. Yes racism, that is really a big problem in Austria. Now I’m speaking mainly about the prison sector, but, well, in other parts of society it’s also really a big problem.”* (Interviewee 15)

Quote 2: *“I’ve always, I live with a woman, and that’s okay in the Netherlands. And in Austria, there are some, not negative, but reactions to that like “Do you share a home? Do you have two bedrooms or something?” But I always say, Austria is about 20 years behind with the Dutch with social things. Also with topics like racism and so on. In Austria, as a black person in the subway, you do get looked at. Well, I can’t imagine that in Amsterdam you’re stared at as a black person in the subway because you’re black.”* (Interviewee 4)

The Dutch are more used to cultural diversity in society. There is a bigger tolerance for cultural differences, which means that everyone can adhere to his or her culture, as long as it does not affect others. On top of that, the value *gelijkheid* (equality) of people is very present in the Dutch culture. Therefore, the Dutch can be very sensitive to unequal treatment and it can even be considered racist.

Respect for rules and structures

Austrians place great importance on adhering to established procedures, protocols, structures, and rules in the workplace. Organizations typically provide clear guidelines or structures, to ensure that everyone is aware of and understands the rules and regulations. This commitment helps create a structured and harmonious work environment where expectations and boundaries are clearly defined. Next to that, the respect for rules contributes to a sense of trust and reliability within Austrian workplaces. Colleagues and managers can rely on each other to fulfill their obligation and perform their roles in accordance with the established standards.

Quote 1: *“A colleague of mine wanted to take his bike into the metro, but there was a rule that you can only take your bike into the metro after 7.30 AM. And he was standing there at 7.20 AM and it was raining very hard, but an older Austrian lady was blocking the road in front of him because he was not allowed to enter the metro because he still had to wait for 10 minutes.”* (Interviewee 15)

Quote 2: *“They are very much into rules. For example, imagine, you are standing along the street and there is not a car for miles, but the traffic light is red. As a Dutchman you think, no problem, I’ll just go, I’ll just walk to the other side. In Austria, they keep waiting. That still surprises me very much.”* (Interviewee 9)

As in Austria, the Dutch also have to follow rules on the work floor. However, the Dutch apply these rules with more flexibility than the Austrians, resulting in the rules being followed less strictly. The Dutch culture values individual autonomy and a certain degree of flexibility in interpreting and applying rules. Instead of strictly following the rules, there is a willingness to challenge existing rules if they are perceived as unjust or inefficient.

Zuständigkeit

Zuständigkeit, which translates to responsibility or competence, means that the Austrians tend to only feel responsible and accountable for their personal tasks and not beyond. It is characterized by a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities within an organization, where individuals are assigned specific tasks based on their areas of expertise. This means that the Austrians can be trusted to take such responsibility for their job, only if the task is in line with their job description.

Quote 1: *“Yeah well again that’s for my colleagues, they’re not really into that. They rather do their own thing, the task at hand. They are more just doing their job, I don’t have those discussions about other tasks with them. It could be that they think it’s the boss’ business and they have nothing to do with it. Which in principle, of course, they do.”* (Interviewee 1)

Quote 2: *“In Austria, they often shift it onto the hierarchy. So they say, yes, that’s not my responsibility, the chief has to do that. Yes, that is something that plays less of a role in the Netherlands, of course. You have a bit of the reverse story, even that everyone has something to say and wants to say, but also takes responsibility. And that’s something that is not present in Austria. That is sometimes very difficult to get things done, you need a lot to get things done. You have to talk to the right people to get things done. This is also the case in small companies. If you ask at a small, hey, can you do that? Yeah, there’s no point. You ask twice because you have to ask the chief too, otherwise it won’t happen.”* (Interviewee 13)

The Dutch culture encourages individuals to take initiative and responsibility beyond their assigned tasks. That is because the Dutch feel responsible for the entire group’s work and the success of the organization, so they will pick up tasks if they can’t be carried out by other colleagues.

Titles

The use of titles plays a crucial role in defining the hierarchical order on the Austrian work floor, and to promote formality and respect. Titles are closely tied to one’s position and role within the organization (e.g. *Herr Dokter*). They can be indicators of ranks, achievements, and qualifications (e.g. “MSc.” followed by name). Furthermore, titles are used during external business interactions.

When communicating with clients or partners, the use of appropriate titles is considered essential to establish credibility and maintain a formal tone.

Quote 1: *“They are all a little bit focused on their titles. So when you go to the doctor, it’s “Herr...” or “Herr doctor” or something. Then I think, well, I don’t care whether I have a title or not. That’s maybe another difference that I do notice, that they are all very fond of their title. And yes, I don’t have it anywhere, I really don’t care if I have a title or not.”* (Interviewee 3)

Quote 2: *“It’s more of a status example, but I was very surprised that in the beginning I was advised to write my title, my academic title, on my post. Everybody does that in Austria. So if you have a bachelor, you are BSc., if you have a Master, you are MSc., etc. But it was said to me that I have to use it because people handle your mail better. In the beginning, my letters came in a white envelope and then it was a little creased. And now that I do, they arrive spotless.”* (Interviewee 16)

The Dutch often skip titles since they have a preference for informal communication and treating each other as equals, even between higher management and ordinary employees. The use of titles can be seen as creating unnecessary distinctions or implying a power difference, which is not in line with the equality that is valued by the Dutch and may be considered as arrogance. The use of titles may also create a barrier to an open dialog, and therefore a more informal approach is preferred.

Hierarchy

On the Austrian work floor, a clear and well-defined hierarchical system is present that influences the interactions. Managers are accorded respect and employees are expected to follow their instructions diligently. One should always report to one’s own superior and never contact a manager higher in the line. Individuals that are placed higher in the hierarchy enjoy higher status, which can come with certain benefits like bigger offices.

Quote 1: *“I felt unfairly treated, treated as an unequal. I also didn’t get an office with the rest on the work floor; that is, in their department. No, they had a kind of classroom for me which was not used and I could sit there. I didn’t feel very connected to the people there, the way they treated me in the first place.”* (Interviewee 9)

Quote 2: *“I have a friend, for example, who works at a law firm. They are very strict there. There, they really just only let her talk to her immediate boss. They will never give her a look or talk to her or anything like that. Because yes, she is an assistant. Yeah, there they are very strict...if you don’t have a doctor’s degree or I don’t know, you’re just somebody...They will treat you with respect, but you’re not interesting to them or anything.”* (Interviewee 8)

The Dutch culture strongly values an egalitarian approach to social interactions, in which everyone is treated the same. Dutch society has a flatter or no hierarchical structure, in which individuals are treated as equals regardless of their position or status. There is the belief in the Dutch culture that power distance on the work floor should be minimized.

Negativity avoidance

Austrians tend to avoid negative issues: not only feedback or criticism, but they also try to avoid confrontations or problems. Therefore, saying “no” is rather unusual. Instead, Austrians often use indirect communication because directly addressing negative issues might be found embarrassing and rude. The focus during interactions on the work floor is not to highlight problems, but to find solutions.

Quote 1: *“It feels that a lot of times here people say ‘we will look, wir schauen mal’. And in other words, well, yes, I’ve heard what you’re saying but, you know, we don’t actually do anything with it.”* (Interviewee 2)

Quote 2: *“In this case, what I’ve noticed in this company with these different colleagues, especially older colleagues, problems are just not talked about. There is something, everybody knows it, and everybody talks about it among themselves. But the right people in the right place...that we say, this is it, these are the options and this is what we’re going to do. But people wait as long as possible.”* (Interviewee 2)

In the Dutch culture, the emphasis is on open communication and directness. As a result, Dutch people tend to be straightforward in expressing their thoughts and opinions, including criticism and disagreement, which can be perceived as rude by the Austrians. The Dutch consider honest and direct feedback to be important for problem-solving and maintaining transparency: Solving the problem is more important than being polite.

Obedience

The obedience displayed by Austrian employees on the work floor is in line with their strong adherence to managerial authority. On the Austrian work floor, there is the expectation for employees to unquestioningly obey their managers, even when assigned tasks may conflict with their personal values or are hardly feasible. Even if they strongly disagree, employees will not express their dissatisfaction as failure to comply with a manager’s directives can be viewed as a disrespectful act.

Quote 1: *“I was in a meeting with another colleague, for example, and he then heard from that Austrian manager if he can have a few slides ready for Tuesday so that the manager can present them for the board meeting. But that was Friday at 4 pm and we have Monday off, so Tuesday is, say, the first working day of the week. And well, I then hear frustration from that colleague saying well, couldn’t he schedule it better, but okay I will do it.”* (Interviewee 7)

Quote 2: “*For example, I have a colleague. We have restructured a bit, structured new tasks, and then the boss says well, I think it’s good if you are going to do that. And then the colleague doesn’t say anything about it. And then you notice that the colleague doesn’t like it at all, or isn’t as cheerful anymore. And a few weeks later she quit her job.*” (Interviewee 1)

Dutch workers are encouraged to think independently, contribute ideas, and suggest improvements to processes, instead of only following the instructions of their superiors, due to the value *zelfbeschikking* (self-determination). If a Dutch person simply follows instructions without actively participating, it can be seen as passive and can lead to frustration among colleagues. In the Dutch culture, it is regarded positively to express opinions that challenge the status quo and to engage in discussions.

Grant

Austrians generally behave politely towards others, but this comes together with a grumpy (*grantige* in German) undertone. Such behavior can be perceived as unfriendly and uninterested by others, and it creates a certain level of distance from their colleagues, especially when dealing with individuals they are not well-acquainted with. The Austrians value their personal privacy, and casual interactions or non-work-related interactions may therefore be considered inappropriate.

Quote 1: “*For example, when I arrived here. I arrived by plane, with a few bags and boxes and stuff. I arrive at the airport and you have these carts, these trolleys. So I wanted to grab one, but it needed a coin. I’m thinking goddamn, an old-fashioned system. And a guy is sitting behind a counter with his feet up, reading a book or on his phone and I’m standing there with a lot of bags. I say, sorry, do you maybe have a coin? Or can you change? I have 5 euros and 10 euros, and there has to be a coin in that thing because I can’t carry all the bags like this. And he is not helpful or anything at all. He thinks ‘What are you doing here?’. He says, yeah, then you should just go to a bank, you should go there and change. I say yes okay, but maybe you personally have some coins in your pocket which I could exchange with you. And he says no. Didn’t even come up for a moment, no intention to help. I got really pissed off and then he said well I would file a complaint then.*” (Interviewee 14)

Quote 2: “*There is no such thing as hospitality in public places. Well, for example, if you go to the swimming pool and you get there and you ask the lady at the counter whether it is busy in the pool right now. And they are just really unfriendly. ‘You can just see for yourself, turn around, what do you think?’. Well sorry, I’m just trying to have a chat. So those are situations where they are just grumpy. And they don’t mince words, to disguise it.*” (Interviewee 9)

The differences in communication styles and interpersonal interactions between Austrians and Dutch can lead to misunderstandings.

The Dutch culture values openness and a casual approach to communication, during which people are treated amicably. On the Dutch work floor, there is a preference for more informal conversations, even in interactions between employees who may not know each other well. The Dutch might find the grumpy and distant behavior to protect their privacy too unapproachable.

Carefreeness

The carefreeness ingrained in Austrian culture is reflected by how Austrians manage their schedules, appointments, tasks, and responsibilities. Unlike those with rigid work schedules, Austrians take it easy with planning and carrying out tasks and enjoy more freedom and availability for spontaneous activities such as meeting friends or accepting dinner invitations. This flexible mindset also extends to their approach to work-related tasks and deadlines. Austrians are less stringent when it comes to adhering to strict timelines and have the ability to adjust deadlines by a few weeks if it better suits their needs timewise and to reduce or avoid stress.

Quote 1: *“I think people are less likely to be stressed here. A day like this is generally not tightly packed, due to which there is time for rather spontaneous decisions. That might also translate into afternoon breaks being longer, or going out to eat somewhere or something. And maybe outside working hours, the time at which people have dinner is often much more flexible. So you can therefore meet up with friends at 6 o’clock and then say, okay, we’ll have dinner somewhere afterwards, which is unplanned.”* (Interviewee 5)

Quote 2: *“It’s all like, well, if it doesn’t get done today, then maybe tomorrow or the day after. I always say the Austrians are half-German and half-Italian. They can work, but they also have that southern European in them like, well, if that doesn’t get done, it’s already 3 o’clock, we’re going home. The deadlines are all flexible. Yes, it has to be finished next week, but if you don’t finish it by then, it’s not really a problem either. Then you can have one or two more weeks. I have the feeling that in the Netherlands it has to be finished, otherwise, you have a problem.”* (Interviewee 10)

The Dutch culture values strict adherence to work-related deadlines, so a lot of emphasis is placed on planning and carrying out tasks. Dutch workers typically follow a stringent working schedule that may extend beyond regular office hours to ensure the timely completion of their responsibilities. As a result, the Dutch do not have much time for spontaneous decisions during a work week. Deadlines are regarded as strict by everyone and failing to meet them or adjusting them is generally not well-received or accepted.

Punctuality

The Austrian culture considers punctuality as a sign of respect for others' time and it is a reflection of one's commitment to the work. Employees are very punctual when it comes to meetings with others, to show respect for other colleagues. By arriving on time for appointments, Austrians create a well-organized work environment in which they foster a sense of order and efficiency on the Austrian work floor. Being late can be perceived as disrespectful or unprofessional.

There is a noteworthy difference between punctuality when it refers to meeting people and when it refers to meeting deadlines. Deadlines and agreements are treated very differently than meetings and appointments, as is explained in the cultural standard carefreeness.

Quote 1: *“If you set deadlines, you have to actually set something up to actually make it work. Austrians are very punctual when it comes to appointments. So an appointment with someone for a meeting is no problem. But when it comes to bigger milestones or projects to get them through, they find that to be more difficult.”* (Interviewee 13)

Quote 2: *“I think the Dutch are pretty well-known for being punctual. And that translates into having an appointment and actually being present 5 minutes beforehand. But Austrians are precise on the minute!”* (Interviewee 5)

The Dutch take appointments seriously as well. While they exhibit a sense of punctuality towards time-based commitments, they still allow for a few minutes of leeway. The Dutch have a bit of tolerance with regard to slight delays and may not view punctuality as strictly as Austrians do.

4.2 Underlying values: Associations among cultural standards

This study does not only identify Austrian cultural standards, but it differentiates from existing research by discussing underlying cultural values that are necessary for creating a thick description of the Austrian cultural behavior. Some cultural standards that are listed above have an overlap, as they can be derived from the same cultural value. In the following section, the cultural standards that have an overlap will be clustered into groups of cultural standards that derive from the same cultural value. These values, also called cultural logic, explain the cultural behavior of the Austrians.

Rangordnung

The Austrians consider *Rangordnung* (hierarchical ranking) as a structure and social safety provider since it acknowledges and secures the position of an employee's social status within the hierarchy. The hierarchical position is what gives the employee a certain degree of respect from colleagues or others, for example by using titles.

The hierarchical structure that comes with this cultural value creates a clear chain of command, with authority and decision-making concentrated at the top. The use of titles and the Austrian cultural standard *Zuständigkeit* reinforce the differences in positions and ensure that employees stick to their designated responsibilities that come with their job position. However, this strict adherence to hierarchy and rules is not necessarily driven by intrinsic motivation of Austrian employees, but because they want security for their social status. The hierarchy acts as a protection for someone's social status. Next to that, it serves as a means for superiors to control and maintain order within the organization. In practice, some Austrians may not always strictly follow imposed rules or agreements if they can circumvent them. While complying to rules and agreements in public and in the presence of superiors, employees may not feel an intrinsic need to adhere to the aforementioned cultural standards. This behavior of adhering to the hierarchical order on the one hand, but the desire to use the rules only in one's own interest on the other hand, will be elaborated on at the end of this paragraph.

The strong desire for the *Rangordnung* comes from the hierarchical society of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and later on the *Ständestaat*. The *Ständestaat* was an attempt of the authoritarian regime in the 1930s to restore the old social ranks of the Habsburg empire. Although formal ranks no longer exist and noble titles have been banned since 1919, the idea of a social order still lives on.

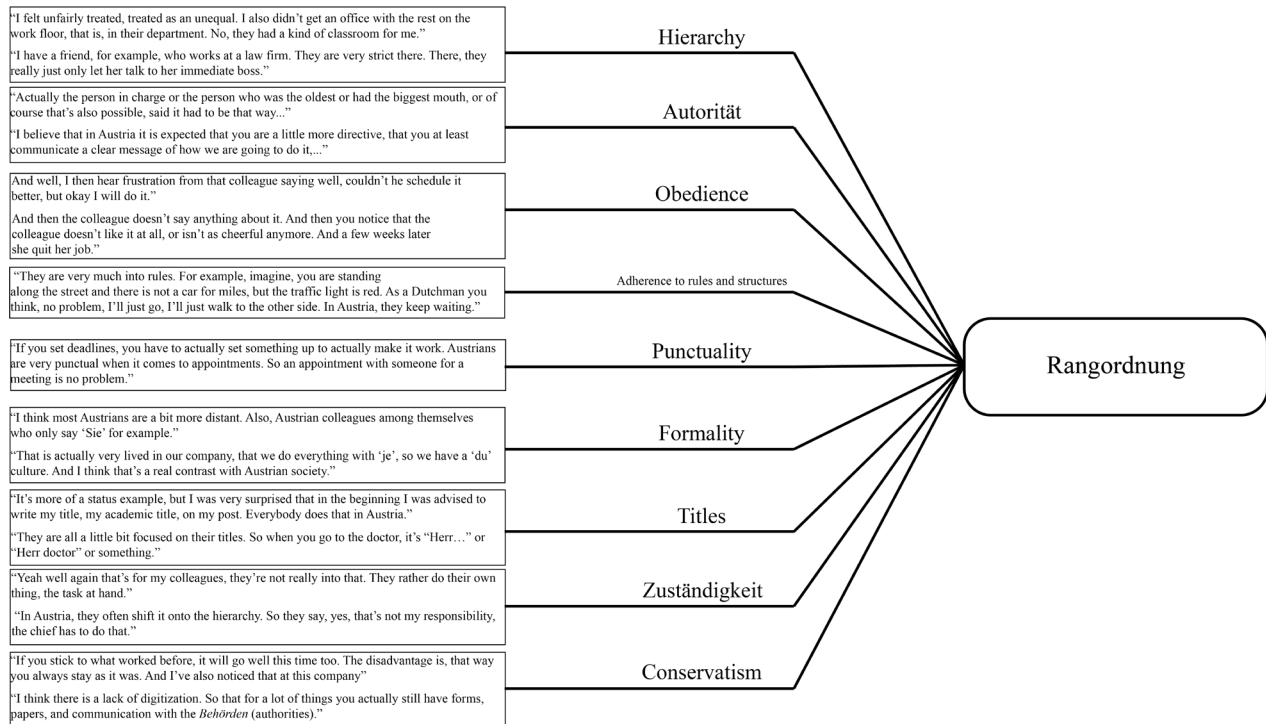


Figure x: The Austrian cultural value Rangordnung

Privatsphäre

The *Privatsphäre*, which translates to the social privacy, is valued by the Austrians to protect themselves from the outside world, in which they are vulnerable to criticism from people they don't know. They are focused on their inner social circle and careful in how they present themselves to strangers.

The *Privatsphäre* of Austrians fosters a sense of personal space and social privacy in the work environment. Austrians have a reserved behavior, especially in a professional setting or with people they are not acquainted with. They are not inclined to share personal information and they appreciate the personal boundaries of other colleagues. This reserved behavior is strengthened by the indirectness of the Austrians. Feedback is given, but negative feedback and criticism are given indirectly or not shared at all. This is because sharing criticism or negative feedback can have an impact on one's *Privatsphäre*, which is strongly separated from the professional environment in which such interactions take place. *Granting*, which reflects the grumpy behavior of Austrians, is a tendency towards seriousness and reserved behavior, which also reflects the desire for personal space. Instead of answering amiably, Austrians often answer in a short, *staccato* way to avoid extended interaction with strangers. While this might be perceived as unfriendly by the Dutch, it is a way of maintaining boundaries for the Austrians. Lastly, the Austrians maintain a distant stance towards people with different social standards and customs, which is regarded as *Aversion gegen Fremden* (aversion towards strangers). They strongly adhere to their own cultural norms but may view differing standards or customs with skepticism or negativity. This behavior is rooted in their desire to protect their own social privacy, but it can be perceived as a strong preference for their own culture.

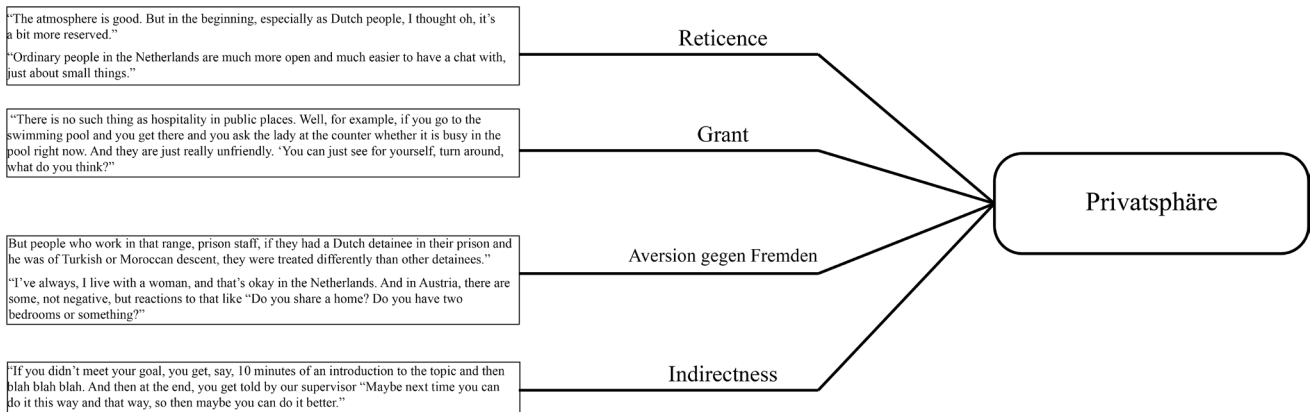


Figure x: The Austrian cultural value *Privatsphäre*

Ein gutes Leben

Ein gutes Leben translates to having a good life. Austrians are afraid to dedicate their entire life to their work. Instead, the Austrians want to put forward their own interest, which is to enjoy their lives and seek happiness.

This cultural value reflects the Austrian approach to achieving a life that is emphasized by well-being and contentment. The Austrians have an understanding that personal happiness and fulfillment are two essential components of a successful work life. These components are reached by avoiding stressful situations over meeting work-related goals at all costs. Austrians avoid such stressful situations by avoiding conflicts on the work floor. Instead, they will immediately involve a superior that solves the conflict or negative situation for them, which relates to the cultural standard negativity avoidance. Employees take their work rather easily instead of caring too much about sticking to their schedules. This means that they don't work overtime, but will push back deadlines if they can't be reached in the current moment or if it brings too much pressure. Lastly, the epicurean lifestyle of Austrians also reflects their well-being.

An epicurean mindset wants to avoid pain and rather seek out pleasure, especially from the act of eating good and delicious food (O'Keefe, 2014). This act is reflected in the fact that Austrians value their time for a warm lunch that includes good food and drinks. For them, this is a sign that everything is going well.

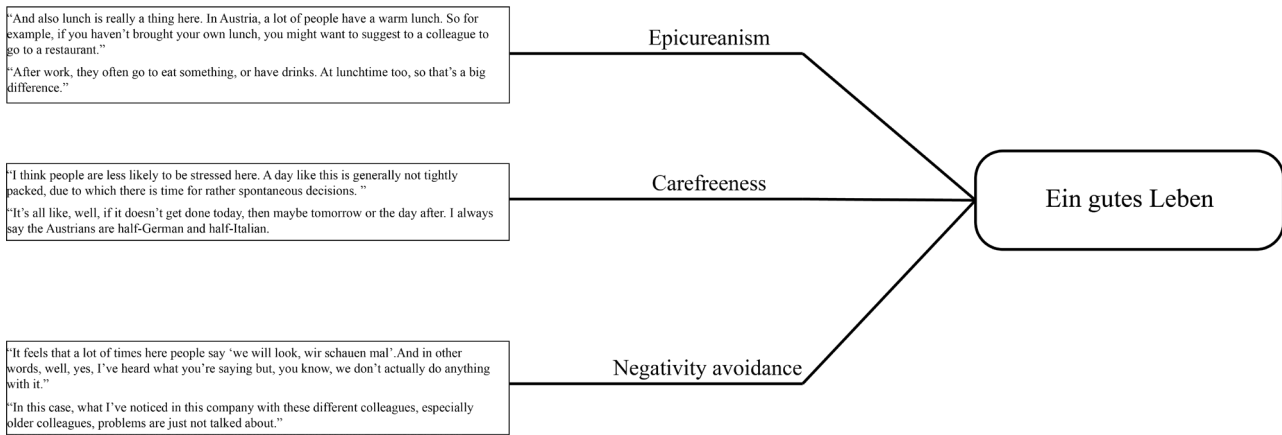


Figure x: The Austrian cultural value *ein gutes Leben*

The balance of values

As mentioned before, the values *Rangordnung* and *ein gutes Leben* have a certain dynamic with each other. In fact, *Rangordnung* acts as a double-edged sword in the Austrian culture. On the one hand, Austrians hold tight to the hierarchical order, which provides them peace, security and respect as it protects one's position. On the other hand is the fact that Austrians strive for epicureanism: aiming to fill body and mind with pleasure (O'Keefe, 2014), which is a conceptualization of the cultural value *ein gutes Leben*. As a result of this double-edged sword, Austrians adhere to the hierarchy by following rules and structures when they are in public, but once they are in an environment in which they aren't being controlled by others, they will only use the rules in their own interest. This behavior might strike as if the Austrians possess two faces: They follow the rules to adhere to authority, but they circumvent them if possible when no one is watching.

5. Discussion

This chapter starts with a concise summary of the outcomes of this study, followed by a comparison with prior scholarly works. Subsequently, the practical limitations of this study will be elaborated on, followed by recommendations for future re-

5.1 Austrian cultural standards as perceived by the Dutch

The objective of this study is to identify the Austrian cultural standards and their cultural values as perceived by Dutch employees within the Austrian work environment. The results of this study identified a total of 16 Austrian cultural standards, which are listed below:

1. Formality
2. Authority
3. Reticence
4. Indirectness
5. Adherence to rules and structures
6. Epicureanism
7. Conservatism
8. Aversion gegen Fremden
9. Zuständigkeit
10. Titles
11. Hierarchy
12. Negativity avoidance
13. Obedience
14. Grant
15. Carefreeness
16. Punctuality

Subsequently, these 16 Austrian cultural standards were linked to three underlying Austrian cultural values, as is evident in section 4.2. These underlying cultural values are an explanation of the Austrian behavior in Dutch-Austrian interactions, creating a thick description.

5.2 Academic relevance

The results of this study can be compared to both etic and emic studies that have been conducted in the past.

Hofstede (1980) showed a clear difference in power distance between Austria and the Netherlands, which shows that the power distance is much stronger in the Netherlands. This study, however, shows a much stronger power distance in Austria, which comes from the cultural value *Rangordnung*. Hofstede also identified a stronger individualism in the Netherlands. Here, the concept of individualism is very broad and abstract, and it doesn't have a unified conceptualization in each culture. It is therefore not possible to compare this dimension of Hofstede with the results of this study.

According to Roraff and Krejci (2011), Austrians are always to the point at hand. This behavior is, to some extent, in line with the results of this study, as Austrians only have professional conversations and don't discuss private matters. At the same time, if conversations are negative or involve criticism, Austrians are rather indirect instead of to the point at hand.

According to Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (1997), Dutch managers have more trust in their employees than Austrian managers. It is difficult to identify what exactly is meant by trust in employees (e.g. lying, giving criticism, openly speaking about problems, trust in employees making their own decisions, etc.). While a difference in trust did not become apparent in this study, the indirectness of the Austrian employees could lead to having less trust in them, as they don't speak openly and they avoid reporting problems to their supervisors. Because of this, supervisors can act as police officers (Interviewee 2) by setting rules to have more control over their employees.

Dunkel and Meierewert (2004) identified one cultural standard: having respect for achieved positions. Austrians use both formal language and people's titles to acknowledge the hierarchy and people's positions. Informal language, like using *du*, can be seen as a threat to the position in the hierarchy. Both the use of formal language and titles are two cultural behaviors that are exactly in line with the cultural standards formality and titles, that were identified in this study.

Brück (2002) identified six Austrian cultural standards from a German perspective by using CIT.

The avoidance of conflict (*Konfliktvermeidung*) is something that became visible during this study as well. Brück (2002) showed that there is a *Neutralitätspolitik* present in Austria, in which people try to be friends with everyone. This is to a certain extent in line with the results from this study, as Austrians avoid conflicts because they don't want to be criticized by others. This is a reason why they value the structures of a *Rangordnung*. On the other hand is the fact that Austrians take a reticent stance towards strangers, which can come across as grumpy (*Grant*). Both studies identified the indirectness of the Austrians. Instead of saying *was Sache ist* (Coming to the point) (Brück, 2002), Austrians bring their message politely. Brück (2002) identified a strong difference between *Leistung* (performance) and social skills (i.e. relationships with colleagues) as a way to achieve something in an organization. While this difference was mentioned by some interviewees during this study, it was not significant. Both studies show the relatively high importance of using titles on the work floor to reflect the hierarchical layers. This is in contrast with the aforementioned low power distance dimension of Hofstede (1980). Lastly, both studies show how Austrians deal with rules, which is not because the Austrians are strict and loyal to them. Brück (2002) implies that Austrians follow the rules, only if they lay within their own interest, while this study assumes rules as a way for managers to control people in the hierarchy .

The contribution of this study is in line with previous research conducted by Brück (2002). That study, however, failed to differentiate between cultural behavior and underlying cultural values. It does therefore not create a thick description of the Austrian culture. This study identified sixteen cultural standards, perceived by the Dutch on the Austrian work floor. On top of that, it provided the underlying cultural values *Rangordnung*, which explains why Austrians strongly hold tight to the hierarchical order, *Privatsphäre*, which elaborates on the fact that Austrians don't want to be vulnerable in society, and *ein gutes Leben*, which explains Austrians' desire to put forward their own interest and preferences.

This study also shows a dynamic between two of the cultural values: *Rangordnung* and *ein gutes Leben*, and why the Austrians try to keep these two values in balance.

Table 5 shows a comparison of the results of this study and the findings of the other aforementioned studies.

Cultural values from this study	Cultural standards from this study	Cultural standards from Roraff and Krejci (2011)	Observations from Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (1997)	Observations from Dunkel and Meierewert (2004)	Cultural standards from Brück (2002)
Rangordnung	Hierarchy				
	Autorität				
	Obedience				
	Adherence to rules and structures				Follow rules (if they are in their own interest)
	Punctuality				
	Formality			Use of formal language	
	Titles			Use of titles	Use of titles
	Zuständigkeit				
	Conservatism				
Privatsphäre	Reticence	To the point at hand			
	Grant				
	Aversion gegen Fremden				
	Indirectness		Lower trust in employees		Not saying <i>was Sache ist</i>
Ein gutes Leben	Epicureanism				
	Carefreeness				Konfliktvermeidung, Neutralitätspolitik
	Negativity avoidance				

Table 5 Comparing results with findings of Roraff and Krejci (2011), Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (1997), Dunkel and Meierewert (2004), and Brück (2002)

5.3 Practical relevance

This study identifies sixteen Austrian cultural standards and three underlying cultural values. Understanding these cultural standards can provide valuable insights for Dutch individuals and Dutch organizations engaged in cross-cultural interactions with Austrians.

From a business perspective, understanding the Austrian cultural standards and underlying values is crucial for successful intercultural collaboration. It can foster effective communication, enhance relationships and facilitate mutual understanding. By aligning business practices with Austrian cultural standards, Dutch individuals and organizations can optimize their strategies for market entry, expansion, and sustained relationships in Austria.

The findings of both Austrian cultural standards and cultural values are also relevant for individuals either working in Austria or working with Austrians. By adhering to the cultural standards, individuals can build strong (working) relationships, foster a positive work environment and demonstrate commitment to the Austrian culture. Embracing the cultural values creates respect and understanding for the Austrian culture. By recognizing and adapting to the Austrian cultural behavior, individuals can effectively navigate through the Austrian hierarchy (*Rangordnung*), and contribute to a harmonious and productive work setting.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This study focused on gathering data from Dutch interviewees who live and work in Austria, aiming to provide insights into their experiences in bicultural situations. Cross-cultural differences only arise when there is a contrast between the two cultures. These contrasts differ from culture to culture and it is therefore important to note that the cultural standards discussed in this study are based on a Dutch perspective and may not represent the entire Austrian culture. Therefore, further research involving diverse intercultural interactions with Austria is necessary to develop a more comprehensive description of the culture on the Austrian work floor.

Additionally, the majority of the Dutch individuals interviewed for this study are employed in Vienna, the capital city of Austria. As Vienna is a more international city compared to other regions in Austria, some interviewees pointed out potential cultural differences between Vienna and less populated areas. Next to that, the historical and cultural influences from Hungary, and also Slovakia, might be more present in Vienna than in the western part of Austria. Although these observations were not included in the current study due to their vagueness, they are an indication for future research about cultural differences between Vienna and other parts of Austria. To establish this, future research should involve individuals from Vienna who live and work outside the city, as well as individuals from other regions who work in Vienna. This approach would deepen the understanding of cultural differences within Austria.

In this research, the coding was conducted by a single individual, the researcher, while data interpretation was discussed with one supervisor. To enhance the reliability of the Austrian cultural standards identified in this study, future research could benefit from employing an additional coder as a double-check. Having a second coder would provide an extra layer of validation, ensuring the accuracy and robustness of the findings.

Lastly, saturation during the data collection of this study occurred after 13 interviews. This means that after the 13th interview, no new cultural standards were found. Future research into cross-cultural interactions should rather focus on the equal spread of the geographical demographic of interviewees instead of the quantity of interviewees. This can lead to cultural standards that better represent the culture of a country.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the following research question: What cultural differences between Austria and the Netherlands are perceived by Dutch employees on the Austrian work place? This question is answered by conducting interviews with Dutch employees in Austria during which the following sixteen cultural standards were identified: Formality, authority, reticence, indirectness, adherence to rules and structures, epicurean, conservative, Aversion gegen Fremden, *Zuständigkeit*, titles, hierarchy, negativity avoidance, obedience, grant, carefreeness, punctuality.

This study differentiates itself from previous literature by making a clear distinction between cultural standards and the underlying cultural values. Therefore, the following cultural values are identified that explain the Austrian cultural behavior:

1. **Rangordnung:** The Austrians consider *Rangordnung* as something that gives them social protection. The fact that the hierarchy defines their position in the society secures their status and gives them respect.
2. **Privatsphäre:** The social privacy that comes with *Privatsphäre* protects Austrians from criticism of the outside world about them as a person. People are focused on their inner social circle, and by sharing personal information with the outside world, they make themselves more vulnerable
3. **Ein gutes Leben:** The Austrians don't want their lives to be entitled to work. Instead of adhering to supervisors, they also want to focus on their own intrinsic motivation in life, which is happiness and pleasure. These come in the form of a stress-free life, leisure time, and good food and drinks.

The Austrians want to find a good balance between *Rangordnung* and *ein gutes Leben*. They embrace the hierarchical structures, as these act as social security for employees. The adherence to rules and structures does therefore not come from an intrinsic motivation, but because they desire security and respect in the social environment. Their intrinsic motivation, however, reflects a behavior that strives for a good life (*ein gutes Leben*) by putting forward their own schedule and preferences instead of the boss'.

The cultural standards that were found during this study offer valuable insights into the Austrian culture. By combining them with cultural values, a thick description of the Austrian culture from a Dutch perspective is created. This thick description enriches existing research, as it enhances the understanding of the Austrian culture.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guideline Cultural Differences the Netherlands and Austria

Time: appr. 1:00 hour

Introduce yourself. The research is meant to learn more about cultural differences between Dutch and Austrians on the work floor and find out how the interaction between them can be improved. Ask permission to make a tape recording (so that this interview will be faithfully documented). The interview is confidential and the literal content will not be shared with colleagues or supervisors. The data may be used for scientific papers. Quotes from the interviews will be given in such a way that they are not traced back to the interviewee.

Name of interviewee:

Position:

Age:

Province:

How long have you been working for this company in Austria? What kind of work do you do?

(I understand that you have regular contact with Austrian colleagues. How often? What does the contact consist of (telephone, e-mail, in person)? What do you discuss together? What is your position and what is the position of the Austrian person (s) (rank, division of tasks)? In which language do you speak with the Austrian people? Is the communication good? How would you describe the atmosphere between your Austrian colleague(s) and yourself? Do you think the cooperation is good or can it be improved? Do you think personal relationships with colleagues are good or can they be better?)

I would like to talk with you about your experiences with the Austrian people. What are your experiences with Dutch people in general? What do you think are the most striking differences between Austrians and Dutch? Do you have an example that may illustrate this?

(When he gives a concrete example of something on the work floor, i.e. a critical incident)

1. How did this happen? (detailed description of the circumstances)
 2. Did you like it or not? Why?
 3. How did you respond?
 4. How did it end?
 5. Why do you think the Dutch colleague behaved that way?
- Do you have any more similar examples?

In the same way:

Have you ever been surprised by the behavior of Austrian colleagues? (Ask for a situation that illustrates this and ask the 4 questions..)

Have you ever experienced that you did not understand Austrian colleagues? (i.e. not their language or accent, but their message)

Have you ever experienced a disagreement with your Austrian colleagues?

Have you ever had a conflict with an Austrian colleague? (How) was this solved?

Have you ever had other problems with Austrian colleagues?

A good manager: How should he behave according to you? Do Dutch and Austrians differ in this respect?

A good colleague: How should he behave according to you? Do Dutch and Austrians differ in this respect?

A good employee: how should he behave according to you? Do Dutch and Austrians differ in this respect?

Proposition: 'It is easier to collaborate with an Austrian person than with a Dutch person.'

What is your opinion and why is that?

Is there anything more you would like to share about your experiences with the Austrian people? Have we discussed everything?

If in the future you suddenly remember another interesting experience demonstrating the differences between Dutch and Austrians which you haven't mentioned today, you can always e-mail me (hand in a card)

The results of this study will be used for scientific publication. Your name will not be mentioned and we will ensure that citations cannot be traced back to you.