

Intercultural Collaboration in European Business

Cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes on the work floor

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Abstract

Globalisation is changing the life of people all over the world, and interactions with people from other cultures are becoming increasingly prevalent. However, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and challenges when people from different countries work or do business together. Since this can hamper successful collaboration, research into the cultural differences within Europe is very relevant. The Netherlands and Sweden are important trading partners and collaborate in many areas since both countries are highly innovative. Therefore, this study aims to explore the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes on the work floor, from a Dutch perspective. This study answers the question which cultural differences Dutch expats working in Sweden perceive.

To answer the research question, an inductive qualitative study was conducted, and seventeen Dutch expats working in Sweden were interviewed. The Critical Incident Technique was used as a research method, which entails that the interviewees were asked about specific situations (critical incidents) in which they experienced differences between the Dutch and the Swedish culture. Thereafter, the critical incidents were analysed to identify Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective.

Fourteen Swedish cultural standards were identified: Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure, Long Decision-Making Process, Confrontation Avoidance, Private Life, Family and Personal Circumstances, Work-Life Balance, Indirectness, Closedness, Disagreement Avoidance, Silence, Emphasis on Equality, No Action Points, Respecting Decisions, and Speaking Swedish. These Swedish cultural standards were linked to five underlying values: Order, Consensus, Solitude, Charity and Equality, providing a thick description of Swedish culture. Together, the cultural standards and underlying values (Order, Consensus, Solitude, Charity and Equality) describe and explain typical Swedish behaviours that can be expected when collaborating on the work floor. As a result, this study enhances the knowledge of cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes, and can contribute to a more successful collaboration.

Keywords: Swedish Culture, Dutch Culture, Cultural Differences, Critical Incidents, Cultural Standards, Swedish Cultural Standards, Cultural Values

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“I hereby confirm that this thesis has been written by me and is the result of my own work, with no help of generative AI”

1. Introduction

Globalisation is changing the life of people all over the planet. As the world becomes more globalised, interactions with people from other cultures are becoming increasingly prevalent (Gomez & Taylor, 2018). However, people from different cultures are accustomed to specific behaviours that are considered normal for them, but that differ from what people in other countries consider normal. For example, people from different countries make decisions differently and communicate differently (Meyer, 2015). As a result, when people from different countries work or do business together, it frequently leads to misunderstandings, which can negatively impact collaboration. Since the European Economic Area is made up of 30 different countries (Rijksoverheid, n.d.), all having their own culture, research into the cultural differences between European countries is quite relevant.

Two European countries that collaborate extensively are the Netherlands and Sweden. Since both countries are highly innovative, they cooperate, among others, on renewable energy, in digital transition, in AI development, and in life sciences (Government of the Netherlands, 2022). Next to that, the Netherlands and Sweden are also important trading partners (RVO, 2024). Moreover, Swedish IKEA, one of the most well-known furniture companies in the world, is headquartered in the Netherlands (IKEA, n.d.). The Dutch and the Swedes thus often work together, and research into the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes would be very useful.

Much etic research, that aims to compare cultures in terms of generalizable phenomena (Lu, 2012), has been conducted. For example, Hofstede (2010) and Meyer (2014) conducted research into cultural differences between countries, including the Netherlands and Sweden. However, if only etic research is used, it is not possible to cover the complete cultural spectrum and the nuances of a culture (Carminati, 2024), so in this way it is not possible to identify all cultural differences. Emic research is a contrasting approach, that aims at discovering distinctive qualities of a culture, with the goal to understand the culture from the inside (Morris et al., 1999). For example, emic research into Swedish culture has been conducted by Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999), but these studies are not based on empirical and systematic research. Besides that, both emic studies are also at least 25 years old.

Additionally, some research has been conducted into the cultural differences between Sweden and other countries. For instance, Verkasalo et al. (1994) compared the cultures of Sweden,

Finland and Estonia. Previous studies that compared the Netherlands and Sweden focused on aspects such as education (Giota, 2007), balancing work and family life (Cousins & Tang, 2004), or gender role portrayals in advertising (Wiles et al., 1995). Although these studies discuss some differences between the Netherlands and Sweden, they do not address cultural differences that can be expected when collaborating on the work floor. So, an in-depth qualitative study from an emic perspective into the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes, in the management and business environment, is still missing. This is important to study, since a better understanding of the cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes can help to avoid many misunderstandings on the work floor, resulting in a more successful collaboration.

1.1 Research Goal and Research Question

To bridge this research gap, this thesis is an inductive qualitative study that aims to explore the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes on the work floor, from a Dutch perspective. Therefore, the following research question has been formulated:

“Which cultural differences are perceived by Dutch expats working in Sweden?”

Three sub-questions were made to answer the main research question. The sub-questions are:

1. What are typical Swedish cultural standards perceived by Dutch expats working in Sweden?
2. What is the cultural logic behind these Swedish cultural standards?
3. How can Dutch expats working in Sweden bridge these cultural differences?

This study aims to identify Swedish cultural standards experienced by Dutch expats working in Sweden by using the Critical Incident Technique. This entails that the interviewees (the Dutch expats) are asked about specific situations (critical incidents) in which they experienced differences between the Dutch and Swedish cultures. Based on these critical incidents, the contrasting cultural standards of the two countries can be identified. Next, the typical behaviours of the Swedes (the cultural standards), and the cultural logic behind these Swedish cultural standards are explained. Meaning, also the Swedish values leading to the typical behaviours are explained, providing a thick description (Geertz, 1973). Additionally, some practical recommendations to improve the collaboration between the Dutch and the Swedes are provided.

1.2 Academic Relevance

This study contributes to the literature by conducting in-depth qualitative research into the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes. Until now, much etic research has been conducted into cultural differences between countries, including the Netherlands and Sweden, such as the studies of Hofstede (2010) and Meyer (2014). However, etic studies are insufficient to fully describe intercultural encounters (Clausen, 2010). Therefore, in-depth qualitative research is of great importance in international business research to supplement the etic studies (Buckley et al., 2014). Ronen and Shenkar's (2013) quantitative study placed the Netherlands and Sweden in the same cultural cluster, suggesting cultural closeness. So, by conducting in-depth qualitative research, this study can contribute to a better understanding of where exactly the differences between the two cultures lie. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature by identifying Swedish cultural standards through using the Critical Incident Technique, since there has been no previous research that identified Swedish cultural standards.

1.3 Practical Relevance

This research is also practically relevant. As a result of this study, Dutch expats or businesspeople in Sweden and people working with Swedish colleagues can gain a better understanding of the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes. By providing a thick description of Swedish culture, this study both describes and explains Swedish behaviours that can be expected when collaborating on the work floor. This information is very useful, since not understanding the rules of behaviour in a given country inevitably leads to misunderstandings (Thomas et al., 2010). Furthermore, this study also provides some recommendations to improve collaboration, based on scientific research. Therefore, this study can contribute to a better collaboration between the Dutch and the Swedes.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The outline of the thesis is as follows. In the next chapter, chapter 2, the theoretical framework is discussed. The theoretical framework includes defining culture, etic approaches to (inter)cultural research, emic approaches to (inter)cultural research, and Thomas' qualitative approach to culture. Following this, in chapter 3, the methodology of the research is explained. Then, in chapter 4, the results of the research is presented. Thereafter, in chapter 5, the theoretical and practical contributions of the study are discussed, as well as the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research are provided. The paper ends with a conclusion in which the research question is answered.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Culture

Before starting to discuss literature on Swedish culture, Dutch culture and cross-cultural differences, it is useful to first define what culture is. Since culture is one of the most difficult concepts to define (Cobley, 2008), different definitions of culture are employed by different researchers. For example, according to Hofstede, culture is “The programming of human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). According to Hofstede, culture can be seen as an onion, since it consists of various layers (Hofstede et al., 2010). On the outer, most superficial layer, there are symbols, such as words in a language, flags and dress symbols. On the second layer there are heroes, which are persons that function as role models in a culture. On the third layer there are rituals, such as ways of greeting and showing respect to others. Symbols, heroes and rituals together are classified as practices. Practices as such are visible to outsiders, but their cultural meaning lies only in the way insiders interpret these practices. Finally, at the core of culture there are the values, the deepest manifestations of culture. Values are tendencies to prefer particular states of affairs over others, and are transmitted through the environment in which one grows up (Hofstede et al., 2010). In other words, values are shared conceptions of what is desirable and good (Savig & Schwartz, 2022).

Thomas et al. (2010) defined culture as linguistic and national entity that provides a sense-giving system of orientation to its members. This entails that culture creates a structured environment in which people can function. According to Thomas et al. (2010), culture influences the perception, thought patterns, actions, and judgement of the members of a given country or society. This system of orientation includes specific symbols like language, clothing and greeting rituals, as well as values, and it is passed on to future generations (Thomas et al., 2010).

This study focuses on differences in typical behaviours between the Dutch and the Swedes, and on the cultural logic underlying these typical behaviours. Therefore, in this study, culture refers to the typical behaviours and the values of the people from a country. Since this study follows a further developed model of Thomas et al. (2010) approach to studying culture (as is explained in the Methodology), Thomas et al.’s (2010) definition of culture is used in this study.

2.2 Etic Approaches to (Inter)Cultural Research

There are two approaches to (inter)cultural or cross-cultural research: the etic approach and the emic approach. The etic approach deals with phenomena that occur in all cultures, while the emic approach deals with phenomena that occur in only one culture (Triandis, 1998). First, the etic approach is discussed. The etic approach to (inter)cultural research tries to identify universal aspects of human behaviour and assumes that cultures can be compared on the basis of generalizable phenomena (Lu, 2012). Therefore, researchers adopting an etic methodology impose universal categories on their data to make cross-cultural comparisons (Davidson et al., 1976). With etic research, behaviour is studied from the view of an outsider, the researcher creates the structure, and the criteria for evaluating certain behaviours are seen as universal (Lu, 2012). Although etic studies are not sufficient to fully describe intercultural encounters, they are useful for gaining a first understanding of the misunderstandings and conflicts that might arise during encounters (Carminati, 2024).

In this study, the etic frameworks of Hofstede (2010) and Meyer (2014) are included to compare the Netherlands and Sweden. Hofstede's (2010) framework is included since Hofstede's framework is one of the most widely used frameworks in cross-cultural research (Lu, 2012; Zainuddin et al., 2018). Hofstede researched cultural differences at the national level and collected data through surveys at IBM subsidiaries around the world (Sent & Kroese, 2020). Originally, Hofstede's framework consisted of four dimensions (Hofstede, 1980), but two extra dimensions were added throughout time (Hofstede, 2011). Next to Hofstede's (2010) framework, Meyer's (2014) framework is included, since Meyer's framework is specifically about how people in businesses work together. Therefore, Meyer's framework may be more relevant when comparing cultural differences on the work floor. Another reason for including Meyer's framework is that Meyer's (2014) research is conducted more recently than Hofstede's research. Additionally, whereas Hofstede's study made use of a quantitative research method, Meyer's (2014) study made use of qualitative interviews as a research method. Furthermore, countries are assigned absolute scores on the dimensions of Hofstede's framework, while the eight scales of Meyer's framework indicate how cultures vary along a continuum (Meyer, 2014).

In addition to the frameworks of Hofstede (2010) and Meyer (2014), also Ronen and Shenkar's (2013) study is discussed. This is because Ronen and Shenkar (2013) made one single cluster map based on the results of the major etic studies that have been conducted.

2.2.1 Hofstede’s Framework

First, Hofstede’s framework is discussed. Hofstede’s framework contains six dimensions on which a country can score from 0 to 100. The dimensions are: power distance (high vs low power distance), individualism (individualism vs collectivism), masculinity (masculinity vs femininity), uncertainty avoidance (high vs low uncertainty avoidance), long term orientation (long vs short term orientation), and indulgence (indulgence vs restraint) (Hofstede Insights, 2023). In Figure 1, the scores of the Netherlands and Sweden on Hofstede’s six dimensions can be seen.

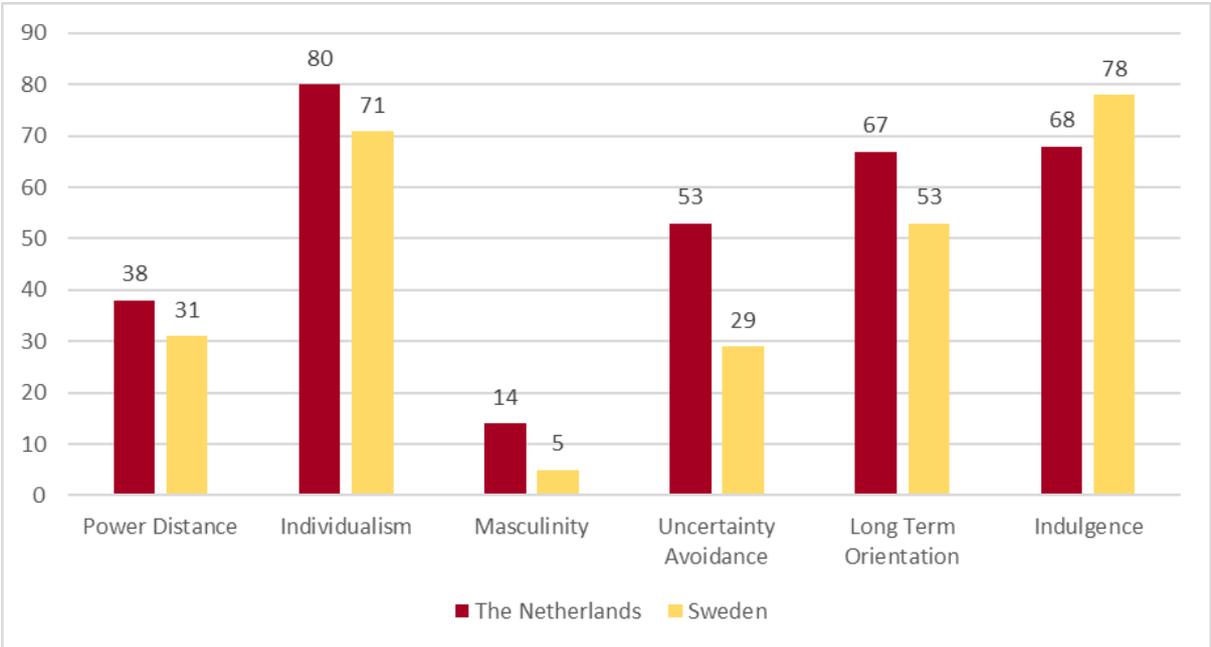


Figure 1. Index Scores of the Netherlands and Sweden on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede Insights, 2023)

Clearly, the Netherlands and Sweden score quite similarly on Hofstede’s dimensions. Both the Netherlands and Sweden have a low score on power distance (38 and 31, respectively), a high score on individualism (80 and 71, respectively), and a low score on masculinity (14 and 5, respectively). Also both the Netherlands and Sweden have a high score on long term orientation (67 and 53, respectively), and a high score on indulgence (68 and 78, respectively). Regarding uncertainty avoidance, Hofstede’s framework shows that the Netherlands, with a score of 53, has a preference for avoiding uncertainty, whereas Sweden, with a score of 29, has a low uncertainty avoidance. So, according to Hofstede’s framework, the main difference between the Netherlands and Sweden is with regard to uncertainty avoidance.

Uncertainty avoidance has to do with a society's level of stress when facing an unknown future (Hofstede, 2011). The score of the Netherlands on uncertainty avoidance suggests that the Dutch uphold stringent rules of belief and behaviour and are less tolerant of unconventional behaviours and ideas (Hofstede Insights, 2023). In addition, there would be an emotional need for rules in the Netherlands (even if the rules never appear to function), time is money, individuals have an inner drive to be busy and work hard, punctuality and precision are the standard, innovation may be discouraged, and security is a key component in individual motivation (Hofstede Insights, 2023).

On the other hand, the score of Sweden on uncertainty avoidance suggests that Swedes have a more easy-going approach in which practice takes precedence over principles and deviation from the norm is easier tolerated (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Swedes would believe that there should be no more rules than necessary, and that if they are vague or do not work, they should be changed or abandoned. Additionally, in Sweden schedules would be open to change, hard work would be done when necessary but not for the sake of hard work, punctuality and precision would not be self-evident, and innovation would not be viewed as threatening (Hofstede Insights, 2023).

Hofstede's framework also received some criticisms. According to Shaiq et al. (2011), one criticism on Hofstede's research is that it is too old to be implemented successfully in today's world of rapid change and globalisation. In addition, because Hofstede's research was based on survey data gathered from a single company (IBM), a criticism is that Hofstede's findings do not provide valid information about the culture of a country. Another criticism is that Hofstede's framework has too few dimensions, making it unable of providing complete information about cultures (Shaiq et al., 2011). Nevertheless, Hofstede's framework was chosen to include in this study since it is still one of the most widely used frameworks in cross-cultural research (Zainuddin et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Meyer's Framework

Next to Hofstede's framework, Meyer's framework (2014) is discussed to compare the Netherlands and Sweden. Meyer's framework contains eight scales that show how cultures vary along a continuum from one extreme to the opposite (Meyer, 2014). In Figure 2, the positions of the Netherlands and Sweden on the eight scales of Meyer's (2014) culture map are shown.

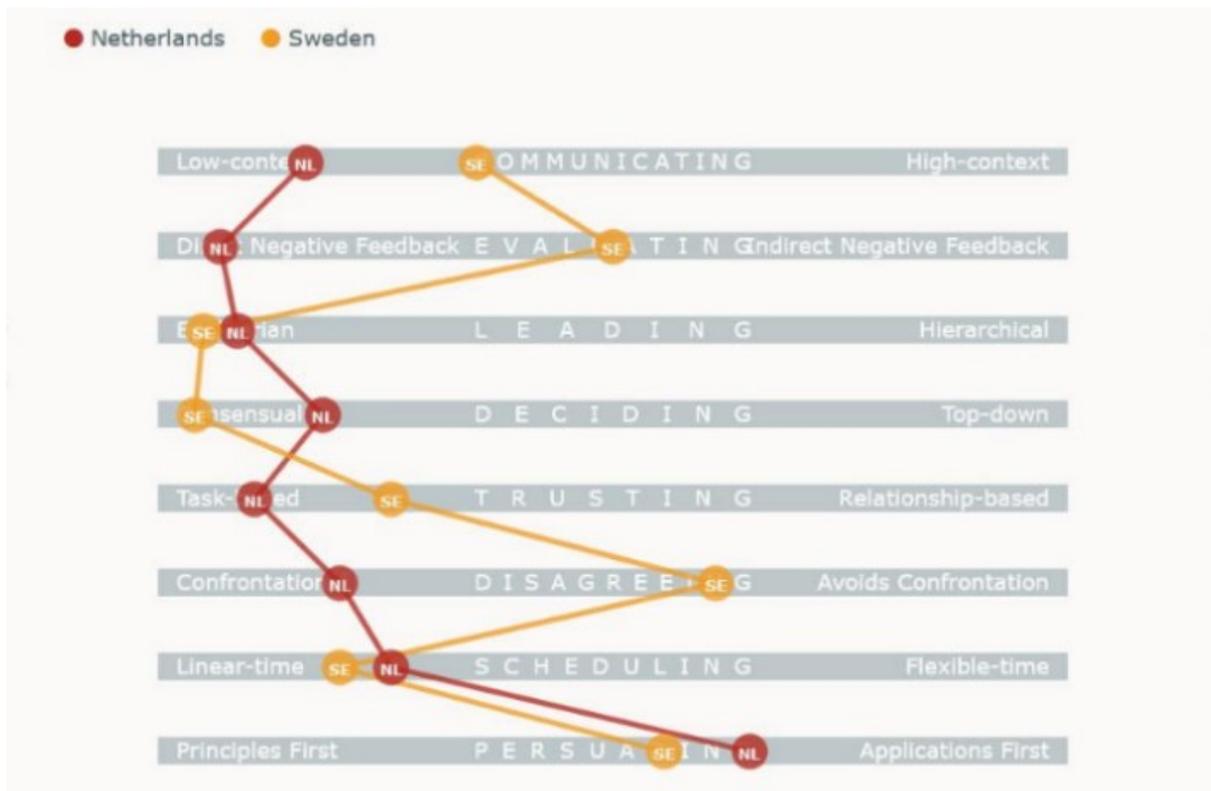


Figure 2. Culture map scales comparing the Netherlands and Sweden (Meyer, 2014)

Regarding Leading, it can be seen that both the Netherlands and Sweden have an egalitarian leading style. As to Deciding, both the Netherlands and Sweden have a consensual style for deciding, with Sweden being even more consensual than the Netherlands. Regarding Trusting, for both the Netherlands and Sweden trust is task-based, although the Netherlands is more task-based than Sweden. With regard to Scheduling, both the Netherlands and Sweden use linear time for scheduling, and regarding Persuading, both the Netherlands and Sweden have an applications first approach.

Differences between the Netherlands and Sweden are visible on the scales Communicating, Evaluating and Disagreeing. Regarding Communicating, the Netherlands is much more low context when communicating than Sweden. This implies that in the Netherlands good communication is precise, clear and simple, and that messages are communicated and understood according to their literal meaning (Meyer, 2014). In Sweden good communication is a bit more sophisticated, layered and nuanced, and messages should be read between the lines more frequently than in the Netherlands (Meyer, 2014).

Regarding Evaluating, the Netherlands is also much more direct than Sweden. This implies that in the Netherlands negative feedback is given frankly and honestly, whereas in Sweden negative

feedback is given softly and subtly (Meyer, 2014). And, with regard to Disagreeing, the Netherlands is much more confrontational than Sweden. Whereas the Dutch, according to Meyer (2014), have quite a confrontational style of disagreeing, the Swedes are more about avoiding confrontation. This implies that in the Netherlands disagreement and debate are seen as positive for the organisation, whereas in Sweden this is perceived as negative for the organisation. Contrary to the Netherlands, in Sweden open confrontation would be seen as inappropriate, and as negatively impacting the relationship and group harmony (Meyer, 2014).

2.2.3 Ronen and Shenkar's Cluster Map

Ronen and Shenkar (2013) conducted quantitative research to make a single cluster map based on a synthesis of the major etic studies that have been conducted. The included studies were Brodbeck et al. (2000), GLOBE by House et al. (2004), Foley (1992), Hofstede (2001), Merritt (2000), Inglehart and Baker (2000), Schwartz (1999), Trompenaars (1994), Smith et al. (2002), Zander (2005) and Ronen and Shenkar (1985). The countries included in these studies were clustered on the basis of the average country ratings on the dimensions that are used in these studies. A dendrogram tree was used to form distinct clusters, which resulted in eleven global clusters. Figure 3 shows Ronen and Shenkar's (2013) cluster map, in which the eleven global clusters and corresponding countries can be seen.

As can be seen in the cluster map, both Sweden and the Netherlands are placed in the Nordic global cluster, together with Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Finland. Ronen and Shenkar (2013) also calculated cluster cohesiveness (Pw) based on the extent of dissimilarity between the countries within a cluster. Therefore, the lower Pw is, the higher the cohesiveness is among the countries within a cluster. The Pw for the Nordic global cluster is 0,24, which suggests that the cohesiveness among the cluster members is relatively high. For comparison, the Latin European global cluster has a Pw of 0,47, and the Anglo global cluster has a Pw of 0,07. According to Ronen and Shenkar (2013), similarity between the countries in a cluster causes cohesiveness, and this is assumed to create homogeneity in behaviours and attitudes.

Ronen and Shenkar's (2013) research thus suggests that Sweden and the Netherlands have pretty similar cultures, and that similar behaviours and attitudes can be expected in the two countries. However, within the Nordic cluster, there are also two subclusters: Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands, and Iceland, Norway and Sweden (Ronen & Shenkar, 2013). This suggests

that the cultures of Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands would be even more similar to each other than to the countries in the Nordic cluster as a whole. And also the cultures of Iceland, Norway and Sweden would be even more similar to each other than to the countries in the Nordic cluster as a whole.

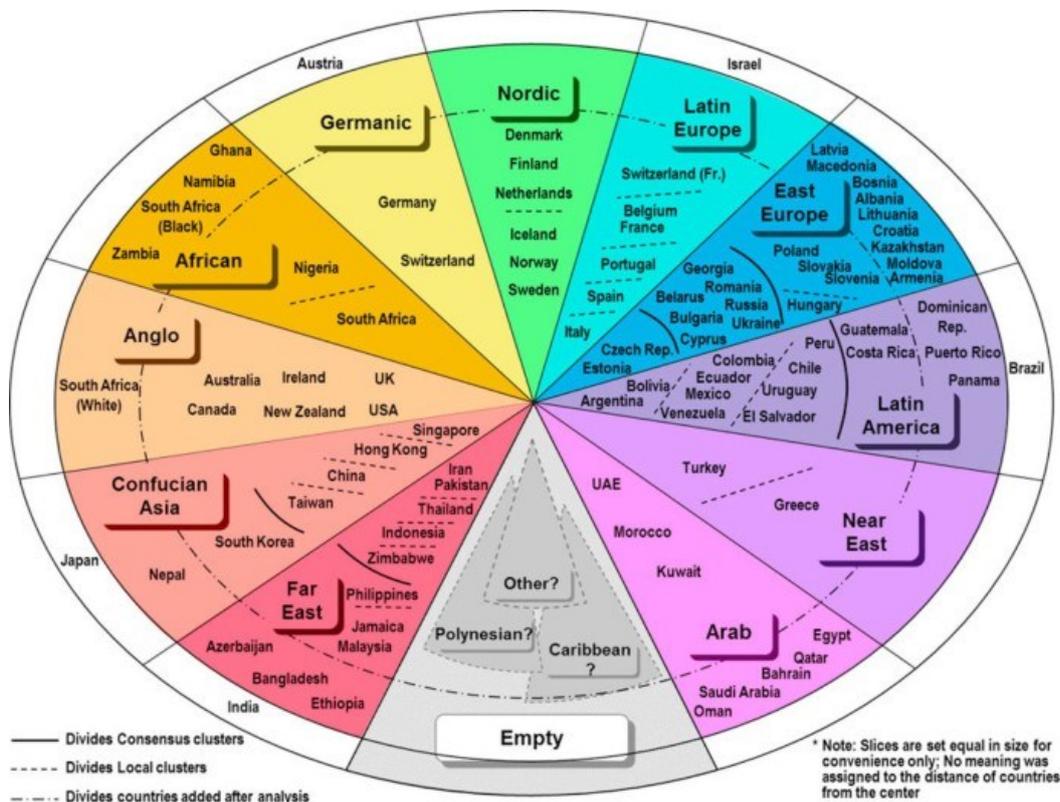


Figure 3. Ronen and Shenkar's cluster map (Ronen & Shenkar, 2013)

2.2.4 Etic Research Comparing Sweden, Finland and Estonia

Verkasalo et al. (1994) tried to discover differences in value priorities between Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. Schwartz's (1992) ten value types were used in the study, and surveys were conducted among university students in the three countries to collect data. Clear differences were found only regarding the values power and hedonism. Power has to do with prestige and social status, and with dominance or control over people and resources, and hedonism is about enjoying life and self-indulgence (Schwartz, 2012). The Swedes scored the lowest on power and the Estonians the highest. According to the Verkasalo et al. (1994), this has to do with the emphasis on equality in Swedish society. This is shown, for example, by the relatively anti-hierarchical, flat organizational structure in Swedish companies (Verkasalo et al., 1994).

Regarding hedonism, the results showed that Estonians scored lower than the Swedes and the Finns (Verkasalo et al., 1994). According to the authors, this is because enjoying life would have more realism in Sweden and Finland than in Estonia. On the other nine value types, either no or only partial country effects were found. Regarding self-directional values, independence turned out to be more important for the Swedes and the Estonians, and choosing one's own goals was more important for the Swedes. With regard to universal values, peace turned out to be more important for the Swedes, while spiritual values were less important for the Swedes. In short, the study mainly showed that there is a relative cultural closeness between Sweden, Finland and Estonia (Verkasalo et al., 1994).

The advantage of the etic approach to (inter)cultural research is that it enables all cultures to be compared on the basis of generalizable phenomena (Lu, 2012). However, the etic approach also received some criticism. For example, according to Lu (2012), etic research would depend too much on surveys as a research instrument. This is problematic since surveys do not allow for an in-depth exploration of respondents' attitudes (Buckley et al., 2014). Furthermore, according to Clausen (2010), etic studies are not sufficient to fully describe intercultural encounters. Namely, the possible synergies or new understandings that can result from intercultural encounters are not taken into account in etic studies (Clausen, 2010), and etic studies cannot capture paradoxes that exist within a culture (Fang, 2005). Additionally, it is also not possible to describe a whole culture on the basis of universal categories. If only etic research is used, one will miss culture-specific information, and in this way, not all cultural differences can be identified (Marin & Marin, 1991). Fang (2005) argues that in the current era of globalisation, using the etic approach is not enough to enhance the knowledge of national cultures and cross-cultural management. Rather, the focus should be shifted to an approach that regards national cultures as having its own life full of paradoxes and dynamics (Fang, 2005).

2.3 Emic Approaches to (Inter)Cultural Research

As opposed to the etic approach, the emic approach to (inter)cultural research aims to find culture-specific aspects of behaviours and beliefs which cannot be compared across all cultures (Lu, 2012). Namely, according to emic researchers, a culture can best be understood as a whole, as an interconnected system (Morris et al., 1999). The main foundation of emic research is also to understand a culture from the viewpoint of a native (Lu, 2012). Therefore, emic researchers

aim to describe behaviours occurring in a specific culture using the concepts employed in that specific culture (Davidson et al., 1976). As a result, researchers using an emic approach can obtain a very accurate within-culture description (Davidson et al., 1976).

2.3.1 Swedish Cultural Values

Emic research into Swedish culture has been conducted by Daun, a Swedish anthropologist, who wrote about different aspects of Swedish culture that he believes are typical for Swedes (Daun, 1996). According to Daun, the following elements (Shyness, Modesty, Independence, Avoidance of Conflict, Honesty, and Homogeneity) describe Swedish relations (Daun, 1996).

1. Shyness

A well-known stereotype of Swedes is that they are shy, reserved, and not very inclined to approach someone they do not know (Daun, 1996). However, in Sweden being shy is not seen as something negative. Swedes assign characteristics like modesty and reflectiveness to shy people, and being loud is seen as something negative (Daun, 1996).

2. Modesty

Something else that is important in Swedish culture is modesty. The importance of modesty is described by a 'Law of Jante' ('Jantelagen' in Swedish), which means that one should not think he or she is anything special (Daun, 1996). Next to Sweden, this Law of Jante is also an important aspect of Danish and Norwegian culture. Another key word in Sweden is lagom, meaning both 'middle-road' and 'reasonable' (Daun, 1996).

3. Independence

A third important element in Swedish culture is independence. Many Swedes have a strong desire for independence (Daun, 1996). It can be expressed as a wish to be alone, to avoid other people, and also to avoid becoming indebted. Many Swedes like to be to have a break from one's social environment and to spend time in nature (Daun, 1996).

4. Avoidance of conflict

A fourth important element of Swedish culture is the avoidance of conflict. This is a particular tendency towards amiability and consensus in direct contacts and the inclination to avoid confrontation with others with whom one is deeply at odds. As a result, Swedes typically avoid emotionally charged topics and topics over which opinions are divided. Furthermore, Swedes do not criticize or contradict publicly, being in accord and being polite is crucial (Daun, 1996).

5. Honesty

Additionally, Swedes assume that what people say is what they mean and there is a fundamental belief that ordinary people are honest (Daun, 1996). Swedes find it difficult to lie to others and they do not want to make things up. However, because of their conflict avoidance, Swedes do stay silent and avoid sensitive subjects during conversations (Daun, 1996).

6. Homogeneity

According to Daun (1996), Sweden has a homogeneous culture. This entails that the Swedes are close ethnically, morally, linguistically and religiously. Equality in Sweden is also about sameness, and in Swedish society people emphasize similarities and ignore dissimilarities. The importance of equality is also visible in that in Sweden a leader is first and foremost a member of the group, rather than an individual (Daun, 1996).

Additionally, Barinaga (1999) used the Swedish language to provide an overview of Swedish culture, from the perspective of the Spanish culture. The method that was used is picking up words from the Swedish language that are not present in other languages, words that are present in other languages but have a different meaning in Swedish, and typical expressions used in Swedish daily life. In doing so, Barinaga (1999) attempts to describe the characteristics that are specific to Swedish culture.

1. Ensamhet (Solitude)

According to Barinaga (1999), the word *ensamhet* has a remarkable positive meaning in Sweden. *Ensamhet* suggests independence, personal strength, and inner peace. Therefore, Swedish children are from a young age encouraged to become independent and to do things by themselves. Furthermore, independence in Sweden also involves social responsibilities; one should also respect other people's need of solitude, not be in debt to anyone, and show solidarity with others. It is important for Swedes to be helpful to others and useful to society as a whole (Barinaga, 1999).

2. Jämlikhet (Equality)

According to Barinaga (1999), the respect Swedes have for 'the other' makes that Swedes are very concerned with equality; *jämlikhet*. A clear indication of this are the similar roles that men and women have in Sweden. Equality is also reflected in the informal atmosphere in the workplace in Sweden, where it is not unusual, for example, that the manager eats together with

his or her subordinates. There is not a hierarchy with long distances, and formal letters typically begin with the informal 'hej!' ('hi!') (Barinaga, 1999).

3. *Enighet (Consensus)*

Another Swedish trait is the search for consensus; *enighet* (Barinaga, 1999). Everyone's ideas, experiences, and opinions are listened to and are respected, because they can all help to accomplish the task or to solve the problem at hand. Closely related to the Swedish' strive for consensus is the ideal to avoid conflicts, especially in the public sphere. Aggression and loud voices are considered to be very negative, and *kompromiss* (compromise) is considered a practical attitude in Sweden (Barinaga, 1999).

4. *Lagom (Not too much and not too little; just right)*

Then another important Swedish term is *Lagom* (Barinaga, 1999). It is an untranslatable term, meaning something along the lines of not too much and not too little; just right. The term *Lagom* is used extensively in daily life. 'Lagom är bäst', meaning 'Lagom is best' (Barinaga, 1999).

5. *Förnuftstanken (Sense of Rationality)*

Finally, an important feature of the Swedish culture is its sense of rationality (*förnuftstanken*) (Barinaga, 1999). Swedish rationality entails an emphasis on practical solutions and on focusing on a single goal at a time. For example, the Swedish phrase 'ordning och reda' (translated as 'order and order') conveys the idea not to mix matters (Barinaga, 1999).

2.3.2 Dutch Cultural Values

Since this study is about cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes, it is useful to also discuss the Dutch cultural values. According to Enklaar (2007), the Dutch culture has twelve underlying values that explain the typical way of thinking and acting of Dutch people. An overview of the twelve values and their origins can be found in Table 1. In addition, an explanation of the values is given as well.

The first four values; salvation, guilt & remission, charity, and truth, originate from Christianity, and are shared with other European countries (Enklaar, 2007).

1. *Salvation* has to do with the belief that when one makes good choices now, this will lead to a good future. The present situation is not seen as the end point. If one keeps the ideal end goal in mind, beliefs in it, and direct all of one's actions towards it, the end goal will sooner or later

become attainable. Furthermore, everything is thought to be improvable. Innovation is seen as leading to improvement and progress.

2. Guilt & Remission has to do with recognizing and taking responsibility for ones mistakes and actions. It is believed that people who have made a mistake are accountable and should be penalised. It is expected that these people acknowledge the mistake they made and express regret. Admitting your mistakes is better than remaining silent.

3. Charity is about treating others in a way one wishes to be treated oneself. It is important to help those in need, and it is better to consider the interests of others rather than only considering your own interests.

4. Truth is about always speaking the truth, also when the truth is painful. It is better to tell the truth openly and truthfully than to hide a secret and be caught in a lie later. If the lie is exposed, the liar loses the trust of others. Dutch people value honesty over politeness. It is important to uncover the truth and to have certainty.

The next five values; work, order & neatness, utility, reliability, and moderation, originate from Protestantism. These values are shared with some other Northern European countries and are also called Weberian values (Enklaar, 2007).

5. Work has to do with the belief that work is good. Working is positive, whilst doing nothing is not. It is beneficial when people work hard, and it is important that the work is done well. Work is good because it is useful and makes people happy.

6. Order & Neatness is about the importance of having order, neatness and rules. If no one follows the rules, things will become disorganised and out of control. Also planning is highly valued by the Dutch.

7. Utility is about that everything one undertakes has to be useful and / or profitable. It is also important to be frugal with one's resources, especially with money.

8. Reliability means that it is critical to fulfil one's commitments after making a promise. For Dutch people, an agreement is an agreement and not anything non-committal. Words and actions must be in accord, and anyone who does not keep their promises is seen as untrustworthy.

9. Moderation is about that everything one does has to be done in moderation. It is important to maintain calmness, avoid exaggeration, and show patience. The Dutch see self-control as an important virtue, emotions should always be kept within boundaries. Extreme ideas are not appreciated, moderation is crucial.

The final three values; consensus, equality, and self-determination, originate from Holland and spread throughout the rest of the Netherlands. The combination of these three values distinguishes the Dutch from the rest of the world (Enklaar, 2007).

10. Consensus is about the importance of settling disputes in a peaceful way. For the Dutch, it is important to enable everyone to have their say and to reach an agreement together. Instead of agreeing with one party, a compromise has to be achieved. Maintaining a pleasant atmosphere free of hostility is crucial.

11. Equality is about that one should not think he or she is better than someone else. For the Dutch it is important that everyone is treated equally. Inequality is seen as unjust and modesty is viewed positively.

12. Self-determination has to do with that everyone has to be free to do what he or she wants, as long as one does not bother someone else. It is important that one can go his or her own way, without interference from others. Everyone has to make their own choices and have their own opinion and another person has no right to tell or force someone else to do something.

Nr.	Underlying Value	Dutch Translation	Origin
1	Salvation	Heil	Christianity
2	Guilt & Remission	Schuld	Christianity
3	Charity	Naasteliefde	Christianity
4	Truth	Waarheid	Christianity
5	Work	Arbeid	Protestantism
6	Order & Neatness	Orde & Netheid	Protestantism
7	Utility	Nut	Protestantism
8	Reliability	Betrouwbaarheid	Protestantism
9	Moderation	Matigheid	Protestantism
10	Consensus	Overeenstemming	Holland
11	Equality	Gelijkheid	Holland
12	Self-determination	Zelfbeschikking	Holland

Table 1. The underlying values of the Dutch culture

2.3.3 Comparing the Swedish and Dutch Cultural Values

When comparing the Swedish cultural values identified by Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999) with the Dutch cultural values identified by Enklaar (2007), many similarities can be seen. So is the value equality, of treating everyone the same, a value for the Swedes as well as for the Dutch (Daun, 1996; Barinaga, 1999; Enklaar, 2007). Also consensus is a value for both the Swedes and the Dutch; in both countries it is important to reach an agreement together, to compromise, and to avoid conflicts (Daun, 1996; Barinaga, 1999; Enklaar, 2007). Also some differences between the Swedish and Dutch cultural values can be identified. The Swedish value independence, about the preference of solitude and the importance of being able to do things by oneself (Daun; 1996; Barinaga, 1999), is not a Dutch value. Additionally, the Dutch value self-determination, about the importance of making one's own decisions and having one's own opinion (Enklaar, 2007), is not a value for the Swedes.

2.4 Thomas' Qualitative Approach to Culture

The studies of Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999) are rather impressionistic, and not directly based on systematic and empirical research. This study aims at carrying out qualitative systematic and empirical research to explore the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes. A more reliable method is Thomas et al.'s (2010) qualitative approach to studying culture. Therefore, this study uses the theory and method of Thomas et al. (2010). Thomas et al. (2010) came up with an emic approach to studying culture, based on cultural standards and by using the Critical Incident Technique.

2.4.1 Cultural Standards

Cultural standards are perceptions, thought patterns, judgements, and interactions shared by a majority of members of a particular culture who consider their behaviour to be normal, conventional, and binding (Thomas et al., 2010). According to Thomas et al. (2010), both one's own and others' behaviour is judged, directed and regulated based on these cultural standards. This is because cultural standards provide members of a culture with a regulatory function for dealing with given situations and with people. Individual and group-specific ways of applying cultural standards for regulating behaviour can vary within a range of tolerance. Consequently, behaviours that go beyond this range are not accepted by the collective and can be sanctioned (Thomas et al., 2010).

Knowing the cultural standards of a country is very useful. Namely, knowing which culture-specific orientation signals apply to people from other cultures is very helpful when intercultural collaborations take place (Thomas et al., 2010). Cultural standards can also be used as material for developing intercultural trainings, which have the goal of preparing individuals for working with people from other cultures. Additionally, knowing that the cultural standards of other cultures created the system of orientation of the people from that culture lays the foundation for mutual respect and intercultural competence. Many studies have been conducted to identify cultural standards, and all have done so by using the Critical Incident Technique (Thomas et al., 2010). The Critical Incident Technique and the methodology of this study are explained in further detail in the next chapter.

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods that were used in this study. Firstly, the research design of the study is explained, thereafter the data collection, then the sample description, following that the research instrument, and finally the data analysis is explained. This study is part of the project ‘One market, many cultures’, which is an initiative of the section of Organisational Behaviour, Change Management and Consultancy (OBCC) at the University of Twente and the European Institute for Cross-Cultural Studies (CROCUS).

3.1 Research Design

This study investigates concrete situations on the work floor where the Dutch and the Swedes work together and where they face collaboration and communication challenges due to cultural differences. This is done with the aim to establish a list of Swedish cultural standards, as seen from the Dutch perspective. Therefore, an inductive qualitative research approach is used in this study.

Qualitative research involves a nonnumerical interpretation and analysis of observations, in order to discover patterns of relationships and underlying meanings (Babbie, 2014). Qualitative research is used in order to understand people’s experiences, beliefs, attitudes, interactions, and behaviour, and it enables study participants to express themselves to share their experiences

(Pathak et al., 2013). Because of the flexible nature of qualitative research, it is suitable to understand interpretations, meanings and subjective experiences of people (Liamputtong, 2010). Therefore, a qualitative approach is very suitable for cross-cultural research (Liamputtong, 2010). This study aims to identify Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective based on the interviewees' experiences working with Swedes, and also to explain the cultural logic behind the cultural standards. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is very suitable for this study.

Additionally, inductive research starts with observations and, after that, looks for patterns in those observations (Babbie, 2014). Inductive research is very suitable for this research since this study aims to establish a list of cultural standards based on the patterns that are found in the data. In Figure 4, a visual representation of the research design is shown.



Figure 4. Visual representation of the research design

3.2 Data Collection

Sixteen interviews were conducted with Dutch expats who live and work in Sweden to collect data. Sixteen interviews were conducted because, according to Thesing (2016), after eleven interviews, a saturation point is reached, which means that conducting additional interviews will result in no or only very few new critical incidents. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees. Purposive sampling entails that the interviewees are selected based on the researcher's judgement regarding the relevance of answering the study's research question (Saunders & Townsend, 2018). Purposive sampling is normally used to select a small number of interviewees who are expected to be particularly informative and, therefore, will enable the researcher to answer the research question (Saunders & Townsend, 2018). Social media networks were used to find the interviewees, and the interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. There were a number of requirements for the interviewees (the Dutch individuals living and working in Sweden):

1. They have worked in Sweden for at least half a year. This is because after approximately six months the so-called honeymoon phase is over. The honeymoon phase is the first phase of expatriation where expats experience feelings of euphoria and excitement of being in a new country, and during which they tend to be unrealistically positive about the host country (Naeem et al., 2015). After the honeymoon phase, expats start to notice the reality from living abroad and the differences with their home country (Naeem et al., 2015).

2. They work with Swedish colleagues and are integrated in a team with Swedish colleagues. This is because it is important that they are working extensively with Swedish colleagues and not just with other expats, so that they have many interactions with Swedes and can speak about the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes.

3. Together the group of interviewees is demographically diverse. Therefore, the interviewees are working in different regions in Sweden. In addition, also other demographic characteristics such as the age, gender, and occupation of the interviewees are taken into account in this study, as well as how many years they have worked in Sweden. This is done to ensure that the sample is demographically balanced.

3.3 Sample Description

Seventeen Dutch expats who are living and working in Sweden were interviewed in this study. An overview of the demographic characteristics of the interviewees can be found in Table 2.

Nr.	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation	Years in Sweden
1	Woman	42	Gothenburg	Project Manager	2,5
2	Woman	35	Stockholm	Tax Director	5,5
3	Man	62	Malmö	Teacher	8
4	Woman	55	Ljusdal	Youth Care Worker	3,5
5	Woman	55	Sala	Nurse	11
6	Man	42	Jönköping	Team Leader	7
7	Man	36	Uppsala	Crane Operator	2
8	Man	53	Stockholm	Financial Controller	13
9	Woman	40	Mora	B&B Employee	0,5

10	Man	42	Stockholm	Head of Sales	13
11	Man	52	Gothenburg	Principal Consultant	2,5
12	Woman	46	Stockholm	Professor	14
13	Man	53	Stockholm	IT Manager	23
14	Woman	34	Stockholm	Marketing Automation Specialist	1,5
15	Woman	59	Stockholm	Product Manager	29
16	Man	46	Stockholm	Director	3,5
17	Woman	53	Stockholm	Teaching Assistant	3,5

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees

3.4 Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Semi-structured interviews consist of both closed and open-ended questions, as well as follow-up or how questions (Adams, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are very suitable for this study, because they allow for a prepared list of interview questions to be asked during the interviews, as well as the possibility to ask additional follow-up questions for clarification and more information (Saunders et al., 2009). In this way, it is possible to gain enough information about the challenges the interviewees face when collaborating with the Swedes. However, a disadvantage of interviews as a data collection method is that the way the interviewer asks questions can influence the answers given by the interviewees (Phellas et al., 2011). The respondents may also give socially desirable responses, which reduces the reliability of the responses (Phellas et al., 2011).

A standard questionnaire consisting of open questions was used during the interviews, and the Critical Incident Technique was used as a research method. This means that the interviewees were asked about their experiences working with Swedes, and about specific situations (critical incidents) they experienced as strange or surprising. The aim was to gather as many detailed stories about typical Swedish behaviour as possible. A successful interview contained detailed descriptions of what exactly happened on the work floor. Therefore, if the answers that were given were too general, follow-up questions were asked to gather more information.

Before the interviews took place, the interviewees were asked for consent for the interview and for recording the interview. The interviews were conducted virtually via Teams, with one interviewee at a time, to prevent the interviewees from influencing each other's answers. Only

one of the sixteen interviews was conducted with two expats at the same time (interviewee 16 and 17). This was considered acceptable since they were husband and wife, and thus had many shared experiences.

The language in which the interviews were conducted was Dutch, the native language of both the researcher and the interviewees. This is done because people are able to communicate more freely when speaking their native language. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, although they could be a bit longer or shorter depending on how much the interviewee had to tell. The interviews were transcribed automatically and afterwards corrected where needed by the researcher. Thereafter the data could be analysed.

3.4.1 Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was introduced by John Flanagan, an American psychologist, in 1954. The CIT grew out of studies conducted during the second World War in the Aviation Psychology Program from the Army Air Forces, and the effectiveness of the method led to extension and further development of the CIT after the war (Flanagan, 1954). In the years that followed, the CIT became a widely utilized qualitative research method and is now recognized as an useful exploratory and investigative tool (Butterfield et al., 2005).

The influence of the CIT extends far beyond its origins in industrial and organizational psychology, and it has been applied across a large number of disciplines (Butterfield et al., 2005). Fiedler, Mitchell, and Triandis (1971) applied the CIT for the first time to the research of cultural differences. They created 'culture assimilators' that helped people from one culture to interact with and adjust to people from other cultures (Fiedler et al., 1971).

In their handbook of intercultural communication and cooperation, Thomas et al. (2010) elaborate on how to use the CIT to identify cultural standards. According to Thomas et al. (2010), to identify the cultural standards of a country, individuals from other countries can be asked what they noticed during their encounters with people from that country (Thomas et al., 2010). The questions that should be asked are about difficulties and problems those people have repeatedly experienced when working with their foreign partners, what kind of unexpected, different and incomprehensible reactions they regularly encountered, and what, according to them, are explanations for the unfamiliar and unexpected behaviour they noticed (Thomas et al., 2010).

Following the interviewing of multiple people, it is possible to identify one sentence that underwrites the critical interaction (Thomas et al., 2010). Thereafter the sentence is analysed with the aim to filter out the cultural standards. If the results demonstrate a large agreement on a number of indicators that are behaviourally relevant, these can be defined as cultural standards of that country. Cultural standards identified in this way, via the Critical Incident Technique, are not representative of an entire culture. However, these cultural standards are helpful for collecting knowledge about the system of orientation of a culture, and can help to explain unfamiliar and unexpected behaviour from foreign partners (Thomas et al., 2010).

Thomas et al.'s (2010) approach also received some criticism. Thomas et al.'s definition of cultural standards is unclear about whether by cultural standards 'typical behaviours' or 'values' are meant (Enklaar, 2022). In this way, the observed typical behaviours and the interpretation of these typical behaviours are mixed up. Many studies that made use of Thomas et al.'s approach also resulted in thin descriptions of a culture, in which only the typical behaviours of that culture are described, but no attention is paid to the cultural logic leading to these behaviours (Enklaar, 2022).

Therefore, this study follows the Grounded Interpretive Model (GIM). The GIM makes use of Thomas et al.'s (2010) Critical Incident Technique to identify cultural standards, and extends it by adding an interpretive part (Enklaar, 2022). The method is grounded because the cultural standards of a culture are identified by systematically analysing the critical incidents that are mentioned by expats. Furthermore, the method is interpretive because the typical behaviours are also interpreted; the cultural logic leading to these behaviours is explained (Enklaar, 2022). So, in this study, first the Critical Incident Technique is used to identify Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective. And, thereafter, the underlying values leading to the typical Swedish behaviours are explained, providing a thick description of Swedish culture.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic Analysis is an accessible and flexible method for analysing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method enables the researcher to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data. Furthermore, Thematic Analysis makes it possible to minimally organise the data and to describe the data set in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clarke (2006) distinguished six phases of Thematic Analysis:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data: transcribing data, reading data several times and writing down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes: systematically code interesting features of the data and collect data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes: organizing codes into potential themes and gathering all data that is relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes: checking whether the themes work in connection with the coded extracts and the full data set.
5. Defining and naming themes: continuous analysis to improve the details of each theme as well as the overall story the analysis conveys, and creating clear names and definitions for each theme.
6. Producing the report: Selecting vivid and compelling extract examples, doing a final analysis of the selected extracts, connecting the analysis back to the literature and research question, and writing an academic report of the analysis.

In addition to Thematic Analysis, the Gioia Methodology was used to describe how the cultural standards and values are grounded in the data. The Gioia Methodology is a method that enables the researcher to conduct inductive research in a qualitative rigorous way, while retaining its potential for creating new ideas and concepts (Gioia et al., 2012). The Gioia Methodology makes it possible to transform the dataset into a data structure consisting of first order concepts, second order themes and aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012). In this study, the first order concepts are the paraphrased quotes from the interviewees, the second order themes are the cultural standards that are retrieved from the paraphrased quotes, and the aggregate dimensions are the underlying values of the cultural standards.

The formation of the first order concepts was done during the second phase of thematic analysis (generating initial codes), the formation of the second order themes was done during the third phase of thematic analysis (searching for themes), and the formation of the aggregate dimensions was done during the fifth phase of thematic analysis (defining and naming themes). Figure 5 shows a visual representation of the data analysis of this study, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2012).

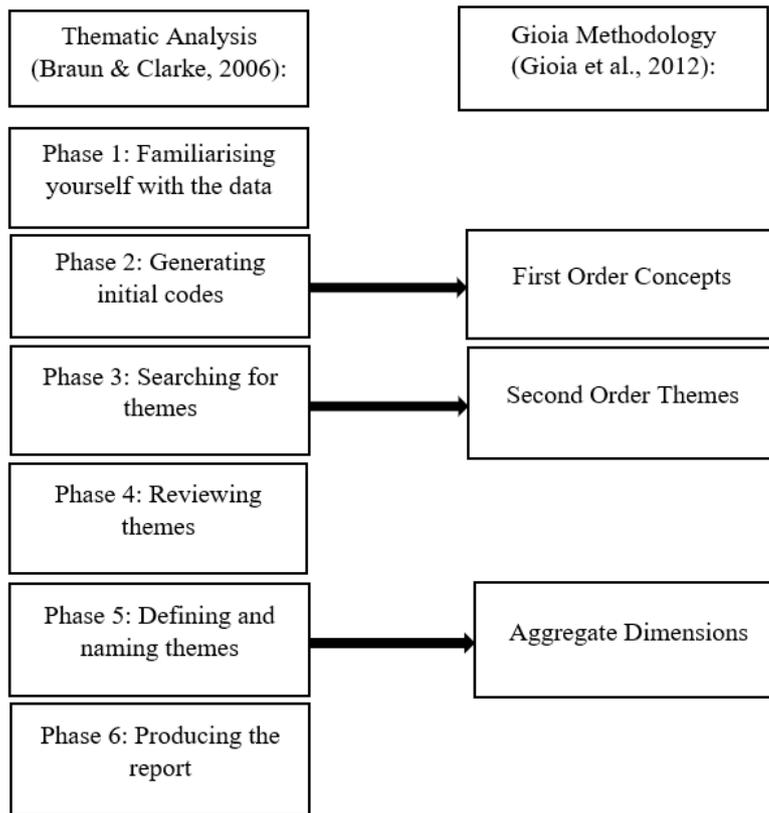


Figure 5. Visual representation of the data analysis using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012)

4. Results

The results of the study are shown in this chapter. Firstly, an overview is given of the Swedish cultural standards identified by the Dutch expats living and working in Sweden. A description is given of the identified Swedish cultural standards, with some quotes from the interviews for illustration, and also the Dutch perspective is explained. Thereafter the Swedish cultural standards are linked to the underlying cultural values to explain the observed behaviours of the Swedes.

4.1 Swedish Cultural Standards

After coding the transcripts of the 16 interviews that were conducted, 14 Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective were identified. Table 3 gives an overview of the identified Swedish cultural standards, together with a short definition and their frequency, i.e. the number of interviewees who mentioned this cultural standard. The frequency is included since the cultural standard is more likely to be a ‘typical’ Swedish behaviour when the behaviour is mentioned by several interviewees. For that reason, only cultural standards that were mentioned by three or more interviewees are included. This is because the cultural standards mentioned by less than three interviewees might not be widespread Swedish behaviours, or they might be widespread Swedish behaviours that do not provoke strong frictions with the Dutch.

Nr.	Cultural Standard	Definition	Frequency
1	Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure	Always strictly following rules and procedures and sticking to a given structure	13
2	Long Decision-Making Process	Repeated long meetings are needed to make decisions, and everyone has to be involved	12
3	Confrontation Avoidance	Avoiding to talk about sensitive matters	11
4	Private Life	Not very open to socialise privately with people outside of one’s inner circle	10

5	Family and Personal Circumstances	High importance given to personal wellbeing and private situation / issues	10
6	Work-Life Balance	Not working overtime or doing more than necessary	9
7	Indirectness	Giving feedback in an indirect way, not asking direct questions, and not communicating explicitly	9
8	Closedness	Sharing personal matters only with people one knows for a long time	8
9	Disagreement Avoidance	Avoiding disagreement by keeping quiet, not expressing one's personal opinion, or using a third party for expressing dissent	8
10	Silence	Only saying something when you have something to contribute	6
11	Emphasis on Equality	Not showing one is better than someone else, and not drawing attention to your competences and successes	5
12	No Action Points	Not deciding concrete action points in meetings	4
13	Respecting Decisions	Always respecting and adhering to decisions that have been made	3
14	Speaking Swedish	Speaking Swedish in the presence of non-Swedish speakers or indicating that they prefer them to speak Swedish	3

Table 3. *Swedish Cultural Standards*

Additionally, a more detailed description of the 14 Swedish cultural standards is given below. First a neutral description of the cultural standard is given, based on the behaviour that the Dutch observed, and thereafter some quotes of the interviewees are provided. The quotes show concrete situations (critical incidents) experienced by the interviewees in which the cultural standard is involved. Finally, a description is given of the Dutch perspective on the Swedish cultural standard, to explain why the Dutch experience these behaviours as strange or surprising. The descriptions of the Dutch perspective are based on the interview transcripts and on the Dutch cultural values identified by Enklaar (2007).

1. Sticking to rules, procedures and structure

The Dutch interviewees observed that Swedes always strictly follow the rules and procedures, and that they do not deviate from them or make exceptions. This applies to rules at work as well as to rules in society at large. In the workplace, Swedes appreciate having structure, and a lot of effort is put into ensuring nothing goes wrong with well-defined procedures everyone must follow. Additionally, Swedes have a lot of respect for the law and for authorities such as the government. Therefore, imposed rules are nearly always followed, and also traffic rules are always strictly followed. For Swedes following the rules is very important, and it is important that everyone follows the rules. As a result, if someone breaks a rule in Sweden, it is likely that someone else will confront him or her about it or call the police.

Quote 1: *“At the parking lot at my previous job it was always difficult to find a parking spot there. And there was a bicycle shed, which only had a few bicycles in it, and part of it, there was an empty part under that roof where you could easily park your car, and sometimes I parked my car there. And a Swedish colleague reacted very angrily to this, saying, ‘How can you park your car there? That’s not allowed?’ But I think yes, you just have to think practically and it doesn’t bother anyone, I won’t take anyone else’s place, the bicycles still have plenty of space. But for Swedes it really is that rules are rules and even if it is, say, counterproductive or something, it’s still more important to follow the rule.”* – Interviewee 15

Quote 2: *“What is remarkable is that Swedes very much follow the rules. You especially noticed it during the coronavirus. When in the Netherlands the government said, well, don’t visit your grandmother or something, the Dutch were like, well, I’ll decide that for myself. And when the government in Sweden says, well, don’t visit your grandmother, everyone sticks to it. Because the government says so. That’s why a lot of fines had to be issued in the Netherlands for all sorts of things, because the Dutch very quickly tend to think, why? I will decide that myself. And Swedes, yes, they are obedient. If the government says, well, this is how it should be done, that’s how we do it.”* – Interviewee 5

Quote 3: *“You just have certain processes, and yes, you have to follow them. And in the Netherlands it is way easier to convince someone like ‘we’re just going to do this, because it is necessary now, we need this, and we have to do it, and it has to be finished today, okay, then we will do that process, we will do that tomorrow’. But in Sweden that’s way more difficult.”* – Interviewee 13

In the Netherlands there are also rules that apply to all citizens, and also the Dutch believe rules are important since they prevent chaos. However, the Dutch follow the rules less strictly than the Swedes. The Dutch tend to give their own interpretation to situations, and do not always follow the rules if they believe that a rule is impractical in a certain situation. This has to do with the Dutch value 'Utility', which means that everything one does must be useful. Therefore, the Dutch also want to do things the most efficient way, which can result in not always strictly following the rules and procedures and not sticking to structure. The Dutch find it acceptable to do this due to the Dutch value 'Self-determination', which means that everyone has to be able to decide what to do for themselves, as long as one does not bother others.

2. Long decision-making process

In Sweden, making decisions is a rather extensive process, according to the Dutch interviewees. It is crucial to involve everyone, so often multiple departments and people from all kinds of positions have to be present at the meeting. Then there will be a lengthy discussion in which people share their views on the subject. It is important that everyone thinks along and says something about the topic, so everyone is asked whether they have any input. Frequently the meeting will end with the conclusion that it was interesting, that there are a lot of different views, and that they will come back to it later. Then there will be another meeting or two more meetings on the same subject, in which everyone will continue 'diskutera', discussing the topic. Namely, because Swedes are careful with giving their opinion and refrain from openly disagreeing, it takes longer until it is clear where everyone stands, and thus, to find consensus. In the final meeting, often the third meeting, the decision is made.

Quote 4: *"In the Netherlands, people discuss a lot, but in Sweden, people totally unbelievable discuss a lot. There is no shortage of meetings, so to speak. (...) Sometimes we have three meetings on the same topic, while there are no new insights and no new information. Of course I sometimes wonder, 'why are we having this meeting, we decided that last week?' And then it's like 'yes, but' and then they just go again. So they often discuss the same thing several times, which I think in the Netherlands we wouldn't do that. There it was just one meeting and moving on. And in Sweden it's only after three meetings that you kind of have everyone being used to doing it this way"* – Interviewee 11

Quote 5: *“As a manager you cannot simply say ‘Okay I decided that we’re going to do this’. You really need to give everyone the idea that they have a say, that they are thinking along, that they can make suggestions. And most of the time you also have to do this in two or three rounds, so that’s a lot of meetings.”* – Interviewee 13

The Dutch also believe it is crucial to be involved when decisions are made, since ‘Consensus’ is deeply ingrained in the Dutch culture as well. Therefore, also the Dutch are used to having meetings in which everyone can express their opinion and an attempt is made to reach agreement on a decision. However, in the Netherlands everyone clearly expresses their opinion in the beginning of the meeting (Self-determination), whereafter the Dutch begin their search for consensus. Therefore, the Dutch are used to discussing the topic and making a decision in one meeting. Having multiple meetings discussing the same topic can therefore feel like a waste of their time. This has to do with the Dutch value ‘Utility’, which implies that one has to be frugal with one’s resources, including time.

3. Confrontation Avoidance

According to the Dutch interviewees, Swedes prefer to avoid talking about sensitive matters. When there is an underlying problem or sensitive matter they have to talk about, they will not directly mention it but rather approach it very carefully. For the same reason, Swedes prefer to avoid giving bad news. Instead, they will remain quiet or leave out the painful details. Similarly, Swedes do not react critically when someone makes a mistake. Rather, they will approach it as a work problem, and start looking into what is needed to get it right, without mentioning that the problem was caused by someone’s actions.

Quote 6: *“It happened quite often that there was an underlying problem that everyone actually knew was there, but no one wanted to mention it, so to speak. They all sort of avoided the subject, or continued to beat around the bush a bit. And again it was a Dutchman who said, ‘I believe we should all talk about this.’ And then you also see that they say, ‘yes, yes’, then they don’t evade it, so it is ‘okay, that is indeed right, we have to talk about that’, but they approach it with much more caution, so to speak, than the Dutch.”* – Interviewee 11

Quote 7: *“We were working on moving a warehouse, so you have to imagine that a company had two locations in the same city and they wanted to achieve having lower real estate costs. So, well, then you try to push everything into one location, makes sense. And, by the way, we had Finns there, anyway, they thought it was all possible, and the Swedes, the very large*

majority, thought that was not the case. And there was more and more talking in the hallways, but no one said during the project meetings 'yes, but this just doesn't fit.' (...) During the meetings everyone was just working on their tasks, but in the hallways there was a lot of talking. 'Yes, this is not possible and that will not work and that will not work.' Until at a certain point a critical mass is created of 'no it won't work' and eventually a director says 'yes, when all my people say it won't work, then someone has to stand up and has to do something about it.' And only then he starts doing something, while I had already been to his office three times, like, 'I don't know, but that's not going to work, is it?'. So, but no, we're not going to do anything about it yet. And everyone continues to cooperate, but in the meantime... yes" – Interviewee 1

The Dutch have less difficulty talking about sensitive matters and underlying problems than the Swedes. This has to do with the Dutch value 'Truth', which implies that truthfulness and openness is more important than holding back painful issues. The Dutch prefer telling the truth, even if it is painful, because they value having certainty. Another value that comes into play here is 'Utility.' Because the Dutch do not want to waste their time, they prefer to act on the facts right away instead of approaching the issue very carefully. Furthermore, because of the Dutch value Self-determination, the Dutch are also used to constantly expressing their opinions. As a result, they will speak up when something is not right (Truth) or impractical (Utility). However, while the interviewees often perceived this Swedish behaviour as not optimal, they regarded it very positive that Swedes do not react critically when someone makes a mistake.

4. Private Life

According to the interviewees, Swedes often keep their private lives apart from their colleagues, and typically have a close inner circle of long-time friends and family with whom they socialise privately. The Swedes also regularly spend their free time relaxing at home, without social activities. This is not only because they do not want to engage in social activities, but also because they value other things such as being outside in the nature. As a result, after-work gatherings with colleagues do not occur very often. Furthermore, even though Swedes are very friendly and helpful, they are usually not very open to making new friends outside of their inner circle of long-time friends and family. Long-time friends and family also come to each other's homes in Sweden, but it is not very common for neighbours to do the same. Swedes typically keep to themselves and keep quiet to avoid bothering others. Swedes would not, for example,

talk with someone they meet on the bus. That is the same on the work floor, Swedes usually do not socialise with people from other departments with whom they do not collaborate.

Quote 8: *“We live in an apartment here and we have good contact with many of our neighbours, you speak to each other, and well, but you are not easily invited like ‘come and have dinner with us’ or ‘oh, a cup of coffee, neighbour?’ , that no, that's something more private. This is also because many Swedes simply go to their summer house, their second home, during the weekend. But also during the week, yes, good colleagues, excellent cooperation, honest, reliable, but in Sweden it is not so common that outside of your family and maybe a close circle of friends, it's not that easy to get involved in the private sphere, so to speak.”* – Interviewee 3

Quote 9: *“I noticed it in the beginning that every Friday I would ask ‘hey, guys, who wants to have a beer?’ , and I was actually always the person who asked that question, and there wasn't really anyone who took over the initiative. And at one point I asked very directly, I'm Dutch after all, ‘but guys, don't you like it or something?’ ‘yes I do like it, but I also like being at home.’ And at some point it was nothing for two months, and I thought well, I'm really going, this is going to be a matter of principle, I'm not going to be the next one to say ‘hey, guys, let's have a beer’. And then you just notice that people indeed have a beer every now and then, but once a month is enough for them, once every two months, so it will be repeated. And of course I also wanted to be sure they would invite me, isn't it me? And I get invited, and I get to attend, and there are no after-works I don't attend, but it's just way less frequent.”* – Interviewee 2

In the Netherlands it is not necessarily easier to make friends, since also in the Netherlands most people already have a close group of long-time friends. However, in the Netherlands it is quite normal for neighbours to visit each other's homes. And, the Dutch often engage in small talk with people they meet, for example, on the bus, or with people who work for the same company but with whom they do not collaborate. This has to do with the importance the Dutch attach to having a friendly (‘gezellige’) atmosphere in all situations. For the same reason, the Dutch find it important to regularly engage in activities with colleagues outside of work, as they believe this increases team cohesion and positively impacts collaboration.

5. Family and Personal Circumstances

The Dutch interviewees noticed that in Sweden employers are very considerate to their employees' family and personal circumstances. Because children are central in Sweden, there are many arrangements that enable parents to take care of their children. For example, both men

and women can stay at home for an extended period of time when having a baby. In addition, mothers and fathers are given numerous extra days off so they can stay at home and care for their children. Parents can also easily leave early to pick up their children, and therefore usually no meetings are scheduled after three o'clock. Next to leaving early for picking up children, it is also totally acceptable and common to leave early for other reasons, such as sports. The employer also invests in the well-being of its employees by, for example, paying for their fitness memberships. Similarly, it is not a problem when employees stay at home if they are sick in Sweden, also when someone only has a cold it is totally acceptable to stay at home.

Quote 10: *“We had someone in our company, that was a woman. She had her first child, and she stayed at home somewhat longer than a year. Then she was pregnant with her second child, and again she stayed at home somewhat longer than a year. So in the end she didn't work for two, two and a half, three years. She eventually quit, but yes, that's very normal in Sweden, that you can stay at home for quite a long time.”* – Interviewee 7

Quote 11: *“A parent can also leave at a moment's notice, so as a manager you have to take that into account. (...) I was of course at school with parents, and once a teacher got a call that her own child was sick at another school, they leave at a moment's notice. Yes children are central and you shouldn't say anything about it. I said 'but who should do that now?', well, then you would get looks, like 'yes, that doesn't matter, but she's leaving now.' And as a teaching assistant like me you're just teaching, and that's just how it is, and everyone knows, yes, that's how it is.”* – Interviewee 17

Many interviewees were surprised by the extent to which Swedish employers are considerate to their employees' family and personal circumstances. Compared to Sweden, the Netherlands places a greater emphasis on work and company results, leaving less room for consideration of family and personal circumstances. As a result, in the Netherlands, employees' absences are often seen as a problem, and parents cannot stay at home for an extended period of time. Most interviewees therefore experienced the respect in Sweden for the fact that you have children, for other aspects of your personal life, and for employee well-being very positively. However, some interviewees also found it hard to understand how it is so accepted for employees to be absent from work so often and for such a long period in Sweden, for example, because others then have to take over their work.

6. Work-Life Balance

The interviewees noticed that Swedes are used to going home strictly at the time their workday ends. There is no need to work extra hours, and working overtime actually does not happen. If something is not finished by the end of the day, it can wait until the next day, and then they will continue. In Sweden, doing exactly what you have to do is ideal, and doing more is not necessary. As a result, it is unusual for Swedes to take the initiative to do extra things, and many interviewees also noticed that the working atmosphere in Sweden is more relaxed than in the Netherlands.

Quote 12: *“For example, if we have work, in principle we work fixed days, but we actually roam everywhere. And if, for example, we have an assignment, well, that takes the whole day and that if we continue a little longer that we will have the work finished, so after 4 o’clock so to speak. In the Netherlands we tend to say, well, you know, we will rapidly work through those 1.5 or 2 hours, we’ll push that through with each other. But here they just say, ‘you know, we stop today and we will continue tomorrow.’ We tend to be a bit more relaxed over here, compared to the Netherlands.”* – Interviewee 7

Quote 13: *“You know, with 40 hours, you’ve done what you have to do. And I would say, yes, but if you work 45 hours, or you do just that little bit extra, or you put in some extra effort, then you will receive a better evaluation, and if someone is up for a promotion, it may be you. ‘Yes, but otherwise it will be me next year’, the Swede responds. And then you think, okay, this is where the discussion ends, this is never going to happen. And the same when hiring new people, they said ‘yes, but now we have two people who have worked overtime for three weeks in a row, so we just need to hire someone new.’ Yes, or we accept that it is sometimes okay to work three hours extra?”* – Interviewee 2

The Dutch find it important to work hard and to do their work well, which has to do with the Dutch value ‘Work’. Therefore it is common for the Dutch to work extra hours if they believe the circumstances require it. This is also because the Dutch find it more important to do their work efficiently than to go home strictly at the official time their workday ends. Furthermore, the Dutch are used to thinking along and taking the initiative to do extra things at work, which is seen as very positive in the Netherlands. Therefore, the Dutch may find it strange when their colleagues only do what they have to do and nothing more, meaning that they feel less responsibility for their work and only focus on working hours.

7. Indirectness

According to the Dutch interviewees, the Swedes communicate rather indirectly. Messages and decisions are often communicated implicitly and are not clearly stated. Similarly, also feedback is given in an indirect way. Rather than directly telling someone what he or she should do differently, examples are given in general, and messages are communicated between the lines. When feedback is given on someone's work, this is done in a subtle manner, along with mentioning many positive aspects. It is crucial to give feedback carefully and indirectly, as otherwise it may be perceived as personal criticism. Also questions are asked in an indirect and polite way, and preferably after talking about some other things first. Furthermore, when Swedes cannot or do not want to do something, they will remain silent rather than saying no, since they do not want to hurt others.

Quote 14: *"I have often heard, especially in the beginning when I started as a project leader, that 'well you can't say it like that.' Or 'in Sweden we don't do it like this', so if you say, that yes, a project didn't go well, then you can't say 'okay, that wasn't good', you really have to say 'okay, good work, nicely done everybody, but adjusting this and that and that.' So you really have to adjust it a little."* – Interviewee 13

Quote 15: *"I had a colleague at another university and once at a conference we discussed writing a research proposal together. He said 'that really sounds like fun, we're going to do that.' Yes, nice, and thereafter I got these very vague reactions, so I said 'do you want to participate or not? Because I have to work on it now and it takes a lot of time, and I would like, well, within a week, would that be possible for you to respond?' Well, and that didn't happen and that didn't happen, and in the end I started doing something else with other people. (...) And then I think, why do you say.. You also save me a lot of hassle by just being clear, saying 'I don't have time for it, but I do like it.' But people do not dare to say why not, or do not dare to say no, even though it is actually a no."* – Interviewee 12

In contrast with the Swedes, the Dutch have a very direct communication style. The Dutch are used to communicating what they mean in a precise and clear way, and they assume that what someone says is also exactly what he means. This has to do with the Dutch value 'Truth'; the Dutch prefer telling the truth, even if it is painful, because they value having certainty. Additionally, due to the Dutch value Self-determination, the Dutch also always express what they think. Furthermore, due to the Dutch value 'Utility', the Dutch want to do things the most efficient way. They prefer to know the facts right away and perceive indirect communication

as time-consuming. As a result, the Dutch communicate explicitly, ask direct questions and provide direct feedback. Some interviewees therefore also experienced situations in which the Swedes stared at them in shock or perceived it as personal criticism when they provided feedback the same way they always did in the Netherlands.

8. Closedness

Many interviewees experienced their Swedish colleagues, and Swedes in general, to be rather closed, especially in the beginning. Matters concerning one's private life are not openly shared at work in Sweden, and only after knowing each other for a long time it is normal for Swedes to share personal matters. After a relationship is built, Swedish colleagues can be quite warm and friendly, as well as interested and compassionate about each other's private lives, but it takes some time to get there.

Quote 16: *“It takes longer for them to tell more about themselves. In the Netherlands, if you know someone a little better, after two weeks, you tell them almost everything, and here it takes a really long time before they tell personal things. It took me three months in the staff room before someone asked ‘would you like to have lunch together?’ Or ‘would you like a cup of coffee?’ or whatever. That really takes a bit longer, and then still sporadically. And that is first of all collegial and I think only after a good six months or three quarters of a year that you hear something personal or that they start asking you something personal. You really have to put some time into that and not be too present, they don't like that.”* – Interviewee 17

Quote 17: *“It took a while before the ice broke, so to speak. Then you really notice these things work quite differently than in the Netherlands, you really have to build a relationship with them. And once you've done that, then it's all just friendly and pleasant, then you can share anything with each other, from what you've done over the weekend to troubles you might face at home. But it did take some time before we were on that level.”* – Interviewee 14

For the Dutch, it is quite normal to share personal matters with each other quickly after getting to know each other, and the Dutch are used to openly discussing matters from their private life at work. This has to do with the importance the Dutch attach to having a friendly ('gezellige') atmosphere on the work floor. As a result, the Dutch are used to treating their colleagues as if they were friends, and they believe this leads to better collaboration. Because the Dutch thus expect their colleagues to behave this way, it can be strange for them when their colleagues are

rather closed, and do not discuss personal matters until they have known each other for a long time.

9. Disagreement Avoidance

The interviewees observed that Swedes always try to avoid showing disagreement as much as possible. As a result, Swedes are careful when giving their opinion, and they do not speak up when they disagree with someone during a meeting. Saying you disagree with someone during a meeting is also not appreciated in Sweden, and may be perceived as personal criticism. When disagreements have to be resolved, Swedes will rather seek the assistance of a third party, such as another colleague or an HR department, than confronting the person directly.

Quote 18: *“If someone disagrees with you, it is unlikely that you hear about it at the meeting itself. You might hear it from someone else that person has spoken with, who says, ‘Hey, what did you say at that meeting?’ Or ‘that proposal of yours was not very well received.’ ‘Well okay, not that I’m aware of, no one said anything.’”* – Interviewee 13

Quote 19: *“There was something in the way in a conference room, studio lights, I believe. And this was asked in a chat message ‘can you put that away?’. And a response was sent saying, ‘well, it’s not in the way, right? Can’t it wait for a while? We’re talking about a day, so to speak.’ And then there is no response to that anymore, but behind their back, someone really had to come to call about ‘hey, you said something and that didn’t sit well.’ Then I think yes, for such a small thing guys, that is, yes, those are difficult, difficult things.”* – Interviewee 14

The Dutch are used to communicating in a very direct way, and they often say precisely what they think. This has to do with the Dutch value ‘Truth’; it is important to tell the truth, even if it is painful, because knowing the truth and having certainty is more important than being polite. As a result, the Dutch prefer people to tell it like it is, and they do not appreciate hearing things later via another person. Furthermore, due to the Dutch value ‘Self-determination’, the Dutch find it important that everyone has their own opinion. As a result, the Dutch are used to clearly expressing their personal opinion and speaking up when they disagree, and they can perceive it negatively when others do not do the same.

10. Silence

According to the interviewees, the Swedes are much less talkative than the Dutch. The interviewees noticed that Swedes usually only say something when they have something to contribute, and that they otherwise keep silent. As interviewee 4 mentioned: ‘A Swede doesn’t speak much, but when they say something, it is good’. Swedes also do not just start talking, but rather first think carefully before they say something. Hence, extended silences are also common in Swedish conversations.

Quote 20: *“In the Netherlands I think it is somewhat the standard if you have a meeting for example that you show that you are active and involved by saying something, even if you have no knowledge of the subject at all. In Sweden it is more, you only say something if you have something to add and you only say something if you actually know something about it substantively or if you have questions, but otherwise you keep silent. And both are just as good as everyone knows how it works, but if you expect with your Dutch attitude ‘well, everyone will enthusiastically engage in a discussion...’”* – Interviewee 10

Quote 21: *“What I had a lot of difficulty with in the beginning, are for example those meetings and that people are actually just silent and don’t seem to have an opinion. And then I think ‘yes but that’s not possible, you feel responsible for your job right? So you need to have an opinion about it, you need to have an idea.’”* – Interviewee 14

Quote 22: *“In the Netherlands you don’t have such long silences, but here in a conversation people can really just say nothing for a few seconds. And that was very uncomfortable for us in the beginning, because we thought, should we now say something or what exactly is expected?”* – Interviewee 17

As opposed to the Swedes, the Dutch are used to always expressing their opinion in a meeting, even if their opinion adds nothing to the discussion at hand. This has to do with the Dutch value ‘Self-determination’, which means that everyone has to make their own decisions and have their own opinion. In the Netherlands, actively contributing and expressing one’s opinion in a meeting is viewed as taking an active position and being involved, which is positive. The Dutch also expect everyone to always have an opinion about everything. Therefore, from a Dutch perspective, keeping quiet during a meeting can be perceived as not feeling responsible for one’s job.

11. Emphasis on Equality

In Swedish society there is an emphasis on equality. Everyone is equal and one should not think he or she is better than someone else. Therefore, in the Swedish workplace people in all positions behave as equals. Also men and women have similar roles in Sweden and equally split child care. Furthermore, until a certain age, no points are awarded in children's sports teams; everyone wins, and no one is better than someone else. As a result, Swedes are also very modest and they will never draw attention to their competences or successes.

Quote 23: *“They surprise me because they are so modest about their competences. Also my colleagues, just the knowledge they have, also when it comes to domestic violence or children and of course development, because of course they also all have a college degree, social work. But they don't show it off so much. And if you say, if we have a case discussion, and we have to write down for ourselves, what do we think about it before we share it with each other? Then they just come up with very good descriptions when it comes to cognitive developments or emotional developments or something, making me think: wow, you can all do it, just you, you don't show it off. And that's, yes, but I also think their modesty is beautiful.”* – Interviewee 4

Quote 24: *“In the beginning I gave compliments to people at work, and then they were looking at you a little uncomfortable like ‘what are you saying?.’ I say ‘yes, you did your work well, right?’ ‘Yes, but the others also do their work well?’ I say ‘yes’, I say ‘but so do you’, and they find that very uncomfortable when you give compliments.”* – Interviewee 16

Quote 25: *“It is less hierarchical here, and they also find it important that you talk with everyone, everyone talks with everyone. It is not like professors sit together and the secretaries sit separately, for example. It's just, yes, that is very much appreciated. And it is very much appreciated when you, we have coffee week twice a year, that you then for example bake something and bring it. And load the dishwasher, everyone has to load the dishwasher for example, it does not matter what your position is, I find that very good.”* – Interviewee 12

Like in Sweden, ‘Equality’ is deeply ingrained in the Dutch culture as well. For the Dutch it is crucial that everyone is treated equally and modesty is viewed positively. However, in the Netherlands there is not such a strong emphasis on equality as it is in Sweden. Furthermore, because of the Dutch value ‘Self-determination’, the Dutch like to express their opinion and they often show it when they have knowledge about a topic. Therefore, the interviewees were surprised by the Swedes’ modesty and the emphasis on equality in Sweden, but most viewed it positively.

12. No Action Points

When a decision has to be made, Swedes prefer easefully discussing the topic together. It is important that there is enough time to easefully exchange different viewpoints, and together to come to a collective decision. However, in Sweden it is not common to end a meeting by making a concrete plan with next steps and action points outlining who will do which tasks.

Quote 26: *“I want to walk out of a meeting with an action list: Who is going to do what and how do we move forward? (...) Well, the Swedes are less likely to do that. They will be a bit more wait-and-see. They will do it, but we as Dutch immediately make it very concrete, and Swedes, because they will eventually solve it, but that can all happen a little slower. A bit less direct. So you will need some patience in the beginning when you come here as a Dutch person. But, there is a lot more going on, well, it's not behind the scenes, but outside of the meeting. And if there are no agreements, that's not really a problem, that will work out eventually.”* – Interviewee 1

Quote 27: *“We recently, two weeks ago, attended a conference of [company] Sweden. (...) That's just, you spend three days sitting outside together, and then you talk and you go 'diskutera' as they all really like here. But what are we going to do now? What will be the concrete next step? And that is missing here. And at one point I talk to another colleague of mine who is half Maltese, and she said to me, 'sometimes it makes me so sick that you are actually ruining three days being here, very enjoyable, and we have a very good discussion, but there is no one who takes notes? There is no one who follows up on this? And we all have lots of inspiration here, and good ideas on the way back in the car, but yes, tomorrow it will be business as usual and we will talk about other things again.' And that, that need for action, like okay, but what are we going to do? Result, that is something that isn't here at all. And they don't mind it at all if I say let me take notes and ensure that the next step is taken, so it's not that they don't want it. But there are few people I meet here on the work floor who would say, well, I can do that, or who are concerned about that here.”* – Interviewee 2

The Dutch are used to ending a meeting with making a concrete plan of what they are going to do, with concrete next steps and action points outlining who will do which task (Order and Neatness). This has to do with the Dutch value of 'Utility', which means that one has to be frugal with one's resources, including time. Therefore the Dutch like to do things the most efficient way, which includes ending meetings with making a concrete action plan that can be

executed. Having meetings without making action points can therefore feel like a waste of time for the Dutch.

13. Respecting Decisions

When a decision is made, Swedes will always respect the decision and adhere to it, even if they actually disagree. Protesting against a decision is something Swedes simply will not do. This means that when a collective decision is made during a meeting, it really is a collective decision, and everyone goes for it. For this reason, it is crucial to involve everyone in the decision-making process. When Swedes were involved, they will respect the decision.

Quote 28: *“Even though people are involved, they may still disagree. And also after the meeting they may still disagree, but they are not going to protest anymore. In the Netherlands it happens quite frequently that decisions are questioned or that when you tell in your department ‘this is how we’re going to do it’ that ten people come who say ‘yes, but it won’t work that way’, or ‘this is not possible.’ In the Netherlands we are used to always counterattacking, almost by definition, so as a manager you are also prepared for the fact that everything you say will be contradicted. That is not the case in Sweden, so it’s very different there.”* – Interviewee 11

Quote 29: *“If everyone at the end says ‘okay, we’re going for it’, then they really go for it. While in the Netherlands you could sometimes walk out of a meeting, and in the meeting everyone says ‘yes, we agree’, and then they leave the room; ‘We’re not going to do this. We’re going to do something else.’ So if they have made a collective decision here, then it really is a collective decision, yes.”* – Interviewee 16

As opposed to the Swedes, the Dutch do not always respect all decisions that are made. When they believe a decision does not make sense or is impractical, the Dutch are likely to protest and express their opinion on why the decision will not work and what they believe would be a better option. This has to do with the value of ‘Utility’, which legitimises questioning decisions that were taken, since everything one does has to be useful.

14. Speaking Swedish

Even though most Swedes speak English very well, they prefer to speak their own language. Many interviewees did mention that the Swedes, just like the Dutch, immediately switch to

English when they notice you are not Swedish. However, at work the Swedes prefer speaking Swedish with their colleagues. Therefore, Swedes may also speak Swedish together even though a non-Swedish speaking colleague is present. The Swedes simply find speaking their own language very important, and they feel more comfortable speaking Swedish. Therefore they also find it important that expats working in Sweden learn to speak Swedish.

Quote 30: *“They all say ‘yes in Sweden everyone speaks English’, and that is true. But before I was comfortable enough to work in Swedish, the communication really was a lot worse. I worked for [the same company] before in the Netherlands, and back then we had a woman who was sent from the United States, and we all assumed that she spoke American. And whenever she so much as got into the elevator, we switched to English, even though she was not directly involved in our conversation. And at some point she invited us to her birthday party, and when we got there she gave her welcome speech in Dutch. And we were actually like ‘oh shit, you just speak Dutch, we were adapting like that for no reason.’ But that would never happen in Sweden. When we all have lunch together, if I am the one who has to hand over the salt, the question is in English ‘can I have the salt?’, and then they got the salt, and then they switch to Swedish again. So that was the first year, that was a bit difficult.”* – Interviewee 2

Quote 31: *“What happens very often here in a meeting, we are with twelve people for example, and the chairman wants to start ‘Yes should we speak English? Oh I see you are here, [name], do you want us to speak English?’ And she is the only one, she has been here for a few years and she can’t speak Swedish very well yet, and that feels, I mean, they have always asked me the same question, then you feel so burdened. And sometimes I have said, like a Dutch person, ‘yes please.’ And then they look at you like: What? This is actually more of a polite question, you were not supposed to say yes English please. And in the Netherlands you would say ‘well, we have a few non-Dutch people, sure, we speak English.’ And here, it happens every single time.”* – Interviewee 12

The Dutch are used to speaking English when a non-Dutch speaking colleague or person is present, and they do not mind speaking English at work instead of Dutch. For the Dutch a friendly (‘gezellige’) atmosphere on the work floor is essential, in which colleagues behave like friends and everyone feels happy and connected. They would consider it unkind to speak in Dutch, thus excluding a foreign colleague.

Normally in a comparison one would expect that only cultural standards are found that are not shared by the Dutch and that behaviours that are shared are not noticed by expats. What is surprising is that a number of standards emerged that are also cultural standards ascribed by other nationals to the Dutch. And these standards even have a place on top of the list as the most often mentioned by Dutch interviewees: Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure, and Long Decision-Making Process. The Swedes are clearly **more** sticking to rules and have a **longer** decision-making process than the Dutch. The explanation and origin of this will be discussed below under the values Ordning and Enighet.

4.2 Underlying Cultural Values

As was mentioned earlier, next to identifying Swedish cultural standards, this study also aims to identify the underlying Swedish cultural values that explain the typical behaviours of the Swedes. In this way, a thick description of Swedish culture is provided. Not all Swedish cultural standards can be seen independently from each other, since some cultural standards are related or overlap. As a result, certain underlying values explain multiple cultural standards, and therefore some cultural standards are connected to the same underlying value.

After carefully reading the interview transcripts and the literature on Swedish culture, five underlying values have been identified; Ordning (Order), Enighet (Consensus), Ensamhet (Solitude), Vålgörenhet (Charity) and Jämlikhet (Equality). The values Ordning, Enighet, Ensamhet and Jämlikhet were all described in the literature by Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999). The value Vålgörenhet is named after the value Naastenliefde (Charity) found by Enklaar (2007). An explanation of the identified values is given below. In addition, visual representations are included to show the relation between the paraphrased quotes of the interviewees, the cultural standards and the underlying value.

1. Ordning (Order)

The first identified underlying value is Ordning (Order). The cultural standards ‘Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure’ and ‘Work-Life Balance’ are explained by this Swedish value. The thinking pattern associated with the value Order is that chaos should be prevented and risks should be avoided, and therefore maintaining an orderly, well-structured and predictable

environment is crucial. As a result, Swedes place a high value on order in their lives. Swedes love order, according to Daun (1996). To maintain order, there are many rules in Sweden that prescribe how people should behave, and everyone is expected to follow them. The Swedes also strictly follow these rules and procedures, both at work and in their private lives, and they are reluctant to deviate from them. This way, risks are minimised and chaos is prevented. Furthermore, to maintain order it is important that everyone follows the rules. Therefore, it is common for Swedes to hold each other accountable when they notice someone breaking a rule.

Something else that plays a role in maintaining order is Lagom, a moral principle applicable in all aspects of life. Lagom means something along the lines of not too much and not too little, balanced, not extreme; just the right amount. Hence, Lagom, literally meaning ‘according to law’ (Kamann, 2017), is required to ensure that everything is in order. At work, Lagom involves doing exactly what one has to do, not more and not less. Therefore, Swedes do not take the initiative to do extra things at work; doing exactly what one has to do is ideal. For the same reason, Swedes typically do not work overtime. If the work is not finished by the end of the workday, it can wait until the next day, and then they will continue. It is important to do exactly what is required, not more and not less, since this way order is maintained and risks, such as sticking out and paying attention to oneself, are avoided. The relation between the two cultural standards and the Swedish value of Order is shown in Figure 6.

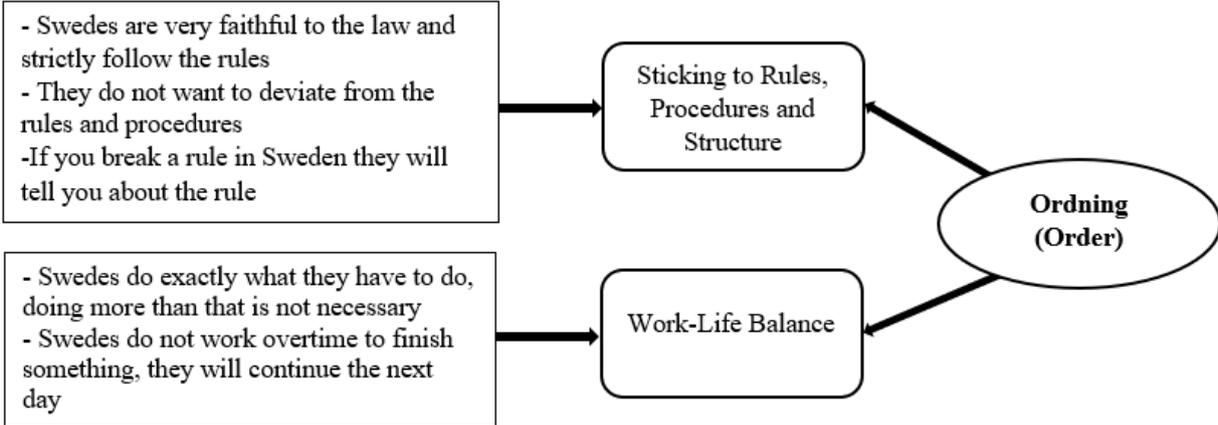


Figure 6. The underlying value of Ordning (Order)

2. Enighet (Consensus)

The second identified underlying value is Enighet (Consensus). The thinking pattern associated with the value Consensus is that conflicts should be avoided, 'konfliktundvikande' (Barinaga, 1999), and a peaceful atmosphere should be maintained. Hence, differing opinions should be resolved by compromising, and an agreement has to be reached collectively. The cultural standards 'Confrontation Avoidance', 'Disagreement Avoidance', 'Long Decision-Making Process', 'No Action Points' and 'Respecting Decisions' are related and explained by this Swedish value.

Because Swedes find it crucial to maintain a peaceful atmosphere, they attach great importance to being polite and friendly, and they are careful not to hurt anyone. It is crucial to be polite, not stubborn or aggressive, and being in accord is very important (Daun, 1996). Therefore, Swedes are cautious when talking about sensitive matters, and they prefer to avoid giving negative news. Namely, when talking about sensitive matters, it is possible to offend someone, which should be avoided to maintain a friendly atmosphere in which everyone is in accord. For the same reason, Swedes avoid openly disagreeing with each other. Openly criticising and disagreeing with someone is perceived as a personal attack, and thus has a negative impact on the friendly atmosphere. Hence, Swedes always try to avoid showing disagreement as much as possible. Related to the importance of maintaining a friendly atmosphere is the importance Swedes attach to taking time for Fika during the workday. Fika entails having a coffee break to relax and talk with colleagues, and it contributes to a pleasant (mysigt) atmosphere at work. The Swedish Mysighet describes cosiness, warmth, a cosy environment in which everyone feels comfortable (Coyle, n.d.), comparable to the Dutch Gezelligheid: a conflict-free amiable atmosphere with strong Enighet.

Additionally, the Swedes strive for consensus is also noticeable when making decisions. When a decision has to be made, everyone is involved, and everyone's opinions and ideas are taken into account in order to reach an agreement together. However, since Swedes are careful with giving their opinion and refrain from openly disagreeing, it takes a long time to find out where they stand and reach an agreement. Hence, usually multiple meetings discussing the same topic are needed before a decision is made. This way there is enough time to discuss the topic, both within and outside of the meetings, and therefore meetings in Sweden do not end with making concrete action points. When in the end a decision is made, Swedes will always respect the decision, even if they disagree, because the decision was made with consensus, and their

personal input was also taken into account. The relation between the five cultural standards and the Swedish value of Consensus is shown in Figure 7.

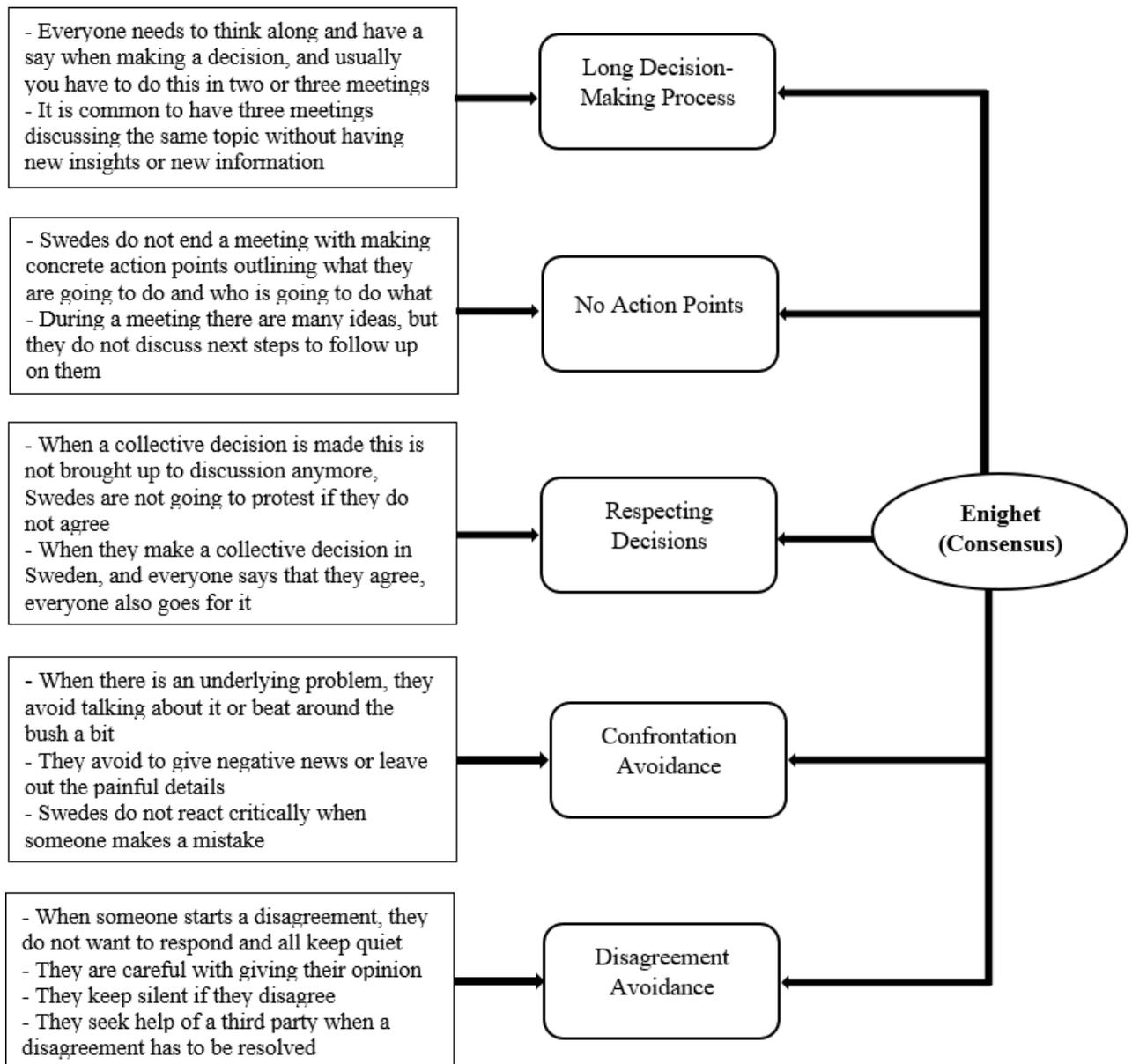


Figure 7. The underlying value of Enighet (Consensus)

3. Ensamhet (Solitude)

The third underlying value is Ensamhet (Solitude). The thinking pattern associated with the value of solitude is that it is best to be alone, or only in the company of one's small inner-circle of family and friends, people they have a close relationship with and with whom they feel at ease. Namely, in this way one is free of the feelings of social unease and the pressures of one's social environment; then it is possible to be yourself (Daun, 1996; Barinaga, 1999). As a result, Swedes love to spend their free time at home with their families, and they enjoy spending time in nature on their own. A Swedish saying related to this value is 'att slippa folk' (to avoid people), which has a positive meaning in Sweden. Namely, unlike many other cultures, in Swedish culture solitude has very positive associations (Barinaga, 1999).

The cultural standards 'Private Life', 'Closedness', 'Indirectness', 'Silence' and 'Speaking Swedish' are related and explained by this Swedish value. Because Swedes thus love free time without social activities and obligations, they only rarely socialise with their colleagues outside of work. Furthermore, due to their preference for solitude, the Swedes attach great importance to their personal space and privacy, and they consider it a virtue to be independent from others (Daun, 1996). For this reason, Swedes typically keep to themselves and keep quiet to avoid bothering others, and therefore it is also not common for neighbours to come to each other's homes in Sweden. When it comes to talking with people outside of one's inner-circle, Swedes are also rather reserved. This is because with people outside of one's inner-circle, Swedes feel less at ease and therefore they are rather cautious and not very talkative. With their inner-circle of family and friends, people they have a close relationship with, Swedes feel more at ease and therefore they are much less cautious and much more open. Since colleagues often do not belong to one's inner-circle, Swedish colleagues do not appear very talkative, and will only say something when they have something to contribute during work meetings.

Similarly, because Swedes feel less at ease and are cautious with people outside of their inner-circle, Swedish colleagues express themselves very carefully towards one another. Instead of explicitly saying what they mean, messages are communicated between the lines, and feedback is given very subtle, softened by mentioning many positive points. In the same way, because Swedes feel less at ease with people outside of their inner-circle, matters concerning one's private life are not immediately shared when just getting to know someone. Only after knowing each other for a longer time, or when a lot of alcohol has been consumed, Swedes may open up and also share private matters. The Swedes also prefer to speak Swedish with their colleagues,

because this way they feel closer towards each other, and thus, more comfortable. The relation between the five cultural standards and the Swedish value of Solitude is shown in Figure 8.

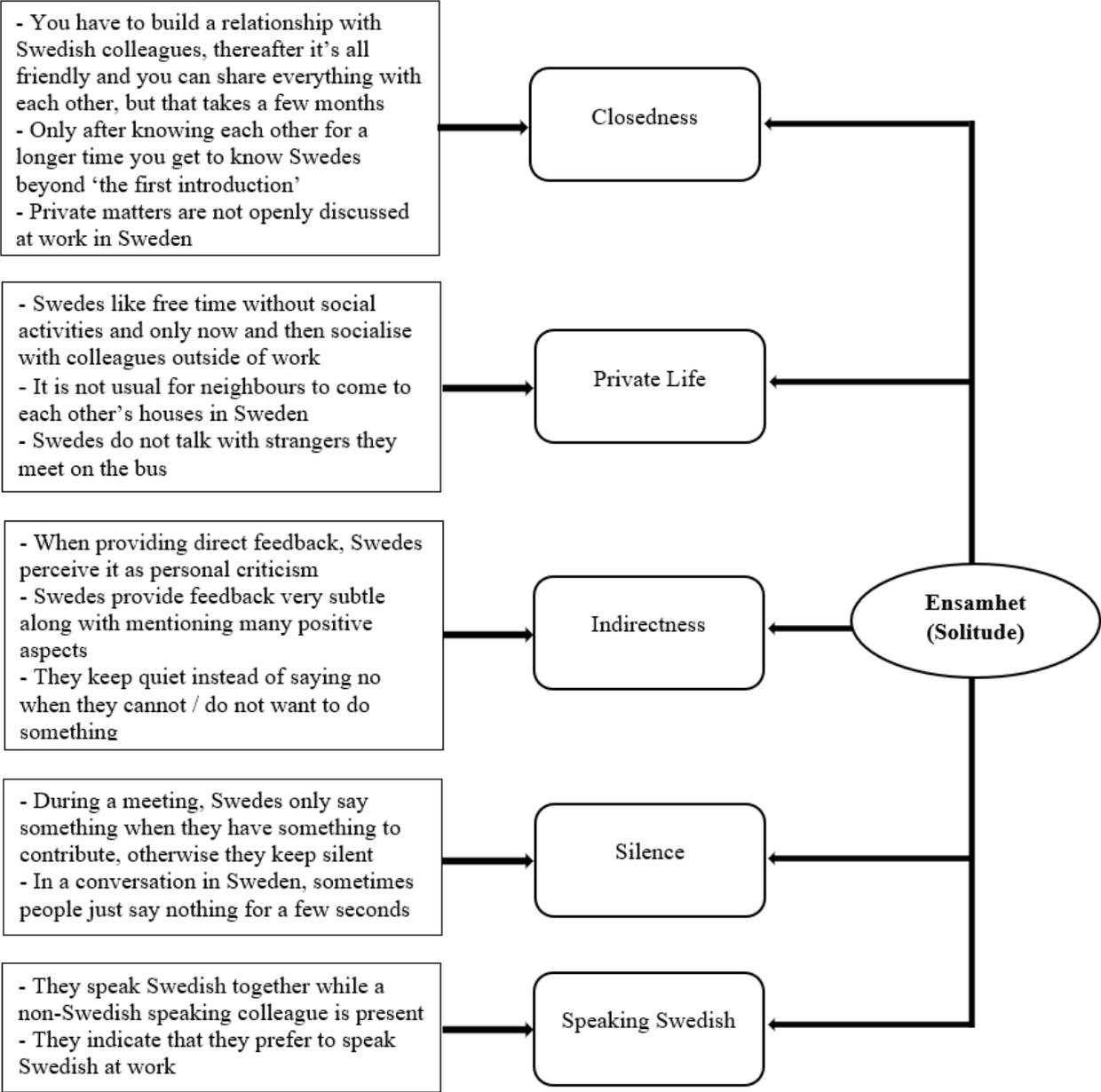


Figure 8. The underlying value of Ensamhet (Solitude)

4. Välgörenhet (Charity)

The fourth identified underlying value is Välgörenhet (Charity). The cultural standard ‘Family and Personal Circumstances’ is explained by this Swedish value. The thinking pattern associated with the value of Charity is that one should show solidarity with others, and treat other people as one would like to be treated. It is important to be helpful to others, and to consider the interests of other people rather than only considering one’s own interests. For this reason, Swedish employers are very considerate to their employees’ private circumstances and well-being. This way they show that they care about their employees’ interests rather than only considering their own interests. This is very important in Sweden, since Swedes are very socially concerned and they believe it is crucial to be helpful to others (Barinaga, 1999). This is also shown by the Swedish welfare state and public social ideals. Sweden has a generous welfare state in which the government plays an important role (Bergh, 2011), and some of the most important principles of Swedish reform politics are social welfare, justice, and equality (Daun, 1996). This has resulted, for example, in the world’s most equalising tax laws, along with those of other Nordic countries (Daun, 1996). Hence, it is also totally acceptable for employees to leave early or to be absent from work due to family or private matters in Sweden. When it is necessary, other employees will then take over each other’s tasks to help each other. The relation between the cultural standard ‘Family and Personal Circumstances’ and the Swedish value of Charity is shown in Figure 9.

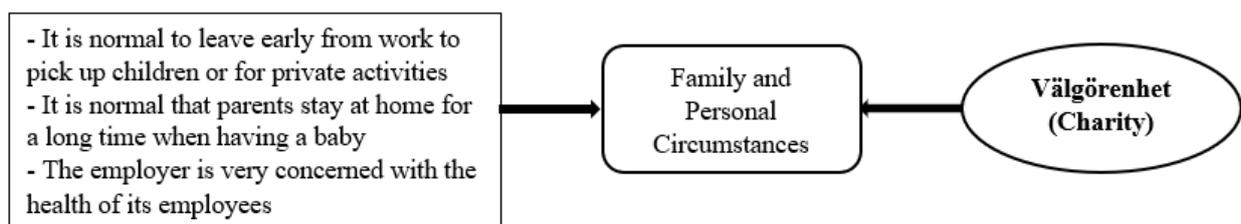


Figure 9. The underlying value of Välgörenhet (Charity)

5. Jämlikhet (Equality)

The fifth, and final, identified underlying value is Jämlikhet (Equality). The cultural standard ‘Emphasis on Equality’ is explained by this Swedish value. The thinking pattern associated with the value of Equality is that everyone should be treated equally, and one should not act like he or she is superior to someone else. This is also described by an unwritten Scandinavian social law called Jantelagen¹, which means that one should not think he or she is anything special (Daun, 1996). As a result, people in all positions behave as equals in the Swedish workplace, and also men and women are equal and have similar roles in Sweden. For the same reason, even while being very knowledgeable and successful, Swedes will not bring attention to it. Namely, doing so implies that one believes he or she is now something special and better than others, which goes against the value of equality. The relation between the cultural standard ‘Emphasis on Equality’ and the Swedish value of Equality is shown in Figure 10.

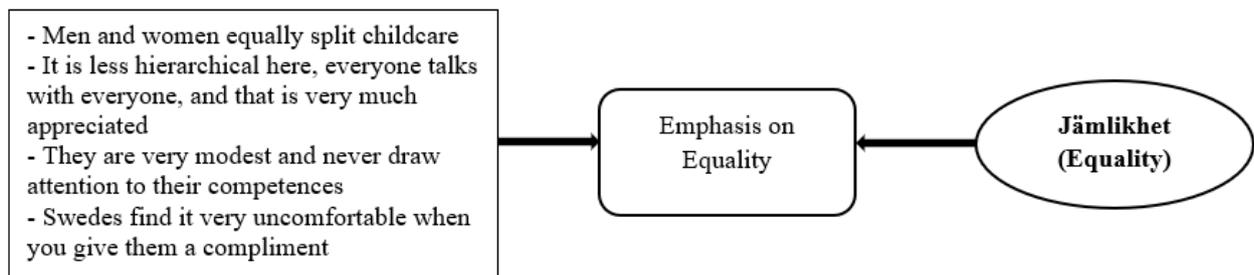


Figure 10. The underlying value of Jämlikhet (Equality)

¹ Jantelagen (Law of Jante in English) originated from a novel written by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose in 1933 (Kamann, 2017). In the novel, Sandemose lists the rules of the village of Jante, an imaginary place in Denmark, inspired by Sandemose’s hometown Nykøbing (Kamann, 2017). The idea behind Jantelagen is that the Scandinavian countries share an unwritten social modesty code, that has a large influence on attitudes and behaviours (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017). Sandemose intended Jantelagen to be a negative attitude towards individualism and success, perceived as undesirable and detrimental. However, Jantelagen is also said to emphasise the virtues of equality and modesty. Jantelagen consists of the following ten rules: 1. Do not think you are anything special. 2. Do not think you are as good as others. 3. Do not think you are smarter than others. 4. Do not convince yourself that you are better than others. 5. Do not think you know more than others. 6. Do not think you are more important than others. 7. Do not think you are good at anything. 8. Do not laugh at others. 9. Do not think anyone cares about you. 10. Do not think you can teach others anything (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017).

4.3. Remarkable cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes

Even though the Dutch and Swedes have many similar values, the identified cultural standards show that, despite sharing many values, there are still some differences in typical behaviours. Hence, there are still incidents in which frictions between the Dutch and Swedish culture occur.

Many of the critical incidents experienced by the Dutch expats working in Sweden can be explained by the Swedes not sharing the Dutch value of Self-determination. For example, while the Dutch and the Swedes both value order, the Dutch find it acceptable to not always follow rules and procedures due to the value Self-determination, whereas the Swedes, not sharing this value, do not. Furthermore, the Dutch are used to always expressing their opinion on everything due to the value Self-determination. As a result, while both countries value Consensus, the Dutch reach consensus and make decisions faster than the Swedes do. Similarly, the Dutch will speak up when they disagree or when something is not right, and they often say what they mean in a direct way, which the Swedes, not sharing the value of Self-determination, do not. The Dutch also like to share their opinion and knowledge on everything due to the value Self-determination, which the Swedes do not. The Swedes are also less talkative than the Dutch due to the Swedish value of Solitude, which the Dutch do not share. Also the Swedish cultural standards 'private life', 'closedness' and 'speaking Swedish' can be explained because these Swedish behaviours emerged from the Swedish value of Solitude, which is not shared with the Dutch.

Additionally, the Swedish cultural standard 'family and personal circumstances' can be explained by that the Dutch and Swedes prioritise different values in different situations. Namely, both the Dutch and Swedes value work and charity, but the Swedes prioritise charity over work and the Dutch prioritise work over charity in this situation. Similarly, the Swedish cultural standard 'work-life balance' can be explained by the Dutch prioritising work and the Swedes prioritising order in this situation. So, even while sharing many values, frictions between cultures can still occur. This can be explained by either the absence of a value (Self-determination and Solitude in this case), or the fact that the priority given to values in specific situations varies between cultures.

5. Discussion

In this final chapter, the discussion and conclusion of the study are presented. First a summary of the results is shown, and thereafter the academic and practical contributions of this study are discussed. Following that, the limitations of the study are discussed and suggestions for future research are given. The chapter ends with a conclusion in which the research question is answered.

5.1 Swedish Cultural Standards as perceived by the Dutch

The aim of this study was to identify Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective, and, additionally, to explain the Swedish values that lead to these typical Swedish behaviours. In this study, 14 Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective were identified, as described in chapter 4, section 4.1. The 14 Swedish cultural standards are listed below.

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 1. Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure | 8. Closedness |
| 2. Long Decision-Making Process | 9. Disagreement Avoidance |
| 3. Confrontation Avoidance | 10. Silence |
| 4. Private Life | 11. Emphasis on Equality |
| 5. Family and Personal Circumstances | 12. No Action Points |
| 6. Work-Life Balance | 13. Respecting Decisions |
| 7. Indirectness | 14. Speaking Swedish |

The 14 Swedish cultural standards were linked to five underlying Swedish cultural values; Order, Consensus, Solitude, Charity and Equality, providing a thick description of Swedish culture. The five underlying Swedish values were described in chapter 4, section 4.2. Together, the cultural standards and underlying values describe and explain Swedish behaviours that can be expected when collaborating on the work floor.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study conducted qualitative and rigorous in-depth research into the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes, using Enklaar's (2022) Grounded Interpretive Model, which further developed Thomas et al.'s (2010) cultural standards method. Therefore, seventeen Dutch expats working in Sweden were interviewed in this study. They were asked about their experiences working with Swedes and about specific situations they experienced as strange or surprising. Based on the experiences of the interviewees, Swedish cultural standards were identified from a Dutch perspective.

When comparing the results of this study to previous research, similarities as well as differences can be seen. To start with Hofstede's (2010) study, Hofstede's framework showed one difference between the Netherlands and Sweden, regarding the dimension 'Uncertainty Avoidance'. Uncertainty avoidance has to do with a society's level of stress when facing an unknown future (Hofstede, 2011). According to Hofstede's framework, the Netherlands has a preference for avoiding uncertainty, while Sweden has a low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede Insights, 2023). The scores of the Netherlands and Sweden on this dimension suggest that in Sweden deviation from the norm is easier tolerated than in the Netherlands. In countries exhibiting low uncertainty avoidance, people would believe there should not be more rules than necessary, and that rules should be abandoned or changed if they are vague or do not work. On the contrary, in countries exhibiting high uncertainty avoidance, there would be an emotional need for rules, even if the rules never appear to function (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Contrary to what Hofstede's framework suggests, the results of this study showed that the Swedes find it important to far more strictly follow the rules and procedures than the Dutch. Dutch professionals in Sweden clearly identified a Swedish cultural standard 'Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure'.

Next, the results of this study can be compared to Meyer's (2014) framework. Clear differences between the Netherlands and Sweden are visible on the scales Communicating, Evaluating and Disagreeing of Meyer's (2014) framework. With regard to Communicating, Meyer's (2014) framework shows that good communication in Sweden is much more high-context than in the Netherlands. Furthermore, regarding Evaluating, the Swedes give negative feedback way more indirectly than the Dutch (Meyer, 2014). The results of this study also showed that the Swedes give negative feedback very carefully and subtly, and that Swedes often communicate messages between the lines instead of explicitly stating what they mean. This is due to the Swedish value

of Solitude: since Swedes feel less at ease and are more cautious with people outside of one's inner-circle, Swedish colleagues express themselves very carefully towards each other. In Meyer's (2014) framework the explanation for this Swedish behaviour is missing.

Regarding Disagreeing, Meyer's (2014) framework shows that the Swedes avoid confrontation, while the Dutch have a more confrontational style of disagreeing. The results of this study also showed that Swedes keep quiet when disagreeing and that they resolve disagreements via a third party. This is due to the Swedish value of Consensus: since Swedes want to maintain a peaceful atmosphere in which everyone is in accord, they try to avoid disagreements as much as possible. Even though the Dutch share the value of Consensus, the Dutch also hold the value Self-determination, which the Swedes do not. Hence, in contrast to Swedes, the Dutch find it important that everyone has their own opinion, and therefore the Dutch will openly state it when they disagree with someone, whereafter they search for consensus.

On the other five scales of Meyer's (2014) framework (Scheduling, Deciding, Leading, Trusting and Persuading), the positions of Sweden and the Netherlands are quite close. Meyer's (2014) findings regarding Trusting and Persuading are also not related to any of the Swedish cultural standards or underlying values identified in this study. Regarding deciding, Meyer's (2014) framework shows that decision-making is even more consensual in Sweden. This is in line with the Swedish cultural standard 'Long Decision-Making Process', explained by the Swedish value Consensus. And, according to Meyer (2014), Leading is even more egalitarian in Sweden, which corresponds with the Swedish cultural standard 'Emphasis on Equality', explained by the Swedish value Equality. Additionally, also scheduling would be more linear-time in Sweden according to Meyer (2014). This is in line with the Swedish value Order identified in this study. Table 5 gives an overview in which the results of this study are compared to Meyer's (2014) findings.

As can be seen in Table 5, this study identified many differences that Meyer's (2014) framework did not cover. So, the 14 identified Swedish cultural standards (from a Dutch perspective) provide more insight into the cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes than the positions of the two countries on the scales of Meyer's (2014) framework. Furthermore, next to describing the typical Swedish behaviours, this study also explained the underlying values leading to these behaviours, which Meyer's (2014) etic study did not. So, while Meyer (2014) only described differences in behaviours, this study went a step further and also explained why Swedes behave this way.

Underlying Swedish values from this study	Swedish cultural standards from this study	Meyer's (2014) findings on Swedish culture (compared to the Dutch)
Order	Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure	Scheduling is more Linear-Time
	Work-Life Balance	
Consensus	Long Decision-Making Process	Decision-Making is more Consensual
	No Action Points	-
	Respecting Decisions	-
	Confrontation Avoidance	-
	Disagreement Avoidance	Avoids Confrontation when Disagreeing
Solitude	Private Life	-
	Closedness	-
	Indirectness	Communicating is more High-Context
		Indirect Negative Feedback
	Silence	-
	Speaking Swedish	-
Charity	Family and Personal Circumstances	-
Equality	Emphasis on Equality	Leading is more Egalitarian
-	-	Trusting is more Relationship-Based
-	-	Persuading is more Principles First

Table 5. Comparing the results of this study to Meyer's (2014) framework

Additionally, the results of this study can be compared to the emic literature on Swedish culture. According to Daun (1996), Shyness, Modesty, Independence, Avoidance of Conflict, Honesty, and Homogeneity describe Swedish relations. And, according to Barinaga (1999), Solitude, Equality, Consensus, Lagom, and Sense of Rationality are characteristics of Swedish culture. In this study Order, Consensus, Solitude, Charity and Equality were identified as underlying values explaining the Swedish cultural standards, which is thus very similar to the elements identified by Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999). This also makes sense since the emic literature on Swedish culture by Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999) was used to identify the underlying Swedish values that explain the Swedish cultural standards.

However, while Daun (1996) and Barinaga (1999) described characteristics specific to Swedish culture, this study focused specifically on how Dutch expats experience the Swedish culture. Hence, this study provided a description of the Swedish culture specifically from a Dutch perspective. Previous studies that described cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes

all used an etic approach, such as the studies of Hofstede (2010) and Meyer (2014). However, since etic studies are not sufficient to fully describe intercultural encounters (Clausen, 2010; Carminati, 2024), there is a scarcity of knowledge about cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes in the current literature. So, by identifying Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective, and, additionally, by explaining the Swedish values that underlie those behaviours, this study adds knowledge to the existing literature and leads to a better understanding of the cultural differences between the Dutch and Swedes.

5.3 Practical Contributions

The 14 Swedish cultural standards and five underlying values identified in this study can help the reader, especially Dutch people, understand what to expect when working with Swedes. Furthermore, by also explaining why Swedes behave the way they do, this study can help to enhance understanding of Swedish behaviour. As a result, the findings of this study can help Dutch expats working in Sweden to improve their intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is the ability to effectively draw upon a set of knowledge, personal attributes, and skills in order to collaborate successfully with people from another culture (Johnson et al., 2006).

Intercultural competence is crucial in today's globalised world, since interactions with people from different cultures are becoming increasingly common (Gao & Kennedy, 2019). Namely, when people from different cultural backgrounds work together, it frequently leads to misunderstandings (Meyer, 2015), which can negatively impact collaboration. Therefore, it is recommended for Dutch expats working in Sweden to familiarise themselves with the Swedish cultural standards, as described in chapter 4, section 4.1, and with the underlying Swedish cultural values, as described in chapter 4, section 4.2. And, additionally, first to familiarise themselves with their own Dutch cultural values, as described in chapter 2, section 2.3.2. This is because, in order to collaborate successfully with people from another culture, it is essential to understand both one's own culture and the other culture.

Furthermore, based on the cultural differences perceived by the Dutch interviewees working in Sweden, a number of practical recommendations are given to improve collaboration with the Swedes. The recommendations are divided in five groups, based on the underlying Swedish value they belong to, and are explained below.

Swedish cultural standard belonging to the underlying value Order:	Recommendations for the Dutch to improve collaboration with the Swedes regarding this cultural standard:
Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure	1. Make sure to always to follow the rules and procedures, also if you believe there is a good reason not to follow them.
Work-Life Balance	2. Understand that in Sweden it is ideal when you do exactly what you have to do, and that working overtime or taking the initiative to do extra things is not necessary.

Swedish cultural standard belonging to the underlying value Consensus:	Recommendations for the Dutch to improve collaboration with the Swedes regarding this cultural standard:
Long Decision-Making Process	3. Accept that making decisions takes a long time in Sweden, and that often three meetings discussing the same topic are needed to make a decision. 4. Make sure that everyone who needs to have an influence on the decision is included in the meeting, and that everyone is asked what they think about the topic.
No Action Points	5. Accept that Swedes do not make concrete action points in meetings, be patient and trust that everything will work out eventually.
Respecting Decisions	6. Always adhere to the collective decisions that have been made, do not protest against a decision with which you disagree.
Disagreement Avoidance	7. Do not say that you disagree with someone or that someone is not right during a meeting, this is perceived as personal criticism. 8. Understand that Swedes prefer to avoid direct confrontation and that therefore disagreements are resolved through a third party or expressed in an indirect way.
Confrontation Avoidance	9. Understand that Swedes approach talking about sensitive matters very carefully, and that therefore things can take a little longer. 10. Do not react critically when someone makes a mistake, approach it as a work problem instead.

Swedish cultural standard belonging to the underlying value Solitude:	Recommendations for the Dutch to improve collaboration with the Swedes regarding this cultural standard:
Closedness	11. Understand that Swedes only feel comfortable sharing personal matters after knowing each other for a long time, be patient and invest in building a relationship.

Private Life	12. Understand that Swedes only occasionally socialise with their colleagues outside of work because they love free time without social activities, do not take it personal.
Indirectness	13. Provide feedback carefully and subtly, along with mentioning many positive aspects. 14. Understand that Swedes do not want to say 'no' when they disagree with a plan because they do not want to hurt others, so be aware that when they keep quiet this may actually mean 'no'. 15. If you have to ask someone to do something, do so politely and make sure that both of you agree that it is important that it happens.
Speaking Swedish	16. Learn the Swedish language, this is very much appreciated and will improve communication with your Swedish colleagues.
Silence	17. Only say something during a meeting when you truly have something to contribute.

Swedish cultural standard belonging to the underlying value Charity:	Recommendations for the Dutch to improve collaboration with the Swedes regarding this cultural standard:
Family and Personal Circumstances	18. Accept that it is normal in Sweden for people to be absent from work or to leave early, do not make any comments about it.

Swedish cultural standard belonging to the underlying value Equality:	Recommendations for the Dutch to improve collaboration with the Swedes regarding this cultural standard:
Emphasis on Equality	19. Do not draw attention to your competences and successes.

6. Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

In this study, 17 Dutch expats who are living and working in Sweden were interviewed to explore what cultural differences are perceived by Dutch expats working in Sweden. This way, 14 Swedish cultural standards, from a Dutch perspective, were identified. However, these 14 Swedish cultural standards are not representative of Swedish culture as a whole. Because only Dutch expats living and working in Sweden were interviewed, similarities between the Dutch and the Swedes remained unnoticed. Expats from other countries working in Sweden may perceive other cultural differences compared to the Dutch, and therefore the cultural standards identified in this study cannot be generalised. Hence, a suggestion for future research is to investigate what cultural differences expats from other countries working in Sweden perceive. This would make it possible to create a combined list of Swedish cultural standards that is better representative of Swedish culture as a whole.

Another limitation of the study has to do with the study's sample. Namely, nine of the seventeen interviewees were living and working in the Stockholm region, and no expats working in Northern Sweden were interviewed. This could be due to the fact that 40 percent of the Swedish population lives in the regions of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö and that only 20 percent lives North of Stockholm (Walter et al., 2022). Hence, most job opportunities are also found in Southern Sweden. That is especially true for Stockholm since Stockholm accounts for more than 80 percent of Sweden's business activities (Stockholms Stad, 2023). Nevertheless, if the interview sample had a better geographic distribution in Sweden, this may possibly have resulted in other cultural standards. But probably they would have been guided by the same cultural values. Therefore, a suggestion for future research is to ensure that the sample has a proportional geographic distribution in Sweden when investigating Swedish cultural standards.

Additionally, this study only explored the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes from a Dutch perspective. As a result, the Swedish perspective on the intercultural collaboration between the Dutch and the Swedes remains unknown. Therefore, a suggestion for future research is to interview Swedish expats living and working in the Netherlands. This would make it possible to get a complete picture of the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes on the work floor. Then, suggestions on how to bridge the cultural differences could be given to the Swedes as well, which could lead to even better collaboration.

Another limitation of this study is in the data collection. The data was collected by conducting 16 semi-structured interviews with Dutch expats who are working in Sweden. A disadvantage of using interviews as a data collection method is that social desirability bias is likely to occur, which reduces the reliability of the data (Phellas et al., 2011). Social desirability bias is the inclination of respondents to give answers that are socially desirable instead of answers that reflect their actual feelings (Grimm, 2010). Social desirability bias is especially likely to occur when questions are asked about sensitive matters (Grimm, 2010). In this study, the interviewees were asked about their experiences working in Sweden, and about specific situations they experienced as strange or surprising. To reduce the impact of social desirability bias, the researcher explained that the interviews were confidential, and that shared information could not be traced back to them when used in the thesis. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the interviewees have sometimes given socially desirable responses. For example, it might be that they did not want to speak negatively about Swedes or share problems they experienced.

Furthermore, in this study, the coding was done by only one person (the researcher). Although the interpretation of the data was discussed with the researcher's supervisor, an additional coder would have increased the reliability of the study's results. Therefore, future research might want to consider including a second coder.

Finally, it is important to note that this study investigated 'typical' Swedish behaviours and thus made generalisations. The results of the study can be used to predict what to expect when working with Swedes and can help the reader to become more culturally aware. However, as is the case with people from all countries, of course not all Swedes behave exactly the same. Therefore, the identified Swedish cultural standards do not have to be true for every Swede. The reader should be aware that the results of this study should not be used to create a stereotype or form prejudices.

7. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes, and to identify Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective. This study aimed to answer the following research question: “*Which cultural differences are perceived by Dutch expats working in Sweden?*”. Therefore, 16 interviews were conducted with Dutch expats who are living and working in Sweden. This resulted in 14 Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective: Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure, Long Decision-Making Process, Confrontation Avoidance, Private Life, Family and Personal Circumstances, Work-Life Balance, Indirectness, Closedness, Disagreement Avoidance, Silence, Emphasis on Equality, No Action Points, Respecting Decisions, and Speaking Swedish.

Next to identifying Swedish cultural standards from a Dutch perspective, this study also aimed to explain the cultural logic leading to these ‘typical’ Swedish behaviours. Therefore, five underlying Swedish cultural values were identified:

- 1. Order:** Sticking to Rules, Procedures and Structure, Work-Life Balance
- 2. Consensus:** Confrontation Avoidance, Disagreement Avoidance, Long Decision-Making Process, No Action Points, Respecting Decisions
- 3. Solitude:** Private Life, Closedness, Indirectness, Silence, Speaking Swedish
- 4. Charity:** Family and Personal Circumstances
- 5. Equality:** Emphasis on Equality

Combined, the Swedish cultural standards and underlying values provide a thick description of Swedish culture, from a Dutch perspective. The findings of the study showed what can be expected when working with Swedes, and explained why Swedes behave the way they do, providing valuable insights into Swedish culture. Furthermore, based on the identified cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes, some recommendations were provided to improve collaboration. As a result, this study can help to enhance intercultural collaboration in European business. To conclude, cultural differences on the work floor will inevitably bring about some extra challenges. However, working in multicultural teams will also lead to many new perspectives and wonderful experiences learning about other cultures.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide (in Dutch)

Mezelf voorstellen + onderzoek kort uitleggen (onderzoek is bedoeld om meer te weten te komen over de cultuurverschillen tussen Nederland en Zweden, en om uit te vinden hoe de samenwerking tussen Nederlanders en Zweden verbeterd kan worden).

Het interview is vertrouwelijk en de informatie die u deelt zal niet gedeeld worden met anderen. Wanneer informatie die u heeft gedeeld wordt gebruikt in de thesis zal ik ervoor zorgen dat dit niet naar u herleid kan worden. Als u een bepaalde vraag niet wilt beantwoorden, of u wilt stoppen met het interview, dan kunt u dat op elk moment doen, zonder daarvoor een reden te hoeven geven. Gaat u akkoord met het opnemen van de audio en het transcriberen van het interview? (Zo ja; Dan kunnen we beginnen met het interview)

Introductie vragen

- Wat is uw naam en uw leeftijd?
- Hoe lang woont u al in Zweden?
- Waar in Zweden woont en werkt u?
- Wat is uw functie?
- Waar bestaan uw werkzaamheden uit?
- Hoelang werkt u al voor dit bedrijf in Zweden?
- Hoelang werkt u nu in totaal in Zweden?

Contact met Zweedse collega's

- Hoe vaak heeft u contact met Zweedse collega's?
- Waaruit bestaat het contact? (Telefonisch, e-mail, in persoon)
- Wat bespreekt u met elkaar?
- Wat is uw positie daarbij en wat is de positie van de Zweedse persoon/personen? (rang, taakverdeling)
- In welke taal spreekt u met Zweden?
- Is de communicatie goed te noemen?
- Hoe zou u de sfeer tussen Nederlanders en Zweden beschrijven?
- Is de samenwerking volgens u goed of kan hij beter?

- Zijn de persoonlijke relaties volgens u goed of kunnen ze beter?

Ervaringen met Zweden

- Hoe zijn uw ervaringen met Zweden in het algemeen?
- Wat zijn de meest opvallende verschillen tussen Nederlanders en Zweden volgens u?
- Wat mist u (vaak of af en toe) bij Zweden?
- (*Als hij/zij specifiek eigenschappen noemt*) Kunt u daar een voorbeeld van geven?

Critical Incidents

- Wat was de meest positieve ervaring die u had met Zweden?
- Wat gebeurde er precies?
- Wat maakte dit voor u tot zo'n positieve ervaring?
- Wat was de aanleiding voor die gebeurtenis?
- Op welke manier droeg deze gebeurtenis bij aan een succesvolle samenwerking?
- Hoe reageerde u?
- Hoe is het afgelopen?
- Waarom gedroeg de Zweedse collega zich op die manier, denkt u?
- Hebt u nog meer van zulke voorbeelden?

- Kunt u ook een minder prettige ervaring noemen die u had met Zweden?
- Wat gebeurde er precies?
- Wat maakte dit voor u een minder prettige ervaring?
- Wat was de aanleiding voor die gebeurtenis?
- Op welke manier belemmerde deze gebeurtenis de succesvolle samenwerking?
- Hoe reageerde u?
- Hoe is het afgelopen?
- (*Als positief resultaat*) Hoe bent u hiertoe gekomen?
- Waarom gedroeg de Zweedse collega zich op die manier, denkt u?
- Hebt u nog meer van zulke voorbeelden?

Meer vragen over ervaringen met Zweden

- Hebt u wel eens misverstanden tussen Zweden en Nederlanders meegemaakt?
- Hebt u wel eens meegemaakt dat u verrast werd door gedrag van Zweden?
- Hebt u wel eens meegemaakt dat u Zweden niet begreep?

- Hebt u wel eens meegemaakt dat u het oneens was met uw Zweedse collega?
- Hebt u wel eens een conflict gehad met een Zweedse collega?
- Hebt u wel eens andere problemen gehad met Zweden?

Stelling: Het is makkelijker om samen te werken met een Nederlander dan met een Zweed

- Wat is uw mening?
- Waardoor komt dat?

Nog een aantal laatste vragen

- Een goede manager: hoe moet deze zich gedragen?
 - Verschillen Nederlanders en Zweden hierin?
- Een goede collega: hoe moet deze zich gedragen?
 - Verschillen Nederlanders en Zweden hierin?
- Een goede werkgever: hoe moet deze zich gedragen?
 - Verschillen Nederlanders en Zweden hierin?
- Hoe wordt er door de Zweden omgegaan met procedures en de controle daarop?
- Hoe gaat het besluitvormingsproces in het Zweedse bedrijf?
 - Wie neemt de beslissingen en hoe gaat dat in zijn werk?
 - Worden de besluiten door iedereen gerespecteerd?

Einde

- Is er nog iets anders wat u wilt vertellen over uw ervaringen met Zweden? Hebben we alles besproken?

Mocht u nog iets te binnen schieten over de verschillen tussen Nederlanders en Zweden, of als u heeft nog vragen heeft, dan kunt u mij altijd nog een e-mail sturen. De resultaten zullen verwerkt worden in mijn thesis, maar uw uitspraken zullen uiteraard niet naar u te herleiden zijn. Als u geïnteresseerd bent naar de resultaten, dan kan ik de thesis naar u toesturen wanneer die af is.

Dan heel erg bedankt voor uw tijd en medewerking!