Dealing with Japanese-Dutch cultural differences

Master Thesis

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GENERAL INFORMATION

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CONTENTS

PREFACE .......................................................................................................................... 3

1. RESEARCH INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 5
   1.1 Problem statement .............................................................................................. 6
   1.2 Research relevance ............................................................................................ 7
   1.3 Company introduction ....................................................................................... 9

2. RESEARCH DESIGN ................................................................................................. 13
   2.1 Methodology ....................................................................................................... 14
   2.2 Research planning .............................................................................................. 16
   2.3 Data collection methods ................................................................................... 19
   2.4 Analysis methods .............................................................................................. 22

3. THEORY ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ............................................................... 25
   3.1 Definition of culture ......................................................................................... 26
   3.2 Culture-comparative models ........................................................................... 27
   3.3 Intercultural communication research ............................................................ 31
   3.4 Case studies ...................................................................................................... 36
   3.5 Linguistics ......................................................................................................... 39

4. RESULTS .................................................................................................................. 41
   4.1 Introduction to results ....................................................................................... 42
   4.2 Language ........................................................................................................... 44
   4.3 Communication style ....................................................................................... 46
   4.4 Relation with clients ......................................................................................... 49
   4.5 Customs at work ............................................................................................... 52

5. ANALYSIS ................................................................................................................. 57
   5.1 Cultural differences in the company .................................................................. 58
   5.2 Important models and theories ......................................................................... 60
   5.3 Predicting important differences ...................................................................... 62
   5.4 Understanding cultural differences ................................................................... 65
   5.5 Dealing with cultural differences ...................................................................... 69

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................. 75

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................. 77

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................... 83
   Appendix 1: Personal profile .................................................................................. 83
   Appendix 2: Interview questions ............................................................................ 85
   Appendix 3: Research software ............................................................................. 86
Welcome to my master thesis for the master Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. Before I introduce my research, I will explain how I became interested in the topic of cultural differences and how I found the company where I did this case study. I will also explain something about the writing style of my thesis and give a word of thanks to everybody who helped me with this research.

Interest in Japan

I became interested in Japan more than ten years ago after I saw the movie Princess Mononoke at a film festival in Amsterdam with my father. This movie was a big hit in Japan, but very few people knew about it in the Netherlands. It is a historical/fantasy story about a hero who becomes involved in a struggle between humans and nature. The movie was very different from the European and American movies that I was used to. What I found most interesting about the movie is that there is no clear distinction between good and evil. The conflict in the movie is not caused by an evil villain, but by the differences in how the characters look at the world. Even the most despicable characters are not purely evil; they have their own values and ideas that influence how they act. I think that one of the lessons from the movie is that if you look at a situation from different perspectives, it becomes very hard to judge what is really good and what is evil. There is often something to say for both sides. The movie sparked my interest in Japan and since then, I learned a lot about this country.

Studies

During my bachelor Humanistic Studies, I attended several additional courses on Japanese history and culture at the Leiden University. It was very refreshing to learn about history from a different perspective and I started thinking about going to Japan. Because of this I also started with learning Japanese and decided to do my master thesis research on Japanese-Dutch cultural differences. In 2012, I got the opportunity to do an internship at the Human Resource department of Hitachi Information and Telecommunication Systems, a Japanese company in Tokyo. This was a great experience that helped me to realize some of the problems (and benefits) that can come with cultural differences.

Research at [company a]

Around this time, I was also looking for Japanese companies that were active in the Netherlands for my master thesis research. After emailing several companies, I came into contact with [company a]. [company a] is an international logistics company with a Japanese background. They have a Branch in the Benelux and were interested in my research. So after a few meetings, I started with my research in the company. I felt welcome in the company and the people were very helpful. They seemed happy to

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1 For more information about my background, see Appendix 1.
2 For more information about the company, see section 1.3.
be able to talk about the subject. One respondent said that the interview also gave him an opportunity to think about cultural differences and that there was not always time to think about these things. During my research, I learned a lot about the logistics business in general and how complicated transportation on a global scale has become nowadays.

**Writing style**

Academic readers may notice that I use a more informal writing style than most other academic writing. This thesis is not just meant for my university, but also for the company where I did my research and for people in general who are interested in the subject of cultural differences. In my opinion, the most important thing is that people who want to read this thesis can understand what is written. And since not everybody will be familiar with academic language, I tried my best to explain things in everyday language. I could not always avoid using some academic jargon in certain sections, but I hope that the structure of the text, the references and the footnotes make the text accessible enough for most people who like to read longer texts like this thesis. Also, chapter 3 is a bit longer than necessary for readers who are already familiar with the field of Humanistic studies and qualitative research. The more detailed explanations of my methods are mainly for readers who are interested in this kind of research, but are not familiar with the research methods.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank everybody who helped with this research. First, I would like to thank the general manager Human Resources of [company a]. I am very grateful that he allowed me to do my master thesis research at [company a] and that he supported me during the whole process. Second, I would like to thank Alexander Maas, my supervising teacher from the university. I could always ask him questions and I especially appreciate that he was both supportive of my work and critical when necessary. Third, I would like to thank all the respondents from the interviews and the other people from the company who helped me. I was aware that many of them were often busy and I greatly appreciate that they were willing to make time for me. The people from the company often shared their experiences, views on cultural differences and sometimes surprising insights with me. I learned a great deal from them and I am thankful for their kindness and for the fun moments that often occurred at work. Last, I would like to thank the people who helped me during the writing process. I have never written such an extensive document in English and many people helped me to improve and correct the text. This report would not be the same without their help.
I. RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

“What a human being, you sit inside your culture, in certain values, certain viewpoints and patterns. You have to dare to step away from these to see that things can be done differently.”
- a Dutch manager of [company a]

Chapter introduction

The ability to deal with cultural differences is becoming more important in society. Especially in companies that do international business, employees are increasingly confronted with cultural differences and companies that employ people with various cultural backgrounds are no longer an exception. A study from PricewaterhouseCoopers (2012), one of the largest international assurance and tax advisory firms, writes that international assignments have increased by 25% over the last decade and they predict a further 50% growth in assignments by 2020. However, it is not easy for employees to step away from the way of working or communicating of their own culture and embrace cultural differences. International companies often struggle with cultural differences and the ways in which both companies and employees deal with culture highly varies.

In this chapter, I introduce my research on cultural differences in one company. I explain what I wanted to research, my research question, what the practical and academic relevance is of this research and I introduce the company where I did my research.

Chapter overview

1.1 Problem statement
1.2 Research relevance
1.3 Company introduction
1.1 Problem statement

In this section I explain what I wanted to research, my research question and sub-questions. For many companies, the problem is how to use the available scientific knowledge on cultural differences in practice. In my case study, I examined one company to understand what problems there are with cultural differences and see how they can deal with them.

How to deal with cultural differences in practice?

International companies are increasingly confronted with cultural differences and one of the most important problems that companies face is how to deal with these differences in practice. In theory, there are numerous solutions. For example, Worldcat, one of largest library catalogs in the world, returns more than a hundred-thousand books from all sorts of disciplines when searching for ‘cultural differences’. But in practice it is not easy to deal with a cultural difference for both companies and individual employees. First of all, even if is easy to tell that cultural differences exist in the company, it is hard to tell what exactly the differences are. If you ask different employees in a company, you will surely get different opinions. Second, the problems that cultural differences cause are almost never issues that can be understood and solved in one simple way. Most literature on cultural differences does not give answers that solves cultural differences easily. The solutions to deal with cultural differences in a company will be different per case.

Research scope

In this research I wanted to do a case study in one company in particular to find out more about the problems caused by cultural differences in this company and how the company can potentially handle them. I held 27 interviews with Dutch and Japanese employees in [company a] to find out what cultural differences there were, what problems they caused and how employees currently dealt with them. My focus in the interviews was on understanding the perspectives of Japanese and Dutch employees in the company and not on understanding Japanese and Dutch people in general. In the analysis I compared my interview results with the literature about cultural differences and examined how the literature could predict cultural differences and help to understand and find ways in dealing with them in the company. In the interviews I asked for the personal views of employees, but in the analysis I approached the questions more from a management point of view. Especially when it comes to dealing with cultural differences, the question is more what the management can do in this case, and not what individual employees can do.

I also look at what can be learned from this case study in a broader perspective. In the analysis I critically examined popular and less popular models and theories for doing research on culture. I also compared my case study with a few other case studies that studied Japanese and Dutch culture. My conclusions could be used to reevaluate existing models and how research on culture in companies can be approached best. However, this is only one case study. Is was outside the scope of this research, but I think it would be interesting to compare my research also with more case studies that researched other cultures. In addition, the methods of this case study could also be used as an example for future case studies. Not as a blueprint, but more as a starting point for deciding which methods to use, since other studies may require adjustment for their specific cases. This also one of the reasons why I tried to explain my methods in much detail in chapter 2.
Research question

I used the following research question in my research:

What problems do Japanese-Dutch cultural differences cause in [company a], and to what extent do existing scientific models and theories help to understand and find ways in dealing with these problems?

This research question is based on the assumption that the cultural differences in [company a] cause a number of problems for employees. From the preliminary talks with my supervisor and a few people in the company, it was already clear that many employees encounter cultural differences at work. Especially, managers and employees in certain teams - like the sales team. However, for me and for the management was not clear exactly what the problems were and what they could do about them.

The main question can be split in several sub-questions:

1. What are the existing Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company?
2. What are the main problems that employees encounter with these differences?
3. How do employees deal with these problems?
4. What are the most important scientific models and theories for my case study?
5. Can the models and theories help to predict which cultural differences are important in the company?
6. How do the models and theories help to understand the problems in practice?
7. How do the models and theories help to deal with cultural differences in the company?

I made 7 sub-questions that each answer a part of the main question. Unlike most research, I did not start with creating a theoretical framework. I followed another methodology than usual in the University of Humanistic Studies. See for example Guba & Lincoln (1989) and Erlandson et al. (1993). After the preparation of my research my first step was to explore the cultural differences in practice, so I started directly with my data collection in the company. The literature study was done during and after the data collection was completed, as is usual in this kind of methodology (Erlandson et al., 1993). I explain more about this way of doing research and why I chose to do this in chapter 2.

1.2 Research relevance

In this section I explain the practical and academic relevance of this research and why I chose to focus on Dutch and Japanese culture. I also explain what I hope to accomplish and how this is related to Humanistic Studies.

Relevance of intercultural communication research

My case study falls into the field of intercultural communication research, which looks specifically at problems in interaction between people from different cultures. Peter Franklin, a professor of intercultural business and management communication, says about this field:

“Those working in international business and management […] are increasingly interested in the study of intercultural communication for the way that it can provide (partial) solutions/remedies for some of

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3 I explain more about the field of intercultural interaction in section 3.3.
Dealing with Japanese-Dutch cultural differences

the problems or unsatisfactory states encountered in cross- and multicultural cooperation. [...] Increasingly, the study of intercultural communication is also being looked to as a source of assistance in tapping the potentially greater creativity and/or effectiveness assumed by companies.” (Franklin, 2007, p. 263)

In this case study, I also tried both to examine the cultural differences in the company and provide solutions and remedies which hopefully let [company a] tap the potential advantages of cultural differences.

The importance of case studies in intercultural communication research

The relevance of case studies is that they can give a very detailed impression of a particular case, such as a person, a situation, a phenomenon or other specific case. This is mostly interesting in comparison with other research, such as other case studies and larger studies that research general patterns. By comparing case studies with other studies, models and theories can be tested and new insights might be found that were not noticed before, which may lead to further research. In this case study, I looked at how useful several leading models on culture are for dealing with cultural differences in [company a]. I focused in particular on the cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede (1980), the model of high- and low-context cultures of Edward Hall (1976), and the cultural standards of Alexander Thomas (1996). 4

Japan and the Netherlands

I decided to focus on Japanese and Dutch culture, because I think that both countries are interesting players in international business. They are the 5th and 6th largest countries in the world by international merchandise trade (World Trade Organization, 2012) and a significant number of important international companies are (originally) from Japan and the Netherlands. Such as Royal Dutch Shell, ING and Unilever from the Netherlands and Toyota, Yamaha and Sony from Japan. Why have both countries been quite successful in international business? Is this in any way related to their cultures or is culture just a minor factor among many others? These questions do not fall within the scope of this research, but I hope that my research contributes to more interest and research on the topic of culture in international business. A second reason why I think that the Netherlands in particular is an interesting culture for a case study is that there are not many studies that look at Dutch culture in international business. Most of the research on culture in international business still focuses on a limited number of large countries, such as Japan and the United State. In section 3.2 I look at several of the studies that focus on Japanese culture in international companies, but I could find very little about Dutch culture.

Humanistic studies

So how does this research on cultural differences relate to Humanistic Studies? The answer is that it can show how Humanistic Studies can help to improve professional practices, which is one of the main goals in the research program 2010-2015 of Humanistic Studies (University of Humanistic Studies, 2010, p. 1). In Humanistic Studies, students do not focus on one discipline, but instead try to understand a number of different disciplines and make connections between them. We learn to look at social issues from the

4 I explain more about these models in chapter 3.
perspectives of different disciplines like philosophy, sociology and organization theory, among others. In the end, students do not become specialists in one single discipline, but rather experts on connecting different perspectives. Cultural differences in organizations are hard to understand from a single perspective and I think that the multidisciplinary approach of Humanistic Studies is very useful for issues like this. For example, in my case study, it is useful to know how culture works in groups of people from an anthropological or sociological point of view, but it may also be necessary to understand how people's identities are formed and how they are influenced by their culture from a psychological point of view. In addition, I think that it is important to understand the management point of view in order to see what the consequences of cultural differences are in the company and what one can do with them in the company. I think that not many other studies have a multidisciplinary approach like Humanistic Studies. And although many researchers who study culture are already looking over the boundaries of their own discipline, this should happen more. According to Spencer-Oatey and Franklin:

“Up to now, both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary theorizing and research has been patchy. […] For example, few publications in applied linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis refer regularly to studies in other subject areas.” (2009, pp. 5-6)

The key aim of their book on intercultural interaction is also ‘to take a multidisciplinary approach’. My aim for this research was the same and I hope to encourage more research in Humanistic Studies that shows the value of this multidisciplinary approach to understand a complex issues like different cultures in a company.

1.3 Company introduction

This section introduces [company a], the company where I did my research. I also go into the background and context in which the company operates, because I think that it is important to know where companies come from and how they may be influenced by their history.

[this section is removed in the online version of this thesis]
2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapter introduction

The type of research that I did is called qualitative research. Qualitative research is often used in social sciences, because it aims to understand why humans think or behave in a certain way; what motivates people, how they give meaning to life, how they interact with other people, and what problems they encounter in all these things. The advantage, as well as the difficulty is that the design of qualitative research has to be very flexible. It is nearly impossible to make a step-by-step plan and follow it through exactly as planned, because new information or new insights can require the whole process to change direction. This will be most clearly visible in how I researched the literature in combination with collecting data. To keep a clear focus in my research despite the broadness of the subject and because I wanted to study cultural differences in practice, I designed it as a case study. In this chapter, I start with the methodology behind my design and then I explain the research process, the data collection and analysis methods that I used.

Chapter overview

2.1 Methodology
2.2 Research process
2.3 Data collection methods
2.4 Analysis methods
2.1 Methodology

In this section I explain the main principles behind the design of my research. First I discuss the characteristics of qualitative research, then the underlying philosophical assumptions, then I make a short comparison of qualitative and quantitative research and finally I look at the foundations of case study research.

Qualitative research

There are several characteristics by which qualitative research can be recognized. Ilja Maso and Adri Smaling (1998), two former teachers at my university, write that it “is a form of empirical research that can be recognized by the way of information gathering, the research design, the research subject, the kind of analysis, and the role of the researcher.” (p. 9-10) Characteristics can be seen in figure 3. Qualitative research is about trying to understand what is going on inside people’s heads and between people. Interpretations, opinions, assumptions and expectations of people are a central element in qualitative research. The results from qualitative research are often descriptive and do not give clear statistics or black-and-white answers. Instead, they try to show the different perspectives on an issue and the underlying patterns to understand a phenomenon.

Foundations of qualitative research

I will not give a full account of the foundations of qualitative research here. But I will look at one important influence for qualitative research, the theory of social constructivism, which I think is interesting to know for this research. Social constructivism assumes that knowledge is constructed by people, rather than discovered. It recognizes how important culture is and that context is essential in understanding human behavior. Social constructivism sees people as constantly learning by exchanging knowledge through interaction and creating new knowledge in the process. This means that the people in the company where I do my research can also change and learn during and because of the research itself. This is one of the reasons why for example the design of qualitative research needs to be flexible and why data collection and analysis alternate in an interactive cycle (which are two of Maso and Smaling’s characteristics). People may for example change their views on cultural differences because of an interview with me about this subject and the researcher has to consider what this means for the research. It can be difficult to make sense of different and changing perspectives in qualitative research. John Creswell (2007), a researcher who has been doing qualitative research for many years, identified five philosophical assumptions that form the basis for many qualitative studies (see the next page). Based on these assumptions, Creswell gives five implications for the research design to consider. I used these implications as guidelines in the design and during my research (see Table 2).
Table 2: Philosophical assumptions for qualitative research
(Adapted from: Creswell, 2007, p. 17)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Implications for research practice (examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study</td>
<td>Researcher uses quotes and themes in words of participants and provides evidence of different perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Researcher attempts to lessen the distance between himself or herself and that being researched</td>
<td>Researcher collaborates, spends time in field with participants, and becomes an insider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and that biases are present</td>
<td>Researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretations of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Researcher writes in a literary, informal style using the personal voice and uses qualitative terms and limited definitions</td>
<td>Researcher uses an engaging style of narrative, may use first-person pronoun, and employs the language of qualitative research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Researcher uses inductive logic, within its context, and uses and emerging design</td>
<td>Researcher works with particulars (details) before generalizations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My writing style in this document (see the preface) is for example based on the fourth philosophical assumption: “The researcher should write in a literary, informal style using the personal voice and using qualitative terms and limited definitions.” This means that a researcher can write in a more storytelling way and use first-person pronouns. This fits, in my opinion, better with qualitative research than a very abstract and formal writing style.

Comparison with quantitative research

Before I go on with the case studies, I briefly compare qualitative research with quantitative research. They can be seen as the opposites of each other. Quantitative research tries to produce knowledge and generalizations that are not bound to one context, but can be used in many different contexts. For example, to make a model on culture that can be used in many different companies. Quantitative research often starts from a clearly defined problem and works with statistical data, such as numbers, lists and graphs. It is more popular than qualitative research, but according to Creswell, qualitative research has become more accepted in the last two decades (2007, p. 2).

Many quantitative studies have their foundations in positivism. The positivist approach is a way of doing research that assumes that the real truth is what is scientifically proven to be true. The only methods of finding these truths are observation and (logical) reasoning. A quantitative research question could be: ‘how can we increase the English proficiency of employees in a company?’ With this question, the problem is already clear (the English of the employees needs to be improved). The researcher can look for the best solutions by studying different companies who implemented different solutions and he or she could measure how good employees are in English (for example with surveys or tests). The results from this research will lead to the conclusion of what is the most effective solution in general.

However, one question that is not asked in the example above is: ‘Why does the English proficiency of employees needs to be improved?’ The answer to this question could make a big difference for a company. Is it because they notice communication problems between people from different countries, or, maybe because they want to expand their business to English speaking countries? Are there other
issues that are important to consider? And, is the solution that is best in general also the best solution for this particular company? These are the kind of questions that qualitative research would ask.5

Case study

As mentioned before, my research is designed as a case study. The idea behind case studies is that researching specific cases uncovers much more deeply what is going on in practice. This can be done by studying either cases that are an exception, or cases that are an illustration of a known phenomenon. For example, in psychology there are many case studies that focus on one or several patients who fall outside the known psychological diseases. On the other hand, in anthropology there are for example many case studies that focus on one or several aboriginal tribes, because these tribes are likely to be a good example of aboriginal life in that region. Both kinds of case studies use and review the existing knowledge on the subject and try to test and expand it through case studies. Peter Swanborn (2010), a professor in social science methodology, writes that the majority of methodology texts makes a clear distinction between case study methods and other scientific methods. However, he argues that different research methods in the social sciences should be seen as complementary, rather than incompatible. One case study by itself is often limited. But its value lies in comparing it with other case studies and with larger theories and models. For example, if several independent case studies come to the same conclusions, there is a good chance that they discovered something that goes beyond their specific cases. For example, one case study is about cultural differences and power relations (see: section 3.4). Some of the things that Ybema and Byun (2009) found are the same as in my case study.

2.2 Research planning

In this section I explain the setup and process of this research. First, I explain two design pitfalls for cultural research that are pointed out by Usunier (1998), and Lim and Firkola (2000). Then, I describe the planning of his research.

Cultural bias

Cultural bias in research means that the researcher is influenced in some way by his or her own cultural background. Qualitative researchers work with the interpretations, opinions and assumptions of the people they study and of themselves. Looking at all these in an objective way is as good as impossible. I am Dutch, which may have influenced how I look at Dutch and Japanese people. For example, maybe I was able to understand better what Dutch respondents thought during the interviews because I am very familiar with Dutch customs and culture. But maybe my view of Dutch people was less clear, also because I am so close to Dutch customs and culture myself. Both are possible and it is hard for the researcher to determine himself what cultural bias there might be. Creswell’s third philosophical assumption6 is that the researcher should “acknowledge that research is value-laden and that biases are present” The implication is that the “Researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretations of participants” (2007, p. 17). And even

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5 For a quick side-by-side comparison of qualitative and quantitative research, see http://wilderdom.com/research/QualitativeVersusQuantitativeResearch.html

6 For all the philosophical assumptions, see section 2.1.
though it is impossible to remove all influence from one’s cultural background, it is important for the researcher to reduce cultural bias as much as possible in his research. Reducing cultural bias is called cultural decentering. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, two researchers who did a lot of intercultural research, say that the aim for researchers is to constantly “move away from our own cultural perspective and to give equal weight to the perspectives of all the cultural groups involved.” (2009, p. 269) I did this in the following ways:

- By being aware that my cultural background influences my perspective and trying to keep an open mindset. This may sound simple, but it is easy to forget your own cultural background during an interesting interview.
- By talking with people from the company about my research. I often went to the company just to work on my thesis, even when I did not have any interviews. I regularly talked informally with employees and see what they thought. This not only helped to reduce cultural bias, but also to lessen the distance between myself and the employees.
- By keeping a research log to write down my thoughts about this topic when I was in the company. This way I could reflect on them later.
- By reviewing parts in the data where bias possibly existed. For example, I noticed that in one interview I asked several times “is it true that ...?” I then gave an assumption. This way of asking is not wrong, but has the risk that respondents may feel being interrogated and they may change their answers.
- By clearly explaining my research design and methods and making a personal profile (see Appendix 1). People who read this research can read what I did and who I am, so that they can place my conclusions in perspective. For example, a business accountant may think that I do not pay much attention to the financial aspects of cultural differences. I think these are important too, but since my background is in the social sciences, my knowledge on how to research the financial aspects is limited.

Language limitations

Language limitations in cultural research are another important issue in cultural research. The languages that the researcher does or does not know determine which information he or she is able to gather. I speak English and Dutch on an academic level, and I speak Japanese and German on a limited level. I could read English and Dutch literature and do interviews in English and Dutch, but unfortunately I could not read Japanese or German literature, or hold interviews in Japanese. For example, there were several interesting publications in German that I was not able to read and in the interviews with Japanese respondents there was a higher chance of misunderstandings than with the Dutch respondents. Just like cultural bias, researchers should try to reduce language limitations as much as possible. I tried to reduce language limitations in the following ways:

- By taking more time for the Japanese interviews. This way there was more time to check if I understood everything correctly;
- By using my experience with and knowledge of Japanese culture. For example, I already knew from my internship in Japan that every Japanese person learns English in school, but that many still have trouble speaking English because the education system focuses on reading and writing. This helped me to better understand why Japanese people more often have trouble speaking English in the Netherlands;
• By asking all Japanese respondents if they wanted to check the transcripts or summaries of the interviews. Almost all transcripts and summaries from interviews with Japanese respondents were checked;
• By asking different Japanese people in the company what they thought of my conclusions or to check parts of my text during writing;
• By searching for translations of interesting publications in other languages.

**Planning**

I started the preparation of my research in May 2011, when I wrote the first draft of my research proposal. At this time, I was not sure if I would find a company that was interested. In December 2011, I came into contact with the general manager Human Resources from [company a]. From January 10 till March 25 I was in Japan for my internship. After I returned I made the final research proposal and prepared with the manager for my research. The research proposal can be found separately with this document. The planning of my research went from May 2012 to January 2013 (see figure 4).

**Emerging design**

I used an *emerging design* in my research, in which data collection and literature research are both open, flexible, and continuously influenced each other. Creswell’s fifth assumption for qualitative research is that the “Researcher uses inductive logic, within its context, and uses and emerging design,” this has the implication that the “Researcher works with particulars (details) before generalizations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field.” (2007, p. 17) In short, the researcher continually makes changes in how he does his research. For example, something that a respondent said can be the reason for searching new literature about a topic and this can in turn lead to small (or even big) changes in how the interviews are done. In my original planning, the preliminary research, data collection and analysis are still separated and I thought that they might slightly overlap, but during the research, it quickly became clear that this was not very helpful, so I changed to going back and forth between these phases. During the data collection phase I also researched literature and during the analysis phase, I was still collecting new data. There was no clear distinction between the phases, until all interviews were done. And after that I still collected data through informal conversations. In qualitative research, the researcher often does not know exactly what to expect. I started with several basic ideas about the cultural differences in the company, but had to adjust my methods and conclusions along the way. My research took much longer than I had expected, because I had trouble comparing the interview results with the literature. I also tried to finishing several other university courses during my research, which slowed me down. The first draft was finished in May 2013. After that, I took several weeks to talk about my conclusions with a few managers and employees from the company and with my teachers. Then I made large adjustments for the final version.

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7 For all the philosophical assumptions, see section 2.1.
2.3 Data collection methods

In this section the methods of data collection are explained. I explain how the data collection was set up and which methods I used.

Data collection set-up

The set-up of the data collection is largely based on Jeanine Evers’ (2007) book Kwalitatief interviewen: kunst en kunde (Qualitative interviewing, art and skills), a former teacher at my university. Interviews are widely used in qualitative research, because they very useful to explore deeper motivations, opinions and views of people and I used them as my primary data collection method. In addition to that I used informal conversations, observations and written sources to collect data. These were mostly used to validate the results from the interviews. There are about 900 employees in the company, of which 40 to 50 managers and about 60 supervisors. These numbers are for the whole Benelux. Most of the interviews were held in the Netherlands, since the focus of this study is on Japanese-Dutch cultural differences. I started with interviews with people who worked at office in [place 1]. Two offices from former [company b] and [company c] had merged together here. My supervisor from the company and I thought that it was good to ask people here first, because the situation had changed here the most since the merger.

After twelve interviews I had identified a lot of cultural differences and several other topics that would be worth exploring. I found it a bit difficult to decide which areas to explore further, so I spent some time looking at the data and I talked with my supervisor about what would be interesting to look at in the second round of interviews. I decided to look at several themes in particular and this lead to the four main themes in chapter 4. Creswell’s (2007, p. 17) second assumption for qualitative research is that the Researcher should attempt to lessen the distance between himself or herself and that being researched. During the research, I spend much time inside the company, talking to employees. I visited offices in [place 2], [place 3], [place 4] and [place 5] and made about 50 visits to the company in total. To a certain extent, I became an insider because I was on friendly terms with many employees and could talk with them in a more informal way. This helped me greatly to understand the company and do my research.

Selection of respondents

Respondents were selected by asking respondents who I interviewed about other people who they thought were interesting or necessary to interview. This is called the snowball sampling method. The goal of this sampling method is to select information-rich respondents, such as employees who communicate with people from the other cultures on a regular basis and to find many of the different perspectives in the company by selecting respondents with different backgrounds, different functions, different work, et cetera. Snowball sampling is a type of purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 87-91). It is called purposeful selection because it is contrary to random selection, which is often used in

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8 For more information about qualitative research, see section 2.1.
9 For more information about the merger, see section 1.3.
10 For all the philosophical assumptions, see section 2.1.
quantitative research. Randomized selection gives a selection that is statistically representative of the population that is being researched. For example, in elections polls respondents are usually randomly selected. Each person has an equal chance to be selected, so with a large sample, there is a high chance that the results are representative for the whole population. However, with a small selection of respondents, such as in a case study, random selection is not necessarily the best option, because the chance that the selection is representative of the whole population that is being researched is quite small. Also, random selection is not always possible or necessary. In my case study, all these reasons apply. Not all employees in the company had to be represented in the selection, because my focus was on employees who are often confronted with Japanese-Dutch cultural differences. It would have been both impractical and unnecessary to determine beforehand which employees were often confronted with cultural differences. Also, it took time to get to know the company and the people. Sometimes respondents who I thought would be often confronted with Japanese-Dutch cultural differences actually did not encounter them very often. Because of these reasons, random selection was not an option.

One of the risks of snowball sampling is that respondents recommend only like-minded people to interview. I minimized this in two ways, first by telling respondents explicitly that I was looking for respondents with different perspectives. And second by making an overview of the backgrounds of people, such as how long they worked in the company and how much experience they had with working with cultural differences. Interviewed a lot of managers and supervisors, because they encountered the most problems with cultural differences, most of them were male. The Japanese employees were far outnumbered by the Dutch employees, so I interviewed a relatively large selection of the total number of Japanese employees. To prevent identification of individual respondents as much as possible, the personal details of respondents are confidential, I only give a general overview of the respondents (see table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural background</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainee</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work location</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[place 1]</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[place 2]</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both: 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other locations: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Overview of respondents**

**Interviews**

The interviews took between 30 and 80 minutes and were held in Dutch or in English. Several days before an interview took place, I always sent a document with a short explanation of my research and the interview questions to the respondents. The interviews were spread over two rounds. I started with open interviews in the first round and used two starting questions. These were:

- Can you tell me about your experience at [company a]?
- How do you deal with cultural differences at work?

These open questions are very broad and gave the respondents the possibility to talk about anything that they thought was relevant to tell. With these questions I wanted to focus on the respondent’s perspective in the company and not limit him or her to talk only about cultural differences. The questions proved helpful to learn more broadly about the context in which the respondents were working. For more information about quantitative and qualitative research, see section 2.1. For more information about open questions, see Evers (2007, p. 55).
the rest of the interview, I used follow-up questions that were based on what the respondents brought up.

After the first round of 12 interviews I switched to semi-open interviews. In a semi-open interview, the interviewer has more questions and there is less time to explore everything the respondents brings up. Compared to open interviews, semi-open interviews are more structured. The interviewer sticks to several starting questions and may cut off topics that seem less relevant. However, the respondent still has a lot of time to talk about the most important things for each question. I used this type of interview in the second round, because there were certain topics from the first round of interviews that I wanted to explore further in the remaining interviews. I adjusted the questions in between interviews if I thought this was necessary. Sometimes I knew beforehand that a respondent knew more about a certain topic and then zoomed in on this topic in the interview. The last version of the document with the explanation and the questions can be found in Appendix 2.

**Interview recording**

I asked each respondent if I could record the interview and most of the interviews were recorded. For the interviews that I could not record, I made notes and wrote a summary that I sent back to the respondent to check for errors. The recordings of first round of interviews were transcribed with a selective and paraphrasing transcribing style. This means that I did not type out every word that the respondents said, but I summarized what was said and only fully wrote out some important details. For the second round of interviews, I knew better what to ask for and transcribed most of what was said, although repetitions and long examples were sometimes paraphrased or left out. Transcribing this way saved me a lot a time and made it possible to do more interviews than would be possible with transcribing every word that was said. The recordings, transcripts and summaries are all kept confidential.

**Informal conversations**

In addition to the interviews, I had many informal conversations with employees in the company. These highly varied in length and were not structured like the interviews were. Sometimes I asked the same questions that I also asked in the interviews, such as how they dealt with cultural differences. People were often helpful and willing to share their opinions. After conversations I often made notes when I got the chance and at the end of every day or the next day I used these to write an entry in my research journal, these notes and the entries in my research journal are also kept confidential. I used my field notes to check the interview data during analysis. For example, some respondents talked in the interviews mostly in a negative way about the other culture, while in informal conversations, they were sometimes much more positive.

**Observations**

Besides talking to people I also made observation notes when I was in the company. For example, whether it was quiet or if people talked a lot, if people were working mostly by themselves or often asked each other questions and so on. I made notes of this in a similar way as I did for informal conversations and these were also kept confidential. The observation data was used in the same way as the informal conversations: to check if there were important differences with the interview data or for conformation of the interview data. To give an example, a few Dutch respondents said in the interviews
that they mostly spoke with Japanese people by mail. And during the times that I was there, I did indeed seldom see them talk with Japanese people directly.

**Written sources**

I also made use of a few written sources. These were internal documents from the company, such as newsletters, documents about the history of the company and organization charts. I used these mostly to get a better understanding of [company a]. During informal conversations and interviews, people sometimes showed me things like emails, invoices, regulations and other documents. For example, one respondent said that email sometimes is a big problem and that it takes a lot of time. Then he showed me a long email conversation in which he tried to clear up several misunderstandings over the course of several weeks.

### 2.4 Analysis methods

*In this section I explain how the analysis was carried out. I started with analyzing the interviews. When I found several interesting themes, I began to search for literature and compared this with the interview data. The more interviews I did, the better I could research the literature.*

**Theoretical framework**

I did not make a theoretical framework before the data collection; instead, after a small explorative study I started with the data collection. The data collection guided the literature research (see also: Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Erlandson et al., 1993). In other academic research, there is often first a literature study and based on that, data are collected and analyzed. Evers (2007, p. 17) recommends starting qualitative research with a literature study, but I kept this very limited, just to make sure that my research was relevant and not been done exactly like this before. I think that it would not have been possible to make a good theoretical framework before doing interviews, because there was too much literature about the subject to make a good selection beforehand. I would not have had clear criteria to decide what is relevant to read and what not. I was new to this field of study and I had only a general idea about the cultural differences in the company. As I explain in section 2.2, I used an emerging design for my research. In the interviews, especially the first few, I received a lot of new information about what was going on in the company and which topics were important. It made much more sense to start with the data collection and then let the results guide the literature study. The interview findings helped me decide what literature to select and then the literature in turn influenced the data collection and guided it towards interesting topics. Trying to make a theoretical framework before starting the data collection would have resulted in a literature study of which I would throw away a lot of irrelevant information later. For example, cultural differences related to gender are seen as a big issue in the literature, but in my case study, they were only a minor topic. I did ask respondents about this topic, but I did not study much literature about gender and culture, since it was not relevant for my case.

**Interview analysis**

The results from the interviews guided the analysis and literature research, so I had to find patterns in the interviews that gave a framework for the analysis. I partly used qualitative data analysis (QDA)
software to analyze the interviews and partly I used macros in Microsoft Word. I explain more about both in Appendix 3. The software is meant to analyze text-data, such as interview transcripts and summaries. By labeling fragments of text with certain tags, the researcher can order the data. This is called coding. For example, I could label a fragment of text where a respondent talks about language differences with the tag 'Language'. I can do the same with tags like 'Communication style', 'Merger differences' etcetera. After all the interviews were coded with tags like these, I could ask the program to show me only the fragments that were labeled with a certain tag. In this way I had an overview of what respondents said about this topic. I could also ask the program to show me combinations of tags or show only what certain respondents said. Based on the topics that often returned in the interviews I started looking for relevant literature. And as I wrote before, this helped me to look for relevant topics in the interviews again. Eventually I came to the four themes that I present in chapter 4.

**Comparison of interviews results and literature**

The four themes from the results also have some similarity to topics that are often mentioned in literature. For example, in their case study on cultural differences in Japanese and Dutch companies, Ybema and Byun (2009) also identify the themes communication style, language and work ethos. One could argue that I just found things in the company that could have been predicted in the literature that I cover in chapter 3. However, the themes and the underlying patterns that I presented in the results are not new in the sense that they have not been discovered before. The goal of this case study was to find which cultural differences cause problems in the company and to explore these much more deeply. The fact that some of the themes are similar to results in other case studies shows that the issues found in my case study are not limited to this case. It provides further evidence for general models and theories of culture that assume these themes as problem areas. In addition, models which do not look at these themes or at different themes can be called into question, although further research is needed for that. For example, some of the literature that I found predicted quite accurately several of the problems that I found, while others totally missed the point.
Chapter introduction

In the first section of this chapter, I give several definitions for culture used by researchers. But there are some researchers who use a metaphor for understanding culture. For example, Harry Triandis compares culture with memory. This metaphor can make one wonder if traditions, values, systems, et cetera are maybe just memories of society, stored in the minds of a group of people. There are many technical definitions, but a metaphor may help to understand the concept of culture in another, more imaginative way.

In this chapter I give an overview of the theory on cultural differences. The selection of literature for this chapter was guided by the results from the interviews in an interactive way. As I explained in chapter 2, both were done at the same time and influenced each other. There was not a separate literature study or data collection phase. However, for clarity I think that it is easier to present the theory on cultural differences first and then the results that I found from the interviews. There is more than enough literature to read about cultural differences, so I do not intend to cover it all, but just the important and relevant subjects for this case study. I also cover a bit of the background about the research on culture and organizations in general.

Chapter overview

3.1 Definition of culture
3.2 Culture-comparative models
3.3 Intercultural communication research
3.4 Case studies
3.5 Linguistics
3.1 Definition of culture

Since culture is a very important concept in this research, I use this section to give an overview of several definitions of culture that are used in literature. I also explain which definition of culture I used during my research.

Defining culture

There are many different definitions of culture from many different authors. The point that they most seem to agree on is that defining culture is not easy. Stephen Linstead, a professor of critical management, summarized this as follows: “The concept of ‘culture’ relates to something that most of us can recognize from our experience in organizations, but is rather elusive when we attempt to define it.” (2009, p. 157)

In the 19th century the term high culture was used to refer to high class taste or refinement of the mind. The anthropologist Edward Tyler was one of the first who made a definition that is close to the meaning of the word ‘culture’ as we use it today.

“[Culture is] the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Tyler, 1871/1920)

At that time, this definition was used almost only in anthropology and referred to cultures of exotic societies, such as the Aboriginal culture or Inuit culture. However, in the 20th century the word was being used more and more to refer to any culture, such as one’s own culture or the culture of a certain group.

Definition often used in organization research

Many researchers use the definition of the organization psychologist Geert Hofstede, which was originally used in research on national cultures in organizations, but is now widespread in the literature.

“[Culture is] the collective programming of the mind, distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others.” (Hofstede, 1980, pp. 21-23)

This definition places emphasis on how people are influenced by culture and it gives the impression of culture as something that people actively do (‘collective programming’). I find it interesting that this definition is so popular, since many other definitions use a more passive description of culture, as something that can occur or develops on its own. I think that culture is both. Also, the definition focuses on how culture can be used to place people in categories or groups. I think this is a narrow view on the purpose of culture. There are in my opinion many purposes of culture, such as giving people a certain identity, sense of belonging to a group or helping to understand someone’s background (et cetera). So, even though this definition is often used in other research, in my opinion it does not suffice.

Definition used in this research

During my research, I looked for an understandable definition of culture that did not reduce the complexity of culture too much. I found this in the definition of Helen Spencer-Oatey, a professor in applied linguistics:

“Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behavior and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behavior.” (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 3)

This definition is the basis for understanding culture in my research. There are several reasons why I prefer this definition over other definitions, such as Tyler’s and Hofstede’s.
1. This definition tries to identify a certain set of elements that are shared by a group of people (just like Tyler’s definition). However, this set of elements is not clear or definitive, which is indicated by the word ‘fuzzy’.

2. It recognizes that culture influences individuals, but that it does not determine them. The influence of culture can highly vary per individual.

3. It emphasizes both people’s own behavior and the interpretations of other peoples’ behavior.

4. Like most other definitions, nothing is said about culture being bound to a country or an organization. It only says that culture is shared by a group of people, leaving open how small or big this group is and what its boundaries are.

5. I find this definition more neutral than Hofstede’s, because it is left open whether culture is something that people actively do, or which passively emerges.

6. It also leaves open for what purpose culture can be used and does not focus on categorization of people.

For an overview of more definitions of culture in relation to organizations, see Linstead (2009, chapter 3).

3.2 Culture-comparative models

In this section I shortly look at the history of research on culture in organizations and some of the models that were very influential. Not all the models were useful for my case study, but I also want to give a bit of background information about the emergence of the field of research on culture and organizations.

Research on culture in organizations

The interest in culture and organizations started in the first half of the 20th century. One of the first mentions of culture and management together was in the Hawthorne studies from 1924 to 1932. The researchers of the Hawthorne studies did several different studies on the factors that increase factory workers’ performance. Two management researchers, Richard Franke and James Kaul, write about the Hawthorne studies:
Research on organization culture became more popular after World War II. One of the popular models at that time was that of strong and weak organization culture (see figure 5). This can be seen as one of the first models that categorized and compared organization cultures. Managers were interested in controlling the culture of an organization. The idea was that a company could succeed if they could build a strong culture. This influenced many companies to make clear company values and preach about them in the company. However, this model of culture received a lot of criticism over the years. For example, the psychologist Irving Janis writes that the cohesiveness of a group is important (how much people stick together). But when there is too much pressure on reaching consensus and avoiding conflict, groups have the risk of groupthink (Hart, 1991). Groupthink is the pressure on employees to not go against the group norms. In companies with a strong culture, people agree more with each other about the company values, so there is also a higher risk of groupthink than in companies with a weak culture.

**Organization culture models**

In the second half of the 20th century, many other models to analyze organization culture were made. Most of these models try to categorize the company culture in a certain way and typically use two variables, which lead to four different culture types, for example, the degree of centralization and formalization of companies. Charles Handy, and later Roger Harrison (1972), looked first at where decisions are made. The more they are taken by a central management, the more centralized a company is. Secondly, they looked at how much of the norms and rules in companies are written down in official procedures and documents. More official procedures and documents mean more formalization. Another famous model is the degree of complexity and transparency of Andrew Brown (1995). He looked first at how complex companies are. Bigger companies are often more complex, but this also depend on other factors, such as the difficulty of the production processes. Secondly he looked at how easy or difficult it is to understand what is going on in the company for people. For example, how does the management inform its employees about decisions? Or how is information shared in the company?

These models claim to identify the four most important types of organization cultures, but what they are in fact doing is pick out certain aspects of organization culture and then make a categorization. The variables that these models focus on may be interesting to look at by themselves, but they only give a limited understanding of organization culture. Martin Parker, a professor of organization and culture, writes that theories and descriptions of culture from models like Handy and Harrisons “provide very little space for the multiple understandings, conflicts and confusions of everyday practices.” (2000, p. 67).

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13 For an overview of more models that compare organization cultures, see Linstead (2009, chapter 3).
Japan and the interest in national culture in organizations

When organization culture became more popular in research, several researchers focused in particular on national cultures. It is interesting that Japan played an important role in increasing the popularity of research on national cultures in organizations. In the decades after World War II, the Japanese economy grew very fast and many researchers started looking for reasons why Japan was so successful economically. Several of them saw the Japanese culture as an important factor for the Japanese success. The interest in Japanese culture increased especially after Japan recovered quickly from the oil crisis of 1973. Two popular books about Japanese culture and business of that time are ‘The Art of Japanese Management’ (Pascale and Athos, 1980) and ‘Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge’ (Ouchi, 1981). See figure 6 for short summaries of the books. Both books mostly see differences in culture as the biggest reason behind the economic boom of Japan. However, there is debate about to what extent this is true. According to economist Karl Mosk (2010), the most important reasons were actually the high literacy rate and well-developed infrastructure in Japan. It can be easy to overestimate culture as the main reason behind such large developments.

So, to what extent Japanese culture played a role in the Japanese economic boom is not certain, but the interest in Japanese culture and business did help to increase awareness of national cultures in organizations. This can be seen in the popularity of research on Japan and the United States. They were the two largest economic powers at this time and Ito Youichi, a Japanese professor of policy management, wrote in 1992 that there were more studies on Japanese-American communication than of intercultural communication between any two other cultures (as cited in Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 15).

Hofstede’s Cultural dimensions

One of the most popular researchers on national cultures is Geert Hofstede (1980). He held more than 100,000 surveys about culture in 70 countries all over the world and found a number of values that distinguish country cultures from each other. These values were grouped in four cultural dimensions. In his later work, a fifth and sixth dimension were added. See figure 7 for a short description of all the dimensions and scores for the Netherlands and Japan. Hofstede made average scores for each country on these dimensions. The dimensions can be seen as problem areas in which people from different countries act differently and have different cultural values. For example, the Netherlands is a more individualistic culture than Japan, so they value individual independence more and place more emphasis on individual success than Japanese people. Hofstede’s dimensions are often quoted in research on culture and intercultural training.

Table 4: Summaries of Pascale & Athos and Ouchi

The Art of Japanese Management
Pascale & Athos, 1980.
Pascale and Athos say that the factors that influence success are much more build into the organizations in Japan, while American business culture relies more on good leadership. Both are of course necessary, but the difference is that if the success depends too much on the leader, the company will typically decline if the leader retires or dies. In Japan, successful companies try to integrate the successful factors more into the structure of the company and this allows them to reach more long-term success.

Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge
Ouchi, 1981.
Ouchi also compares Japanese and American business cultures and used both cultures to propose a hybrid theory of managing a company that combines the best of both worlds. For example, Japanese companies create more loyalty and commitment among employees, because they care more the well-being of the employees and their family. Promotions are slower, but this also gives promising leaders more time to get to know the company very well.
There are several other researchers who did a similar attempt at creating a complete model for understanding cultural differences, such as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) and House & GLOBE (2004). These models also identify certain cultural dimensions, but did not become as popular as Hofstede.\footnote{For more information on Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner and House & GLOBE, see Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, §2.2.3).}

### Review of Hofstede

There is much criticism on Hofstede’s work, of which several points are similar to the criticism on the early models of organization culture by Handy and Harrisons. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin write for example that there is a “fundamental concern in applying his findings to intercultural interaction: how can scores that are country-level averages be used to explain the influence of culture on individual behavior?” (2009, p. 19) They continue to explain that Hofstede defends himself to criticism like above by making a distinction between the more abstract comparison of cultures and the expected cultural differences between individual people. He writes:

“The usefulness of the country scores is not for describing individuals, but for describing the social systems these individuals are likely to have built.” (1991, p. 253)

In other words, the cultural dimensions are about society, not individuals. However, this also reveals that the usefulness of his dimensions for dealing with cultural differences is questionable. Other scholars are even more critical. For example, Paola Signorini, Rolf Wiesemes and Roger Murphy, three researchers in the field of higher education, write:
“Limitations include an oversimplification of cultural differences, inconsistencies between his categories, lack of empirical evidence from educational settings and overall a model of culture as static (instead of dynamic).” (2009, p. 253)

They identified four problems with applying Hofstede’s model of culture in higher education:

- Equating ‘culture’ to ‘nation’ is highly problematic.
- Hofstede’s model does not take into account the flexible and changing nature of culture and his model is not able to reflect culture changes in the new global context of higher education.
- His data sets have been applied over in relation to time and space, i.e. Hofstede collected his data in IBM offices in the 1960s and 1970s, not in internationally mixed higher education settings at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
- Finally, in relation to education settings, Hofstede’s data are anecdotal and non-specific regarding the level of education that he refers to.

In my opinion, this criticism does not mean that Hofstede’s research should be thrown away. Despite the criticism, he did find several interesting themes in cultural differences and his work has helped greatly in increasing awareness about cultural differences in companies. But there are also several alternatives for Hofstede’s dimensions. I describe these in the following sections.

Other models for culture

There are several other important models on culture from different fields of study, but I could not look further into this, because it would make my research too big. For example, in psychology the value scales of Shalom Schwartz are an important model. He asked people in his surveys directly about how they looked at their own values. This model for comparing cultures looks at both the country level and the individual level. Schwartz found that priority of values of individual people and those groups of people overlap, but are not the same. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin suggest that this model could be useful for working out which personal characteristics people may be sensitive to in interaction (2009, p. 20). In further research, it could be interesting to study more models from different disciplines.

3.3 Intercultural communication research

The field of intercultural communication research looks specifically at problems in interaction between people from different cultures. This is the most important field of study for my case study because it focuses on cultural differences in practice and combines insights from different disciplines. I cover two pioneers from this field of study that may help to provide alternatives for Hofstede.

Intercultural vs. culture-comparative research

Before discussing the two pioneers from the field of intercultural communication research, I would like to point out that in the literature, the terms that are used for research on cultures are sometimes confusing, because not everybody uses the same terms to talk about the same kind of research. Cross-cultural is for example often used to describe both research that compares cultures on a more abstract level, like Hofstede’s cultural dimensions,15 and research that focuses on the interaction between people.

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15 For Hofstede’s dimensions, see section 3.2.
from different cultures in practice, like case studies. I think that these are very different kinds of research and I agree with Signorini, Wiesemes and Murphy, that “it is crucial to differentiate clearly between a range of culture research, e.g. cross-cultural, multicultural and intercultural research.” (2009, p. 262) I use intercultural for research on communication between people from different cultures and I use culture-comparative for research that compares cultures on a more abstract level.

**Edward Hall**

The founder of the field of intercultural communication is said to be the anthropologist Edward Hall (Spencer-Oatey, 2009, p. 5; Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 3). He did case studies on cultural differences after WO II and developed several models to analyze culture. In anthropology in the 1960’s, the dominant way to do research on culture was to look at single cultures from a macro-level perspective. This means that researchers studied all sorts of aspects of a single culture, such as economics, governance, religion, etcetera. Hall took a different approach and instead focused on micro-level behaviors and interactions between people from different cultures (Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 5). This means that he looked at the behavior of people when they communicated with people from a different culture. Several researchers have used Hall’s work in their own models to compare cultures. One of the more important models is for example the cultural orientations framework of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck16 (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, pp. 25-26).

During the 1960’s, Hall developed training courses about dealing with cultural differences for American Foreign Service officers (such as ambassadors and other diplomats). He noticed that the existing academic models on culture did not have much practical value for the trainees. Many of Hall’s trainees already had a lot of experience with cultural differences and were not really interested in anthropological research. They wanted to know how to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures (Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 9). This is how the field of intercultural communication was born. By combining knowledge from linguistics and anthropology, Hall made his training courses more participatory and experimental. He focused less on giving lectures and reading books and more on using examples from the experience of his trainees. About half of the course content was language instruction and the other half was about intercultural communication. The new approach was a big success among the trainees and Hall trained about 2000 Foreign Service officers (Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 10).

**The Silent Language**

Hall wrote several books that have become very influential in the field of intercultural communication research. His first and probably most important book is called ‘The Silent Language’ (1959). In this book, he outlined his theory of culture and shows how much impact culture has on our lives. According to Rogers, Hart & Miike, this book was “the founding document of the new field of intercultural communication.” (Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002, p. 11). Hall focused on several aspects of culture that people are often unaware of. Among other things, he looked at body language and at how people perceive time and space. For example, in some cultures, good planning and being on time is very important, while in other cultures, human interaction and relations are more important. If someone is late for a meeting because he or she met a friend on the way, people from the second culture may find

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16 Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck analyzed hundreds of studies and identifying six dimensions or orientations in life that societies have to deal with. Two of these come directly from Hall. For further information about the cultural orientations framework: see Spencer-Oatey & Franklin (2009, pp. 24-26) and Maznevski et al. (2002).
this perfectly acceptable, while people from the first culture may not. Hall’s (1963) research on proxemics is also very famous, this is about the personal space that people need and how they organize the space around them. Cultures can differ in how much distance people should keep from others. For example, in Japan it is acceptable to stand together very closely in the train when it is busy. However, many Dutch people would probably feel more uncomfortable in such situations.

High- and low-context communication

Another model of Hall that received a lot of attention is that of high-context and low-context communication. This model was presented in detail in his book Beyond Culture (1976). It is widely quoted in research and often used in training situations to explain differences in communication style between people from different cultures. High or low context refers to how much of the context of communication is implicit. Both high- and low-context communication can be found within every culture, in different situations. Certain forms of communication are by nature high-context, such as inside jokes. An inside joke depends on people who have certain context information that others have not. Only people within a group who know the information understand the joke. In other words, an inside joke highly depends on the context that is not being told. Other communication is by nature meant to be low-context. For example, emergency procedures and regulations are preferably as clear as possible, without the need for any context. People who read them should be able to understand them without any extra implicit information, so that everybody knows what to do in an emergency.

Use of Hall’s models to compare countries

There are certain differences between cultures in how they deal with context in communication. Hall says that in some cultures, high-context communication is expected more often, while in others low-context communication is more expected (see figure 8). Hall never did research in a quantitative way on which countries have more high- or low-context cultures, but many other researchers did. For example, the Netherlands is often seen as a low-context culture and Japan is often seen as a high-context culture. Low-context cultures are generally associated with a more direct communication style, while high-context cultures are associated with a more indirect communication style.

![Figure 8: Summary of Hall’s high and Low context cultures. (Adapted from Layes, 2010, p. 56)](image-url)
However, it is questionable to what extent the research that categorizes countries with Hall’s models is reliable. Markus Kittler, David Rygl and Alex Mackinnon, who reviewed the use of Hall’s model of high- and low-context culture in many studies, say:

“Most previous research that utilized high-context/low-context country classifications is based on seemingly less-than-adequate evidence. Mixed and often contradictory findings reveal inconsistencies in the conventional country classifications and show that they are flawed or, at best, very limited.” (2011, p. 63).

The arguments to support this are similar to the criticism on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions,17 such as the problematic use of national culture; Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon say that it is hard to determine a sort of average in general, because there is so much variation within countries. Peter Cardon, who also did a meta-study of Hall’s high- and low-context model in the literature, goes even further with his critique. He says:

“The theory was never described by Hall with any empirical rigor, and no known research involving any instrument or measure of contexting validates it.” (2008, p. 24)

It is as if everybody knows it exists, but it has not yet been scientifically proven. As Cardon explains, this is partly because Hall never said how to measure high- and low context culture. Most of his explanations are examples and stories of cultural differences.

**Cultural standards**

Another pioneer in the field of intercultural communication research is Alexander Thomas, a professor in social and organizational psychology. He gave intercultural action training courses for managers and was looking for a way to identify the most important problems that people from different cultural groups may encounter in everyday interaction. Thomas developed the so-called cultural standards framework about which he first wrote in a German article, called Analyse der Handlungswirksamkeit von Kulturstandards (Analysis of the effectiveness of cultural standards) in 1996. This model can be used to find out where the expected behavior of two cultural groups is different. Thomas focused on what he called critical incidents. A critical incident happens when someone from one culture does something that someone from another culture does not expect. These incidents can be very small, such as bowing instead of giving a hand, but they always have to do with expectations and interpretations of the meaning of other people’s behavior. Thomas’ idea is that by looking for patterns in these critical incidents, one can find the cultural standards of a group (or several groups) of people. In short, the cultural standards can be seen as a sort of values or norms that are used by people from one culture to evaluate each other’s behavior. For example, according to Thomas, German people highly value honesty, while Chinese people place more value on showing respect. When a Chinese person wants to refuse a request politely, he may give a vague answer to not offend the other person. But a German person may expect that it is said clearly when the other person wants to refuse the request and interprets the vague answer of the Chinese person as dishonest. Thomas, Kinast, & Schroll-Machl define cultural standards as in table 5.

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17 For a review of Hofstede, see section 3.2 ‘Culture-comparative models’.

Page 34 of 88
Flexible model

The interesting thing about Thomas's cultural standards is that there is not a fixed set of them. A cultural standard that is very important for one group is not always opposite or low in the other group. What often happens is that certain norms or values are more important than others. For example, when German people meet Chinese people for a business deal, the German people might think that the Chinese people are being overly polite and not honest in what they really want. However, this does not mean that Chinese people do not care about honesty. The problem is that Chinese people may value respect more than honesty and therefore care more about showing respect than being honest about what they really want. They may not understand that for the German people, it is the other way around. Also, the cultural standards for people from one culture depend on which group they interact with. For example, different cultural standards of a group of German people may come up in research, depending on whether they interact with Chinese people or with American people. This gives a complex, but flexible picture of cultural differences that are relevant in interaction between people from different cultures.

Review of Thomas's work

There is also criticism on Thomas. However, much of Thomas's work is written in German and the same is true for the reviews. Therefore I was not able to fully review Thomas' work. Based on the publications written in English, there are a few points to consider. Britta Kalscheuer and Lars Allolio-Näcke, are two scholars who wrote a philosophical paper about the world views that are created by models, like those of Hofstede and Thomas. They write that these models imagine “culture as a homogeneous and stable entity” (n.d., p. 4), because they do not take into account that culture changes over time. According to them, these models “systematically ignore the cultural diversity originating from the increasing mixture of people and cultures, [which] leads to an essentializing of cultural differences and a strengthening of the boundaries” (Kalscheuer & Lars Allolio-Näcke, n.d., p. 5). Even though Thomas' model is more flexible than Hofstede’s, Thomas still tries to identify certain core cultural values for national cultures (2010, pp. 23-25). And as we have seen with Hall and Hofstede, the use of national cultures is seen increasingly as highly problematic in research on culture.

Brueck and Kainzbauer, two researchers of intercultural business and education, also point out several limitations of Thomas' model, but do not necessarily see this as a weakness.
“According to Brueck and Kainzbauer (2003), the Kulturstandards have a clearly relative and bilateral character, and cannot be used more generally to compare one particular national group to a variety of others. [...] However, [...] far from being a weakness, this relativity is what makes Kulturstandards particularly valuable for intercultural development programmes, because it is the most problematic aspects of specific interactions that people most want to address in training.” (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009, pp. 33-34)

In other words, the value of Thomas’ model is that it can identify much more precisely what kind of problems people encounter in intercultural communication. The comparison of national cultures in general is not something that should be done with this model.

The last point to consider with Thomas’ work is that except in Germany, his work does not seem to be very well-known and it took me a while myself before I came across his work. Kalscheuer and Allolio-Näcke (n.d., pp. 2-3) write that his work is very influential, but English authors rarely mention his work. Of the more than 40 articles that I used for this research, only a few German authors referred to him. Therefore I suspect that his influence is largely limited to Germany. This also reveals that the limitations of language18 that researcher may encounter are not just theoretical. There may be many more relevant studies on cultural differences in other languages that are just as important as Thomas’ cultural standards, which I missed because I do speak that language.

3.4 Case studies

In this section I examine two of the few case studies on consensus and power relations. I present them here because of their resemblance to certain findings in my own research.

Consensus in Japanese and Dutch culture

The first article is called 'Comprehensiveness versus Pragmatism: Consensus at the Japanese-Dutch interface', by Niels Noorderhaven, Jos Benders and Arjan B. Keizer (2007). They did research on international human resource management and organizational behavior. In their article, they show differences between the decision-making process of Japanese and Dutch managers when it comes to reaching consensus. According to Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer, both Japan and the Netherlands are consensus-seeking countries, but Dutch people have a more pragmatic approach to consensus than Japanese people. They don’t mind it as much as Japanese people if they cannot reach absolute consensus and they are less concerned about all the details of a plan before they put it into action. In their research, Japanese respondents said that they do not expect that everybody fully agrees, but much more so than Dutch respondents.

“Japanese consensus can be characterized as ‘comprehensive’ [...] In contrast, Dutch consensus can be characterized as ‘pragmatic’.” (Noorderhaven, Benders & Keizer, 2007, p. 1366)

The interesting thing about this case study is that Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer found a striking difference in how Japanese and Dutch view each other’s decision-making process. Dutch respondents often saw the Japanese process as more top-down, while Japanese respondents had the opposite view, they saw the Dutch process as more top-down.

18 For several important design considerations of research on cultural differences, see section 2.2 ‘Research planning’.
According to the Japanese:
- In Japan the bottom-up process, the consensus building is there but [at headquarters in the Netherlands] it is more top-down (Jj6).
- I don’t know about real Dutch decision making [i.e. in a Dutch company, not a Japanese transplant], but as far as I can imagine it is more top-down (Jn15).
- Japanese consensus might be horizontal while Dutch consensus tends to be vertical (Jn23).

The Dutch voice the following opinions:
- I think that the hierarchy is much more important in Japanese organizations (Nj31).
- In Holland we are much, much less authority-centered, everyone is equal (Nj32).
- In the Japanese environment, people more easily seem to accept a limited role (Nj33).”

(2007, p. 1360)

**Different perspectives**

This difference was not caused by grave misunderstandings of each other’s decision-making process, but by how people viewed certain elements in the process. Dutch respondents emphasized the delegation of authority and open discussion with their bosses. Differences of opinion are accepted, as long as people respect the decision of the responsible manager. On the other hand, Japanese respondents emphasized the consulting of subordinates and the harmonious atmosphere. It is the job of the manager to find support among his or her subordinates, before giving a proposal about a decision to higher management. Finally, Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer write that:

“Our analysis also demonstrates that a comparative analysis focusing on the meaning of a particular aspect of management […] may reveal important differences that might otherwise escape attention. In particular, concepts that at the surface carry similar meaning or seem equally important in two societies (like consensus in Japan and the Netherlands) may give rise to misunderstandings when in practice they are associated with different kinds of behaviour.” (2007, p. 1367)

They emphasize that it can be misleading to focus on large differences, because sometimes -as is the case with Japanese and Dutch consensus- the subtle differences are just as important in practice.

**Cultural differences and power relations**

The second article is called ‘Cultivating Cultural Differences in Asymmetric Power Relations’, by Sierk Ybema and Hyunghae Byun (2009), two researchers from the VU University of Amsterdam. They interviewed local employees and expats from several Japanese companies in the Netherlands and Dutch companies in Japan. They looked at communication style, hierarchy and decision-making and found that cultural differences can influence how people look at themselves and others. Just like Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer, they write that people’s interpretations of cultural differences are highly influenced by the context in which they live, such as differences in power that exist between people. They are also critical of Hofstede’s dimension scores and write:

“[They] give a rather minimal, static and monolithic sketch of national cultures.” (Ybema & Byun, p. 340)

Ybema and Byun found in their research that People who encounter cultural differences at work can sometimes consciously or unconsciously make a strong distinction between one’s own culture and the other to justify their way of doing things, defend their opinion or protect their position. For example, when someone is afraid to lose his position, he might say that someone from another culture can never
do what he can do. According to Ybema and Byun, the arguments of people can change, depending on their position in the organization. For example, they found that Dutch people who have a Japanese manager, have a different view of Japanese culture than Dutch managers who have Japanese subordinates. Ybema and Byun write:

“Apparently, when hierarchic positions are reversed, both parties interpret cultural differences quite differently.” (2009, p. 352)

Just like Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer, they found that in unequal relations, both Japanese and Dutch subordinates seem to view the other culture as more hierarchical or top-down oriented (see table 6).

**Table 6: Talk of ‘cultural differences’ in relation to decision-making styles**
*(Adapted from Ybema and H. Byun, 2009, p. 352)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese Firms in the Netherlands</th>
<th>Dutch Firms in Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Japanese senior manager:</strong> “Even if the top management makes an illogical decision, you just have to follow it.”</td>
<td><strong>Dutch senior manager:</strong> “Thorough preparation [that Japanese claim is typical of their way of working] is in fact a very closed and secretive process.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dutch staff member:</strong> “Japanese decision-making is not consensus-based. It is asking permission and the highest in rank will finally make a decision and the rest just agrees to share the responsibility.”</td>
<td><strong>Japanese staff member:</strong> “The most important thing is negotiation in Japanese cultures and the boss normally has [a] stronger position in [the] negotiation. But in Dutch culture, the opinion of the boss is the most important and the boss is responsible for the decision. The decision-making style of the [Dutch] head office is the same. They usually do not consult the OPCOs [local subsidiary] about the local situation when they make strategic decisions. Only after a decision is made they just order us to implement it.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Using cultural differences**

The interesting thing about Ybema and Byun’s research is that they looked at a rather controversial theme of cultural differences: the use of cultural interpretations when there are power differences. Culture is normally often described as something that emerges and influences people, but the fact that people may use cultural differences for their own goals is not often mentioned in literature. I think this is partly because it is hard to research, since people will not easily talk about use, or even abuse of cultural differences. How do you know if a cultural difference is emphasized on purpose by someone? For research on cultural differences, this is an important question to consider and it would be interesting to do more research on this point. This is also a reason why the study of Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer is important for my own research. It is possible that to some extent the respondents who I interviewed also emphasized certain differences on purpose. By the way, this doesn’t mean that people always have bad intentions. It is also possible that some people for example try to give a positive image of cultural differences, because they think it is a good attitude to focus on the good things. I think that Ybema and Byun’s research shows that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to get a truly objective perspective on cultural differences.
3.5 Linguistics

The research on language is much older than the research on culture and organizations. In this section I give a short overview of some models and ideas in linguistics that are relevant for this case study. I do not cover the complete background or history of linguistics because this is less important for my research.

The code-model of language

Being able to speak the same language to some extent is fundamental for good understanding between people from different cultures. In linguistics, language was seen for a long time as a code to convey messages, this is the so-called code-model of language (Spencer-Oatey, 2009, p. 82). The view was that as long as people used the code by the same rules, they could understand each other. However, modern theories of communication accept that not everything can be conveyed using language. There is always a certain amount of interpretation needed from the person who listens. Also, a significant part of communication is left to non-verbal communication. Cultural differences can greatly affect the interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. The consequence is that language can no longer be viewed as a separate factor in communication; to communicate effectively in other cultures, it is not enough to just learn the language. So in international companies that use a shared language like English, it is not enough that employees are proficient in English. Language proficiency should rather be seen one aspect of a broader category of intercultural communication competences.

Values and styles in communication

Language can no longer be seen as just a code to communication. According to Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, pp. 29-33), there two complementary perspectives on culture in linguistics.

1. The first perspective is about the values or underlying principles of language use. The best known model that uses this first perspective is the politeness principle of Geoffrey Leech. He identified certain constraints in communication that differ across cultures. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin write that this model can be used to compare language use in different cultures. For example, one constraint is that you have to be modest about your own qualities. Japanese and Dutch people can differ in how important they find this constraint and how they think one should act. This influences how people react to compliments and how people expect others to react.

2. The second perspective is about the styles or patterns of language use. There are no universal linguistic models this this, but the model of direct and indirect communication of Hall\(^\text{19}\) has been extremely useful for studying speech acts. For example, is it possible to find certain patterns in how direct or indirect Dutch and Japanese people speak?

The role of proficient speakers

Another issue related to language is about the responsibility of people in interaction to make sure that they understand each other. In international companies it is for example often the responsibility of not-proficient speakers to learn the shared language that is used. There is enough literature on how to improve language proficiency in companies or in teams. But proficient or near-proficient speakers also have a specific responsibility in communication that is sometimes overlooked. Evelyne Glaser (2010, pp. 77-78), a professor in management, writes that proficient speakers in multicultural teams should practice

\(^{19}\) For an overview of Hall’s work, see section 3.3.
self-discipline and avoid using difficult expressions and local accents. I think that this is not limited to multicultural teams, but can be said in general of proficient speakers in companies who often work together with less-proficient speakers. People who are not (yet) proficient in the shared language are, because of the language barrier, often at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding what is going on in the company. It takes them more time to learn the local processes, regulations and norms of the country or culture that they are in and they cannot work as effectively as proficient speakers. Glaser especially points out the feelings of insecurity and anxiety that not-proficient speakers may feel. For example that they may not be able to voice their opinions clearly on matters that are important to them. This can give them the feeling that their position in the group is less influential. This is why Glaser argues that proficient speakers, especially when people work together closely, are responsible for helping not-proficient speakers.

**Linguistic accommodation techniques**

The techniques that can be used to help not-proficient speakers are called *linguistic accommodation techniques*. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin write:

“[Linguistic accommodation techniques] are extremely important for achieving mutual understanding. When something is unclear, there is often a strong temptation to 'let it pass'; however, if this is done too frequently or at too critical points, serious problems in achieving mutual understanding can result.”

(Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009, p. 87)

Table 7 is a list of techniques that have been identified by Comfort and Franklin, and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin. I list them here because they are a good example of linguistic theory that can almost directly be used in practice.

**Table 7: List of linguistic accommodation techniques**

(Adapted from Comfort and Franklin, 2008, p. 93; and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009, pp. 86-87)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Use of words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Speak more clearly and slowly than usual</td>
<td>• Avoid unnecessarily technical words, slang and idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pause and emphasize key words</td>
<td>• Restrict the range of your vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increase redundancy; i.e. repeat and paraphrase</td>
<td>• Avoid contractions, e.g., I'll, shouldn’t’ve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language structure</th>
<th>Active listening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Use short sentences</td>
<td>• Show that you are listening and following by using backchanneling (e.g., mhm, uuh, yes, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use transparent sentence structure; e.g., <em>He asked if he could leave</em>, not <em>He asked to leave</em></td>
<td>• Ask for clarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use more yes/no questions</td>
<td>• Check whether you have understood something correctly (e.g., by summarizing what the other person has said) [this is called ‘testing understanding’]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide answers for the interlocutor to choose from, e.g. <em>We can set up the equipment in two ways: like this [...] and like that [...] Which do you prefer?</em></td>
<td>• Repair misunderstandings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. RESULTS

“Generally speaking, if I compare Japanese and Dutch, I think the two nationalities are completely different. But, [...] there are so many individuals, so many ways of thinking, mind, and mentality. I cannot easily mention just Dutch or Japanese differences. To be honest, I think all are up to the individual.”

- a Japanese manager of [company a]

Chapter introduction

This research is about dealing with Japanese-Dutch differences, but what exactly is Dutch and what is Japanese? When I asked employees in the company about cultural differences, they often gave many differences between Japanese and Dutch people. However, respondents did not have clear categories of differences. Differences often overlapped with each other. Many respondents also knew that culture is not black and white. People are not just ‘Japanese’ or ‘Dutch’. But it is hard to see where the boundaries are. A few respondents said that it all depends on the individual, but also that both cultures are totally different (see above). However, if it all depends on the individual, then strictly speaking, it is no longer possible to talk about cultural differences. On the other hand, if both cultures are completely different, then it cannot depend on the individual. Or is it possible that both are somehow true at the same time? I think that this is an interesting paradox that shows some of the tension between the individual and culture. In section 4.1, I first explain these and several other issues that show how complicated research on cultural differences is. In the following sections in this chapter, I examine four important themes in my interview results and I explain the most important Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company.

Chapter overview

4.1 Introduction to results
4.2 Language
4.3 Communication style
4.4 Relation with clients
4.5 Customs at work
4.1 Introduction to results

Before I go into detail about the Japanese-Dutch differences in the company, I want to make a note about the references in text to the interviews and look at three topics that respondents regularly mentioned in the interviews which I think they are important to understand some of the complications with researching Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in this case study.

Note on references to interviews

In the text of this chapter, I refer to the interviews between brackets { }. The numbers in the brackets tell in which interviews something was said and the letters ‘i.c.’ are used to refer to informal conversations. For example {3, 7, i.c.} is a reference to interviews 3 and 7 and one or more informal conversations. Quotes from Dutch respondents are translated from Dutch to English. To make sure that the identity of respondents is kept confidential as much as possible, the interviews are numbered in a different order than they were held and I only give information about the background of respondents if this is necessary, for example whether a certain view is from a Japanese or Dutch respondent.

Individual differences

The topic of individual differences often came up in the interviews {1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19}. Many people mentioned that whether someone is good at dealing with cultural differences depends a lot on the person. Respondents gave examples of Japanese and Dutch individuals who were either good or bad at dealing with cultural differences. Experience was often mentioned as an important factor that helps to learn how to deal with cultural differences {1, 3, 5, 9, 11, 14, 15, 17, 27}. However, I also noticed that some people talked mostly about negative experiences with people from the other culture and were skeptical about being able to really understand people from the other culture {4, 13, 20}. They had more trouble dealing with the cultural differences.

Individual differences were also often mentioned to soften general statements about one group, for example by saying that there lot of individual exceptions to the rule. One respondent {19} said that he tries to see differences between people not as cultural differences, but as differences between individual people. He wanted to focus on individuals, not on cultures. Respondents found it hard to distinguish between whether something is an individual difference or a cultural difference. A Japanese respondent {12} said for example that even among Japanese people, personality can make it difficult to communicate with a person. He meant that communication problems can still exist, even when people come from the same culture and speak the same language. This makes cultural differences quite complicated, because it is hard to tell when something is a cultural difference and when something has to do with individual differences. There were several moments during the interviews when respondents gave examples of cultural differences that could just as easily be individual differences. For example, one Dutch respondent {5} described an argument with a Japanese expat and said that the behavior of the other person was typically Japanese. However, other respondents {21, i.c.} said that the behavior of the Japanese person was partly an exception. So the question is to what extent his behavior was really typical for Japanese people and to what extent it had to do with personality.
Cultural groups

I asked respondents in the interviews not only about Japanese-Dutch cultural differences, but also about cultural differences in general (in the company). Many respondents gave examples of cultural differences between other people than just Japanese and Dutch people. Other cultures that were mentioned were American, Russian, Belgian, Rotterdam, Asian, Western, management, sales and warehouse culture. The differences between former [company b] and former [company c] were also mentioned in many interviews. The boundaries between all these cultural groups and (sub)groups in the company were not always clear. For example, some respondents talked mostly about European-Japanese differences {3, 12, 18, 27} while others talked more about Western-Japanese differences {8, 17}. Respondents used the words ‘Western’, ‘European’ and ‘Dutch’ loosely, so it is not always clear to which culture a cultural trait belonged. For the results this means that ‘Dutch’ and ‘Japanese’ culture should not be seen as clearly separated cultural groups. There is some diffusion and overlap with other groups.

For example, I asked one respondent {17}:

“You say Western people, do you see them as one group, or are there also differences?”

The response to this was:

“There are cultural differences within Europe, but these are not as big as with the Japanese people.”

This example shows that it is more about how big the differences with another culture feel and not how you define the cultural group. Many Dutch respondents felt a much larger gap in culture with Japanese people than with Dutch, European or Western people (or however they called their own group). However, not all Dutch people shared this view. On some aspects, such as directness, they saw Dutch people as quite different from other European countries. The same seemed to be true for Japanese people. I had the impression that most Japanese people felt the biggest cultural gap between Japan and Europe. But a few of them pointed out specific differences between the Netherlands and other European countries, for example in directness of communication style {12}.

Merger

In section 1.3, I explained that [company a] is the result of a merger between [company b] and [company c] and as I said above, these merger differences came up in many interviews {5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27}. Since this topic falls outside the scope of this research, I will only briefly look at it, but many respondents saw the merger differences as just as important as Japanese-Dutch cultural differences. The merger differences seemed to have put extra pressure on the cultural differences that already existed in the company. For example, because most of the managers in the merged company were from [company b], several respondents said that some of the [company c] employees felt shut out {8, 13, 23, 27}. Especially for the Japanese employees from [company c], the merger meant a big change in the way they used to work.20 Another point is that because of the merger, some jobs became superfluous and other jobs merged into one. Several respondents {11, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26} mentioned uncertainty among employees or were not sure themselves about where the company was headed. For example, one respondent said about the management:

“They did too little to express a clear vision in the company about what direction to take, or they did not dare to tell their vision.” {25}

And one manager {8} explained:

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20 For more on this issue, see section 4.5.
“As an organization, I think that we did not provide enough direction. […] we assumed too easily that people would take it up themselves.”

During the interviews, it was not always clear whether a difference was a Japanese-Dutch difference, a difference between the two former companies, or both. For example, in [company c], the price margins were usually higher than in [company b] (a higher margin means that they earn more per shipment). One respondent (i.e.) said that this had to do with Japanese-Dutch differences, because Japanese people focus more on the relation with the client and the clients are prepared to pay more. However, the air freight business has higher margins anyway, because shipments by airplane are much smaller and on a more irregular basis, this means that clients have to pay more. It is very hard to determine to what degree this difference has to do with Japanese-Dutch differences and to what degree with differences between Ocean Freight and Air Freight. Just like how it is difficult to distinguish between cultural and individual differences.

4.2 Language

This section is about the problems with language and reasons behind them. First I explain the problems that many respondents experienced in normal conversation and email. Then, I look at the English level of Japanese people, why Japanese people who are not proficient in English are sent abroad and how the Netherlands can be seen as sort of an exception when it comes to language proficiency.

Language issues

Problems with language were often mentioned by respondents {3, 5, 11, 12, 14, 17, 21, 22, 23, 27}. Respondents said that Dutch people are usually able to speak English rather well, while there are big differences in proficiency among Japanese people. Some Japanese employees were fluent in English, but others had a lot of trouble, mostly with speaking and writing. The language barrier that sometimes existed made it more difficult for people to communicate and understand each other. Dutch respondents said this was sometimes frustrating for them, especially in stressful situations. For example, one Dutch respondent (5) said that he sometimes had to ask his Japanese colleague to repeat two or three times what he was saying in meetings. One respondent (22) also said that he often could not tell if a Japanese colleague really understood what he was saying or just nodded out of politeness. And two others {22, 21} said that a Japanese colleague sometimes asked the same question several times or to different people. The Dutch respondents in these examples said that they were not sure if this was because the Japanese employees were not good in English or because of other reasons, such as communication style. Or maybe there were multiple reasons at the same time.

Understanding email

Another issue often mentioned was email {3, 5, 12, 14, 15, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, i.e.}. Dutch respondents said that the email they received from Japanese people was sometimes hard to understand, especially from the head office in Japan. One respondent showed me a few emails with questions that he sometimes received from Japan. Some questions were difficult to understand. And if an explanation was asked, the

21 For more on communication style, see section 4.3.
next mail was sometimes just as difficult to understand. Several Japanese respondents said that they had their own ways of dealing with email. One of them {i.c.} said that it sometimes took a lot of time to write English emails, because he was not sure how the email would be interpreted by other people. Another Japanese respondent {3} said that he sometimes printed an email if he did not understand it. This way he could ask a local employee to help and show exactly what he did not understand.

**English level of Japanese people**

There were several reasons why Japanese employees were not always good in English. Japanese respondents {3, 11, 12, i.c.} said:

- There is not much opportunity to talk in English in Japan and not much as exposure to the English language as in the Netherlands. For example, there are many English movies in the Netherlands on television with subtitles (and not dubbed in Dutch).
- The English education system in Japan is mainly focused on reading and writing. Most Japanese people learned English at school, but many still have trouble speaking English, although this is slowly improving with the younger generations.
- The Japanese and English languages are quite different. Japanese has relatively few sounds compared to English, the pronunciation of English is irregular and difficult and sentences have a different order. When Japanese people want to translate something to English, they have to reorganize the sentence in their heads.
- The knowledge of Europe and the Netherlands is limited among Japanese people in Japan. For example, Japanese people sometimes have the misconception that most European people are proficient in English. When they are sent to Europe, they can feel embarrassed and too nervous to speak English in the beginning.

**Why are not-proficient Japanese people sent abroad?**

A few Dutch employees {22, i.c.} were wondering why Japanese people who are not good at English were sometimes sent abroad. I discussed this with one Japanese manager {12} and he said that in Japan, they do not select expats based on their English proficiency.

“It is more about who can do the job, about character. It’s better to speak English, but not mandatory.”

He also said that there was almost no preparation before expats are sent to the Netherlands, such as training sessions or language courses. So it seems that at least in the past, English proficiency was not a priority. However the Japanese manager {12} said that new employees in Japan who want to join the company are now required showing their scores at the TOEIC test.\(^{22}\) Also, in some countries the company pays for language courses for Japanese expats, so that they can learn English or the local language. So it seems that language proficiency is slowly becoming more important.

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\(^{22}\) Many Japanese companies use the TOEIC test. In the company in Japan where I did an internship they used the TOEIC test to get an overview of how good all employees were in English. However, the test consisted only of reading and listening, not speaking. The actual conversation skills of people were therefore sometimes quite different.
The Netherlands as the exception

As I showed above, the language differences between Dutch and Japanese people in the company are an important cause of communication problems, but there are indications that in the long term, this will slowly improve. The low English proficiency of Japanese people is usually mentioned as the source. However, I also found another perspective on this issue. Japan is by far not the only country where people do not speak English that well. Several Japanese respondents {1, 12, 19, i.c.} said that the English proficiency is much higher in the Netherlands than in other countries and that Japanese expats in other countries sometimes cannot even talk with the local employees if they do not know the local language. One respondent {12} gave the example that in Hong Kong, if the local employees had a complaint, they first had to talk to the local managers, who spoke Cantonese and English. Then the local managers could speak in English with the Japanese expats. Compared to this, it is much easier for expats in the Netherlands. Even if they do not speak English that well, they can at least talk directly to most local employees. The respondent said: that the Netherlands is “the most easy country to communicate in.” Even more easy than the United Kingdom, because native English people often speak much faster in English than Dutch people.

4.3 Communication style

This section is about several topics that have to do with communication style. I give an overview of some of the important topic, such as directness, decision-making, importance of personal opinions, and the use of email.

How do people communicate?

Communication style is about patterns in how people communicate with each other. It came up in most of the interviews {1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 25, 27} and affected many other cultural differences in one way or another. Respondents often mentioned communication style in combination with other topics and problems that were not clearly separated from each other. For example, how people talk to each other is related to how they make decisions. How they make decisions is again related to what they think is important in decision-making. This again is related to underlying cultural values and their values are related to history and traditions, etcetera. Below I look at several important topics that came up in the interviews, but they should not be seen as separate or absolute topics. They are linked together and overlap with each other and with the other themes in this chapter. Another point that is important to mention is that many respondents {1, 2, 5, 11, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 27} said that they talked about differences in communication style in an earlier cultural training that several of the supervisors and managers had received. This means that it is not sure if they would also have mentioned it in my interviews without the training. Most of them said that it had helped them to understand the people from the other culture somewhat better.

Directness

Directness was often mentioned explicitly {3, 5, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 22, 25, 27} and many respondents said that Dutch people communicate in general more directly than Japanese people. For example, a Dutch respondent {13} said “The
The Netherlands is just about the most direct country in the world” and a Japanese respondent {22} said that Japanese people are not really straight to the point, while Dutch people are more direct. Direct behavior was described as saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ clearly {16, 20, i.c.}, asking ‘why?’ when someone else makes a request {1, 9, 12, 15, 25} and expressing one’s own ideas or opinion directly {15, 16, 18, 23, i.c.}. Indirect behavior was described as opposite, such as avoiding confrontations in front of the group {27} and giving a long explanation before saying something {3, 15}. In a few interviews {3, 12, 21, 22}, indirectness was associated with lower language ability. Japanese employees who are not good at English may partly be more indirect because they can express themselves less clearly in English. Several Dutch respondents {15, 17, 18, 24} said that Japanese people talk more indirectly because they have a stronger hierarchy. However, I think that the main problem with differences in communication style between Japanese and Dutch people was that employees had the feeling that they did not really understand each other, which had all sorts of consequences and is not linked to just one cause like a difference in hierarchy.

**Decision-making and meetings**

Another topic that often came up was decision-making {2, 5, 8, 12, 15, 16, 20, 24, 27}. Meetings were mentioned several times as an example to explain the differences. There are a few important aspects to this topic. First is that Dutch people make their decisions more during meetings, while Japanese people more often have informal conversations outside of meetings where decisions can be made {5, 8, 14, 15, 16, 17, 27}. A Japanese respondent {16} said it is typical to Japanese meetings is that they know the opinions of the others beforehand and that meetings are more of a reporting. Japanese people will not easily disagree with each other and it is easier to come to a conclusion in a meeting. The respondent continued that in a Dutch meeting, people express their different opinions. This helps people to think of new ideas and there is more creativity. However, it is also more difficult to come to a conclusion. The respondent said that both ways have its advantages and disadvantages and that he would like to learn more about this Dutch style of meetings. A Dutch respondent also said that there can be new input in Dutch meetings:

“I think that we have enough examples of meetings where we think that a decision goes one way. And then eventually the decision goes the other way, because of new input. That will not happen in a Japanese meeting.” {15}

Another Dutch respondent also mentioned the Japanese informal discussions, but he did not necessarily see this as a negative point:

“The informal discussions before you go into a meeting, so that you know a bit what the ideas are before you ask a specific question. [...] I actually do not find that such a bad way of holding a meeting.” {27}

**The speed of the decision-making process**

Japanese employees may reach a conclusion in a meeting faster, but a number of respondents {8, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 24, i.c.} called the whole Japanese decision-making process slower than the Dutch process. For example, one respondent said:

“The whole cycle is longer than we are used to as Dutch people.” {14}

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23 A few Dutch people {5, 15, 17} said that this informal preparation is called nemawashi in Japanese. The dictionary definition is ‘making necessary arrangements; laying the groundwork’. However, two Japanese respondents {i.c.} said that this word can also have a negative meaning in Japanese, such as playing a political game to get one’s way.
Some Dutch respondents said that they did not understand why Japanese decision-making takes longer \(18, 20, 24, \text{i.e.}\), but others mentioned also some advantages \(8, 15, 16\). For example, one Dutch respondent \(20\) said that because of the time and informal conversations in Japanese decision-making, the acceptance of decisions is higher. This higher acceptance of decisions was also mentioned by Japanese respondents \(11, 12, 19, \text{i.e.}\), but the reason of it was not very clear, maybe partly because of a group culture. A Dutch respondent \(20\) said that it was because Japanese people see the value of the group more and that they are prepared to accept decisions more easily, because the group gives protection and benefits. He said that on the other hand, Dutch people are more individualistic and want to show that they are different.

**Importance of personal opinions**

I think that the way Japanese and Dutch people communicate in the company is not just caused by customs, but also by how important they find personal opinions. Both agree that Dutch people more often express their personal opinions than Japanese people. However, they looked at this in a different way. Dutch respondents described the reluctance of Japanese people to express their personal opinion more often as ‘being afraid’ of losing face. But Japanese respondents said that whether they personally agree or disagree with something is often less important. For example, one Japanese respondent said:

“Generally speaking, Dutch people cannot agree without realizing... how should I say, once Dutch people recognize or accept the direction or request itself, everybody start to go in the same direction. But in case they cannot agree, they face difficulties. Whether Japanese people agree or disagree, does actually not matter. As long as the client requests us to do something, then we are trying to do this in general. Of course, we cannot do impossible things. This is I think a big difference between Japan and the Netherlands, to work together.” \(2\)

On the other hand, Japanese respondents described the Dutch directness in expressing their opinion as that they are ‘very confident of their own opinions’. But Dutch respondents often said or implied that expressing their opinion is part of having more ‘open communication’. For example, one Dutch manager said:

“We Dutch people can be a horror for Japanese people, because A, we are very outspoken, and B, we do not have a heavily hierarchical attitude. [...] The first question I get from Dutch people when we decide to do something is ‘why’? That is impossible with the Japanese people. A Dutch employee does not ask questions because he wants to criticize his boss. We are very pragmatic and have a problem-solving attitude. And we deal with each other in more open communication.” \(15\)

I do not judge whether one side or the other is right or wrong, because I don’t think that will help much. However, the differences in interpretation of cultural differences like this might be a reason for some of the misunderstandings and irritation in the company.

**Use of email**

As I said in section 4.2, email came up several times in the interviews. Except for problems with language, there also are a few differences in how Japanese and Dutch people communicate by email. Both Japanese and Dutch respondents said that Japanese employees often put more people in the cc of emails \(19, 21, 23, \text{i.e.}\) and that Dutch employees are not always as fast with responding to email as Japanese employees \(3, 12, 19, \text{i.e.}\). The problem with this is that Dutch respondents were sometimes wondering why so many people had to be involved, especially when something went wrong. On the other hand, Japanese people sometimes wished that Dutch people responded more quickly. In section 4.5, I look at some of the possible reasons behind this difference.
Two Dutch respondents (7, 14) also said that Japanese people can be more direct in their emails than in face-to-face conversation. One of them said about his Japanese colleagues:

“When they react to things by email they are more… not really blunt, but, how can I say this… they communicate in a different way by email than we. […] I notice that they are very direct by email with what they want and how fast this should be done.” {14}

He added that this point was very personal and may not apply to others. The other respondent (7) said that he could sort of appreciate the directness in email, because then he just knew what was going on. It is interesting that these respondents said this, because it seems to be contrary to the stereotype of the Japanese person who is always indirect.

4.4 Relation with clients

This section is about the differences in how Japanese and Dutch employees deal with clients. First I give an impression of the difference between the Japanese and Dutch perspective. Then I look at the market situation and the expectations of clients.

The issue of the relationship with the client

Almost all respondents (1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27) mentioned differences between Japan and the Netherlands in how they deal with clients, so this is one of the most important themes for dealing with Japanese-Dutch differences in the company. Instead of summarizing everything, let me first give a selection of what respondents said about Japanese people in comparison with Dutch people to get an impression of some of the differences (the sentences are paraphrased).

- Japanese people are more focused on the client {5, 8, 15, 18, 23, 26}
- They focus more on building a relation with their clients {8, 14, 15, 16}
- Japanese clients stand higher {8, 15, 16, 17, 23, 27, i.c}
- In contact with Japanese clients, it is sometimes more easy for Japanese employees to understand what is going on when there is a problem {19, 23, 27}
- They have more informal contacts with clients {22}
- They are more on top of issues that concern Japanese clients {20}

And respondents said about Dutch people:

- Dutch people are more straight-to-the-point with customers {8, 14, 21, 27}
- They are more active in trying to arrange things, even when things go not as expected {24}
- They are prepared to try to satisfy the client, but till a certain price {2, 8, 15, 16}
- They do not always seem to understand the expectations of Japanese clients {11, 12}
- For Dutch people, the customer and the supplier are more on the same level {16}
- In negotiations, Dutch people focus more on arranging the conditions and rules, while Japanese people focus more on the relationship {8}
**More client satisfaction vs. balance of costs**

As can be seen, respondents think that Japanese people in general do more for the clients and build stronger relations than the Dutch people. On the other hand, the Dutch people seem to balance how much they do for the customer against other priorities, such as costs and arranging a good contract. Examples of misunderstandings and disagreements between Japanese and Dutch employees were often about how far they should go for the client. One Dutch respondent (8) gave an example of theft of goods during transport. For the Japanese employees, this was a very important issue and a lot of time was spent to solve it and show the client that they took this seriously. However, Dutch employees said that the costs of the stolen goods were not that high and that much more than necessary was spend on solving the issue. This is a typical example where the Japanese employees seem to focus more on satisfying the client, while the Dutch employees seem to focus more on balancing different costs. In the interviews, two topics came up that I think may help to explain the different views of Japanese and Dutch employees on the relation with clients. These are the market situation in both countries and the expectations of the client.

**Market situation**

Let me first explain the market situation in both countries. Respondents often mentioned something about Japanese clients, such as that they have different expectations than Dutch clients (2, 9, 11, 12), that they are more loyal (9, 17, 23) and that they are prepared to pay more for good service (9, 12, 18). Not much was said about Dutch clients, but a few respondents said that Dutch clients look more for the lowest price and tend to switch more often to other suppliers (17, 23, 24). I cannot tell if these opinions are representative for the market situations in general, but I do think that they are representative in the company and that they influenced the views of employees on what is important in the relation with the client to a certain extent.

Dutch employees were probably more conscious of things that unnecessary cost money, because they are used to clients that look for the lowest price and switch more often. One Dutch respondent said for example that it can make a big difference in costs if a transport is arranged in the Netherlands or in some overseas daughter companies of [company a]:

“It can simply be a few hundred Euro difference for one transport if it is arranged here or there. [...] With the Dutch customer, it is better if everything is arranged here. However, they are not used to this in Japan. They say: ‘These are the costs for the customer, so he will just pay them, right?’ But, it doesn't work like that, why would he pay a few hundred more if he can pay less with another provider?” (23)

On the other hand, I think that Japanese employees were probably more conscious of things that could be bad for the relationship with the client, because they are used to clients that are loyal and are prepared to pay more for good service. A Japanese respondent said for example:

“The customer satisfaction may be different between Dutch and Japanese people. [...] The judgment is maybe different. Some cases are very urgent and some are not. In case of urgent issues, we have to take action immediately. The Japanese staff is very keen about this point, but the Dutch staff is sometimes not so keen about urgent issues.” (2)
Strong point of the company

I think that it is interesting to know that many of the respondents (both Japanese and Dutch) said that the Japanese quality and service of [company a] is one of the strong points of the company {2, 5, 8, 12, 15, 17, 18, 23, 26, 27}. One Dutch respondent said for example:

“What I absolutely find a positive cultural difference, [...] that for many Japanese people, the client stands very high in the hierarchical pyramid. The client decides; focus on the client. That is why they are indeed very flexible in maintaining a satisfied client. I have to say honestly, they go extremely far in this. I think that this is also our power as a logistics provider.” {15}

So, despite some differences in opinion about how far they should go for clients, Japanese and Dutch people agree to some extent with each other that the higher quality and service that the company provides (compared to European competitors) is a good point. It is not a question whether the company should aim for the lowest price or for the highest service; the company chooses the high service, which is more in line with the Japanese perspective. Although it is not as simple as saying that the Japanese perspective always wins.

Understanding client expectations

The second topic is about the expectations of clients. I already explained that Japanese clients seemed to expect more service, while Dutch clients seemed to look more at the price. However, respondents also mentioned other things related to client expectations. Dutch respondents said for example that Japanese clients want to know more details {5, 8, 9, 19, 24, 25}, are less forgiving of mistakes {21, 22} and that Japanese employees sometimes have a tendency to defend the client’s perspective {5, 17, 21}. On the other hand, Japanese respondents said that Dutch employees do not always seem to understand the importance of answering a request from clients {2, 12}, giving more information to clients for several reasons {1, 16, 19} and are more reluctant to apologize to a client {19}. I think that these differences are not just caused by different market situations, but also by misunderstandings about what the client expects. However, it is hard to tell the exact differences, so I’ll try to explain this with the help of several examples.

Doing more than the customer expects

It seems that Japanese employees want to do (to some degree) more than the customer expects. One Japanese respondent {1} said that if a boat left too late, the Dutch employees will often think that not much can be done about it and that it is not necessary to give all the details. However, the respondent pointed out that the client may need this information because they may decide to do something else to solve the problem. If they know the boat will be late, than they might decide to transport things by air. This is of course much more expensive, but that way they can keep agreements they might have in turn with their clients. This example shows that the reasons behind why the Japanese put in extra effort for the client are not always clear, because in this example there is uncertainty about if the client really needs the extra information. Dutch employees may ask how big the chance is that the Japanese client would really send a shipment by air. However, for the Japanese employee, this is not the issue. It seems that the important thing here is that by giving all the details, they can show the client that they are trying their best to help them deal with the delay and make informed decisions. It seems that Dutch employees do not always understand that this kind of service is more important for Japanese clients than things like a low price. So if extra effort or money is spend to satisfy a Japanese client, this can result in benefits that are not very clear, but still important.
What is good service?

When local clients are concerned, the Japanese perspective of good service may not always apply. There were a few examples of cases where Japanese employees tried to do something extra for the client which didn’t work out. For example, one Dutch respondent {8} gave the example that the head office in Japan asked to deliver one day earlier for a European client, to better serve the customer. But the respondent said that he had to explain that this client would not at all be happy if the delivery was one day earlier, because the client would not have the space for the goods and the people to unload. In another example of a Dutch respondent {7}, a required change from Japanese superiors that was meant to make the process more efficient did not take into account that it would hinder certain services that the local employees provided informally for several Dutch clients. These two examples show that the knowledge of local employees is very important to determine how to provide good service to local customers.

4.5 Customs at work

This section is about how employees usually work together and what traditions, procedures and practices they are used to at work. The other themes are related to this theme, because you could say that language, communication style and the relation with clients are also part of the customs at work. In this section I wrap up the remaining important Japanese-Dutch differences.

Merger

Before discussing this theme, I think that it is important to point out that the merger that I mentioned in sections 1.3 and 4.1 played an especially big role in the work customs in the company. A lot of things were done differently in both companies, such as how working hours were registered {17}, differences in salary {11}, the speed of decision-making {20}, information sharing {16, i.c.}, etcetera. Several respondents {17, 18, 22, 26, 27} said that the merger differences were slowly being solved or were disappearing, but that the process takes a lot of time. The most important point is probably that [company c] had more Japanese expats in the management than [company b] (in the Benelux). According to many respondents, [company c] did things in a more Japanese way {5, 8, 9, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 27} and their employees better understood the Japanese way of working than employees from [company b] {9, 11, 14, 16, 19, 21, 26}. However, respondents also said that some things were more difficult, for example that it was more difficult to get permission for small things like an employee event {22} or working at home {5}. In my interviews, I kept track of whether respondents were from [company b], [company c] or from neither to see if this influenced their answers. It is quite possible that it did, but I could not find clear patterns in my results, except that employees from [company b] and [company c] were both somewhat more positive about their own former company.

Respondents said that things at [company c] where more tightly managed {8, 9, 17, 18, 20, 22, 26}, while employees from [company b] had more freedom in their work {5, 14, 17, 18, 22, 26}. The tighter control was sometimes thought to be caused by the stronger influence of Japanese culture in [company c]. But one respondent {20} who worked for [company c] said that according to him, the tighter control was
Dealing with cultural differences

just the way they worked and that this was not caused by the Japanese people. This example also shows again that it is hard to tell to what extent differences are really caused by Japanese or Dutch culture and to what extent things are maybe unique to the company or have other causes.24

Handling problems

The first and most often mentioned difference in this section about customs at work, is how Japanese and Dutch people handle problems {1, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 21, 27}. This difference is related to the relation with clients, because the main question is again how far one should go in solving problems. Respondents said that Dutch people are more pragmatic {9, 10, 12, 15} and want to solve problems more quickly {1, 17}, while Japanese people are said to aim for 100% performance {2, 9, 16, 22, 27}, they focus more on details {5, 8, 9, 10, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26} and they want to know more why something went wrong {9, i.c.}. Dutch respondents sometimes also said that Japanese people make problems bigger than they are {5, 9, 10, 21} and are less tolerant of mistakes {17, 21, 22, 23}, although some could also see both positive and negative sides. One Dutch respondent said for example:

“Japanese people can go very far in that everything has to be perfect. In itself, that is a positive thing, because we want to be different from other logistics companies around us. We want to excel, we want to be the 10 and do not settle for 9.8. […] However, reality is that you cannot set this goal for yourself, it is not achievable, because there are a number of external influences that you cannot control.” {5}

On the other hand, Japanese respondents said that they mainly just want to prevent mistakes as much as possible {1, 16, 19} and that they do this because clients expects this {1, 2, 16}.

I think that the question of how to handle problems is not only a matter of what people actually do, but that it is also important what image is created towards the client. A Dutch respondent (9) said that Japanese employees will promise 100% performance, while Dutch employees may for example promise the client at least 98% on-time delivery. The respondent said that Japanese employees are not unreasonable and they know things do not always go perfectly, but they do not want to say in advance that things may not go perfectly. He also said that whether Japanese people make an issue of something depends on if the problem is preventable or not. For example, if there is a traffic jam, they will say that the driver should have left earlier. But if there is an accident or something that could really not have be foreseen and you it explain it to them, they will understand.

Information sharing

The second difference is information sharing. This is related to the issue of handling problems. As I mentioned above, Japanese people were said to focus more on the details. This was especially the case with getting information when there is a problem. I got the impression that Japanese employees often think they get too little information from Dutch employees. Several Dutch employees {9, 23, 24, 25} said that the Japanese employees often want to know all sorts of details that are not always necessary. For example, one Dutch respondent said:

“Dutch people always ask ‘Why?’ which can really drive them [the Japanese] crazy. But they will not quickly show this. On the other hand, Japanese people ask a lot of questions about -in our opinion- unnecessary details.” {25}

24 For other causes of differences, see section 4.1.
Most Japanese respondents \{1, 2, 11, 12, 19\} also said that Dutch people often ask ‘Why?’ For example, one Japanese respondent \{16\} said that he tries his best to explain to Dutch people why he needs certain information; else, they might stop giving him information. He also said that Japanese people are more likely to help each other with this. But, when one Dutch forgets something and other people miss information, they will point to the first person and say that it is his fault. Another Japanese respondent \{19\} said that they ask for details to learn. They just don’t know a lot of things that might be obvious for Dutch people.

**Job responsibilities**

The third difference in this section is about job responsibilities. Several Japanese respondents \{12, 16, 19\} said that Dutch employees have much more clear boundaries about what responsibilities they have and do not have. They will say more quickly ‘that’s not my job’. One Japanese respondent said:

“For the Japanese staff there is a sort of grey area. It is not his job, but he does it. That is Japanese culture, they don’t define, but work in teams, but the Dutch people work separated.” \{12\}

I also mentioned in section 4.3 that Japanese seem to focus more on the group. This could explain why Dutch employees more often ask why they have to do something; for Japanese employees, it is more natural to ask something of others that may not be part of the other’s job, while Dutch people are less used to doing work that is not part of their job. So many Dutch employees probably feel that it is not their job to provide Japanese people with all the information they need, while Japanese people think the opposite. This could also explain why Japanese people put more people in de cc of emails.\(^{25}\) They share more information and responsibilities, while Dutch employees will not include people for who the email is probably not relevant. Compared to the Japanese way, the Dutch way has other advantages (less email) and disadvantages (less shared information).

**Cooperation**

The fourth difference in this section is about how much Japanese and Dutch cooperate. This difference is not necessarily related to Japanese and Dutch culture, because I noticed this issue also plays between different departments in the company. Several respondents said that Japanese and Dutch employees have separated tasks \{12, 16, 19, 27, i.c.\} and that the cooperation mainly consists of exchanging information \{1, 12, 24\}. There were a few projects in which Dutch and Japanese employees worked together, but I got the impression that Japanese and Dutch employees in general did not often work closely together on the same tasks. A few respondents \{i.c.\} said that they did not know that much about the other’s work. I am not sure how big this issue is, but it is possible that little close cooperation and low knowledge of each other’s work have increased problems with other differences, such as information sharing and views about job responsibilities. For example, if a Dutch employee has little knowledge about what a Japanese employee does in general, then it is much harder for the Japanese person to explain why he needs certain information. The same goes the other way around. If a Japanese employee knows little about the daily work of a Dutch employee, it is more difficult for the Dutch employee to explain which information he can and cannot provide. A number of respondents where open to more cooperation \{2, 5, 9, 10, 18, 23, 27\}, so I think that it is not just a matter that people do not want to know or cooperate, but also a matter of custom. Japanese and Dutch people are not that used to working closely together on the same tasks.

\(^{25}\) For more about email, see section 4.3.
Other differences

There were many more differences from the interviews that can be discussed in this section, but since I do not want to make my thesis too long, I will only briefly look at a few more.

- Many respondents mentioned that Japanese people often work more hours {2, 3, 12, 14, 15, 27} and have differences regulations for sick leave and vacation {9, 10, 12, 15, 17}. I got the impression that there were some tensions, because it was not always clear to what degree employees have to be available for the company.

- I talked with several respondents {2, 5, 9, 12, 14, 22} about informal relations between employees at work. Respondents said that friendships between Japanese and Dutch employees are quite rare, although they do happen sometimes. Also, it seems that there are more friendships among between Japanese employees (and also clients) then between the Dutch. I could not objectively confirm it, but I noticed the same when I did my internship in Japan. I suspect that Dutch people have a stricter boundary between their private lives and their work when it comes to relations. This might be an interesting topic for future research.
5. ANALYSIS

“I did you encounter any similarities between the Japanese and Dutch people that you had not expected?”
- A question that I asked in many of the interviews

Chapter introduction

I think that research is more about asking questions than anything else. What do employees think when they communicate with people from other cultures? What expectations do employees have of people from the other culture? Why do people behave as they do? One can only find the right answers by asking the right questions. In the interviews, I always tried to ask a few interesting questions that might reveal new perspectives.

In this chapter, I answer the sub-questions from section 1.1 of this research. I hope that the questions and answers give the reader a relevant and interesting perspective on cultural differences, and hopefully some new insights. In section 5.1, I look back at my results to answer the first three sub-questions. Then in section 5.1, I give the most important models and theories for this case study from the literature and explain why I chose these. In the rest of the chapter I analyze the results and literature. I look at whether the models and theories can predict important cultural differences and how they help to understand and deal with differences. Also draw conclusions about the usefulness of existing models and theories in general and how research on cultural differences could best be done.

Sub-questions from section 1.1:
1. What are the existing Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company?
2. What are the main problems that employees encounter with these differences?
3. How do employees deal with these problems?
4. What are the most important scientific models and theories for my case study?
5. Can the models and theories help to predict which cultural differences are important in the company?
6. How do the models and theories help to understand the problems in practice?
7. How do the models and theories help to deal with cultural differences in the company?

Chapter overview

5.1 Cultural differences in the company
5.2 Important models and theories
5.3 Predicting important differences
5.4 Understanding cultural differences
5.5 Dealing with cultural differences
5.1 Cultural differences in the company

In this section, I answer the first three sub-questions:  

**Existing Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company**

- What are the existing Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company?
- What are the main problems that employees encounter with these differences?
- How do employees deal with these problems?

I found numerous Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company. In chapter 4, I already grouped the most important differences from the interviews results in four themes. In table 8, I give a short overview of each theme.

| Table 8: What are the existing Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in the company? |
| Language | Many respondents said that Dutch employees were on average more proficient in English than Japanese people. However, the English of Japanese people seems to be slowly improving and it seems that problems with language are actually not as bad as in other countries where the company does business. |
| Communication style | Several differences related to this theme came up in the interviews:  
- directness, Dutch people were said to be more direct;  
- decision-making, Japanese people had more informal conversations outside of meetings and the process was slower;  
- the importance of personal opinions, Dutch people placed more importance on expressing their personal opinions;  
- email, Japanese people involve more people in email communication and seem to expect faster responses; surprisingly, a few Dutch respondents also said that they were more direct in email. |
| Relation with clients | Japanese and Dutch employees both said that good service for clients was a strong point of the company, but they often still had different opinions about how much should be done for the client. Japanese employees seemed to focus more on satisfying clients and build stronger relations as much as possible, while Dutch employees seemed to be more focused on balancing the costs of client satisfaction against the benefits. The reasons for this difference were probably that Dutch and Japanese employees were used to different expectations from Dutch and Japanese clients. It also seems that the company is not always able to fully use the knowledge that Japanese and Dutch employees have of what clients really want. |
| Customs at work | Many differences can be grouped under this theme, the important ones were:  
- how they handle problems, Dutch employees were seen as more pragmatic;  
- how they shared information, Japanese employees were said to share more information;  
- how they see job responsibilities, Dutch employees seemed to have clearer boundaries about what their job is and what not;  
- that they have separated tasks, both Japanese and Dutch employees did not often seem to work closely together on the same tasks and did not always know much about each other’s work. |

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26 For the main and sub-questions, see section 1.1.
Dealing with cultural differences

What are the main problems that employees encounter with these differences?

The problems that employees encountered ranged from small irritations to large and time-consuming problems. It highly differed per person if they had any trouble with cultural differences at all. Some respondents (24, 26) said that they had hardly any trouble, while for others it seemed an issue that returned daily. Below I summarize the main problems from the results.

Lack of understanding
Almost all respondents mentioned problems with understanding (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 24, 27). For example, one respondent said:

“Everything has to do with some lack of understanding. This works both ways. [...] So the solution is, you have to explain cultural differences to each other.” (9)

The issue that respondents talked about differed, but understanding (or lack of understanding) returned in all the themes in the results and seemed to be a sort of keyword for where the problems lay. This is most obvious in section 4.2; it is difficult to understand each other if you have trouble speaking the same language. But also in the other themes, understanding is a keyword for where things go wrong. In section 4.3 the main problems are misunderstandings of each other’s behavior. In section 4.4 it is mainly about not understanding each other’s views on the relation with clients. And in section 4.5 the problems are that people do not understanding each other’s work customs.

Time and stress
Two more practical problems with cultural differences were that they costs time and can be stressful for employees. Both Dutch and Japanese respondents said that they lose a lot of time on clearing misunderstandings in emails or explaining things directly to people from the other culture. For example, one Japanese respondent said about explaining an important issue to a Dutch employee:

“It took one hour or something to explain how this customer is important to our company.” (12)

There were many of these examples during the interviews in which it was clear that cultural differences could cost employees a lot of time and create stress. The extra time and stress that are caused by cultural differences are hard to measure for the company, since they are often short moments, but I think that the sum of these short moments may cost the company a significant amount of money.

Conflict
In some cases, the problems caused more than just stress or loss of time. Several respondents (5, 8, 10, 15, 16, 27) mentioned that there were sometimes conflicts between Japanese and Dutch people. Mostly small work conflicts, but I heard also a few examples of conflicts that severely damaged cooperation. The heaviest case in my results was of an employee who left the company because of such a conflict. Of course, conflicts also happen between people from the same culture, but it seemed that cultural differences had a high risk of making conflicts bigger than normal.

The shadow of problems
One respondent said about the problems caused by cultural differences:

“They cast a shadow over the positive things.” (17)

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27 I mention problems with email in section 4.2 and 4.3.
And I think that this is a good way to sum up the main problems caused by cultural differences. Many respondents \{5, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27\} said that there were also positive things about the other culture, such as the challenge, the diversity and how people from the other culture do things sometimes in a much better way. But the problems caused by cultural differences casted a shadow over the positive effects of cultural differences.

**How did employees deal with the problems caused by cultural differences?**

Employees dealt with the problems in various ways. I asked most of the respondents \{2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 24\} how they personally dealt with differences. The answers varied: Japanese respondents \{1, 2, 3, 12, 16, 24\} mostly said that they tried to explain things, while Dutch respondents \{10, 14, 15, 22, 25\} said that they try to talk more informally to Japanese people when they get a question or when there is a problem. This is not surprising, since Dutch employees ask more often for reasons behind a decision or an assignment, which explains why Japanese employees try to explain more. And Japanese employees use informal conversations more explicitly, so Dutch employees try to reach them in this way.\(^{28}\) There were several other ways in which respondents dealt with differences, such as cooperating on certain tasks \{1, 5, 27\} and making clear what one’s limits are \{10, 21\}. In general I got the impression that employees mostly tried to accept differences in their own way \{9, 14, 17, 21, 26\}. For example, one respondent said:

> “Ehm, I accept it. And I think that it is often a bit difficult for people to accept that it is different. I try to imagine myself in their shoes as much as possible and how they do certain things. That makes it more easy for me to deal with it.” \{14\}

I noticed that few respondents \{i.c.\} said that they actively tried to learn about the other culture or about specific cultural differences. Patience was also mentioned by just one respondent \{5\}. Employees mostly seemed to learn from previous experiences. Also, cultural differences seemed to be more of an issue for employees in higher positions, especially managers. They encountered them more often and two respondents \{10, 15\} said that they sometimes let someone in a higher position solve a problem with cultural differences if they could not solve it themselves. Another point is that employees sometimes ask the few people who speak both Japanese and Dutch to intermediate \{1\}. The reason was that even for Dutch employees who are fairly proficient in English, it was sometimes easier to explain a complex issue in their own language than in English.

### 5.2 Important models and theories

The fourth sub-question was: ‘What are the most important scientific models and theories for my case study?’ In chapter 3, I gave an overview of the literature on culture. In this section, I summarize in short the most important models and theories that I use in sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5. I also explain why I focus on this selection of literature.

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\(^{28}\) On the issue that Dutch employees ask more often why they have to do something, and Japanese employees use more informal conversations to decide things, see section 4.3.
**Most important for this case study**

The most important scientific models and theories for this case study are partly a matter of opinion. I selected several models and theories from chapter 3 to focus on in the analysis. However, other researchers may have chosen others, so below I shortly explain why I think these are the most important for this case study. In short, Hofstede and Hall were chosen because they are both widely used in research and training and I think that it is good to look critically at these models. On the other hand, Thomas and the case studies are not widely used, but I think that they are very promising for further research in this field of study.

**Hofstede’s cultural dimensions**

In the literature, there is a lot of *culture-comparative research*. In short, this kind of research on cultural differences tries to compare the characteristics of cultures, usually national cultures. As I explained in section 3.2, Geert Hofstede (1980) did large-scale surveys and categorized cultural values into six cultural dimensions that can be used to compare national cultures and it is one of the most widely used models in the English literature about cultural differences. In research the dimensions are often used as a basis for the research design to decide on which areas to focus and which questions to ask in interviews or surveys. It is also often used in workshops and training sessions in companies. In these situations, the dimensions are used to indicate which cultural differences people are likely to encounter and what the possible reasons behind them are. Because of Hofstede’s influence and also the criticism on his work, I wanted to examine more closely how useful it was in my case study. And to a certain extend, I also looked at if conclusions could be drawn about its usefulness in general.

**Hall’s models of culture**

*Intercultural research* focuses mainly on how people interact with each other, instead of comparing (national) cultures. As explained in section 3.3, Edward Hall (1959; 1966; 1976) was one of the first researchers to place more emphasis on interaction between people and less on comparing characteristics of cultures. He made several different models, for how people perceive time, how they use personal space and about high- and low-context communication. The last model is the most interesting for this research. Hall’s models are an interesting alternative to Hofstede. There are several differences between Hall and Hofstede that are important for this case study:

- Hall did not develop a complete model of culture like Hofstede, but instead developed smaller models that look at more specific issues that return in all cultures.
- Hall acknowledges that there are big differences depending on the context and his models are not meant to score national cultures (although attempts have been made).
- Hall’s models were developed based on his experience with intercultural communication training, while Hofstede created the dimensions based on large-scale surveys.
- Hall’s models are not as thoroughly tested and reproduced as Hofstede’s dimensions.

These differences are interesting, because Hall’s work is about as influential as Hofstede’s work in the English literature. It has often been used and adapted in new models by other researchers and in training situations. Hall developed more practice-based models, while Hofstede’s dimensions are based on the analysis of large statistical data. One could also look at the difference in approach. Hofstede tries focuses on categorizing cultural differences, while Hall focuses on studying intercultural interaction.
Alexander Thomas

A second pioneer from the field of intercultural research is Alexander Thomas (1996), whose work is not well-known outside Germany. His model is especially promising for finding out which differences cause problems between two cultural groups and what possible underlying reasons are. This is because the model is very flexible and uses examples from real life (critical incidents) rather than dimensions or categories that are given beforehand. I found this model also very promising as a theoretical framework for future case studies. I explain why in section 5.3.

Case studies

Case studies are not really one model or theory on their own, but I mention them here because I think that the results from case studies and their approach of focusing on a specific theme or situation can be very useful in both research and interventions in companies. Case studies can show a more complex and nuanced perspective on cultural differences. This is why I explain not only my methods in much detail in chapter 2, but also some of the underlying principles of qualitative research and case study research. In the following sections I hope to show why case studies are so valuable.

5.3 Predicting important differences

The fifth sub-question was ‘Can the models and theories help to predict which cultural differences are important in the company?’ For this question I focused mostly on the models and theories from section 5.2. I compare the topics from my results with the models and theories to see how good they are for finding important cultural differences in practice.

Which models can predict differences?

To deal with cultural differences in the company, it is necessary to know which differences are important. I first look at Hofstede and the case studies, because they point out important topics and differences. Then I look at Thomas’ model. He provides a method for findings important differences. I do not discuss Hall in this section, because his models are made for specific differences and do not say anything about how important certain differences are in practice. For example, his model of the use of personal space does not say if it is likely that there is be a big difference between Japan and the Netherlands on this issue.

Hofstede’s scores

The scores of Japan and the Netherlands differ the most on the dimension of masculinity. This suggests that masculinity is one of the most important topics (see figure 9). This contradicts the results from my interviews. Differences in gender roles between the Netherlands and Japan were only mentioned by a few respondents {5, 13, 22}. For example, one respondent {22} said that when meeting new people,

29 For more about Hall’s model of the use of personal space, see section 3.3.
Japanese people assume more quickly that the woman has a lower position. Other issues seemed to be more important in the company, such as differences that had to do with uncertainty avoidance and individualism. Japanese people wanted to prevent mistakes more and Dutch people were said to be more individualistic \( \{8, 9, 15, 16, 23\} \). Another thing that did not really match Hofstede’s scores is that several Dutch respondents \( \{10, 15, 17, 18, 24, 25\} \) said that Japanese people have a stronger hierarchy. I mentioned hierarchy briefly in section 4.3 and 4.4 and this seemed to be an important difference for several Dutch respondents, although it was not really mentioned by Japanese respondents. If hierarchy is important for Dutch people, it is strange that the difference between Japan and the Netherlands on the dimension of power distance is so small.

I conclude that Hofstede’s country scores are not very accurate for predicting which cultural differences are important in practice. I must note that my results do not prove that Hofstede’s scores are incorrect and they may still point to some interesting possible themes. For example, that gender roles were not mentioned often in my interview may be related to the fact that there were more male than female employees and that I had more male respondents. And in other companies, Masculinity might still be an important issue. However I think that it highly depends on the context whether the national scores on the dimensions match with the important differences in a company. As many critics\(^31\) of Hofstede say, there is too much variation in the context on a smaller scale, so the dimensions are not likely to present a good image of the cultural differences that people actually encounter in practice. This means that using national averages, especially as a starting point for a case study or in a training, is not advisable.

**Important topics from case studies**

Case studies provide an alternative for finding out which differences are likely to be important in practice. There are of course not always case studies available on the cultures that people may encounter in practice and case studies are not always done the same way, so there is no consistent way to compare their results with each other. I found two case studies that researched a similar context as me.\(^32\) They did not focus on one company, but rather on certain themes. Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer looked at consensus in Japanese and Dutch culture and they ordered the differences that they found in their interviews in 3 categories and 14 subcategories. They emphasize that the distinctions between the categories are blurred and the overview of topics is not a theoretical model to be tested. It was merely used to organize their data. I compared their topics with my results,\(^33\) the green topics in table 9 are the same or similar to important topics in my results.

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\(^30\) These differences are described in more detail in sections 4.4 and 4.5.

\(^31\) For a review of Hofstede, see section 3.2.

\(^32\) For more on the two case studies, see section 3.4.

\(^33\) For an overview of my results, see section 5.1.
Table 9: Important topics in the article of Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer (2007, p. 1357)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision context</th>
<th>Consensus antecedents</th>
<th>Consensus consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hierarchy</td>
<td>decision process</td>
<td>consensus attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibilities</td>
<td>information, communication and discussion</td>
<td>decision implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>management styles</td>
<td>formal meetings</td>
<td>speed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nemawashi</td>
<td>risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ringiseido</td>
<td>harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>loyalty to company goals and commitment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The other case study of Ybema and Byun examined cultural differences and power relations. They selected five issues to research that often came up in their interviews: work ethos, language, communication style, decision-making and the superior-subordinate relationship (2009, p. 343). All these issues were also important in my interviews. So even though my case study and the other two case studies did not exactly research the same subject and did not do any statistical analysis, the important topics from my study and the two case studies overlap to a large extent. This suggests that case studies that study similar contexts may give a fairly good image of which cultural differences are important in practice. Therefore I think that they are a much better starting point for new case studies or training on this cultural differences than Hofstede's dimension scores.

**Thomas’ model for finding differences**

Thomas provides an alternative method for finding the important cultural differences compared to my case study and the two case studies mentioned above. I relied on interviews and focused on the views and experiences of respondents. Quotes from respondents were analyzed and this is a very time-consuming process. Thomas model seems to provide a quicker way to find important differences. As I explained in section 3.3, Thomas' model should be seen as a method for finding out which cultural values or norms (the cultural standards) are important for a group of people. His method is to collect and examine examples of frequently occurring problems between people from different cultures. The advantage is that it is more consistent way of finding cultural differences and it is more focused on actual behavior, instead of opinions and assumptions of respondents. For example, many of my respondents talked about what they thought Japanese and Dutch culture was like. In the process, I got many examples of the problems, but it was not always easy to separate facts from opinions. If I had found Thomas’ work earlier, I could have tried to use his method for this case study - although I am not sure if I would have been able to see the value of his model when I started this research.

**A framework for finding cultural differences**

It could be tempting to try to use Thomas’ model to find categories for national cultures, just like Hofstede dimensions. However, to predict cultural differences in practice, I think that research should not focus on categorizing cultural differences in abstract differences. In my opinion, it is much better to use Thomas' model to further develop a good framework and an array of methods to be able to quickly determine the most important cultural differences in any given situation. Together with more case studies on cultural differences in practice, this will be much more valuable. The case studies would be a starting point for prediction cultural differences in a certain case and then Thomas' model could be used to further narrow down the cultural differences that are really important.
5.4 Understanding cultural differences

The sixth sub-question was ‘How do the models and theories help to understand the problems in practice?’ In this section I take examples of cultural differences or issues from my results and see how good the models and theories can help to understand them.

Understanding is key

What does it mean to understand cultural differences? As I mention in section 5.1, understanding (or the lack of it) was a sort of keyword for where problems with cultural differences lie. But when can anybody say that they understand a difference? Does someone has to know the whole history of a culture or is it enough that someone knows the consequences in practice? I do not have a clear answer to this, but what I tried to do by comparing my results with the literature is to see if the models and theories helped to clarify differences in such a way that one can think of new ways to deal with the differences. This highly depends on my own views, so other researchers may come to other conclusion on this issue. Therefore I try to explain my train of thoughts as much as possible in this section.

Linking cultural differences to Hofstede’s dimensions

I start again with Hofstede. I tried to link cultural differences from my results to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to see if they could help clarify them. This was difficult, because in my results the cultural differences were highly connected with each other, while Hofstede’s dimensions are presented as mostly separate categories. For example, respondents said that Japanese employees focus more on details than Dutch employees34. This could be interpreted as that they want to avoid mistakes, which means that the difference has to do with the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. This was partly true, but Japanese respondents said that the main reason why they focus on details is because the client expects this. The difference may therefore also have to do with the dimension of power distance, since Japanese people accept the higher position of the client. Or it may be related to the dimension of long-term orientation, since doing what the client expects mostly improves the long-term relationship with the client.

To me, trying to link this difference with Hofstede’s dimensions did not really clarify it. This was similar with many other differences from the results, so the example above can be seen as representative. By connection differences with the dimensions, it becomes rather vague what is really important and I think that one could easily think that a difference has to do with one dimension, while its relation with another dimension is overlooked. For the example, if someone assumes that the Japanese focus on details is just a form of uncertainty avoidance behavior, they may overlook the important connection of this difference with the Japanese aim to satisfy clients as much as possible. In my opinion, this does not help with thinking of new ways to deal with the difference.

34 This difference is described in section 4.4.
Hall’s simple, but helpful model

As I mentioned in section 3.3, Hall’s models can be seen as an alternative for Hofstede. A difference that is interesting for this research is that Hall’s models are not as thoroughly tested as Hofstede’s dimensions. But despite lack of scientific evidence for Hall’s model of high- and low-context communication, this model helped more to understand cultural differences from my results, especially in the theme of communication style. For example, many respondents said that Dutch people communicate more directly.\(^{35}\) In Hall’s model, this is associated with a culture that prefers more low-context communication. This means that reading the atmosphere of a situation is seen as vague and unreliable and people prefer that things are more clear and explicit. This could also explain why Dutch people like to express their personal opinions more and why they often ask ‘why’ when given an assignment or request.\(^{36}\) The context is not clear enough for them, while for Japanese people it is. I think that understanding this can be very helpful for Japanese employees, because they can now think of all sorts of ways to make things more explicit or clear for Dutch employees.

One could argue that high- and low-context communication is just as much a simplification as Hofstede’s dimensions, since there is just one simple axis with two opposites and many nuances can be overlooked. I agree with this criticism and I think that one should be careful with any model that uses just two opposites. For example, Hall’s model does not have an explanation for why Japanese employees seem to be more direct in their emails.\(^{37}\) But despite the danger of oversimplification of reality by the model, it does provide clarity that is helpful for thinking of new ways to deal with the cultural differences in the company. This is in my opinion the important difference with Hofstede’s dimensions. By the way, I also looked at Hall’s other models, but I they did not as clearly help to understand differences from my results as the model of high- and low-context communication. However, they might still be useful in other case studies that study culture.

Understanding from case studies

In section 5.3, I wrote that the topics that came up in the two case studies overlap to a large extent with the topics from my interviews.\(^{38}\) But do they also help to understand these topics better? Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer (2007) examined the issue of consensus in Japanese and Dutch culture. In my results, many of the respondents said that there is more informal communication in the Japanese decision-making process and the process is slower than the Dutch process.\(^{39}\) The reasons may have had something to do with that Japanese people see the value of the group more, but this was not very clear. Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer explain that Dutch people have a more pragmatic approach to consensus, they make quicker decisions and are more flexible in adjusting them. On the other hand, Japanese people have a more comprehensive view on consensus, they take more time to consider decisions and find consensus among the people involved. Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer also explain the reason behind this difference:

“[The Dutch] seem to regard consensus decision making as a practical necessity rather than something desirable in itself. They see themselves as reasonably consensus-oriented but recognize that consensus is even more important for their Japanese colleagues. For the Japanese, consensus is ‘very necessary’

\(^{35}\) These differences are described in section 4.3.  
\(^{36}\) These differences are described in section 4.5.  
\(^{37}\) This exception of email is described in section 4.3.  
\(^{38}\) For more information about the two case studies, see section 3.4.  
\(^{39}\) This difference is described in section 4.3.
and ‘very important’ and ‘decisions should be made as much as possible by consensus’.” (2007, p. 1363)

So, Japanese people see consensus more often as something that is important by itself, while Dutch people see is more as a practical necessity. This insight can help Dutch employees to think about what they can do to show that they respect the value that Japanese place on aiming for consensus. On the other hand, it can help Japanese employees to think about if it is always necessary to aim for consensus when dealing with Dutch people. Maybe it is sometimes acceptable to use the more pragmatic approach of the Dutch people. This example shows in my opinion that Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer’s case study does indeed help to understand cultural from my interviews. The example above is not the only insight from Noorderhaven, Benders and Keizer’s study, but it is representative for how insights from the study increased understanding of cultural differences from my results.

The case study shows a different perspective

Ybema and Byun’s (2009) study was about cultural differences and power relations. In section 4.3, I wrote that several Dutch respondents found expressing personal opinions more important than Japanese people and that it also differed how they described the communication style of the other group. Dutch respondent decribed the Japanese reluctance to express their opinion more often as ‘being afraid’ of losing face, while Japanese respondents said that they found their own opinion ‘less important’. Ybema and Byun show that this difference may not be an accident, but that it could be that Japanese and Dutch people described their own culture as more positive on purpose. Especially people lower in the hierarchy of the organization are more likely to paint a more negative picture of their superiors’ culture (2009, p. 347). This can be seen in the following example from Ybema and Byun’s case study:

“Dutch subordinates of Japanese management […] challenge what they see as ‘highly hierarchical’ relations by criticizing both the ‘submissive’ attitude of their Japanese bosses towards their superiors, and their sometimes ‘dictatorial’ attitude towards subordinates. Annoyed at being excluded by their Japanese bosses, they accentuate their own ‘Dutch’ egalitarian values to oppose the Japanese regime, and claim that Japanese management tries to preserve the status quo by emphasizing Japanese values of hierarchy and consensus. Dutch managers in Japan, however, hardly mention the supposed egalitarianism of Dutch culture and do not present the hierarchic attitude of their Japanese subordinates as a hindrance for their work or their functioning.” (2009, p. 350)

So, Ybema and Byun’s respondents sometimes placed extra emphasis on their own cultural values because they were annoyed by certain cultural differences. If the same is to some extend true for the respondents in my interviews, this gives a new perspective on dealing with cultural differences in the company. Maybe it is not just that there are problems with understanding each other. It can also be important to create a more positive image of both Japanese and Dutch culture in the company to counter negative ones that people might create. It is hard to tell for to what extent this was the case, but I think that Ybema and Byun show that the image that people have or create of their own and other cultures are very important to consider.

The fuzziness of culture

The comparison of my results with Hofstede, Hall and the case studies show that cultural differences are complex and that is not easy to see all the connections and the reasons behind differences. I think that this is why Spencer-Oatey called culture “a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations
Dealing with Japanese-Dutch cultural differences

to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions.” (2008, p. 3) There is a certain fuzziness to culture that is hard to grasp. This fuzziness can be seen in the following quote from a respondent:

“It is difficult to communicate with Japanese employees, because they are not good in English. If they ask something I try to explain it at best as I can, but in the end I still have the impression that they do not understand it. […] That is inconvenient, because how are they in turn going to explain it to our clients?”

Respondents often talked in this way about cultural differences. In this example, elements from language, communication style, the relation with clients and customs at work are all mixed together. It is hard to single out one difference. I think that this is also why it is hard to link the cultural differences from my results to Hofstede’s dimensions. The cultural dimensions try to reduce the fuzziness of culture. Paola Signorini, Rolf Wiesemes and Roger Murphy, three researchers who analyzed the use of Hofstede’s dimensions in higher education, write that “Hofstede appears to overlook the innate ‘fuzziness’ of culture.” (2009, p. 258) and they argue that culture should be considered as fundamentally flexible and dynamic. The two case studies seemed instead to embrace the fuzziness. I think this is why the case studies turned out to be much more helpful. I think that every model, theory or study that tries to capture culture in fixed categories, dimensions or axis has a large risk of overlooking this fuzziness of culture.

More case studies!

However, this does not mean that all models of culture should be abandoned. Signorini, Wiesemes and Murphy suggest that research on culture should not start with large models, like Hofstede’s dimensions, but with examining micro-cultures. Then eventually, larger models of culture can be constructed.

“We argue that culture cannot be reduced to immutable concepts such as nationality or other regional geopolitical constructs. Instead, we advocate the opposite approach by starting with examining micro-cultures, for example, one particular learning setting in higher education in combination with an individual’s relevant experiences. This would allow us to develop ‘small’ models, which can gradually be expanded into larger models of ‘culture’ and intercultural learning.” (2009, p. 262)

For example, Hall’s model is (despite flaws) still helpful for understanding differences in communication style. Hall’s models are simple models that he first used in training situations, but after seeing their usefulness, they eventually expanded into a larger model that are now widely used in research and training. Signorini, Wiesemes and Murphy’s view is also in line with Spencer-Oatey and Franklin’s suggestion that there is a need to move away from research that compares cultures, toward more research that studies interaction between people from different cultures. (2009, p. 246). Again, I think that case studies are a good starting point to do this. They can be used to find new (small) models and test existing models. And Thomas’ cultural standards and method of focusing on critical incidents can provide the framework to do this in a more consistent way. I think this will create a much better understanding of cultural differences than large scale models that look only at national cultures.

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40 This definition is explained in more detail in section 3.1.
41 I mentioned Franklin and Spencer-Oatey’s view on moving away from culture-comparative research in section 1.2.
42 For more about Thomas’ model, see sections 3.3 and 5.3.
5.5 Dealing with cultural differences

In this section, I answer the last sub-question ‘How do the models and theories help to deal with cultural differences in the company?’ I use the insights from previous sections in this chapter, but I also look more broadly at how the literature can help to deal the cultural differences in the company. The points in this section can also be seen as recommendations for the company.

The positive side

In section 5.1 I wrote that the problems with cultural differences cast a shadow over the positive effects of cultural differences in the company. It is even possible that negative images of a culture are sometimes created on purpose. The task for the company is to stimulate a more positive view of cultural differences while trying to solve the most important problems and help employees deal with the differences. For example by seeking how the company can make more use of the advantages of cultural differences. When working with cultural differences, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, p. 200) point out that there is an important difference between actively organizing activities that increase employees’ competence in dealing with cultural differences and passively letting employees learn from their experiences when they encounter cultural differences. Both need a somewhat different approach. Activities that aim to increase employees’ competence (such as training and coaching) can be planned, organized, and evaluated by the company. On the other hand, letting employees learn from experience is more about creating the right environment, which often takes time and may not have results that are easily to measure. In both cases, constant case study research could also be done to determine the changes. However, the first thing that is necessary before such things are attempted is a clear strategy on cultural differences in the company. Corporate strategy is far more complex than I can hope to discuss in this section. But I briefly look at the strategies in [company a] and introduce a few basic considerations for corporate strategy. After that, I discuss specific activities. Training and recruitment can be more directly organized, while informal activities and intercultural teams are more about creating the right environment for employees to learn from experience.

It starts with strategy

Kinast and Schroll-Machl (2010, p. 388), two HR management consultants, write about how individual employees deal with cultural differences. This depends for a large part on a company’s basic strategy for international business:

“A basic strategy for interculturality establishes the necessary and binding framework for conclusive, consistent intercultural interaction for managers and employees. Without this commitment, the corporation risks confusion, counterproductive interaction and ‘damage repair costs’, both materially and socially.” (2010, p. 396)

I wrote in section 4.1 that several respondents mentioned that it was not always clear where the company was headed, especially after the merger. Some of them suggested that it was important for the company to have a clearer strategy. This was not an issue for everyone, but it seemed that employees were also not always sure what was expected of them when they encountered cultural differences at work. I think that this uncertainty is one of the reasons behind the shadow of cultural differences that I mention in section 5.1.

43 See Ybema and Byun in section 5.4.
Two strategies?

The uncertainty among employees may indicate that to some extent, the company either did not have a clear strategy on cultural differences or did not communicate it well. I did not have time to look much further into this issue, but perhaps the company was not able to decide on a single strategy after the merger. To me, it seemed that the companies that merged and became [company a] had somewhat different strategies. Based on the descriptions of strategy on intercultural business of Kinast and Schroll-Machl’s (2010), former [company c] seemed to use an ethnocentric strategy, while former [company b] seemed to use a regiocentric strategy.

- Using an ethnocentric strategy means that the head office decides the corporate strategy and philosophy and then transfers these to local daughter companies. Kinast and Schroll-Machl write that this strategy feels more one-sided for employees (since the perspective of the head office is leading in most cases). This may explain why respondents said that things were done more in a Japanese way in former [company c] and that employees understood Japanese culture better.44
- Using a regiocentric strategy means that regional and local daughter companies use the strategy of the head office and adapt it to the requirements of their region. Employees experience this strategy more as a give and take situation, but the downside is that it is “time consuming and requires participants to continually negotiate options until a solution is found.” (Kinast and Schroll-Machl, 2010, p. 389). This may explain why there were less Japanese expats in former [company b] and why respondents said that employees there had more freedom in their work.45

Developing strategy

Analyzing the current strategy and deciding on one strategy are the first two steps in developing strategy. In table 10 are several steps for developing strategy on intercultural business.46 Strategy will change how individual employees deal with cultural differences. For example, if the company would choose a strategy where the Japanese perspective is leading (ethnocentric), this could mean that individual Dutch employees have to spend more time on answering questions from Japanese clients and focus more on details.47 Activities to increase intercultural competence of employees, such as training, may not work or will have just limited effects if they are not part of a clear strategy.

Another issue for the development of strategy is how it is connected to the overall strategy. Yvonne Benschop (2004, p. 253), a professor who did research on diversity in companies, writes that

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44 For some of the merger differences, see section 4.5.
45 Again, see section 4.5.
46 For an overview of other strategies on intercultural business and their advantages and disadvantages, see the chapter of Kinast and Schroll-Machl (2010) in the Handbook of Intercultural Communication and Cooperation.
47 For more about the Japanese-Dutch difference on how far employees should go for clients, see section 4.4. For more about focusing on details, see section 4.5.
many companies have the tendency to create separate policy for issues like diversity when they feel that the situation should be improved. The risk of this is that diversity will be seen as a separate issue in the company. Benschop argues that it is important to rethink human resource management with diversity as a basic principle and not as a side issue.

**Training**

Training is often mentioned in the literature as an instrument to help people deal with cultural differences and can be used in the company in a fairly straightforward way. [Company A] started in 2012 with training courses about cultural differences between the Netherlands and Japan. The program was implemented after the merger and focused mostly on differences between Japan and the Netherlands in general. Most of the respondents who attended the training course said that it was interesting and that it helped them to understand the other culture better. Several respondents said that they changed some things in their own behavior and some of them {2, 5, 8, 9, 22, 23, 24, 27} recommended that the company should give this kind of training to (new) employees, although not all of them were in favor of repeated training sessions for existing employees.

In section 5.1, I wrote that understanding (or lack of it) was a sort of keyword for many of the problems caused by cultural differences. Trying to increase mutual understanding is the first goal of training on cultural differences. And as I explained in section 5.3 and 5.4, case studies are more likely to help understand cultural differences than large models like Hofstede's cultural dimensions, because these large models cannot accurately predict which cultural differences people are likely to encounter in the company and culture is too fuzzy to be captured in several large dimensions or categories.

But it is not enough that employees only understand cultural differences, they also need to be able to solve the problems that they cause. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin wrote:

> “Professionals may see cultural knowledge as a 'nice to have' but what they really require are skills and behaviours which lead to competence in the target situation.” (2009, p. 213)

The second goal of intercultural training is the development of skills that employees can use to deal with cultural differences. This can be done by letting participants discuss and practice dealing with cultural differences. In table 11 there are several more considerations for training.

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48 I mentioned respondent’s reactions to the training in section 4.3.
49 For more about creating an intercultural training program, see Kinast (2010).
Recruitment

Another area that the company can directly influence is recruitment. For positions where employees will often encounter cultural differences, the goal for a company should be to find individuals who are competent in dealing with cultural differences. (Kinast & Thomas, 2010, p. 217) For other positions in the company, it is important that potential employees know about the cultural differences in the company. However, it seemed that the expectations of employees did not always match with the actual cultural differences in the company. One respondent {14} said that there are several employees who were just interested in the job itself, but did not have any connection or interest in Japan. Another respondent (22) said that he had not expected that the differences would be so big. I therefore agree with two respondents {8, 14} who said that the recruitment procedures could be adjusted. The company could do more to let candidates know what they can expect and test how competent they are at dealing with cultural differences. Yvonne Benschop (2004, pp. 268-270) and one respondent {14} suggested that involving managers from both cultures in the selection procedure can be beneficial, it seems this already happens sometimes in the company for important positions for Dutch people, although not yet for Japanese expats and most of the not-manager positions.

Another point for recruitment is language. In section 4.2., I wrote that one respondent said that Japanese expats are not selected based on their English proficiency. This is improving, since new employees in the company in Japan now need a certain score on a language proficiency test. But, I still think that the importance of language proficiency of expats is not always recognized and it should be improved in all possible ways, such as in recruitment. In the Benelux, the company can also try to hire more employees who can speak both Japanese and Dutch. They can be assigned to fulfill an intermediating role between Dutch and Japanese employees, the head office in Japan and Japanese clients. A few Japanese employees already intermediate sometimes, but people who speak both languages could be used more deliberately when there are problems or misunderstandings.

Informal activities

Informal activities concern an area that is more difficult to control for the company, and is more about creating the right environment for employees to learn from experience. I talked with several respondents about informal about activities in the company and relations between Japanese and Dutch employees. There were certain events in the company where employees can get to know each other in a more informal setting, like a yearly football tournament for all [company a] companies in Europe, Sinterklaas,\textsuperscript{50} a barbecue and going to the zoo (among other things). These were organized by the staff association.\textsuperscript{51} Also, Japanese and Dutch managers and employees from sales sometimes have lunch or dinner with clients. But in general, I got the impressions that there is not that much informal contact between Japanese and Dutch employees.

Informal activities are not often mentioned in the literature, but in the interviews several Dutch respondents actively tried to find more informal settings to get to know Japanese people,\textsuperscript{52} because they knew that it makes a difference whether they talk in a formal or an informal setting with Japanese people.

\textsuperscript{50} Sinterklaas is a Dutch children’s festival.
\textsuperscript{51} In Dutch it is called the Personeelsvereniging.
\textsuperscript{52} For how Dutch employees currently deal with cultural differences, see section 5.1.
It is important partly, because decision-making is done more in informal settings. One Dutch respondent said:

“You notice that you can build a better bond with Japanese colleagues, because at that moment you have a conversation in an informal setting. You learn a little more about each other. In the office, you will ask less quickly ‘Are you married? Do you have children?’ But if you drink a beer and eat something, then these conversations will come. [...] Because of this, you can have more understanding for each other, because he knows what your situation at home is and you know his situation.”}

I think that the company could make use of this knowledge by organizing or supporting more informal activities in the company where Japanese and Dutch people can get to know each other. One consideration for these activities is that in the beginning, when there are language differences or employees are not yet used to each other’s communication style, conversations may be more difficult. One respondent {9} said that people on such occasions often form a group with just their own people or they don’t know what to talk about with people from the other culture. People may also be hesitant to join these activities in the beginning, so it may take a while before there are any results. For example, Dutch people are used to taking their own lunch to work and they often just eat it at their desk, so they may be hesitant at first to join a lunch with a mixed group of people. Trying to find the right activities that employees enjoy and where the threshold to talk to each other is low may take several attempts. To summarize, I think that stimulating informal activities for Japanese and Dutch employees, like lunches, movie nights, bowling, watching football, trips to Japan or other things could be a good investment to increase mutual understanding and therefore productivity of employees.

**Intercultural teams**

Intercultural teams (teams with members from different cultures) are the last point that I discuss that is important for dealing with cultural differences in the company. In section 4.5, I wrote that cooperation between Japanese and Dutch employees mainly seemed to consist of exchanging information. Both groups of people have mostly separate job responsibilities, although they work more closely together in the sales team and certain projects. In the literature, there is a lot of research on team performance. The psychologist Siegfried Stumpf (2010), looked at several studies that researched performance of intercultural teams. In most of the studies, intercultural teams needed a certain start-up period in which they performed less than teams with few cultural differences, because it takes longer for intercultural teams to deal with differences between team members. However, in many studies, intercultural teams eventually catch up or even surpass the teams with few cultural differences. Stumpf says that success is guaranteed, but there are several factors that can stimulate performance, such as a careful selection of team members and intercultural training and coaching. If members of intercultural teams accept each other and are able to learn from mistakes, they are more likely to come up with creative solutions and use cultural differences to their advantage.

[company a] could experiment more with intercultural teams in the company in which Japanese and Dutch employees work closely together. Especially in sales and management, but other departments could also benefit from closer cooperation in teams. If these teams are able to use cultural differences between their members to their advantage, they can help stimulate a more positive view of cultural differences in the company. Members from these teams can also help other employees deal with cultural differences.

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53 For more about decision-making of both culture, see section 4.3.
differences and they can use their experience to lead new intercultural teams. This may be a long term perspective, but I think it would be a big step towards unlocking the potential of cultural differences.
CONCLUSION

The main question of this thesis, which I answer in this chapter, is:

“What problems do Japanese-Dutch cultural differences cause in [company a] and to what extent do existing scientific models and theories help to understand and find ways in dealing with these problems?”

A case study on cultural differences

Cultural differences are a growing concern for companies that do international business and the ability to deal with cultural differences is becoming more important for employees. I researched Japanese-Dutch cultural differences in [company a] through interviews and looked at which cultural differences there are, which problems they caused and how employees dealt with them. Then I compared the results with the literature about cultural differences and examined how the literature could help predict and understand cultural differences in the company. And last I looked at how the literature helped to find ways in dealing with them. Case studies like this can complement other research and are especially helpful for understanding cultural differences in practice. I chose Japan and the Netherlands because are they are both quite successful in international trade and are important trading partners.

Cultural differences in the company

I found four important themes in the interviews with employees and most of the problems could be connected to these themes. The themes are language, communication style, the relation with clients and customs at work. However, they should not be seen as separate categories. Many cultural differences had to do with multiple themes and were highly connected with each other. It differed highly per person how much trouble people had from cultural differences, but most of the problems had to with a lack of understanding and could result in loss of time, stress and conflict. The problems with cultural differences in the company often seemed to cast a shadow over the positive aspects of cultural differences. Respondents mostly tried to deal with the differences by accepting as best as possible.

Literature on cultural differences

There was a lot of literature on cultural differences. Larger models of culture, like Hofstede’s cultural differences, where not very helpful to predict and understand the cultural difference in the company, even though they are widely used in research and training. Hall’s models of culture, that only look at certain aspects, such as communication style, were more usable, but their use was limited to the aspects that they focused on. It turned out that especially, case studies were helpful to predict and understand the differences in the company. The comparison of my results with models and theories showed that it is better to focus research on certain themes, specific contexts or smaller aspects of culture, than trying to understand culture as a whole. Culture is too dynamic, there is too much variation and there are too many small differences in practice that are easily overlooked in larger models of culture. In other words, culture has a certain fuzziness that larger models cannot capture, but is essential to recognize for dealing with cultural differences in practice. It might still be possible to develop larger models, for example for by looking at consistent problems that turn up in many case studies, but trying to separate cultural differences in strict categories is not likely to be very useful.
Dealing with cultural differences

For [company a], it would be best to stimulate a more positive view of cultural differences while trying to solve the most important problems of the four themes. The first things for this are to develop a clear strategy on cultural differences that is part of the overall corporate strategy. Under this strategy, [company a] can further work on developing a training program and make a few adjustments in recruitment. However, it is also important to focus on creating the right environment to let employees learn from experiences with cultural differences at work. This will take time and may not have results that are easily to measure. Two options for this are supporting and organizing informal activities among Japanese and Dutch employees and creating more intercultural teams.

Framework for further research

After the preparation of my research, I started directly with the data collection and not with researching the literature. This was because I used a so-called emerging research design, where the data collection and literature research are both open, flexible and continuously influenced each other. In qualitative research, this design is useful to research complex issues like culture, where the researcher works mostly with interpretations and opinions of people. However, during my research I found that the cultural standards framework of Thomas could potentially make it easier to do research on cultural differences in a quicker and more consistent way. Thomas’s model focuses more on people’s actual behavior in interaction by looking for examples of small and big incidents in interaction between people from different cultures (called critical incidents). Then the values and norms (the cultural standards) of any group of people can be determined. This should lead to a more accurate image of the problems with cultural differences between two culturally different groups and hopefully makes it easier to find ways of dealing with the cultural differences. It is one of the few models that is suited for researching cultural differences on a small scale, rather than finding general cultural dimensions (like Hofstede) or examining only specific aspects of culture (like Hall). However, it does not seem to be well-known outside of Germany. Developing this model further could be a great benefit for research on cultural differences.
REFERENCES


Dealing with cultural differences


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[Picture of card with the word ‘Culture’]. Retrieved April 8, 2013, from http://naturecultureethnic.blogspot.nl/2011/02/culture-my-quote-for-today.html


APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Personal profile

This section is my personal profile. I think that in cultural research it is useful to know something about the background of the researcher. This can help people who read this research to place the conclusions in perspective.

Overview

- Name: Dieko Boekel
- Age: 26
- Nationality: Dutch
- Current place of residence: Utrecht
- Grew up in Bunnik
- University education: Humanistic studies
- Followed additional courses on Japanese history and culture at the Leiden University
- Master profile: Critical Organization and Intervention Studies
- Did an Internship at the Human resource department of Hitachi ITSC in Tokyo, Japan

Early life

I grew up in a small village near the city Utrecht. My parents shared work and upbringing of my brother and I equally. They both worked part-time and were at home for a few days each week. Both of them work in primary education. I went to a protestant Christian elementary school and a Montessori high school. In elementary school I was very interested in biology and used to be a WNF ranger. In high school I was better at natural sciences (such as physics and biology) than humanities (such as languages and history). I was also interested in computer science, but there were no courses about this subject in school, so I tinkered with computers myself. At the end of high school I became more interested in psychology and eventually I decided to do Humanistic Studies.

Bachelor

My education is Humanistic studies. This is a multidisciplinary study in the social sciences. We learn about philosophy, organizations, anthropology, psychology and sociology and there is special attention for qualitative research\(^\text{54}\). This research aims at finding underlying views/ideas and needs of people or groups of people. As I explained in the Preface, I was already interested in Japan before I went to University and this became more serious when I started my education. In the first year we had to do a small research project with a group of students about identity, young people and society. We decided to

\[^{54}\text{See section 2.1 ‘Methodological foundations’ for information about qualitative research.}\]
research Japanese youth subculture and we made a presentation about it. I was motivated to learn more and took additional courses on Japanese history and culture at the Leiden University in the second and third year. It was very interesting to learn about the history of Japan, because I mostly learned history from a Dutch perspective and not often from the perspective of another country - at least not very detailed. For example, when I was in high school we learned a lot about World War II in Europe. But we learned very little about what happened in the rest of the world during the war. Things like the fire-bombings of Tokyo and the atomic bomb were mentioned in the history classes at my high school. But, how enormous its physical and mental impact was for the Japanese remained unclear. I was also quite interested in religion in Japan and I wrote two papers about Shinto, the indigenous spirituality of Japan.

**Master**

In my master I chose the profile ‘Critical Organization and Intervention Studies’. This specialization focuses on understanding organizations. We learned about how organizations function internally and how they function in society. At this time I also started learning Japanese. I also wanted to do an internship in Japan and eventually I found an internship at Hitachi in Tokyo. At Hitachi I learned a lot about the company’s globalization training programs in the Human Resource department and I experienced how a Japanese company works. For my master thesis I wanted to continue on the subject of Japan, culture and organizations. I approached several companies to ask if they were interested in this subject, and that is how I came into contact with the general manager Human Resources of [company a].

**Values underpinning my research**

There are several values from me that probably influenced this research. This list is not complete, but these are some of the most important ones:

- I believe that it is good to look at complex problems from multiple perspectives.
- I believe that most people have good intentions, even when I do not always understand them.
- I believe that it is a good trait to be reluctant in judging someone from another culture.
- I do not believe in quick solutions for complex problems.

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55 See section 1.1 ‘Company introduction’ to read about the company.
Appendix 2: Interview questions

Research
The goal of this research is to study Japanese-Dutch cultural differences between people in [company a] and see how people deal with these differences. Japanese-Dutch cultural differences are of course not the only cultural differences in [company a]. There are for example also differences between the people from who worked for the former [company b] and [company c] and between Belgian and Dutch people. However, the differences between Japanese and Dutch people are the main focus in this research.

About the interview
- **The interview is an open interview.**
  This means that people do not have to stick to the question if they think that other topics are also important.
- **The interview is confidential.**
  This means that I will not disclose information from the interview that can be traced back to the person being interviewed without their permission.
- **I will make a summary of the interview.**
  If the person who was interviewed wants to, he or she can see the summary of the interview (this summary is also confidential).
- **If possible I would like to make an audio recording of the interview.**
  But only if this does not make the person being interviewed feel uncomfortable.

Questions
1. How do you deal with cultural differences at [company a]?
2. How often do Dutch and Japanese employees have to work together?
3. Is there much informal contact between Japanese and Dutch people?
4. Can the company do something to bridge cultural differences?

Bonus question:
5. Did you encounter any similarities between Japanese and the Dutch people while working in the company that you did not expect?
Appendix 3: Research software

In this Appendix I explain in more detail the software that I used for my research. This is mainly to help other researchers save time and to give more insight in how I did my research.

Zotero

Zotero is a data reference database tool where I collected all my literature. Managing references is often still done manually, and I shortly explain this program, because it can save a lot of time. Zotero can be used to store and organize research sources, such as books and articles. This program has several advantages over other reference databases, such as RefWorks and EndNote. The most important advantage is the integration in the browser and in Microsoft Word (and other software). When you want to store something that you found on the internet you can do this with a click on a button in the address bar. The references can be organized in folders in the program and Zotero can create a complete bibliography of a folder that can be pasted anywhere. With the add-on in Word, you can insert references in a document that automatically have the right information. Even when something changes, all information in the document can be automatically updated. For more information, see https://www.zotero.org/
Dedoose

Dedoose is qualitative data analysis software (QDA) that can be used to analyze qualitative data (such as interviews). Dedoose is not very well known at my university, therefore I shortly look at its features in this Appendix. The program is younger than other QDA software, such as Atlas ti, and according to Peter Nielsen (2012), a professor of software and action research, the basic functionality of Dedoose is the same as other QDA software. It has less advanced analysis functions, but is easier to learn and has better features for cooperation among multiple researchers. It is also platform independent and accessible online, which means that it can be used on Windows, Mac or Android computers. This is not possible with other QDA software. The platform independence was especially important for me, since I worked on different machines. Dedoose also had more features to analyze a combinations of qualitative and quantitative data. For example, I could link respondent data with interviews and ask the program to show only quotes from certain types of respondents. For more information, see http://www.dedoose.com/
**Macros in Microsoft Word**

I also used Word macros to analyze the data. A macro can be seen as the automatization of certain repeated actions. For example, if I search for the word 'client' in a document, I could highlight it each time I find it, but I can also automate this process with a macro, highlighting all words in the document at once. It is also possible to highlight different words with different colors. Highlighting is helpful in analyzing large amounts of text, because it makes it easy to find important parts in the text in a fast and flexible way. Compared to QDA-software, macros have the advantage that the researcher can see directly the whole context in which respondents said something. A macro can be created in two ways, by recording several actions with mouse or keyboard or by directly writing a piece of code. They can be used for numerous different tasks that would normally take a lot of time. For more information about creating and running macros, see http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/word-help/create-or-run-a-macro-HA102919734.aspx

```vba
' this is the macro that I used to search and highlight certain words
Sub searchhighlight()

' these are variables that are used to make this macro work
Dim range As range
Dim i As Long
Dim TargetList

' in the brackets are the search words that are used in this macro, to search for other words just change, add or delete the search words between brackets
TargetList = Array("klant", "customer", "client")

' this is the code that lets the macro search in the document
For i = 0 To UBound(TargetList)
    Set range = ActiveDocument.range
    With range.Find
        .Text = TargetList(i)
        .Format = False
        .MatchCase = False
        .MatchWholeWord = False
        .MatchWildcards = False
        .MatchSoundsLike = False
        .MatchAllWordForms = False
        Do While .Execute(Forward:=True) = True
            range.HighlightColorIndex = wdBrightGreen
        Loop
    End With
Next
End Sub
```