Intercultural communication in German-Dutch business contexts
Niederlande-Studien

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1 Introduction

1.1 German-Dutch relations and interdependencies

Germany and the Netherlands maintain close relationships. At the beginning of the 20th century, both countries were close trading partners. Over the last few decades, their relations have constantly intensified, resulting in today’s close cooperation, consultations and interrelations in a variety of fields.

The countries cooperate on a variety of political issues. They maintain active cooperative alliances in global forums such as NATO and the UN and support each other’s positions on global issues (cf. e.g., Läufer, 2007; Pekelder 2013). As Nijhuis (2015) stated, Germany and the Netherlands cooperate closely in the European Union and have mostly agreed on questions concerning the European integration process and the general orientation of the European Union.

At the federal, state and provincial levels there are (institutionalized) intensive contacts between parliamentarians and government representatives who discuss and work together on numerous issues. The institutionalized government consultations and German-Dutch conferences that regularly occur and in which various political issues are discussed are especially worth mentioning here (cf. Pekelder, 2013).

Below the intergovernmental level, the five German-Dutch Euregios (voluntary associations of German and Dutch public-law bodies) play an important role in removing cross-border obstacles for businesses and individuals. They also help in establishing cross-border cooperation in areas such as work, education and healthcare.

Furthermore, Germany and the Netherlands also maintain close educational and cultural relationships. In addition to about 570 cooperation agreements between universities and research facilities, there is also intense German-Dutch collaboration in regional science and technology networks between universities and companies (International Office of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany, 2015). Pekelder (2013) also emphasized the numerous cooperations in education and science and claimed that the scientific cooperations between Germany and the Netherlands rank among the highest between two countries worldwide.

The Netherlands is also popular with German university students studying abroad. In 2013, more than 25,000 Germans studied at Dutch universities. However, there were only 2,000 Dutch students studying at German universities.

In the cultural field there are countless cooperations between German and Dutch museums, theaters, exhibitions and film productions. Germany is one of the ‘priority countries’ for Dutch cultural policy while German cultural policy, especially in North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony, also has a strong focus on the
Netherlands (Läufer, 2007). In addition, many German-Dutch cultural foundations actively foster bilateral cultural relations.

In addition to political, educational and cultural relationships, there are also many personal relationships between German and Dutch people. In 2014, about 370,000 Germans lived in the Netherlands permanently and 140,000 Dutch people lived in Germany (CBS, 2014; German-Dutch Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

Moreover, the two countries have a very close economic relationship. The German Foreign Office (2014) stated that economic relations between Germany and the Netherlands are more intensive than between any other two countries, apart from the United States and Canada. In 2013, Germany exported goods and services with a total value of 71 billion euros to the Netherlands while importing goods and services with a total value of 89 billion euros from the Netherlands (Destatis, 2014). Germany is the Netherlands’ most important trade partner while the Netherlands is Germany’s fifth most important trade partner (after France, the USA, the UK and China). Moreover, the Netherlands is the biggest foreign investor in Germany, while Germany is the fourth largest foreign investor in the Netherlands (after the USA, Luxembourg and the UK). In 2013, there were about 5,350 Dutch companies in Germany and 2,200 German companies in the Netherlands (German-Dutch Chamber of Commerce, 2013). Furthermore, there are more than 25,000 German and Dutch cross-border commuters who work in the neighboring country.

German tourists are also extremely important for the Dutch tourism industry. In 2010, the 2.8 million Germans who visited the Netherlands (10.8 million overnight stays) accounted for almost 50% of all tourists in the country (Tyroller, 2010). Dutch tourists are also fairly important for the German tourism industry (cf. Tyroller, 2010): in 2014, 18% of the foreign tourists who visited Germany were Dutch. With roughly 11 million overnight stays, they were the biggest foreign group of tourists (Destatis, 2014).

These figures clearly demonstrate that Germany and the Netherlands are already closely interrelated in a variety of fields and that they depend on each other, especially economically. This view is supported by van Paridon (2009b) who found that over the past decades the interdependences between the German and the Dutch economic development were closer than between any other two countries with the exception of the US and Canada. Klemann and Wielenga (2009) also pointed out the close economic interdependency and entanglement between the two economies.

1.2 The effect of culture on (economic) relations

Despite close ties and geographic proximity, there are cultural differences that can lead to disturbances in cross-border cooperation. Linthout (2008, p. 39) claimed that the cultural differences between Germany and the Netherlands are bigger than between almost any other neighboring countries in the EU. This opinion was indi-
rectly confirmed by van Paridon (2009b), who stated that the close economic relationships between Germany and the Netherlands could be even closer if German and Dutch people were more familiar with the peculiarities of each other’s markets and cultures. This was also stated by Gersdorf (2015), who interviewed German and Dutch entrepreneurs who experienced problems in the other country because they had not familiarized themselves with the business culture.

Cultural differences can manifest in differences in behavior, perceptions and attitudes. Numerous studies have found that these differences can lead to irritations, problems, communication breakdowns and/or misunderstandings in intercultural interaction situations. They can also influence intercultural interactions in various ways.

First, numerous studies have already extensively illustrated the extent to which cultural differences can prevent people and organizations from getting in contact with people and organizations from another culture. Salacuse (1991), for example, showed that cultural and linguistic barriers often prevent people from even considering establishing cross-border cooperation. Reiche, Carr, and Pudelko (2010) showed that people are generally reluctant to start business with people whose culture differs strongly from their own. Other studies (e.g., Linders, Slangen, de Groot, & Beugelsdijk, 2004) have suggested that cultural distance decreases bilateral trade while a common language and few cultural differences increase service trade (e.g., Kimura & Lee, 2004). Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson (2006) showed that culture has an important impact on organizations’ entry modes in foreign markets. Benassy-Quere, Coupet, and Mayer (2005) pointed out the impact of cultural differences on foreign direct investments which are highest between countries that score similarly on Hofstede’s (2009) dimension power distance. In measuring a similar effect on cross-border debt-holding between companies, Aggarwal, Kearney, and Lucey (2009) concluded that the effect is highest among companies from countries that score similarly on Hofstede’s (2009) dimension masculinity/femininity.

Besides the effects of culture on these rather technical issues of cross-cultural business, a variety of studies (e.g., Finch, 2009; Kwok & Tadesse, 2006; Pagell, Katz, & Sheu, 2005) have illustrated that cultural differences directly influence business negotiations between people from different cultures. Cultural differences can lead to irritations, misunderstandings or even a termination of the business activities.

In conclusion, these studies show that cultural differences present an array of challenges for companies, institutions and people who want to establish and maintain cross-border contacts. Those who manage to adapt effectively to other cultures have competitive advantages and can enter new markets more easily; in contrast, failure to adapt to other cultures can drag down business performance considerably. This applies to the German-Dutch context as well.
Some of the above-mentioned studies have tried to quantify the effect of culture. For example, studies have tried to estimate the welfare effects that could be realized if both parties in cross-cultural business were aware of certain cultural differences (e.g., Morosini, 1998) or if organizations were more aware that after a cross-border merger or acquisition it would be helpful to keep in mind that the employees of the other company are used to different management styles (e.g., Brake, Walker, & Walker, 1994). However, it is hard to quantify the effect of cultural differences on such issues since culture is just one factor among many others. Therefore, efforts to quantify these effects are rarely empirically based estimations (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006).

In 2011 the Duitsland Instituut, a Dutch research institute at the University of Amsterdam, estimated that the cultural and linguistic differences between Germany and the Netherlands result in cross-border business dealings with a value of up to 6 billion euros per annum not being realized (Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam, 2011). Even though this estimate has a rather weak empirical basis, it nevertheless indicates that — although sustainable and close relationships and cooperations already exist in various fields — cultural differences play an important role in the German-Dutch context. It is essential for both German and Dutch people to know and understand each other’s culture. This view is supported by other studies (e.g., FENEDEX, 2011; Rabobank, 2008).

German-Dutch cultural differences, commonalities and characteristics have already been analyzed by various social scientists and authors, using different methods of analyzing culture. Social scientists like Hofstede (2008), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012), Hall (1990), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), House (1997), Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) have developed cross-cultural dimension models that can be used to compare — among others — the German and Dutch cultures with regard to certain dimensions. Furthermore, many scientific studies have analyzed single aspects of German or Dutch culture. Von der Dunk (1998), for example, analyzed the roots of Dutch liberality from a historical perspective while Weismann (2001) linked certain differences in mentality to religious development. Wesselius (1999) based his study on Hofstede’s masculinity/femininity dimension and analyzed how Dutch femininity manifests in Dutch everyday life. Koentopp (2000) analyzed how differences in Hofstede’s power distance dimension influence teamwork in German-Dutch teams.

Thomas and Schlizio (2009) used the intercultural concept of culture standards to analyze Dutch cultural characteristics that play a role in German-Dutch interactions. Culture standards are processes of perception, thought, evaluation and action that the majority of the members of a particular culture regard as normal, typical and obligatory (Thomas, 2005, p. 45). Since culture standards are deduced from the specific perspective of a culture they can point out potential sources of irritations or conflicts in bicultural interaction.
Furthermore, many German and Dutch authors have written popular science and guidebooks about their neighboring countries. For example, Ernst (2007), Schürings (2010) and Linthout (2006) have written about Dutch culture and Kerres (2008), Jacobs (2008) and Reyskens (2007) have written about German culture. Even though these books are generally not scientific but rather based on their authors’ personal experiences, they are a rich source of information about cultural aspects and characteristics that might play a role in intercultural encounters.

1.3 Comparison of methods for analyzing culture

In the following section I will present three of the most widely used methods of analyzing culture and discuss their advantages and disadvantages as well as their assets and weaknesses. These three methods are: 1) popular science and guidebooks as a non-scientific respectively popular scientific way of analyzing culture, 2) dimension models as a cross-cultural method of analyzing cultural differences and 3) commonalities and the concept of culture standards as an intercultural method of analyzing intercultural interactions.

1.3.1 Popular science and guidebooks

German and Dutch authors have written a lot of popular science and guidebooks (e.g., Koentopp, 2000; Müller, 1998; Versluis, 2008) describing the culture of each other’s countries. Apart from the advantages and weaknesses of individual books, these books have many general advantages and disadvantages compared to other methods of analyzing culture.

First, the majority of the books describes only those aspects of culture that are easily visible to outsiders. The underlying norms and values which account for many (though not all) visible and invisible aspects of culture are hardly or not described and discussed. Without ascribing these visible cultural characteristics to underlying norms and values it is hard to understand the reasons for many cultural differences or commonalities and it is therefore also hard to comprehend or predict general German or Dutch behavioral patterns in bicultural interactions.

Furthermore, the authors (most of them expatriates) predominantly describe their own, usually subjective, experiences. Although these experiences have occurred in certain cultural sectors, industries and organizations, they declare them to be valid for a whole country.

Finally, the authors offer diverging observations and explanations. For example, while Reyskens (2007) claimed that Germans regard a task as more important than good relations with colleagues at work, Meines (1990) claimed the opposite. A more comprehensive discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the analysis of a book corpus about the German and Dutch cultures is presented in chapter 3.
1.3.2 Dimension models

A scientifically more validated approach of identifying and explaining cultural differences and commonalities between Germany and the Netherlands can be found in different concepts and models developed by culture specialists. Well-established social scientists such as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hall (1989), Hofstede (2008), House et al. (2004) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) have compared different national cultures with each other from a global perspective, usually by using dimension models. The basic assumption of these models is that there are universal categories of culture, a generalized framework that underlies the more apparent and striking facts of cultural relativity (Kluckhohn & Kroeber 1952, p. 220 ff.). According to Hofstede (2008, p. 29) this framework must consist of different dimensions on which cultures can be ordered. Those dimensions are rooted in basic problems which every culture has to cope with, but on which their solutions vary. Each dimension has two opposite poles; every country can be positioned on a line between those poles.

For example, one of Hofstede’s (2008) dimensions is masculinity/femininity. In short, masculine cultures are characterized by an appreciation of competition, achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success while feminine cultures are characterized by a preference for cooperation, consensus, modesty and quality of life. The extreme pole masculinity is assigned a score of 100 while the other extreme pole, femininity, is assigned a score of 0. With a score of 66, Germany is regarded as a more masculine country than the Netherlands with a score of 14.

However, the dimension models have — in addition to the criticism of the methodological approach of individual social scientists (e.g., McSweeney (2002) on Hofstede; Hofstede (2010) on Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner; Smith (2004) on the GLOBE study) — some advantages and disadvantages compared to other methods of analyzing culture.

First, dimension models are cross-cultural. They compare cultures with each other from a rather global perspective but do not analyze if, in which cases and to what extent the differences with regard to cultural dimensions play a role in concrete interactions between people from different cultures. They allow assumptions but they cannot predict which cultural differences will eventually lead to irritations, conflicts or communication breakdowns. Some authors even claim that such things as stable, comparable cultural dimensions cannot exist because culture is always constructed within a specific context and can only be understood through the interaction between the observed and the observer (cf. Hartmann, 2012).

According to Layes (2003, p. 53–65) dimension models are useful and helpful when it comes to comparing different cultures, especially in the context of frequently changing business partners and multicultural work groups. While in a strictly bicultural environment a person can frame all relevant knowledge about the cultural characteristics of the people from the other culture, this information
would become overwhelming in a multinational environment. According to Hartmann (2012), such an environment requires a general framework such as dimension models that shows the areas and ways in which cultures differ considerably.

However, those models are less practical when comparing two cultures for the purpose of giving practical advice for binational encounters, because they do not consider a variety of aspects that might play a role in those encounters. For example, they may not consider aspects such as self-perception and the perception of others or shared history. This opinion is supported by Schönhut and Antweiler (2002, p. 13) and Hartmann (2012, p. 24), who claimed that dimension models could only show how cultures work in isolation from each other but not how their members deal with each other. Nevertheless, as Bhawuk and Brislin (2001) as well as Egan and Bendick (2007) have described, dimension models are frequently taught in business schools around the world and are used to prepare individuals for interaction with people from other cultures, without making a distinction between multi- and bicultural contexts.

Layes (2003, p. 62) also noted the problematic one-dimensionality of the dimension models. Hofstede (2008, p. 28) claimed that the dimension models allow cases to be scored unambiguously (in the sense that for each dimension nations can be unambiguously placed on a line between two extreme poles and can then be compared to each other). Layes rejected this opinion and claimed that by placing nations on one line between two extreme poles the dimension models deny that there might be totally different forms of and characteristics to a certain dimension that apply to completely different aspects of life in different cultures. For example, on Hofstede’s dimension individualism/collectivism, the Netherlands, with a score of 80 (on a scale from 0 to 100), appear more individualistic than Germany with a score of 67 (Hofstede, 2008, p. 215). However, by analyzing the answers to the 14 questions Hofstede (2008, p. 214) used to determine the national scores for the dimension individualism/collectivism (by averaging the answers to the separate questions), it appears that the differences between Germany and the Netherlands differ — sometimes substantially — from question to question (see Hofstede, 2008, p. 256 ff.).

Furthermore, when using the dimension models, it is hard to unambiguously show links and correlations between the different dimensions. Hofstede (2008) acknowledged that there are correlations between the dimensions and that cultural characteristics can often only be explained by the interplay of different dimensions. However, the dimension models can only show general universal correlations between the dimensions. These correlations and interdependencies can vary from culture to culture, which makes it hard to analyze the exact interplay of dimensions when analyzing separate cultures.

Besides, the dimension models cannot unambiguously show hierarchical relations between the dimensions. The models do acknowledge that there are certain hierarchies between the dimensions, but these hierarchies are often not very obvi-
ous and, just like the correlations, they can vary from culture to culture. This makes it harder to determine which dimension(s) play(s) the most important role when comparing two cultures.

Finally, it is hard to use the dimension models to compare cultures that do not greatly differ from each other with regard to the dimensions. For example, in Hofstede’s (2008) dimension model (in which the extreme poles of each dimension differ by 100 index points) Germany and the Netherlands have similar scores on most dimensions (except for masculinity/femininity and indulgence/restraint), with a maximum difference of 13 index points. Nevertheless, irritations, problems, misunderstandings and/or communication breakdowns occur frequently in German-Dutch interactions (Linthout, 2008, p. 39) and many of these cannot be ascribed to those two dimensions. Of course Hofstede does not claim that irritations, problems, misunderstandings and/or communication breakdowns can be completely explained by differences in dimensions, but the dimension models can convey the impression that problems do not occur between countries that show only minor dimensional differences.

In summary, both guidebooks and popular science books as well as the dimension models show disadvantages when it comes to describing, explaining and predicting cultural characteristics and behavioral patterns in bicultural encounters, to pointing out potential communication breakdowns and to giving members of a certain culture practice-oriented insight into another culture. The popular science and guidebooks often lack objectivity and scientific validation. Dimension models are well suited for comparing cultures with each other, but they are not very suitable for analyzing what happens in concrete interaction situations between the members of two cultures.

1.3.3 Culture standards

In addition to guidebooks and popular science books and the dimension models, the concept of culture standards (a detailed definition and explanation of the term culture standard can be found in Section 2.3) can convey aspects of a country’s culture in a practical and easily understandable manner. Culture standards are deduced from practical situations of bicultural interaction. In contrast to the dimension models the concept takes into account aspects such as self-perception and perception of others by decidedly analyzing one culture from the perspective of another (Demorgon & Molz, 1996, p. 57). It also considers the changes of cultural characteristics over time, the relevance of personal factors and the existence of different cultural sectors (Section 2.4.5 will describe how this is done).

In contrast to the cross-cultural dimension models, culture standards deal with cultural differences in intercultural situations. They describe, explain and predict what happens in concrete bicultural interaction situations, which irritations, con-
Conflicts and communication breakdowns can occur. This makes the concept of culture standards more practice-based than dimension models.

In addition, the concept of culture standards refers not only to the invisible, underlying aspects of culture, but also to the visible cultural characteristics that come to light in bicultural interactions. The authors of the dimension models also assume that culture consists of invisible and visible elements. Hofstede, for example, has claimed that the core elements of culture are values but that culture also manifests in the visible elements symbols, heroes and rituals (2008, p. 10). However, since dimension models are rather universal, they do not analyze or describe those visible and invisible elements for every culture.

Furthermore, the concept of culture standards can more clearly discern how culture standards are linked to each other than the dimension models can. Since many concrete cultural characteristics or behavioral patterns cannot be explained with just one single dimension or culture standard but rather with an interplay of different dimensions or culture standards (cf. Hofstede & Hofstede, 2009), the concept of culture standards facilitates understanding another culture. While the dimension models can only show general universal correlations between the separate dimensions (which above all might not apply to every single culture), the concept of culture standards can point out links and interdependencies of the separate culture standards particular to every separate culture that is analyzed.

The concept of culture standards also has the advantage of being able to show the hierarchical relations between single culture standards more clearly than the dimension models can. Since culture standards are deduced from concrete binational encounters, it is possible to analyze how important certain culture standards are in those encounters. This facilitates a prediction and explanation of cultural characteristics and behavioral patterns. While the dimension models can only show universal correlations between dimensions, culture standards can point out hierarchical relations of the culture standards for every particular culture (as will be described in Section 2.5.8). Moreover, the concept of culture standards allows a more nuanced analysis of cultural characteristics and differences than the dimension models when it comes to comparing cultures that do not greatly differ from each other with regard to dimensions.

Finally, Glaser and Strauss (2008, p. 12 ff.) criticized the fact that social scientists often first establish a theory and then try to explain observations or data with this theory. Since those theories are not deduced from concrete situations or observations, it is hard to adjust or correct them if they do not match the concrete observations. This criticism applies to the dimension models but not to the concept of culture standards. Here the theory (culture standards) is deduced from concrete observations and therefore fits into the approach of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2008).
1.3.4 Assessment of methods of analyzing culture in a German-Dutch context

An inventory of the existing studies and books on German and Dutch cultures, cultural commonalities and differences reveals a need for further research in this field. This research is needed for several reasons.

First, a general intercultural analysis of cultural characteristics that play a role in German-Dutch interactions has not yet or has only partially been conducted. Only Thomas and Schlizio (2009) have made a contribution to this topic.

Second, existing methods and concepts of analyzing culture are and have been used incorrectly. For instance, data collected in cross-cultural analysis is frequently used to predict irritations and problems in intercultural interactions in management books (e.g., Holtbrügge & Welge, 2010; Macharzina & Wolf, 2012), scientific studies and intercultural workshops and trainings which can lead to misinterpretations and miss important aspects. This observation has been confirmed (both directly and indirectly) by several social scientists. For example, Reuter (2010) criticized interculturalists (i.e., intercultural trainers, consultants and mediators) and professionals in the field of intercultural management who often assume that big differences related to certain cultural dimensions automatically imply a high probability for irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns in intercultural interactions, even though this claim is hardly empirically justified. Rathje (2007) claimed that existing intercultural competence training methods are increasingly criticized for using cross-cultural approaches and Bolten (2001) accused those who use dimension models for their intercultural training of an improper use and simplification. In this regard Dahlen (1997) points out two problems when using dimension models for intercultural analysis. First of all he claims that dimension models are based on outdated concepts of culture which were developed in the field of anthropology decades ago and which anthropologists have abandoned in favor of new concepts which are based on the assumption that there is “internal diversity within various kinds of social units” (p. 174). Authors of dimension models such as Hofstede or Trompenaars have therefore been criticized for leading to a generic, essentialist and representational view of cultures and for regarding culture as rather static, as a “stable value system” (Dahlen 1997, p. 159). This is also confirmed by Dervin (2010) who criticized the “solid vision on culture” of dimension models. Second, Dahlen states that even though it is known that the concept of culture has developed over the past decades and that cross-cultural models might not be well-suited for intercultural analysis, many interculturalists nevertheless stick to them because the “interculturalist field (unlike anthropology) is practically oriented and situated in the marketplace, they need to be able to offer to their customers ways of predicting the behaviour of “people from different cultures” (p. 174 f.).

However, it is striking that even though the existing methods and concepts used to analyze culture are subjected to criticism, there are few suggestions for improve-
ment. Some suggestions have been made for certain aspects (e.g., for avoiding stereotyping when working with Hofstede’s model or for improving the intercultural competences of intercultural coaches). Furthermore, Dervin (2012) makes a general plea for improving and further developing the field of intercultural research. He states, “the world is changing all the time; our conception of intercultural encounters is in the midst of a revolution. […] the concepts we have been used to work with are very slippery and the research tools offered by the fields that have worked on representations, stereotypes and Othering are very useful to take a critical stance towards them. The future of research on intercultural communication, if it follows the changes other fields which deal with Otherness (Anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy …) have witnessed, lays within further reflexivity, criticality and the idea of diverse diversities (p. 197). However, a concrete solution for the general problem has not been addressed.

Third, single methods of analyzing culture have proved to be insufficient for predicting and explaining what happens in intercultural interaction situations. Each method has some disadvantages compared with other methods but can also reveal things that the other methods cannot reveal (a discussion of the single methods, their advantages, disadvantages and limits will be conducted later).

In summary, there are important cultural differences between Germany and the Netherlands. Despite diverse and good cooperation in various fields, there are nevertheless problems in the cross-border cooperation that to a considerable degree are caused by irritations, misunderstandings and/or communication breakdowns that arise from these cultural differences. As a result, potential is not being fully exploited, and business cooperations are sometimes not realized or are unsatisfactory for both sides. Since comprehensive scientific intercultural research has not yet occurred in this field, there is a scientific gap that this dissertation project seeks to fill.

1.4 Definitions and presuppositions

1.4.1 Culture

There is a vast number of definitions for the term ‘culture’. Scientific disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology, history, psychology, communication sciences, sociology or educational sciences each maintain and prefer their own definitions, emphasizing the different aspects that are most important for their field of study. In addition, there are various definitions for the term within these disciplines (Appelsmeyer & Billmann-Mahecha, 2001; Nünning, 2008) and many authors (e.g., McSweeney, 2002; Sorrells, 2013) have addressed the problem of finding a general definition for culture.

This dissertation used methods and concepts of analyzing culture from different authors — each using his or her own definition of the term — and compared them to each other. The challenge was therefore to find a definition that subsumed
the definitions of all these authors and allowed for a comparability of their methods and concepts and the results from this dissertation project. On closer inspection, it became apparent that Thomas’s (2005) culture definition meets these demands. It is sufficiently similar to the culture definitions of the other scholars whose methods are dealt with in this dissertation and to some degree subsumes these definitions.

Thomas (2005) analyzed culture from a psychological perspective. According to him, culture creates and structures an environment in which people can function (Thomas, Kinast, & Schroll-Machl, 2010, p. 19 ff.) and encompasses ideas and values. Culture is always manifested in a system of orientation which is typical of a country, society, organization or group. This system of orientation consists of visible aspects such as rituals, language, body language, mimicry, clothing and greeting rituals as well as underlying norms and values. It is passed on to future generations from the respective society, organization or group. It provides all members with a sense of belonging and inclusion within a society or group and creates an environment in which individuals can develop a unique sense of self and function efficiently. Culture influences the perceptions, thought patterns, judgments and actions of all members of a given society (Thomas, 2005, p. 48). In summary, Thomas (2005, p. 21 ff.) sees culture as a national entity that provides its members with a sense-giving system of orientation. A person living in his or her own cultural orientation system can likely be understood and accepted by others who share the same cultural orientation system. Culture provides a common frame of reference that is learned by cultural socialization.

A comparison of Thomas’s definition of culture with Hofstede’s definition shows some resemblance. Hofstede (2008) described culture as a “collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values” (p. 19). Obviously, similar definitions of culture are used for the concept of culture standards and the dimension models. What Hofstede calls “collective programming” is reflected in Thomas’s “common frame of reference learned by cultural socialization” and “is passed on to future generations.” The distinguishing factor in Hofstede’s definition can be found back in Thomas’s “it provides its members with a sense of belonging and inclusion within a society” and “sense-giving system of orientation.” While Hofstede refers to culture as a “system of collectively held values,” Thomas also states that culture encompasses values, that is a “common frame of reference” (p. 48) and just like Hofstede he points out that culture consists of both values (which are hardly or not visible) and visible elements (e.g., rituals, clothing).

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (2012) definition of culture also does not differ considerably from Thomas’s definition. He states that “culture is the way in which a group of people solve problems and reconciles dilemmas” (p. 6 ff.). This is reflected in Thomas’s statements that “culture has an influence on the perception, thought patterns, judgment and actions of all members of a given society,” there
is a “system of orientation” and “culture creates an environment in which people can function.” (p. 49). Just like Thomas, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner also emphasized that culture consists of different layers of depth, on visible and invisible underlying aspects.

Hall’s definition — he regards culture as “the way of life of people, the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes and material things” (1989, p. 4) — also resembles Thomas’s definition. Hall also states that culture is learned, that it influences behavior and attitudes and that it consists of layers (which he calls implicit and explicit elements of culture).

This comparison thus shows that the definitions of culture used by these different social scientists show substantial similarities and overlap. Since the first study of this dissertation project (Chapter 2) is a study on culture standards, I decided to use Thomas’s culture definition throughout my studies.

1.4.2 National culture

This dissertation compares the German and Dutch cultures. Before making this comparison, I had to consider whether using the concept of national culture to analyze interaction between different nations is possible and makes sense. I also had to examine whether Germany and the Netherlands can be considered (relatively homogeneous) national cultures.

These ideas are the subject of controversial discussions in the scientific community. On the one hand, critics of the concept of national cultures (e.g., Au, 1999; House et al., 2004, Reiche, Carr, & Pudelko, 2010) point out that there is significant intra-cultural variation within the societies of most countries. Hartmann (2012) gave examples that show differences within in-country groups. On the other hand, some social scientists (e.g., Beugelsdijk & Maseland, 2011; Tipton, 2009) have argued for the convergence hypothesis, which claims that the importance of national cultures decreases with increasing globalization and that in the business world, the best practices that emerge are similar in most countries (cf. Carr & Pudelko, 2006).

However, other social scientists have disagreed with these claims and argued that the concept of national cultures is still relevant (cf. e.g., d’Iribarne, 2009; Ghemawat, 2001). Witchall (2012), who summarized most of their arguments, acknowledged the criticism but pointed out that nevertheless the majority of national cultural differences have remained fairly stable over time and convergence in cultural habits occurs only on the surface. Religious, legal, political and social systems (i.e., institutions which disseminate information within a culture) remain relatively isolated, and it is these systems that coordinate and maintain social and cultural systems. Furthermore, most cultures remain predominantly national due to the self-centeredness of social systems themselves which may be structurally open (i.e., have contact with other systems) but are functionally closed (i.e., the
mechanism for interpretation does not come from the outside, but from within the cultural system itself).

Apparently this also applies to Germany and the Netherlands. House, Wright, and Aditya (1997), for example, discussed studies in which — for Germany and the Netherlands among others — Hofstede’s dimensions were analyzed for different subgroups of nations and subsequently compared to the general country scores. These studies showed that the intra-national differences between Germany and the Netherlands were rather small. It can therefore be assumed that a comparison of the German and the Dutch cultures is indeed possible and makes sense.

Naturally — as it is the case for most cross- and intercultural studies — researchers must remember that there are factors apart from national culture (e.g., regional, organizational, contextual or individual factors) that also influence perception, behavior and attitude (Barmeyer & Genkova, 2011; Broszinsky-Schwabe, 2011). National cultures exhibit general characteristics, attitudes, perceptions and behavioral patterns that the members of a country are likely to show, but individual or group behavior can always deviate from it to varying degrees.

1.5 Aims and structure

As previously illustrated, there has been little scientific intercultural research on German and Dutch cultures. To fill this scientific gap, the general aim of this dissertation project was to offer a general intercultural analysis of differences and commonalities between German and Dutch cultures and to analyze which cultural aspects lead to irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns in intercultural encounters. The general research question is: Which cultural characteristics are relevant in German-Dutch interaction and which role do they play in these interactions?

An analysis of different methods of analyzing culture revealed that no single method is sufficient to thoroughly answer this research question. Each method has limitations and disadvantages compared to other methods, but can also point out things that the others cannot reveal. Therefore different methods of analyzing culture had to be used to answer the research question. Three independent studies were conducted (described in Chapters 2, 3 and 4), each with its own research question and methodology and each approaching the general aim from a different perspective.

Furthermore, the results of the first and second studies were compared to each other and with other methods of analyzing culture. Since each method has advantages and disadvantages compared to other methods, this made it possible to minimize the disadvantages and create additional value by finding aspects that could not be found with a single method.
The aim of the first study was to identify general, rather superordinate and underlying aspects of culture that play a role in German-Dutch interaction and to find potential sources for misunderstandings, irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns. The intercultural concept of culture standards was best suited to address this aim. Basically, culture standards are rather abstract, superordinate aspects of culture that describe and subsume typical behavioral patterns of a culture that come to light in bicultural interaction with the members of a specific other culture from the perspective of which they are deduced. They thus not only show the cultural characteristics through which German culture differs from Dutch culture, but they also point out potential sources for irritations, conflicts and/or communication breakdowns in German-Dutch interaction situations. Since Thomas and Schlizio (2009) have already identified Dutch culture standards from a German perspective (indicating which irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns Germans experience in interaction with the Dutch), the following research question is addressed: Which German culture standards exist from a Dutch perspective and how do they relate to Dutch culture standards from a German perspective and other methods of analyzing culture?

There were several steps to answering this research question. First, German culture standards were identified using Thomas’s (1996) culture standards method.
(with gradual changes in the methodology). Second, the German culture standards were compared to Thomas’s and Schlizio’s (2009) Dutch culture standards from a German perspective to more clearly deduce which cultural characteristics and behavioral patterns are likely to cause irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns in bicultural interactions. Third, the results were compared to dimensions from the dimension models of different scholars (i.e., Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2011; Trompenaars, 2012 and Hall, 1989). Cultural dimension models are basically index systems that identify the value orientations of different national cultures, measure them and express them in numerical values (a more detailed definition and explanation of these models will be provided in Chapter 2.1).

The aim of the second study was to analyze the rather concrete and visible aspects of culture (i.e., how cultural differences manifest in German-Dutch interaction, and in which situations and contexts). An analysis of popular science and guidebooks from German authors about the Dutch culture (Dutch book corpus) and from Dutch authors about the German culture (German book corpus) was well suited to this aim because these books predominantly describe concrete and visible aspects of culture and are therefore a rich source for analysis (a list of these books can be found in Appendix 7; a description of the criteria these books had to meet can be found in Section 3.3.1.1). Since such a cross-cultural analysis of intercultural literature has not been conducted before, the study was primarily explorative in nature. It was hard to predict in advance which results the analysis would yield; therefore a rather open research question was formulated: Which cultural aspects and characteristics are described in the German and Dutch book corpora and how do they relate to each other? The results of this study were compared to the results of the first study to analyze if and which additional value they could provide and if and how they could complement the German culture standards. Furthermore, the results were compared to the dimensions of the dimension models that were also dealt with in the first study.

The aim of the third study was to analyze the potential for conflict related to different cultural characteristics. Up to now, such an analysis has not been or has only been conducted to a small extent; it is usually assumed that the cultural characteristics on which national cultures differ the most are also the ones that have the biggest conflict potential. However, as will be pointed out in Chapter 4, there is good reason to doubt this assumption.

The research question for the third study is: Are cultural characteristics that Germans and Dutch regard as differently relevant in bicultural interaction more likely to lead to irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns in bicultural interactions than cultural characteristics that Germans and Dutch regard as similarly relevant? This question was analyzed by conducting an online survey.

Besides answering the general research question this dissertation project also tries to contribute to the progress of the field of intercultural research. In their meta-study Matsumoto and Yoo (2006) described how cross-cultural research method-
ologies have evolved and how each phase of research has addressed the limitations of previous ones. They stated that current research has to evolve to a new phase that minimizes the limitations of current studies. Among others, they addressed the problem of attribution fallacies (i.e., that researchers often link differences between groups to cultural causes without empirically testing if they might be caused by other factors instead) and pointed out that interrelations between cultural characteristics and their relevance are neither analyzed nor taken into consideration when explaining and/or predicting behavioral patterns. Even though Matsumoto and Yoo criticized cross-cultural studies, their criticism also applies to intercultural research for the most part. This dissertation project therefore tries to discover new approaches for intercultural research that address the limitations stated by Matsumoto and Yoo. The general conclusion will discuss how and to what extent this study contributes to a new phase in intercultural research.

The last chapter (Chapter 5) will point out some practical implications. It will note how the results can be used to extend and enhance existing concepts for intercultural workshops and trainings for German and Dutch people who want to prepare themselves to interact with people from the neighboring country. It will also note how these results can serve as a basis for a guidebook about cultural characteristics and behavioral patterns that play a role in German-Dutch interaction.
2 German culture standards from a Dutch perspective

2.1 Introduction

As illustrated in the introductory chapter, different methods of analyzing culture have their own advantages and disadvantages. A combination of different concepts and methods is necessary to answer the general research question — which cultural characteristics are relevant in German-Dutch interaction and which role do they play in these interactions? — because doing so reduces the disadvantages of each method and creates additional value. While a corpus analysis of popular science and guidebooks can predominantly reveal the concrete manifestation of culture in intercultural interaction, the concept of culture standards is suited to analyzing such cultural characteristics on another level. Culture standards show the rather abstract and underlying aspects of culture, essentially the underlying norms and values that determine behavior, behavioral patterns, perceptions and attitudes. In this way, they enable a deeper understanding of the cultural characteristics that play a role in bicultural interaction by virtually revealing their core. And while the dimension models enable a general comparison of different cultures, the concept of culture standards illustrates which cultural characteristics actually play a role in bicultural interaction. In addition, especially when it comes to comparing two cultures that do not differ from each other to a great extent with regard to dimensions, it can show cultural characteristics and differences in a more nuanced way. However, even though Dutch culture standards from a German perspective have already been identified (Schlizio, 2005), an identification of German culture standards from a Dutch perspective has not yet taken place.

2.2 Choice of methods and aims of this study

This study has two aims: 1) to identify, describe and explain the general, rather superordinate and underlying aspects of culture that play a role in German-Dutch interaction and 2) to find potential sources for misunderstandings, irritations, problems and/or communication breakdowns in German-Dutch interaction by using the concept of culture standards. The research question is: *Which German culture standards exist from a Dutch perspective and how do they relate to Dutch culture standards from a German perspective and other methods of analyzing culture (such as dimension models)?*

This study does not aim to analyze the German culture in general or to compare the German and Dutch cultures in a cross-cultural manner. Different methods and concepts of comparing culture, such as dimension models, would be more suitable for that task. Rather, the objective is to analyze how German culture manifests in bicultural interactions with Dutch people and which aspects of German culture...
play a role for Dutch people in these interactions. A basic assumption is that this study will show additional value compared to the dimension models.

A secondary aim of this study is to give Germans a better orientation in German-Dutch encounters. Thomas and Schlizio (2009) already identified Dutch culture standards from a German perspective but Thomas and Kinast (2010, p. 48) argued that only people who are familiar with both the foreign cultural orientation system and with their own can be successful in intercultural cooperation. Knowing and understanding both cultural orientation systems enables people to estimate whether and to what extent cultural divergence becomes evident in a binational encounter, to which extent the different orientation systems can coexist without leading to conflicts or irritations, and to which extent one can and should adapt to the other’s orientations system. A comparison between one’s own and a foreign orientation system can help a person to better avoid potential sources of misunderstanding or irritation and to estimate how a combination of both orientation systems can possibly create cultural synergies.

**Structure of the study**

Section 2.3 will define the term *culture standard* and outline the essential aspects of culture standards. Section 2.4 will explain the methodology for and process of identifying German culture standards from a Dutch perspective. It will also note in which parts the methodology is close to Thomas’s (1996, p. 119 ff.) methodology (see also Schlizio, 2005; Dünstl, 2005; Gruttauer, 2007) and in which parts and for which reasons it diverges.

Section 2.5 will present the German culture standards from a Dutch perspective. It will include an analysis of how and to what extent they interact with each other and in which hierarchical order they stand. Section 2.6 will compare German culture standards to Dutch culture standards from a German perspective (identified by Thomas & Schlizio, 2009) to identify potential sources of misunderstanding and irritation in bicultural encounters. Section 2.7 will compare them to the dimensions from different dimension models — among others from Hofstede (2008, 2011), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) and Hall (1990) — and will analyze whether this study provides additional value compared to these models. Section 2.8 will conclude the culture standards study, including theoretical and practical implications as well as suggestions for further research.

### 2.3 Definition of culture standards

Culture standards are processes of perception, thought, evaluation and action that the majority of the members of a particular culture regard, for themselves and others, as normal, typical and obligatory. Personal behavior and the behavior of others
is judged and regulated according to these central culture standards. The individual and group-specific manner of handling culture standards for behavior regulation can vary within a certain range of tolerance. Culture standards give orientation, and influence the perception of one’s material and social environment as well as one’s evaluation of things and people. They thus guide one’s actions (Thomas 2005, p. 45). Culture standards provide a regulatory function for mastering a given situation and dealing with people.

Krewer (1996, p. 150 f.) emphasized that culture standards have two characteristics. On the one hand, they show basic cultural differences between groups regarding their central organization of action, thinking and feeling. On the other hand, they point out potentially problematic situations in intercultural interactions. For Krewer, the most important feature of culture standards is that they are specific orientation systems that have the purpose of making one’s own and foreign processes of thought, perception, evaluation and action comprehensible and understandable in intercultural interaction situations. He sees culture standards as a means to self-reflect (of course, dimension models can also be means for self-reflection but they do not require it) and reflect on foreigners in intercultural encounters (Krewer 1996, p. 152). This is why culture standards can only be deduced from specific bicultural interaction situations between groups or individuals.

If culture standards are reflected in other aspects of science and society such as literature, sociology, ethnology and religion or other studies in comparative culture, then it can be assumed that they are central culture standards. Central culture standards are not only applied in specific cultural sectors, problem situations or a narrowly defined scope of action, but are characteristic behavioral patterns of a vast majority of the members of a specific country. They are valid for different cultural sectors, apply in different situations and are stable over time.

2.4 Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is based on the methodology for identifying culture standards as suggested by Thomas (1996) (see also Dünstl, 2005; Gruttauer, 2007; Schlizio, 2005). In parts, it has been modified and developed further. Where the methodology deviates from Thomas’s approach, it is mentioned explicitly and the reasons are explained.

2.4.1 The critical incidents method as a means of identifying culture standards

A person living in his or her own cultural orientation system is likely to be understood and accepted by others who share the same frame of reference and cultural orientation system. However, if people from different cultures interact, they tend
to judge the behavior of the other from their own culture’s orientation system (Edvardsson & Roos, 2000, p. 21 ff.). This might lead to critical incidents: situations in which people are confronted with unexpected behavior and reactions, the meaning of which is not clear to them and which cannot be deciphered on the basis of their respective and familiar cultural system of orientation (Göbel, 2003; Thomas, Kinnast, & Schroll-Machl, 2010, p. 17–28). Critical incidents can be negative, positive or neutral. However, they are usually negative because they pertain to observed behavior that differs from the person’s own cultural orientation system, which is regarded positively.

Cultural scientists working in the field of culture standards (e.g., Edvardsson & Roos, 2000; FitzGerald, Seale, Kerins, & McElvaney, 2008; Göbel, 2003; Thomas, 1996) generally agree that culture standards can best be identified by analyzing critical interaction situations in bicultural encounters. Therefore, this study used the critical incidents method to create a database from which German culture standards from a Dutch perspective could be identified.

Since the most practical approach for gathering critical incidents is interviewing people with experience in diverse intercultural encounter situations (Thomas, 1996), for example expatriates, that method was also applied to this study. Dutch people living in Germany were asked to describe situations in which their counterpart from the other culture reacted differently, unexpectedly or inexplicably (Thomas, 1996, p. 116 ff.). For instance, the first person interviewed in the course of this study described the following critical incident:

“In 2008, I climbed one step further on the career ladder. That same day, my supervisor said, ‘Ok, you have a new function, now you may choose a new car. You need a bigger car; how about a BMW 5 Touring?’ In the Netherlands, it is not self-evident that the company car you drive reflects your position in the hierarchy.”

Another interviewee related a rather positive critical incident:

“At my first meeting, I was pleasantly surprised. Even though everyone could state his or her opinion, the production supervisor and the manager made the decision. It took less than half an hour to get to a conclusion that everyone could live with. Back in my old company in the Netherlands, this discussion would have taken hours.”

2.4.2 Choice of interviewees

To gather critical incidents for identifying German culture standards, interviews were conducted with Dutch people living and working in Germany. The interviewees had to meet the following criteria.
First, only people who lived and worked (or had worked: two of the interviewees had retired shortly before the interviews) in Germany were chosen for the interviews. A second requirement was that they had regular contact with Germans, both at work and in their private lives, to ensure that a certain level of pressure for adaption to or integration in the German culture existed.

Another prerequisite was that the interviewees had to live at least 75 kilometers from the Dutch border. This regional differentiation is not found in Thomas’s (1996) methodology (see also Dünstl, 2005; Gruttauer, 2007; Schlizio, 2005). However, given that Germany and the Netherlands are neighboring countries, a regional differentiation made sense because it ensured that the interviewees spent most of their time in Germany. Particularly in the border region, there are many Dutch people who live and work in Germany but still spend a lot of time in the Netherlands or in the company of other Dutch people. Interviewing such people could have biased the results of this study.

According to Thomas (1996, p. 119–121), it is most effective to interview people about critical incidents when they have been in the country whose culture is to be analyzed for about three to four months. Research (e.g., Berry, 1985, p. 235–248; Bhawuk, 1998, p. 630–655) has shown that after three to four months, the first euphoria about the new country ceases and increased efforts toward cultural integration have to be made, leading to an accumulation of critical incidents. Thomas (1996, p. 119–121) expressed his concern that after being too long in the host country, interviewees might adopt the cultural orientation system of the host country and judge earlier critical incidents from the host country’s perspective.

For this study, the first three interviews were used to test whether the duration of stay had an influence on the critical incidents related. The first three interviewees had been in Germany for 10, 3 and 42 years (see Appendix 1). However, the analysis showed that there was no indication that Thomas’s concern was substantiated in the context of this study. Not only did the interviewees remember a lot of and similar critical incidents (see Appendix 2) and how they evaluated them, but they also had the ability to retrospectively state how typical those critical incidents were and how frequently they occurred. For this reason, a maximum period of time living in Germany was abandoned as a prerequisite for being interviewed. To be considered for this study, the interviewees just had to have lived in Germany for longer than three months to ensure that they were able to relate a relevant number of critical incidents.

To find people who met these criteria, contact was established via the internet with Dutch-German clubs such as the DNG Köln (German-Dutch association in Cologne) or the German-Dutch club in Recklinghausen. Most of the members of these clubs did not meet the criteria themselves, but they were often able to supply addresses of friends, colleagues or family members who did. Thirty-nine potential interviewees were eventually found via personal recommendations.
However, since the population of people who met the requirements was unknown, it was not possible to draw a random sample. There was thus a possible bias because it could not be completely ruled out that the sample of interviewees found was not representative of the whole population. One of the characteristics of the concept of culture standards is that they are often only valid for a certain cultural sector (Krewer, 1996). Since the aim of this study was to identify central culture standards (i.e., culture standards that are valid for the German culture as a whole), special care had to be taken to ensure that the culture standards deduced from the interviewees’ answers were valid beyond single cultural sectors.

When a population is unknown and cannot be estimated, statistical methods can be used to calculate the probability that a sample is representative of the population (cf. Hudec & Neumann, 2010). However, since this study used a qualitative approach, the sample size was not large enough for such a calculation (at least not large enough to get reliable results from such a calculation).

To minimize the potential bias of a sampling error, this study therefore tried to select a sample that was as heterogeneous as possible: interviewees with a variety of different socio-demographic backgrounds were chosen. Subsequently, their answers were compared to each other and it was analyzed whether one or more of them had stated a considerable number of critical incidents that the others had not stated. This would have been an indication that it could indeed not be ruled out that certain culture standards do not apply to certain cultural sectors and that the results of this study could not be regarded as valid for the whole German culture. Since a statistical analysis of the concordance of the interviewees’ answers was not feasible due to the relatively small number of interviewees, I merely checked whether there were critical incidents that were only stated by one or a few of the interviewees.

Eventually, 16 people were interviewed for this study. After 11 interviews a saturation point (cf. Ostertag, 2010, p. 4) was reached; the following 5 interviews provided no or only very few new critical incidents. For this reason, the 16 interviews were sufficient for the qualitative approach of this study.

Appendix 1 shows that the 16 interviewees covered a heterogeneous spectrum and represented a variety of cultural sectors: 10 of the interviewees were female, 6 male. Their ages varied from 26 to 65 years. Each of them had a specific (academic or professional) qualification (1 upper management, 3 middle management, 2 in public administration, 10 self-employed or qualified personnel) and worked in different industries and companies. They lived in different parts of Germany (11 people in North Rhine-Westphalia, 3 in Lower Saxony, 1 in Bavaria and 1 in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania). The names of the interviewees were anonymized and replaced by the pseudonyms In 1–16.

Appendix 2 shows that all the interviewees related similar critical incidents. This indicates that the potential bias mentioned above did not apply to this study. It could therefore be assumed that the German culture standards that were identified...