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## A FIRM SOFTNESS; A FIRST IDEA OF CULTURE

Cultural differences hardly get attention from people working with international contacts or in an international environment, let alone the consequences of these differences or the way they should be dealt with. We are not even aware of our own culture. We neglect culture because of its more or less automatic functioning in the background. However, it does determine important aspects of our behaviour. These may make or break an international contact or a stay abroad. On the other hand a full consciousness of our culture would be impossible. It would imply full consideration and evaluation of each behaviour, each thought and each emotion. We would block ourselves and hence, an inbuilt mechanism would take over for us, enabling us to turn our attention elsewhere.

Culture has an impact on the way you do your international business (e.g. consultations in the EU) or stay abroad and determines success or failure. An example may be found in the European Court of Auditors, in particular the divergent ideas about the control on expenditures. Southern European governments prefer controls prior to spending. The main question to be answered is then whether all conditions for realising the expenditure have been met. In the North of Europe control takes place afterwards. These two preferences are strongly linked to cultural perceptions. Another example may be found in the French character of the organisation and functioning of the European Commission.

Culture is not limited to differences between countries but also influences your own way of thinking, feeling and acting. It directly influences your way of living and your relations with other people. If you stay abroad for a longer period of time, you may recognise the effects of culture and try to deal with them by minimalising the negative consequences and maximising the positive aspects.

For these and other reasons knowledge and understanding of culture is required, as well as cultural differences ('us' and 'them') and ways and means to deal with these differences. This introduction provides you with a general overview of the topic. The reader also includes copies of the sheets I use during my presentations. The latter include the concept of culture, national cultural differences, values and possibilities for dealing with cultural differences.

Prior to any discussion of culture an important proviso has to be made. Each human being is part of a number of cultures (see below), influencing the very perception of culture – just like physics where the very observation of fundamental particles influences the object studied. This implies that a fully objective study of culture cannot be made. Culture has its effect on all and everything we do, think and feel, more often than not unconsciously. Indeed, none of us escapes culture and we would not even be human without it. Even the calculation of the cost of living indices in different countries has proven to be prone to cultural perceptions. For this reason of the fundamental nature of culture research often appears inconsistent or contradictory. Furthermore, perceptions of culture are irrevocably linked to one's own mental make-up.

Because of this personal involvement in each study of culture (the linkage between a person and his or her opinion of culture) you have to be aware of your own background and the reasons for knowing more about culture. I know for instance that my Roman catholic upbringing has had a much stronger effect than I would have guessed a few years ago. I obtained this bit of information about myself through the study of culture. I have also a more academic interest in culture. In a previous function I observed the cultural dimension of the transformation process in Central and Eastern Europe and recognised the need to stress this dimension. Just because culture has such wide and penetrating effects on human behaviour I developed the following more comprehensive view of culture.

### THE STUDY OF CULTURE

Although we all have some idea of cultural differences, a structured discussion proves to be rather difficult (also in view of the above mentioned proviso). The first problem in the study of culture is the definition of the object and the further delineation of the study. Such a definition tends to be elusive

due to the intangible nature of the object and the circumstance that a human being cannot function without it. Culture is us and we are culture; culture is all encompassing. Because we cannot step outside ourselves, the final word will never be said on the topic. An entomologist may study bees by placing a piece of red glass in the beehive (bees cannot see red light), but he cannot communicate with the bees.

However, thanks to the research methods of the social sciences we may research important aspects of culture. We may make observations, process and aggregate them, study the differences, interpret and draw some conclusions, all the time hoping for further refinement over time. Looking back to these efforts, we see hundreds of definitions on culture, each reflecting a slightly different intention or approach in trying to get a grip on the concept. These definitions may be divided in two groups: culture as in 'the arts' and culture as a condition of human behaviour. The two of them do not exclude one another but rather reinforce one another. Culture as a condition of human behaviour encompasses the expression of ideas in art.

This reader focuses on the second or behavioural concept of culture. The words 'condition of human behaviour' refer to a number of scientific disciplines, in particular cultural anthropology, sociology and psychology. The idea is the same each time: we may observe human behaviour and try to draw conclusions from this behaviour. The focal point for cultural anthropology is culture, for sociology the group and for psychology the individual person. Researchers try to understand from the behaviour of people and to formulate statements with a predictive validity: certain groups of people in certain circumstances show certain behaviour (or have a limited set of options for behaviour).

The conclusions and hypotheses of researchers form the concept of culture. It is not something we can touch, not a physical object but something we play around with in our heads. In the more technical sense of the social sciences we call a construct. Researchers use this construct in their efforts to explain behaviour. In this way researchers need 'national culture' as one of the differences between two groups of people from different countries. In those cases talents and environment no longer provide sufficient explanations. Only theoretically you may imagine two groups of people with only cultural differences but in reality all kind of other aspects have their effects (e.g. place of living, contacts with others, race). We still do not have the answer to the nature – nurture debate but more and more research point to the fact that the two go hand in hand.

The study of culture started over one hundred years ago within anthropology, later more specifically cultural anthropology. At the time such studies were a natural complement to the discovery of the world, studying other peoples, in particular far-away 'odd' tribes in 'dark Africa'. Sometimes researchers did not even consider these people human beings and hence, in their perception we were free to study them as if they were animals. However, once the human dimension was recognised, these people 'needed to be civilised' and converted to Christianity in the process. Many of these studies had a built-in assumption of these tribes being backward in their development and the West – being at the cutting edge of development - would take care of them. These studies matured when more information became available, e.g. from people who lived among those tribes (participatory observation). Over the decades researchers and their objects developed a more equal balance of mutual respect.

At that point in time cultural anthropology started to recognise that the observations of and conclusions on those far away peoples might be applied to the Western world itself, enhancing our understanding of our own civilisation. Later still some people in the West even wondered whether their own civilisation was really at the top of human development.

The step from cultural anthropology to sociology is relatively easy to make. Cultural anthropology and sociology both study groups of people. Furthermore, culture fits well in the wide variety of techniques and perceptions of sociology. Culture is then one of the possible research objects, describing and explaining the behaviour of groups of people from this specific angle.

Within such a way of thinking we may also make the step to psychology. The characteristics of a group are not floating in the air but are somehow part and parcel of individuals and their brains. Psychology studies the thinking processes of individuals and this may include the elements of why a person belongs to different groups. As Kottak says: *Cultures train their individual members to share certain personality traits*<sup>1</sup>.

The psychological aspects of culture, however did receive up till now less attention than the sociological aspects. Some special topics were studied, such as the attachment problems of children who are raised mostly outside their own culture. Psychology nevertheless offers good opportunities to enhance the understanding of culture. One of the interesting starting points may be found in the theories over the development of personality. None of these theories is complete or comprehensive and all of them includes disclaimers like 'context' or 'environment'. If we would fill these openings in the different theories with culture, I am convinced we would make major inroads into both culture and psychology.

#### DEFINITIONS

Against this background of a wide variety of studies over more than a century we should not be surprised to find many different definitions of culture. An early definition from cultural anthropology is E.B. Tylor in 1971:

“Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”<sup>2</sup>

The key point here is that culture is not nature but nurture, something we learn.

An often cited definition from later days of cultural anthropology is by Kroeber and Kluckhohn.

“Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditioning elements of future action.”<sup>3</sup>

This definition relates to the already mentioned keywords 'group' and 'behaviour'. Furthermore, culture is shared within the group and it determines not only behaviour but also perceptions of reality and hence, the interpretation of experience. This definition also contains also the by now familiar idea of transfer from people who already have a given culture to people without that culture, in particular the intergenerational passing on of culture. However, this perception may put us on the wrong footing when discussing specific subcultures. In a specific youth culture hardly any age differences exist, its members do not belong to one social group and concepts like 'achievement' and 'traditional' are hardly applicable. Everybody in the subculture of for instance a disco nevertheless learns the socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Group and behaviour are also as mentioned before, core topics of study within sociology. Hofstede and Trompenaars are two well known researchers in the field of national cultural differences. Hofstede worked in the seventies at IBM and used available material (32 questions out of IBM's opinion research programme, related to 72 national offices with people in 38 functions, in 20 different languages and collected between 1968 and 1972)<sup>4</sup>. He applied a thorough statistical analysis (multivariate factor analysis) on a large number of questionnaires and concluded that the answers to the questions could be divided in four groups. If the answer of the respondents within one country on a specific question tended in one direction, the answers within the same cluster proved to be related. A decade later Trompenaars used the same technique, all differences notwithstanding.

Hofstede defines culture as collective mental programming which differentiates the members of one group or category of people from those of others<sup>5</sup>. This sounds much more big brother like than

intended. It concerns the thinking of people in certain patterns, just like computer programmes. The latter however, are less flexible than the thinking of people. Furthermore, the thinking has an collective element, the thinking of a group of people in a similar way. Hence, Hofstede regards culture as a more or less fixed way of thinking. It results in behaviour, although that has not been mentioned in the definition. The same applies for the concepts of norms and values which belong to the core of culture.

Criticism of other researchers focuses on two points. The first is that Hofstede would have used existing materials and derived his theory from these. If the questionnaire does not cover certain aspects, the results will not reflect these aspects either (the reverse of the former IBM slogan: garbage in, garbage out). The question is then what the validity of the questionnaire is for the research of culture and on which this questionnaire was based. Secondly, only IBM staff filled out the questionnaire. Hofstede mentions on this point that just because all respondents were IBM employees, the only difference is culture (selective sample). He recognises that these IBM managers are not representative for national populations (a Dutch IBM employee is not representative for Dutch culture). However, in his opinion they do not need to be representative, only functionally equivalent, based on the idea that each country follows a similar recruitment policy<sup>6</sup>.

Trompenaars based his research on approximately 50,000 questionnaires from more than 100 countries. He does not give a strict definition of culture but rather a description<sup>7</sup>. Culture is a collective system of meaning with a number of layers. The outside, the easiest aspect to be observed, shows explicit products of culture, such as language, food, architecture and art. One layer deeper we see the norms and values. The core consists according to Trompenaars of assumptions related to our existence or solutions to the problems of life. These are dilemmas which he further divides into the relations between people, the experience of time and the relationship between men and nature.

The reality of doing international business resulted in a number of interesting definitions, such as the approach by John Mole<sup>8</sup>. From the title of the Dutch translation of one of his books I derive a practical definition of culture: the way we do things here. Culture is then a specific behaviour, limited to time and place. The word 'here' expresses both limitations. At another time and in a different place we do things differently.

Culture: the way we do things here!

International business has an open eye for cultural differences, while government hardly so. Although governments nearly by definition operate in an international environment, they did take cultural differences into consideration or the consequences for international relations. For this reason government does not contribute to further understanding of culture.

#### A LAYERED CONCEPT

This introduction aims at giving you a preliminary idea about what culture is and sufficient background for further explorations. The general idea is to see culture as the background to the behaviour of groups of people at a given time and place. However, different researches into one and the same national culture sometimes appear to have little in common. Such differences should not surprise us because national cultures are composed of a large number of elements, each with a different weight. The one element has a stronger impact on external observation than the other. Although hardly anybody will deny the differences between countries, the descriptions of these differences vary considerably. This is also influenced by the background of the observer; from which culture does he or she come, to what degree is he or she taking cultural differences into account and what background information is available?

The difficulty results in part from the layered nature of culture, as demonstrated in figure 1. The drawing represents four levels of culture, from top to bottom the levels the state, the organisation, the

small group (team, family) and the individual. By distinguishing between these four levels you may be more specific and more consistent on what you are discussing and hence, avoid confusion. In this way a proper understanding of culture may be obtained.

The graphic representation in the form of a triangle indicates an ever smaller number of people from top to bottom. At the same time each layer is interrelated with the others. However, this representation is in itself a nice demonstration of cultural consequences. When this triangle was used during a lecture on culture, one person in the audience pointed out that the triangle representation gives the idea of culture bearing down on the individual, making the individual more or less the victim of culture. He proposed to present the same idea in the shape of four concentric circles with the individual in the middle. That, however, is giving too much credit to the individual (the individual in the middle of the circle) to our liking, as if s/he is the core of existence. The triangle on the other hand depicts the idea of an exchange between individual and group, between determining and being determined and between influencing and being influenced. Furthermore, such a drawing with concentric circles makes it difficult to recognise that the individual is a member of many different groups.

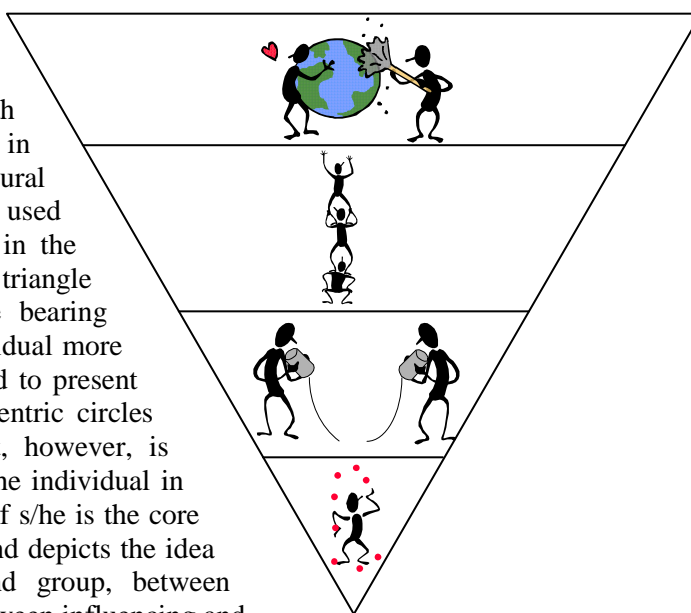


Figure 1

At the bottom of the triangle we see an individual with juggling balls, trying to keep them all in the air. These balls represent the different groups and hence the different cultures the individual belongs to. Each person belongs to many different groups, each with different characteristics and intensity. These groups vary from virtual to realistic. Realistic groups may indeed come together (e.g. the staff of one department, the members of a family) and virtual groups only share certain characteristics (e.g. the group of all women in a society, all academics worldwide, leisure time coaches of the sports team of son or daughter, Saturday supermarket visitors). Each group results in different behaviour on the basis of different cultures and the individual person switches continuously between these cultures. In this sense one may say that one's identity is the sum of one's (sub)cultures.

On this level culture results in individual behaviour. A number of individuals however, may show similar behaviour and may share at that moment some culture, causing similar behaviour. Group behaviour may be related to pressure in different degrees. The question is who exercises this pressure and for what reason but also why the individual adapts him/herself accordingly (socialisation processes). Answers may be found through sociological and psychological approaches of culture. The same applies to socialisation processes.

One level up you see the small group, e.g. a family or a project team. At this level interactions with others and communication are added. The individual meets others and has to clarify his/her position, defend his/her interests, ask something etcetera. However, the individual is still recognised as such, an individual person with all his/her good and bad habits and other characteristics.

One more layer up and we come to the level of a company. The picture shows three people standing on top of one another, representing hierarchy. However horizontal an organisation may be, someone is ultimately responsible, implying that no organisation goes without hierarchy. The important thing at this level is that persons do not count on this level as individual persons but rather as people who fulfil certain functions within the objectives of the organisation. People at this level are important for their role, not who they are.

Finally, at the top we see culture on the national level or the state with patriotism and the like. People are not recognised as individuals but rather as numbers in a population. As a whole they represent that state, they form the political, economic, cultural and other power factors of the state in the international arena.

A state in turn consists of many different organisations, small groups and individuals. The triangle clearly clarifies that culture at the national level is an aggregated concept; an average, which gives an overall idea but which also does not do justice to individual persons. I am not my national culture; I only contribute to it.

#### TWO PROCESSES

The four layers of culture as described above, do not only differ from one another but they also show similarities. At each level two similar processes may be perceived, even if they differ from one another in their expression (fractal<sup>9</sup>). These two similarities are answers to the search of individuals and groups for identity and certainty.

Regarding identity I mentioned already the idea that an individual person switches continuously between the cultures of all groups in which s/he participates. This implies that individual identity is not something that stands on its own. People try to define their identity in an exchange between the individual and the group. At the one but lowest level identity is defined as member of a family or of a working group. One level higher people derive identify from the organisation for which they work (loyalty to the employer). At the highest level an individual obtains the nationality of a state. Looking back to the practical definition of culture given, identity is shown in the word 'we'.

At the same time people try to avoid uncertainty (up to a point; some cultures allow much ambiguity). The way in which this happens, differs again from one level to the other. The larger the group, the more it may offer a sense of security (more people, more defence). At the same time it demands increasing adaptation of the individual and hence, loss of autonomy. This quest for certainty is also reflected in the practical definition. As long as you act according to the norm of the group, you do not have any problem.

The search for identity and certainty may take many forms and result in many different answers. These answers are presented in or expressed through a more or less coherent package, the fundament of our thinking, feeling and behaviour, culture for short.

#### RELATED CONCEPTS

Culture relates to quite a number of concepts. I will mention just a few because they may help you in getting a grip on another culture. They are value, norm, belief, attitude, ideology, institution, symbol and hero. I will discuss these terms but not elaborate on their interdependency or whether some are more fundamental than others.

##### *values and norms*

Values are fundamental orientations about what is good and bad ("deeply rooted dispositions, orientations, or motives guiding people to act or behave in a certain way"<sup>10</sup>), irrational convictions and relative to one another. They are often mentioned in the same breath with norms, because norms are the application of values in day-to-day reality, the actual expression of values.

Although some people say otherwise, the question remains whether truly universal values exist, like freedom, democracy, justice or welfare. The question is related to the question of universal human rights. If such universal values do exist, they form only a small part of the values of a given society. In order to know the values of a country, you need a thorough understanding of that country, something

you normally only acquire after a couple of years. However, you may read on the history of the country, its institutions (see below) and its culture, giving you an appropriate first idea to develop your knowledge of the country in question in more detail.

Both values and beliefs represent fundamental opinions of people but within different domains and with a different nature. Some researchers do not make the distinction between the two and only discuss values, implicitly taking beliefs on board. To avoid confusion I will use the terms values in the narrow sense and values in the wider sense. The former represents values as just being defined above, the latter the combination of values in the narrow sense and beliefs.

### *beliefs*

If values are about what is good or bad, beliefs are about true and false<sup>11</sup>. Beliefs are rational convictions; they exist as such (in contrast to the relative nature of values). Hence, they are the product of reasoning and exist as such. What we said on obtaining an understanding of values also applies to the understanding of beliefs.

### *attitudes and ideology*

Wood defines attitude as “approval of, or agreement with, or disapproval of, or disagreement with, some external object, or possibility” and ideology as “a systematic doctrine of human life; an ideology provides direction (an end state) and specifies appropriate behaviour (means) for achieving this end<sup>12</sup>. Ideology is strongly linked to personality. It also provides a framework to business. Attitudes and ideologies are easier to recognise than values and beliefs but still take time through reading and discussing.

### *institutions*

Institutions in a sociological sense are not organisations or buildings but rather collective ways of thinking, feeling and acting (derived from Durkheim). Prof. Zijderveld mentioned in an interview: “Institutions are social traditions and patterns of conduct, such as the family, the church, the neighbourhood. They are not empty; they contain values. They give meaning to a relation<sup>13</sup>. Even a small group of people meeting one another at a fixed day of the week for drinks may already be an institution. Institutions are relatively easy to recognise in another society, just because they are more or less concrete, important to people and topics of discussion. Institutions may also be the starting point for a further understanding of values. However, if institutions become only functional by losing their values, they will continue to exist for a limited period as empty shells. The creation of new institutions is then in order but at the same time a difficult and slow process.

### *symbol and heroes*

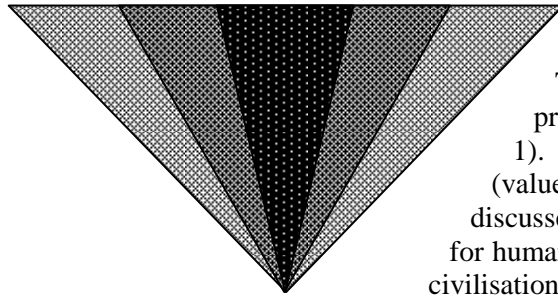
If values belong to the core of culture, symbols and heroes may be considered as the more external aspects of culture. Symbols are a representation of an idea, whether physical or not, a shorthand for a specific element of world of ideas of a given culture. Windmills in the Netherlands have a symbolic function because they stand for the way the Dutch created land from water and ultimately for the Dutch conviction that man controls nature (rather than being controlled by nature). In the same vein heroes are an expression in human form of what is considered to be of key importance. Heroes may be a good example of the layered nature of culture; within one culture the same person may be a hero for one group of people and not for another group of people.

## A FURTHER PERSPECTIVE

The four layers of figure 1, the two common processes and the related concepts depict a general picture of culture. At all four levels culture is a firm softness, soft in the apparent appearance but firm

in the consequences for the behaviour of people. Two more elements need to be added, one the place of culture within human history and the other values as the core of culture.

The layered nature of culture consists on the one hand of the number of people involved in a culture and of the role of culture in assigning meaning to human existence on the other. I will clarify this once



**Figure 2**

again with a triangle (figure 2). It consists of three overlapping triangles, light, medium and dark grey. The medium grey triangle represents culture as presented above (the triangle with four layers of figure 1). The dark one represents values in the wider sense (values and beliefs), key concepts of culture. They will be discussed in more detail below. The outer, light triangle stands for human history, in particular the history of civilisations. Each civilisation may be characterised by its culture but a civilisation is wider than culture.

Each civilisation answers at least two questions, which have a formative impact on culture. The first question is about organisation. How are state and society organised? Think for instance about the Roman empire in all its variations and you see the consuls on the Forum, the criminals in the Colosseum and the armed forces on all the roads to and from Rome. Organisation in this sense has to do with the way people live together in a fixed and orderly way over a longer period of time (generations). This is a much wider concept than for instance a constitution and encompasses all the habits, assumptions, perceptions, written and unwritten rules for the fulfilment of individual and collective needs and goals.

A civilisation also has an answer to a second question, the question of death (phrased in this way to be neutral towards religions). This question consists of three sub-questions: where are we coming from, why are we on earth and where are we going to after death? The answers to these questions give meaning to the existence of mankind and form a key element of culture. You may discuss whether religion is (wholly or partially) part of culture or whether religion stands on its own (although possibly having an impact on culture). To do so, however, would jeopardise our neutral stand vis-à-vis religions.

An example of how Netherlands national culture may be derived from history may be found in Han van der Horst's *The Low Sky*<sup>14</sup>. The impact of history on culture will not be further elaborated and will be intuitively clear to most of you. To understand another country, you have to know about its history, normally by reading about it.

#### CULTURE ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Co-operation between countries shows cultural differences. The large differences are the easiest to notice, compared to e.g. differences between company cultures within one country. National cultural differences are a classic example of 'us' and 'them'; 'they' are doing things (sometimes) in strange ways; odd, why cannot 'they' do it our way? Many researchers tried to get a grip on these differences by conducting comparative studies between countries according to certain aspects. Hofstede used existing material and derived four dimensions from his analysis. His main research was done around 1980. Later he added a fifth dimension. Trompenaars did his work more than a decade later, developed his questionnaire on the basis of a theory on cultural differences and found seven dilemmas.

These studies give insight into the cultural differences between countries and also help to deal with them. However, rational understanding differs from emotional apprehension, does not automatically result in different behavior or adaptations in communication. If you really want to bridge cultural differences you should be willing to adapt. However, by stressing the differences we should not forget the commonalities. We are all human beings and have more in common than what divides us.

The research by Hofstede results in easy to use key figures per country. However, this cannot be stressed enough, these figures are not more than aggregates of individual perceptions and an individual person never fits completely his or her national average. Furthermore, a national culture consists of many subcultures, which may vary considerably from the overall picture. Next to this rather general word of caution, other researchers have expressed methodological criticism, requiring even more caution in the use of this research. One point concerns the fact that all questions have been submitted to managers of one international company. Hofstede mentions on this point that hence the only difference between these managers may consist of culture. The counter question is whether and to what degree these managers are representative for their national culture. Is a Dutch manager of an international company representative for Dutch culture? However, we should keep in mind that this research was an innovation, the first large-scale sociological comparative research of national cultures.

Hofstede defines the original four dimensions as follows<sup>15</sup>:

1. Power Distance: the extent to which the less powerful members of society accept that power is distributed unequally
2. Masculinity versus femininity
  - Masculinity: the dominant values in society are achievement and success.
  - Femininity: the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life.
3. Individualism versus collectivism
  - Individualism: people look after themselves and their immediate family only
  - Collectivism: people belong to in-groups (families, clans or organizations) who look after them in exchange for loyalty.
4. Uncertainty Avoidance: the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations.

For each of these four dimensions Hofstede developed lists of characteristics for scoring either high or low on a given dimension. He also ‘translated’ the four dimensions to business environments. Below you find the scores of some selected countries according to these four dimensions (on a scale from 1-100) as an example of this research.

COUNTRY	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance
Austria	11	55	79	70
France	68	71	43	86
Germany	35	67	66	65
Japan	54	46	95	92
Netherlands	38	80	14	53
USA	40	91	62	46

Trompenaars<sup>16</sup> perceives culture as finding answers to the key dilemmas (in contrast to the dimensions of Hofstede) of life. People find their own positions somewhere between the two extreme positions and may move back and forth between those positions. Trompenaars does not give figures per country but he does show how populations in different countries answer to questions, related to his seven dilemmas. These seven dilemmas are divided in three: He formulated three domains: relations between people, attitudes to time and attitudes to environment. The first one (relations between people) is further split in five.

1. relations between people
  - universalism versus particularism

- o universalist: obligation to adhere to standards which are universally agreed to by the culture in which we live; rule-based; abstract
  - o particularist: focus on the exceptional nature of present circumstances
  - individualism versus communitarianism: what we want as an individual versus the interest of the group we belong to (prime orientation to the self; prime orientation to common goals and objectives)
  - neutral versus affective
    - o neutral: not showing emotions, keep them carefully controlled and subdued
    - o affective: showing our emotions, also receiving an emotional response.
  - specific versus diffuse: degree to which we engage others in **specific** areas of life and single levels of personality, or **diffusely** in multiple areas of our lives and at several levels of personality at the same time
  - achievement versus ascription
    - o achievement: accord status to people on the basis of their achievements (achieved status); refers to doing
    - o ascription: accord status to people on the basis of age, class, gender, education etc. (ascribed status); refers to being; logically or not logically connected with business effectiveness
2. attitudes to time
- sequential (line of events) versus synchronic (cyclical and repetitive)
  - we think about past, present and future with relative time horizons
3. attitudes to environment
- survival meant acting against and with the environment; economic growth has to do with controlling nature
  - inner directed: societies believe that they can and should control nature by imposing their will upon it; this kind of culture tends to identify with mechanisms
  - outer directed: societies believe that man is part of nature and must go along with its laws, directions and forces; tends to see an organisation as itself a product of nature

Although the research by Hofstede and Trompenaars is based on tens of thousands of questionnaires in dozens of countries, they show different pictures. Hofstede sees for instance the Netherlands as a country with limited power distance between people, a high femininity (focused on the quality of existence and care for others), individualistic and average on the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Trompenaars perception of the Netherlands is strongly universalistic, moderate individualistic, neutral in showing emotions, strongly specific, inclined to according status on external characteristics (ascriptive), with fairly long time horizon (less so to the future than to the past) and inner directed.

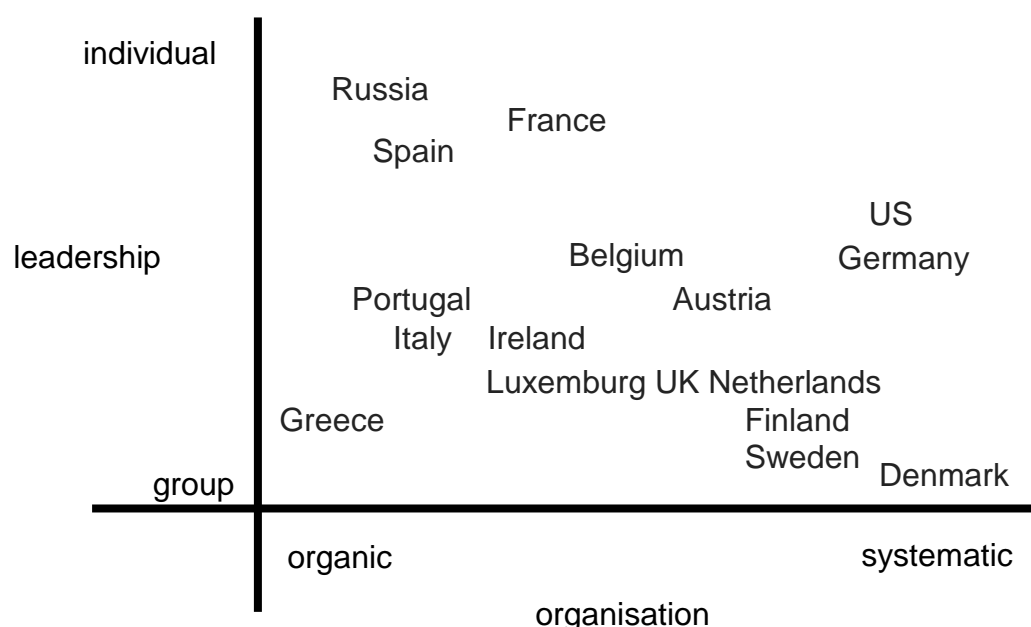
These differences should not surprise you. A national culture is of course composed of a large number of different elements, each with a different weight. One element may have a stronger effect on the external perception of culture than another. Although nobody denies the differences between countries, the descriptions of these differences vary widely. This is also influenced by the background of the observer: what is his or her (sub)cultural background, does s/he perceive cultural differences and to what degree and what is his or her background? Other causes for differences in perceptions of national cultures may be the result of another point in time of the research, the theoretical framework, the research method and the target group.

These differences between the results of two researchers, both dealing with the same, established culture, highlight the point that their results only should serve as a source of inspiration. Building up experience with cultural differences over time, you will prefer the one point over the other on the basis of your own individual preferences<sup>17</sup>. By then you have discovered what for you, again as an individual, is an important indicator of cultural differences.

The linkage between national culture and company culture is not always simple or direct. Even if only Dutch people work in a company with full Dutch property, national and company culture will not coincide. The Dutch people bring of course their culture with them but nobody fits exactly in the

national picture. The accidental combination of those employees is one factor, the mentality of the owner or the one who established the firm another. The realisation of company objectives has also its effects, in contrast to a national culture which does not serve directly one purpose. These and some more factors make their own, unique combination.

The linkage between national cultures and company cultures is demonstrated John Mole<sup>18</sup>. He gives a clear picture based on research personal experiences as an international consultant. In the graph below business cultures are plotted on the axes of leadership and organisation. The horizontal axis represents the form of the organisation, ranging from organic to systematic. An organic organisation grows over time and gets its shape as a result of all developments with a major impact on the organisation. A systematic organisation is one, which is designed as if on the drawing board and implemented as such. The vertical axis depicts leadership, from individual to collective leadership (from the strong boss to the management team). On the one end you may find the strong boss or the single owner who established the firm, on the other the management team. The dominant company culture according to these axes has been indicated by country.



Philip d'Iribarne also clarifies the linkage between national and company culture. He investigated three identical aluminium melting plants of one company in France, the US and the Netherlands. He shows not only the differences in company cultures but also the linkage between the national culture and the national history<sup>19</sup>.

## VALUES

The core of culture consists of values in the wider sense (values in the limited sense and beliefs; see above). They shape the deepest and strongest motivations of people. Examples of values are justice, individual freedom and thrift. Norms are the translation of values in the day-to-day reality. Norms and values only change over years.

Research of values is difficult. Values are of course no concrete things but a deduction or interpretation of the behaviour of people; a construct. Furthermore, values are mostly unconsciously present in our thinking. Hence, we cannot ask for values directly. You might determine values by long-term observation but such an approach costs lots of time, the group should not be too large and the researcher gets more and more involved. A solution lies in carefully drafted questionnaires, asking all the time what people consider important, often on the basis of a series of alternatives.

Inglehart already mentioned the necessity of certain values for a functioning democracy and market oriented economy<sup>20</sup>. His theory has the change from the western, industrial society to the next phase of development (postmodern society) as a starting point, a similar change as the earlier one from agricultural to industrial society (the modernity discussion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Marx and Webers as the best known representatives). For the first time in history modern man in the West does not need to worry about survival, thanks to quite a number of provisions (retirement funds, illness insurance, unemployment benefits and the like). This development results in different values and beliefs. However, such a process is dependent on a number of conditions. Applying this theory of Inglehart to the development in Central and Eastern Europe we have to acknowledge that the populations in those countries need at least two generations to complete the desired transformation into democracy and market oriented economy.

Tilburg University has initiated a large-scale research project in the late seventies to outline the values of people in different European countries. This research through an extended questionnaire has been repeated twice with the intention to demonstrate possible changes. The last questionnaire was submitted to the respondents by the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000 in 32 countries, including Central and Eastern Europe, and dealt with values related to family, work, religion and politics. The first results have been published by the end of 2001<sup>21</sup> but only the percentages of the responses to the different questions. Further processing of this source material has just been released<sup>22</sup>. Question 54 of this questionnaire demonstrates perceptions about work, such as the self-responsibility of people, competition, role of the state, ownership of firms etc.).

54	Now I'd like you to tell me your views on various issues. How would you place your views on this A scale [1 to 10]?	
A	Individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves.	The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for.
B	People who are un employed should have to take any job available or lose their unemployment benefits.	People who are unemployed should have the right to refuse a job they do not want.
C	Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas.	Competition is harmful it brings out the worst in people.
D	The state should give more freedom to firms.	The state should control firms more effectively.
E	Incomes should be made more equal.	There should be greater incentives for individual effort.
F	Private ownership of business and industry should be increased.	Government ownership of business and industry should be increased.
G	Each individual should be responsible for arranging his or her own pension.	The state should be responsible for everyone's pension
H	Each individual should be responsible for arranging for his or her own housing.	The state should be responsible everyone's housing.
I	One should be cautious about making major changes in life.	You will never achieve much unless you act boldly.

The answers to this question 54 with nine contrasts show a number of interesting differences between countries. Below you find the answers of the respondents' group in the Netherlands, in Central and Eastern Europe and the total (the average of the answers in all 32 countries). However, not all countries did respond on all nine dimensions. The highest and the lowest value in each column has been printed in bold typeface.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Netherlands	<b>4.65</b>	5.22	<b>4.70</b>	5.49	6.09	4.42			
Estonia	6.08	<b>6.40</b>	4.39	6.11	6.88	5.74	7.71	6.24	<b>6.47</b>
Latvia	<b>6.68</b>	5.64	3.43	<b>7.36</b>					
Lithuania	5.38	5.39	3.99	<b>4.60</b>	4.81	4.94	<b>7.77</b>	6.10	<b>4.88</b>
Poland	5.75	4.39	3.99	6.64	6.09	5.78			
Czech Republic	4.90	4.69	3.25	6.03	5.48	4.71	6.61	5.77	
Slovakia	6.37	4.65	3.59	7.13					

Hungary	6.13	4.29	3.75	6.86					
Romania	4.82	4.99	<b>2.74</b>	6.19	<b>3.69</b>	4.38	6.38	4.34	4.96
Bulgaria	5.23	5.17	3.50	5.38	6.12	<b>4.24</b>			
Slovenia	6.54	<b>3.60</b>	3.24	5.54	4.05	<b>6.26</b>			
Croatia	5.21	4.91	2.93	5.03	4.43	<b>4.12</b>	6.31		
Belarus	5.64	5.84	3.67	4.80	5.27	5.24	7.19	7.04	6.28
Ukraine	6.07	6.28	4.05	5.42	<b>7.35</b>	5.60	7.63	7.12	5.84
Russia	5.70	6.11	4.09	6.08	7.15	<b>6.11</b>	7.73	<b>7.16</b>	5.38
Total	5.15	4.84	3.87	5.39	5.66	4.64	6.80	5.72	5.55

In column A most countries (with the Netherlands and Romania as exceptions) show a score larger than five. It implies a strong role of father state rather than individual responsibility in care for the individual. Column C only has answers smaller than 5, indicating that the populations in all countries mentioned are in favour of competition. The scores in column D are larger than 5 with the exception of the neighbouring countries Lithuania and Belarus. Hence, most countries prefer more state control of firms, including the Netherlands! Column E represents a preference for more rewards of individual efforts with the exceptions of Slovenia and Croatia.

We may read the table also in a horizontal way. We see that Estonia scores all the time higher than 5 with the exception of dimension C, indicating a preference for a strong role of the state next to individual liberty. A similar pattern may be found for Latvia, the Ukraine and Russia. Lithuania scores rather average with the exception of dimension G. High score on G – state responsible for everyone’s pension – are standard. Slovakia and Hungary score high on A (stronger role of the state than of the individual) and D (state control of firms).

The importance of value can hardly be overestimated. Gabriël van den Brink for instance clearly demonstrates the strong role of values in the developments in the Netherlands, marked by the rise to political fame of Pim Fortuyn<sup>23</sup>. His research focuses on the shifts in the political habitus of the Dutch people, an excellent area for seeing values at work. On the basis of societal changes Van den Brink differentiates between three types of citizens: the threatened citizen, the resigned citizen and the active citizen. The threatened citizen faces difficulties in dealing with societal changes and prefers an active attitude of the government. They liked Fortuyn because he promised a more active role of government regarding these problems, perceived and experienced as threats. The active citizen on the other hand wants an as limited as possible involvement of government because s/he may solve the problems him or herself. Fortuyn appeared to be an attractive alternative also for this group due to the promised of a leaner government.

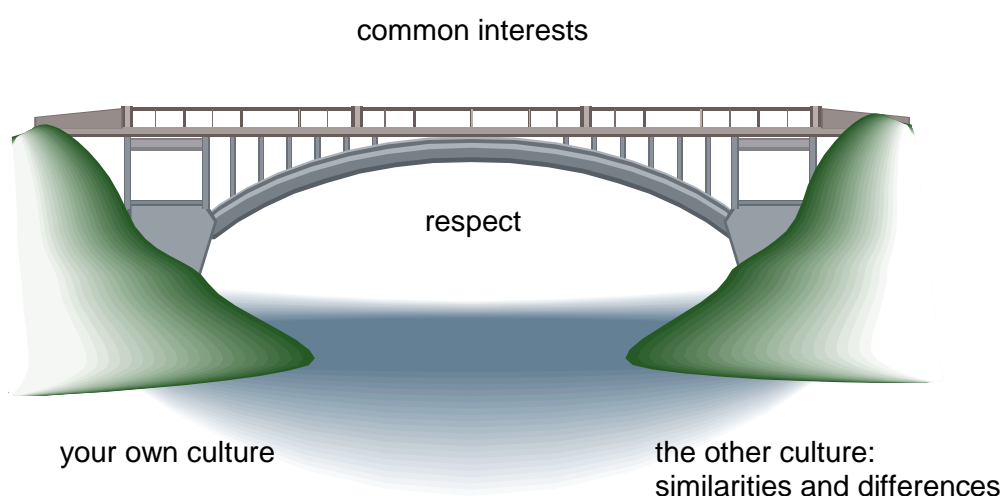
#### INTERCULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Although we may study and discuss cultural differences in much detail, we should not only focus on these differences. Emphasizing the differences may result in misunderstanding and conflict. Respect for these differences and trying to bridge them on the other hand, leads to comprehension and co-operation. Less conflict and more co-operation between people and countries are important conditions for progress. For this reason intercultural co-operation is ultimately of much more importance than the study of the differences. However, you have to know the differences in order to bridge them, to limit and neutralise their negative consequences and to use their positive aspects and potential, including your own adaptation to the situation. In the long run cultural understanding enhances the co-operation between people.

Wood<sup>24</sup> suggests that cultural differences may be bridged by personality and ideology. A drawing represents this hypothesis by showing cultures as columns of the same size (like the sovereignty of states in international law) and at equidistance from one another. If you try to apply this model to actual situations, you notice that the idea of ideology and personality bridging cultures is much too limited. It would imply that you may bridge the differences only if persons have a common personality and/or ideology. In reality more means exist to overcome the differences, boiling down to the

recognition of common interests. Furthermore, the distance between cultures may vary considerably and may even partially overlap. The idea that one national culture has the same size as another national culture may be understood in the sense of the importance of that culture to the population in question; not in the number of people involved or the effects of a culture on others.

On the basis of this idea and our own experience we rather depict the idea of dealing with cultural differences as a bridge between your own culture and the culture of the other party you are dealing with (figure 4). Such a bridge is founded on respect for the other as a fundamental condition, based on the equality of people<sup>25</sup>. Do not say that the other is behaving in an odd way, just accept the way he or she is behaving and try to understand where this behaviour is coming from. Respect implies a restraint in judgement on different behaviour and the start of a dialogue with the recognition that your own behaviour is strange to the other. Respect also implies a dialogue, aimed at co-operation. The second necessary condition (on the basis of this fundament) is the recognition of common interests. The picture also draws attention to the necessity of knowing your own culture; how does your own culture comes across to your discussion partner? Finally, the figure stresses the importance of trying to understand the culture of the other.



A simple or widely accepted method to deal with cultural differences does not exist. Definitions and methods are at present insufficiently clear or limited in their application. Furthermore, national cultures are hard to describe, because they consist of many different smaller scale cultures. Even if you would be able to find a comprehensive description of national cultures, you should adapt it to yourself, your individual perceptions, character and the like. In this way, you are once again referred back to yourself in trying to deal with cultural differences. However, the study of these differences gives you a handle, even if only by raising your awareness. Reading and talking about cultural differences shows the wide variety of what might happen and also what you may do.

From my own experience I would like to give you the following points of attention in dealing with other cultures.

- respect  
In the discussion above we already mentioned respect. It is considered to be a basic condition. Although it does not give you immediate answers on how to cope with the situation, you cannot start doing so without respect.
- mentality, background, development  
The difference in mentality is at the core of cultural differences and has ultimately to do with values and beliefs. However, you should be careful not to confuse it with background. If you have two students with different nationalities within one university, they may have a common understanding of physics, although the books they used at school are different. The books are part of a background, which is roughly speaking neutral in relation to mentality. In the same vein people

may be at different stages of development and as a result perceive differences, which are not necessarily of a cultural nature.

- give time, opening  
A specific aspect of respect is that you give other people an opening, the time to explain things. If you do not do that and you are the entire time ready with your judgement, you will never understand the culture of the other. In the end, you will be the victim of it, getting only a minimal result from your intercultural dealings.
- question yourself, never be satisfied about yourself  
One side of the bridge above states that you have to know what the perception of your own culture is from the other side. This also applies to you as an individual: how do you come across? Overbearing, shy, respectful, direct, dominant, polite... Both aspects, knowing yourself and your own culture may be difficult, just because you take so many aspects for granted, without thinking twice. Throughout your whole youth you have in fact been working on making things automatically, which you now need to recognise again.  
The difficulty of knowing your own culture is demonstrated by the diverging results of research into and foreign descriptions of the Dutch culture. All perceptions about a national culture however, are not more than averages because of its composition of many other cultures (organisational cultures, cultures of large and small groups and even individual cultures).
- transfer of information: form and content, interactive, variation  
Transfer of information in an intercultural context is much more difficult than in your own culture, even if you could use the same language. Communication consists for 55% of body language, 38% of the tone of your voice and only 7% on the content of your words (in an intercultural setting more often than not in a foreign language). The (unconscious) interpretation of body language and tone of voice is very much determined by culture, all these automatic assumptions that flavour the statement by the other. Because of these circumstances, you have to do something extra to get your message across, in particular with lectures and trainings. It implies that you have to think more consciously about the form and content of your message than you would do in your own culture, you have to try to be as interactive as possible (the best learning situation for adults) and you need to include variations on your presentation (if one way does not appear to work, try another one).
- language! jokes: yes and no  
Another way of getting your message better across is by using jokes. Laughing relieves. However, few things are as dangerous as jokes in an intercultural context. Jokes may obtain quite a different meaning for the recipient than you intended. The difference may be in gender, the use of colour, political connotation, the meaning of flowers etc. but more often than not unknown to you. On top of that people in some cultures will laugh politely, giving you hardly a hint on what toes you have been stepping. On the other hand, again, jokes may help to bridge the differences. Hence, try to use jokes, but be very careful and try to test them beforehand.
- sensitivity for status  
People in quite a few countries attach much value to status, whether by achievement or ascription. If you are in such a situation the acknowledgement of status is of importance in order to avoid feelings of offence or impoliteness. An example from Indonesia concerns a Dutchman who was invited by his host to sit down. The Dutchman took the chair he favoured, not the chair indicated by the host. Later the Dutchman learned that chairs indicated had their own meaning in a process of ever increasing acceptance. This relationship at least got off at a wrong start.
- collectivity versus own responsibility  
In group oriented societies you should not expect too much self-responsibility because people within that culture have learned to follow the lead of the group. You have to convince the group first before you may expect the individual to act.
- obedience versus initiative  
In societies, which stress obedience you should be careful with taking the initiative. You are being served coffee or tea and you do not take sugar until indicated.

Again and again, respect and politeness are excellent starting positions, enabling you to avoid serious mistakes, even without understanding why. Many examples and anecdotes may be told, but they are

only sources of inspiration. Some theory may give you some background information. However, bridging the cultural gap depends in the end on individual persons with all their personal characteristics in a unique situation. You have to develop your personal style while keeping an open mind.

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- <sup>1</sup> Conrad Phillip Kottak: *Anthropology, The Exploration of Human Diversity*, Boston (McGraw Hill), 2000 (eight edition), p. 67
  - <sup>2</sup> E.B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture*, 1871/1958, quoted in Kottak, p. 62
  - <sup>3</sup> Nancy Adler: *International Dimensions of Organizational Behaviour*, 1996, South Western College Publishing
  - <sup>4</sup> Geert Hofstede: *Allemaal andersdenkenden, omgaan met cultuurverschillen*, Amsterdam, 1999, Uitgeverij Contact, p. 310 (translation in Dutch of *Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Mind*). Hofstede limited himself in his first analysis to 40 countries and random sample surveys of 50 people. He then added 10 more countries with smaller random sample surveys and three country groups.
  - <sup>5</sup> Hofstede, work quoted, p. 16
  - <sup>6</sup> Hofstede, work quoted, p. 310 and 311
  - <sup>7</sup> Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner: *Riding the Waves of Culture, understanding cultural Diversity in Business*, Londen, 1997 (Nicholas Brealey Publishing), chapter 3
  - <sup>8</sup> Mole, J. *Zo doen we dat! over het omgaan en samenwerken met Europeanen*, Schoonhoven, 1997, Academic Service; Dutch translation of *Mind your manners: Managing Business Cultures in Europe*
  - <sup>9</sup> This perception of similarities between different levels is called a fractal. A fractal is a term from chaos theory, which in turn discusses non-linear, dynamic systems.
  - <sup>10</sup> Halman, L.: *The European Values Study: A Third Wave. Source book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys*, Tilburg, 2001, EVS, WORC, Tilburg University
  - <sup>11</sup> Jack Denfeld Wood: The nature of ideology, in: *Mastering Management*, London, 1997, Financial Times Pitman Publishing, p. 616-617
  - <sup>12</sup> Wood, article quoted, page 617
  - <sup>13</sup> Martin Sommer: We zijn weer op de goede weg; interview with Anton Zijderveld, in: *De Volkskrant*, 23 november 2002; newspaper interview with prof. Zijderveld
  - <sup>14</sup> Han van der Horst: *The Low Sky*, Schiedam, 2001, Scriptum
  - <sup>15</sup> Hofstede, work quoted, pages 39 (power distance), 71 (individualism), 108 (masculinity) and 144 (uncertainty avoidance). After the conclusion of his original research he added a fifth dimension, long-term orientation or Confucian dynamism (p. 206-208).
  - <sup>16</sup> Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, work quoted, chapters 4-10
  - <sup>17</sup> Knowledge and understanding of one's own culture is an important condition for co-operation with people from other cultures. Concerning the Netherlands I refer to the still relevant work by H. Chorus: *De Nederlander uiterlijk en innerlijk*, Leiden, 1965, Sijthoff (fourth edition). An approach from a historical angle may be found in the already quoted work by Han van der Horst. For a comparative, qualitative study I refer to Philip d'Iribarne: *Eer, contract en consensus, Management en nationale tradities in Frankrijk, de Verenigde Staten en Nederland*, Amsterdam, 1998, Uitgeverij Nieuwezijds. The original publication by d'Iribarne is in French (*La logique de l'honneur*, 1989) and the Dutch translation summarizes the study in its title: Honour, Contract and Consensus, Management and national Traditions in France, the USA and the Netherlands. This study also links national and organizational cultures.
  - <sup>18</sup> Mole, work quoted, p. 265
  - <sup>19</sup> D'Iribarne, work quoted
  - <sup>20</sup> R. Inglehart: *Modernization and Postmodernization, cultural, economic and political change in 43 societies*, Princeton, 1997, Princeton University Press
  - <sup>21</sup> Halman, work quoted; question 54 on 161-170
  - <sup>22</sup> Wil Arts, Jacques Hagedaars, and Loek Halman (editors) in collaboration with Wim van de Donk and Ton van Schaik: *The Cultural Diversity of European Unity, Findings, Explanations and Reflections from the European Values Study*, Leiden – Boston, 2003, Brill
  - <sup>23</sup> Gabriël van den Brink: *Mondiger of Moelijker? Een studie naar de politieke habitus van hedendaagse burgers*, Den Haag, 2002, Sdu Uitgevers
  - <sup>24</sup> Jack Denfeld Wood: Culture is not enough, in: *Mastering Management*, work quoted, p. 417
  - <sup>25</sup> See for instance Richard Sennet: *Respect in een tijd van sociale gelijkheid*, Amsterdam, 2003, Uitgeverij Byblos; translation of *Respect. The formation of character in an age of inequality*