

Developing a high quality intercultural relationship: expatriates and their local host

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This is the accepted version of the following article: Van Bakel, M.S., Van Oudenhoven, J.P., Gerritsen, M. (2015). Developing a high quality intercultural relationship: expatriates and their local host. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 3(1), pp. 25-45, which has been published in final form at <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/JGM-04-2014-0009>.

DOI: 10.1108/JGM-04-2014-0009

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Abstract

Purpose – Our qualitative study examines the development of purposely created interpersonal relationships in an intercultural context. Contact with a local host is a way of helping expatriates deal with the challenges of an international assignment. Since the quality of contact with the host is pivotal to benefit most from this experience, this paper examines which factors influence contact quality.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted a case study analysis of thirty-three expatriates and ten accompanying partners who were put in touch with a local host, with whom they undertook a broad range of activities during a period of nine months.

Findings – Nine factors influenced the development of the contact (similarities, motivation, benefits, anxiety, expectations, busy schedules, suboptimal timing, communication breakdown, and cultural differences). Key factors were similarities, motivation and benefits.

Research limitations/implications – While some of the factors (e.g. similarities) are predictable according to the Social Penetration Theory, four factors were uniquely applicable to purposely created relationships such as contact with a local host: motivation, expectations, anxiety, and suboptimal timing.

Practical implications – Our study provides suggestions that could stimulate the contact with a local host, making the intervention more valuable for organizations who wish to support their expatriates in this way.

Originality/value – This longitudinal study is one of the first to examine in detail the process of development of purposely created interpersonal relationships in an intercultural context.

Furthermore, our study is new because it also examines *unsuccessful* relationships.

Keywords: Contact quality, local host, expatriate support, intercultural friendship, social penetration

Article type: Research paper

Introduction

The general gist of the expatriation literature is to improve the expatriate experience and thereby minimize the number of underperforming expatriates, who might even return early from their assignment. Expatriate assignments are a strategically important but costly means to fill a position abroad; the direct and indirect costs involved warrant our research attention into areas such as expatriate selection and training, performance management, and the adjustment of expatriates and their families. A burgeoning area in International Human Resource Management is the important role that contact with host nationals or locals can play – both at work, for example as socializing agents or in a liaison role (e.g. Selmer, 2001; Toh and DeNisi, 2007; Vance, Vaiman, Andersen and Gale, 2014) and outside of work (e.g. Geeraert, Demoulin and Demes, 2014). These and other studies show that contact with locals can stimulate various aspects of expatriate and spouse adjustment (e.g. Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater and Klein, 2003; Shaffer, Luk and Gilley, 2000).

One of the theoretical lenses the above mentioned studies employ is social capital: “the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243). Many of the studies, however, have exclusively focused on the benefits of contact with locals within the workplace (e.g. Bruning, Sonpar and Wang, 2012; Liu and Shaffer, 2005), thereby restricting their definition of social capital. We believe that it is important to also examine social ties outside of the workplace because social capital usually includes resources embedded within any relationship an individual has (e.g. Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Social contact with host nationals can have extensive benefits. First, according to the culture learning model expatriates can learn about the new culture through contact with locals – through observation or discussion (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). Second, host nationals can be an important source of social support in a time when most of the social network has been left behind. The stress and coping model posits that social support is an essential resource to deal with the stresses associated with the cross-cultural transition (Ward *et al.*, 2001).

It is not always easy, however, to get in touch with locals; many expatriates stay in a so-called ‘expatriate bubble’ and get more support from co-nationals than from host nationals (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). One solution is to put expatriates in touch with a buddy or local host, with whom they have

regular social contact. Van Bakel and her colleagues conducted a randomized controlled experiment where 33 expatriates who were put in touch with a local host were compared to 32 expatriates without a local host. This contact took place outside of the workplace to study the benefits of social contact with host nationals in the private sphere. They found that contact with a local host resulted in increased *Interaction Adjustment* (Van Bakel, Gerritsen and Van Oudenhoven, 2011), increased social support from host nationals (Van Bakel, Van Oudenhoven and Gerritsen, 2010), and a buffering effect with regard to *Openmindedness* and *Social Initiative* (Van Bakel, Gerritsen and Van Oudenhoven, 2014). In short, expatriates with host communicated more easily with locals in general, received more social support from locals, and remained open-minded and socially active. Furthermore, Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven (2013) found that the quality of the contact was pivotal: the higher the quality of the contact, the more benefit the expatriate derived.

While these studies have shown that contact with a local host has clear benefits for expatriates in the area of adjustment, social support and intercultural competence, especially if the contact between expatriates and their local host is of high quality, they do not specify how high quality contact is established. This is very relevant for various reasons. First, although a good theory exists to explain how interpersonal relationships develop – the social penetration theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973; see next section) – there is no evidence, to the best of our knowledge, of whether these mechanisms also drive relationships that are purposely created. Furthermore, although some research has focused on social penetration processes in an intercultural context (Gudykunst, Nishida and Chua, 1987), our knowledge about positive intercultural relationships is still scant (Bennett, Volet and Fozdar, 2013). There is a need to focus on “how to enhance the quality of intercultural friendships and how to make such relationships work” (Lee, 2006, p. 6). Also, much of the extant literature on intercultural relationship development focuses on international students, and not on expatriates. Finally, from a practitioner viewpoint, it is very relevant to study the factors that stimulate high quality contact because it will provide them with the means to favourably influence expatriate-local host relationships if they decide to implement such a programme in their organisation. The present study, therefore, explores the factors that influence the creation of high quality contact between expatriates and their local hosts.

We studied the experiences of thirty-three expatriates and ten partners who were put in touch with a local host for a period of nine months. During this time they undertook a broad range of

activities together with their host. Many went for drinks or had dinner, either in a restaurant or at home; some also took the opportunity to explore local attractions. They visited cities together or undertook activities such as a Spanish cooking workshop or a visit to the floral park *Keukenhof*.

We focused on Western expatriates in the Netherlands. Transitions to relatively close cultures¹ can pose unexpected problems due to the “presumed cultural similarity paradox” (Vromans, Van Engen and Mol, 2013). If cultures are similar on a superficial level, expatriates may unrealistically expect the culture not to differ at all. This lack of awareness of cultural differences can create difficulties. For this reason, it is important to address relocations within and between North America and Europe.

Developing interpersonal relationships

The social penetration theory of Altman and Taylor (1973) provides a framework for the development of interpersonal relationships. This framework was selected because it highlights three categories of factors that affect relationship development (personal characteristics of participants, outcomes of exchange and situational context) that can help explain how the relationship between expatriates and their local host developed, and could possibly be stimulated by an external party. Social penetration processes have been found to be generalizable to intercultural relationships (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1987).

Personal characteristics

First, Altman and Taylor (1973) list biographical properties, personality and social needs as personal characteristics that are important for the development of the contact. An important theory in this regard is the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971) because it posits that individuals with similar attitudes are more attracted to each other. This positive relationship also holds for individuals with the same abilities, opinions, emotional states, self-description, economic status, behavioural similarity and personality (Byrne, Griffitt and Stefaniak, 1967). Studies on the formation of intercultural friendships also point to the importance of similarities or homophily (e.g. Sias, Drzewiecka, Meares, Bent, Konomi, Ortega and White, 2008). Sudweeks, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida (1990) found that one needs some similarity in background, lifestyle, attitudes and values to move out of the low intimacy stage of relationship development. For this reason, it is

plausible that similarities between expatriate, partner and host would promote the development of high quality contact, pointing to the importance of matching both parties to each other on a number of characteristics.

Second, another personal characteristic is social need, which can be a possible fuel for the development of the contact (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Expatriates and partners would only sign up for contact with a local host if they feel the need to meet host nationals; for that reason this social need is a prerequisite for relationship development in the present study. Furthermore, a wish to share their experiences and solicit social support might lead to development of the contact during the project, as Karcher, Nakkula, and Harris (2005) showed in their study of children who were mentored by adolescents.

Outcomes of exchange

Second, Altman and Taylor (1973) define the outcome of the exchanges as important for the development of the contact. Participants continually evaluate the rewards and costs of interactions, looking at the pleasures, satisfactions, gratifications and fulfilment of needs, but also at the costs of these interactions. Behaviours might cost physical or mental effort, anxieties might need to be overcome or conflicting interests might need to be resolved; the greater the inhibition that must be overcome, the greater the costs. The participants then make forecasts of future interactions, resulting in judgments of whether they liked each other and would like to meet again. In these evaluations they balance both immediate and future rewards and costs. Especially the estimation of future rewards is important because if one expects rewards if the exchange were to become more intimate, the relationship would be propelled to move to new and potentially more satisfying interactions. Expatriates might derive benefits in the areas of social support and culture learning from their local host (Van Bakel *et al.*, 2014; Van Bakel *et al.*, 2010), and expect even more rewards if the contact continues and deepens which then might stimulate the development of the contact.

Situational context

Situational factors might also influence the development of interpersonal relationships (Altman and Taylor, 1973). A primary factor mentioned in the literature is proximity: the closer people lived to

one another, the more they interacted (Altman and Taylor, 1973). This is also applicable to intercultural relationships (Kudo and Simkin, 2003), suggesting the relevance of trying to reduce the geographical distance between expatriate and host. Furthermore, in the case of relationship development in an intercultural context an important situational factor is cultural differences. Having a different cultural background creates less similarity between two parties, especially if the cultural distance is great. However, this does not necessarily inhibit relationship development. Interestingly, Sias *et al.* (2008) found that both cultural similarity and differences could play a positive role in friendship formation; similarities in culture (e.g. two international students in the US who were both from Asian cultures) could help form the relationship, yet cultural differences were also found to have a positive impact because the respondents found them interesting. In our study, the cultural distance is relatively restricted due to our focus on Western expatriates in the Netherlands, yet cultural differences could still play a role in the development of the contact and make friendship formation more difficult (Gareis, 2000).

Various factors with regard to personal characteristics, outcomes of exchange and situational context (Altman and Taylor, 1973) might influence the development of the contact between an expatriate, partner and local host. To shed more light on the aspects that helped or hindered the development of the contact, we formulated the following research question:

RQ: Which factors influence the development of the contact between the expatriate, his/her partner and host?

Method

To examine the factors that influence the quality of the contact between expatriates, their partners and local hosts, we conducted a case study analysis of 33 expatriates and 10 accompanying partners who were put in touch with a local host for a period of nine months. We used four sources of information (see appendix 1 and 2): 1. *Interviews*: Semi-structured interviews were held with ten expatriates, four partners and five Dutch hosts (N = 19). During a window of about half a year (of 2 years of data collection in total) we asked every participant who finished the project whether they would be interested in an interview about their experiences; 2. *Diaries*: If the expatriate had an

accompanying partner, the partner was asked to keep a weekly diary during their participation. Although this diary study was a separate project with the aim of gathering ‘thick descriptions’ about the adjustment process of expatriate partners (Haslberger, Brewster and Hippler, 2014), the diaries also provided information about their experiences with the host. Eight of the ten partners did so and even three expatriates volunteered; 3. *Questionnaires*: After 5 and 9 months the expatriates and partners filled in a questionnaire, which included five questions about the contact with the host. 4. *E-mails*: About every four to six weeks the first author sent an e-mail to the host asking how the contact was progressing, which could provide valuable information about the contact between the expatriate, partner and host.

Throughout the paper we include the source of each quote, where E, P or H + number indicates the participant, with the source in upper case (I = interview, DW4 = diary week 4, E = e-mail, Q2 = second questionnaire, and Q3 = third questionnaire).

Participants

Expatriates could participate in the study only if they:

- were Western expatriates with English or French as first language²;
- were on a temporary job assignment of at least ten months;
- had been in the Netherlands for less than twelve months;
- did not have a Dutch partner.

Of the thirty-three expatriates who participated, the top three nationalities were French (40%), US American (18%) and British (24%). More than half were male (58%); fifty-two percent had a partner who also stayed in the Netherlands. Our sample included two dual-career couples of which both individuals (n = 4) were taken into account as ‘expatriate’ in this study according to our definition: “an expatriate is anyone who works outside of his or her home country, with a planned return to that or a third country” (Cascio, 2006, p. 176). Consequently, these respondents were not considered in the partner sample (see below). The expatriates were on average 34 years old and 39% had children. The expatriates had been in the Netherlands for six and a half months on average when they started in the project. While a quarter of the expatriates were on their first assignment, almost half of them had been abroad for more than 2 years. Almost two-third was planning to stay at least two years. Ten expats had non-working partners who also participated in this study. These

partners were all female. Again, the top three nationalities were French (50%), US American (20%) and British (10%). They were on average 36 years old and the majority had children (70%). Sixty percent of the partners had been in the Netherlands less than half a year at the time of participation. None of the partners was on their first assignment: 60% had up to two years of international experience. Seventy percent was planning to stay at least 3 years.

Instruments

We also gathered quantitative information about two aspects of the contact:

Frequency of Contact: The number of face-to-face meetings with the host.

Rating of Contact Quality: Participants with a local host were asked to assess the quality of the contact with their host after five and nine months on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*). To indicate the final evaluation of the contact by the expatriate and partner (if available), a composite score of their assessment of the quality of contact after nine months was created (with the score at 5 months as a substitute if the score at 9 months was missing).

Procedure

The participants in our study were solicited through a variety of channels: expatriate welcoming fairs, websites for expatriates, international schools, expatriate associations and (online) networks, company newsletters, and local newspapers. After registering, the expatriates were asked to fill in the baseline questionnaire as well as a form with questions (e.g. about hobbies) that could help to match the expatriate with a suitable host. After completing these questionnaires, the expatriates were put in touch with their local host, matching primarily for place of residence, age, and family situation (see below). The hosts were volunteers who did not work for the same company as the expatriate, and they were mainly found through our personal networks and through snowball sampling. The registration procedure for the hosts was similar to that of the expatriates. At this point in time, the partners were asked to keep a weekly diary until the third and last questionnaire.

Expatriates were put in touch with their host through an e-mail that contained a short introduction to both parties to facilitate the first contact. The first author kept in touch with the hosts via e-mail, and at regular intervals tokens of appreciation (e.g. Dutch recipes) were sent to the participants. Directly after filling in the third and last questionnaire, some of the expatriates,

partners and hosts were asked for an interview about their experiences. These participants were interviewed within two months after completing the third and final questionnaire.

Matching expats and local hosts

The literature review suggests some starting points for matching expatriates and their local hosts in order to maximize the chances for beneficial outcomes. Our study employed three main matching criteria: 1. Geographical proximity; 2. Similarity in age; and 3. Similarity in family situation (having a partner and children).

Geographical proximity was our first criterion because it simply makes it easier for people to meet up frequently (Altman and Taylor, 1973). The average distance between places of residence of expatriates and hosts was 10 km (M (SD) = 10.13 (11.32)). In fact, more than three quarters of the hosts (76%) lived less than 10 km away. Only in a few cases did the participants live further from each other, however, this did not necessarily preclude high quality contact. As one host noted, it is more practical if you live near each other [H27¹], but it also depends on whether there is a ‘click’ and whether one wants to make an effort or not [H43¹].

Second, following the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971), Brafman and Brafman (2010) argue the importance of similarities for ‘instant connections’. They cite some interesting research that shows that incidental similarities such as having a birthday in common might already lead to surprising effects on compliance (Burger, Messian, Patel, Del Prado and Anderson, 2004). Interestingly, Byrne (1997) showed that it was the *amount* of similarities that was important for attraction, not the importance of the topics. It did not matter whether the subjects were similar with regard to superficial topics such as taste in music or with regard to political opinions. This suggests that a matching process should try to match participants on as many characteristics as possible.

In our study we have focused on matching in terms of similarity in age and family situation. Unfortunately, as we did not have an extensive database of local hosts to choose from in every location, it was not feasible to match on more characteristics such as hobbies. In 75% of the cases the age gap between expatriates, partners and hosts was less than eight years. It seems that this is indeed a relevant matching criterion because in two cases the age gap (10 years and 23 years) was mentioned as a reason for the lack of the development of the contact.

In terms of similarity of family situation (having a partner, children), we were able to create 20 exact matches. If that was not possible, then single participants were matched only to participants with partner ($n = 7$), and participants with partner and children only to participants with partner ($n = 5$). Our study had only one exception, where an expatriate with partner and children was matched to a single host, and this expatriate said: “[...] *but it would have been better if they had a child of the same age because of the life style (different from that of a couple without children).*” [E25^{Q2}]

Contact with the local host

Expatriates and partners who were put in touch with a local host faced the challenge of building a relationship with their host. According to their own assessment, almost two thirds of the experimental group (64%) succeeded: they assessed the contact with the host as a 7 or more on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*) and met their host more than seven times on average during the nine months ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 4.15$). Almost half of this group (48%) met their host at least nine times. The remaining third of the expatriates (36%) evaluated the contact with their host as of low quality (≤ 5 on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*)). They also had a much lower frequency of contact with the host than those with high-quality contact: they met on average fewer than three times ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.93$) over nine months, with half of the expatriates (50%) meeting their host only once or twice.

The effects of frequency and appreciation of the contact were intertwined in this study. A bivariate Spearman correlation analysis showed a strong and positive correlation between the *Rating of Contact Quality* and the *Frequency of Contact* ($r_s = .61$, $p < .001$). This is understandable because contact with a local host is a new tie that needed to be established. For that reason, it is likely that the more frequent the contact became, the more the contact developed, and the higher it was rated on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*). It is impossible, however, to state anything with regard to cause and effect of the quality and frequency of the contact, because it is also plausible that a positive perception of the contact lead to more frequent encounters, or that they mutually influenced each other.

Data analysis

We conducted a case study to explore the factors that influence the development of the contact between expatriates and their local host. The core strength of case study method is exploration and

description (David, 2006), which is why we chose this method here. The subject of the case study were the 33 expatriates and 10 partners who were put in touch with a local host; a case study method may be applied to organisations or communities as well as individuals, as long as the object of study is a “coherent entity” (David, 2006, p. XXV). Our aim was to find out which factors contributed to the development of the contact in this real-life situation, and therefore, we used inductive content analysis to search for those factors in the qualitative data. Furthermore, we analysed the four highest and four lowest scoring cases to establish if certain factors are more important than others. These cases were selected by taking a maximum of five highest and lowest scores based on a composite rating by the expatriate, partner (if applicable) and host after nine months. This composite score showed the end evaluation of all parties involved in the contact.

Results

In our analysis we found several factors that influenced the development of the contact (Figure 1) which are described in this section, following the three categories of the Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973)

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

Personal characteristics

Among the personal characteristics that stimulate or hinder the development of the contact are similarities between the participants, their motivation to develop the contact and their expectations about it.

Similarities: Does it ‘click’?

In our matching, we took similarities in age and family situation into account. This provided a basis for the development of the contact, but were not necessarily the most important element. A popular expression that was used in this context, especially among the Dutch hosts, was “clicking” with the other person (“click”: n = 8; “no/not really a click”: n = 4). In the majority of the pairs (79%), either the expatriate or host (or sometimes even both) said something about (not) having something in common.

Although we were unable to specifically match for common interests, many pairs still found common ground to establish their relationship. An important reason might be that most hosts had also lived abroad or had travelled abroad extensively. In other cases, it was more unpredictable. An interesting illustration is the case of one local host, who asked in the interview whether she had been put in touch with the expatriate because of their mutual connection with Israel. Although the registration form had registered that the expat had lived in Israel, we were not aware that the father of the local host partly grew up there.

Motivation

Another personal characteristic is the motivation of each party, which might influence the development of the contact between the expatriate, partner and host. First of all, a desire to make the connection might facilitate finding common ground to build the relationship on: *“I would apply emphasis to real genuine interest. And to help a fellow human being out. Simply to express empathy, that’s really what it’s about”* [E26¹]. Furthermore, it is important that both parties are open to meet the other and motivated to make it work, as in this case: *“The family is [...] very keen to meet me.”* [E54^{Q2}]. Participants can also influence each other’s motivation through showing enthusiasm about the activity they did together [H29¹] or by giving feedback through a thank-you e-mail [H27^E]. Motivation to make the contact work was a key factor to overcome potential barriers to the contact, such as an age gap: *“Age is only a problem if we make it a problem. [...] I think we should just make contact and see if we can get on.”* [H9^E]² [age gap: 16 years]. It would seem self-evident that participants would like to invest time and energy in the contact because they signed up on a voluntary basis. Although this was normally the case, there were exceptions: *“Neither of us made enough effort to keep up the contact.”* [H58^{Q2}].

Different expectations

The expectations that both parties have of their participation might influence the development of the contact: *“Was OK, but not what I wanted”* [E18^{Q3}]. Participants sometimes had different expectations about the goal of the project, the type of activities that should be undertaken and who should take the initiative. These are a mix of personal and situational factors that could affect the development of the contact (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Although expectations are a personal

characteristic, they are affected by the context in which the contact takes place. For example, certain activities suggested at the website of the research project might have directed the expectations.

With regard to the goal of the project, some hosts thought they had to help the expatriate settle in a practical way: *“I thought it was more really helping someone”* [H49¹], and did not realise that the host might also ‘help’ the expatriate by just going for a drink. Different expectations with regard to who should take initiative – which was not specified – seemed to be more problematic. The initiative in this study came more frequently from the host than from the expatriate. Six hosts said explicitly that they found this regrettable. If there was a discrepancy in this regard, it might have hindered the development of high quality contact.

Outcomes of exchange

Among the outcomes of the exchanges are benefits in terms of adjustment, social support, and other benefits, and costs such as anxiety. When considering the balance between costs and benefits, the frequency of the contact might play a role. The more frequently the participants met, the more opportunities they had to derive benefits from the contact.

Benefits: adjustment

The contact between expatriate, partner and host might help the expatriate and partner to settle in. The concept of Adjustment can be divided in three aspects (Ward *et al.*, 2001). First, the *affective* aspect is conceptualised in the stress & coping framework and focuses on the feelings of well-being and the emotional impact of culture contact. The host was a local contact for the expatriates, sometimes being the first or even only Dutch contact that the expatriate had: *“So it’s brilliant just to sit down and be asked questions. And feel like I was being included in something.”* [E26¹]. This might have stimulated the development of the contact.

Second, the *behavioural* aspect concerns the adjustment to the new culture with regard to social interaction, which fits in the culture learning model (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Five expatriates and one partner recounted an anecdote about what they learned about how to behave in the Netherlands. Some expatriates learned by observing, for example through sitting down with the host and seeing how they eat Dutch food [E43¹] or by visiting the host at home [E22¹].

Third, the *cognitive* aspect focuses on information about the new culture, ethnic identity and the way in which sojourners perceive and interpret their intercultural experiences (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Expatriates learned a great deal about the Netherlands through the contact with their host. In almost two third of the cases (64%) the expatriates said that they had gained more insight into Dutch culture or had practiced their Dutch.

Benefits: social support

Social support might help expatriates cope with the difficulties associated with their transition to a new country (Ward *et al.*, 2001). A local host could play an important role in this respect, because the expatriate left a large part of his or her social network behind and has to build up a new one. First of all, for six expatriates and two partners the contact with a local host offered an opportunity to *access social support* in general, regardless of nationality. For twelve expatriates and seven partners it was important that the host was Dutch because they found it difficult to meet Dutch people on their own, especially outside the workplace. Adding a local contact would *diversify their social network*.

A local host can offer four types of social support (Cohen and Wills, 1985) – social companionship, informational support, emotional support and instrumental support – which were all present in the qualitative data.

Social companionship: A variety of activities were undertaken by expatriates, partners and their hosts, ranging from having a drink to a Shakespeare festival. Social companionship was probably one of the types of social support that was offered most by the hosts in this study, because this can be done right from the start. Social companionship is part of normal interaction and offers the opportunity to learn about specific problems the other might have, triggering the provision of other types of social support because these occur in response to learning about such a specific problem (Rook, 1985). As such, social companionship is a prerequisite for the occurrence of other types of support.

Informational support is the process through which other persons might provide information, advice and guidance (Cohen and Syme, 1985), which helps in defining, understanding and coping with difficulties (Cohen and Wills, 1985). In 11 of 33 cases the qualitative data offered evidence that the local host offered informational support to the expatriate. This could range from advice on

restaurants, shops and museums, but also on buying a house and giving birth in the Netherlands. As this kind of support offered by a local host focused mostly on dealing with situations with a ‘Dutch flavour’, this category is closely linked to the contribution of a local host to the cognitive element of adjustment, where the expatriate learned to better understand Dutch culture.

Informational support is also closely linked to a third category of social support, namely *emotional support* (Cohen and Syme, 1985). Emotional support is information that a person is esteemed and accepted, and contains elements such as sympathy, listening, understanding and encouragement (Cutrona, Suhr and MacFarlane, 1990). This category often occurs simultaneously with informational support because, for instance, expressing advice may be interpreted as emotional support as well. The qualitative data suggests that at least in seven cases emotional support was given by the host, e.g. when discussing some of the frustration of living in the Netherlands [E26¹]. It is likely that emotional support has occurred more often, for example when the expatriate stated that the host was seen as a friend.

The final category of social support that a local host can offer is *instrumental support*. As this is the provision of financial aid, material resources and needed services, it is more likely that this occurred when the contact developed into high quality contact. In this study there is some evidence that small-scale services have been rendered to the expatriate, e.g. translation of Dutch documents or assistance to buy a bike.

Other benefits

The contact with the host could be very enriching for the expatriate and the partner because it offered the opportunity to discover new places, foods and undertake new activities. In addition, a Dutch host can offer a different perspective [E17], or answer some content-specific work related questions of the expatriate [H29¹]. The contact also made it possible to get to know a new person and have good discussions that are not restricted to life in the Netherlands [P61^{DW6}]. For others the contact with the host increased the confidence needed to interact with Dutch people in general [E43¹]. Another partner felt that the contact with her host enabled her to contradict her fellow-expatriates when they were generalising about the Dutch [P23¹].

Cost: Anxiety

Interacting with culturally dissimilar people might cause anxiety (Neuliep and Ryan, 1998), which could make people apprehensive about intercultural contact. In addition, participation in a project in which one is purposely put in touch with a local host might cause some extra anxiety. First, some participants felt some anxiety about how the contact with the host would work out and whether it would feel artificial, because the participants would never have met if it were not for this project. The fact that the first meeting of the participants was a sort of “blind date” [H43^E] might also have added some anxiety. Second, first impressions based on the introductory e-mail that was sent to introduce the participants to each other caused some anxiety in two cases, because these introductions made participants wonder whether they would get along. Third, four participants (two French expatriates and two hosts) expressed some anxiety about their language skills. These anxieties might slow down the development of the contact between the expatriate, partner and the host. Overcoming anxiety is a cost factor, which might inhibit the development of interpersonal relations if they are not balanced by enough current and expected rewards (Altman and Taylor, 1973).

Situational context

Situational factors that influenced the development of the contact include busy schedules, suboptimal timing, communication breakdown and cultural differences.

Busy schedules

The barrier to the development of the contact most often mentioned was the available time of the participants, which may be seen as a situational constraint to the development of the contact (Altman and Taylor, 1973). As shown earlier, even the participants with high quality contact met only about seven times on average during the nine months, although participants were asked to meet at least once a month. Twenty-three of the thirty-three pairs (70%) mentioned busy schedules as a reason why it was sometimes difficult to pick a date. This did not necessarily hinder the contact, because fourteen of these pairs still developed high quality contact. In these cases, the difficulties with the schedules were overcome in some way, for example by a desire or motivation to make it work: “*it’s not easy to make appointments, but we all try and it works out.*” [H11^E]

Suboptimal timing

The timing of the contact was relevant in two ways: in terms of how long the expatriate had been in the Netherlands at the time of participation, and with regard to the moment the contact was established (e.g. before the summer holidays).

The expatriates could only participate in this project if they had not been in the Netherlands for more than one year. If an expatriate felt they had already established their life in the Netherlands, it might have inhibited the development of the contact, because contact with the host may not be felt necessary any more. All in all, these cases were rare in the present study ($n = 2$), probably due to our selection criterion and to the fact that participants voluntarily signed up. Of course, this also ties in with the expectations that one had of the contact. As this project was intended to be useful in a broad sense – the contact could also contribute for instance by exchanging thoughts about Dutch culture or by offering social support – the contact might be helpful throughout the first year of residence, and possibly even beyond.

Communication breakdown

Another barrier to the development of the contact was communication breakdown on a technical or personal level, in which personal characteristics and situational constraints interplay (Altman and Taylor, 1973). In two cases e-mails did not reach their destination, thereby delaying the development of the contact because both parties were wondering whether the other party would still want to meet. Life events might also be disruptive, for example the birth of a baby which “*cut off the relationship a bit*” [E43^{Q3}] (see below).

Cultural differences

Cultural differences can also be a barrier to the development of the contact, as in the case of the expatriate who had a baby after being in touch with their host for about five months. On the one hand, the host expected a card to announce the birth, which is the custom in the Netherlands [H43¹]. On the other hand, the expatriate waited for the host to contact her, since she was the one who had the new baby [E43¹]; which is the custom in the home country of the expatriate. The result was that the expatriate did not meet her host anymore during the remaining four months of the project. Another cultural difference was also hindering the development of this particular contact, namely

perceptions of what hospitality should be like (e.g. the scale upon which children's birthday parties are celebrated). Furthermore, for a French expatriate, cultural differences in lifestyle ["rythme de vie"] made it more difficult to meet with their host.

Cultural differences are situational factors which might affect the development of the contact (Altman and Taylor, 1973), although personal characteristics are important here as well. The way one reacts to these cultural differences could decide whether these cause the breaking of the contact or not. In the first case of this section, the contact might not have been disrupted had either the expatriate or the host reached out regardless of perceived conventions.

Ultimate catalysts and barriers

In our discussion of the various factors that influence the development of the contact, it sometimes becomes clear that one factor is more important than the other. In Table 1 we analyse the four cases with highest quality contact and the four with lowest quality contact to examine which factors override others.

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

Table 1 shows that the four cases with highest quality contact presented many factors that helped the development of the contact, and only a few that hindered it. The barriers that were present – such as busy schedules, suboptimal timing and anxiety about language skills – were overcome in one way or another. Each pair was similar in many respects, and where they were different, for example with regard to age, they seemed to overcome this barrier through similarity in other respects. The four expatriates with highest quality contact all found the contact enjoyable and enriching, and derived benefits in the areas of adjustment and social support, which might have contributed to the development of the contact.

The four pairs with the lowest quality contact most of all lacked a similarity in interests: they did not have enough commonalities on which to base the relationship, which might have resulted in decreased motivation to make the contact work. Although two of the cases were relatively similar with regard to the matching criteria, the contact did not develop due to the presence of too few stimulating factors and too many barriers. The contact was rarely enriching and the expatriates did

not derive many benefits. Suboptimal timing of the contact with the host and busy schedules seem to be the two main barriers to the contact. Anxiety about the artificial character of the contact also played an important role in one of the cases, and cultural differences in life style complicated another. Communication breakdown due to technical or personal reasons was not relevant in these four cases.

To determine the reason why these four cases ended up with the lowest quality contact, it does not suffice to look only at the factors that hindered the development of the contact. The absence of a catalyzing factor might also be a reason for breakdown of the contact. Dissimilarity between expatriate and host, lack of motivation on one or both sides, and lack of benefits were barriers to the development of high quality contact. Moreover, the absence of similarity of interests, motivation and rewards is especially regrettable, because these factors might have made it possible to overcome barriers such as being in a different life phase or living in different cities.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study sought to examine the factors that influence the development of the contact between expatriates, partners and their local host. Our aim was to look at the process of development of an purposely created relationship in an intercultural context as well as provide practical recommendations to practitioners who would like to implement the intervention of contact with a local host and make the most of this new way to support expatriates. This study also contributes to the nascent field of intercultural relationships (Gareis, 2000), which has not yet received much research attention (Lee, 2006;) and has, thus far, focused mainly on international students.

Theoretical implications

Nine factors were identified that influenced the development of the contact (similarities, motivation, benefits, anxiety, different expectations, busy schedules, suboptimal timing, communication breakdown, and cultural differences). By expanding our study beyond successful friendships (e.g. Sias *et al.* 2008), we were not only able to discern the factors that stimulated the development of the contact but also those that acted as barriers.

Similarities, benefits, available time, and cultural differences are factors that have also been found in other studies of intercultural friendship formation (Bennett *et al.*, 2013; Lee, 2006; Kudo

and Simkin, 2003; Sudweeks *et al.*, 1990) or were predicted based on the Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973); but four factors are unique, or have aspects that are unique, to purposely created relationships: motivation, expectations, anxiety and suboptimal timing. Furthermore, communication breakdown is a barrier that has previously been unidentified as a barrier to the development of the relationship, as far as we know, possibly because studies have so far focused only on successful relationships.

Our study offered a unique opportunity to examine how friendships are formed when people are deliberately put in touch with each other, thereby adding another layer to the Social Penetration Theory. The findings suggested four developmental factors that are unique to the case of purposely created relationships. First, a core characteristic of friendships is that they are voluntary (Sias and Cahill, 1998), which is at odds with being deliberately put in touch with a local host. This created friction in some cases as some of the participants felt some anxiety with regard to the initial contact. Second, as each participant developed expectations of the contact based on the information about the project and each other, these expectations may conflict – especially with regard to who takes the initiative – and thereby hinder the development of the contact. A third factor specific for our study was the timing of the contact. If the expatriate found he or she had been in the Netherlands for too long to really benefit from a local host, this could inhibit the development of the contact. A final factor with some unique characteristics is motivation. The participants voluntarily signed up for the study so, overall, a high motivation level of investing in the contact was present. This is one way of circumventing the problems caused by low receptivity by host nationals, which is pointed out by Kudo and Simkin (2003) as one of four factors that impact friendship formation.

Practical recommendations

While contact with host nationals has been found to carry many benefits for expatriates (e.g. Johnson *et al.*, 2003), many expatriates do not find it easy to break out of the expat bubble and create friendships with locals. Our study shows that putting expatriates in touch with a local host provides a basis for developing an intercultural friendship. This could, therefore, be a valid way in which organisations can support their expatriate employees during the sojourn. Of course, expatriates themselves can also reach out to the locals they meet at work or in their private life.

Essential ingredients seem to be being open to the new culture, finding out about the way in which to make local friends in that particular culture, taking initiative and persevering.

There are various ways in which to stimulate contact with a local host so as to maximize the benefit participants derive from it. A key question is how much time and effort to put into the matching process. The mentor literature has pointed out the difficulty of matching mentors and mentees (Forret, Turban and Dougherty, 1996; Hale, 2000), even suggesting to abandon matching altogether except ‘perhaps by geographical location and time availability’ (Cox, 2005, p. 403). From the literature on intercultural friendship it is clear that similarities are an important base to build the relationship on (Kudo and Simkin, 2003; Sudweeks *et al.*, 1990), although it is very difficult to pinpoint exactly which factors contribute to the unfathomable ‘click’. As we could only use three matching criteria in our study (place of residence, and similarity in age and family situation), it is somewhat surprising that 64% of the matches in this study developed into high quality contact. This finding is promising. A contributing factor in the present study seemed to be the fact that hosts were generally internationally oriented, highly educated and well-travelled, providing additional similarity. Many of them had lived abroad or travelled extensively, which could have provided the necessary “adjustment empathy” that makes the local host a suitable source of social support (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro and Shin, 2010). For these reasons, our study suggests that it is worthwhile to put an effort into the matching process: *“I think you need to have enough communality for people to at least [...] find some common ground to have a relationship.”* [E46¹].

In addition to similarities, we would also suggest to take geographical location, time availability, optimal timing, and motivation into account in the matching process. While the first three factors merely remove potential barriers to the contact, the latter is a key factor to stimulate relationship development. Motivation to help is critical for the value of the support given (Farh et al. 2010). A strong motivation could overrule potential barriers to the contact, such as different family situation, busy schedules and communication breakdown. Furthermore, a lack of motivation was probably the barrier that was most difficult to overcome. Even though it seems self-evident that participants who signed up for this project were willing to invest time and energy in the contact with their host, this was not always the case so it is important to ascertain this fact. Finally, it may also be worthwhile to take the opinion of the participants themselves into account, e.g. through organising an event where expatriates can meet potential local hosts and indicate who their favourite match would be.

Other recommendations when setting up a local host system include being more specific about what is expected of the participants in terms of who should take initiative, and have an intermediary or contact person who has contact with all participants and, therefore, may be able to solve some of the problems due to different expectations, communication breakdown and cultural differences.

Limitations

A first limitation is that we did not carry out interviews with all participants who had a local host, nor did all participants keep a weekly diary. This means that we miss information on a part of the participants. Consequently, it is possible that we might have missed certain factors, or that the frequency of occurrence is in reality higher than reported in this paper. However, we do think our analysis provides an overview of the factors that are relevant when one is setting up a local host or buddy-programme.

Second, we did not enquire into the specific benefits that the participants derived from the contact. In the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and in the interview we asked in what way the contact has helped them and we probed for examples, but we did not specifically ask, for example, whether they had received emotional support. This has limited our ability to report on the exact frequency and magnitude of the various benefits participants experienced.

Third, the contact took place within a research context, which may have influenced the development of the contact. The participants were informed that they were expected to meet at least once a month during the nine months of the contact. Also, the questionnaire after five months, the tokens of appreciation and the e-mails to the hosts, might have served as reminders if they had not had contact with their host for a while. The research context might also hinder the development of the contact, e.g. if it is perceived as too demanding, but no evidence was found for this.

Future research

Our study suggests several avenues for future research. First of all, the correlation between the frequency and the quality of the contact suggests possibilities to influence the quality of the contact for example through organising events for participants to attend together, because more frequent meetings lead to more opportunities for deriving benefit from the contact. An important mechanism of the Social Penetration theory is the balance between rewards and costs of the relationship

(Altman and Taylor, 1973; Taylor and Altman, 1987). If the rewards outweighed the costs of the relationship with the host then the contact might have received an impulse and developed towards higher quality contact. One must bear in mind, however, that although the quality of the contact was correlated with the frequency of the contact, it is not possible to conclude that more frequent contact led to higher quality contact. Future research should determine whether promoting the frequency of the contact is a viable way to stimulate the quality of contact between participants.

Second, although it seems clear that the benefits experienced stimulated the development of the quality of the contact, it was not clear from the present data what contributed most to the development. Were all rewards equally important for the development of the contact? Did learning about Dutch culture lead to high quality contact as much as emotional support? For example, Collins and Miller (1994) show in their meta-analysis that those who disclose at an intimate level are liked more, and also like the person to whom they disclose more as a result of these exchanges. If the expatriate discusses his or her problems and receives emotional support from the host it would probably encourage the development of the contact more than if only informational support or social companionship were offered. It would be interesting to examine in more detail what exactly sets the development of the relationship in motion. Future research should delve into this issue to be able to formulate more precise recommendations to put participants on the path toward high quality contact.

Endnotes

[1] E.g. cultures in the same or adjoining clusters, as determined by Ronen and Shenkar (2013)

[2] In this study, the term ‘Western’ refers to cultures of European origin. Expatriates from the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the French-speaking part of Belgium and Switzerland were included.

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Appendix 1 Interview schedule

This appendix shows the interview schedule that was used for the interviews. Similar ones in Dutch and French were used for the interviews that were held with French expatriates and partners and with Dutch hosts.

Interview schedule English

Introduction

- goal of interview
- background expat
- contact with the host
- first contact?
- how did it develop?
- what did you do?
- email, phone?
- who took initiative ?
- what did you expect?
- was it different?
- what did you like most?
- what did you like least?
- anything else that struck you?

Usefulness

- do you think the contact has helped you in any way? why, or why not?
 - examples
 - practical help?
 - to ask questions on Dutch culture?
 - professional work relations?
 - to have a Dutch family to meet up with?
 - what was most important?
- do you think this could help in general?
 - necessary conditions?
 - type and attitude of host?
 - when to join the project?
 - frequency of contact?
 - would you participate again?
 - would you recommend it?

Appendix 2 Relevant questions in diary outline and questionnaire

Diary outline

Every week a diary outline was sent to the participants. One of the questions focused on the contact with the local host:

- Have you met the host the past week?
 - If so, what have you done and what was your impression?

Questionnaire

The following questions were added to the questionnaire after 5 and after 9 months.

The final items of this questionnaire regard your contact with the host. *Please note that your answers to these questions will not be revealed to your host.*

- How would you evaluate the contact with your host, the past months (since the last questionnaire)? Please indicate your evaluation on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being lowest and 10 being highest. _____
- How many times have you seen the host? (approximately) _____ times
- What have you done together with the host?
- Did you enjoy the contact with the host? Why?
- Did the contact with the host help you? In what way?

Table 1. Presence of factors that influence relationship development for the four pairs with highest quality contact and the four pairs with lowest quality contact

	Frequency (times)	Matching criteria		Personal characteristics			Outcomes of exchange		Situational context			
		Proximity	Similarity (matching)	Similarity (click)	Motivation	Different expectations	Benefits	Anxiety	Busy schedules	Suboptimal timing	Communication breakdown	Cultural differences
<i>Highest quality*</i>												
E2 + P2 (9.5)	15	3km	+	+	+	-	+ (1,2,3)	-	-	-	-	-
E46 (9)	15	9km	FS: + Age: -	+	+	+	+ (1,2,3)	+	+	-	-	-
E59 (9)	3	3km	+	+	+	-	+ (1,2,3)	-	+	+	-	-
E57 + P57 (9)	8	13km	FS: + Age: -	+	+	-	+ (1,2,3)	+	+	-	-	-
<i>Lowest quality*</i>												
E25 (2.75)	1	9km	FS: - (c) Age: +	'no common interests'	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	+
E50 + P50 (2.75)	1 (E) 2 (P)	27km	FS: - (p) Age: +	P: +	-	-	E: - P: + (1,2)	-	+	+	-	-
E49 (3.5)	1	5km	+	'no click'	-	+	+ (1)	-	+	+	-	-
E18 (3.75)	3	6km	+	'not much in common'	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-

* Based on the final judgment of the expatriate, partner and host after 9 months on a scale of 1 (*lowest*) to 10 (*highest*)

+ = factor is present; - = factor is not present

FS = family situation: (c) = dissimilarity with regard to children; (p) = dissimilarity with regard to partner

1 = adjustment benefits

2 = social support benefits

3 = other benefits

(E) = in the case of the expatriate

(P) = in the case of the partner