

## **The Importance of Relationship Quality: Maximizing the Impact of Expatriate Contact with a Local Host**

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY:  
MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF EXPATRIATE CONTACT WITH A LOCAL HOST**

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY:  
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**Executive summary**

Contact between expatriates and a local host – a specific type of peer mentoring – has been shown to result in benefits to adjustment, social support, and intercultural competence. This longitudinal study examines the role of the quality of this contact. Expatriates in the Netherlands were randomly divided into an experimental group (n = 33) in which 21 participants had developed high-quality contact with their host, and a control group (n = 32) that had no host. The results suggest the higher the quality of the contact, the more benefit the expatriate experienced. Moreover, expatriates with low-quality contact did not experience a detrimental effect. Theoretical and practical implications for mentoring in general, and peer mentoring of expatriates specifically, are discussed.

**Keywords:** expatriate-local interactions; relationship quality; mentoring; expatriate adjustment; social support; host nationals

## Introduction

Due to the high costs of international assignments, a great number of studies have focused on ways to improve expatriate effectiveness and avoid expatriate failure. One way to deal with difficulties of cross-cultural transitions is to get in touch with nationals of the host country (e.g. Bruning, Sonpar, & Wang, 2012). This is an under-acknowledged area within International Human Resource Management, where much of the focus still lies with parent country nationals (Collings & Scullion, 2009). Yet this area has much to offer in terms of increasing the success of international assignments both on the professional level (e.g. Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Vance, Vaiman, Andersen & Gale, 2014; Vance, Vaiman, & Andersen, 2009) and the private level (e.g. Geeraert, Demoulin & Demes, 2014).

Contact with locals can stimulate various aspects of expatriate and spouse adjustment (e.g. Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Klein, 2003); however, it is not always easy to get in touch with locals. For example, the Expat Explorer Survey (HSBC, 2010) showed that Europe, and especially the Netherlands, was the most difficult region in which to make local friends. One solution is to purposely put expatriates in touch with a local host (Van Bakel, Gerritsen, & Van Oudenhoven, 2011).

Contact with a local host outside of work can have several benefits. First, according to the culture learning model (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), expatriates can learn about the new culture and acquire new skills through this contact, which can be a source of important information (Johnson et al., 2003). Van Bakel et al. (2011) showed that expatriates with a local host improved more on their interaction adjustment with host nationals in general than those without a host. Contact with a local host was also found to buffer a decrease on attitudinal (*Open-mindedness*) and behavioral (*Social Initiative*) aspects of intercultural competence (Van Bakel, Gerritsen, & Van Oudenhoven, 2014). This indicates a beneficial impact of contact with a local host, although it was not as expected because there was no

*improvement* in attitude and skills. The authors explain this unexpected finding as being the result of overly optimistic expectations with regard to trying to make contact with Dutch people upon arrival in the Netherlands. When this was not as easy as expected, expatriates might become less open-minded and less willing to take initiatives to meet Dutch people – unless they have contact with a local host.

Second, the stress and coping model posits that social support is an essential resource used to deal with the stresses associated with a cross-cultural transition (Ward et al., 2001). When expatriates move abroad they leave behind a large part of their social network, which could partially be filled by the local host. Indeed, Van Bakel, Van Oudenhoven, and Gerritsen (2010) found a significant positive impact of contact with a local host on the social support expatriates received from host nationals in general.

These studies did not examine the quality of the contact between expatriates and their local host, although this could influence the degree of the benefits they experienced during the contact. The quality of the contact could moderate the effect that contact with a local host has on the success of the international assignment. Whether this is the case will be investigated in the present study. We will take the same dependent variables into account as were used in Van Bakel et al. (2010), Van Bakel et al. (2011), and Van Bakel et al. (2014), which focus on adjustment, performance, intercultural competence, and social support.

### **A local host as peer mentor**

Contact with a local host can be seen as a form of on-site peer mentoring outside of the workplace. Mentors can help with career coaching and social support (Kram, 1985), which among other things, leads to career advancement, job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions and work stress, increased work adjustment, and organizational socialization (Carragher,

Sullivan, & Crocitto, 2008). Eby (1997) distinguishes two forms of the mentor–protégé relationship: hierarchical mentoring and lateral mentoring, also called peer mentoring.

Kram and Isabella (1985) suggested that peer relationships have the potential to serve some of the same critical functions as hierarchical mentoring relationships, and that the lack of hierarchy might even make it easier to communicate and achieve mutual support and collaboration. This could be especially relevant for expatriates who find themselves in high power-distance cultures, for example important new economies such as China, where this flow of information and support might be even more obstructed. Peer mentoring can take place within an organization, but also between individuals who work in different organizations. An example of peer mentoring is a *buddy*, conceptualized by Nigah, Davis and Hurrell (2010) as a job resource that could help with the socialization of newcomers in the organization. Contact with a local host is a similar intervention, but one that occurs outside the workplace. Furthermore, this peer mentoring takes place when the expatriate is actually abroad, which has been argued to be especially important for expatriates since it can help with onsite host country adjustment needs (Feldman & Bolino, 1999).

### **The role of contact quality**

Johnson et al. (2003) distinguish three aspects of social ties: frequency, depth, and breadth of the contact. We particularly focus on the role of the depth – or quality – of the contact between the expatriate and the local host. An important reason for this is that the meta-analysis of mentoring by Eby, Allen, Hoffman, Baranik, Sauer, Baldwin, Morrison, Kinkade, Maher and Curtis (2013) clearly pinpoints perceived relationship quality – defined as the “protégé’s evaluative feelings toward the mentor, or to the relationship as a whole” (p. 443) – as an important factor to achieve various outcomes, such as satisfaction with the work environment and career, sense of affiliation and perceptions of career success. This finding is

confirmed in the intercultural field by Geeraert et al. (2014), who show the importance of high quality contact with support providers in general: “good (quality) contact is important for promoting cultural adjustment and managing stress, especially during the early stages of a sojourn”. The quality of the contact is also an important determinant of the willingness of host nationals to provide assistance (Varma, Pichler, Budhwar, & Biswas, 2009).

Although the preceding studies suggest that contact quality plays an important role for the impact of contact with a local host, it is also possible the quality of the contact plays no role at all, and expatriates may benefit from their local host regardless of the quality of the contact. The very presence of a local host might convey a perception of social support, and just knowing one can get support from one’s host might be sufficient to help the expatriate on their international assignment. Albrecht and Adelman (1987, p. 19) state, for example, that the *availability* of social support might be even more beneficial than the actual use of the support, because “the belief that one has support available, if needed, raises self-confidence and a greater sense of mastery than would have occurred had one actually used the support.”

The literature review above led to the following research question:

*RQ1: Does contact quality between expatriates and their local host moderate the impact of their contact on the success of the expatriate assignment?*

### **Possible effects of the quality of the contact**

The quality of the contact with the host may have a linear or a curvilinear (exponential) effect.

We outline the theoretical support for each option below.

### ***Linear effect of contact quality***

A linear relationship between quality of contact with the local host and the success of the international assignment would mean the higher the quality of contact with the host, the greater the benefit experienced by the expatriate. This suggests that expatriates with low-quality contact would also benefit from the contact, but to a lesser extent than those with high-quality contact. Granovetter (1983) has introduced the theory of the *strength of weak ties*; weak ties can be beneficial when they provide access to information and resources beyond those available in one's own social circle, and lead to many benefits. This suggests expatriates who do not establish high quality contact with their host – the local host can then be considered as a weak tie – could still benefit from the contact. Adelman (1988) states weak ties are especially important in times when strong ties such as family and close friends are disrupted. Even when a local host is not yet a strong tie (or will never become one), the host can still support the expatriate during the initial stages of the cross-cultural transition.

Many studies in the mentor literature support this hypothesis. Eby et al. (2013) conclude in their meta-analysis that relationship quality is associated with various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g. turnover intentions). Furthermore, Geeraert et al. (2014) found a positive association between the quality of contact with support providers and cultural adjustment. These arguments support the linear scenario: the higher the quality of contact with the host, the greater the benefit experienced.

### ***Curvilinear effect of contact quality***

A second possibility of the relationship between contact quality and the success of the international assignment is that the contact with the host is beneficial only if sufficiently high-quality contact between the expatriate and the host is established. This would mean contact quality follows a curvilinear pattern; in this specific case, we theorize an exponential curve. In

such a case, expatriates with low-quality contact would hardly benefit from the contact with their host. Cohen and Wills (1985) have provided a classification of four types of social support (emotional support, informational support, social companionship, and instrumental support). A local host can provide all four types of support; however, while informational support (e.g. recommendation of a restaurant) and social companionship can be offered right from the start, it is likely emotional support is only offered when the contact has deepened. It is possible the latter type of support makes a special difference – more so than informational support and social companionship – so contact with a local host is only beneficial if the expatriate has established high-quality contact with his or her host. Moreover, when an expatriate meets his or her host only once or twice, there is very little opportunity to learn the norms and behaviors of the host culture, which sheds some doubt on whether significant culture learning (Ward et al., 2001) can occur in situations of low-quality contact between expatriates and hosts. It is possible the contact needs to reach a certain level for culture learning to take place. This would be in line with Ragins, Cotton and Miller (2000, p. 1190), who found that “attitudes of those in dissatisfying or marginally satisfying relationships were equivalent to those of non-mentored individuals.” This would support the hypothesis that expatriates with low-quality contact with a host would not benefit from the contact at all.

Contact with a local host might also be dysfunctional. Ragins et al. (2000) set the quality of a mentoring relationship on a *continuum of effectiveness* ranging from highly satisfying to dysfunctional. The quality of the contact with a local host could be seen on the same continuum. When the contact with the local host remains at a superficial level, the expatriate might be strengthened in holding the idea that all people of the host country are the same, and for that reason would fail to acquire a more positive attitude towards them. In the worst-case scenario, the expatriate could even acquire a more negative attitude if the contact with the host does not turn out well. The mentor literature shows mentoring can have negative effects

(Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Scandura, 1998) such as loss of self-esteem, more stress, and more turnover intentions. In the case of contact with a local host, the expatriate has to deal with a host who has a different frame of reference, which might cause extra stress. It is possible low-quality contact with a local host has a counterproductive effect, and expatriates with low-quality contact with their host are worse off than expatriates without host.

In these scenarios, a curvilinear (exponential) pattern would be applicable: expatriates could benefit from the contact *only* if sufficiently high-quality contact is established; expatriates with low-quality contact would not benefit, or could even experience a detrimental effect.

This leads to our second research question:

*RQ2: Does contact quality have a linear or a curvilinear effect on the success of the international assignment?*

## **Method**

A field experiment was designed in order to examine the longitudinal effects of contact with a local host and the relevance of the quality of the contact for the effectiveness of this intervention. Thirty-three expatriates were put in touch with a Dutch host with whom they had contact for a period of nine months (experimental group); another thirty-two expatriates were not put in touch with a host (control group); their assignment to experimental conditions was random. Interviews were held with some of the expatriates, and some of them also filled in a weekly diary to provide insight into how the contact played out. Upon conclusion of the experiment, we divided the experimental group into two groups by using assessments of

contact quality from the various parties (see Instruments – Contact Quality) to examine the role of the quality of the contact with the host.

## Participants

Western expatriates in the Netherlands were the focus of this study. Transitions to relatively close cultures can pose unexpected problems due to the *psychic distance paradox* (O'Grady & Lane, 1996). Superficial similarities may lead to an unrealistic expectation that the cultures do not differ at all (Martin & Harrell, 2004). This lack of awareness of cultural differences can create difficulties for expatriates, so it is important to address relocations within and between North America and Europe.

Expatriates could participate in the study only if they:

- were Western expatriates with English or French as first language<sup>2</sup>;
- 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.

Sixty-five expatriates participated in this project. French (31%), US American (25%) and British (22%) were the top three nationalities represented in the sample. Fifty-seven percent of the expatriates were accompanied by their partner on their assignment; 11 percent had a partner back home; and 32 percent did not have a partner. Almost half of the expatriates (48%) had children, 73 percent of the expatriates with a partner had children. Most of the children had accompanied the expatriate on the assignment (87%). Forty percent of the expatriates were female. The age of the expatriates ranged from 23 to 56 years ( $M [SD] = 35.2 [7.99]$ ), and most of the expatriates were living in the western part of the Netherlands. The expatriates had been in the Netherlands for six and a half months on average when they

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<sup>2</sup> In this study the term 'Western' refers to cultures of European origin: United Kingdom, France, Ireland, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the French-speaking part of Belgium and Switzerland.

started in the project. In terms of international experience, half of them had been abroad for twenty-three months or more at the time of their arrival in the Netherlands. A quarter of the expatriates were on their first international assignment, and almost three-quarters were planning to stay at least two years in the Netherlands. There were no significant differences in these variables: neither between the experimental and control group, nor between expatriates with high-quality contact and those with low-quality contact.

## **Instruments**

### *Contact Quality*

#### *Rating of the contact quality by expatriate and partner*

Expatriates 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*). The same question was included in the questionnaires of accompanying partners (five and nine months) and of the hosts (nine months). The ratings were all strongly correlated, especially between expatriates and their partners after nine months (see Table 1), and showed that expatriates, partners, and hosts assessed the quality of their contact in a similar manner. To get an indication of 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. The score at five months was used if neither the expatriate nor partner provided a score after nine months (4 cases; 12%).

--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

### *Frequency of the contact*

The amount of face-to-face contact with the host during nine months is another way to measure the quality of the contact. For each expatriate, the rating rendered for the questionnaire item, *How many times have you seen the host?* was checked with the reported activities to ensure a correct measuring of the frequency of face-to-face contact. A bivariate Spearman correlation analysis showed a strong and positive correlation between the rating of contact quality of the expatriate and partner and the frequency of contact ( $r_s = .61, p < .001$ ). A high rating of the contact was associated with a high frequency, which indicates the effects of frequency and appreciation of the contact were intertwined in this study. This is understandable because contact with a local host was 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. It is impossible, however, to conclude that more frequent encounters led to high-quality contact, because it could also be the other way around, or they could have mutually influenced each other.

### *Measuring Contact Quality*

The contact quality rating of the expatriate and partner together was used as the yardstick for the quality of the contact, thus reducing common method bias. This rating was not normally distributed, but clearly divided the experimental group into those who highly appreciated the contact ( $\geq 7$  on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*)) and those for whom the contact was less successful ( $\leq 5$  on a similar scale). For this reason, we created a new variable which also took the control group into account as being *without host*; this resulted in three categories: 1. High quality of the contact, rating  $\geq 7$  ( $n = 21$ ); 2. Low quality of the contact, rating  $\leq 5$  ( $n = 12$ ); and 3. Without host ( $n = 32$ ). Table 2 shows the means and SDs for *Rating of the contact*

*quality by expatriate and partner* and *Frequency of contact* for expatriates with a host – split for high and low-quality contact.

--- Insert Table 2 about here ---

### ***Success of the international assignment***

The role of contact quality was examined for each of the dependent variables in the three previously mentioned studies (*Psychological Health, Satisfaction with Life, Physical Health, Socio-cultural Adjustment, General Adjustment, Interaction Adjustment, Work Adjustment, Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, Cultural Empathy, Flexibility, Host National Access, Host National Social Support, Assess your own Performance, Most Recent Actual Performance Evaluation, and Desire to Terminate the Assignment*; see Van Bakel et al., 2010, Van Bakel et al., 2011, Van Bakel et al., 2014), yet contact quality only played a role for four of these variables. These are reported in this paper (*Interaction Adjustment, Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, and Host National Social Support*). These variables were measured in a questionnaire at baseline level, after five, and again after nine months.

*Interaction Adjustment* was part of an adjustment scale very similar to the Black and Stephens (1989) scale. This scale consists of three dimensions (*General, Work, and Interaction Adjustment*). Four items focus on *Interaction Adjustment*, for example *socializing with host nationals* ( $\alpha^{\text{baseline}} = .88$ ;  $\alpha^{5\text{months}} = .95$ ;  $\alpha^{9\text{months}} = .90$ ).

*Host National Social Support* was measured with 16 items of the Interpersonal Relations Scale (Searle & Ward, 1990: 454). These 16 items assessed the expatriates' frequency of and satisfaction with a certain type of contact with host nationals on a scale of 1 (*never / not at all satisfied*) to 5 (*very often / very satisfied*). Mean scores were computed for the frequency of and satisfaction with contact with host nationals (frequency:  $\alpha^{5\text{months}} = .76$ ,  $\alpha^{9\text{months}} = .77$ ; satisfaction:  $\alpha^{5\text{months}} = .90$ ,  $\alpha^{9\text{months}} = .95$ ). The value for *Host National Social Support* was

then created by multiplying the satisfaction score by the frequency to create a variable that takes both frequency of and satisfaction with the contact with host nationals into account. This resulted in a variable ranging from 1 (*low*) to 25 (*high*). Due to length constraints of the questionnaire, this variable was not included in the questionnaire at 0 months.

*Open-mindedness* and *Social Initiative* were measured through the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000). The MPQ contains 91 items in total and was administered at 0 and 9 months due to length constraints of the questionnaire. The items were answered on a scale of 1 (*totally not applicable*) to 5 (*totally applicable*). The MPQ measures five dimensions, of which two are relevant here. *Open-mindedness* (18 items) is seen as “an open and unprejudiced attitude towards outgroup members and towards different cultural norms and values” ( $\alpha^{\text{baseline}} = .87$ ,  $\alpha^{\text{9months}} = .83$ ). An example item is *Is fascinated by other people's opinions*. *Social Initiative* (17 items) is “the tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiatives” ( $\alpha^{\text{baseline}} = .88$ ,  $\alpha^{\text{9months}} = .81$ ). An example item that must be mirrored is: *Keeps to the background*.

## **Procedure**

The participants in our study were solicited through a variety of channels: expatriate fairs, expatriate associations and (online) networks, international schools, websites for expatriates which put information about our project online, company newsletters, and local newspapers. Also, social networking sites such as Facebook were used.

The expatriates could register through the website of the project. They were then asked to fill in the baseline questionnaire of the project as well as complete a form with questions (e.g. about hobbies) that could help to match the expatriate with a suitable host. After completing these questionnaires, the participants were told they would either be put in touch with a host immediately (experimental group), or after nine months (control group). We tried to find a

suitable host within a reasonable amount of time; suitability was determined by primarily matching for place of residence, age, and family situation. 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.

Expatriates in the experimental group were put in touch with their host through an e-mail that contained a short introduction to both parties to facilitate the first contact. To monitor the contact during the project, the first author kept in touch with the hosts, and minimally with the expatriates; this was done to strictly limit the possible effects of contact with the researcher. After nine months, at the end of the project, the participants in the control group were asked if they were still interested in being put in touch with a host; if they were, they were placed in contact with a host using the same procedure as described above. Members of this group were not considered research subjects, and did not have to fill in any further questionnaires.

### **Contact with the host**

Expatriates who were put in touch with a local host faced the challenge of building a relationship with their host. Many went for drinks or had dinner in a restaurant or at home; some also took the opportunity to explore local attractions. They visited cities together or undertook activities such as crossing the mud-flats of the North Sea or sharing a visit to a Shakespeare Festival.

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 of the project ( $M = 7.14$ ,  $SD = 4.15$ ) (see Table 2). Almost half of this group (48%) met their host at

least nine times. One example was a US American couple who met their host about once a month, and were very enthusiastic about the contact:

*“They are very nice people and are as interested in showing us the Netherlands as we are in seeing it. We have really enjoyed meeting our host family and doing things with them.”*

The remaining third of the expatriates (36%) evaluated the contact with their host as of low quality ( $\leq 5$  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 (see Table 2).

### **Data analysis**

Repeated Measures analyses with *Contact Quality* (High quality, Low quality, Without host) as independent variable for each of the dependent variables in the earlier studies showed *Contact Quality* only played a role for *Interaction Adjustment*, *Open-mindedness*, *Social Initiative*, and *Host National Social Support*. This shows expatriates with low quality contact were never worse off than those without a host, which could have masked a positive effect of high quality contact with a local host.

Our data analysis consisted of three steps. First, to examine the effect of contact quality on the four variables we performed a Multivariate General Linear Model with *Contact Quality* (High quality, Low quality, Without host) as the independent variable, and *Interaction Adjustment*, *Open-mindedness*, *Social Initiative*, and *Host National Social Support* after nine months as dependent variables. Although this study had three data waves (0, 5, and 9 months),

some variables were only measured at two points in time due to the length constraints of the questionnaires. *Host National Social Support* was not measured at baseline, and *Open-mindedness* and *Social Initiative* not at five months. For this reason, we could not perform a Multivariate Repeated Measures Analysis. This analysis was followed up by Repeated Measures analyses (within-subject MANOVAs) with *Time* and *Contact Quality* (High quality, Low quality, Without host) as factors for each of the four dependent variables. This enabled us to assess whether *Contact Quality* had an impact on these variables over time, not just after nine months of contact. Third, to learn more about the nature of the effect of *Contact Quality*, we compared

1. High quality vs. Without host,
2. Low quality vs. Without host, and, if relevant,
3. High quality vs. Low quality.

A linear effect of *Contact Quality* occurs if both the comparisons High quality vs. Without host and Low quality vs. Without host are significant. In these cases, the third comparison, High quality vs. Low quality was also examined to see if expatriates with high-quality contact benefited more than expatriates with low-quality contact. A curvilinear (exponential) effect of *Contact Quality* should be concluded if only the first comparison, High quality vs. Without host, is significant.

Each analysis was checked for possible moderating effects of *Sex*, *Partner*, and *Children*; other covariates, such as length of stay in the Netherlands before participation, age, and international experience, were added to refine the model only if they were relevant for that particular dependent variable. Although the three groups (High quality, Low quality, and Without host) showed differences at baseline level on some dependent variables, one-way ANOVA-analyses showed that the groups were not significantly different on these dependent variables at the outset (0 months).

## Results

In this section, we present the findings with regard to the role of contact quality for *Interaction Adjustment*, *Host National Social Support*, *Open-mindedness*, and *Social Initiative*.

First, a Multivariate General Linear Model with *Contact Quality* (High quality, Low quality, Without host) as independent variable and *Interaction Adjustment*, *Host National Social Support*, *Open-mindedness*, and *Social Initiative* at nine months as dependent variables showed a marginally significant effect ( $F(8,118) = 2.01, p = .057, \eta^2 = .07$ )<sup>3</sup>. Although this effect is only marginally significant, the fact that the effect is of medium size suggests *Contact Quality* played a role for these four variables.

Second, we examined the role that *Contact Quality* played for *Interaction Adjustment*, *Host National Social Support*, *Open-mindedness*, and *Social Initiative* through separate Repeated Measures analyses in which we took the covariates that were relevant for that particular dependent variable into account, making full use of the longitudinal data. It must be noted that we only examined *Interaction Adjustment* for expatriates *without* partner and *Open-mindedness* for expatriates *with* partner, because the previous studies showed that the impact of a local host for those two variables was confined to those particular two groups (Van Bakel et al., 2014; Van Bakel et al., 2011).

We performed separate Repeated Measures analyses with *Contact Quality* (High quality, Low quality, Without host) and each of the four dependent variables and found a significant effect for all four variables: *Interaction Adjustment* (expats without partner) ( $F(4,38) = 3.15, p < .05, \eta^2 = .25$ ), *Open-mindedness* (expats with partner) ( $F(2,39) = 6.22, p < .05, \eta^2 = .24$ ), *Social Initiative* (controlling for Children) ( $F(2,62) = 3.70, p < .05, \eta^2 = .11$ ), and *Host*

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<sup>3</sup>  $\eta^2$  is the partial eta squared, indicating the effect size. Boundary values for small, medium and large effect sizes are .01, .06 and .14; (Cohen, 1988: 283).

*National Social Support* ( $F(2,62) = 4.31, p < .05, \eta^2 = .12$ ). These findings show *Contact Quality* played a role for each of these dependent variables. The Estimated Marginal Means of these variables are reported in Tables 3-6. Furthermore, Figures 1-4 show the development over time for each of the four dependent variables.

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 Insert Tables 3-6 and Figures 1-4 about here  
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The four figures show expatriates with low quality contact occupied an intermediate position between those with high quality contact and those without host, which suggests the linear effect of a local host. We explored this pattern further by comparing expatriates with high quality contact to those without a host for *Social Initiative* and *Host National Social Support*. We did not perform these analyses for *Interaction Adjustment* and *Open-mindedness*; the sample size for these two variables was too small since the quality of the contact was only relevant for a subgroup of the experimental group (either with or without partner).

### *Social Initiative*

First, expatriates with high-quality contact were compared to expatriates without host. A Repeated Measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Contact Quality* (High quality vs. Without host) as independent variables, controlling for *Children*, showed that high-quality contact buffered a decrease in *Social Initiative* ( $F(1,49) = 6.87, p < .05, \eta^2 = .12$ ). Second, when comparing expatriates with low-quality contact with the control group, a similar Repeated Measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Contact Quality* (Low quality vs. Without host) as independent variables did not find a significant effect.

These results indicate that expatriates benefited regarding *Social Initiative* only if the quality of the contact with their host was high. However, when exploring the development over time of each individual group, separate Repeated Measures analyses with only *Time* (0 and 9 months) as factor showed expatriates with high-quality contact as well as those with low-quality contact did not show a significant change; whereas, expatriates without host decreased on *Social Initiative* ( $F(1,30) = 5.93, p < .05, \eta^2 = .16$ ). This suggested the decrease on *Social Initiative* was buffered for expatriates with both high-quality contact and low-quality contact. Figure 3 shows expatriates with low-quality contact occupied a position between expatriates with high-quality contact and those without host. These findings supported the conclusion that expatriates experienced *more* benefits when the quality of the contact was high, while expatriates with low-quality contact still seemed to benefit to some extent from the contact.

#### *Host National Social Support*

The second variable we examine in more detail is *Host National Social Support*. When examining the development over time, a Repeated Measures analysis with *Time* (5 and 9 months) and *Contact Quality* (High quality vs. Without host) as factors showed that expatriates with high-quality contact with their host increased significantly more on *Host National Social Support* between five and nine months than expatriates without host ( $F(1,51) = 7.86, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$ ) did. Similar Repeated Measures analyses comparing expatriates with low-quality contact to expatriates without host did not find a significant effect.

We then analyzed the development over time of each individual group. Separate Repeated Measures analyses with only *Time* (5 and 9 months) for expatriates with high-quality contact, low-quality contact, and those without host showed a marginally significant increase over time on *Host National Social Support* of expatriates with high-quality contact ( $F(1,20) =$

4.30,  $p < .10$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ ), whereas expatriates without host did not show an increase, and even showed a tendency to decrease in *Host National Social Support* (Figure 4). Expatriates with low-quality contact maintained the same level.

These results indicate contact with a host *only* had an impact on the *Host National Social Support* received by expatriates if they had established high-quality contact with their host. Figure 4 shows, however, expatriates with low-quality contact occupied an intermediate position between expatriates with high-quality contact and expatriates without host. This also seemed to be the case with regard to *Social Initiative*, *Interaction Adjustment* for single expatriates, and *Open-mindedness* for expatriates with partner, and would suggest the higher the quality of the contact, the *more* benefit expatriates experienced.

## Discussion

This study examined the impact of the quality of the contact between expatriates and their local host on the success of the international assignment. The first research question we wanted to answer was: *Does quality of contact between expatriate and local host have an effect on the success of the expatriate assignment?* Our study showed the quality of contact played a role in the impact of a local host on four variables. High-quality contact was associated with the highest benefit in the four aspects in our study: *Interaction Adjustment* (for single expatriates), *Host National Social Support*, *Open-mindedness* (for expatriates with partner), and *Social Initiative*. It was not merely the link between the expatriate and the host that had a positive impact, but rather, the *quality* of the contact was pivotal in making the most of the experience. This is in line with the general finding in the mentor literature of the central role of relationship quality for mentoring outcomes (Eby et al., 2013).

Our second research question focused on whether the quality of contact had a linear or curvilinear (exponential) effect. In the case of a linear effect, the higher the quality of the

contact, the *more* benefits expatriates might experience. In this case, expatriates also would derive some benefit from the contact if the quality of the contact was low. In the case of a curvilinear effect, contact with a host was beneficial *only* if high-quality contact was established. Expatriates with low-quality contact with their host would then not benefit; they might even be adversely affected by the contact. To be able to determine between these two possible effects, we had to answer the question: did expatriates with low-quality contact also benefit to some extent from the contact with their host?

Although the differences between expatriates with low-quality contact and those without host were never significant, this does not necessarily mean that expatriates with low-quality contact did not benefit somewhat from the contact with their host. For example, expatriates with low-quality contact did not decrease over time on *Social Initiative*, whereas expatriates without host did. The lack of statistically significant findings with regard to the expatriates with low-quality contact as compared to expatriates without host might be due to the reduced sample size of this group ( $n = 12$ ) (see Limitations).

When examining the patterns in the data, it was striking that in all four cases, expatriates with low-quality contact took up an intermediate position between expatriates with high-quality contact and those without host. This recurring intermediate position suggests that expatriates with low-quality contact did benefit to some extent from the contact with the host, and that expatriates with high-quality contact benefited even more: the higher the quality of the contact, the more benefits the expatriates derived.

Although the data do not permit firm conclusions as to the exact effect of the quality of the contact due to the small sample size of the groups with high- and low-quality contact, it seemed that contact quality had a linear relationship with the four examined aspects. The higher the quality of the contact, the more benefit the expatriate experienced. Expatriates who had established low-quality contact still seemed to be somewhat better off than expatriates

without host; in any case, they did not experience a detrimental effect. This suggests that a local host, even if he or she remains a weak tie, might be able to fulfill an important supportive role (Adelman, 1988).

### **Theoretical implications**

Our study adds to the mentor literature in several ways. First, it examined a specific type of peer mentoring *outside* the workplace, in the international context of expatriate assignments; this extends the literature on workplace mentoring (Eby et al., 2013), and specifically peer mentoring.

Second, Eby et al. (2013) point out the general paucity of longitudinal studies in the mentoring literature. They found only 12 studies, and none of them focused on the effect of relationship quality on career outcomes. Our study, although only focusing on a particular form of peer mentoring, helped to fill this gap.

Third, while relationship quality has been found to play a central role in the effectiveness of mentoring (Eby et al., 2013), which was confirmed in the present study, there has been little research attention paid to the exact role contact quality plays in the effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Some studies show mentoring can have negative effects (Eby et al., 2000; Scandura, 1998). Our study showed this does not hold true for contact with a local host; expatriates with low quality contact with their host were not worse off. This suggests contact with a local host is a low-risk intervention. It seems possible negative effects, as found in the mentoring literature, do not occur when putting expatriates in touch with a host. If expatriates did not establish high-quality contact with their host, they did not suffer from the contact, and did not become worse off than if they had not had a host. For that reason, it does not seem to be as necessary as it is in youth mentoring (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) to apply caution when putting expatriates in touch with a local host.

Finally, while many studies focus exclusively on the perceptions of the protégés, our study has also gathered information about the relationship quality as perceived by the local host. This is one step towards a more detailed examination of the importance of the perceptions of the mentor, which is an important avenue for future research according to Eby et al. (2013).

### **Practical implications**

Our study shows contact with a local host is a low-risk HR intervention with many benefits for expatriates. With little effort, organizations can use this intervention to support their expatriates. All that is needed is to put expatriates in touch with a local host, taking care to match for age, place of residence, and family situation. In many cases (in the present study, in about two-thirds of the matches), the contact should automatically develop; even if it is not of high quality, the expatriate still seems to derive some benefit from this contact; in any case, no harm is done.

Implementing a system in which expatriates are put in touch with a local host mostly demands time and effort. Because of its voluntary basis and the fact that it takes place outside of work, the program is not costly; although this depends, of course, on how the system is designed. Since it is not easy to get in touch with locals in many European countries (HSBC, 2010), such a program could be the crucial push that expatriates need to break out of the *expatriate bubble* and get in touch with locals.

Our study also has implications for expatriates themselves. It is shown that high quality contact with a host national can offer many benefits. Expatriates and their partners could deliberately look out for a host national in their environment, e.g. a local colleague or neighbor, with whom they may build a high quality relationship. This is relevant for both company-sent as well self-initiated expatriates. Especially the latter group may need to take a

more active role as company support is often missing. Seeking out and establishing contact with host nationals which may offer them various types of support, could be a valuable way to deal with the stresses of an expatriate assignment.

### **Limitations and future research**

An important limitation of the present study was the small sample size. Although it was clear at the outset of the field experiment that the quality of the contact between expatriate and host might play an important role, contact quality was not manipulated. The main problem this presented was the limited sample of participants with low-quality contact ( $n = 12$ ). Reduced statistical power heightens the chance of falsely accepting the null-hypothesis (Cohen, 1988). For example, when comparing Low quality ( $n = 12$ ) with No contact ( $n = 32$ ), it is possible that the null hypothesis ( $H_0$  *Expatriates with low-quality contact do not differ from expatriates without host*) is falsely accepted because the difference is not statistically significant. Although the results pointed towards expatriates benefiting *more* the higher the quality of the contact (linear effect), it is impossible to define with certainty the exact role of the quality of contact. Future research should include a larger sample of participants in order to find a definite answer to this question.

A second limitation is we have to be cautious in drawing conclusions with regard to causality. We cannot conclude the quality of the contact led to the results noted in this paper, although this seems to be plausible. The field experiment was set up to examine the effect of a local host; therefore, we created an experimental group (contact with host) and a control group (no host). After completion of the study, expatriates were assigned to a high-quality and low-quality contact group, based on the rating of the contact with their host. As contact quality was not manipulated as was the case with contact with a local host, the quality of the contact cannot be definitively identified as the cause. However, certain patterns in the data

suggest it is the quality of the contact that caused the effect on the four variables. For example, single expatriates who established low quality contact with their host were slightly *more* open-minded at the start of the project than those who established high quality contact (Figure 5). This suggests it was not a high baseline score on *Open-mindedness* that led to high quality contact. More research should examine these dynamics and shed light on the nature of the causal link.

A third limitation is that we did not distinguish between company-sent and self-initiated expatriates. We employed a broad definition of the term ‘expatriate’ because both company-sent and self-initiated expatriate face the challenge of settling in a new culture, with which a local host can help. Fortunately, the research design – random assignment to the experimental and control group –made sure that it is unlikely that this has influenced the results as reported in this study (see also Van Bakel et al. 2014). However, future research should take this distinction into account.

It is also important to note that the nature of the helping relationship between expatriate and local hosts in our study is likely to prevent any negative interactions to occur within this contact. Therefore, we have only been able to contrast two groups of positive interactions with locals (high and low quality contact with a local host) with a group who did not have a local host. It would be interesting for future research to examine the quality of expatriate-local interactions in general. In the absence of a specific helping relationship, contact with locals may also have negative effects. It would be worthwhile to examine the effect of the balance between both positive and negative interactions with all the host nationals the expatriate is in touch with.

When putting expatriates in touch with a local host, organizations should endeavor to enhance the quality of the contact. A potential means of influencing the quality of the contact might be through influencing the frequency of the contact. It is shown in this study that the

quality of the contact is strongly related to the frequency of the contact: the higher the quality of the contact, the more frequent the meetings. Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) suggests the importance of a balance between costs and rewards for the development of a relationship. This balance might be favorably influenced if the frequency of the contact is higher. More frequent meetings would heighten the opportunity for expatriates to derive benefits from the contact with their host, and in turn, this would stimulate the development of the contact. One must bear in mind, however, although the quality of the contact was correlated with the frequency of the contact, it is not possible to conclude 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 expatriate and host. Furthermore, while our paper focuses solely on perceived relationship quality, it would also be worthwhile to examine the effect of frequency and breadth of the contact (Johnson et al. 2003), and compare the relative contribution of each (e.g. is highly frequent contact of medium quality more valuable than low frequent contact of high quality?).

Further research should also focus on other nationalities and other host cultures. Since the difficulty in accessing host nationals in some Western countries is known (HSBC, 2010), it is plausible that purposefully putting expatriates in touch with a local host in these countries could be as beneficial as for expatriates in this study. In the current study the cultural distance between the expatriate and the local host was relatively small. It is uncertain whether the effects for expatriate-local interactions with a higher cultural distance will be similar to those found in this study, because more and larger cultural differences have to be bridged when the cultural distance is larger. Future research should focus on this, and determine if, for example, in such cases training of the local host is necessary.

A final, important area for future research is to examine what factors lead to the establishment of high quality contact. Van Bakel, Van Oudenhoven, and Gerritsen (2015) have

identified nine factors that stimulate and hinder the development of the contact, using Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) as a theoretical basis: similarities, motivation, benefits, anxiety, expectations, busy schedules, suboptimal timing, communication breakdown, and cultural differences. This study, however, only looks at expatriate contact with a local host in the Netherlands. It is also worthwhile for future research to take culture into account, and examine whether cultural dimensions such as power distance, masculinity, and indulgence (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) facilitate or hinder the establishment of high quality contact between expatriates and their local host.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows the pivotal role relationship quality plays in determining the impact of expatriate contact with a local host: the higher the quality of the contact between the participants, the more benefit expatriates derive. Our results have important implications for international human resource management, since effective (peer) mentoring is one way for organizations to support expatriates on their international assignments, and stimulating high quality contact is the key to its success.

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