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Publisher: Routledge

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The International Journal of Human Resource Management

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjih20>

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Published online: 23 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: Marian Van Bakel, Marinel Gerritsen & Jan Pieter Van Oudenhoven (2014) Impact of a local host on the intercultural competence of expatriates, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25:14, 2050-2067, DOI: [10.1080/09585192.2013.870292](https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.870292)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.870292>

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Impact of a local host on the intercultural competence of expatriates

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Intercultural competence is an essential asset for those who live abroad or who work with people from different cultural backgrounds. This longitudinal study examines the impact of contact with a local host on five attitudinal and behavioural aspects of intercultural competence. Sixty-five Western expatriates in the Netherlands were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group ($n = 33$) that had contact with a Dutch host during 9 months, and a control group ($n = 32$) with no host. The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire was filled in at baseline and again after 9 months. A local host buffered a decrease in both attitudinal (*Open-mindedness*) and behavioural (*Social Initiative*) aspects of intercultural competence; although, in the case of *Open-mindedness*, this decrease was only buffered for expatriates with a partner. No effect was found for *Cultural Empathy*, *Flexibility* or *Emotional Stability*. The article concludes by discussing the various merits of contact with a local host as compared with cross-cultural training.

Keywords: buddy scheme; expatriate supporting practices; intercultural competence; local host; Multicultural Personality Questionnaire; *Open-mindedness*; *Social Initiative*

Introduction

Intercultural competence has gathered prominence in international business in the past decade, in conjunction with increasing attention for the development of global leaders and their competencies (Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens and Oddou 2010; Bückner and Poutsma 2010; Morley and Cerdin 2010). Originally stemming from linguistic studies in the 1960s, the concept of *competence* developed from the innate ability to learn a language to *communicative competence* that can be learned through education (Witte and Harden 2011). In the 1990s researchers began to study this concept in an intercultural context (Martin 1993). At the same time, intercultural competence was emphasized in relation to expatriate training and selection because cross-cultural training is based on the assumption that intercultural competence can be learned and taught (Gertsen 1990).

Cross-cultural training is, however, not the only way to develop intercultural competence. Expatriates can also learn about the host culture and acquire new skills through contact with host nationals, who can be an important source of information about the host culture (Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater and Klein 2003). Culture learning is the process whereby sojourners acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in their new society (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001). Although expatriates can benefit enormously from contact with host nationals, expatriates often find it difficult to make contact with them. The Expat Explorer Survey (HSBC 2010) found that 58% of expatriates were more likely to go out with expatriate friends than with local friends: they remain in the

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so-called *expatriate bubble* (Ward et al. 2001, p. 86). It is, therefore, important to find ways to facilitate contacts with host nationals since this contact does not develop by itself as Olaniran (1993) showed for international students: those who stayed longer in the country did not have more contact with host nationals. Moreover, exposure to locals is not enough: Groeppel-Klein, Germelmann and Glaum (2010) found that in the case of international students, the contact needed to be stimulated in order for positive effects to show. In this study, expatriates were put in touch with a local host to examine whether this contact helps to develop the intercultural competence of the expatriate.

What is intercultural competence?

There has been much discussion about intercultural competence and similar concepts such as intercultural communication competence (Martin 1993; Chen and Starosta 1996; Wiseman 2002), cross-cultural competence (Johnson, Lenartowicz and Apud 2006) and cultural intelligence (Earley 2002). In this paper, we use the term intercultural competence because it is the term most widely used in the literature (e.g. Deardorff 2009; Bird et al. 2010; Morley and Cerdin 2010; Witte and Harden 2011). Although different terms, definitions and components abound, consensus can also be observed: 'The theories and models display both considerable similarity in their broad brushstrokes (e.g. motivation, knowledge, skills, context, outcomes) and yet extensive diversity at the level of specific conceptual subcomponents' (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009, p. 35). A definition which clearly shows that intercultural competence consists of three components and can be measured by two criteria (effectiveness and appropriateness) is given by Wiseman (2002): 'the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures' (p. 208).

The plethora of approaches to intercultural competence has also resulted in a multitude of instruments which usually emphasize one component over the other. There does not seem to be an instrument which covers the concept completely; there is also no consensus yet as to exactly which subcomponents are part of intercultural competence (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). Fantini (2009) gives an overview of 44 instruments, which 'represent varying conceptualizations of intercultural competence or otherwise address specific components' (p. 465). Some of these instruments focus on cognitive aspects such as language proficiency, others on behaviour or personality. In this paper, we use the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000).

Multicultural Personality Questionnaire

The MPQ (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000; Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee 2002) is an instrument to measure multicultural effectiveness, one of the criteria of intercultural competence. It consists of five dimensions, *Open-mindedness*, *Cultural Empathy*, *Social Initiative*, *Emotional Stability* and *Flexibility*. The instrument aims to cover more specific aspects of broader traits that are relevant to multicultural success (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000) in order to be better able to predict important job criteria. The MPQ also has been shown to predict adjustment of international students (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee 2002; Leong 2007) and expatriate adjustment (Van Oudenhoven, Mol and Van der Zee 2003).

We have chosen this instrument in this study for several reasons. First, the MPQ was developed not only to contribute to international selection, but also to assess individual training needs (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000). Second, the five dimensions of

the MPQ cover an important part of what is usually mentioned as part of either the attitude or skills component of intercultural competence. A detailed examination of each dimension is given when we build our hypotheses. Third, the MPQ is a cross-culturally validated instrument (Leone, Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Perugini and Ercolani 2005). Finally, the instrument is available for research at no cost, and no specific training is needed to use it – as compared with, for example, the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman 2003).

Nature or nurture?

It is debated whether some part of intercultural competence is innate or whether all competence can be learned. For example, Leiba-O'Sullivan (1999) distinguishes between stable and dynamic competence and considers stable competences – e.g. personality traits – as a basis on which to build dynamic competences. Bird et al. (2010) follow her approach and Van de Vijver and Leung (2009, p. 406) mention personality traits as a component of intercultural competence. Personality traits are also part of the *personal attributes* in the definition that Johnson et al. (2006) specifically formulated for the international business context: 'an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad' (p. 530).

The innate-learned question is particularly relevant considering the instrument we chose to measure intercultural competence in this study. Although the instrument is called the MPQ, it may be used as a tool to establish training needs (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000). Van Oudenhoven (2002, p. 223) states that even though the five dimensions represent relatively stable individual differences, they are trainable to a certain extent. This is especially the case for *Open-mindedness*, *Social Initiative* and *Cultural Empathy*, because, as Herfst, Van Oudenhoven and Timmerman (2008, p. 69) argue, these three dimensions are 'more easily trainable because of their social component'. Furthermore, although personality characteristics are seen as more stable than skills, the stability of personality itself is also debated. In a meta-analysis of 206 personality stability coefficients, Ardel (2000) fails to find support for personality stability theory (Costa and McCrae 1988) which states that personality basically remains stable after the age of 30. Instead, Ardel (2000) suggests that the environment is paramount: 'personality may be relatively stable across time because of a stable social environment' (p. 393). For expatriates, the social environment changes drastically upon expatriation. According to the stress-related growth perspective (Park, Cohen and Murch 1996), life events – such as an international transition (Ward et al. 2001) – can lead to positive change in, for example, personality. Expatriates leave behind their social network and have to rebuild it in the host country. A local host is part of that new social environment. It is possible these circumstances might still have an effect even if part of the MPQ is more stable than dynamic. Although this paper seeks to address the impact of a local host on intercultural competence through the MPQ instrument, at the same time it is also a test of whether the MPQ dimensions can be changed through such an intervention. This could shed light on whether the five dimensions of MPQ could be considered as personality-based skills or as more stable personality characteristics.

Hypotheses

In this section, hypotheses about the impact of a local host on each of the five MPQ dimensions are formulated.

Open-mindedness

The MPQ dimension *Open-mindedness* is defined as ‘an open and unprejudiced attitude towards outgroup members and towards different cultural norms and values’ (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000, p. 294). *Open-mindedness* or related constructs such as openness to experience are alternatively seen as an attitude or motivation (Imahori and Lanigan 1989; Gudykunst 1993; Chen and Starosta 1996; Deardorff 2006; Williams and Johnson 2011), a cognitive orientation (Wiseman 2002), a relational skill (Ruben 1976; Arthur and Bennett 1995) or a stable competence (Leiba-O’ Sullivan 1999; Bird et al. 2010). Caligiuri, Jacobs and Farr (2000) developed an instrument for the personality construct of openness through behavioural and attitudinal indicators – such as *attitudes to openness*. As the authors of the MPQ define *Open-mindedness* in terms of *attitude*, this dimension can be seen as a representation of the attitude component of intercultural competence. As Williams and Johnson (2011), who also used *Open-mindedness* in their research, state: ‘It is important to note [...] that open-mindedness is not a static trait, but an attitude or stance which can be cultivated with appropriate education and experiences’ (p. 46).

Several studies of international students indicated that attitudinal aspects can be changed through studying abroad (e.g. Carlson and Widaman 1988). Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) showed that international students not only had a more positive perception of the host culture, but also ‘had become more accepting of people with different attitudes and values’ (p. 18). In this study, we are interested in the potential impact of contact with a local host on *Open-mindedness*. The association hypothesis states that social interaction with host nationals leads to a more positive attitude towards these host nationals (Church 1982). Two studies in the US context found evidence that close contact with locals was associated with more favourable attitudes towards the country and its people (Selltiz and Cook 1962; Kamal and Maruyama 1990). Contact with a local host might similarly affect *Open-mindedness*.

H1: Expatriates with a host have a greater increase in *Open-mindedness* than those without a host.

Cultural Empathy

Cultural Empathy is defined as the ‘ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of members from different cultural groups’ (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000, p. 294). According to the authors of the MPQ, *Cultural Empathy* is also referred to as *sensitivity* (p. 293). Empathy (or sensitivity) has been listed in the literature on intercultural competence as a motivational construct (Wiseman 2002), a skill (Ruben 1976; Imahori and Lanigan 1989; Gudykunst 1993) or a stable competence (Bird et al. 2010). Deardorff (2006) views empathy not so much as a component of intercultural competence, but as a desired internal outcome of intercultural competence, involving an internal shift in frame of reference.

Except for Bird et al. (2010) who consider the competencies they list in their review as stable, empathy or sensitivity is usually seen as something that can be developed or influenced. For example, the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Hammer et al. 2003) is founded on the belief that intercultural sensitivity can be developed. Contact with locals, especially an intervention such as a local host which is aimed at helping the expat settle into the host country, provides ample opportunity to learn about the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of host nationals (Johnson et al. 2003). This helps expatriates understand and recognize such feelings, thoughts and behaviours so that they become more culturally emphatic. This leads to our second hypothesis.

H2: Expatriates with a host have a greater increase in *Cultural Empathy* than those without a host.

Social Initiative

Social Initiative focuses on the ability to establish and maintain contacts and to take initiatives (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee 2002, p. 681). It is close to the ability to effectively communicate and to establish interpersonal relationships (Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman 1978). These dimensions of intercultural competence are usually classified as behavioural aspects (Hammer et al. 1978; Hammer 1987; Wiseman 2002). Bird et al. (2010) list closely related aspects such as *relationship interest* and *interpersonal engagement* as more stable competences, but within a ‘broader conceptualization of interpersonal skills’ (p. 816). Such skills are the subject of the culture learning theory, which posits that a sojourner can acquire social knowledge and skills that are relevant in another culture (Ward et al. 2001, p. 51). Through contact with a local host, the expatriate can learn how to establish and maintain contact with locals in that host country. They might also more easily take the initiative to reach out to other locals and establish a social network beyond the expatriate bubble because they have already experienced contact with a local host. This leads to our third hypothesis.

H3: Expatriates with a host have a greater increase in *Social Initiative* than those without a host.

Emotional Stability

Emotional Stability is the tendency to remain calm in stressful situations versus a tendency to show strong emotional reactions under stressful circumstances (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000, p. 294). The classification of *Emotional Stability* and related constructs in terms of components of intercultural competence depends on the source. The ability to deal with stress is usually seen as a personality trait in the literature on competences of global leaders (Bird et al. 2010; Bückner and Poutsma 2010), although Hammer et al. (1978) consider it as a *behavioural* aspect of intercultural effectiveness. A related construct in intercultural communication is that of tolerance of ambiguity – ‘the ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with minimal discomfort’ (Ruben 1976, p. 341). Tolerance of ambiguity is often classified as a skill (Ruben 1976; Ruben and Kealey 1979; Imahori and Lanigan 1989; Gudykunst 1993). Furthermore, *Emotional Stability* is also very similar to social relaxation, which is the ‘ability to reveal little anxious emotion in intercultural communication’ (Chen and Starosta 1996, p. 363). They see social relaxation as part of the attitudinal aspect of intercultural competence.

Would contact with a local host lead to an increase in *Emotional Stability*? The fact that tolerance of ambiguity is seen as skill and social relaxation as an attitudinal element of intercultural competence suggests that *Emotional Stability* can be changed. However, the MPQ dimension of *Emotional Stability* focuses on the more general ability to deal with stress, whereas tolerance of ambiguity tailors more specifically to the context of an international transition – ‘situations where one lacks information needed to interact effectively’ (Gudykunst 1993, p. 59). Furthermore, *Emotional Stability* is often mentioned in psychology as a personality trait that is negatively related to Neuroticism (e.g. DeNeve and Cooper 1998). *Emotional Stability*, therefore, is not expected to be influenced by contact with a local host.

Flexibility

Flexibility is the ability to switch easily from one strategy to another because the familiar ways of handling things will not necessarily work in a new cultural environment (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000, p. 295). This dimension, sometimes called *behavioural flexibility*, is most commonly attributed to the skills component of intercultural competence (Chen and Starosta 1996; Wiseman 2002). Deardorff (2006) lists *Flexibility* ('selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviours', p. 254), together with *empathy*, as internal outcomes involving a shift of frame of reference. This suggests that flexibility can be learned. In their discussion of the construct, Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) highlight an important element of flexibility: 'the ability to learn from mistakes and adjustment of behaviour whenever it is required' (p. 295). It is about adjusting oneself cognitively and behaviourally to new situations (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee 2002). Contact with a local host offers the scope to learn new behaviours through observation of the host, to try out these behavioural alternatives and then discuss them with the host. This suggests that contact with a local host might influence *Flexibility*, leading to our fourth hypothesis.

H4: Expatriates with a host have a greater increase in *Flexibility* than those without a host.

Method

In order to test whether contact with a local host contributes to intercultural competence, a longitudinal field experiment was set up in which expatriates were put in contact with a Dutch host with whom they had regular contact during a period of 9 months (experimental group; $N = 33$). Many went for drinks or had dinner, either in a restaurant or at home; some took the opportunity to explore the Netherlands or engage in activities such as a visit to a whisky brewery or a spectacular floral park. These expatriates were compared with expatriates who were not put in contact with a host (control group; $N = 32$). A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods was used: expatriates filled in questionnaires at 0 and 9 months, which also contained open-ended questions about their contact with the host. Furthermore, nine expatriates and five Dutch hosts were interviewed after completion of the study in order to gain more insight into the particulars of contact with the local hosts. This study was part of a larger study that examined the impact of contact with a local host on the success of the expatriate assignment (Van Bakel 2012).

Sample and procedure

In this study, an expatriate is defined as 'anyone who works outside of his or her home country, with a planned return to that or a third country' (Casio 2006, p. 176). Expatriates could participate in the study only if they:

- were Western expatriates with English or French as first language¹;
- were on a temporary job assignment of at least 10 months;
- had been in the Netherlands for less than 12 months;
- did not have a Dutch partner.

Sixty-five expatriates participated in this project. The top three nationalities represented in the sample were French (31%), US American (25%) and British (22%). Fifty-seven per cent of the expatriates were accompanied by their partner on their

assignment; 32% did not have a partner; 11% had a partner back home. Almost half of the expatriates (48%) had children; 73% of the expatriates with a partner had children. Forty per cent 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 first language of the majority was English (65%); the remainder had French as their mother tongue. The expatriates had been in the Netherlands for six and a half months on average when they started in the project. In terms of international experience, half of them had been abroad for 23 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 2 years in the Netherlands. Only 6% of expatriates had received cross-cultural training (ranging from 3 to 20 h) prior to their departure.

The participants in our study were solicited through a variety of channels, for example, welcome fairs for expatriates, expatriate associations and (online) networks, and various websites tailored to expatriates. They could register through the website of the project. They were then asked to fill in the baseline questionnaire of the project, which included the MPQ, as well as a form with questions (e.g. about their hobbies) that could help to match the expatriate with a suitable host. After completing these questionnaires, the participants were either told they would be put in touch with a host immediately (experimental group), or after 9 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 email 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 9 months, at the end of the project, the participants in the control group were asked whether 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.

Random assignment

Participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control condition to rule out alternative explanations of experimental results other than contact with a local host. The aim of random assignment is to create two groups whose attributes are equivalent, so the effects found are due to the experimental manipulation and not to characteristics of individuals in the group (Levin 1999). Random assignment eliminates systematic sources of bias, but it does not guarantee that the experimental group and the control group are completely alike (Levin 1999, p. 13). This was checked by one-way ANOVA comparing the expatriates with a host to those without a host. These showed that the experimental and control groups did not differ significantly on the dependent variables at baseline (0 months). As we conducted a field experiment in which contact with other locals is unavoidable, at the beginning of the experiment we also compared the two groups on the amount of contact with Dutch nationals. This difference was not significant, thereby eliminating a possible confounding factor. Furthermore, we set up the experiment

according to a pre-test – post-test design (Campbell and Stanley 1963), so that the baseline level could be taken into account in the analyses and the differences in the baseline level could not influence the results.

Dependent variables

The MPQ (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000) contains 91 items,² and was administered at 0 and 9 months. The items were answered on a scale of 1 (totally not applicable) to 5 (totally applicable). The MPQ consists of the following five dimensions:

1. *Open-mindedness* (18 items) is seen as ‘an open and unprejudiced attitude towards outgroup members and towards different cultural norms and values’ (expatriates: $\alpha^0 = 0.87$, $\alpha^9 = 0.83$). Example item: ‘Is fascinated by other people’s opinions’.
2. *Social Initiative* (17 items) is ‘the tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiatives’ (expatriates: $\alpha^0 = 0.88$, $\alpha^9 = 0.81$). Example item: ‘Makes contacts easily’.
3. *Cultural Empathy* (18 items) is ‘the ability to empathise with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of members from different cultural groups’ (expatriates: $\alpha^0 = 0.88$, $\alpha^9 = 0.88$). Example item: ‘Tries to understand other people’s behaviour’.
4. *Emotional Stability* (20 items) is ‘the tendency to remain calm in stressful situations versus a tendency to show strong emotional reactions under stressful circumstances’ (expatriates: $\alpha^0 = 0.88$, $\alpha^9 = 0.89$). Example item: ‘Remains calm in misfortune’.
5. *Flexibility* (18 items) is ‘the ability to switch easily from one strategy to another, because the familiar ways of handling things will not necessarily work in a new cultural environment’ (expatriates: $\alpha^0 = 0.77$, $\alpha^9 = 0.71$). Example of a reversely formulated item: ‘Looks for regularity in life’.

Control variables

Sex (male, female), partner (yes, no) and children (yes, no) might moderate the effect of a local host on the dependent variables: for example, the effect of a local host could be different for male and female expatriates. For each analysis, the possible effect of these three moderating variables was examined, and only reported if significant. Furthermore, a list of covariates was included in this study to control for possible differences between the experimental and the control group which could occur despite the random assignment to both conditions. We checked for differences between both groups on age, place of residence, schooling, native language, nationality, international experience and length of stay in the Netherlands before participation, and found no significant differences. Nor were these covariates confounding factors in the analyses reported here.

Results

Repeated measures analyses with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Host* (yes, no) as factors showed no significant effects of contact with a local host for *Cultural Empathy* (H2), *Flexibility* (H4) and *Emotional Stability*. While these findings were in line with our expectation with regard to *Emotional Stability*, H2 and H4 were not confirmed. In this section, we present the results of the two MPQ variables that showed significant differences between expatriates with a host and expatriates without a host [*Open-*

mindfulness (H1) and *Social Initiative* (H3)]. We also look at effect size (η^2) to be able to interpret the findings (Clark-Carter 2003).³

Open-mindedness

A repeated measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Host* (yes, no) as factors showed a two-way interaction effect of *Time* and *Host* on *Open-mindedness*, controlling for the effects of *Children* (yes, no) ($F[1,61] = 5.80, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.09$). However, when checking for possible moderating effects of having a *Partner*, as was done in each analysis, a repeated measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months), *Host* (yes, no) and *Partner* (yes, no) showed a significant three-way interaction effect on *Open-mindedness* ($F[1,61] = 4.98, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.08$), indicating that the effect of a local host was different for expatriates with a partner than for single expatriates. The following subsection separately investigates the impact of a local host for expatriates with and without a partner.

The moderating effect of having a partner

Figures 1 and 2 show the difference in development of *Open-mindedness* over time in expatriates with a partner and those who are single. The estimated marginal means are shown in Table 1.

A repeated measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Host* (yes, no) as factors showed that a local host had a significant impact on the *Open-mindedness* of expatriates with a partner ($F[1,40] = 10.36, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.21$) (Figure 1). When examining the development over time, separate repeated measures analyses with only *Time* (0 and 9 months) as factor revealed that expatriates with a partner and host maintained the same level of *Open-mindedness* throughout the project; whereas expatriates with a partner but without host showed a decrease ($F[1,21] = 20.18, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.49$). Contact with a local host acted as a buffer with regard to a decrease in *Open-mindedness* for expatriates with partner.

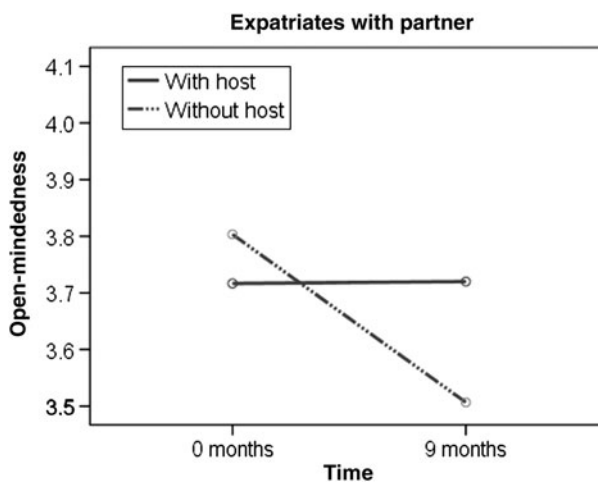


Figure 1. *Open-mindedness* for expatriates with partner with and without host after 0 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).



Figure 2. *Open-mindedness* for expatriates without partner with and without host after 0 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Table 1. *Open-mindedness* of expatriates split into partner and host after 0 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) with estimated marginal means and standard errors.

	<i>Partner</i>		<i>No partner</i>	
	<i>With host</i> (<i>n</i> = 20)	<i>Without host</i> (<i>n</i> = 22)	<i>With host</i> (<i>n</i> = 13)	<i>Without host</i> (<i>n</i> = 10)
0 Months	3.72 (0.10)	3.80 (0.09)	4.06 (0.12)	3.87 (0.14)
9 Months	3.71 (0.09)	3.51 (0.08)	3.76 (0.11)	3.62 (0.13)

Another repeated measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Host* (yes, no) as factors showed that contact with a local host did not have an impact on the *Open-mindedness* of expatriates *without* a partner (Figure 2). A repeated measures analysis with only *Time* (0 and 9 months) as factor revealed that single expatriates decreased in *Open-mindedness* ($F[1,22] = 22.24, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.50$). These findings indicate that contact with a local host only buffered the decrease in *Open-mindedness* for expatriates *with* a partner.

Social Initiative

A repeated measures analysis with *Time* (0 and 9 months) and *Host* (yes, no) as factors showed a significant interaction effect on *Social Initiative* ($F[1,61] = 6.81, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.10$), controlling for the effects of *Children* (yes, no). When examining expatriates with and without a host, separate repeated measures analyses with only *Time* (0 and 9 months) as factor, and controlling for the effect of *Children* (yes, no), revealed that expatriates who did not have a Dutch host decreased in *Social Initiative* ($F[1,30] = 5.93, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.16$) during the 9 months of the project, while expatriates with a host did not show a decrease (see Figure 3). Table 2 shows the estimated marginal means of *Social Initiative* for expatriates with and without a host. The findings show that a local host acted as a buffer for a decrease in *Social Initiative* of expatriates.

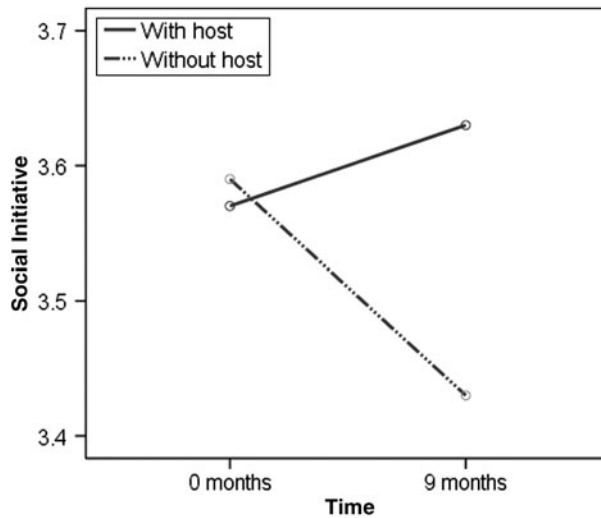


Figure 3. *Social Initiative* for expatriates with and without host after 0 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Table 2. *Social Initiative* of expatriates with and without host after 0 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) with estimated marginal means and standard errors.

	<i>With host</i> (n = 33)	<i>Without host</i> (n = 32)
0 Months	3.57 (0.09)	3.59 (0.09)
9 Months	3.63 (0.08)	3.43 (0.08)

Discussion

Does contact with a local host have an influence on intercultural competence? The findings presented here show that contact with a local host has an impact on both attitudinal (*Open-mindedness*) and behavioural (*Social Initiative*) aspects of intercultural competence.

First, contact with a local host buffered a decrease in *Open-mindedness* for expatriates with a partner. Expatriates with a partner did not become less open-minded when they were put in touch with a local host. The other expatriates – even single expatriates with a host – all decreased in *Open-mindedness*. Although this finding indicates a beneficial impact of contact with a local host, it was not as was expected, because expatriates with a host did not become *more* open-minded towards people from other cultures (H1). Although H1 was not supported, the finding was still in line with the association hypothesis (Church 1982), the studies of Selltitz and Cook (1962) and of Kamal and Maruyama (1990), because expatriates with a host had a more positive attitude than those without a host.

The results with regard to *Open-mindedness* are striking for two reasons. First, the general tendency for expatriates to decrease in *Open-mindedness* – with the only exception being expatriates with partner and with host – was not expected. A possible explanation is that the expatriates came to the Netherlands with an open mind, ready to establish a life there and make contact with the Dutch, and then found the reality more difficult than expected. The Expat Explorer Survey (HSBC 2010), indeed, showed the Netherlands to be a very difficult country in which to make local friends according to the

expatriates themselves. Their expectations might have been too optimistic, and thus resulted in a decrease in *Open-mindedness*. A local host might counteract this decrease in *Open-mindedness*:

But if you have that family contact, a normal family, whether it is a guy with his girlfriend or just a guy who takes you to meet his parents 1 day for a weekend, you go bowling or whatever, where you see normal Dutch people interacting, I think you get a different perspective of their cultures, not to see the negatives that you see here by yourself.

The second surprising finding is that contact with a local host only buffered the decrease in *Open-mindedness* for expatriates with a partner. Why would a local host not work for expatriates without a partner? One explanation is that single expatriates cannot share their experiences with a significant other. If an expatriate has been in touch with their host, it is likely he or she will talk about it with his or her partner, especially if this partner was also included in the contact. This is called capitalization, which is likely to increase the positive effect of the event (Langston 1994; Gable, Reis, Impett and Asher 2004). For example, reliving the event through retelling could make the experience more salient and easily accessible in retrospect. Disappointing experiences the expatriate might have had with the Dutch might then be more successfully counterbalanced, preventing a decrease in *Open-mindedness*.

Second, an effect similar to *Open-mindedness* was found for *Social Initiative*: a local host buffered a decrease on *Social Initiative*. The third hypothesis (H3: expatriates with a host have a greater increase in *Social Initiative* than those without a host) was not confirmed because expatriates with a host did not increase in *Social Initiative*. The decrease in *Social Initiative* for expatriates without a host should probably be seen in the same light as the decrease in *Open-mindedness*, being the result of overly optimistic expectations with regard to trying to make contact with the Dutch upon arrival in the Netherlands. If expatriates cannot get in touch with the Dutch as easily as they expected, then they might take fewer initiatives to meet Dutch people, and consequently decrease in *Social Initiative* – unless they have contact with a local host. A partner in the control group expressed this as follows:

No more progress in Dutch “contacts”, but I’ve quit expecting that to change – whether it is where I live or how this culture is, I don’t know, but I don’t think I will make any close Dutch friends here. Just can’t seem to get beyond the very basics with the neighbours, and we don’t meet anyone new who is Dutch [...]. Oh well.

Third, no effects of a local host were found for *Cultural Empathy*, *Flexibility*, and *Emotional Stability*. The lack of effect for *Emotional Stability* was in line with our expectation. It seems that *Emotional Stability* is indeed one of the more stable MPQ-dimensions; in any case, contact with a local host does not influence expatriates’ *Emotional Stability*. It would be interesting for future research to include measures for tolerance of ambiguity. A local host is more likely to have an impact on this aspect because tolerance of ambiguity is more tailored to dealing with stress in intercultural situations than *Emotional Stability*. The lack of effect for *Cultural Empathy* and *Flexibility* is contrary to what was expected: H2 and H4 were not confirmed. A possible explanation is that learning about cultural differences and understanding the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of host nationals through contact with a local host are not enough to increase one’s *Cultural Empathy*. This knowledge needs to be translated into behaviour. A similar case can be made for *Flexibility*, which is the ability to switch easily from one strategy to another because the familiar ways of handling things will not necessarily work in a new cultural environment. During the contact with the local host, expatriates might have

learned new strategies that could work in the new cultural environment, or they learned why some of their familiar strategies no longer worked. However, this knowledge does not necessarily affect the *ability* to switch easily between strategies.

What do these findings say about the stability of the MPQ-dimensions? As hypothesized, *Emotional Stability* seems to be a stable competence and should, therefore, be taken into account in the selection phase of an international assignment. It is possible that *Cultural Empathy* and *Flexibility* are also more stable than dynamic competences because we did not find an impact of a local host. On the other hand, contact with a local host might not be powerful enough to effect a change in *Cultural Empathy* and *Flexibility*. It might be that more structured interventions – e.g. cross-cultural training where behaviour is trained; i.e. through role modelling – are needed to target these competences. In view of this consideration and the literature review earlier in this paper, we are inclined to think that *Cultural Empathy* and *Flexibility*, together with *Open-mindedness* and *Social Initiative*, are the dynamic MPQ-dimensions; whereas *Emotional Stability* is a more stable competence. Although future research should determine whether *Cultural Empathy* and *Flexibility* are indeed trainable, one could say, in terms of Caligiuri (2006), that you should buy emotionally stable global leaders, but that you seem to be able to make open-minded, socially active, culturally empathetic and flexible ones.

Although the findings show an impact of a local host on attitudinal and behavioural aspects of intercultural competence, this study did not contain a complete overview of this concept. For one, it focused on personality-based aspects which represent (part of) the attitudinal and behavioural component of intercultural competence. For another, we did not examine the cognitive benefits of a local host. Consensus has not yet been reached as to the best way to measure intercultural competence, as exemplified by Fantini's list (2009) of 44 instruments. In this study, we used the MPQ (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2000), arguing that this instrument represents certain attitudinal and behavioural elements of intercultural competence. However, there are other relevant aspects in the attitudinal and behavioural domain, such as language proficiency, which are not covered by the MPQ. Also, the MPQ does not include any cognitive aspects of intercultural competence, such as knowledge of the host culture. It is possible that contact with a local host would have shown a greater impact if such aspects were also included. Future research should examine the impact of a local host on aspects of intercultural competence beyond what is measured in this study.

Limitations and future research

The choice for a randomized controlled experiment with a longitudinal scope counteracted some limitations found in cross-sectional studies. An important strength of this design is we made sure that the effects found were due to the contact with a local host and not to other factors. Another advantage is we could see the development of intercultural competence over time instead of assessing it only at one moment in time.

A difficulty associated with longitudinal research is to find enough participants who are willing to participate in a 9-month study. Sixty-five expatriates participated in this study, which was adequate to test the impact of contact with a local host. When comparing subgroups such as expatriates with a partner with a host ($n = 20$) with expatriates with a partner without a host ($n = 22$) with regard to *Open-mindedness*, the chance of falsely accepting the null-hypothesis (H_0 : expatriates with partner with host do not differ from expatriates with partner without host) is heightened because the difference might not be statistically significant with a small sample size (Cohen 1988). This is not the case,

however, for our findings with regard to *Open-mindedness*. The effect was not only statistically significant, but also very large ($\eta^2 = 0.21$).⁴

Another limitation is that our study employed a broad definition of *expatriates*. We included both company-sent expatriates and self-initiated expatriates because they all face the challenge of settling into a new host culture. Contact with a local host might be beneficial for both groups. However, we did not gather data on whether an expatriate was self-initiated or company-sent. Fortunately, it is unlikely that this has influenced the outcome of the study. The random assignment in this study created two groups with equivalent attributes, as shown by the comparison on a number of covariates and dependent variables at the beginning of the study. Any differences found between the groups, therefore, should be a result of the experimental manipulation (host or no host) and not to any other variables (Levin 1999). It would be interesting, however, to explore the difference between company-sent expatriates and self-initiated expatriates (Suutari and Brewster 2000) in combination with the impact of a local host in future research. Although all expatriates in this study signed up voluntarily for contact with a local host, it is possible that self-initiated expatriates may have been more motivated than the traditional expatriate to learn from their local host, suggesting the contact might be even more beneficial for self-initiated expatriate. Future research should take this factor into account.

A final limitation is that, due to the method of soliciting participants, the sample in this longitudinal study might not be representative of the Western French- or English-speaking expatriate population in the Netherlands. For example, it is likely those expatriates who were interested in connecting with their local community and had not yet managed to do so would have signed up more easily for this project than those who were less interested. This might make it more difficult to discern the effect of a host for this particular group than for other expatriates. It is possible that contact with a host is especially beneficial for those expatriates who find it more difficult to make contact with others, and who would not readily sign up for such a project. This calls for further research.

Conclusion

This longitudinal study examined the effect on intercultural competence of a new way for organizations to support expatriates: by putting them in touch with a local host. For a period of 9 months, expatriates went for dinner or drinks with their host, went for a walk or a bike ride, or visited a museum, a cinema, a festival or a floral park together. The study showed that contact with a local host counteracts a tendency of expatriates to decrease in *Open-mindedness* and *Social Initiative*, encouraging them to keep an open mind and take social initiatives in the Netherlands. As a result, it is a viable way for organizations to support their expatriates. Frequent interaction with locals might be ‘the key to appreciating the culture of the host country and, in turn, open the door to long-term adjustment of both the expatriates and their family’ (McEvoy and Parker 1995).

One of the strengths of this study is its longitudinal nature, enabling us to ‘identify which aspects of intercultural competence remain invariant during a sojourn and which aspects are altered by intercultural encounters’ (Van de Vijver and Leung 2009, p. 415). It examines the role of contact with locals, and more specifically, as an alternative to cross-cultural training, the impact that organized contact with a local host can have on the development of intercultural competence. Although learning during contact with a local host is not structured as it would be in cross-cultural training, contact with a host offers several advantages. First, it offers the opportunity to observe and learn from a host national, who is an important source of information about the host culture (Johnson et al.

2003; Van Bakel, Gerritsen and Van Oudenhoven 2011). Second, the contact is tailored to the specific individual and takes place when the expatriate is experiencing living and working abroad. In this sense, it is close to individualized coaching (Caligiuri 2006) after arrival. A final important benefit of contact with a local host is that it can provide social support to the expatriate (Van Bakel, Van Oudenhoven and Gerritsen 2010), which is essential to dealing with the stress associated with an international assignment (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002).

The question, however, is to what extent is it realistic to expect expatriates to learn skills from their hosts. Even though expatriates can learn through observation and experience (Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley and Riedel 2006), the contact with the host was not specifically designed for knowledge or skills acquisition as cross-cultural training would be. Future research should study the content of the contact with the host in more detail to explore which elements determine the development of intercultural competence.

Notes

1. In this study the term 'Western' refers to cultures of European origin: the UK, France, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the French-speaking part of Belgium and Switzerland were included.
2. The MPQ is not shown in an appendix, because copyright issues prevent its complete reprint.
3. Boundary values for small, medium and large effect sizes in this study are 0.01, 0.06 and 0.14 (Cohen 1988, p. 283).
4. Boundary values for small, medium and large effect sizes in this study are 0.01, 0.06 and 0.14 (Cohen 1988, p. 283).

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