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Expatriate contact with a local host: an intervention to increase social support

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ABSTRACT

Social capital is a crucial factor for expatriates to employ as they cope with the demands of an international assignment. This longitudinal study used a mixed method approach to examine the social support benefits of expatriate contact with a local host. 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. Qualitative methods such as interviews and diaries were included to shed light on the various types of social support that occurred. Results show that local hosts offered all four types of social support: social companionship, informational support, emotional support, and instrumental support. Furthermore, expatriates with a host increased their social capital; they received significantly more social support from host nationals than did those without a host. This study shows that HRD professionals may develop the social capital of expatriates by bringing them into contact with a local host, which can produce more social support from host nationals. Increased social capital may lead to a higher performance at both the individual and organisational levels.

Introduction

The past decades have seen a surge in studies focusing on expatriate adjustment and performance, examining the various factors that play a part in successful international assignments (e.g. Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou 1991; Hechanova, Beehr, and Christiansen 2003; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005). Although, in reality, failure rates are much lower than often mentioned in the literature (e.g. Harzing 1995; Harzing and Christensen 2004), the domain still calls for research attention because of the strategic importance of expatriates and the high direct and indirect costs that are associated with expatriate failure, for both the company and the expatriate (Hechanova, Beehr, and Christiansen 2003).

Increasingly, research has focused on the expatriates' social environment because of its relevance to their success (e.g. Toh and Srinivas 2012; Takeuchi 2010). Fontaine

(1986) was one of the first to highlight social support as a primary strategy to cope with the stress of an international assignment. According to stress and coping theory (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl 2008), resources such as social support can help reduce the uncertainty expatriates face and help them effectively cope with the demands of an international assignment. Social support has a positive effect on well-being in general (Cohen and Wills 1985; Ong and Ward 2005) as well as on the well-being of expatriates (Wang and Kanungo 2004). Yet, in the expatriate assignment, the existing social support network itself (e.g. family and friends) is greatly disrupted or under stress. Therefore, expatriates need to invest in creating new social ties such as with host nationals.

Since social support is recognised to be an important resource for expatriates, it would be helpful if organisations could somehow encourage the social support expatriates receive. Selmer (1999), for example, recommends promoting expatriate contact with host nationals because this is a problem-focused coping strategy with positive effects on general adjustment, interaction adjustment, and the sense of well-being. Social support of host nationals has been found to positively impact expatriate adjustment (Malek, Reiche, and Budhwar 2015), which is 'central and critical' to expatriate effectiveness (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005). Most valuable are instrumental ties with host nationals, which have been found to positively impact expatriate performance (Chiu et al. 2009; Bruning, Sonpar, and Wang 2012). For this reason, the present study focuses on an intervention that stimulates expatriates' social support through purposefully putting expatriates in contact with a local host – a host national from the host-country itself.

The flow of resources in an individual's social network is captured in the theory of social capital (e.g. Halpern 2005), which is emerging in both HRD (Nakamura and Yorks 2011) and international HRM (Taylor 2007). Social capital is often defined as 'the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit' (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998, 243). Social capital is about the resources that individuals can access and mobilise in their social networks (Claus et al. 2015; Lin 1999). These can favourably influence outcomes; that is, through the flow of information, or through emotional support because social ties reinforce identity and recognition (Lin 1999). Social capital is also relevant at the organisational level, with regard to the creation and sharing of knowledge throughout a firm, and the effective coordination and cooperation across subsidiaries in different countries (Taylor 2007).

The intervention that this study examines is relevant in an HRD context because it might be a way for HRD practitioners to help expatriates and their organisation increase their social capital and, as a consequence, improve their performance (Swanson 2001). As Brooks and Nafukho (2006) state, 'well-trained and educated employees need an environment that will propel them to the top', and this includes investments in social capital. Social networking can lead to broader sources of information and improved quality, relevance, and timeliness of information, which should then positively influence performance for individuals as well as organisations (Nakamura and Yorks 2011). Social capital building is an important task for HRD professionals to facilitate; in fact, Kessels and Poell (2004) suggest that a practical contribution from HRD practitioners in this regard is to help individual employees gain access to and sustain social networks.

The intervention of expatriate contact with a local host has already been found to impact on interaction adjustment (Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven 2011), open-mindedness, and social initiative (Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven 2014). In the present study, we examine whether contact with a local host may also be helpful for expatriates in providing social support, and thereby increase their social capital for improved performance on both individual and organisational levels (Nakamura and Yorks 2011).

The paper is structured as follows; we first outline the potential benefits expatriates can derive from increased contact with locals. Then, we review the social support literature to explore which types of support a local host could provide, which leads to our two research questions. Next, we describe both the qualitative and quantitative method of our study and report the results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for both academic research and corporate practice.

Breaking out of the expatriate bubble

Expatriates often feel the need to establish a new social network in the host-country because they inevitably leave behind a great part of their existing network, and consequently, their sources of different types of social support. The existing network slowly 'fades away' (Wang 2002), yet the stresses of an international assignment increase the need for support (Leatham and Duck 1990). Expatriates, therefore, have to locate and draw on new sources of support in the host-country, which are (1) co-nationals, (2) host-country nationals (locals), and (3) expatriates from other countries.

Having moved abroad, it is natural for expatriates to look for support from other expatriates, persons who are able to help them deal with the wide range of challenges faced by a new arrival. Many expatriates stay within the *expatriate bubble* and shy away from making contact with locals since these contacts usually are more stressful and uncertainty-prone. Dissonance theory posits that dissimilar values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms lead to dissonance and discomfort (Bruning, Sonpar, and Wang 2012). Living in compounds (Lauring and Selmer 2009) and the fact that host nationals are often part of an established circle of friends, which is not always easy to enter into (Sovic 2009), makes it even more difficult to reach out to the people of the country (host nationals) in which they work and live – even if they want to. For these reasons, it is hardly surprising that expatriates tend to receive more support from co-nationals than from locals (Johnson et al. 2003).

A number of studies suggest, however, the importance of contact with host nationals as well: it determines expatriate satisfaction with the sojourn (Podsiadlowski et al. 2013) and stimulates adjustment to interaction with host nationals and to the workplace itself (Johnson et al. 2003). A greater variety of assistance from locals (e.g. nonwork information and social support) also led to better general adjustment (Johnson et al. 2003). For international students, Geeraert, Demoulin, and Demes (2014) found that any social support has a positive impact on adjustment at the start, but that staying in a co-national expatriate *bubble* has a negative effect in the long run. These findings suggest that it is important for expatriates to establish a new social network in the host-country by interacting with locals, as Oberg (1960) earlier noted in his seminal article about culture shock:

> What can you do to get over culture shock as quickly as possible? The answer is to get to know the people of the host-country. (Oberg 1960, 182)

Expatriates could benefit from forming connections with locals, but this is not always easy because contact with host nationals does not develop by itself. Olaniran (1993) showed that, for example, international students who stayed longer in the country did not have more contact with host nationals than did international students who stayed for a shorter period. Groeppel-Klein, Germelmann, and Glaum (2010) found that mere exposure to locals is not enough to increase intercultural interaction; they suggest that the contact needs to be facilitated in order to show positive effects. Our study focuses on an intervention in which expatriates are put in touch with a local host to actively stimulate contact with host nationals.

Types of social support

The present paper particularly focuses on the flow of social support resources between expatriates and their local host. Social support can be defined as 'an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient' (Shumaker and Brownell 1984, 13).

Four types of social support are commonly distinguished in the social support literature (Cohen and Wills 1985, 313): (1) emotional support – information that a person is esteemed and accepted; (2) informational support – help in defining, under-standing, and coping with problematic events; (3) social companionship – spending of time with others in leisure and recreational activities; (4) instrumental support – provision of financial aid, material resources, and/or required services. These four types of social support have different functions. While emotional support and social companionship – sometimes together termed 'socio-emotional support' – can fulfil the basic human need of belonging, counteracting feelings of isolation and loneliness (Shumaker and Brownell 1984), informational and instrumental support alleviates stress through resolving instrumental problems or 'providing the recipient with increased time for activities such as relaxation or entertainment' (Cohen and Wills 1985). Podsiadlowski et al. (2013) add a distinction based on the amount of control one has. Informational and instrumental support is best suited to deal with stressful events that are seen as controllable (e.g. searching for a new house) because these enable problem-focused coping. Socio-emotional support is particularly helpful when encoun-tering uncontrollable problems (e.g. acculturation stress) that need an emotion-focused coping strategy. This support can help 'disengage from negative experiences' (564).

The social support benefits of contact with a local host

A local host might be able to offer social support in several ways. At the start of the contact, a local host can offer *informational support* for settling in the new country and understanding the new culture. Also, the host can accompany the expatriate to all kinds of activities, thereby offering *social companionship*. After a while, when the contact is established and has deepened, a host can also offer *emotional support*. Although

instrumental support might be more often offered when the contact is well established (e.g. loaning something or offering to help out in a stressful situation [Cutrona, Suhr, and MacFarlane 1990]), small scale offers such as translating a letter written in the foreign language could also occur early on. To be able to provide more insight into how a local host offers social support, we formulated the following research question:

RQ1:   What kind of social support does a local host offer?

We would also like to examine whether a local host is able to provide a significant amount of social support in the relatively short time the expatriate has been in touch with them (9 months). This leads to the second research question:

RQ2:   Do expatriates with a local host receive more social support from host nationals over time than do expatriates without a local host?

Method

In order to answer our research questions, we used data of a longitudinal randomised controlled experiment in which Western expatriates in the Netherlands (see the Sample section) were put in contact with a Dutch host with whom they had regular contact during a period of 9 months (experimental group; $n = 33$). They were compared with expatriates who were not put in contact with a local host (control group; $n = 32$). Both qualitative (interviews, diaries, e-mails) and quantitative methods (questionnaires) were used to answer our research questions.

Sample

Expatriates

This study defines an expatriate as 'anyone who works outside of his or her home-country, with a planned return to that or a third country' (Cascio 2006, 176). It focuses on Western expatriates to counter the predominant focus on transitions across large cultural divides at the expense of assignments that might suffer from the *presumed cultural similarity paradox* (Vromans, Van Engen, and Mol 2013).

   Expatriates could participate only if they met the following four criteria:

- The Western expatriates had English or French as their first language[1];
- They were on a temporary job assignment of at least 10 months;
- They had been in the Netherlands for less than 12 months; and
- They did not have a Dutch partner.

Sixty-five expatriates participated in this study; at the time of registration, the majority of them were in the Netherlands less than a year (89%). At the start of the study, the expatriates had been in the Netherlands for six and a half months on average. The top three nationalities represented in the sample were French (31%), US American (25%), and British (22%). In 57% of the cases, the expatriate was accompanied by their partner; 11%

had a partner back home. Almost half of the expatriates (48%) had children. Forty per cent of the expatriates were female; a number that is more than twice the average (19%) as reported by Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2015). A possible reason is that we also included self-initiated expatriates, who are more often female (Suutari and Brewster 2000). The expatriates were between 23 and 56 years old (M [SD] = 35.2 [7.99]); 89% were college graduate or beyond. At the time of their arrival in the Netherlands, half of the expatriates had been abroad for 23 months or more; a quarter of them were on their first international assignment. More than a quarter (31%) were managers, presidents, or directors of their companies; 17% were engineers. The expatriates worked in a variety of industries, from the oil and gas industry to the financial and education sectors. Prior to departure, only 6% had received cross-cultural training (ranging from 3 to 20 h), showing that many companies do not deem it necessary to prepare expatriates for assignments to relatively nearby countries.

Even though the partners of the expatriates also participated in this study, their numbers were too low to allow for meaningful analyses with regard to our second research question (partners with host n = 10; partners without host n = 13). However, because the partners were part of the contact with the host, they were included in the qualitative part of this study.

Local hosts

Thirty-three hosts participated in the study. A local host is a host national contact outside of the workplace with whom the expatriate undertakes all kinds of social activities. Most of the hosts had a partner (73%); 33% had children. The hosts were highly educated, almost all of them (97%) were college graduates or beyond. The age of the hosts ranged from 21 to 62 years (M [SD] = 35.4 [10.54]) and most of them lived in the western part of the Netherlands, as did the expatriates and partners. The hosts were internationally oriented; almost two-third of the hosts (64%) had previously lived abroad for more than 6 months for study or work purposes. Hosts were volunteers, and did not work for the same company as the expatriate.

Instruments

Instruments to answer RQ1 (What kind of social support does a local host offer?)

Various qualitative methods were used to gain more insight into the kinds of social support a local host offers (emotional support, informational support, social companionship, and instrumental support [Cohen and Wills 1985]).

Open-ended questions in the questionnaires. The second and third questionnaire of the expatriate and partner (after 5 and 9 months, respectively) contained one question about the frequency of the contact, as well as three open-ended questions about (1) the type of activities done together with the host, (2) whether they enjoyed the contact with the host and why, and (3) whether they thought that the contact was helpful.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine expatriates, three partners, and five Dutch hosts (N = 17) about their experiences with their local host. For the interviews, we selected participants with different characteristics and different situations with regard to the contact with the host: participants with high-quality contact as well as

low-quality contact (see Section Contact with the host), participants from different countries, single, or with family and living in different parts of the Netherlands, were incorporated in the sample. Five hosts were also interviewed because they could throw light on the other side of the picture. The interviews were conducted in the first language of the participant.

Diary. If the expatriate had a partner, the partner was asked to keep a diary during their participation in the study to gain insight into the adjustment process to a new country on a week-to-week basis. They were also asked to answer the following: 'Have you met the host the past week? If so, what have you done and what was your impression?' This resulted in detailed, qualitative information about the activities undertaken with the host. Eight out of 10 partners of the experimental group participated, and some of the expatriates even volunteered to keep a diary (12%; four of 33 expatriates). The diaries were kept for a period of 34–40 weeks.

E-mails. Once a month, the researcher sent an e-mail to the host inquiring about the progress of the contact. We made an effort to avoid creating an impression of overly strict monitoring by making this email as casual as possible; for example, by asking about a recent holiday. The purpose was twofold: not only could this email stimulate the host to get in touch with the expatriate, but it could also provide valuable information about the contact between the participants.

Instruments to answer RQ2

For RQ2 (Do expatriates with a local host receive more social support from host nationals over time than expatriates without a local host?), we used the data of the questionnaires which assessed the social support they received from host nationals (at 5 and 9 months).

Host National Social Support was measured with 16 items of the Interpersonal Relations scale (Searle and Ward 1990, 454) in the questionnaires at 5 and 9 months. 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). Example items were 'Do you engage in recreational activities with Dutch people?' and 'Do you seek help from Dutch people with personal problems?' Mean scores were computed for the frequency of and satisfaction with contact with host nationals (frequency: Cronbach's α (5 months) = .76, α (9 months) = .77; satisfaction:Cronbach α (5 months) = .90, α^9 (9 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 took both frequency of and satisfaction with the contact with host nationals into account. This resulted in a variable that ranged from 1 *(low)* to 25 *(high)*, and mainly targeted social companionship and emotional support provided by host nationals.

Procedure

The method used to find expatriates was availability sampling, where they were solicited through a variety of channels: for example, welcome fairs for expatriates, expatriate associations and (online) networks, and international schools. After registering for the

project, they were asked to fill in the baseline questionnaire as well as a form with questions that could help match an expatriate with a local host. After completing these questionnaires, the expatriates were either told that they would be put in touch with a host immediately (this became the experimental group), or after a delay of 9 months (this became the control group). We tried to find a suitable host for each expatriate within a reasonable amount of time. The primary criteria for suitability were place of residence, age, and family situation. We avoided matching single expatriates to single hosts of the opposite sex.

With regard to the local hosts, we used our personal networks and snowball sampling to find them. Various calls for participation were sent out to colleagues, friends, and family. In some cases, friends or family of local hosts also signed up for the project. The hosts were volunteers who did not work for the same company as the expatriate. 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. We asked participants to meet at least once a month. The first author kept in touch with the hosts to monitor the contact during the project, and only very infrequently with the expatriates in order to strictly limit the possible effects of that contact.

Contact with the host

Expatriates and partners had to build a relationship with their local host. Many went for drinks or had dinner, in a restaurant or at home; some also took the opportunity to explore local attractions. They undertook activities such as a Spanish cooking workshop or climbing the Dom Tower in Utrecht.

According to their own assessment of the relationship, almost two-thirds of the experimental group (64%) succeeded in building a relationship with their local host: they rated the contact with the host as a seven or more on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*). This group was, therefore, considered to have *high-quality contact* with their host. These expatriates met their host more than seven times on average during the 9 months of the project ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 4.15$). There was a large variability in meeting frequency; almost half of this group (48%) met their host at least nine times. The remaining expatriates in the experimental group (36%) were less positive; they evaluated the contact with their host as of low quality (≤ 5 on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*)) and were, hence, labelled *low-quality contact*. They also had a much lower frequency of contact with the host than those with high-quality contact: they met on average less than three times ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.93$) over 9 months, with half of the expatriates (50%) meeting their host only once or twice.

Data analysis

First, we examined the types of support the local host could offer (RQ1). We studied the available qualitative data of the 33 matched expatriates, partners, and hosts to find instances where social support was offered, and to determine to which type of social support this example belonged. Throughout the text, we have used quotes from the interviews, the diaries, the e-mails, and the questionnaires. The source of each quote is indicated, where I = interview, DW4 = diary week 4, E = e-mail, Q2 = questionnaire after 5 months, and Q3 = questionnaire after 9 months.

Second, to answer our second research question, we performed univariate General Linear Models for each of the data waves (5 and 9 months) to compare the experimental and control groups on *Host National Social Support*. In addition, Repeated Measures analyses with *Time* and *Host* were done to analyse the development of *Host National Social Support* between 5 and 9 months. Unfortunately, no information was gathered at baseline on *Host National Social Support* because of length constraints of the questionnaire of the larger study. However, participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control condition to minimalize alternate explanations of experimental results other than contact with a local host. The goal of random assignment of participants 'is to assure that the characteristics of the participants are as likely to be similar as possible across groups at the start of the comparison' (Stolberg, Norman, and Trop 2004, 1540). For this reason, it is likely that both groups had a similar level of *Host National Social Support* at the start of their participation in the study (0 months). This assumption is supported by the fact that the experimental and control group did not differ statistically on the *amount* of contact with host nationals at baseline level, nor on any of the other covariates taken into account (gender, age, children, partner, length of stay in The Netherlands, schooling, Dutch language proficiency, nationality (EU vs. non-EU), international experience (in months), and relocation assistance (yes, no)).

Randomised controlled experiments or trials are used to examine the effect of an intervention (a local host) on particular outcomes (in this case social support) (Stolberg, Norman, and Trop 2004). It is 'one of the simplest but most powerful tools of research' because – due to random assignment of the participants – 'any significant differences between groups in the outcome event can be attributed to the intervention and not to some other unidentified factor' (Stolberg, Norman, and Trop 2004, 1540).

For each analysis, the possible effect of three possible moderating variables – *Sex* (male, female), having a *Partner* (yes, no), and *Children* (yes, no) – was examined, but these variables did not impact on *Host National Social Support*, neither after 5 nor 9 months. We further examined the potential relevance of the covariates mentioned above through *t* tests and correlation analyses with *Host National Social Support* at 5 months and at 9 months. None of the covariates were significantly related to the dependent variable.

Results

RQ1: What kind of social support does a local host offer?

First of all, a local host can help build a social network through offering an opportunity to *access social support*, in this case Dutch people. Twelve expatriates and seven partners mentioned that participating in the project was a way to meet Dutch people, which they found difficult to do on their own, especially outside the workplace:

> [1] It has helped us because we have found it difficult to meet Dutch people socially outside my husband's work. We are on friendly terms with our neighbours, but that is really just saying hello in the street. [P4[Q3]]

So, what kind of social support does a local host offer? The qualitative data showed that all four types of social support (social companionship, informational support, emotional support, and instrumental support) were present in the qualitative data.

Social companionship

Social companionship is defined by spending time together in leisure or recreational activities. The activities that were undertaken by expatriates, partners, and their hosts ranged from having a drink to visiting a Shakespeare festival.

> [2] It gave me an opportunity to socialise and share some plans to see people at the weekends. It has taken a long time to settle in and we haven't made a lot of friends yet. [E43Q2]

Social companionship was probably one of the types of social support that was offered most frequently by the hosts in this study; this is something that can be done right from the start when the relationship has not yet been able to grow into something more. Social companionship is part of normal interaction and offers the opportunity to learn about specific problems the other might have. It triggers the provision of other types of social support which usually occur in response to learning about a specific problem (Rook 1985, 246). As such, social companionship is a prerequisite for the occurrence of other types of support.

Informational support

Informational support is a second category of social support and is the process through which other persons might provide information, advice, and guidance (Cohen and Leonard Syme 1985), which help in defining, understanding, and coping with difficulties (Cohen and Wills 1985):

> [3] I've asked him for advice on various things in terms of dealing with the Dutch systems and that kind of stuff. Asking for, if he knows a plumber, that kind of things, recommendations for all sorts of things. Otherwise I might have struggled, or find a bit more difficult having to search through the yellow pages that kind of stuff. [E46I]

In 11 of 33 cases, the qualitative data offered evidence that the local host offered informational support to the expatriate. This could range from advice on restaurants, shops, and museums to providing information on buying a house, and even on giving birth in the Netherlands.

Emotional support

Emotional support is information that a person is esteemed and accepted and is often conveyed by offering the opportunity to talk about problems. Emotional support contains elements such as sympathy, listening, understanding, and encouragement (Cutrona, Suhr, and MacFarlane 1990, 39). One expatriate felt that the encounters with her host were 'caring and stimulating', which made her 'feel welcome and cared for' [E9Q3]; another expatriate discussed with his host some of the frustration he felt with living in the Netherlands so far [E26I], as did this expatriate:

[4] We have been able to exchange what I was experiencing in the Netherlands without prejudice and without criticism, just sharing our experiences. [E54[Q3]]

The qualitative data suggests that in at least seven cases, emotional support was given by the host; but it is likely that this occurred more often; for example, when the expatriate stated that the host was seen as a friend. Emotional support can occur simultaneously with informational support because, for instance, expressing advice may be interpreted as emotional support as well.

[5] At one point I was feeling concerned about my work and I talked openly with them about it. They provided me with some websites that might be helpful – and listened when I needed to talk. [E45[Q2]]

Instrumental support

The final category of social support a local host can offer is instrumental support. This is the provision of financial aid, material resources, and needed services (Cohen and Wills 1985). In the present study, there is some evidence that services have been rendered to the expatriate. For example, one host helped translate some Dutch documents, whereas another host helped to call veterinarians to find one that was open on a Sunday to help the expatriate's dog. A third expatriate said:

[6] We met so that I could become a typical Dutch woman, that is, buying a bike – here that's a real sign of integration. [E40[DW4]]

These results show that a local host could be an important means to enlarge and diversify the expatriate's social network, and that a local host could offer all four types of support.

RQ2: impact of a local host on host national social support

Our expectation was that expatriates with a local host would receive more social support from host nationals than would expatriates without a host. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the *Host National Social Support* of expatriates with and without a host at 5 and 9 months. A univariate General Linear Model with *Host National Social Support* at 5 months as a dependent variable and *Host* (yes, no) as a fixed factor did not show a significant difference in *Host National Social Support* between expatriates with a host and without a host. A similar univariate General Linear Model with *Host National Social Support* at 9 months as a dependent variable showed that expatriates who had contact with a host received significantly more *Host National Social Support* than expatriates without a host ($F (1,63) = 8.04$,

Table 1. Host National Social Support of expatriates with and without host after 5 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 25 (high) with estimated marginal means and standard errors.

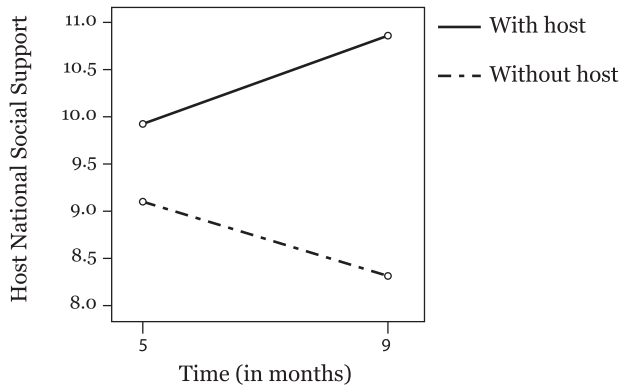|	With host (n = 33)	Without host (n = 32)	With vs. without host
5 months	9.93 (.67)	9.12 (.68)	n.s.
9 months	10.87 (.64)	8.32 (.65)	$F(1,63) = 8.04$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .11$
5–9 months	+.94	−.80	$F(1,63) = 6.50$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .09$

n.s. = not significant.

Figure 1. Host National Social Support for expatriates with and without host after 5 and 9 months on a scale of 1 (low) to 25 (high) (no measure available of 0 months).

$p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .11$). Since the difference between expatriates with and without a host was not yet significant after 5 months, these results suggest that the impact of a local host would need more time to manifest itself. When comparing the development of both groups between 5 and 9 months, a Repeated Measures analysis with *Time* (5 and 9 months) and *Host* (yes, no) as factors showed a significant effect of a local host on *Host National Social Support* ($F(1, 63) = 6.50$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .09$).

When examining the development over time of each group, separate Repeated Measures analyses with only *Time* (5 and 9 months) as an independent variable showed a marginally significant increase in *Host National Social Support* over time for expatriates with a host ($F(1,32) = 3.51$, $p = .076$, $\eta^2 = .10$); whereas, expatriates without a host seemed to show a tendency to decrease in *Host National Social Support*. These findings show expatriates who had contact with a host increased more in *Host National Social Support* between 5 and 9 months than did expatriates without a host and supported the conclusion that a local host had a positive impact on *Host National Social Support* in the long term.

Discussion

Social capital is receiving increased attention in HRD as well as international HRM because of its promise in terms of contributing to performance both at the individual and the organisational level (Lin 1999; Taylor 2007). The present study examined the effect of a new way for HRD practitioners to stimulate the social capital of expatriates, namely, by putting them in touch with a local host with whom they could undertake social activities. The underlying idea behind this experiment was that a local host could offer social support, which has long been recognised as 'one of the primary strategies for coping with the stress of an overseas assignment' (Fontaine 1986). Since it is not always easy for expatriates to get in touch with locals, such an intervention could be a valuable way for organisations to encourage their expatriates to reach out, and thereby increase the resources they could access through their social networks (Claus et al. 2015; Lin 1999).

Our research question (RQ1) focused on how local hosts supported the expatriates. The qualitative data showed that, even though the contact was newly established, a local host could provide all four types of social support: social companionship, informational support, emotional support, and instrumental support. These types are often blended together, with social companionship providing the opportunity for many of the support exchanges. An example is the fifth quote, where websites were provided after the expatriate talked openly about some difficulties she was facing at work. This suggests how informational support might convey emotional support, as suggested by Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002) and Podsiadlowski et al. (2013). Furthermore, in terms of instrumental support, only small-scale offers were found (e.g. translation of letters). It is plausible that the contact did not develop far enough within 9 months for larger offers of instrumental support to occur (e.g. a loan of something or taking over a task [Cutrona, Suhr, and MacFarlane 1990]). This finding, however, shows that instrumental support, although only on a small scale, could happen from the start of the contact with the host.

We also expected that expatriates who had contact with a host would receive more social support from host nationals in general over time than did expatriates without a host. This research question (RQ2) received a positive answer, which suggests that a local host offers social support – in particular, social companionship and emotional support because this was the focus of the instrument used in this study.

An alternative explanation is that through the contact with their host, expatriates felt more confident in soliciting support from other host nationals in their surroundings, which might have resulted in an increase in *Host National Social Support*. As this variable reported the support received from host nationals in general, it would be interesting for future research to examine how much of this increase is directly due to the support offered by the local host, and how much is due to increased social support received from other host nationals. In any case, due to the fact that we carried out a randomised controlled experiment (Stolberg, Norman, and Trop 2004), it is clear that a local host was the cause of this increase in *Host National Social Support*, if not necessarily the provider of all of the increase in social support.

The findings with regard to *Host National Social Support* further suggest that the quality of the contact played a role because the effect of a local host on an expatriate's *Host National Social Support* was not yet present after 5 months; the difference between the experimental and control group only became significant after 9 months. This is understandable because the contact between the expatriate and local host was newly established and needed to develop. This finding also suggests that expatriates who established high-quality contact with their host benefited more from the contact than did those with low-quality contact. Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven (2016) further explored this question and found a linear effect of contact quality for, amongst others, interaction adjustment and open-mindedness: the higher the quality of the contact, the more benefit the expatriate derived from the contact with the local host. This further begs the question: what factors lead to high quality contact? This question has been explored by Van Bakel, van Oudenhoven, and Gerritsen (2015) who found nine factors that stimulated or hindered the development of the contact, of which similarities between participants, motivation, and benefits derived from the contact were key factors to establish high-quality contact.

If the effect of a local host took at least 5 months to materialise, then this raises the question of how relevant the intervention is for shorter term assignments. Nowadays, short-term assignments up to 1 year become more and more frequent, as well as other options such as commuting and frequent flying (Brookfield Global Relocation Services 2015).

One reason why contact with a local host might still be beneficial for short-term assignments is that some effects of contact with a local host appear early. For example, Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven (2011) found that, as early as in the first 5 months, expatriates with a local host had a higher increase in *Interaction Adjustment* than did those without a host. Furthermore, the qualitative data showed that some of the support occurred early on in the contact (e.g. quote 6). On the other hand, according to the social-penetration theory (Altman and Taylor 1973), the cost–reward balance of the contact needs to be positive for a local host to want to invest in the contact. If the expatriate only stays for a very short amount of time, it will be very difficult to find a local host who is motivated to develop the contact. In short, contact with a local host would be at its most valuable if a long-term relationship is possible, but some advantages can be obtained right from the start.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the theory in a number of ways. First, our study contributes to the under-researched area of social capital in the field of HRD (Kessels and Poell 2004). We do not know much about the development of social networks in and around organisations, nor about the potential role HRD professionals can play in terms of affecting a company's social capital (Kessels and Poell 2004; Nakamura and Yorks 2011). Our study showed that it is possible for an organisation to influence an expatriate's social capital through putting them in contact with a local host. Such contact led to an increase in social support received from host nationals in general. This increased social capital could, in turn, lead to better individual performance through easier access to information or through emotional support (Lin 1999; Nakamura and Yorks 2011).

Our study further contributes to the field of HRD by emphasizing that social capital is not necessarily restricted to ties within the same organisation. If we consider the research on social capital in the wider field of international HRM, we can see that many of those studies (e.g. Bruning, Sonpar, and Wang 2012; Liu and Shaffer 2005; Au and Fukuda 2002; Reiche, Harzing, and Kraimer 2009) focus exclusively on the advantages of social ties at work, even though the often-used definition by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) is broader than that. The present study extended the current use of social capital to include social ties *outside* of the workplace. Our findings showed that, at the individual level, such ties can offer expatriates important resources which can help them to cope with the challenges of an international assignment. Furthermore, organisational level benefits might also be accrued if the organisation manages to convert individual social capital into firm-level social capital (Griffith and Harvey 2004; Reiche, Harzing, and Kraimer 2009). This suggests that future research on social capital – in the field of HRD but also in the wider field of IHRM – should not only take social ties within the organisation into account, but

also examine the benefits of other social ties. These ties could give access to broader sources of information and improved quality of information, which may lead to improved performance (Nakamura and Yorks 2011).

Managerial relevance

Several authors have already pointed out the need for organisations to promote contact of their expatriate employees with host nationals (Black 1990; Caligiuri 2000; Hechanova, Beehr, and Christiansen 2003; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl 2008; Johnson and Duxbury 2010; Pruetipibultham 2012). Suggestions include installing mechanisms to develop friendships with host nationals, encouraging expatriates to live outside of the expatriate compound, and providing the expatriate with a host national sponsor. This study examined the impact of one such mechanism, contact with a local host, and showed that social ties can be developed in this way and that they can offer the expatriate valuable social support.

Nakamura and Yorks (2011) advocate a central role of the HRD professional in facilitating social capital building for improved performance of both the individual and the organisation. Our study indicates that it is possible for HRD professionals to stimulate the social support that expatriates receive. As the provision of social support is something that happens between two individuals, it is difficult for an organisation to have a direct effect on this, especially without violating the private sphere. Creating a system in which expatriates are voluntarily paired with a local host is a way to encourage this social support in a safe way.

An alternative to the approach presented in this study is that organisations could put their expatriates in touch with a local host colleague. Setting up a local host system within an organisation could have additional benefits when a local host is part of the same organisational culture and knows his or her way around within the organisation. Carraher, Sullivan, and Crocitto (2008) showed having a host-country mentor within the organisation was positively associated with organisational knowledge and organisational knowledge sharing; Feldman and Bolino (1999) found that on-site mentoring was related to organisational socialisation, and Nigah, Davis, and Hurrell (2010) showed a positive association between satisfaction with a buddy at work and work engagement. A local host within the organisation could also fulfil one or more of the Host-country National Liaison Roles (Cultural Interpreter, Communication Facilitator, Information Resource Broker, Talent Developer, or Change Agent), and thereby contribute to more efficient knowledge flows and ultimately firm performance (Vance et al. 2014). Such a system could also have the additional benefits of preparing potential future expatriates and of utilizing the often neglected knowledge of recent repatriates (Szkudlarek 2010) if they are used as local hosts.

The responsibility of establishing contact with locals, however, does not lie only with the organisation. Expatriates and partners themselves can also take action to benefit more from contact with host nationals. They can seek out contact with host nationals such as colleagues or neighbours and invest in a high-quality relationship which could offer various types of social support. Both company-sent and self-initiated expatriates may benefit; the latter group especially since they often lack extensive support from the organisation.

Limitations and future research

A first limitation of this study is we did not measure *Host National Social Support* at baseline (0 months). Even though randomised assignment to experimental conditions eliminates the systematic sources of bias (Levin 1999, 13), it would have been better if we had been able to verify whether both groups indeed had the same level on this variable at baseline.

Our data also did not enable us to examine the relative importance of the four types of support offered by the local host. Although all four types of support are important resources, Podsiadlowski et al. (2013) found that socio-emotional support plays a more important role than instrumental support in determining the satisfaction with the sojourn. On the other hand, Ong and Ward (2005) showed the importance of instrumental support, positing that it is 'ultimately more critical to sojourners' psychological adaptation' (657). They explained this finding by emphasizing that informational support is very valuable to sojourners who need to learn to navigate the new culture. The various quotes cited in this paper show some of the value placed on the support received. For example, the social companionship was appreciated because it gave an 'opportunity to socialise' (quote 2) and the instrumental support made the life of the expatriate in quote 3 easier. Future research could delve deeper into this topic, highlighting the value of specific support exchanges and comparing the relevance of the four types of social support.

First time expatriates could also be compared to the more seasoned ones, who might know better how to find the information they need, and not need as much emotional support since they had previous experience with moving abroad. It would also be interesting to apply a temporal perspective because some types of support (e.g. instrumental support) might be more important at the outset of the contact when there are many practical issues to arrange.

Another limitation is that the present study did not distinguish between company-sent expatriates and self-initiated expatriates (Suutari and Brewster 2000) because the fundamental challenge to adjust to living and working in a new culture is similar for both groups and, hence, a local host is relevant for both groups. Even though we did not know who was company-sent or self-initiated, it is likely that both the experimental and control group had a similar proportion of company-sent and self-initiated expatriates because of the random assignment of the participants (Stolberg, Norman, and Trop 2004). Therefore, any differences found between the groups should be a result of the experimental manipulation (host or no host) and not to any other variables (Levin 1999). We would recommend, however, taking the distinction between company-sent and self-initiated expatriation into account in future research.

Another area for future research is the potential of contact with a local host for short-term assignments, or for other types of assignees such as flexpatriates (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, and Herbert 2004). While, on the one hand, such types of assignments – international commuting and frequent business travelling – seem to preclude the use of a local host, the intervention might still have its benefits in offering the expatriate a break from an intensive work schedule as well as a local connection, which may help expats improve their understanding of their local business partners. On the other side of the spectrum, it would also be interesting for future research to establish the benefits of contact with a local host beyond the first 9 months of the contact: the fact that some expatriates became friends with their local host suggests that there may be very valuable longer term benefits as well.

Finally, our study focused on Western expatriates in the Netherlands. This focus ensured that the cultural distance between the home and host country was relatively small, which may have facilitated the contact between the expatriate and their host. While transitions to relatively nearby cultures are important to study due to the perceived cultural similarity paradox (Vromans, Van Engen, and Mol 2013), future research should also focus on whether contact with a local host is equally valuable in situations where more and larger cultural differences have to be bridged. HRD professionals may need to put more effort in establishing and monitoring local host contact when cultural distance between the expatriate and the local host is larger. Whether the results of our study can be extrapolated to other host countries remains an open question since the Netherlands, as a host location, has some particularities. On the one hand, it has some characteristics that facilitate contact with the local population. First, it is a developed country where expatriates are on a more similar economic level with the local population than they would be in the developing world. Future research should examine if and how contact with a local host could contribute to expatriate effectiveness in host countries with a larger economic divide between expatriates and the local population, and where, for example, expatriates more often live in compounds, apart from the local population (Lauring and Selmer 2009). Second, the command of languages – in particular English, but also French – is quite high in the Netherlands (Gerritsen et al. 2016), which facilitates local host contact with expatriates. When setting up expatriate contact with a local host in other countries, attention should be focused on potential language barriers. On the other hand, it seems to be difficult for expatriates to make contact with locals in the Netherlands. In a study among 25 countries around the world, the Netherlands has been highlighted as the most difficult country in which to make local contacts (HSBC 2010). It is likely that a local host system could also be beneficial for the other (Western) countries that make up the top five of that list (Germany, United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Belgium).

Conclusion

The present study showed that contact with a local host increases expatriate social capital. Expatriates received a significant amount of social support through this contact – whether emotional, informational, or instrumental support, or simply social companionship. This contact with a local host could be used as a tool for HRD professionals to support expatriates in dealing with the challenges posed by living and working in a foreign country (Pruetipibultham 2012), to enable them to perform well at their jobs (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005). Accessing useful resources through social networks does save time and effort, which could lead to improved performance on both the individual and organisational levels (Nakamura and Yorks 2011).

Note

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

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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