How You See Me, How You Don't:

Ethnic Identity Self-verification in Interactions between Local Subsidiary Employees and Ethnically Similar Expatriates

Abstract

Multinational corporations often assign expatriates who share an ethnicity with host country employees (termed ethnically similar expatriates) to work on international assignments. Although sharing an ethnicity with local employees can be an advantage, it also creates a unique identity challenge. In this article, we develop the argument that ethnic similarity might in fact threaten expatriate-local employee interactions if the two parties hold divergent views towards the importance of expatriates' ethnic identity in their interactions. Drawing on self-verification theory, we explain why people desire to achieve congruence between how they view their own identity and how others view this identity. Subsequently, we identify key cultural and personal constraints affecting expatriates' efforts to achieve ethnic identity self-verification. We also illustrate how unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification affects ethnically similar expatriates, local employees and their interactions. Our study, thus, introduces a new angle to understand expatriate-local employee interactions and advances self-verification research by demonstrating the challenges in achieving ethnic identity self-verification when two social parties share an ethnicity.

Key words: self-verification; ethnic identity, expatriates; host country employees; MNCs

Introduction

Multinational corporations (MNCs) assign expatriates to overseas subsidiaries to achieve organizational goals such as strategy implementation, subsidiary control and knowledge transfer (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1999; Harzing, 2001). To fulfill these goals, expatriates need support from local employees, who can assist with local knowledge, local adaptation and task performance (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). As such, it is important to explore the prerequisites for successful expatriate-local interactions and identify the conditions that facilitate this interaction.

To increase the likelihood of successful expatriate-local interactions, MNCs often deploy expatriates on international assignments who share an ethnicity with host country local employees (Björkman & Schapp, 1994; Thite, Srinivasan, Harvey & Valk, 2009; Tung, 2016). In this paper, we use the term *ethnically similar expatriates* to describe this specific type of expatriate. Compared with *ethnically different expatriates*, ethnically similar expatriates can benefit from their shared ethnicity with local employees, because this shared ethnicity is likely to reduce social anxiety and result in in-group categorization. Further, their shared ethnic background may facilitate their adjustment to the host country environment (Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Lau, Fung, Wang & Kang, 2009). These advantages are likely to encourage social interactions, interpersonal acceptance, and information exchange (Byrne, 1971; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989).

However, whether or not ethnically similar expatrates are indeed more effective needs further investigation. Although research on this type of expatriate is still in a nascent state, evidence recorded in the literature contests the idea that they have special advantages. For example, some local employees criticize ethnically similar expatriates who do not conform to local norms as "bananas" in China, meaning yellow outside but white inside (Tung, 2008b), or as "ABCDs" in India, standing for American Born Confused Desi (meaning American Born Confused Indians) (Thite et al., 2009). Some ethnically similar expatriates complained that they were judged more harshly than other expatriates for any mistakes they made (Hung, 1994), and others even thought that they faced physical threats from unhappy local employees (McEllister, 1998). It appears as if sharing an ethnic identity with local employees might be a double-edged sword for expatriates. Its impact on expatriate-local employee interactions and on expatriate performance is, therefore, still unclear (Tung & Lazarova, 2006; Tung, 2016).

In this article, we develop the argument that ethnic similarity might threaten expatriate-local employee interactions if the two parties hold divergent views towards the importance of expatriates' ethnic identity in their interactions. Drawing on self-verification theory (Swann, 1987; London, Polzer & Omoregie, 2005; Swann & Bosson, 2008), we explain why people desire to achieve congruence between how they view their own ethnic identity and how others view this identity. A higher level of identity self-verification can give people a sense of psychological coherence and being in control; it can also ensure interactions proceed smoothly (Cable & Kay, 2012). Applying this theory to ethnic identity, ethnically similar expatriates desire to achieve ethnic identity self-verification, i.e. they want to see their view of their ethnic identity verified by others. However, this might not happen automatically. Drawing on self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982), we first explain in detail why congruence on the importance of ethnically similar expatriates' ethnic identity might not occur naturally. We then develop a conceptual model explaining the factors that are likely to affect the success that ethnically similar expatriates' experience in achieving ethnic identity self-verification. Further, we delineate how unfulfilled ethnic

identity self-verification might influence ethnically similar expatriates, local employees, and their interactions.

Our paper contributes to the expatriate and international management literatures, as well as the self-verification literature in three ways. First, by introducing ethnic identity self-verification, we introduce a new factor to explain why ethnic similarity does not always generate a positive social impact for expatriates. We, thus, offer an opportunity to resolve previous, inconsistent findings regarding whether or not ethnically similar expatriates are more effective in interacting with local employees. In doing so, we advance our understanding of the role played by ethnic identity in expatriate-local employee interactions and its implications for expatriate selection, expatriate success and expatriate training.

Second, our research extends self-verification research into the domain of social identity. Interactions between ethnically similar expatriates and local employees provide an ideal opportunity to investigate self-verification of a social identity, and ethnic identity specifically, whereas so far in management research the focus has been on personal identity self-verification (Polzer, Milton & Swann, 2002; London et al., 2005; Milton & Westphal, 2005). Traditional self-verification research implicitly and explicitly assumes that only two social parties are involved in an identity negotiation. By introducing social identity, our paper raises the importance of social/cultural pressure that can limit individuals' *opportunity* to achieve self-verification, as well as the factors that influence an individual's *ability* to achieve self-verification.

We start our literature review with the theoretical background to this paper, namely self-categorization theory and self-verification theory. On the one hand, self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982) supports individuals' agency in determining which social identity is important in a particular situation. It also explains why expatriates' ethnic identity is likely to be salient in the eyes of local employees. On the other hand, self-verification theory endorses individuals' desire to have their identity verified by others (Swann and Bosson, 2008). It explains why ethnically similar expatriates desire to receive ethnic identity self-verification from local employees. Together, these two theories explain why mutual agreement between ethnically similar expatriates and local employees about the importance of expatriates' ethnic identity is vital (self-verification theory) and which factors might cause disagreement regarding the role of expatriates' ethnic identity in their interactions with local employees (self-categorization theory).

Subsequently, we develop a conceptual model outlining the key cultural factors (i.e., collectivism and cultural tightness) that may restrict or provide opportunities for ethnically similar expatriates to pursue ethnic identity self-verification, as well as the personal ability factors (i.e., identity knowledge and identity management skills) that can facilitate their identity negotiation with local employees. Finally, we explain how unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification affects expatriates, local employees and their interactions. We conclude by outlining our contributions to the literatures on expatriates, international management, and self-verification and by discussing research boundaries.

Theoretical Background

An identity can become salient in specific situations (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Researchers have proposed that two factors are likely to determine the salience of an identity, namely *subjective importance* & *situational relevance* (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Below, we discuss how these two factors influence both how expatriates view their own ethnic identity, and how local employees view expatriates' ethnic identity in the context of this research.

Self-categorization Theory: The Agency of Ethnically Similar Expatriates When Viewing Their Ethnic Identity

The prediction that ethnic similarity will generate a positive social impact for expatriates assumes that these expatriates view their ethnic identity as important when interacting with local employees, so they self-categorize as the ethnic in-group of local employees. Thus, in-group categorization would positively influence their interactions, communication and knowledge exchange with local employees. However, this assumption might not be valid for all ethnically similar expatriates.

First, ethnic identity is one of the many social identities that ethnically similar expatriates simultaneously have, so it might not be automatically seen as *subjectively important* by expatriates. Which identity has high subjective importance is influenced by personal experience. Taking ethnically similar expatriates who are of Chinese ethnicity and were born and raised in the USA as an example, they could see themselves as American, Chinese American, or ethnic Chinese. Many of them might view their ethnic identity as less important than their other identities because they might not have been strongly influenced by the ethnic Chinese culture, or because the ethnic Chinese identity has not been a major factor in their successful career in America (Lemay & Ashmore, 2004). Even for people who were born in China and emigrated to the USA as adults, the importance of their ethnic Chinese identity might have been reduced due to changes in their life experiences. Given differences in personal experiences, we cannot assume ethnic identity is automatically viewed as important by all ethnically similar expatriates.

Second, which identity is considered as important among multiple social identities is also determined by *situational relevance*. Individuals view one identity to be more situationally relevant than others because it is socially appropriate in the given situation (Harris & Brewster, 1999; Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). In the context of our study, ethnically similar expatriates are responsible to both the headquarters and subsidiaries because they are expected to play a bridging role in MNCs (Toh & DeNisi, 2005; Harzing, Pudelko & Reiche, 2016). To achieve this goal, ethnically similar expatriates need to work with local employees as well as with other expatriates. Thus, over-emphasizing ethnic identity by making ethnicity-based categorizations can become a socially divisive factor. Although it can help ethnically similar expatriates to build a social connection with local employees, it can at the same time generate social distance between them and ethnically different employees. Therefore, ethnically similar expatriates might not view ethnic identity as situationally relevant as this might not be appropriate in their work context.

Self-categorization Theory: The Salience of Expatriates' Ethnic Identity in the Eyes of Local Employees

How people view their own identity and how their identity is viewed by others is related to two different psychological processes. When people view their own identity, their subjective experience and sense of belonging play a more important role (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003). In contrast, when others evaluate a person's identity they tend to use their own experience as the reference point for evaluating the importance of the person's identity. As a result, these two views are not necessarily aligned. *Subjective importance* and *situational relevance* are crucial when explaining the salience of expatriates' ethnic identity from the vantage point of local employees.

First, ethnic identity often has visible, physical markers such as skin color, hair, and facial features, so it is perceived automatically in social interactions (Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska & George, 2004). Local employees will easily notice that they share an ethnicity with some expatriates. If local employees view their own ethnic identity as important

(i.e. *subjective importance*), they might also view the ethnic identity of ethnically similar expatriates as important, because it signifies the shared identity between them. It can be difficult for local employees to accept apparent in-group expatriates who do not view their ethnic identity as important. They might feel the views of ethnically similar expatriates threaten the group's shared identity and their collective self-esteem (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, 1998; Corley et al., 2006).

Second, how local employees view the identity of ethnically similar expatriates is also likely to be influenced by the demographic composition of expatriates in the subsidiary. On the one hand, when the majority of expatriates are ethnically different from local employees, the fact that some expatriates share an ethnic identity with local employees becomes salient. Due to the existence of an "out-group" (i.e., ethnically different expatriates), local employees tend to make ethnicity-based categorizations and view ethnically similar expatriates as in-groups. In this inter-group context, the same origins and common cultural traditions can function as a source of solidarity and collective identification and can enhance the perceived power of their own social group (i.e., *situational relevance*) (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Eriksen, 2010). Subsequently, local employees might hold higher expectations toward ethnically similar expatriates and expect them to identify with the ethnic group, follow ethnic cultural norms and favor in-group members (Marques & Paez, 1994; Castelli & Carraro, 2010). For the same reason, local employees might find it difficult to accept ethnically similar expatriates who downplay their ethnic identity. On the other hand, if ethnically similar expatriates are the majority of expatriates in the subsidiary, a situation rarely discussed in the expatriate literature but one that can exist in reality (Björkman & Schapp, 1994, Yuan, 2007), inter-group competition is weakened and local employees might not view ethnic identity as *situationally relevant*; consequently, they might be less likely to make ethnicity-based categorizations. Thus, they may be more tolerant of expatriates who do not view their ethnic identity as unimportant.

The fact that local employees might view the ethnic identity of ethnically similar expatriates differently from the way in which ethnically similar expatriates view their own ethnic identity can raise challenges for these expatriates. How do they reconcile these divergent views? We answer this question from the perspective of self-verification theory.

Self-verification Theory: Why Self-verification of Ethnic Identity is Important to Ethnically Similar Expatriates

Self-verification theory assumes that the search for coherence is a fundamental human desire (Swann, Rentfrow & Guinn, 2003). Having one's identity self-view verified by social partners is an important source of psychological coherence. A key feature of self-verification is that it requires two pieces of information to understand to what extent self-verification is achieved, namely the focal person's identity self-view and how he/she is viewed by others. It is the level of congruence between these two views—not the view of one party—that determines the extent of self-verification (Polzer et al., 2002, Milton & Westphal, 2005). Self-verification can occur naturally when people first meet or be achieved in subsequent interactions through specific efforts (Polzer et al., 2002, Swann & Bosson, 2008). Achieved self-verification can generate positive psychological effects, such as perceiving a sense of control and coherence (Swann et al., 2003). In contrast, a lack of identity self-verification can cause a feeling of frustration, because people perceive inconsistency between what they believe should be important and others' expectations (Swann et al., 2003).

The extant management literature has so far focused mainly on the self-verification of personal identities. In the context of work teams, researchers have revealed that if an

individual's personal identity (e.g., being creative) is verified by team members, the individual gains a feeling of acceptance and interpersonal connection. As a consequence, identity self-verification encourages group identification and information sharing (Polzer et al., 2002) and facilitates group learning and group development (London et al., 2005). Moreover, personal identity self-verification may also affect important organizational outcomes. Employees whose identity is verified are more satisfied with the organization and will be less inclined to leave (Seyle & Swann, 2007).

Self-verification theory (Swann, 1987; Burke & Stets, 1999) also stresses the agency of individuals in achieving self-verification. It argues that although individuals desire to have their identity verified by others, they are not passive in this process. Individuals come to know if their identity self-view is verified through observing others' attitudes and behaviors (Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, 2005). When self-verification does not occur, people can change their own views to conform to others' views, or maintain their own views and expect others to change. Although self-verification researchers admit that individuals often face a tension between making an effort to change others' views (i.e., achieving self-verification) and changing their own view to conform to that of others (i.e., identity conformation), they have found that individuals tend to have a stronger desire to pursue self-verification (Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, 1987). To that end, people can use a variety of identity negotiation strategies to achieve self-verification. For example, they can use an avoidance strategy by withdrawing from further interactions with people who do not verify their identity and only interact with those who do. Alternatively, they can directly face the different views and try to change others' views by releasing more information to help others understand their identity self-view (Burke, 1996; Swann & Bosson, 2008).

As the majority of research occurs in the domain of personal identity self-verification, our knowledge related to social identity self-verification is limited. Compared with personal identity, social identity has special characteristics, such as its ascribed nature (i.e., gender or ethnicity) and its association with a social group, leading to connotations with ethnic culture and tradition (Eriksen, 2010). These characteristics could affect the interpretation of self-verification and people's opportunity to achieve self-verification through negotiation. Using ethnic identity self-verification as an example, we elaborate on these points in the next section.

Ethnic Identity Self-verification

The interpretation of ethnic identity self-verification. Similar to personal identity self-verification, ethnic identity self-verification is based on the congruence of the views of both parties. When seeking self-verification of a personal identity, such as being creative, the focus is on whether or not an individual possesses a personal characteristic. In contrast, when seeking ethnic identity self-verification, what is contested is not whether or not ethnically similar expatriates belong to the ethnic group, because people's biological connection to the ethnic group is often clear to both parties. Instead, the focus is whether or not the ethnic identity should be viewed as important. Thus, when examining ethnic identity self-verification, we focus on expatriates' view of the importance of their ethnic identity and on whether local employees verify this view. Furthermore, we do not assume all expatriates with the same ethnic identity hold the same view towards their ethnic group. Thus, in an MNC subsidiary, some ethnically similar expatriates can gain ethnic identity self-verification easily, but others may face great challenges. Furthermore, since ethnic identity self-verification depends on the views of local employees, the same expatriate can achieve a high level of ethnic identity self-verification with one local employee, but fail to gain self-verification with another local employee.

Opportunities in achieving self-verification. When personal identity is not verified, an identity negotiation only involves two social parties, meaning expatriates only need to negotiate with specific individuals who do not verify their personal identity. However, this process is more complicated for ethnic identity self-verification, because it brings in a third factor, the social group. Even though the social group is not physically present during the interaction, the social norms and normative expectations associated with it may influence the interaction (Moreland, Levine & Cini, 1993; Settles, 2004). Thus, when ethnically similar expatriates pursue their goal of self-verification through identity negotiation, they not only need to change the views of local employees, but also need to face the conforming pressure of ethnic cultural norms. Although changing an individual's view might be relatively easy, it is more difficult to go against ethnic cultural norms because cultural norms are shared within the group (Hofstede, 1980; Leung & Morris, 2015). If expatriates believe that their ethnic identity, an ascribed identity, is not particularly important, many local employees might be less willing to accept this view, because it is not only contradicting their personal view, but also the interests of their ethnic group. As a result, social norms and expectations associated with the social identity might become an additional constraint that limits ethnically similar expatriates' freedom in identity negotiation.

Introducing the concept of situational self-verification. Ethnically similar expatriates might face a dilemma in their desire to achieve self-verification, on the one hand, and the pressure they face from local employees (i.e., the social group), on the other hand. We introduce a third option that might mitigate the pressure faced by expatriates, namely, situational self-verification. In situations when achieving the goal of self-verification fully is not possible or socially inappropriate, expatriates might compromise their goal of achieving self-verification and try to achieve situational self-verification. Rather than aiming at self-verification in all situations, expatriates could try to achieve self-verification in specific situations. For example, in work situations, they can claim work identity is more important than their ethnic identity, while viewing the latter as important in non-work situations (Brewer & Pierce, 2005). They could also divide work situations into formal and informal sitiuations, and seek self-verifiction in formal work situations (e.g., business meetings). Meanwhile, they could relax the self-verification goal and conform to local employees' expectations in informal settings at work (e.g., informal discussions) or when interacting only with local employees. The advantage of situational self-verification is that it provides a middle ground for both parties. It does not require local employees to change their views completely and it still retains opportunities for expatriates to achieve partial self-verification.

In sum, the special features of ethnic identity can affect the opportunities for ethnically similar expatriates to succeed in their negotiation for identity self-verification and will, therefore, shape expatriates' behaviors in identity negotiation. In the next section we will elaborate on this and outline the antecedents and consequences of ethnic identity self-verification.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon self-verification theory, we assume that individuals have a strong desire to achieve ethnic identity self-verification, and, in the following, we depict a conceptual model of antecedents and consequences of ethnic identity self-verification. As discussed above, in the process of pursuing ethnic identity self-verification, expatriates face the additional pressure of social norms and expectations associated with their ethnic identity. Our model, thus, specifically identifies factors that might support or inhibit the efforts of ethnically similar expatriates in pursuing ethnic identity self-verification and indicates how the re-

sults of their efforts might affect their interactions with local employees. Specifically, we first identify two key cultural characteristics (i.e., collectivism and cultural tightness) as opportunity factors that may constrain or foster expatriates' freedom in pursuing ethnic identity self-verification and determine the compromise they have to strike. We then identify two factors (i.e., identity knowledge and identity management skills) that will influence expatriates' ability to be successful in negotiations with local employees. We also address different possible outcomes of expatriates' efforts in pursuing self-verification: they may successfully encourage local employees to support the expatriate's own view (i.e., achieved self-verification), they may have to compromise their goal of self-verification (i.e., situational self-verification), or they may fail to achieve self-verification (i.e., unfulfilled self-verification). Finally, we discuss how these different outcomes might affect ethnically similar expatriates (i.e., adjustment to the host country), their interactions with local employees (i.e., local employees support for expatriates), and the local colleagues (i.e., local employees' well-being).

Insert Figure 1 here

Ethnic Identity Self-verification Opportunity

As explained previously, different from negotiating for personal identity self-verification, the social group will play a role in ethnic identity negotiation. This means that although ethnically similar expatriates have the agency to seek self-verification through identity negotiation, to what extent they can achieve this goal may be affected by the social group. In the context of this study, the social group is the ethnic cultural group. Cultural groups differ in terms of shared values and norms held by members. These values and norms shape people's behaviors and attitudes, such as defining how they are related to a social group or to what extent they are allowed to violate social norms (Hofstede, 1980; Kashima, 2015). We have identified two cultural characteristics that are crucially important in this respect, namely collectivism-individualism and cultural tightness-looseness. Collectivism-individualism defines the relationships between individuals and the group (Triandis, 1989); cultural tightness-looseness reflects to what extent the group tolerates members who violate shared norms (Gelfand, Nishii & Raver, 2006). These cultural characteristics might restrict or provide opportunities for expatriates aiming to achieve ethnic identity self-verification in their identity negotiation with local employees.

Collectivism-individualism. Collectivism-individualism reflects the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups (Hofstede, 1980). In collectivist cultures, individuals have strong ties with in-groups, which can be categorized based on characteristics such as demography, institutions or preferences. Individuals are expected to align personal goals with collective goals or subordinate their personal goals to collective goals (Triandis, Brislin & Hui, 1988; Triandis, 1989). They are obliged to obey in-group authorities and look after in-group members. People's behaviors are strongly influenced by in-group norms, especially when in-groups are stable or impermeable, meaning group membership is difficult to gain or give up, such as in ascribed social groups. In contrast, in individualist cultures, individuals have more autonomy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004). They are expected to look after themselves and they tend to give priority to personal goals over group goals.

In the context of this research, if ethnically similar expatriates do not view their ethnic identity as important and this view is *not* verified by local employees, expatriates may perceive a stronger pressure to change their own views and to conform to the views of

local employees in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures. In collectivist cultures, to de-emphasize ethnic identity (i.e., an ascribed membership) is difficult for ethnically similar expatriates because local employees may actually expect ethnically similar expatriates to identify with the ethnic group and support in-group members (Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens & Paladino, 2000). Local employees might view ethnically similar expatriates who downplay their ethnic identity as disloyal members or even traitors of the ethnic group (Marques, 1998; Yzerbyt et al., 2000).

If expatriates insist on their own ethnic identity view and, hence, attempt to change local employees' views, they are likely to face strong resistance. This is because, backed by the local culture, local employees might be unwilling to change their view of expatriates' ethnic identity and might expect ethnically similar expatriates to change their views instead. To respond to this dilemma, expatriates might pursue the third option that we introduced above: trying to achieve situational self-verification. This option is not just about compromise; it also has a practical rationale. A successful identity negotiation needs to achieve two goals. One is an identity goal, such as achieving the desired identity through negotiation. In the case of our study, this involves achieving ethnic identity self-verification. The other is an interaction goal, which includes behaving in a socially appropriate way and establishing a positive relationship with social partners (Cooper, Doucet & Pratt, 2007; Swann & Bosson, 2008). In our study, this involves gaining support from local employees. If expatriates insist on gaining self-verification, they may fail to achieve self-verification (i.e. the identity goal) as local employees are likely to be unwilling to change their views. At the same time, they might fail to gain support from local employees (i.e. the interaction goal). Thus, compromising full self-verifcation and trying instead to achieve situational self-verification could generate the optimal social outcome for expatriates.

In individualist cultures, ethnically similar expatriates might face lower levels of conformity pressure (Triandis, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). They are likely to have more freedom in selecting in-groups based on personal interests and do not have to make self-categorizations based on an ascribed identity. Consequently, expatriates might feel less pressure if they do not view ethnic identity as important or do not view local employees as ethnic in-group members. They, thus, have more freedom to pursue self-verification and to try and change local employees' views. Therefore, we propose that:

> *Proposition 1: In highly collectivist cultures, ethnically similar expatriates are more likely to compromise ethnic identity self-verification and try to achieve situational self-verification.*

Tightness. In addition to the collectivism-individualism dimension, cultures can also be compared based on their level of tightness-looseness (Harrison, Shaffer & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004). Tightness-looseness was first theorized by anthropologist Pelto in 1968 and was adopted by cross-cultural psychologists (Pelto, 1968, Triandis, 1989; Carpenter, 2000; Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011). It compares cultures based on the strength of norms and the level of tolerance of deviant behaviors, rather than reflecting specific values or beliefs as collectivism-individualism does. Thus, tightness-looseness and collectivism-individualism are different concepts. Empirical data show that they are only moderately correlated (r = 0.44) (Gelfand et al., 2006). Cultures can be collectivist and loose (e.g., Brazil, Hong Kong), collectivist and tight (e.g., Japan, Singapore), individualist and loose (e.g., the U.S., New Zealand), and individualist and tight (e.g., Germany)(Gelfand et al., 2006).

Tight cultures have strong norms and a low level of tolerance of deviant behaviors (Gelfand et al., 2011). As a result, individuals' autonomy is restricted, and they have little

room to negotiate or to change these expectations (Boldt, 1978). Tight cultures have more restrictions on which behaviors are appropriate in certain situations. In contrast, loose cultures tend to have weaker norms and are more likely to tolerate deviant behaviors (Gelfand et al., 2011). Therefore, individuals have more freedom in deciding how to behave in different situations. In the context of our research, when ethnic identity self-verification is not achieved and ethnically similar expatriates do not view their ethnic identity as important, they might face more challenges in identity negotiation in tight cultures than in loose cultures. In tight cultures, if local employees believe ethnically similar expatriates' ethnic identity is important, they might be unwilling to accept the idea that expatriates can freely define who they are. Because these views are determined by the cultural characteristics, local employees are less likely to change their views. Expatriates thus face stronger resistance when negotiating with local employees and face higher external pressure to conform to local employees' views. As discussed above, in this situation, achieving situational self-verification might be an appropriate decision because it can lead to partial self-verification and help maintain a certain level of social appropriateness. Therefore, we propose that:

> *Proposition 2: In cultures with a high level of cultural tightness, ethnically similar expatriates are more likely to compromise ethnic identity self-verification and try to achieve situational self-verification.*

Ethnic Identity Self-verification Ability

Having the desire and opportunity to achieve ethnic identity self-verification does not mean self-verification can be achieved because individuals differ in their ability to achieve self-verification through identity negotiation. Based on our review of the literature, we have identified two factors that can influence ethnic identity self-verification ability, namely identity knowledge and identity management skills. Identity knowledge can ensure the authenticity of identity performance, whereas identity management skills can provide guidance on how to release identity information and how to negotiate identity appropriately.

Identity Knowledge. No matter which identity people want to emphasize in social interactions, they need to be able to perform this identity. In turn, to perform an identity, they need to have knowledge about this identity. The identity literature implicitly or explicitly assumes that identities, such as social identity and cultural identity, are associated with identity knowledge, which includes the understanding of normative expectations, behavioral scripts, or norms (Burke, 1991; Hong, 2012). When individuals perform a social identity, their behaviors are derived from this identity knowledge (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee & Morris, 2002; Burke, 2003). Since social identity knowledge and cultural knowledge are knowledge shared by people in the same society, when we evaluate whether or not others' identity performance is authentic, we calibrate their behaviors against this shared identity knowledge (Hofstede, 1980; Burke, 1991).

To increase their chances of changing local employees' views, ethnically similar expatriates need to demonstrate that they have sufficient knowledge about the identity they prefer to perform. If they prefer to stress their ethnic identity, they should have sufficient knowledge about the ethnic cultural norms and behavioral expectations. If they want to stress their newly adopted cultural identity, they should demonstrate knowledge of that identity. If they pursue a situational self-verification strategy and act on different identities in different situations, they need to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of each identity. The more knowledge expatriates have about the identities they want to perform, the more authentic their identity performance can be (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martínez, 2000).

For example, if an American-Chinese expatriate manager prefers to stress her American identity rather than her ethnic Chinese identity, she needs to have a solid understanding of American cultural values, beliefs and behavioral scripts. When interacting with local employees, she also needs to decide which language to use. The choice of language is an important indicator of identity choice (Dewaele & Nakano, 2012). If she prefers to speak English rather than Chinese, she should have a high level of proficiency in English. If ethnically similar expatriates can achieve a high level of authenticity, local employees are more likely to accept their identity expressions and identity choice. In contrast, if expatriates do not have sufficient knowledge about the identity they prefer to act on, it would be difficult to persuade local employees to accept their identity choice. Therefore:

> *Proposition 3: Ethnically similar expatriates with high identity knowledge are more likely to achieve high ethnic identity self-verification or situational self-verification.*

Identity Management Skills. In addition to having identity knowledge, in order to succeed in identity negotiation individuals need to develop a repertoire of identity negotiation strategies and use them appropriately in social interactions. To bring other people's view more in line with their own, individuals have many strategies at their disposal. They can actively engage in identity negotiation or purposefully select to interact with self-verifying partners and withdraw from interacting with non-self-verifying partners (Swann, 1987). The usage of the latter option may be limited in an organizational context, however, because it might not be possible. In organizations, people do not generally have the freedom in selecting with who they work. Many workplace interactions are defined by people's organizational roles. Thus, our discussion focuses on strategies related to active identity negotiation. People can signal their identity preference indirectly by disclosing identity cues through dress, workplace decorations, or choice of language (Swann, 1984). They can also use a more direct approach by sharing personal information with others (London et al., 2005), such as personal history or past experiences, to explain why a particular identity is important to them. They can even directly discuss their identity choice with others, such as explaining why one identity is more relevant in certain situations than others. Furthermore, people with high identity negotiation skills not only know what strategies are available, but also know how to use them effectively, meaning that they can use these strategies to convince others to accept their identity choice (Cooper et al., 2007).

In the context of our research, ethnically similar expatriates might not have the freedom to avoid interacting with local employees who failed to verify their identity. Those with high identity management skills can utilize more identity negotiation strategies to influence local employees' views and to persuade them to accept their own view of ethnic identity, while at the same time establishing or maintaining good relationships with local employees. Through the process of identity negotiation, they can achieve their identity goal (i.e., self-verification) and an interaction goal (i.e. positive relationships) (Swann & Bosson, 2008). Therefore, we propose that:

> *Proposition 4: Ethnically similar expatriates with high identity management skills are more likely to achieve high ethnic identity self-verification or situational self-verification.*

Consequences of a Lack of Ethnic Identity Self-verification for Ethnically Similar Expatriates

Fulfilled ethnic identity self-verification and situational ethnic identity self-verification both indicate that ethnically similar expatriates have reached an agreement with local employees on the role of their shared ethnicity in their interactions. This agreement is

likely to generate positive effects for their interactions. However, unfulfilled ethnic self-verification can affect their interactions negatively. We distinguish three distinct consequences of unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification, namely a personal effect (i.e., adjustment of ethnically similar expatriates), an interpersonal effect (i.e., local employees' support for ethnically similar expatriates), and a partner effect (i.e., local employees well-being). These outcome variables have generally been regarded as crucial outcomes for expatriates and their interactions with local employees, especially ethnically similar expatriates.

First, expatriate adjustment is a key factor determining expatriates' success (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Hippler, Caligiuri & Johnson, 2014). Many expatriates terminate their period of work prematurely because of maladjustment (Selmer & Shiu, 1999; Kraimer, Wayne & Jaworski, 2001). Second, interactions with local employees, an important source of local information, have also been recognized as a crucial factor for expatriate success (Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Varma, Pichler, Budhwar & Biswas, 2009; Arman & Aycan, 2013). Finally, local employees' experiences when interacting with expatriates have long been neglected (Takeuchi, 2010; Caprar, 2011). Without understanding local employees' experiences, MNCs are less likely to develop effective approaches to encourage them to support and assist expatriates.

The personal effect: Adjustment of ethnically similar expatriates. Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification is likely to generate negative effects on expatriates' well-being, such as expatriates' psychological and interaction adjustment. Psychological adjustment refers to expatriates' subjective well-being working in the host country environment (van Erp, Giebels, van der Zee & van Duijn, 2011). It focuses on emotional and attitudinal responses, such as stress, anxiety or satisfaction with work and life. Unfulfilled self-verification signals an identity threat because expatriates may believe that their freedom of identity choice is constrained by local employees (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003). When ethnically similar expatriates view ethnic identity as unimportant and emphasize work-related identities at work (i.e., low situational importance), a lack of identity self-verification may disrupt their planned identity presentation at work, possibly leading to stress and frustration (Burke, 1996; Swann et al., 2003). Some ethnically similar expatriates may even experience discrimination because others categorize them into a social category they reject (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006; Noels, Leavitt & Clément, 2010). These negative experiences can lead to dissatisfaction and have a negative impact on their psychological adjustment.

> *Proposition 5: Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification is negatively related to the psychological adjustment of ethnically similar expatriates.*

The above-mentioned negative effects and attitudes caused by unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification not only affect ethnically similar expatriates personally, but also affect their interactions with local employees and, thus, influence interaction adjustment (Black et al., 1991, Takeuchi, 2010). Ethnically similar expatriates may perceive that they are not understood or respected by local employees. Consequently, they are less likely to trust local employees (Burke & Stets, 1999). They may perceive conflicts and hostility when interacting with local employees. For example, in an informal conversation with us, a German expatriate with an ethnic Chinese background complained about her interactions with Chinese local employees: "I am German. I should be treated the same as other Germans. If they cannot accept me for who I am, how can they respect me?" The more negative the views are that ethnically similar expatriates hold towards local employees, the more interaction challenges (such as communication difficulties) they will experience. The

perceived challenges and hostility from local employees are likely to reduce expatriates' desire to become involved in further interactions with them. Thus, we propose:

> *Proposition 6: Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification is negatively related to the interaction adjustment of ethnically similar expatriates.*

The interpersonal effect: Local employees' support. When working in the host country, ethnically similar expatriates need to establish a new support network, and local employees are an important source of support (Takeuchi, Yun & Tesluk, 2002; Toh & DeNisi, 2005; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Support to expatriates can largely fall into three categories: information support (information concerning organizational norms or local environments), emotional support (support to overcome negative feelings and build interpersonal connections), and instrumental support (support on practical matters, such as local shopping information or finding baby-sitters) (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004). Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification can become a barrier preventing local employees from providing support to ethnically similar expatriates. First, it may increase uncertainty in interactions. Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification means that the two parties fail to achieve an agreement on the role of expatriates' ethnic identity. As a result, local employees might need to spend more time and make more effort to understand what social norms expatriates prefer to follow in order to predict their behaviors, otherwise they may face a higher risk of miscommunication. Therefore, the costs and risks involved in interacting and offering support will increase (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Consequently, local employees are more likely to avoid interactions with ethnically similar expatriates and ethnically similar expatriates lose a source of support.

What is even worse is that unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification might have counter-productive consequences. Based on social identity theory, individuals are driven to maintain a positive image of the social group with which they identify strongly (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). If local employees believe that their ethnic identity is downplayed by in-group expatriates, they may perceive that the positive image of their ethnic group is at stake, and, thus, desire to reinforce the group image. They can do so by drawing a distinction between these expatriates and the ethnic group, so that the behaviors of the expatriates do not negatively affect the overall group image (Marques, 1998). Consequently, they may give ethnically similar expatriates extremely negative evaluations, worse than other expatriates might receive. By doing so, local employees are able to enhance their social identity (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Marques, Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1988). Thus, ethnically similar expatriates not only lose support, but also face social sanction. This could explain why researchers have revealed that some expatriates complained that they receive harsher criticism than other expatriates when making the same mistakes or why some local employees are not willing to work with ethnically similar expatriates (McEllister, 1998; Chung, 2008). Therefore:

> *Proposition 7: Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification is negatively related to the level of support ethnically similar expatriates receive from local employees.*

The partner effect: Local employees' well-being. When two social parties share an ethnicity, the unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification of one party (i.e., ethnically similar expatriates) may also affect the other party involved in the social interaction (i.e., local employees). When an ethnically similar expatriate and a local employee interact, both parties desire to have their ethnic identity self-view verified by the other. Thus, there are two ethnic identity self-verification processes involved. These two processes are connected by the shared ethnicity, so the effect of one process can spill over into the other. Ethnically

similar expatriates' self-verification is likely to affect local employees' ethnic identity self-verification. This is because ethnically similar expatriates are an external source of appraisal of local employees' ethnic identity. When expatriates view their own ethnic identity as unimportant, they are also less likely to view local employees' ethnic identity (i.e., the shared ethnicity) as important. Even though expatriates do not make a direct evaluation of local employees' ethnic identity, local employees might sense an unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification, which is likely to have negative consequences on the well-being of these employees.

The well-being of ethnically similar expatriates and the well-being of local employees both suffer with a lack of self-verification. First, interacting with ethnic in-groups is supposed to give people a feeling of connection and comfort (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995). Ethnically similar expatriates who view ethnic identity as unimportant can generate an acceptance threat for local employees and cause considerable psychological stress because local employees may perceive that they are being rejected by in-group members (Postmes, 2002; Schaafsma, 2011). This is a subtle form of rejection as expatriates do not evaluate local employees' identity directly; rather, local employees infer it from expatriates' attitudes and behaviours. However, it is this ambiguity that can be most harmful because it does not leave room for people to contest others' views (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). This can be seen as a subtle form of discrimination that can generate negative emotional (e.g., upset, distress) and cognitive (e.g., being rejected, being seen as stupid) consequences (Noh & Wickrama, 2007). All of these can negatively influence local employees' well-being and further lead to low self-confidence (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). Finally, the lack of ethnic identity self-verification from apparent ethnic in-group members threatens local employees' self-concept of ethnic identity, which can challenge their collective self-esteem and negatively affect their well-being (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994). Thus:

> *Proposition 8: Unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification is negatively related to local employees' well-being.*

Discussion

We have introduced a conceptual model to identify the cultural and personal factors that can facilitate or inhibit ethnically similar expatriates to seek ethnic identity self-verification when interacting with local employees, and the trade-offs that they might have to make in this process. Subsequently, we have outlined how unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification can affect expatriates themselves, local employees, and their interactions. We now discuss the contributions of our research and explore the boundaries of the concept of ethnic identity self-verification.

Contributions to the Expatriate Management Literature

Our research has important implications for the role of ethnic identity in expatriate selection, expatriate success and expatriate training. We have argued that ethnic similarity does not necessarily have a positive social impact and that it might require conscious effort for expatriates to turn it into a positive relationship-enabling factor. In our article, we have proposed a theoretical mechanism that explains how ethnic identity affects expatriates' interactions with local employees. Therefore, MNCs should not use ethnic identity in expatriate selection, either implicitly or explicitly. This is true not only because it is discriminatory, but also because we might not yet have fully understood ethnic identity's implications for expatriates. Second, MNCs need to understand that expatriates with different demographic characteristics may face different realities when working in the same host country. In our research, we argued that ethnically similar expatriates might face

identity challenges that are specifically related to their shared ethnicity with local employees. It is possible that expatriates with other demographic characteristics (such as gender, religion, sexual orientation and disability) might have to deal with different identity challenges when interacting with local employees. Therefore, to help expatriates be successful during international assignments, MNCs need to provide tailored support that can help expatriates overcome different identity challenges.

Our research also informs the development of expatriate training programs. Our theorizing reveals the complexity of identity negotiation when ethnically similar expatriates pursue ethnic identity self-verification. Due to the challenges in the identity negotiation process, MNCs should provide training that can help ethnically similar expatriates succeed. However, the key components of current expatriate training are often related to cultural and practical matters (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique & Burgi, 2001). This is not sufficient to help expatriates cope with complicated identity challenges on their assignments. We thus advocate incorporating identity management-related topics into training programs, especially when expatriates will work in host countries marked by collectivism and cultural tightness. The training programs should make expatriates aware of the challenges related to identity self-verification, equip expatriates with strategies to cope with identity-related stress, and help them to develop identity-management skills (such as identity expression, communicating identity and identity negotiation), so their identity choice can facilitate their interactions with local employees (or at least not be detrimental to their performance). Although we only focus on the identity negotiation of ethnically similar expatriates in this article, identity negotiation is relevant to all expatriates, albeit expatriates with different demographic characteristics might face different types of identity challenges.

Contributions to International Management Research

Extant international management research simplifies the role of social identity in expatriate-local interactions in that it focuses on the influence of social identity on one social party: either local employees' categorization of expatriates (Olsen & Martins, 2009; Varma et al., 2009) or expatriates' categorization of local employees (Caligiuri et al., 2001). In contrast, ethnic identity self-verification provides an alternative perspective by simultaneously incorporating the views of expatriates and local employees toward one and the same social identity. This analytical perspective can be further applied to a broader range of phenomena in international management, such as potential perceptual divergence between expatriates and local employees on other identities (e.g., gender or role identity) or on issues including cultural differences, leadership, or social support.

Second, current research tends to focus on surface-level identity and has identified how demographic characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity (Carr, Ehiobuche, Rugimbana & Munro, 1996; Varma, Toh & Budhwar, 2006; Tung, 2008a), influence expatriates' performance and their interactions with local employees. However, little research has gone beyond the surface-level demographic characteristics and revealed their complexity. For example, expatriates' biological connection with a social category might not be in alignment with their subjective feelings towards this category, and local employees might not be aware of expatriates' subjective feelings. Our proposed angle provides a psychological mechanism that can explain these different perspectives. Given that we have limited our discussion to ethnic identity self-verification between ethnically similar and local colleagues, future research could apply our model to analyze ethnically similar expatriates' efforts in seeking ethnic identity self-verification with multiple stakeholders of MNCs, such as local clients, ethnically different expatriates, and headquarters. It could identify the different constraints that ethnically similar expatriates may face and how the outcomes

affect their adjustment, organizational commitment and performance. Furthermore, future research could go beyond the ethnic identity self-verification of ethnically similar expatriates and apply this model to the self-verification of local employees or other expatriates. Although we believe ethnic identity self-verification affects every employee category in the subsidiaries of MNCs, we also expect variations because ethnic identity may have different meanings for each group depending on individuals' experiences, MNCs' HR policies, and the social context. We further hope that our research encourages the international management research community to identify more psychological mechanisms that affect commonly studied international management phenomena.

Contributions to the Self-Verification Literature

We extend self-verification research to the domain of social identity using ethnic identity as an example. Traditionally, self-verification research has focused on personal identity (Swann & Ely, 1984; Polzer et al., 2002, Milton & Westphal, 2005). By extending self-verification research to a social identity such as ethnic identity, we pay attention to the dynamics and contextual factors in social groups (e.g., group norms) that can affect the identity negotiation process. The group context might create opportunities for or place external constraints on individuals as they are pursuing ethnic identity self-verification. We, thus, capture the tension between individuals' desire to achieve social identity self-verification and dealing with external conformity pressures. In doing so, we propose situational self-verification as an additional strategy that individuals may use when pursuing ethnic identity self-verification, a strategy that so far has not been discussed in the literature. We further extend the consequences of ethnic identity self-verification from focusing only on the focal individual (Swann & Ely, 1984; Polzer et al., 2002; Milton & Westphal, 2005), to including the effects on their social partners and their social interactions and demonstrate that identity self-verification has a wide range of social consequences. Future research could extend our work and investigate, for example, the self-verification of other social identities in the context of organizational interactions, such as age, gender, social status or disadvantaged social identities.

Research Boundaries

The effect of ethnic identity is expected to be stronger under certain conditions. First, ethnic identity tends to have a stronger social impact when the ethnic difference between local employees and expatriates is clearly visible or can be inferred from other cues (e.g., language). High ethnic visibility increases the probability of local employees making ethnicity-based social categorizations and, thus, increases the likelihood of divergent views between ethnically similar expatriates and local employees. For example, this effect is more likely to occur in interactions between expatriates from Western countries and local employees from countries in Asia or Africa. If both expatriates and local employees are from the same broad ethnic group, ethnic cues might not be highly visible, but someone's ethnicity can still be inferred based on names or accent.

Second, people's awareness of ethnic identity varies. For example, members of ethnic minority groups in society tend to have a higher level of awareness of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990, Phinney & Ong, 2007). Consequently, in Western societies, ethnic identity research often focuses on Asian, Irish, Turkish, or Jewish ethnic groups (Phinney & Ong, 2007). In contrast, members of the ethnic majority group may not be particularly sensitive towards their ethnic identity. However, as long as one party in an interaction between an ethnically similar expatriate and a local employee has a high level of ethnic identity awareness, ethnic identity self-verification will have an effect due to its influence on the overall social interaction.

Third, in this paper, we presume that the ethnic group to which local employees and expatriates belong is the only ethnic group in the host country. We neglect the potential influences of other ethnic cultures as this would have added a level of complexity to our theorizing that would have gone beyond of the scope of this paper. However, many countries are multi-ethnic societies. In these societies, additional factors might need to be considered in negotiations for ethnic identity self-verification. Therefore, future research should further develop ethnic identity self-verification in multi-ethnic host countries by identifying additional factors that could affect expatriates' identity negotiation and investigating the interplay of these factors. India, for example, would be an ideal research context in this respect because of its multi-ethnic society and large diaspora groups (Kee, 2014). The recent economic development of India has also attracted many Indian expatriates to return to India to work (Thite et al., 2009).

Finally, the consequences of ethnic identity self-verification on ethnically similar expatriate-local employee interactions might be influenced by national level factors, such as current or historical national tensions between the MNCs' home country and the host country. For example, in a Japanese subsidiary in China, an ethnic Chinese expatriate may downplay their Chinese ethnic identity but local colleagues may hold a different view. Local employees may not be happy with the expatriate's identity choice and might view the person as a traitor. This dissatisfaction is likely to be intensified by the tension caused by the Second World War that strained relationships between the two countries (He, 2007). Local employees might, thus, provide stronger social sanctions towards ethnically similar expatriates who seem to favor their Japanese identity.

Conclusion

As referred to in the title of this paper, "how you see me, how you don't", expatriates' visible ethnic group membership might not be the same as their subjective view of this identity. In social interactions, people might give too much attention to others' visible identity and ignore their invisible subjective identity choice. Based on this line of argument, we revealed the complexity of the effects of ethnic similarity between expatriates and local employees. Drawing upon self-verification theory, we developed the concept of ethnic identity self-verification, an identity-related mechanism that plays out specifically when expatriates interact with ethnically similar host country employees. To demonstrate the effects of this concept, we created a conceptual model that identified the key cultural and personal constraints affecting expatriates' efforts to achieve ethnic identity self-verification and elaborated on how unfulfilled ethnic identity self-verification can affect expatriates' interactions with local employees. Ethnic identity self-verification thus provides us with a new lens to explain under which circumstances expatriates can benefit from ethnic similarity. Consequently, the introduction of ethnic identity self-verification makes an important contribution to both the expatriate and international management literature and provides a theoretical framework that is able to generate significant future research opportunities.

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Figure 1: A Model of Ethnic Identity Self-verification and its Influences on Interactions between Ethnically Similar Expatriates and Host Country Employees

Ethnically Similar Expatriates' Opportunity to Gain Self-verification (Cultural factors) - Collectivism - Cultural tightness	P1-2			

Ethnically Similar Expatriates' Opportunity to Gain Self-verification (Cultural factors)
 - Collectivism
 - Cultural tightness

P1-2

Ethnically Similar Expatriates' Self-verification Ability (Personal factors)
- Identity knowledge
- Identity management skills

P3-4

Outcomes of Pursuit of Ethnic Identity Self-verification

- Fulfilled self-verification
- Situational self-verification
- Unfulfilled self-verification

P5-6

(Personal Effect) Ethnically Similar Expatriates' Adjustment
 - Psychological adjustment
 - Interaction adjustment

P7

(Interaction Effect) Local Employees' Support
 - Information support
 - Emotional support
 - Instrumental support

P8

(Partner Effect) Local Employees' Well-being

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