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LOCAL-EXPATRIATE CONTACT, CULTURAL CONTRASTS, AND THEIR ROLE
IN EXPATRIATE ADJUSTMENT IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The aim was to examine Turner's (1985) self-categorization theory and contact theory (Stephans, 1987) among expatriates working alongside host country nationals in Malaysia. *Meta-contrast ratios* are differences between self (expatriate) and others (Malaysian host country nationals) compared with the difference between self and less "exotic" others (fellow expatriates). Do they mediate between social contact and expatriate adjustment? Ninety-three expatriates from one expatriate community were surveyed about their level of social contact with (i) host country nationals and (ii) fellow expatriates. To assess meta-contrast, participants made comparisons on socio-cultural and psychological variables between themselves and fellow expatriates and between themselves and local hosts. This was then tested as a mediator between expatriates (i) level of social contact with host country nationals and fellow expatriates, and (ii) their overall expatriate adjustment. Fellow expatriates were consistently perceived as more similar to participants on socio-cultural and psychological indicators than host country nationals ($F(16,77) = 15.13, p < 0.000$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.832$). Mediation was not supported. Instead social contact and meta-contrast had direct effects on socio-cultural adaptation. Expatriates who perceived more similarity between themselves and host country nationals had better adjustment. This research has implications for both theory and practice. The operationalization of Turner's (1985) concept of meta-contrast provided a useful integrative measure of the competition for socialization between expatriate and local communities, with consequences for adjustment. A significant percentage of expatriates had no social contact with host country nationals, suggesting employers might enable more social contact with host national communities, especially during the orientation phase.

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