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Master's thesis Intercultural Communication

Expatriate life: experiences of expats living in the Netherlands

An exploration of the experiences of expats in terms of culture shock and adjustment

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“I always said to my people and I think (of) myself the same way, that the concept of boundaries, especially for skilled people, have completely vanished. We are all economic migrants at some point in time. So we are like the lotus leaf, it doesn't have a root to something firm, it goes wherever the water it takes. So yeah, from that perspective I look at myself as a global citizen.”

- Participant 4

Preface

Due to globalisation and technological developments international mobility is increasing (HSBC, 2017). There is a growing number of people choosing to work and live abroad for a temporary period. These people are called expats. Because the number of expats worldwide is increasing and is predicted to keep increasing (Finaccord, 2014), an exploration of how expats experience expat life is desired. This master's thesis explores the topics of culture and adjustment related to expat life in depth.

As the quote on the previous page wonderfully illustrates, for expats national borders may not be as rigid as they might seem at first sight. The participants I have spoken with have travelled, seen the world and lived in many places. Due to the cultural influences of living and working with culturally diverse people, the participants themselves have become multicultural in a way. Like participant 4, who he sees himself as a global citizen.

It has been a pleasure talking with a group of expats. Most of them I knew already from Dutch class (I was their teacher for some weeks). Others I knew less well and I was happy to get to know them. I was intrigued to learn how they experience expat life. I would like to thank all eight of them for their time and for sharing their opinions, happy moments, sad moments and wisdom. I have learnt a great deal from their insights into intercultural communication.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my supervisor Roos for offering advice and guiding me through the process of writing this thesis. Your ideas helped me shape this thesis and your feedback kept me on the right path.

And thank you Debbie, for your comments and feedback regarding the English language.

Abstract

This research has contributed to the field of intercultural communication by providing more insight into expat life. It has explored how expats experience their transition to the Netherlands, which is one of the most attractive countries for expats to work and live in (HSBC, 2017). In particular their experience of culture shock and adjustment are investigated in relation to several topics, like multiculturalism, previous expat experience and intercultural competences. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight expats living in the Netherlands were held to explore the influence these and other issues have on their experiences. The results indicate that the experience of the transition to the Netherlands overall is positive. Participants' previous expat experience, mixed cultural identity, cultural awareness, social network and intercultural competences seem to ease their transition. Due to these factors, one cannot speak of a culture 'shock', but rather of a culture learning process. The results are in dispute with the traditional models of culture shock (Oberg, 1960) and adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), because these models use an essentialist approach of culture and generalize to all groups of travellers. However, the current research has found that multiple types of culture play a role and that situational circumstances, like language and work-related factors, are of importance as well. Support is provided for Dervin's (2012) approach of culture as plural, dynamic and changeable. The results indicate that the essentialist view of culture does not seem applicable to expats. It is therefore advised to take these new insights into consideration for future research into culture and adjustment.

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1. Introduction

Contact between different cultures is an ancient phenomenon. Nevertheless, the establishment and character of intercultural contact has changed over the centuries. Nowadays, it is easier to fit travellers into more specialized role categories which have different purposes (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This thesis focusses on one specific group: expatriates (from now on called expats). They are working professionals who temporarily transfer to another location of the multinational company that they work for. The exact definition of expats is given in paragraph 3.1.1. The number of people working abroad has been increasing over the years (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2005). This is mainly due to globalisation: many large companies have become multinationals with subsidiaries in multiple countries. To ensure effective cooperation between the subsidiaries, employees are sent abroad, Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2005) state. Along with the growth of intercultural contact, the scientific interest in it has increased.

When different cultures meet, communication is not always easy. People might have different values and beliefs and behave in a different way. This can lead to miscommunication or misinterpretation and consequently to unsympathetic and hostile feelings towards each other (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). A widely described phenomenon that can occur is ‘culture shock’ (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1994): a state of shock and disorientation experienced when relocating to an unfamiliar environment. To overcome this shock, sojourners must learn to navigate in the new environment they find themselves in. This thesis argues that moving to a different environment is more like a learning process than a shock. This position is further explained in the theoretical framework.

Another important theory related to intercultural contact is that of adjustment by Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Their theory looks at two types of processes of adjustment individuals go through. However, they, as well as Oberg (1960), approach culture in a rather essentialist way. This thesis attempts to show that the process of adjustment is not only about national cultures and is also not the same for all sojourners. Different factors come into play, which can influence someone’s process of adaptation. Specifically relevant for expats are factors like previous expat experience and acquired intercultural competences. Also their cultural identity and experience of multiculturalism are considered. In the theoretical framework these factors are discussed.

The current research focusses on expats from a variety of countries living in the Netherlands. Why this country has been chosen will be explained in the next chapter. This

research intends to investigate how expats experience the transition to the Netherlands and their adjustment process. Do they encounter any difficulties or do they fairly easily manoeuvre through society? A lot of research on adjustment has been done in the field of psychology by employing a quantitative method (Ward et al., 1998; Berry, 2005). However, a qualitative approach can dive deeper into the subject. Therefore, this study uses in-depth interviews with expats to gain understanding of their experiences. In addition, the field of intercultural communication has developed new ideas about culture and multiculturalism, as opposed to the rather essentialist view of culture in the psychological field. These new views are explained in the following chapters and taken into account in the interpretation of the interviews. The goal of the current study is to further explore the topic of expatriate experience by making use of a more recent perspective on culture and adjustment.

First the context of this study is outlined in the next chapter. In order to investigate the experience of expats living in the Netherlands, relevant research is discussed in the theoretical framework. These theories lead to several research questions. Subsequently, the appropriate methodology is explained and the results are presented and discussed in relation to the existing literature in the succeeding chapter. Finally, the answers to the research questions are given in the conclusion. In the discussion the implications of the findings are debated. This study attempts to provide further insight into the field of intercultural contact related to the experience of adjustment of expats by making use of a different point of view and methodology than has been done before.

2. Context

Expats are a modern type of traveller. A recent report by Finaccord (2014) has found that the number of expatriates worldwide has increased. In 2013 the total number of expats was estimated to be more than 50 million. The report predicts this number will have risen to almost 57 million in 2017. Because of this growth, more and more information is being provided about and for expats. The current research is focussed on expats living in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has been found to be one of the best countries for expats to live in, having been placed fifth in the HSBC research 'Expat explorer: broadening perspectives' (2017). The HSBC has carried out extensive research representing the views of almost 30,000 expats in 159 countries and territories (HSBC, 2017). They conducted an online survey ranking these countries from good to worse for expats to live in based on three themes: economic strength, lifestyle and experience and family opportunities. Singapore, Norway, New Zealand, Germany and the Netherlands form the top five. This high score is mainly because the Netherlands scored the highest in the family rankings, providing the best living and educational conditions for family and children of expats, according to the research (HSBC, 2017). Moreover, the Netherlands is increasing in popularity. It has by far improved the most in the top ten: it climbed from the fifteenth place to the fifth in one year (HSBC, 2017). The 'Expat Insider Survey' confirms this finding, in which the Netherlands are ranked 13th in 2017, compared to 30th in 2016 (InterNations, 2017). Their online survey represents the views of more than 12,500 expats with 166 different nationalities living in 188 countries or territories. The ranking is based on the themes: quality of life, ease of settling in, work, family life and personal finance.

The Dutch governmental institution Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) gathers statistical information. Only in 2015 has the CBS attempted to delineate the group of expats in the Netherlands for the first time (Ooijevaar & Verkooijen, 2015). The study found that, depending on the criteria for defining expats, the number of expats lies between 39,000 and 75,000 in 2015. This number is likely to grow in the coming years. To provide services adapted to the needs of expats it is important to understand what they go through. This research explores the experiences of expats in the Netherlands and could expand the knowledge we have of this group.

The Netherlands is already offering services and facilities to expats living there. There are eight official Expat Centres to help expats take care of official matters and to navigate through their new way of life (IND, 2017). More expats are being attracted to move to the

Netherlands by offering certain benefits. For instance, the Dutch revenue service Belastingdienst offers the 30%-facility to incoming employees, which means expats receive 30% of their wage tax-free (Belastingdienst, n.d.). In addition, the Dutch migrant and start-up visa attracts expats, because it makes it possible also for expats outside of the European Union to apply for a temporary residence permit (NFIA, 2017). Besides that, to meet the growing demand of international settlers in the region of Amsterdam, three new international schools opened in September 2017 (I amsterdam, 2017).

Moreover, there are many companies providing intercultural training to expats. These trainings are focussed on cultural self-awareness, cultural differences and culture shock (for instance Akteos, KIT, Culture-Inc, etc.). Popular models used in these trainings, such as ‘culture shock’ (Oberg, 1960) and Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (1983), are based on an essentialist view of culture, in which culture is seen as something stable and fixed. These models do not take into account the situational and personal factors that influence someone’s identity and culture, which the current thesis does attempt to do. New ideas about culture have arisen in the intercultural field, which will be applied to the current research in order to shed new light on culture related to expat experience. This investigation attempts to move beyond the existing models. By using an inductive approach, the experiences of expats are explored in an open way without limiting the interpretations to the already existing theories and categories. To do so, first of all, relevant literature fundamental to the current research is discussed in the next chapter.

3. Theoretical framework

The following chapter addresses some important theories and definitions related to expats and adjustment. First of all, the term ‘expat’ and its definition are introduced. Then the reasons why expats are sent abroad are discussed, as well as reasons for failing assignments. Next, the topic of culture is introduced. Two opposing views of culture are discussed as well as the related concept of ‘culture shock’ and new ideas about this. Finally, what is meant by ‘adjustment’ is explained and existing theories about adjustment and influencing factors, such as previous expat experience and intercultural competences, are presented. The theoretical framework eventually leads to the formulation of the research questions.

3.1 Expats

3.1.1 Definition

Expats fall under the broader category of sojourners. Ward and Kennedy (1994, p. 331) describe sojourners as “individuals who travel voluntarily to a new culture, usually for specific objectives such as educational and occupational opportunities, who view their residence in the new culture as fixed and finite, and who usually have expectations of returning to their country of origin.” Here the difference lies with long term travellers such as immigrants and refugees. Expats have usually been sent by their employers to work at a foreign branch location of their company for a certain amount of time. They have expectations of leaving that location once the purpose of their stay has been reached. This definition only applies to highly skilled technicians, professionals and managers (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2005, p. 168). In this research expats are defined as adult working professionals who work abroad for a certain amount of time, either having transferred to a subsidiary of their company abroad or having applied to a new temporary position abroad.

3.1.2 Purpose of expats

The sending abroad of professionals has become more and more important for large companies. According to Black and Gregersen (1999) it has become a competitive necessity. They state that nearly 80% of midsize and large companies send employees abroad. Employees are often sent abroad for two main reasons: to generate and transfer knowledge or to gain new knowledge (Black & Gregersen, 1999). An expat either has the mission to provide knowledge to the subsidiary to help solve a problem or to acquire new skills that will benefit themselves and the

company. Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2005) have concluded that three- to five-year contracts of expats are fundamental to ensure effective global operation. Another reason for sending employees abroad, according to the researchers, is that it is considered advantageous if managers have had the experience of managing a foreign subsidiary, precisely because of the globalisation in the business sector.

3.1.3 High rate of failure

However ambitious these goals might be, often expatriate operations abroad seem to fail. Between 10% and 20% of managers sent abroad from the United States did not finish their contract and returned home early, Black and Gregersen (1999) found. The researchers also found that of those expatriates that did stay the entire period as planned, almost a third of those did not live up to the expectations of their superiors. Another major problem they mention is that a fourth of the employees that return home after their assignment abroad leave their company within one year. The newly acquired skills and knowledge leave the company with them. As can be seen, often the result of expatriate missions turns out to be the opposite of what was intended.

How is it possible that such a high percentage of expatriate operations results in failure? This is especially surprising because usually the employees who are selected to work abroad have proven to be successful (Lee, 2006). An explanation for this is the belief that the practices of business are universal, an assumption Mendenhall and Oddou (1985, p. 39) call 'domestic equals overseas performance'. When employees are selected, they are selected using the same criteria superiors would use to select an employee for a domestic task. However, conditions and demands for domestic and foreign jobs are often different (Lee, 2006). This means that successful employees may not possess the right skills and knowledge to successfully complete an assignment abroad in a certain country.

According to Black and Gregersen (1999) expats should be selected not only based on their technical skills, but also on their cross-cultural abilities. When expats experience problems with getting accustomed to the new cultural and business climate, this can negatively influence their performance and productivity and consequently the efficiency of the assignment abroad (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Expats are required to be able to adjust and be open to different cultures in order to succeed. These intercultural skills are addressed in paragraph 3.5.3. Firstly, the topic of culture is discussed and the perspective of the current research is explained.

3.2 Culture

3.2.1 What is culture?

In order to investigate the process and outcome of intercultural contact, an exploration of the definition of culture is required. Culture continues to be a much-debated topic amongst scholars, as Dervin (2012) illustrates. There are two opposing views of culture. The essentialist view of culture is that of seeing culture as something static. Individuals are grouped to an identity that is general and fixed and shared by all members of that culture. Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2010) describe it as a homogeneous view of culture in which people belong only to one culture. Usually these cultures are separated by national borders. Hofstede (1983) for instance, uses this view to categorize different cultures based on four dimensions. He sees these characteristics as tightly rooted in a culture. Similarly, Adler (1975) views culture as a perceptual frame of reference that a group shares, which is influenced by someone's orientation and world view.

The opposing view of culture is that of a dynamic, fluid and interactive culture (Dervin, 2012). According to Dervin, culture is changing, adaptable and constructed in discourse. The anthropologist Dettwyler agrees and adds that culture is negotiable and emergent depending on the context (2011, p. 416). Culture is constituted in relation to others and therefore has to be plural, Dervin (2012) argues. Kim (1988, p. 48) shares this approach of culture, stating that it is "(...) a complex process of continuing interpretive activity internal to individuals as a result of their enculturation experiences". Kim (1988) claims that it is through communication that we obtain our culture. In this view, culture is not simply a bundle of common values, beliefs and behaviours, but it is made up of many different and varying aspects. It certainly is not only related to nationality. Dettwyler argues in her book that culture "consists of many overlapping circles of shared knowledge, beliefs, practices and is not based solely on nationality or ethnicity" (Dettwyler, 2011, p. 416). It is this view of culture that is being applied to the current investigation. People can have many different cultures, which are discussed in the following section.

3.2.2 Different types of cultures

Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) say that culture is associated with social groups, which are not necessarily formed by national borders. The individuals in these groups share some patterns of regularity, like orientations to life, values and principles and behavioural rituals (p. 35), but also differ on certain aspects. Moreover, everyone can be a member of multiple groups simultaneously. The authors mention a couple of cultural groups. For instance, religious groups,

organisations and professional groups can have their own culture. Kaharanna, Evaristo and Srite (2006) distinguish several levels of culture. The supranational level, which crosses national boundaries, like ethnic or religious cultures; the national level, where collective properties are attributed to citizens; the professional level, which entails someone's social class and loyalty to the work industry; the organisational level, the social and normative aspects that shape an organisation; and group level, a collection of individuals smaller than an organisation.

A particularly relevant kind of culture for the current research is 'expat culture'. According to Beaverstock (2002) expatriates often surround themselves with fellow expats in their social networks. He calls these clusters 'expatriate enclaves', which are formed as a result of the cultural differences between them and the local people. The clustering of expats can hinder their integration in the new society. Gatti (2009) provides an outline of expats in Brussels: how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. He found that the group of expats in Brussels has their own rituals, language (the so-called Eurolanguage), status symbols and meeting places. However, he argues that the expat community is actually made up of many groups, although there is a common cultural layer (p. 12).

Expat culture, as well as the other types of culture, all influence and shape an individual. Dettwyler (2011, p. 416) says everyone carries a unique combination of cultural memberships. Kaharanna et al. (2006, p. 5) state that an individual's culture is the product of belonging to several cultures. In the current research this is referred to as multiculturalism. Individuals who identify with and belong to multiple cultures are defined as being multicultural. It is explored to what extent expats can be considered to be multicultural. This does not only apply to national cultures. All kinds of cultures are looked at, although national, organisational and expat culture receive the most attention, as they are significant for expats. It is important to repeat that this research does not regard the different types of culture as fixed, but as changeable and continuously emerging.

To understand the different views on culture and consequently on intercultural contact, the following paragraphs discuss some traditional theories about intercultural contact and their applicability to the current research.

3.3 Culture shock

There is a multitude of theories trying to understand, describe and explain what sociological and psychological phenomena take place when people with different cultures meet. One of the first approaches describing the consequences of intercultural contact is the theory of 'culture

shock' by the anthropologist Oberg in 1960. It must be noted that this theory focusses on cultural differences on a national level. However, because the theory has received much attention and is still being applied to research, it is first explained and afterwards critically reviewed.

3.3.1 Culture shock and the U-curve

According to Oberg (1960), an individual experiences a state of shock as a consequence of the transition to another culture: a disorientating, confusing experience. He called this 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960). When someone moves to a new environment with a different culture, familiar cultural cues, like values, gestures, customs or norms, are lost. These cues help to orient an individual to daily situations. When these cues are lost, Oberg (1960, p. 177) says an individual is "like a fish out of water" and experiences anxiety and uncertainty as a result of not knowing what to do. Pedersen (1994) describes culture shock as the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment (p. 1). Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, p. 152) specify that culture shock is both the psychological and physical consequences occurring in an individual due to changes in circumstances.

One aspect of Oberg's (1960) theory has received considerable attention: the application of culture shock as a process over time with distinct stages. The so-called 'U-curve' was first observed by the sociologist Lysgaard (1955) in his investigation of 200 Norwegian academics in the United States. When individuals move to a place with a different culture, they first feel fascinated and excited about their stay: the 'honeymoon' stage, which may last from a few days to six months. The second stage is one of 'crisis': individuals have to seriously cope with new life conditions and thus experience difficulties. This results in a hostile attitude towards the host nationals and the seeking of support of people from their original culture. After this stage, the 'recovery' stage takes place. The individual has gained knowledge about the country and is beginning to find his way. Finally, the visitor reaches the 'adjustment' stage, where he is adjusted enough to the new environment to comfortably live daily life (Oberg, 1960). Schematically, this adjustment process can be viewed as a U-curve (see figure 1.)

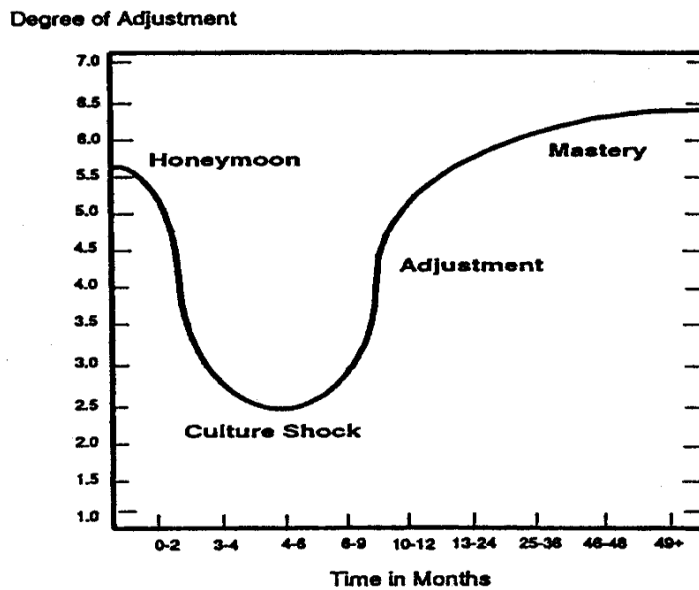


Figure 1. The U-Curve, adopted from Lee (2006, p. 24).

3.3.2 Contradicting evidence and alternative views

For over thirty years the U-curve has had a central position in research on transition and adjustment (Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima, 1998). However, not all studies provide support for the U-curve of adjustment. Church (1982) critically reviewed literature related to psychological adjustment of short-term visitors and sojourners to new cultures. He found as much literature supporting the U-curve as disconfirming it. He concludes that support for the theory is “weak, inconclusive and overgeneralized” (p. 542). In addition, Church (1982), as well as Furnham and Bochner (1986), says that most data used to investigate the U-curve was cross-sectional. Longitudinal studies are necessary to provide further insight. Church (1982, p. 560) also states control groups are necessary to attribute the levels of adjustment to cross-cultural experience.

Many alternatives to culture shock have been proposed. Adler (1975) in part acknowledges the phenomenon of culture shock and its belonging stages, but offers an alternative view. Adler sees the negative aspects of culture shock as a fundamental condition to overcome these difficulties and grow as an individual. He calls this process a ‘transitional experience’, whereby an individual grows from low self- and cultural awareness to a state of high self- and cultural awareness. Adler derives five phases of the transitional experience, which are fairly similar to the four stages of Oberg (1960), although no time sequences are connected to the phases. The difference lies in the fifth phase, which Adler calls ‘independence’. After an individual has gone through the cycle of culture shock and feels adjusted to another culture, he or she can become independent of cultural influence. One now

cherishes and accepts cultural differences and has learnt that behaviour comes forth from cultural embedded motivations and intentions (p. 20). Although Adler's model could be considered an improvement compared to Oberg's (1960), also Adler's view is debatable, as the next paragraph illustrates.

3.3.3 Applicability of culture shock as a learning process

Culture shock and its alternative theories are based on an essentialist view of culture. The models assume someone has a single culture, based on nationality. Adler (1975) already begins to point out that culture is not simply distinct and unchangeable, but fails to include the complex of cultures an individual can have to begin with, besides only a national culture. The current research argues that multiple cultures are relevant and should be taken into account when analysing someone's transition to a new environment. Besides a person's nationality, a person can for instance belong to a certain organisational culture or a certain religious culture which also influence his or her transition. Therefore, this research takes Adler's theory of a transitional experience as a starting point and moves on from there. It argues that culture shock is more like a learning process.

To put this approach into use, it certainly depends which group is being looked at. When applying the view of culture shock as a learning process to expats, several circumstances have to be considered. Often expats have lived and worked in multiple countries and companies with different (national and organisational) cultures. This could mean that their intercultural experience could have made them more aware of different cultures and their influence. Kadianaki, O'Sullivan-Lago and Gillespie (2014) state that the experience of living in an intercultural environment leads to the creation of multiple cultural points of view in the self (p. 29). They investigated this by in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic participatory observation in three immigrant communities in Athens, providing rich and detailed information. They found that intercultural encounters transform someone's identity and self-perception.

Seeing culture shock as a learning process is the view this research shares. It attempts to make use of the intercultural approach of culture as something hybrid. The relevance of culture shock is examined in relation to this perspective. This could affect the extent expats experience culture shock during their (multiple) transitions to other environments and companies. It also has consequences for the adjustment process expats go through. Adjustment is considered the final stage of culture shock or of the so-called acculturation process (Oberg, 1960; Berry, 2005). In the next paragraph a widely used theory about adjustment is outlined.

3.4 Adjustment

Adjustment has been studied extensively in relation to sojourners and expats (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2005). In the following paragraphs the topic of adjustment is addressed. Firstly, the terminology issues related to the term ‘adjustment’ are explained and a more suitable definition is proposed. A major theory, namely that of adjustment as a two-fold process by Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) is examined and afterwards its applicability to the group of expats is discussed.

3.4.1 Terminology of adjustment

In the field of psychology, adjustment (also called adaptation¹) is seen as the outcome of intercultural contact. The psychologist Berry (2005) defines adaptation as the relatively stable changes that occur in an individual or group in response to external demands (p. 709). In the field of communication, Kim (1988) defines cross-cultural adaptation as “the process of change over time that takes place within individuals who have completed their primary socialisation process in one culture and then come into continuous, prolonged first-hand contact with a new and unfamiliar culture” (p. 38).

Although the definitions slightly differ from each other, they do share a common meaning: adjustment is a process of changes in an individual as the result of transferring to a different environment. However, the term adjustment implies that an individual adapts according to the conventions of society. This is not necessarily the case. It is also about getting used to new things, without necessarily adapting to them. Besides, adjustment does not only take place on the level of national culture. The focus of the current research lies both on the adaptation to the Dutch society and the work environment, as well as on life changes and personal developments in an individual. This sense is applied to the current research.

3.4.2 Psychological and sociocultural adjustment

The psychologists Ward and colleagues (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward et al., 1998, Searle & Ward, 1990) use ‘adjustment’ in the traditional sense, meaning adjusting to a national culture. This must be borne in mind when applying their view to the current research. They have proposed that adjustment is a two-fold process: it is constituted by psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Sociocultural adjustment is situated within the culture learning framework and

¹ The studies cited in this thesis use the term adjustment as well as adaptation to refer to the same process. It is possible, however, that other studies do make a clear distinction. Because this is not relevant to the current research, it is left out of consideration.

focusses on behavioural aspects. It is associated with the ability to “fit in” and with social skills (Ward et al., 1998, p. 279). An individual learns the necessary skills relevant in a new cultural environment. Psychological adjustment is situated within the stress and coping framework and has to do with psychological well-being and emotional satisfaction of a sojourner (p. 279).

Ward and colleagues (1998) have demonstrated that neither of the processes of adjustment follows a U-curve. Both types of adjustment problems seem to be the highest at the moment individuals enter into a new culture, which then both decrease over time (Ward et al, 1998). The researchers therefore provide no support for the so-called ‘honeymoon’ stage Oberg (1960) describes as the initial euphoric stage that sojourners go through. Instead, the initial phase seems to be the most difficult and stressful.

3.4.3 Applicability to expats

Even though the vision of adjustment as a twofold process has received a lot of support (Ward, Furnham & Bochner, 2005), the question remains to what extent this model is applicable to the modern view of culture and the group of expats.

To create a generalizable model, Ward and colleagues (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward et al., 1998, Searle & Ward, 1990) use an essentialist view of culture. Their model sees identity as something stable. In their investigations culture is equivalent to nationality. However, as has been outlined before, in the intercultural field culture is seen as being constituted of multiple aspects and as being dynamic. Multiple different cultures play a role in the process of adjustment. Especially expats who work in a multicultural environment could experience culture as something more complex. Kadianaki et al. (2014) claim that a new unfamiliar social environment stimulates change and self-reflection. Consequently, migrants often redefine their cultural values and identities (p. 31). The adjustment model, for these reasons, cannot be applied directly to expats. Nevertheless, it does provide a theoretical framework for examining how people change and adapt to new unfamiliar circumstances. The two types of adjustment, sociocultural and psychological, are considered in this research.

Moreover, many other factors could influence the transition and adjustment process of expats. Especially intercultural competences and previous overseas experience could have a big influence. These topics are discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.5 Factors that influence intercultural contact

3.5.1 Situational and individual factors

Many researchers have attempted to categorize the components of adjustment into several dimensions or variables. This way, it is easier to predict how someone will experience a period spent in an unfamiliar setting. In the field of management studies extensive research has been carried out into factors that influence the success of expatriate assignments, because of the importance this has for the international business sector. Again, it must be pointed out that the below mentioned studies see adjustment as mainly adapting to national cultural aspects. The current research attempts to investigate whether these factors are relevant also to expats in a broader sense.

Because work is an important part of expats' lives, several work-related factors are considered that can influence their transition. The offering of pre-departure training was found to positively influence cross-cultural adjustment, skill development and job performance (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991, p. 293). Secondly, the company has to select its expats based on the right selection criteria. As Black and Gregersen (1999) also debate, many companies fail to select the right people to send abroad, because of using the wrong selection criteria, that is, only focussing on technical skills. Besides those, intercultural skills also prove to be necessary to succeed in their overseas assignment. Intercultural competences are discussed in the next paragraph.

Furthermore, in the literature about adjustment the factor of 'cultural distance' or 'cultural toughness' is often mentioned (Church, 1982; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) say that the more an environment feels different from what someone is used to, the harder it is to adapt to it. However, there are some critical points to be mentioned. The authors lay the focus mainly on differences between cultures, but similarities between cultures are evenly important and relevant for adjustment. Moreover, the terms cultural distance or toughness imply only someone's nationality is being considered. As has been argued before, besides nationality many other aspects are of importance. Other types of culture, like organisational cultures, will be investigated in this study as well.

In addition, how someone's spouse or family is doing is of major influence. Both Church (1982) and Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) state that there is a positive relationship between the adjustment and wellbeing of the family and that of the expatriate. According to Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2005) this influence is underestimated, even though research has shown that

dissatisfaction of the family is one of the main reasons that expats shorten their stay abroad and return home early.

Under the dimension of individual factors, Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) suggest in their review of expatriate adjustment that replacing hobbies that were practiced at home with similar activities in the new environment, makes an expatriate more likely to adjust well. The authors refer to this as ‘reinforcement substitution’. Another fundamental aspect is related to ‘stress reduction’: when expatriates are able to withdraw to a place where they can unwind when situations become too stressful, this serves as a psychological support system to reduce shock and stress. By doing this, they have the possibility to gradually get used to the new environment. Finally, being confident in one’s ability to fulfil the purpose of the placement overseas and also possessing the required skills to do so, is also beneficial (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, p. 40-41). According to Haslberger (2005, p. 99) language skills influence sojourner’s level of confidence, which help him or her to require the relevant social skills. Mendenhall and Oddou (1986) also point out the usefulness of language skills for expatriate adjustment.

3.5.2 Previous expat experience

Also of importance is previous expat experience. Because this research views expat transitions as a learning process, previous experience can have a big influence. If expats have previously lived in different countries and worked at different subsidiaries, they could have learnt how to deal with uncertainties, difficulties and different kinds of cultures. Research suggests that having accurate expectations reduces uncertainty, which in turn improves the adjustment (Church, 1982; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991). These expectations can be related to work, the national culture and daily life (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991, p. 305).

Research has overall shown that previous experience facilitates the adjustment process (Church, 1982; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991). Therefore, this research attempts to explore in which ways previous expat assignments influence the experience of expats in the Netherlands.

3.5.3 Intercultural competences

Related to previous experience are intercultural competences. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) emphasize the importance of intercultural interaction competence in their book. They define this as “the competence not only to communicate (verbally and non-verbally) and behave effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural groups, but also to handle the

psychological demands and dynamic outcomes that result from such interchanges” (p. 51). Expats who have experience with intercultural contact are more likely to have developed intercultural competences. Some of the competences Spencer-Oatey and Franklin mention that are necessary to manage intercultural situations are open-mindedness, non-judgementalness, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility in thinking and behaviour, self-awareness, knowledge of one’s own and other cultures, resilience to stress and communication or message skills (p. 57). The competences are derived from the criteria of having appropriate and effective communication. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) have added two criteria: adaptability and creativity. Communication adaptability is the ability to change interaction behaviours and purposes to comply with the needs of the situation. Communication creativity is about being imaginative and flexible.

There is a vast list of intercultural competences. It is therefore useful to order them into categories. One of the models that attempts to do that is Byram’s (1997) model for intercultural communicative competence. He divides intercultural competences into these three categories: attitudes, knowledge and skills. Attitudes are related to the willingness to suspend one’s own beliefs and to look with the perspective of the other without judgement. This is called ‘decentring’. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, p. 269) describe this as the moving away from one’s own cultural perspective and to give equal importance to the perspectives of all the cultural groups involved. Openness and curiosity are key (Byram, 1997, p. 34). Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) found the establishing of relationships to be vital for the adjustment of expats. In order to establish these, expats must be ‘willing to communicate’ (p. 42). To prevent misinterpretation, it is crucial to be non-judgemental and non-evaluative. This leads to better intercultural communication and relationships and consequently to a better adjustment process, the authors found.

The competence of knowledge consists of two types of knowledge. The first is knowledge about social groups and their cultures (Byram, 1997, p. 35). Byram is referring to national cultures, however this research expands knowledge of cultures to all kinds of cultures (see paragraph 3.2.2). The second type is about having knowledge of the processes of interaction of social groups (p. 35), meaning the understanding of conversation practices of a certain culture. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) indicate the importance of the ability to interact effectively and to be able to use the language of the other. Church (1982) mentions the importance of having prior knowledge about the new environment for adjustment.

Lastly, skills are divided into three categories: skills of interpreting and relating, which refer to the ability to interpret something from other cultures and to relate it to one’s cultural

embeddedness; skills of political education and cultural awareness, which concern the ability to evaluate practices and perspectives of one's own cultural embeddedness and that of others; and lastly skills of discovering and interacting, which relate to the ability to gain new knowledge of a culture and to function under the constraints of interaction (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 66). Crucial is the ability to understand different types of behaviour to communicate effectively (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). These kinds of competences are vital to an expat having to operate in an environment with many different cultures. This study explores the competences the participants have acquired and how they influence their experiences abroad.

3.6 Research questions

Because expats are a special type of sojourner dealing with multiple intercultural situations, it is interesting to explore their experiences related to culture and adjustment. A lot of research in the field of adjustment and culture shock has been done by means of a quantitative method (Lysgaard, 1955; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Searle & Ward, 1990) or by reviewing empirical and literature studies (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Berry, 2005). However, these methods do not provide a deep understanding of the process people go through when transitioning to unfamiliar environments. Furthermore, a rather essentialist approach of culture predominates in research. This research attempts to explore the experiences expats have, while making use of a multifaceted and broad view of culture. It zooms in on expats living in the Netherlands, a country that is rapidly increasing in popularity for expats to live in (HSBC, 2017; Expat Insider, 2017). By means of in-depth interviews with expats in the Netherlands the factors that influence their transition are explored. The theoretical framework leads to the following research question:

How do expats experience the transition to the Netherlands and their adjustment process?

In order to answer this question, several topics are addressed. Firstly, because expats are usually exposed to and work in a multicultural environment, the influence of multiculturalism on the experiences of the transitions of the participants is explored. Furthermore, as has been argued, previous expat experience and intercultural competences could influence the transitions as well and are therefore investigated. Next, it is possible expats experience difficulties and adjustment problems related to any kind of culture. These issues will also be addressed. Finally, the results of the preceding topics lead to the final sub-question. In the theoretical framework it has been

suggested that culture shock is not really a shock but more of a learning process. The extent to which expats view their transition as a learning process is therefore investigated.

To summarize, these matters lead to the formulation of the following sub-questions:

1. *To what extent does multiculturalism or expat culture influence their transition?*
2. *To what extent does previous expat experience influence their transition?*
3. *To what extent do intercultural competences influence their transition?*
4. *To what extent do they encounter adjustment problems?*
5. *To what extent do they experience their transition as a learning process?*

4. Methodology

In this chapter the chosen methodology to examine the experience of expats is presented. After discussing the research design, a description of the participants is given. Subsequently, the chosen method for analysing the data is illustrated. Finally, the validity and trustworthiness of the chosen method is addressed.

4.1 Research design

4.1.1 Inductive qualitative approach

As has been mentioned in the theoretical framework, many studies examining adjustment and culture shock use a quantitative approach, for example by the use of surveys. A quantitative method enables the researcher to analyse a large amount of data and to establish cause-effect relationships (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 115 and 120). Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) have applied self-rating surveys to examine adjustment. However, surveys could lead to superficial data, because in order to be understood by everyone, the questions cannot dive deep into the matter (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 115).

Since the current research tends to explore the experiences of expats to provide in-depth information a qualitative approach is more suitable. According to Dörnyei (2007, p.38) the purpose of qualitative research is “(...) to explore the participants’ view of the situation being studied”. He says that the focus lies on opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals. Researchers try to view a phenomenon from an insider’s perspective: the perspective of their participants (p. 38). The way this is done is by applying an inductive approach to the analysis. This approach begins with observations that could lead to the finding of patterns and regularities. These patterns eventually could develop general theories (Trochim, 2006). This means there are no fixed categories to begin with, so the topic can be explored in its entirety. A major advantage of an inductive approach is that it does not limit or predetermine the course the research might take (Trochim, 2006).

Interviews are an appropriate method for this inductive approach. They provide descriptive data of the life of the participant (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 134). The most frequently used type of interview is a semi-structured interview, which is guided by a pre-constituted set of questions and prompts about the chosen topics, but gives the possibility to the participant to elaborate on certain issues (p. 136). If noteworthy issues come up, the researcher has the

freedom to ask additional questions. However, it must be mentioned that this method also has some downsides, which are discussed in the concluding paragraph of this chapter.

4.1.2 Procedure

The interview questions are based on the previously discussed literature and can be sub-divided into several topics: culture shock, psychological adjustment, sociocultural adjustment, work-factors influencing adjustment, situational factors, individual skills or competences and multiculturalism or expat culture. The questions were adjusted after a pilot interview with a non-Dutch man who has been living in the Netherlands for over a year. All interviews took place face-to-face in an informal setting, either at the office of the interviewee or in a quiet coffee bar. It was explicitly emphasized the interviews would be dealt with anonymously and would be recorded in order to be typed out afterwards. The interviews took around an hour and all topics were addressed (see table 3 in the attachments section).

As an introduction, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and explained the purpose of the interview, namely to learn about the experience of expats in the Netherlands. She emphasized that the interviewees could share any stories with her. She explained the interview would be guided by a set of questions and topics, but that there was enough room for elaboration on any aspect. Moreover, the researcher made clear that she was there in the role of a neutral researcher, not as a member of the Dutch culture, so the participants were asked to be honest and not to be afraid to insult the researcher in any way. After this explanation the researcher asked for some relevant personal information (age, nationality, expat experience, etc.) and began the interview.

4.1.3 Topic list

The interview questions (see table 3 in the attachments) attempted to provide insight into several topics: multiculturalism, expat culture, culture shock as a learning process, adjustment, situational and work factors, previous expat experience and intercultural competences. The constructed questions investigated these topics. Because the interviews were semi-structured, there was room for ‘probe’ questions and extra elaboration and not all questions were literally asked and addressed in this order.

4.2 Description of participants

Eight expats were found through personal connections of the researcher. Seven participants used to take Dutch lessons at the language school where the researcher works and one is the husband of one of the students of the researcher. The participants were selected based on a number of criteria. First of all, the reason they have moved to the Netherlands is for work. People that moved for a relationship with a Dutch person were excluded, because they could have been influenced by their partners in how they experience the Dutch culture and their transition. The second criterion was that the expats were either sent on an overseas assignment by their company, applied for a position abroad within the company or were offered a job at a new company (but in the same industry) in the Netherlands. This criterion is important to diminish the differences in organisational cultures when they moved. Thirdly, preferably they have worked as an expat in another country or countries before, although this was not a necessity. And finally, the participants must have lived in the Netherlands for a minimum of three months, in order to have experienced daily life for at least a short period. Furthermore, they should not have Dutch relatives or spouses before arriving here. All participants met the criteria. In table 1 relevant information about the expats is presented.

Table 1. Participant information

	Nationality	Gender	Age	Previous experience	Time in the Netherlands	Moved with family	Transfer within same company	Dutch or expat colleagues
P1	Indian	Male	34	No	5 years	Yes, wife	Yes	Both
P2	South-African	Female	31	Yes	3 months	No	Yes	Mainly Dutch
P3	Italian	Female	29	Yes	6 months	No	No, but same function	Both
P4	Indian	Male	45	Yes	5 months	No	No, before yes	Mainly expats
P5	Australian	Female	25	Yes	5 months	No	Yes	Mainly Dutch
P6	Portuguese	Male	44	Only short projects	5,5 years	Yes, wife and children	Yes	Both
P7	Turkish	Male	29	No, but has lived abroad	1,5 years	Yes, wife	Yes	Both
P8	Italian	Male	32	Yes	3,5 years	No	No, but did a project there before	Mainly Dutch

4.3 Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, they were each transcribed in full (see attachments). The analysis of the data already began during the conduction of the interviews. The researcher spent around an hour with each participant talking about their experiences. The processes of interviewing and transcribing allow the researcher to get to know the data thoroughly (Dörnyei, 2007). Even though paralinguistic factors are lost, the researcher remembered the way the participants gave their answers. Nevertheless, the focus of the transcription lies on the verbal content. The transcriptions were analysed by means of qualitative coding (Dörnyei, 2007). Using a qualitative coding program, NVivo, patterns were sought between the comments made in the interviews. The mentioned topics were first given labels describing the topics that were addressed by means of an open and inductive approach: the initial coding phase. Afterwards, in the second-level coding phase the labels were organised in several categories and patterns emerged. The categories were compared and analysed in order to find differences and similarities between the experiences of the expats.

4.4 Validity and trustworthiness

Although interviews have many benefits as a research method, they also have weaknesses, as identified by Dörnyei (2007, p. 41). First of all, it is a time-consuming process which can slow down the investigation. Because of this, there is usually not enough time to interview a large sample. However, the focus of this research lies on individual experiences, not on general shared experiences of expats. The goal is to investigate the field of adjustment in an exploratory way.

Another major limitation has to do with the role of the researcher. Because of the fact that the participants face the interviewer, they could try to present themselves in a better light (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 144). Related to this is the phenomenon of desirability of responses (p. 54), whereby participants try to meet expectations they think the researcher has of them and therefore do not provide accurate and real data. The researcher knows almost all participants due to her work as a Dutch teacher. This might prevent the participants from providing inaccurate information. However, it is also possible that because of this the participants might hold back in their answers, because they are afraid to insult the researcher as a member of the Dutch culture. To prevent this, the researcher has emphasized at the start of the interview to view her as a neutral researcher to whom the participants can say anything they want to share.

Since this research focuses on culture, the cultural embeddedness of the researcher could influence the interpretation of the interviews. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) describe the need of the researcher to decentre from his or her own cultural perspective. Decentring is necessary to overcome the biasing effect of the researcher's own cultural background (p. 269). It is important to take all the different perspectives into account. Because the researcher comes into regular contact with many different people and expats due to her work, she looks at situations from multiple perspectives. In the interpretation of the interviews, the researcher is aware of her own perspective, while at the same time tries to describe the phenomena from a multicultural perspective.

5. Results

In this chapter the results of the analysis of the interviews are presented. The interviews lead to answering the question of how expats experience their transition to the Netherlands and their adjustment process. A great amount of information was required. However different the participants' experiences are, several patterns were found during the coding phase. The significant findings are presented below. Each paragraph is related to a sub-question and discusses several relevant topics. The first paragraph provides information about the cultural identity of the participants and about multiculturalism. The second paragraph explores the influence of previous expat experience on the participants. Besides experience, intercultural competences are relevant in the discussion related to culture shock. The intercultural competences the participants have and have acquired are discussed in the fourth paragraph. The fifth paragraph looks into the adjustment process the participants go through. The last paragraph discusses other difficulties or benefits the participants have. Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the findings.

5.1 Multiculturalism

5.1.1 Mixed cultural identity

Multiculturalism is looked at from a broad perspective and all kinds of cultures are included, besides nationality. When asked how the participants identify themselves and with which cultures, none of them answered that they identify with only one culture. However, most participants do feel a strong connection with their national culture. They, except P5, identify with their own national culture, because this is the place where they grew up, as P4 exemplifies:

“We can travel across the world, but it doesn't matter where you are. Where you are born it influences a lot.”

However, the fact that they relate to their nationality, does not mean they only feel connected to their home country. P8 explains this:

“I think I'm aware of my culture, but that doesn't limit me.”

All participants, except P3 and P7, mention especially their national culture. P3 and P7, however, come from a country where there are big regional differences. It is more suitable to speak of regional cultures than of one national culture. Therefore, they identify also with their regional culture. This finding is in line with the view of Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), who say that culture is not necessarily formed by national borders, but rather that it is associated with social groups.

Besides that, all the participants feel multicultural in some way. Also this is in line with Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009). They say people can be members of multiple groups simultaneously. Besides national culture, also organisational culture and expat culture play a role (see paragraphs 5.1.2 and 5.1.3). The participants are not only shaped by one culture. Intercultural contact and their working experience abroad has led to a multicultural identification, as all of the participants indicate. By meeting different kinds of people, working at companies with different organisational cultures and learning to deal with all those cultures, the participants feel their own cultural identification change and become more multicultural. P4 gives a good example. He finds expats to be global citizens without a firm root to only one place:

“I suppose I call myself a global citizen, because I was born in India, I was there for 25/26 years of my life. And then the next 20 years I've been in Britain. So it's kind of a mixture. I always said to my people and I think myself the same way that the concept of boundaries, especially for skilled people, have completely vanished. We are all economic migrants at some point in time. So we are like the lotus leaf, it doesn't have a root to something firm, it goes wherever the water it takes. So yeah, from that perspective I look at myself as a global citizen, but of course I have very firm roots and values that belong to India.”

According to Dervin (2012) and Dettwyler (2011), culture is changeable and adaptable. The participants show that for them their culture is not fixed, but is influenced and reconstructed due to intercultural contact. Moreover, as was described in the theoretical framework, Kadianaki et al. (2014) found that living in unfamiliar social environments stimulates change and self-reflection. This certainly applies to the participants. P6 and P1 have lived in the Netherlands for several years and find themselves influenced by the Dutch national culture. P1 says:

“I feel now I'm somewhere in between, because it has been five years now. I've moved away from the pure Indian way of working and pure Indian culture, but I'm still not pure Dutch as well. Somewhere in between and moving towards becoming more Dutch.”

As was described in paragraph 3.2.2, an individual's culture is the product of belonging to several cultures (Kaharanna et al., 2006). The multicultural expats have been influenced and shaped by other cultures. It is clear that cultural identification is not limited only to your nationality, although it has a big influence, but it does not restrict the participants.

5.1.2 Organisational culture

Besides speaking of national cultures, organisational cultures influence an individual as well. This paragraph addresses how the organisational cultures of the companies the expats work at are viewed.

All the expats work either in a multinational company or in an international environment. Most have transferred within the same company to the Dutch location (see table 1). However, this does not mean that the organisational culture is the same in all its subsidiaries. Only one that works for the same company says the cultures are similar, which is P6. He says his company promotes a similar culture in all its subsidiaries. Four participants that work for the same company indicate that there are big differences between the locations. The main difference is about the lack of hierarchy, like P5 shows:

“But here it's really close knit. Everyone knows you really really well. You've got professionals and consultants are partners that interact a lot more.”

As was discussed earlier, Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) state that it is harder to adapt to an environment that is strikingly different from what one is used to. Most participants say their current working environment is very different. However, all but one are happy with the environment they work in. For these seven their transition to the Dutch company was a positive change. These results therefore do not support the idea that the more different circumstances are, the harder it is to adapt. The positive differences that are mentioned the most are that, firstly, the organisational cultures in the Netherlands are very informal and that there is no steep hierarchy at their work. Three mention that they have more free time in the Netherlands. They used to have longer working days. Two expats mention that they were happily surprised by the fact that their Dutch colleagues take a genuine interest in them. One less positive aspect of their

organisational cultures is that people separate their professional lives from their personal lives more than they are used to, as two participants mention.

The importance of organisational culture besides national culture is emphasised by four participants. Culture is not only about nationality to them. P1, P4, P6 and P8 say that their own work-related culture is shaped by their experiences abroad. Again this supports Dervin's (2012) view of culture as something changeable. P8 for example has never worked in Italy and therefore finds he doesn't have a strong working culture related to his nationality. They are influenced by the ways organisations are structured and organised, like P4:

“The formative years of mine were in India, but then when I came to the business world, (...) most of it was shaped, 15/20 years were shaped in Britain. So a lot of my habits, my practices, how I behave, how I lead a team, how I conduct my business, pretty much it was shaped by the UK.”

The participants show the essentialist view of culture cannot be directly applied to them. Besides adjusting to a national culture, they have to, to a certain extent, adjust to the new organisational culture as well. P6 says:

“Well in a way you have to adjust, but also working in a company, there's the company culture and the company way of doing things. So they need to adjust to the company way of doing things.”

All the participants say it was necessary to adapt to their organisational culture. Six of them found it difficult in the beginning, but they had expected this. Having realistic expectations is a topic that is addressed in paragraph 5.2. First another type of culture is addressed in the next paragraph, which is expat culture.

5.1.3 Expat community

Beaverstock (2002) describes the occurrence of 'expatriate enclaves', whereby expats surround themselves with fellow expats. They form a kind of separate expat culture. All participants, except P8, mainly turned to other expats in their social life. Partly because it is easier to be friends with people who are on their own as well and partly because other expats understand what they are going through. Especially P6 lives in a bubble, as he calls it. In this community

the main language is English. He also mentions the fact that the other expats provide real support to his and his family when times are hard:

“Well we tried to get some help. We're in this international community, so tried to get some support from other families that went through the same process. So trying to understand if this was normal, how long would it take. And that helped a lot (...).”

Also P4, P7 and P1 say they have a community of expat friends. It seems that these expat communities provide a lot of support to the participants (see 5.4.1). Only one participant, P8, specifically did not want to do this, because he finds it limiting to only stay with expats.

In addition to multiculturalism, there are other relevant factors to discuss in relation with expat experience. The next paragraphs focus on several topics that could influence the experience and adjustment process of expats. Firstly, previous expat experience is discussed.

5.2 Previous expat experience

In order to investigate whether expats experience culture shock or rather a culture learning process, several topics are discussed that could be of influence. Previous expat experience could influence the intensity of culture shock the participants experience.

All of the participants who have previously lived and worked abroad feel their experience helped them in the Netherlands. Previous research also found this (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Church, 1982). Because they have moved before and had to start over, they know that they can do it also this time, like P3 says:

“And then I learnt that I can always start from scratch again.”

What seems to be vital is having realistic expectations. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) state having accurate expectations reduces uncertainty. In the end this improves adjustment, the researchers say. The interviews also indicate this. The participants know that it is going to be difficult, that they will feel alone in the beginning and that they will have to get used to a lot of things, but they are confident in themselves and this consequently eases their transition.

Life as an expat broadened their horizons. The value of travelling is that they get to experience different cultures first-hand. Travelling made them more understanding of different circumstances people live in, as P2 indicates:

“And without travelling I would not always understand the circumstances that people come from. The nature of the countries they live in, the difficulties they have, so it opened my mind to the fact that it's not always just what I think it might be.”

According to Adler (1975) intercultural experience leads to the cherishing of cultural differences and the awareness of how behaviour comes forth from cultural embeddedness. This is in line with the participants' experience. By going through difficult moments related to adjustment and cultural differences, the participants learn and develop cultural awareness.

Developing understanding is related to intercultural skills. The participants all developed their competences in some way because of their experiences abroad. These competences are discussed in the next paragraph.

5.3 Intercultural competences

Intercultural competences are necessary for effective communication and cooperation. The participants were asked how they approach difficult and unfamiliar situations themselves. Specifically, which skills and characteristics help them and do they make use of? Many different things were mentioned. The competences are ordered based on Byram's (1997) classification of intercultural competences in attitudes, knowledge and skills.

5.3.1 Attitudes

According to Byram (1997), attitudes of openness and curiosity are crucial for intercultural speakers. These attitudes are part of intercultural competences and are necessary to have efficient and appropriate communication (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). To do so, it is necessary to be open to different people and situations. All participants seem to be aware of this. Intercultural contact has made them more aware of their own cultural baggage, as P8 illustrates:

“And that different people, they have different solutions for the same problems. And that what you do in your own small country or small city might not be the optimal. So you change the way you look back to where you are from.”

All participants are aware of how their own background influences the way they behave and how this influences other people's behaviours. Living and working abroad showed them that people act in different ways and that their own way is not necessarily the best. Other ways of behaving can also be good. This is related to attitudes of openness and curiosity of Byram (1997), who says there needs to be a willingness to analyse situations from the viewpoint of the other. As was described in the theoretical framework, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) call this 'decentring', which is vital for effective intercultural communication. Five participants mention this competence specifically. They learnt to look at things from different perspectives, like P7 who's talking about his wife:

"She complained a lot, but I was really shocked because I was really calm and I said 'okay look from the other perspective. Would you want to work with yourself if you act like this?' And I think that I learnt this after I came to the Netherlands. It's not something I had before."

Another important attitude related to openness is to not judge people (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Four participants say they stereotype less, judge less quickly or have become more tolerant. Their previous experiences have taught them this.

As well as the importance of having the right attitude for having efficient communication, the participants all seem to realize their own attitude and mindset is very important to their happiness as well. This is not something specifically mentioned by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), who mainly talk about effectiveness. Three participants say their happiness is about their own mindset and motivation. Important is the realization that it all comes down to them. Because they are alone in a new place, they have to dare to go out and meet new people. They have to make the transition work and actively make new friends. Even if this is difficult, they do not give up. P2 is the only one having trouble with this. She feels discouraged to go out and talk to people:

"Yes, so then you tend to either go to places where it's okay to sit on your own. So you tend not to do the fun stuff. Or you end up eating at home or eating at your apartment, cause it's safer."

This shows that if you don't force yourself to try to get into contact with people, you end up feeling very lonely. It is vital to be acceptant of the new situation and to be determined to make it a success. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) mention the importance of being confident in one's abilities for successful adjustment. The results seem to support this.

5.3.2. Knowledge

Knowledge of social groups, cultures and of processes of interaction are crucial skills, according to Byram (1997). Two participants mention that it was important for them to prepare themselves in advance, to get some knowledge about the place they are going to live. This not only eases their transition, it also makes them feel more relaxed. Linked to knowledge is having realistic expectations, which was discussed in paragraph 5.2.1. Being prepared and knowing what to expect made the transition of the participants easier. As was written in the theoretical framework, Church (1982) found that having prior knowledge of the new environment positively influences adjustment. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) found pre-departure training is useful for expats. It is remarkable that only three participants have received cultural training at work. They think it did help them to understand life and culture in the Netherlands better. However, these trainings were given after they arrived. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) did not investigate cultural trainings given at a later stage.

Having knowledge of the Dutch language and communication standards is found to be a plus, although it is not essential. Since most participants were selected via a Dutch language school (except P7), they have had some Dutch lessons. However, most only followed a basic level course. Only two participants were offered Dutch language lessons by their companies. The others were not and had to arrange it themselves, because their managers did not find it necessary, as P6 shows:

“And I remember, so when I came our president was Italian, I remember approaching him and say ‘can I have Dutch classes?’ And he said ‘no, because you don't need it. You know this guy here, that was an English, he lives here for ten years and he doesn't speak one single word of Dutch. So you also don't need it.’”

All the participants say speaking Dutch is not necessary to live well in the Netherlands. They can manage with only speaking English. They feel like it is easy to approach and communicate with Dutch people, because most Dutch people speak English. However, for most it can be quite stressful to not understand Dutch, because their official documents and letters are written in Dutch. Two participants especially felt stressed because of this, as P4 illustrates:

“I say ‘why can't you write it to me in English? You know I'm an expat. You have me as an expat.’ ‘No we don't have that in the system, we are working on English etc.’ Those things stresses me out big time.”

Six participants find it to be a barrier if you cannot understand the language. Especially P2 has a hard time because of the language. At her office the main language is Dutch and she feels people do not adjust to her. Even though she works in a multinational company, she is the only expat in her team. She feels stressed and pressured. The other expats do not experience this as such, because at their work the main language is English. Most have other expats in their team, but even those who work mainly with Dutch people feel accommodated because they speak English to them.

Even though Dutch is not necessary in most daily situations, five participants do advise other expats to learn Dutch. P5, P6 and P8 say that is the only way to get into close contact with local people and to fully experience life in the Netherlands. To illustrate, P6 says:

“And then you miss the interaction with the locals. So if you don't understand everything of what they're saying, you're missing a part of the local culture and how things happen. So and that part, I know I don't have the same relationship with my neighbours as if I would be speaking Dutch. For me this is the main thing that I'm missing.”

Learning the language is important for integration. It helps with understanding daily situations better.

5.3.3. Skills

The third type of competences is related to skills. Four participants say daring to ask for help is an important skill they have. The participants who do not shy from asking people for help, seem to have less problems related to communication. This competence is linked to the skills of discovering and interacting (Byram, 1997). Half of the participants say they are social people or extravert. This helps them with getting in contact with people, which five of them mention.

Besides asking, listening is also important. Two participants mention they are good at listening to other people. Six participants say they try look at situations from both perspectives and try to understand it, which matches the skills of interpreting and relating (Byram, 1997). P6 gives an example:

“Well, I try to understand the situation. Analyse it and decide on the best way to deal with it. But there's not a structured approach for it. So I try not to react immediately and think first about this new situation, see it in different angles and then decide on how to approach it.”

Another crucial skill is related to adaptability. This is one of the criteria of Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) for the intercultural communicator. Most participants say they are good at adapting to new situations. For instance, P1 and P7 adjusted the way they speak to become more understandable and to prevent miscommunication. Three say they are very flexible and they are happy with this skill, like P4:

“I’m very flexible, that’s something which I’m very proud of. You put me, I tell my friends and family, you put me anywhere in the world, I can survive.”

Intercultural skills are essential for expats. P8 emphasizes that is partly why he was hired in the first place. He says cultural differences can never be an excuse not to work together. Dealing with cultures and the consequences of intercultural contact is part of the job of an expat. Five participants specifically mention that they are aware of cultural differences. They take into account who they are working with and adjust their working style. Cultural awareness and adaptability are amongst the intercultural competences Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) discuss. If an expat is not successful in creating common ground, misunderstandings may happen. As was mentioned before, Black and Gregersen (1999) found that if expats are not selected based on their intercultural skills, their assignments may fail. The participants of the current research are aware of and confident in their intercultural skills. P4 says it is their challenge to work with different people and to make them work with you, however he seems confident in himself:

“That’s extremely important, so understanding business is one side, you’ve got to deliver on the other side. The challenge is not for you to understand but for them to understand you.”

The factors discussed in this and the subsequent paragraphs all seem to influence the adjustment process of the participants. The way they experienced this and a possible culture shock is discussed in the next paragraph.

5.4 Adjustment and culture shock

Despite the experience, skills and preparation of the participants, six of them acknowledge that the first period in the Netherlands was difficult. Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) found adjustment problems related to wellbeing and social skills were

the highest during the initial period abroad. Even though their model cannot be applied directly to this research because of their essentialist view of culture, their finding is in line with the current results. This paragraph looks at how the two types of adjustment of Ward and colleagues can be applied to the participants.

5.4.1 Psychological adjustment

The participants were often alone in the beginning and had to get used to the new life and work conditions. Four participants indicated they felt stressed in the first period. P2 is still experiencing many difficulties related to language issues and unaccommodating colleagues. She feels quite alone and this affects her wellbeing. Only P6 and P5 didn't experience difficulties and felt very happy to be here. Also P4, although he had some trouble, was very excited since the start.

P8 mentions the importance of finding hobbies. Spending your free time well is necessary to feel at home in a new place. P1 also mentions the fulfilling feeling of having free time. This is in line with the suggestion of Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) that replacing hobbies with similar activities in the new environment improves adjustment.

Three participants are married and one also has children. Their families transferred to the Netherlands a couple of months after them. P8 now has a Dutch wife. All of them say their families provide a lot of support. The fact that they have somebody to talk to and to come home to helps them a lot. P6's daughter went through a difficult period. He indicated he felt guilty he brought his family. It is possible that if his daughter did not improve he would have shortened their stay. Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2005) say this is one of the main reasons expats return home early.

The wellbeing of their families also influences their own wellbeing. However, it did not influence their sociocultural adjustment or culture learning process. For instance, P6 and P7 both say their adjustment process goes well, even though their wives had more trouble. P7 does emotionally feel better since she is here. Church (1982) and Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) found a positive relationship between adjustment of the family and of the expatriate. The results suggest family adjustment influences the psychological adjustment more than sociocultural adjustment.

According to P1 and P7, having someone around to talk to is a great relief. P1 says it is very comfortable to come home and be able to share his experiences. This is related to one of the factors that help with adjustment, according to Mendenhall and Oddou (1985), namely stress reduction: having a place to unwind functions as a support system.

Besides family, also friends and expat communities contribute to the wellbeing of the participants. As was pointed out in paragraph 5.1.3, P6 receives support from his expat community when he or his family has problems. Five of the participants say they felt alone in the beginning and found it difficult to make friends. Once they started to have a richer social life, they felt happier. Without friends, they seem to feel more lonely and unstable, like P2.

5.4.2 Sociocultural adjustment

Sociocultural adjustment is related to social skills and behaviour ((Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). P1 indicates he had trouble with adjusting in the beginning:

“Initially, when I landed yes. The first month was like, o my god I have to solve all the puzzles.”

The rest of the participants had some difficulties, but learnt to deal with them and are not affected by them greatly. For them the difficult period did not last long, because they say they were fast with learning how to deal with new things. Especially because they are motivated to learn, even if it is hard, and accept the different conditions, this helps their adjustment, like P1:

“I was like in a state that I had to learn everything here, I have to get used to these things. So I was like, let's learn, let's learn.”

This motivation seems to be essential for the adjustment process. Motivation is not something that Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) have taken into account.

Three participants explicitly mention they changed their own way of behaving. P7 and P1 for instance adjusted their way of communicating. P7 and P1 learnt to explicitly say ‘no’ when they mean no, which they didn’t do in at their companies in Turkey and India, like P1 shows:

“First I started a bit like that, a very new guy, in a different land, so confused, saying yes to everything. But then I realized that's not the way people here like it, so if I have to say no, I have to say no!”

Making friends is one of the most important things for adjustment and wellbeing the participants say. Related to sociocultural adjustment, Dutch friends are found to be an important influence.

P8, P3 and P5 say that their Dutch friends (or spouse) provide guidance and advise them on things they are not sure of.

Besides friends, for five participants Dutch colleagues also provide support and guidance in terms of cultural behaviour. All the participants have Dutch colleagues and most participants have become friends with their Dutch colleagues. They say they can ask their colleagues when they do not understand something and they get advice. This also applies to the expat communities. Especially expats who have been in the Netherlands for longer advise the participants on how to act and how to get around.

5.4.3 Overall adjustment and culture shock

Especially one participant struggles a lot in terms of both types of adjustment. P2 feels a bit unwelcome, because the people around her and at work do not accommodate her. Besides that, she is aware of certain cultural differences like directness, but is still offended if a colleague is very direct to her. She feels stressed and has not yet learnt how to manage in the new environment. However, P2 has been living in the Netherlands for only three months, so it is possible she will still learn to deal with these problems. She does say she feels like it is getting better over time.

For most it is natural that there are differences and they therefore do not consider this as particularly difficult. Three participants emphasize that it is not necessarily adjusting to the national culture, but also to the organisational culture (see 5.1.2). Ward and colleagues look only at national cultures in their research. However, four participants say their adjustment is not necessarily related to culture, but that it is like adjusting to any kind of new situation, for instance P6 says:

“You know, it's like everything else. Sometimes it's stressful, but like adjusting to neighbours in your own country is the same.”

Still, not all participants found their overall transition difficult. For four participants the transition felt really easy. P5 did not experience any difficulties and was only positively surprised. Even though most expats will likely experience some difficulties, it is therefore not a given that adjustment problems occur.

The next paragraph addresses some noteworthy aspects that were initially not planned to be discussed, but were nevertheless found to be important factors.

5.5 Other difficulties or benefits

Besides the topics addressed above, some other significant factors were mentioned that influence the experiences the participants have. The most-mentioned factors are related to housing and racism.

5.5.1 Housing

Most companies have helped the participants to find living accommodation. It was a huge stress relief for those who got help with housing. Six of the expats specifically mention this, although it could be that the other two also received help, since this topic was not addressed in their interviews. The companies arranged hotels for the participants to stay at in the beginning until they had found a house and some (at least for P7 and P8) also paid the rent of a house temporarily. P2 and P3 had to find their own place to live and experienced a lot of difficulties and stress, like P3 says:

“If you take just renting a house here or an apartment, that was extremely stressful. Because the demand for apartments or for accommodation is so ridiculous (...).”

It appears that having suitable living accommodation right away reduces stress.

5.5.2 Ethnicity and racism

The topic of ethnicity was not initially planned to be discussed. However, two participants shared their experience about it. P1 and P2 are very aware of their skin colour in the Netherlands. P2 says that especially now in Europe she is worried that people relate her to terrorism:

“So I don't think I necessarily have to be, but I'm probably more conscious of the colour of my skin against where I travel to. Because then I have to worry, do people think that I look like a certain culture. (...) In Europe you feel it. And especially when there are any kind of terrorist activities you feel it a lot more. So you don't know whether people are staring at you strangely. If you're in a restaurant, it's silly things, if you're in a restaurant with a backpack, when you get out to go order coffee and then you have to worry.”

Also P1 is aware of racism. When other people commit crimes in the Netherlands and they happen to have a dark skin, he feels judged as well. He therefore wishes that expats and immigrants behave themselves well, so that they do not cast a shadow over the entire group. These two issues were the most remarkable difficulties the participants experience.

To sum up, the above and previously discussed topics all have an impact on the experience of the participants. As can be seen, there seem to be many factors influencing the experience and adjustment process of expats. The next chapter summarizes the findings and gives an answer to the research questions.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences expats have in the Netherlands. By qualitatively analysing the interviews conducted with eight participants, several relevant topics were investigated. This chapter summarizes the findings and presents the answers to the sub-questions and the main research question: how do expats experience the transition to the Netherlands and their adjustment process?

1. To what extent does multiculturalism or expat culture influence their transition?

The first topic is multiculturalism and how this influences the participants in their transition to the Netherlands. All the participants identify themselves with multiple cultures. Their national or regional culture plays a big role, but it does not form a barrier for them when interacting with people from other nationalities. Actually, their working and living experience abroad has made them more aware of their own culture and of differences between cultures. They have been influenced by multiple cultures, which led all of them to feel multicultural. To them, culture can be shaped and changed, which resembles Dervin's (2012) view of culture.

In addition, it has become clear that not only their national culture plays a role. The organisational cultures present at their offices and previous working locations also influence them. They have to adapt to this culture besides the Dutch national culture. Several participants indicated they are aware of the distinction between organisational culture and national/regional culture.

Besides, some participants also speak of an expat community or bubble. Not everyone experiences this in the same intensity, but especially P6 lives in an expat community where the main language is English and everyone is from different nationalities. For most participants, their expat friends influence their lives by offering support and understanding of the situation the participants go through. This has a positive influence on the experience of the participants.

Hence, it can be said that their individual culture is the result of belonging to multiple cultures (Kaharanna et al., 2006). These findings support the notion of culture as something dynamic, fluid and interactive (Dervin, 2012; Dettwyler, 2011) as opposed to the essentialist view which says people only belong to one culture (Holliday, Hyde and Kullman, 2010). It can be said that for expats, multiculturalism has a positive influence on their transitions, because they are more open to and understanding of different cultures.

2. To what extent does previous expat experience influence their transition?

The previous expat experiences of the participants have opened their minds to different ways of living and behaving. All the participants with previous experience feel like this certainly helped them with their current transition, mainly because they know what to expect and how to deal with difficulties. They have become experienced in adapting and getting used to new situations. What plays a big role is having realistic expectations. Even if they experience difficulties, the fact that they had expected these and they feel confident in managing these problems, leads to most not being affected by them greatly. Previous research has found similar results (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Church, 1982).

Furthermore, they have developed intercultural competences partly due to their experiences. Intercultural competences are acquired as a result of experience with intercultural contact. The factors previous expat experience and intercultural competences therefore overlap to a certain extent. The influence of intercultural competences on the transition of the participants is discussed in the next paragraph.

3. To what extent do intercultural competences influence their transition?

Intercultural contact has made the participants aware of both their own cultural embeddedness and that of others. Cultural awareness is one important competence they all seem to have. Besides, they are open to other cultures and are willing to look at situations from multiple perspectives. Adaptability is another important competence, as the analysis showed. Most participants consider themselves flexible or good at adapting. This helps them in their daily work activities. Again, knowing what to expect and having prior knowledge also appears to be beneficial. Besides skills, being confident and motivated to make the period abroad work is of great influence. This helps them to settle faster.

The biggest issue related to competences has to do with the Dutch language. Although the participants emphasize that speaking Dutch is not necessary to be able to live in the Netherlands, because most people speak English, they do say it is necessary if you want to get to fully experience the local life. Some participants feel particularly stressed because of understanding problems. This shows that language skills are of greater importance than the participants might have thought at first.

All in all, the intercultural competences that the participants have developed certainly ease their transition, for daily situations, but also at work. They work in a multicultural environment, so these competences are fundamental. Despite having intercultural skills, the

participants do experience some problems related to adjustment, as the next paragraph summarises.

4. To what extent do they encounter adjustment problems?

Even though the participants have experience with intercultural contact and have intercultural competences, they do go through an initial difficult period. Related to psychological adjustment, which is associated with emotional wellbeing, the majority felt alone and some a bit stressed when they first moved here. However, most got used to the new situation quickly. Having family, friends or an expat community contributes to their wellbeing. There is one participant who is the exception to this, she experiences more feelings of stress and anxiety. However, she has not made many friends yet and has been in the Netherlands only for three months. She also experiences housing problems and is conscious of racism. This all together might explain her negative experience.

In terms of sociocultural adjustment, the expats experienced some difficulties related to behaviour. Some changed aspects of their behaviour to prevent misunderstandings. Their Dutch friends and colleagues help them by explaining new situations and by offering support. Also, being motivated to learn eases their adjustment greatly.

The results show that adjustment is not necessarily related to national culture. The participants also had to adjust in some degree to their organisational culture. Whether they have experienced their transition as a learning process is discussed next.

5. To what extent do they experience their transition as a learning process?

When looking at the traditional theory of culture shock of Oberg (1960), it seems not to fit the experiences of the participants completely. In the beginning they do experience difficulties and it was hard for some to get used to certain differences. However, because they expected this and because they had the right attitude and motivation, they quickly learnt to deal with these situations. Therefore, a so-called 'shock' does not seem a suitable term. It appears that the most significant influencers of culture shock are previous experience and intercultural competences. All the participants have learnt how to deal with different people and different work cultures, mainly because of their work in a multicultural environment. Motivation and realistic expectations seem to be essential for the adjustment process. This appears to significantly reduce a potential shock. By knowing what to expect, being motivated to learn and by having developed the right competences to tackle possible problems, the shock they could have felt,

was not there as such. In sum, to regard expat transition as a learning process seems to be more fitting.

How do expats experience the transition to the Netherlands and their adjustment process?

The experience of the transition to the Netherlands overall is a positive one. The participants' expat experience, mixed cultural identity, cultural awareness, intercultural competences and social network support positively contribute to their transition. They still experience difficulties related to adjustment, however they deal with them quickly and do not let them stand in their way. The results have shown that expat transitions can be seen as a culture learning process, rather than as a culture shock.

7. Discussion

7.1 Implications

This research has contributed to the field of intercultural communication by providing more insight into expats' experience of culture, culture shock and adjustment. The results suggest that the essentialist view of culture does not seem applicable to intercultural research. Today's world is not so strongly divided by national boundaries anymore, especially for skilled expats who travel around the world to offer their knowledge and skills to international companies. The traditional psychological models focus a lot on the importance of nationality. For instance, Oberg (1960) and Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) take having a different nationality as a starting point to analyse culture shock and adjustment. However, this research has shown that nationality is not so decisive. Adjustment is not limited to nationality. Other types of culture also play a role, like expat and organisational cultures. Therefore, the essentialist models cannot be used directly to analyse the adjustment and experiences of expats. Instead, this research provides support for Dervin's (2012) view of culture as plural, changing and dynamic. The field of psychology, which uses models like Ward's, is advised to take these insights into account. The results are also useful for intercultural training centres for expats to provide trainings which better match the experiences and perspectives of expats.

Moreover, previous models that describe culture shock and adjustment tend to generalize to all sojourners and locations. However, this research has shown that a big part is determined by the personal situation of the sojourner or expat. Many factors play a role. Where an expat is sent, does influence his or her adjustment process. For instance, language skills are shown to have a big impact. When an expat experiences stress and confusion due to problems with the language, this greatly influences their wellbeing and adaptation. If an expat is sent to a place where they do speak the local language, less adjustment problems will most likely be experienced. Therefore, one cannot speak of a model that can directly be applied to all situations. Many personal and situational factors must be considered.

7.2 Shortcomings and recommendations

Many studies referred to in this thesis use a traditional view of culture, that is seeing culture mainly as national culture. Because the field of intercultural communication has fairly recently developed new ideas about culture, like Dervin (2012), there is not yet a great amount of studies

on adjustment which make use of the broader sense of culture. Therefore, the current research had to rely on studies that do not share the same view of culture. More research into adjustment which uses the modern approach of culture is required, in order to better investigate expat experiences. Personal and situational factors must be included and besides nationality other cultures must be taken into account. Therefore, additional exploratory qualitative research is required to find out more about these factors. In depth-interviews with a large sample of expats about culture and adjustment could lead to new and relevant information.

A major limitation related to the topic of culture has to do with the perspectives of the participants. During the interviews the definition of culture as something plural and dynamic (Dervin, 2012) was not explained to the participants. It was chosen not to give details about the theories and terms to prevent the researcher from influencing the answers the participants would give. However, when the participants were asked about their cultural identity, many automatically referred to their nationality. An explanation for this could be that the general view of culture is still mainly related to nationality. This could have limited their interpretation of the questions and consequently could have influenced their answers. If a similar study would be carried out in the future, it is advised to clearly define what is meant by culture in order to obtain rich and full descriptions of the participants' views.

Furthermore, this research focussed on one particular group. It would be interesting to investigate whether other groups of sojourners have similar experiences or not. Expats have a lot of intercultural experience and their multicultural identity appear to be of great influence. The question is whether other groups of travellers (immigrants, sojourners, international students, etc.) have similar experiences and whether they go through a comparable culture learning process or not.

In addition, some shortcomings of this research have to do with the nature of qualitative research. Since the method of interviewing, transcribing and coding is a time-consuming one, it was not possible to interview a bigger sample of expats. The results did show some common patterns, although there were also many differences between the participants. To get a clearer picture, it is advised to use a bigger sample for future research into expat experiences.

Another weakness of qualitative research is related to its interpretive nature. The researcher has formulated the questions of the interviews herself, although they were based on the discussed theory. The questions were evaluated by a non-Dutch test person living in the Netherlands. However, they were not quantitatively tested on validity and trustworthiness. The analysing of the results depended on the interpretations made by the researcher. The researcher therefore had a substantial influence. To reduce this influence, as was mentioned in paragraph

4.4, the researcher has attempted to decentre from her own cultural perspective while analysing the interviews to take into account the diverse perspectives of the participants.

Finally, it is also possible that by the way the questions were formulated, the participants could have been steered in a certain direction. This could have influenced the way they answered the questions. In an attempt to prevent this, many follow-up and probe questions were asked so the participants could expand on their answers.

Despite these limitations, the current research has shed light on expat life related to culture and adjustment. It has provided insights into the experiences of expats' transition to and life in the Netherlands. Finally, this thesis has contributed to research into the notion of culture and intercultural contact.

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Attachments

1. Topic list interviews

In table 2 the topics investigated are listed, they are given a number which the interview questions in table 3 relate to.

Table 2. Research topics

Topics	Given number
Culture shock as a learning process	1
Psychological adjustment/wellbeing	2
Sociocultural adjustment	3
Work-factors	4
Situational factors	5
Intercultural competences	6
Previous experience	7
Multiculturalism/expat culture	8

Table 3. Interview questions related to topics

Icebreaking/ introduction questions	Related to topic
Where are you from?	
How old are you?	
How long have you lived in the Netherlands?	
What kind of job do you have? In which industry do you work?	
Were you sent on a foreign assignment by your company or did you apply to a new organisation?	
Have you had previous expat assignments? In which countries and in which working branch?	4, 7
Did your family move with you?	5
Multiculturalism	
How do you identify yourself? With a specific culture or not?	8
Are you aware of your cultural identity?	6, 8
Do you feel multicultural? Because of previous experience or contact with expats?	8
Has the travelling changed you as a human being? Has it changed how you view yourself? Personal growth?	8, 1, 7, 6
What did you learn from living abroad?	8, 1, 7, 6
Culture shock as a learning process	
What do you find difficult to get used to?	1

Did you experience situations that were new to you? Did it shock you? How did you react?	1
Have you found a way to deal with these situations?	1, 6
Feelings	
Can you describe what you felt when you just moved here?	1, 2
Has your emotional state changed over time since being here?	1, 2
Do you feel satisfied with the way life goes here? Has this changed?	1, 2
Do you find it stressful to adjust? How do you try to adjust yourself?	1, 2, 6
Social	
Do you feel like you fit in?	3
Do you know how you are expected to behave? At work and in informal situations? Or do the Dutch standards confuse you?	1, 3
Do you find it easy to communicate with Dutch people? Does it sometimes discourage you? Do you keep trying to make contact?	3, 6
Have you established close relationships with Dutch people? How do they influence your stay here? Do they guide you through the culture?	3, 6
Do you interact more with Dutch people, people from your own country, or other expats?	3, 6, 8
If so: do you feel like the other expats influence your adjustment? Do they help you or prevent adjusting? Do you recognize an 'expat cluster'?	8
Work factors	
Do you work or live with people from different backgrounds?	8
Can you describe the working environment at your company? What kind of organisational culture is it?	8
Is the organisational culture similar to where you previously worked in other countries?	8
Have you received predeparture training at your company? Or current training? Has this influenced your stay here?	1, 4
If relevant: do you feel like your previous experience abroad has helped you cope here? Did it influence your expectations?	1, 4, 7, 8
Family	
If family moved: How well are they doing here? Does their adjustment and satisfaction influence you?	2, 3, 5

Individual skills	
Do you speak Dutch? Do your language skills help you to cope? Do you feel confident in your language skills?	3, 6
How do you approach unfamiliar situations and different people?	6
Do you generally find it easy to adapt to new situations?	6
Which skills or characteristics have helped you to adjust?	6
Did you have knowledge of the Dutch culture before coming here?	6
Concluding	
Overall, are you happy with the choice to move here?	2
What would you recommend to other expats?	
What has helped you the most to make life as an expat easier?	

2. Transcriptions interviews

To respect the participants anonymity, the transcriptions of the interviews are not included in this thesis. For research purposes the transcriptions can be requested at the author or at dr. Roos Beerkens.