

“I’m not sure how she will react”: Predictability moderates the influence of positive contact experiences on intentions to interact with a host community member.

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### Abstract

The present research examines the role of positive contact with a host family for exchange students in intercultural encounters. We assumed that positive contact with a host family can facilitate the willingness to interact with unknown host community members in the new cultural environment and that this impact is moderated by the predictability of the unknown host community members' behavior. In detail, we hypothesized that the importance of positive contact experience increases when the predictability of a possible interaction partner decreases. In a study with Swiss exchange students, we measured contact with the host family and the willingness to interact with an unknown host community member. The predictability of the behavior of the unknown host community member was manipulated (high vs. low). As predicted, positive contact with the host family predicted the intention to meet an unknown host community member in the condition with a poorly predictable host community member, but not in the condition with a well predictable host community member.

*Key words:* positive contact, predictability, intercultural interaction, uncertainty management

## Intercultural Contact under Uncertainty: The Role of Predictability in the Influence of Contact Experiences on Intentions to Interact with an Unknown Host Community Member

Imagine an exchange student who is studying abroad in a new country and an unknown culture. There are many different ways to experience such a stay. The student, for example, can build new relationships with people from the host culture and participate strongly in the life of the new culture. It is also possible that a student is less interested in building relationships with unknown people, but focuses more on the relationship with friends from the own culture at home during the stay. The situation in another country is full of possibilities for new experiences and unknown situations. Will he or she take opportunities to interact with an unknown host community member? Will positive contact with host community members influence the intention to meet an unknown host member? Does the predictability of the behavior of an unknown person influences these decisions?

In the present paper, we analyzed the role of positive contact experiences with the host family for an exchange students' intention to meet a member from an unknown culture in a poorly predictable situation. We assume that positive contact experiences with the host family could provide exchange students with a promising starting point that facilitates further contact in particular when the exchange students have difficulties to assess the behavior of their possible interaction partner. We tested our assumptions in a real life context with exchange students who were asked to indicate their willingness to engage in contact with a host community member. We varied the degree to which the exchange students experienced the possible interaction partner as predictable.

### **1 Theoretical Background**

There are many different reasons why people leave their homeland to live in another country. For example, some flee out of fear of violence, others go abroad to work or study for a period of time, and still others travel to discover foreign cultures (cf. Van Oudenhoven & Hofstra,

2006). In this paper, we focus on exchange students who visit a new country for a limited time to study, and who live in a host family during their stay. Exchange students may experience a high level of uncertainty in their host country because they encounter new problems and because they cannot rely on their usual sources of informational and emotional support (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010).

Like any kind of acculturation experience, visits of limited duration can have different outcomes already during an early stage of acculturation. The exchange students might, for instance, experience excellent contact with the host family and a regular and vivid exchange with members from the host country. But they might also spend most of their time in isolation and have trouble getting in touch with members from the host country. An important question concerns the consequences of such good or bad early contact experiences. One basic assumption of this paper is that intensive positive contact during an early phase of the stay in a new country is a good base for further contact with other host community members, in particular, if such other host community members are difficult to assess. Approaching host community members and establishing contact with them in the country of visit is a challenging task for exchange students. We assume that the experience of positive contact with the host family helps exchange students to manage the resulting uncertainty (Gudykunst, 2005).

Numerous studies on intergroup contact have shown that positive contact can reduce prejudice (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 2008; Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Important mediators that have been identified are the enhancement of knowledge about the outgroup, the reduction of anxiety and the increase of empathy and perspective taking (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). A further stream of research originated from attachment theory supports the notion that individual contact can serve as source of security that facilitates the exploration of the environment and reduces negative reactions to strangers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). This research shows that personal relations across the whole lifespan

have an important influence on the openness for contact with other individuals (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Mikulincer and Shaver (2001, Study 3), for example, asked participants to think about a person who accepts and loves them, or, in a control condition, to think about a person who lives in the neighborhood, but does not know them. Participants then indicated how threatened they felt by Russian immigrants. They found that participants rated the Russian immigrants more positively when they thought about a person who accepts and loves them compared to the control condition.

The above review of the literature indicates that positive relations with other individuals are a good starting point for the establishment of further contact. One aspect of such positive relationships that may particularly contribute to this importance of positive relationships is that they provide adjustment-facilitating informational and emotional support (Farh et al., 2010). For exchange students who live in a host family during their stay, the host family may provide such adjustment-facilitating informational and emotional support. Positive relations with the host family may help exchange students to experience the security that is needed to cope with the challenges of establishing additional contacts in the host country, and to develop schemas to assess other individuals and forecast the outcome of contact with other individuals in the context of the host culture. Furthermore, positive contact with host family members might represent an opportunity to gain more knowledge about how to act in the new culture and provides the possibility to ask questions about situations that are difficult to interpret. However, even if the contact to the host family is at least to some degree inevitable, the quality of contact with the host family may vary considerably and is not intensive and positive in any case. Therefore, we suppose that the positivity of contact with the host family shapes the openness for contact with other host community members, in particular. In detail, we propose that if the relationship with the host family has a good quality, the willingness to explore the environment and get to know new people from an unknown cultural group should be higher than if the relationship with the host family has a lower quality.

Based on Gudykunst's (2005) anxiety and uncertainty management theory, we assume in addition that positive contact with the host family is particularly important when exchange students perceive interaction partners to be unpredictable. In the anxiety and uncertainty management theory, Gudykunst proposed that uncertainty in intercultural encounters leads to avoidance of intercultural contact when individuals feel unable to manage uncertainty. In line with this assumption, Samochowiec and Florack (2010) found that participants in an experimental study were more likely to avoid the interaction with an unpredictable interaction partner when incidental anxiety was induced compared to when it was not induced. Importantly, the incidental anxiety was unrelated to the interaction partner. Interestingly, incidental anxiety had no effect on the avoidance of a potential interaction partner when participants perceived the potential interaction partner as predictable. Accordingly, we assumed that the contact of exchange students with the host family is of greater importance in the case of intercultural contact with an unpredictable interaction partner. The study of Samochowiec and Florack (2010) did not test this assumption. The participants were neither exchange students or immigrants nor were relations to a host family studied.

Because previous research did not study the role of positive contact with host families for the determination of contact with other host community members under conditions of high and low predictability, we tested the following hypotheses in the present study. First, we hypothesized that positive contact with the host family leads to an increased willingness to engage in contact with an unknown host community member. Second, we hypothesized that contact with the host family is a more important predictor of the willingness to engage in contact with an unknown host community member when the unknown host community member is poorly predictable than when he or she is highly predictable. Finally, we expected the predictability of an unknown host community member to influence the willingness to engage in contact with an unknown member from the host community. Higher predictability should lead to a higher willingness to engage in an interaction

with an unknown member of the host community. The main contribution of the present paper is to demonstrate that the contact with host families is of particular importance for uncertain interactions.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a study with Swiss exchange students spending a year in the United States and New Zealand. We measured contact quality with the host family and applied an experimental approach to vary the predictability of the potential interaction partner and test the effects on the willingness to engage in contact with the potential partner.

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

Eighty-six exchange students from several exchange student organizations (62 females, 24 males) participated in the study. Participants were Swiss exchange students in the United States of America (58 females, 21 males) and New Zealand (4 females, 3 males). Participants' age was between 16 and 19 years ( $M = 17.01$ ;  $SD = 0.78$ ). Six cinema gift certificates were drawn among all participants as a reward for participation. At the time of their participation in the study, all participants had been living abroad with a host family and attending a high school for 10 months. Three participants were excluded from the statistical analyses. One participant did not answer the contact items necessary for the regression analyses; two participants were excluded because of double citizenship and therefore greater experience in intercultural encounters than the other participants. The study was conducted online to facilitate participation for the students, who were in different places in the US as well as in New Zealand.

### **2.2 Procedure and Measures**

Participants first answered demographic questions. Then, they were asked questions about their life in the host country and about the quantity and the quality of the contact with their host family and other relevant groups. Next, an unknown host community member was introduced. The host community member was always a same-sex person from the country the participants were visiting. The host community member was male and named John for the male participants, and

female and named Jessie for the female participants. The host community member was described as a regular 17 year-old peer from the host country. A short ambiguous description followed (e.g., the host community member was described as a person who is sometimes very open and extraverted, but who could also be very shy in some situations). After the description, participants were asked to think about how the host community member would react in certain contexts and to select a possible behavior. We used this task to vary the perceived predictability of the host community member using a false-feedback-procedure. Subsequently, participants answered questions relating to appraisal of an interaction with the host community member, the willingness to engage in contact with the host community member, and the perceived predictability of the host community member.

### **2.2.1 Manipulation of Predictability of the Unknown Host Community Member**

We varied the predictability of the host community member with eight scenarios in which participants had to estimate the host community member's behavior by selecting from different alternatives (e.g., "Jessie/John tells you that she/he's got problems with his brother. You offer your help, but she/he declines. Why? a) Her/his pride does not allow her/him to accept your offer. b) She/he says no but means yes. c) She/he does not dare to take your time for this. d) You have to ask three times until she/he accepts."). Participants were randomly assigned to either a condition with a highly predictable host community member or to a condition with a poorly predictable host community member. In the condition with the highly predictable host community member, participants received the feedback that their choices were correct for 75 % of the scenarios. In the condition with the poorly predictable host community member, participants received the feedback that their choices were correct for only 25 % of the scenarios. To ensure that participants did not perceive the success or failure of their prediction as specific to themselves, they also received information about the performance of other participants. In the condition with the highly predictable host community member, participants received the information that most of the other participants had been able to predict the behavior of the host community member well. In the condition with the

poorly predictable host community member, participants received the information that most of the other participants had been poor at predicting the host community member's behavior. There were no correct solutions for the scenarios and the feedback given did not depend on the guesses of participants.

### **2.2.2 Contact with the Host Family and Further Contact**

To assess the frequency of contact with the host family, we asked participants to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = *no time at all*; 7 = *very much time*) how much time they spent with their host family ("How much of your leisure time (e.g., excursions, spending the evenings together, leisure time activities) do you spend with your host family?"). Furthermore, we asked participants to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*) how they liked the time spent together with their host family ("How much do you like spending your time together with your host family?"). We multiplied both item scores to obtain a single indicator of frequent and positive contact (cf. Voci & Hewstone, 2003). We applied this composite measure because research on intergroup relations has shown that the two variables in combination are important predictors of attitudes and behavior (cf. Allport, 1954; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). High values on the composite contact measure indicate frequent positive contact. In the same way, we measured contact with family and friends at home, with Swiss exchange students, and with American students. Also, we computed the same composite measure for all these forms of contact.

### **2.2.3 Willingness to Engage in Contact with the Unknown Host Community Member**

As main dependent measures we assessed the positivity of beliefs about an interaction with the host community member and the behavioral intention to interact with the host community member. We measured the beliefs about the interaction with the host community member with 5 questions ("I could imagine that getting to know John better will be very good"; "I think John is likeable"; "I believe contact with John might be very enriching"; "I believe it would be hard to get along with John"; "If John were to seek contact with me, I would be glad and react to it") and the

behavioral intentions with 2 questions (“I would like to spend an afternoon with John”; “I am interested in a discussion with John”). Participants answered all questions on 9-point scales (1 = *I do not agree at all*; 9 = *I completely agree*). The answers were averaged into single scales for the beliefs about the interaction and the behavioral intention to interact. High values indicate positive beliefs about an interaction and strong behavioral intentions to interact. The item “I believe it would be hard to get along with John” was the only reverse coded item. As it led to lower scale reliabilities it was excluded from further analyses. Cronbach’s alphas were .91 for the appraisal of interaction and .80 for the behavioral intentions. Since the two scales were highly correlated,  $r(83) = .89, p = .001$ , we computed a composite score with all items which we termed the willingness to engage in contact with the host community member. The Cronbach’s alpha for this composite scale of willingness to engage in contact with the host community member was .94.

### **General Openness for Contact and Home Sickness**

We also assessed whether participants were already open for contact at the time they arrived in the host country with one item (reversed: “At the beginning of my stay, I found it difficult to find friends with whom I felt like with my friends at home.”) and feelings of home sickness after arrival with one item (“At the beginning of my stay, I experienced home sickness and missed my friends and family at home”). Both items were answered on a 7-point scale (1 = *I completely disagree*; 7 = *I completely agree*).

#### **2.2.4 Manipulation Check**

To check whether the predictability manipulation affected the perceived predictability of the host community member, participants had to answer two questions (“How good are you at predicting John’s behavior?”; “How good are you at predicting John’s reactions to your own behavior?”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very well*). The scores of the two items were averaged into a single scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .88). High values indicated that participants perceived the host community member as highly predictable.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Manipulation Check

First, we tested whether the different versions of feedback in the multiple choice prediction test affected the perceived predictability of the host community member. As expected, participants perceived the host community member as less predictable when they received the feedback that they had correctly predicted 25 % of the scenarios about the host community member ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ), compared to when they received the feedback that they had correctly predicted 75 % of the scenarios, ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = .77$ ),  $t(83) = 11.43$ ,  $p = .001$ .

#### 3.2 Willingness to Engage in Contact with an Unknown Host Community Member

We hypothesized that contact with the host family predicts willingness to engage in contact with an unknown host community member. Furthermore, we hypothesized that contact with the host family is a more important predictor of the willingness to engage in contact with the unknown host community member when the host community member is poorly predictable than when she or he is highly predictable. To test these assumptions, we computed a multiple regression analysis in which we included the dummy coded predictability manipulation and the contact quality with the host family and the interaction of both variables as predictors, and the willingness to engage in contact as dependent measure. To ease interpretation of the regression weights, we *z*-standardized all continuous predictor variables (cf. Aiken & West, 1991). The regression model significantly predicted the willingness to engage in contact,  $R^2 = .28$ ,  $F(3, 79) = 10.27$ ,  $p = .0001$ . In line with the hypotheses, the main effect of contact with the host family,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(79) = 3.20$ ,  $p = .002$ , and the interaction between the predictability of the host community member and the contact with the host family predicting the willingness to engage in contact were significant,  $\beta = -.20$ ,  $t(79) = -2.07$ ,  $p = .042$ . The results are displayed in Figure 1.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

To examine the effects of the contact with the host family in each condition, we used dummy coding of the experimental conditions (low predictability = 0; high predictability = 1 vs. low predictability = 1; high predictability = 0). This allows the interpretation of the main effects under conditions of low and high predictability, separately (Aiken & West, 1991). In the condition with the poorly predictable host community member, contact with the host family was a good predictor of the appraisal of an interaction with the host community member,  $\beta = .50$ ,  $t(79) = 3.59$ ,  $p = .001$ . The more positive contact with the host community the more positive was the appraisal of an interaction with the host community member. In the condition with a highly predictable host community member, contact with the host family did not significantly predict the appraisal of an interaction with the host community member,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $t(79) = .83$ ,  $p = .409$ . In addition, the main effect of the predictability of the host community member was significant,  $\beta = .39$ ,  $t(79) = 4.03$ ,  $p = .0001$ . Participants indicated a higher willingness to engage in contact with the host community member when the host community member was highly predictable ( $M = 6.98$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) than when he or she was poorly predictable ( $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ).<sup>1</sup>

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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<sup>1</sup> To further strengthen the assumption that the role of contact with the host family is of particular importance, we also assessed indicators for the initial “mindset” of the exchange students with questions according to feelings of homesickness and the ease to find contact. Neither feelings of home sickness,  $r(83) = -.037$ ,  $p = .741$ , nor the ease to find contact immediately after arrival,  $r(83) = -.069$ ,  $p = .536$ , was correlated with the quality of contact with the host family. Also, ease to find contact and feelings of homesickness after arrival were not correlated with the willingness to engage in contact with the unknown host community member (see Table 1 for an overview of the correlations). Thus, the present results cannot be explained by initial difficulties to find contact or feelings of homesickness that shaped the perception of the quality of contact with the home family as well as the readiness to engage in contact with an unknown host community member under conditions of uncertainty.

### 3.3 Effects of Other Forms of Contact

To test whether other forms of contact impact also the willingness to engage in contact with the poorly predictable host community member, we computed regression analyses separately for the contact with Swiss friends and family at home, with Swiss exchange students, and with friends from the host country. In each of the regressions, we included the dummy coded predictability manipulation and the respective contact quality and the interaction of both variables as predictors, and the willingness to engage in contact as dependent measure, all  $R^2 > .28$ ,  $F_s(5, 82) > 6.08$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . Neither for contact with Swiss friends and family at home,  $\beta = -.15$ ,  $t(79) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .146$ , nor for contact with Swiss exchange students,  $\beta = .09$ ,  $t(79) = 0.87$ ,  $p = .389$ , and contact with friends from the host country,  $\beta = .07$ ,  $t(79) = 0.70$ ,  $p = .485$ , the interaction with the predictability of the unknown host community members was significant. A multiple regression in which all forms of contact and all interactions of contact with the predictability were entered simultaneously  $R^2 = .31$ ,  $F(9, 73) = 3.65$ ,  $p = .001$ , yielded only an interaction effect of the contact with host family members with the predictability of the unknown host community member that approaches significance,  $\beta = -.19$ ,  $t(73) = 1.84$ ,  $p = .071$ , as well as the main effect of the predictability of the unknown host community member,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $t(73) = 3.85$ ,  $p = .0001$ , and the main effect of the quality of contact with the host family,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $t(73) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .009$ .

## 4 Discussion

In this article, we argued that host families are an important source for informational and emotional support that provides exchange students with a secure base to face the challenges of intercultural contact with other host community members. We put forward that the importance of host families as a source of informational and emotional support for intercultural contact should be particularly high in contexts in which potential interaction partners seem to be difficult to predict. We hypothesized that, in particular in such cases of uncertainty and more than in cases with low

uncertainty, positive contact with the host family facilitates approach behavior and reduces the likelihood of avoidance of contact. In line with this reasoning, the present study with Swiss exchange students in the USA and New Zealand provided evidence that positive contact with a host family was more strongly correlated with the willingness to interact with an interaction partner when the interaction partner was poorly predictable than when the interaction partner was highly predictable. The more positive the contact with the host family was, the greater the exchange students' willingness to contact the unpredictable interaction partner. Contact with the host family was less important when the potential interaction partner was predictable.

The results of the present study provide support for Gudykunst's anxiety and uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 2005), which proposes that the management of anxiety and uncertainty is a key to approach contexts in which intercultural contact is likely. In support of this theory, a recent laboratory study of Samochowiec and Florack (2010) already found that individuals were more likely to approach uncertain intercultural contact when incidental anxiety was low compared to when it was high. The results of the present study show that the host family facilitates intercultural contact under conditions of uncertainty and suggest that host families can provide a background to manage anxiety in such contexts of uncertainty. However, while the results of the present study show the correlation between positive contact with the host family and the willingness to have contact with a difficult to predict host community member, the results lead to the question what exactly drives this correlation and whether the effect is of causal nature. We assume that positive contact with the host family has two effects that both might contribute to the openness to have contact even under a context of uncertainty: First, we assume that in a positive relation with the host family exchange students receive important information how to communicate and interact with host community members. Hence, exchange students can develop their competence to communicate and interact with host community members. Second, we assume that host families provide individuals with emotional support that might be needed if uncertain interactions lead to an

undesired outcome. The first function of a host family can be regarded as informational support (Farh et al., 2010), and the second function as emotional support that can be provided by interpersonal relations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). Indeed, research has shown that both functions are important facilitators of intercultural contact. Contact reduces prejudice by enhancing knowledge about the outgroup and by reducing anxiety about the outgroup (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). As Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst (1999) propose, people are likely to perceive an outgroup as threatening when they know very little about the outgroup, underlining the importance of informational support. Mikulincer and Shaver (2001) have shown that primes of emotional support reduce the experienced threat in intercultural relations, a result highlighting the role of emotional support.

Main strengths of the current research are that a) the research was conducted with exchange students who experienced the contact with the host families and b) that we applied an experimental approach for studying the difference between the willingness to have contact with a predictable or unpredictable interaction partner. Moreover, the experimental variation of the potential interaction partner was established in a context where real contact with the interaction partner was conceivable and felt as a real possibility by participants. The conduction of the study in a real context shows that the predicted correlations appear in such a context and are not tight to scenarios or lab studies. The experimental variation of the predictability of the interaction partner served the goal to rule out that the observed results can be explained by variables that affect the perception of the host family and the assessment of the predictability of the potential interaction partner similarly (e.g., general difficulties to find contact).

While the conduction of the study in a real context was important to us, it implied also that, because of ethical and practical reasons, we could not assign participants to families where positive or negative contact was likely. Hence, we finally cannot state a causal influence of the contact with the host family on the willingness to have contact with the host community member under

conditions of uncertainty. We cannot rule out, for instance, that exchange students who evaluated the contact with host family negatively already differed in their personality traits such as sensation seeking (Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993) prior to their stay abroad. Also, differences as regards other traits that have been shown to be important in multicultural encounters such as social initiative or open mindedness (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven 2000; van Oudenhoven & van der Zee, 2002) may impact the quality of contact in the host family as well as the desire for contact with other host community members. Hence, even if it is unlikely that personality traits alone are responsible for the differential evaluation of host families, future studies might take the problems of a correlational cross-sectional design into account, and (if a pure experimental design is not possible) to apply a longitudinal design with points of measurement before participants arrive in the new culture. The results should also be replicated in a larger sample in different cultural contexts.

In addition, further research should study more extensively the functions of the host family and the process underlying the observed correlations. For example, future studies might consider whether thoughts about the host family in case of positive contact with the host family activate positive emotional schemata that are used to assess intercultural contact or whether a negative outcome in intercultural contact let exchange students think about the host family as source of emotional support. In addition, research might examine whether positive contact in host families increases intercultural competences and knowledge about the host culture that increases the perceived self efficacy to cope with difficult contact experiences.

Finally, it is important to stress that the results of the present studies are applicable chiefly to experiences of exchange students who visit a new country for a limited time. It is also an interesting and promising venue of research to analyze the role of positive relationships and informational and emotional support for immigrants who come to a new country with a life-long perspective. In these cases, source of information and uncertainty reduction might not be a host family, but the friends

they find during an early phase of acculturation (e.g., Ramelli, Florack, Kosic, & Rohmann, in press).

In sum, the present research shows the high importance of host families for exchange students. Hence, programs designed to support exchange students in a new country should provide them with the possibility of developing positive relations with host families at an early stage of their stay. In particular, organizations that support exchange students should establish advanced procedures for the selection of host families.

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571-580.

Table 1

*Correlations of Relevant Variables*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Willingness to Engage in Contact	-						
2 Contact (Host Family)	.306**	-					
3 Contact (Exchange Students)	-.051	.131	-				
4 Contact (Swiss Friends / Family)	.133	.086	-.058	-			
5 Contact (American Friends)	-.135	-.240*	-.134	-.147	-		
6 Ease to Find Friends (After Arrival)	-.057	-.069	-.263*	-.114	.155	-	
7 Home Sickness (After Arrival)	.118	-.037	.077	.299**	-.042	-.094	-

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Figure Captions*

*Figure 1.* Willingness to interact with the unknown host community member as a function of the predictability of the host community member and contact with the host family. High values indicate more willingness to interact with the unknown host community member.

