

# In need of a third party

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The influence of conflict asymmetry, future interaction and cultural background on the needs from third-party help.

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**Abstract**

Research suggests that third-party help has several benefits for a conflict and the conflict parties. So far, research on the needs of a conflict party from third-party help is limited. In this study the influence of *experienced conflict asymmetry* and *anticipated future interaction* on the needs from third-party help is investigated. Additionally, the role of cultural background as a moderator is explored. It was expected that depending on the amount of experienced conflict asymmetry and anticipated future interaction by a conflict party, there would be a different need for certain type of third-party help. 726 former clients of the Dutch legal desk with a wide range of conflicts (e.g. work related conflicts, civil disputes, divorce) filled in an adaptive computerized questionnaire. Using factor analysis three different main types of third-party help a conflict party could have need for were distinguished, *emotional help*, *positive relational help* and *content oriented help*. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses. It was found that the more symmetrical the conflict is and the higher the anticipated future interaction, the higher the need for positive relational help. Further, the more asymmetrical the conflict is and the less anticipated future interaction, the higher need for content oriented help. No moderator effect of cultural background was found. Participants from a high-context culture indicated to have a higher need for emotional help.

**Abstract**

Onderzoek suggereert dat derde-partij hulp voordelen heeft voor een conflict en de conflict partijen. Tot nu toe is het onderzoek naar de behoeften van een conflict partij aan derde-partij hulp beperkt. In deze studie werd de invloed van *ervaren conflict asymmetrie* en *verwachte toekomstige interactie* op de behoeften van derden hulp onderzocht. Daarnaast is de rol van *culturele achtergrond* als moderator onderzocht. De verwachting was dat afhankelijk van de hoeveelheid ervaren conflict asymmetrie en de verwachte toekomstige interactie, er een andere behoefte aan bepaalde type van derde-partij hulp zou zijn.<sup>726</sup> Voormalige cliënten van het Juridisch Loket met een breed scala aan conflicten (e.g. werk gerelateerde conflicten, civile geschillen, echtscheidingen) vulden een adaptieve gecomputeriseerde vragenlijst in. Met behulp van een factoranalyse werden drie verschillende hoofd soorten derde-partij hulp onderscheiden, *emotionele hulp*, *positieve relationele hulp* en *inhoudelijke hulp*. Hiërarchische multiple regressie analyses werden gebruikt om de hypothesen te toetsen. Gebleken is dat hoe meer symmetrisch het conflict is en hoe hoger de verwachte toekomstige interactie, des te groter de behoefte aan positieve relationele hulp. Verder, hoe meer asymmetrisch het conflict is en hoe minder verwachte toekomstige interactie, des te groter behoefte aan inhoudelijke hulp. Geen moderator effect van culturele achtergrond werd gevonden. Deelnemers uit een hoge-context cultuur gaven aan een hoger behoefte aan emotionele hulp te hebben.

On several occasions in our lives we encounter conflicts. In first instance, people often try to resolve conflicts themselves together with the other party. On other occasions, people call in the help of a third party. Third-party intervention can be binding when the third-party has decision-making power, for example a judge. However, often it concerns non-binding third-party interventions (further referred to as third-party help). Research suggests that third-party help has several beneficial influences on a conflict and the conflict parties. For example, third-party help can facilitate the resolution of conflicts (Colon & Meyer, 2004; Kressel & Pruitt, 1989). In addition, research suggests that third-party help may buffer the long-term effects of conflict in terms of emotional exhaustion, absenteeism and turnover intentions (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Since there are different forms of third-party help, the question arises if all these forms cause the positive effects found in research. In addition, depending on the characteristics of the conflict party and the conflict situation the conflict party could have needs for specific types of third-party help. Therefore, in this study we try to answer the question: What influences a conflict party to have needs for certain types of third-party help?

Third-party help is an intervention that can be defined as: ‘I) an extension or (and) elaboration of the conflict management (negotiation) process that II) involves (the intervention of) an acceptable (impartial and neutral) third party who III) has no authoritative decision-making power’ (Moore, 1986, p.14). The three different aspects pointed out in this definition are reflected in most definitions of third party help. Folberg and Taylor (1984) define as well the tasks of a third-party during a conflict management process. These tasks are to: a) systematically isolate disputed issues in order to b) develop options, c) consider alternatives, and d) reach a consensual settlement that will accommodate their needs (Folberg & Taylor, 1984, p.p. 7-8). In this definition all the tasks mentioned, and therefore the overall process, have as ultimate goal to reach a settlement that accommodates the needs of the participants. We argue therefore that the needs of the conflict parties play an essential role in achieving a satisfying outcome from the conflict management process. These needs can be divided into two types of needs: I) the individual needs in relation to a certain desired outcome and II) the individual needs in relation to the process of conflict management. In this study the focus is on the second, since these are the needs that can be directly influenced by third-party help.

Research about the needs from third-party help so far is limited in two different ways. First of all, most research focuses on the preferred procedure to reach conflict resolution. LaTour, Houlden, Walker, and Thibaut (1976) and Shestowsky (2004) describe for example, that conflict parties can have a need for a certain type of third-party intervention such as mediation or arbitration. So far, little attention has been paid to the need for different types of support a neutral third-party can provide to a conflict party. There are only two initial studies on this type of needs from third-party help. Giebels and Yang (2009) conducted a comparative study between Dutch and Chinese employees and their preferences for certain types of third party help. In another study Rotman (2011) explored different types of needs from third-party help, as well as the influence of interdependence (in the form of anticipated future interaction) and the relative power position (between the two conflict parties) have on these needs. Second, most of the research on third-party help has been carried out in organizational settings (De Dreu, 2011; Giebels & Euwema, 2006; Giebels & Yang, 2009; LaTour, et al., 1976). In recent years, however, there has been an increasing interest in research about third-party help in other settings. This interest is shown for example, within neighbour conflicts (Ufkes, Giebels, Otten, & Van der Zee, in press) and civil disputes (Reich, Kressel, Scanlon, & Weiner, 2007). In this article, we continue this line of inquiry by examining the influence of conflict asymmetry, anticipated future interaction and the possible moderating effect of cultural background on a wide range of conflict involving among others organizational conflicts, civil disputes and neighbour conflicts.

A contingency perspective on differential preferences for third-party help depending on the characteristics of conflict parties and the conflict setting itself is also important from a practical point of view. As mentioned before, we argue that the needs of a conflict party play an essential role in reaching a satisfying outcome resulting from the conflict management process. Therefore being able to know what personal characteristics and/or which conflict situations influence these needs at the beginning of the conflict management process may facilitate achieving a satisfying outcome at the end. A third party could use this knowledge to choose a strategy at the beginning of the intervention that highlights certain type(s) of third-party help. In the remainder of this introduction, we will first present several types of third-party help that could be differentiated within the literature. Then we will elaborate on the possible factors that predict the need for certain types of third-party help, these factors are “conflict asymmetry” and “anticipated future interaction”. Finally, the potential moderating

effect of cultural background (high- vs. low context) on the relation between anticipated future interaction and the need for certain types of third-party help will be explored.

### **Types of third-party help**

For the purpose of giving an extended overview of the different types of third-party help possible, research from several disciplines and conflict situations were taken into consideration. In the literature seven different types of third-party help could be distinguished: emotional, procedural, positive relational, negative relational, advice, information and social comparison. Rotman (2011) mentions in her study emotional, procedural, positive relational, negative relational, advice and information. Below every type of help will be further elaborated on.

#### *Emotional, procedural and positive relational help*

In the research of Giebels and Yang (2009) three types of non-substantial third-party help are distinguished: emotional, procedural and (positive) relational. Within non-substantial third-party help there is a more facilitative intervention to support the conflict parties into finding a solution, instead of focusing on the factual issues that the conflict parties have (Albert, Heisterkamp, & McPhee, 2005). *Emotional* help gives the conflict parties the possibility to vent their emotions and deal with the emotional side of conflict. It can increase the feeling that they are taken seriously and that someone understands their situation. *Procedural* help focuses on keeping structure in the conversations, helps conflict parties not to stray from the main issues and gives the procedures to follow to best handle the conflict. *Relational* help has the goal to preserve or restore the harmony in the relationship. A third party can facilitate that the conflict parties maintain a respectful treatment towards each other.

#### *Negative relational help*

A type of help related to the relational help of Giebels and Yang (2009) is negative relational help. *Negative relational* help also addresses the relation between the conflict parties. In contrast with the more constructive type of positive relational help of Giebels and Yang (2009), negative relational help focuses on helping one conflict party to reprimand the other party for the caused damage. It is related to vengeance, where the imbalance created by the conflict seeks to be restored. Shnabel and Nadler (2010) give the example of a conflict between a victim (for example of burglary or rape) and the perpetrator. After a crime the victim loses the feeling of power over the situation and needs to restore it. A third-party can support the victim in this process.

### *Substantive help: Advice and information*

Giebels and Euwema (2006) mention *substantial help* as another type of help a third-party can provide within the conflict management process. This type of help is similar to procedural help, the difference is that where in procedural help the focus is only on guiding the process of conflict resolution, in substantial help it is on the content of the conflict itself. For example, a third-party can give possible solutions that the conflict parties had not seen themselves. Substantial help can be given in two forms, through giving *information* about possible actions or through giving *advice* on what kind of action would be the best according to the specific situation.

### *Social comparison*

Finally, a third-party also can provide examples of other people having similar conflicts and how they handled them. This type of help we call *social comparison*. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory this is an important type of help because we can learn by observing others (Bandura, 1977). Through social comparison conflict parties can learn that they are not the only ones that had these types of conflicts. Additionally, they can learn and be inspired by how others handled the conflict. This is in line with the research on Cialdini's social proof principle, which shows that people usually have a strong need to learn what others do and this guides their behaviour (Cialdini, 2001).

The types of third-party help described above can be translated into the needs a conflict party can have from third-party help. The central idea of the current research project is that a conflict party can have needs for one or more of the above described types of third-party help depending on the conflict situation and personal characteristics. Within research on conflict negotiation processes with and without a third-party intervention several variables influencing this process have been found. In this study we look at conflict asymmetry, anticipated future interaction and cultural background. It is interesting to look at conflict asymmetry as results show a significant influence of asymmetry on the course of events within a conflict and the conflict effects (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010; Ufkes et al., in press). A considerable amount of research has shown an influence of anticipated future interaction on the conflict management process (Deutsch, 1977; Deutsch, 2006; Tjosvold, Morishima, & Belsheim, 1999; Sagan, Pondel and Wittig, 1981) as well as on the needs of a conflict party from third-party help (Rotman, 2011). Some research also focuses on the influence of cultural background on the conflict management process (Adair,

2003; Adair & Brett, 2005; Brett, 2001) as on the needs of a conflict party from third-party help (Giebels & Yang, 2009). However, the possible moderating effect of cultural background between anticipated future interaction and the needs of the conflict party has so far not been explored. For these reasons, we believe that studying the influence of these three variables will meaningfully increase our understanding of the needs a third party can have from third-party help.

### **Conflict asymmetry**

Jehn and Chatman (2000) describe conflict asymmetry as “a concept referring to the degree that one conflict party perceives more conflict than the other”. A conflict can be one sided, when only one party experiences discord but avoids any communication about the problem (Van de Vliert, 1997). Research shows that conflict asymmetry is an important variable influencing the course and outcome of the conflict management process (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010; Ufkes et al., in press). For instance, symmetrical conflicts within a group can increase performance, however, when one or more group members experience more conflict than the others the positive effects of conflict cannot be reached (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2010).

Ufkes et al. (in press) found that symmetrical conflicts tend to be more escalated, and that within an asymmetrical conflict it is important to provide emotional support to the conflict party experiencing more conflict and convince the other party to participate in the intervention. As such, we can assume that conflict asymmetry has an impact on a personal level and on the relation of the two parties. In the case of a more asymmetrical conflict the impact will be mostly on a personal level, since one of the parties is not aware of the conflict or does not attach so much importance to it that the relation can be directly affected. This reasoning is supported by research. Tyler (1999), for example, found that parties who perceive more conflict often feel disrespected and insecure. On one hand a conflict party can feel disrespected while their concerns are not (sufficiently) heard. On the other hand they can feel insecure, since individuals that perceive more conflict than the other may start to question their view on the situation. When one conflict party perceives more conflict, often this party would like to change the current situation. This circumstance can have long term effects on the conflict party experiencing the most conflict. In the case of personal relationships, for example, it was found that spouses challenging the status quo feel more depressed than those defending the status quo (Kluwer & Mikula, 2002).



These processes causing that in a more asymmetrical conflict the conflict party experiencing the most conflict feels disrespected, insecure and in some cases even depressed can be explained by the self-verification theory of Swan (1999). This theory states that the believe that one's view of a situation is not shared or validated by others may cause them to question their own sense of reality leading to decreased satisfaction. Hearing from the third-party that other people where in similar situations and what they did could therefore also help to diminish this discomfort. In this line of reasoning we expect that *the more experienced conflict asymmetry by a conflict party, the higher the need for a) emotional help and b) social comparison information from a third party (Hypothesis 1).*

In symmetrical conflicts, the conflict parties experience a similar amount of conflict. In these types of conflicts the parties have the tendency to reciprocate conflict behaviour (Giebels & Taylor, 2009). This reciprocation of behaviour can lead to conflict escalation when the response to the behaviour of the other party concerns retaliation, thus leading to negative conflict spiral processes (Mummendey & Otten, 1989; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). To be able to diminish these negative conflict spiral processes and reach conflict resolution it will be the necessary to restore the relationship between the parties and their communication paths. The relationship of the conflict parties can be restored and maintained with the positive relational help a third-party can provide (Giebels & Yang, 2009). Procedural help from a third party would also make it possible for the conflict parties to restore communication and not stray from the main issues at hand (Giebels & Yang, 2009). However, even if there is no conflict escalation it can be assumed that the conflict parties within a more symmetrical conflict tried to reach conflict resolution without help. The fact that the parties look for third-party help implies that they did not manage to find a solution by themselves. Substantive help from a third-party would facilitate finding a solution, both by providing information about what could be done and by giving advice about what action would be best in their situation (Giebels & Euwema, 2006). We predict therefore that: *the more conflict symmetry experienced by a conflict party, the higher the need for a) positive relational help, b) procedural help, substantive help in the form of c) information and d) advice from a third party (Hypothesis 2).*

### **Anticipated future interaction**

According to Rusbult and Van Lange (2003), the relationship between two parties has a strong effect on their behaviour. Shetach (2009) also describes that the relationship between two parties determines their behaviour. This connection between the underlying relationship of the parties and their behaviours can be explained through the “needs-as-motive” process (Sheldon & Gunz 2009). Sheldon and Gunz (2009) describe that within this process when an individual has a need, a motivation arises to meet this need. An individual behaves in a certain way because his/her needs are met or not. From this line of reasoning it can be deduced, that the underlying relationship between the two parties, not only influences the behaviour, but also the needs of the conflict parties.

Research has shown that with regard to the relationship of two parties, their interdependency is a crucial concept (Deutsch, 1977; Tjosvold, Morishima, & Belsheim, 1999). Deutsch (2006) points out that analysing the interdependency of conflict parties contributes to the understanding and prediction of their conflict behaviour. The amount of interaction a conflict party expects to have with the other party in the future is a form of interdependency (Rumble, 2005). Sagan, Pondel and Wittig (1981) define this as “anticipated future interaction”. In the case of conflicts it was found that when an individual expects future interaction with the other party after the conflict has ended, this individual will be more prone to show cooperative behaviour than when no future interaction is expected (Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977). Shapiro (1975) and Zhang (2001) found that subjects divided the reward between peers more equally after realization of the high amount of future interaction. It was also found that people are more inclined to compliance when they expect a high level of future interaction (Lewis, Langan, & Hollander, 1972). Lewis et al. (1972) explain that when a person supposes high level of future interaction there are big chances that the investment made, in this case compliance, will pay off in the future. From the above results it can be deduced that people have the need to keep a good relationship with the conflict party, when they anticipate future interaction.

Conflict are often associated with high amounts of stress (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). The pressure to keep a good relationship can increase the level of stress felt by the conflict party. This kind of pressure, next to the already high level of stress felt during conflict, makes the conflict party also need other types of help to deal with the emotions and insecurities that conflict brings along. That is why we expect that when the conflict party anticipates future interactions the need for both positive relational help and emotional help will be higher.

More specifically, *higher anticipated future interaction with the other conflict party is associated with a higher need for a) emotional help and b) positive relational help (Hypothesis 3).*

In contrast, when a conflict party does not expect future interaction, they will be more prone to choose for their own gain. In the study of Lewis et al. (1972) they found that people were less inclined to comply when they did not expect future interaction. In another study the subjects were also less inclined to divide the rewards equally when they were not reminded of possible future contact (Shapiro, 1975; Zhang, 2001). Since the other party and maintaining a relationship with this party is not a main goal, the own interests are the most important. One of these interests is to put at least effort as possible and still achieve one's own goals. We therefore predict that *lower anticipated future interaction with the other conflict party is associated with a higher need for a) negative relational help, b) procedural help and substantial help in both forms of c) information and d) advice (Hypothesis 4).*

#### *Cultural background as moderator of anticipated future interaction*

The way we manage interdependency is highly defined by our culture. According to Hall's theory (1976) in low-context cultures people are highly individualized and see themselves as independent from others. The communication in these cultures is often explicit and direct, the message content is important and therefore information is given in explicit codes. In high-context cultures the social bonds are stronger, the community is more important than individual feelings and opinions. Therefore the communication in high-context cultures is more often evasive, indirect and relationship oriented. Even though there are individual differences in communication style within a group, low-context communication tends to be seen more often in Western (individualistic) cultures and high-context communication in non-Western (collectivistic) cultures (Adair, 2003; Adair & Brett, 2005; Conlon, Meyer, Lytle, & Willaby, 2007; Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis & Suh, 2002). In several studies cultural background has been found to have an influence on the conflict negotiation process (Adair, 2003; Adair & Brett, 2005). This is supported by Brett (2001) who argues that dispute resolution procedures are embedded within culture. Conlon et al. (2007) evaluated several third-party help procedures related to negotiation and explored the potential impact of cultural background when evaluating these procedures. They conclude in their study that culture has a substantial impact on the evaluation of the preferred procedures, and that cultural background should therefore be taken into consideration when

investigating third-party help procedures. Accordingly, we expect that the needs for third-party help are also influenced by cultural background.

Since in the case of low anticipated future interaction maintaining a good relation with the other party is of less importance than one's own gain, we expect that cultural background will have little influence on the conflict management process. On the contrary, when there is high anticipated future interaction the relational aspects are more important and cultural background will have more influence. In the case of high anticipated future interaction and high-context culture the importance of maintaining a good relationship and the stress related to it could be higher, as in these cultures the harmony within the group they belong to is more important than the self-interests (Hall, 1976). In the study of Giebels and Yang (2009) it was also found that conflict parties from a high-context culture (China) had a stronger preference for relational help than the participants from a low-context culture (The Netherlands). So, we expect the relationship between *anticipated future interaction and positive relational help to be stronger for conflict parties from high rather than low-context cultures (Hypothesis 5)*.

Giebels and Yang (2009) also found in their studies that the participants from low-context culture had a stronger preference for emotional help than the participants from the high-context culture. They explain this through the findings that people from individualistic cultures tend to experience and express their emotions more often than people from collectivistic cultures (Kumer, 2004; Mesquita, 2001). Consequently, we expect the relationship between *anticipated future interaction and emotional help to be stronger for conflict parties from low rather than high-context cultures (Hypothesis 6)*.

## Method

### Procedure and participants

The data used for testing the hypothesis is a part of a large data set with former clients of several legal desks in major cities in the Netherlands. Data were collected online by means of an adaptive computerized questionnaire. The overall purpose of the questionnaire was research on the expectations from, consequences of and satisfaction with the help given to clients of "the legal desk" in the Netherlands. The legal desk in the Netherlands is a non-profit governmental organization that offers legal help to all inhabitants of the Netherlands. A request to fill in the questionnaire was sent to 17 487 former clients of the legal desk.

These clients were all the clients of the legal desk in 2009 and 2010, two years previous to the conduction of the questionnaire. In this request it was mentioned that on average 20-30 min were required to fill in the questionnaire, the answers would be processed anonymously and that the first 500 participants that filled in the questionnaire would receive a compensation of €10. After exclusion of incomplete questionnaires a total of 726 participants were left. The sample included 392 woman (56%) and 334 men (46%), with a mean age of 42 years and range from 19 to 79 years. 486 (66%) participants indicated to have completed tertiary education, of which 268 (36%) at university level, and 314 (31%) participants had as highest secondary education. Most of the participants had a gross income either lower than 17 000 yearly (28%) or more than 24 000 (28%). The conflicts reported in these questionnaire were: termination of employment (271; 37%), consumer conflicts (100; 13%), divorce (70; 9%), conflicts with the government (56; 7%), rent/housing conflicts (38; 5%), other work related conflicts (24; 3%), alimantation/parenting agreements conflicts (18; 2%), bankruptcy/debits (15; 2%) and other unique cases (134; 18%).

## Measures

The adaptive computerized questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was designed with the purpose of diagnosing the conflict situation and events and the second entailed questions about the experience and consequences of third-party help. The first part tapped into the type of conflict, who the other conflict party is/was and the conflict phase, followed by a question about the participants needs from third party help. At the beginning of this first part the participant was asked to think back how the situation was just before contacting the legal desk. This was done to approximate the situation, expectations and needs from third-party help as much as possible before intervention of the legal desk. Some of the questions in the first part gave the respondent the option to indicate not having sufficient information to answer the question properly. The second part of the test asked about what was done during the third party help, the consequences of contacting the legal desk and the satisfaction with these consequences, ending with 6 demographic questions about the gender, age, educational level, ethnicity and income of the participants. In this research the questions about experienced conflict, anticipated future interaction and needs from third-party help from the first part of the questionnaire are used. The demographic question about the ethnicity of the participant will be also used for the analysis of the data.

Experienced conflict asymmetry was measured through the difference between two items. The first item asked about the participant's degree of experienced conflict: "*To what extent did you find that there was a problem?*". A later question asked about the other party's degree of experienced conflict: "*To what extent did the other party find that there was a problem?*". The response could be given in a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1= "*not at all*" to 7= "*a very large extent*". A 7-point scale was chosen above a 5-point scale to allow the respondent to give more nuances to the answer. By calculating the difference score of the two questions we acquired values ranging from -6 to 6. Values closer to 0 indicate less experienced conflict asymmetry; positive values indicate that the respondent experienced more conflict than the other party and negative values indicate that the respondent experienced less conflict than the other party.

To measure *anticipated future interaction* we used one item asking "*How much did you think at that time that you had to deal with the other party after dealing with the problem?*" was used. The participants answered this question on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1= "*(almost) not*" to 7= "*a lot*". In total 159 respondents (21%) indicated not to have sufficient information to answer this question.

*Cultural background* was measured by the demographic question about the ethnicity of the participant. The question was: "*Were you or (one of) your parents born abroad?*", respondents could choose as answer between: "*I would rather not say*", "*No*" and "*Yes, namely....*". In case the respondent answered "Yes", but gave an unclear answer about the country of origin, it was coded as missing as when the answer was "*I would rather not say*" (in total 29 cases; 4%). The answer "*No*" (598 cases; 82%) means that the respondent and both his/her parents were born in the Netherlands and could therefore be classified as having a low-context culture according to the classification of Hofstede (2001). When the answer was "Yes, namely..." the respondent filled in from which country he/she or his/her parent originated from. The countries given in the answer were coded as having either low- or high context culture according to Hall's (1976) theory. All Asian, South-European, East-European, South-American, Arabic countries and Russia were coded as high-context culture countries (79 cases; 11%). North European, Scandinavian, North American countries and Australia were coded as low- context culture countries (in total 618 low-context culture cases; 84%). See Appendix 1 for the exact amount of participants from each country and how they were coded.

The *needs from third party help* of the participants were measured with a question with 16 items. The items were derived from the seven different types of third-party help described above: emotional, procedural, positive relational, negative relational, advice, information, and social comparison. For every type of need there were two items developed to measure which needs the subjects had before they received the third party help (see Table 1). The first 12 items measuring the first six types of needs were used in the study of Rotman (2011). In the study of Rotman (2011) the items for emotional, procedural and positive relational help were originally derived from the items of Giebels and Yang (2009), the items for negative relational and substantial help (advice and information) were drawn in collaboration with experts on third-party intervention. The last items measuring the need for social comparison were specifically made for this study. See Appendix 2 for the original questionnaire in Dutch. The respondents answered the items in a 6-point Likert-scale ranging from: “*I strongly disagree*” to “*I strongly agree*”. A scale with uneven amount of choice possibilities (6) was preferred for this scale to prevent neutral answers if the respondent did or did not have the need for a certain type of third-party help. The statement “the next questions are about the moment that you contacted the legal desk” was written just before the question to indicate that we were interested in the situation before the participant contacted the legal desk. This statement was followed by the instructions: “*This question is about the reasons you had for contacting the legal desk. To what extent did the following needs play a role (in this decision)?*”.

An exploratory factor analysis with the principal component method was conducted on the 16 items measuring the needs for different types of third-party help. Factors were extracted on the basis of Eigenvalue  $> 1$  and the scree plot. Three factors emerged according to the rotated component matrix (Varimax rotation), as from the scree plot. The items belonging to the need for negative relational help and the need for social comparison, were not included in the analyses since they loaded higher than .30 on more than one factor (see Table 1). Table 1 shows as well that procedural help, advice and information load on the same factor (Factor 1). This result is in line with literature where it is pointed out that substantial help in the form of information and advice is related to procedural help (Giebels & Euwema, 2006). Consequently, Factor 1 represents “content oriented help”, Factor 2 “emotional help” and Factor 3 “positive relational help”. The reliability analysis for Factor 1 indicates a Chronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .90. Since Factor 2 and 3 consist of two items each, correlations

between these items where used to indicate the reliability, for Factor 2  $r = .84$  and for Factor 3  $r = .60$ . The three factors explain 63% of the total variance.

Since two types of third-party help were not included, the hypotheses, insofar they relate to negative relational help and social comparison, cannot be tested and will be further disregarded. Within the hypotheses addressing procedural help, information and advice will these types of help be replaced by content oriented help.

**Table 1:**

Exploratory factor analysis on needs from types of third-party help, with the eigenvalue and explained variance per factor.

<b>I wanted...</b>	<b>Factor 1</b>	<b>Factor 2</b>	<b>Factor 3</b>
<b>Emotional</b>			
<i>...a listening ear</i>	.12	<b>.87</b>	.26
<i>...understanding for my situation</i>	.14	<b>.89</b>	.24
<b>Positive relational</b>			
<i>...a solution favourable for me and the other party</i>	.09	.18	<b>.80</b>
<i>...to find a solution where the relation with the other party would not suffer</i>	.01	.09	<b>.84</b>
<b>Procedural</b>			
<i>...to know which steps I had to take to solve my problem</i>	<b>.83</b>	.03	.07
<i>...advice about the path that I still had to go through to handle my problem</i>	<b>.80</b>	.07	.07
<b>Negative relational</b>			
<i>...stand up for my own interests</i>	<b>.59</b>	<b>.39</b>	-.08
<i>...to find a solution most favorable as possible for myself</i>	<b>.56</b>	<b>.41</b>	-.02
<b>Advice</b>			
<i>...someone with tangible guidelines that would solve my problem</i>	<b>.71</b>	.24	.18
<i>...someone that thinks along about possible solutions for my problems</i>	<b>.75</b>	.22	.22
<b>Information</b>			
<i>...to be informed about my rights and duties in my situation</i>	<b>.81</b>	-.00	.10
<i>...to know if I had the right on my side</i>	<b>.78</b>	.07	.12
<b>Social comparison</b>			
<i>...to know what the most common solution is for my problem</i>	<b>.53</b>	.15	<b>.36</b>
<i>...to know how other people solved a similar problem as mine</i>	<b>.34</b>	.15	<b>.51</b>
<b>Eigenvalue</b>	5.8	1.9	1.1
<b>Explained variance per factor (%)</b>	41.6	13.9	8.2



## Results

Means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations among the control, independent and dependent variables in this study are presented in Table 2. As expected, the correlations between the three dependent variables (content oriented, emotional and positive relational help) are moderately high (ranging from  $r = .22$  to  $r = .36$ , all  $ps < .01$ ). The independent variable experienced conflict asymmetry correlates ( $r = .12$ ;  $p < .01$ ) with content oriented help and with positive relational help ( $r = -.08$ ;  $p < .05$ ). These correlations indicate that the more asymmetrical the conflict experience is, the more need is for content oriented help; and the more symmetrical the conflict experience is, the more need for positive relational help. Anticipated future interaction has a negative correlation with content oriented help ( $r = -.12$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and with emotional help ( $r = -.08$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In other words, the less future interaction is anticipated by a conflict party, the more the need for content oriented and emotional help. None of the factors correlates significantly with cultural background of the participants.

Interestingly, the control variables gender, age and education correlate with the dependent variables. Gender and age correlate positive with need for content oriented help (gender  $r = .12$ ; age  $r = .14$ ) and emotional help (gender  $r = .10$ ; age  $r = .14$ ; all  $ps < .01$ ). This finding demonstrates that females and older participants have a higher need for content oriented and emotional help. Education correlates negatively with emotional help ( $r = -.21$ ) and with positive relational help ( $r = -.11$ ). Seemingly, higher educated people have less need for emotional and positive relational help.

Another interesting result showed in Table 2 is the relatively high mean of content oriented help, on a scale with a range from 1 to 6  $M = 5.21$ . Apparently, the respondents overall have a high need for content oriented help. The positive mean of experienced conflict asymmetry ( $M = 2.25$ ) and the observed range (see Figure 1) confirms that most people looking for third-party help experience an asymmetrical conflict where they experience more conflict than the other party.

**Table 2:**  
Mean, SD and intercorrelations of the control, independent and dependent variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.54	.49	-								
2. Age	42.08	12.91	-.15**	-							
3. Education	3.75	1.30	-.04	.00	-						
4. Experienced conflict asymmetry	2.25	2.54	.02	.04	.03	-					
5. Anticipated future interaction	2.97	1.85	-.04	-.09*	.14**	-.03	-				
6. Cultural background	1.11	.31	.01	-.07*	.05	-.02	.00	-			
7. Content oriented help	5.30	.97	.12**	.14**	.00	.12**	-.12**	-.01	-		
8. Emotional help	3.87	1.68	.10**	.14**	-.21**	-.03	-.08*	.06	.33**	-	
9. Positive relational help	3.52	1.60	.07	.05	-.11**	-.08*	.06	.01	.22**	.36**	-

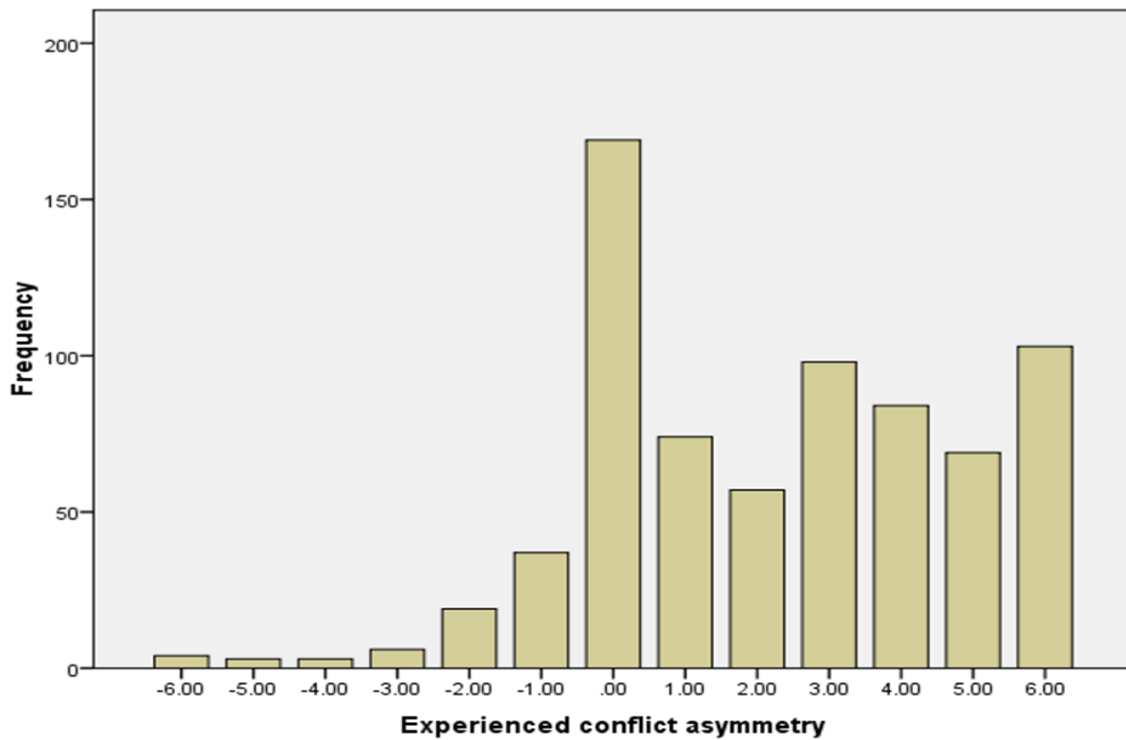
Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

For gender male was coded as 1 and female as 2

Education was coded on a scale ranging from 1=basic or no education to 6= postgraduate

Used scale for experienced conflict asymmetry ranges from -6 to 6.

For cultural background low as 1 and high was coded as 2



**Figure 1:**

Bar plot of measured range of experienced conflict asymmetry. Numbers around 0 indicate a symmetrical conflict. Positive numbers indicate an asymmetrical conflict where the participant experiences more conflict than the other party. Negative numbers show the amount of cases where the participant estimated that the other party experienced more conflict.

### Hypotheses test

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analysis were used to test our hypotheses. The regression analyses were done separately for every hypothesis. Each regression analysis entailed at least two steps. The first step contained the control variables gender, age and education, because of their significant correlations with the dependent variables. In the second step the two main predictor variables experienced conflict asymmetry or anticipated future interaction were added accordingly to the to be tested hypothesis. To test cultural background as a moderator in hypothesis 5 and 6, z-scores of anticipated future interaction, positive relational help and emotional help where calculated. Cultural background was added as a predictor in step 2. Additionally, a possible interaction effect of cultural background was tested by adding in a third step the interaction term between anticipated future interaction and cultural background.

*Hypothesis 1* predicts that the more a conflict party experiences conflict asymmetry, the higher the need will be for emotional help. Table 3 contains a hierarchical regression analysis with emotional help as dependent variable. This table shows that adding experienced conflict asymmetry does not contribute to a better prediction of the model ( $\beta = -.03$ ;  $p > .05$ ), in other words there is no significant relation between experienced conflict asymmetry and need for emotional help. Therefore, we cannot confirm hypothesis 1.

**Table 3:**

Standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ),  $R^2$  and  $R^2$  change from the regression analysis of *emotional help* (N=726) with *experienced conflict asymmetry* as predictive variable.

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1	Gender	.12**	.12**
	Age	.16**	.16**
	Education	-.20**	-.20**
Step 2	Experienced conflict asymmetry		-.03
	$R^2$	.08	.08
	Adjusted $R^2$	.07	.07
	$R^2$ change	-	.00

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

*Hypothesis 2* expects that the less experienced conflict asymmetry, the higher the need for a) positive relational help and b) content oriented help. A significant relation between positive relational help and conflict asymmetry can be found as shown in Table 4 ( $\beta = -.08; p < .05$ ). Although the contribution of conflict asymmetry to the model is marginal ( $R^2 \text{ change} = .01$ ), we can thus sustain hypothesis 2a. In Table 5 a significant relation between content oriented help and positive relational help is shown ( $\beta = .11; p < .05$ ). This relation is however in the opposite direction as expected in hypothesis 2b, namely: the more experienced conflict asymmetry, the higher the need for content oriented help. Consequently, we cannot confirm hypothesis 2b.

**Table 4:**

Standardized regression coefficients,  $R^2$  and  $R^2$  change from the regression analysis of *positive relational help* (N=726) with experienced conflict asymmetry as predictive variable.

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1	Gender	.07*	.07*
	Age	.06	.06
	Education	-.11**	-.11**
Step 2	Experienced conflict asymmetry		-.08*
	$R^2$	.02	.02
	Adjusted $R^2$	.01	.02
	$R^2$ change	-	.01

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 5:**

Standardized regression coefficients,  $R^2$  and  $R^2$  change from the regression analysis of *content oriented help* (N=726) with *experienced conflict asymmetry* as predictive variable.

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1	Gender	.15**	.14**
	Age	.17**	.16**
	Education	.00	.00
Step 2	Experienced conflict asymmetry		.11**
	$R^2$	.04	.05
	Adjusted $R^2$	.03	.05
	$R^2$ change	-	.02

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

*Hypothesis 3* foresees that higher anticipated future interaction would be associated with a higher need for a) emotional help and b) positive relational help. In Table 6 can be seen that no significant relation was found between emotional help and anticipated future interaction ( $\beta = -.03; ns$ ). Hypothesis 3a cannot be sustained. Anticipated future interaction contributes significantly to the predictive model of positive relational help ( $\beta = .09; p < .05$ ) (see Table 7). This relation between anticipated future interaction and positive relational help is positive as expected. Therefore, hypothesis 3b is confirmed.

**Table 6:**  
Standardized regression coefficients, R<sup>2</sup> and R<sup>2</sup> change from the regression analysis of *emotional help* (N=567) with *anticipated future interaction* as predictive variable.

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1	Gender	.13*	.13**
	Age	.17**	.16**
	Education	-.23**	-.23**
Step 2	Anticipated future interaction		-.03
	R <sup>2</sup>	.10	.10
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.09
	R <sup>2</sup> change	-	.00

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 7:**  
Standardized regression coefficients, R<sup>2</sup> and R<sup>2</sup> change from the regression analysis of *positive relational help* (N=567) with *anticipated future interaction* as predictive variable.

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1	Gender	.07	.08
	Age	.03	.04
	Education	-.12**	-.13**
Step 2	Anticipated future interaction		.09*
	R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.03
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.02
	R <sup>2</sup> change	-	.01

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

In *Hypothesis 4* we expect that lower anticipated future interaction is associated with a higher need for content oriented help. There was a significant contribution of anticipated future interaction to the predictive model found for content oriented help ( $\beta = -.10$ ;  $ps < .05$ ) (see Table 8). The relationship between anticipated future interaction and content oriented help is negative as expected. For that reason, hypothesis 4 is confirmed as well.

**Table 8:**

Standardized regression coefficients,  $R^2$  and  $R^2$  change from the regression analysis of *content oriented help* (N=726) with *anticipated future interaction* as predictive variable.

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1	Gender	.15**	.15**
	Age	.13**	.12**
	Education	.01	.02
Step 2	Anticipated future interaction		-.10*
	$R^2$	.03	.04
	Adjusted $R^2$	.03	.04
	$R^2$ change	-	.01

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

*Hypothesis 5* expected the relationship between anticipated future interaction and positive relational help to be stronger for conflict parties from high rather than low-context cultures. The results in Table 9 show that the z-scores of anticipated future interaction has a significant contribution to the model for positive relational help ( $\beta = .13$ ;  $p < .01$ ), as equally demonstrated in Table 7. There is however no significant contribution of cultural background to the model ( $\beta = .04$ ; *ns*). No interaction effect between anticipated future interaction and cultural background was found. Based on the above presented results we did not find support for *hypothesis 5*.

In *hypothesis 6* we expected that the relationship between anticipated future interaction and emotional help would be stronger for conflict parties from low rather than high-context cultures. From the results of the regression analysis, presented in Table 10, no significant contribution of anticipated future interaction to the model, with emotional help as dependent variable, was found ( $\beta = -.03$ ; *ns*). Interestingly, it was found that cultural background contributes highly significant to the predictive model of the need for emotional help ( $\beta = .12$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The relationship between emotional help and cultural background is

positive, which indicates that high-context cultures have more need for emotional help than low context cultures. This result is in the opposite direction as expected. No interaction effect was found between anticipated future interaction and cultural background. Hypothesis 6 cannot be sustained.

**Table 9:** Standardized regression coefficients, R<sup>2</sup> and R<sup>2</sup> change from the regression analysis on zscores of *positive relational help* (N = 542)

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Step 1	Gender	.07	.08	.08
	Age	.04	.05	.05
	Education	-.13**	-.15**	-.15**
Step 2	Zscore: Anticipated future interaction		.10*	.10*
	Cultural background		.04	.04
Step 3	Zscore: Anticipated future interaction * Cultural background			-.00
	R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.03	.03
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.03	.02
	R <sup>2</sup> change	-	.01	.00

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 10:** Standardized regression coefficients, R<sup>2</sup> and R<sup>2</sup> change from the regression analysis of *emotional help* (N = 542)

	Variables entered	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Step 1	Gender	.13**	.13**	.13**
	Age	.18**	.19**	.19**
	Education	-.25**	-.25**	-.25**
Step 2	Zscore: Anticipated future interaction		-.02	-.03
	Cultural background		.12**	.12**
Step 3	Zscore: Anticipated future interaction * Cultural background			.01
	R <sup>2</sup>	.11	.12	.12
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.10	.11	.11
	R <sup>2</sup> change	-	.01	.00

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

## Discussion

In the current study we argue that the needs a conflict party has with regard to third-party help, and being able to address these needs, are important for reaching a satisfying outcome from the conflict management process. The aim of this study was to investigate what influences the needs of a conflict party for certain type of third-party help. To answer this question we looked at the possible influence of experienced conflict asymmetry, anticipated future interaction and cultural background. Three different types of third-party help were identified in this study: emotional help, positive relational help and content oriented help. Similar types of third-party help, were distinguished in the study of Giebels and Yang (2009).

As expected we found that the less experienced conflict asymmetry, in other words the more symmetrical the conflict is, the higher the need for positive relational help. Surprisingly, the relation found between experienced conflict asymmetry and content oriented help is positive instead of negative as expected. Preliminary results suggest that the more experienced conflict asymmetry, the higher need for content oriented help. This could be caused by the amounts of insecurity that an asymmetrical conflict causes to the conflict party looking for third-party help (Tyler, 1999). A way to diminish this insecurity could be to acquire information and advice about what could be done, and thereby security about the “best to follow” procedure.

For anticipated future interaction it seems, that the more a conflict party expects future interaction, the higher need it has for positive relational help. On the other side the less future interaction is expected, there is more need for content oriented help. Both of these findings are as expected and in line with previous research, in particular with the results gathered in the study of Rotman (2011).

The need for emotional help seems not to be able to be predicted by experienced conflict asymmetry or anticipated future interaction. Interestingly, a significant relationship between emotional help and cultural background was found. This relationship shows that high-context culture participants indicate to have more need for emotional help than low-context culture participants. This is opposite to what was expected based upon the literature review. A reason for this unexpected result could be that high-context culture participants have a bigger differentiation of emotions (Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, & Jing, 2003), causing that they are more aware of their need for emotional help.



No moderating effect of cultural background was found in this study, even though substantial amounts of research would indicate a possible moderating effect (Adair, 2003; Adair & Brett, 2005; Giebels & Yang, 2009). This could be due to the relatively small amount of participants in this study originating from a high-context culture. On the other side it is possible that immigrants from high-context culture have adapted to the “low-context” Dutch culture for managing their conflicts, and consequently, no moderating effect of cultural background will be found. Future research on this possible moderating effect should therefore contain a greater amount of participants from high-context culture, to be able to draw stronger evidence based conclusions.

In general it seems that the older the participants the more need for emotional and content oriented help. This could be caused by the type of conflicts encountered the further a person advances in to live (e.g. divorce, termination of long term employment). It seems as well that females have overall a greater need for emotional and content oriented help. Further, it was found that the higher educated the participant, the lesser the need for emotional and positive relational help. To be able to draw conclusion based on these findings further research and analysis needs to be done.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

The main weakness of this study is that the needs the participants had from third-party help were measured after the intervention had taken place. As we are interested in how to predict the needs a conflict party can have from third-party help before the intervention. That the needs a conflict party can have where measured after the intervention, lessens thereby the internal validity of this study. The limited amount of scales for measuring experienced conflict asymmetry and anticipated future interaction decrease as well the internal validity of the current study. Another important limitation of the current study is the relative small amount of participants in the high-context culture, which makes it hard to draw any solid conclusions upon the possible influence and moderating effect of cultural background on anticipated future interaction. Furthermore, the ecological validity of this study is questionable since all the participants were clients of the Dutch legal desk and could be therefore considered as a limited convenience sample addressing only the legal side of conflicts. On the other hand, a lot of different kinds of conflicts are addressed at the legal desk, as well as in this study (e.g. termination of employment, consumer conflicts, divorce). That several different kinds of conflicts are addressed are an argument for the possible

generalizability of the findings in the current study. The findings in this study can most be generalized to cases where legal matters of a conflict are being addressed.

Future research should contain more scales to measure experienced conflict asymmetry and anticipated future interaction. The measurements should preferably be made before the third-party help intervention takes place. Additionally, could prospect studies make sure to include more participants from a high-context culture, to be able to make proper cultural comparisons and investigate the possible moderating effect of cultural background. Complementary to this study would be research on how experienced conflict asymmetry and anticipated future interaction relate to each other, and their relative influence on the conflict party needs from third-party help. Furthermore, research on the topic within an experimental setting is needed to test the predictive power of experienced conflict asymmetry and anticipated future interaction on the conflict parties needs for third-party help, as well as on the level of satisfaction with conflict management process and with the outcomes.

### **Practical implications and conclusions**

The results of this study entail several practical implications for third-parties willing to provide help to a conflict party. The findings of this research are particularly transferable to cases where the third-party help refers to legal matters. In this study we demonstrate that knowledge about the level of experienced conflict asymmetry and the amount of anticipated future interaction can be used to predict the specific needs a conflict party will have for certain type of third-party help. In turn, knowledge about the needs of the conflict party facilitates choosing a conflict management strategy that takes the needs of the conflict party into consideration. If a conflict party for example experiences a lot of conflict asymmetry and there is little anticipated future interaction, this conflict party will probably have more need for content oriented help than any other type of help. On the contrary, when a party experiences more symmetry in the conflict and expects more future interaction, it can be predicted that it will have more need for positive relational help.

From this study we can conclude that three different types of third-party help can be distinguished a conflict party can have need for. Additionally, we conclude that experienced conflict asymmetry and anticipated future interaction have an influence on the need for content oriented and positive relational help.

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## Appendix 1

<b>Low-context culture</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>High-context culture</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Austria	2	Asia	2
Australia	1	Bosnia	1
Belgium	3	Brazil	2
England	2	Chile	1
Finland	1	China	2
Germany	9	Curacao	6
Netherlands	598	Egypt	1
Sweden	1	France	2
USA	1	Greece	1
		Hungary	1
		India	3
		Indonesia	19
		Iran	2
		Italia	2
		Malaysia	2
		Morocco	2
		Peru	1
		Philippines	1
		Poland	2
		Portugal	2
		Russia	2
		Serbia	1
		Spain	2
		Suriname	17
		Syria	1
		South Africa	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>

