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Sojourner expectations: Are they met and does it matter if they're not?

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the association between cross-cultural travelers' well-being and the discrepancy between expected and experienced adaptation, in a longitudinal study of intercultural exchange students ($N = 1762$; $M_{age} = 17$ years; 70 % female). Specifically, two competing hypotheses were tested. Whereas the *accuracy hypothesis* suggests that unmet expectations lead to poorer outcomes, the *directional hypothesis* proposes that the outcome of unmet expectations will depend on whether expectations are overmet or undermet. Both sojourners' adaptation expectations (pre-travel) and adaptation experiences (during the sojourn) were measured alongside general well-being. Controlling for baseline, well-being during the sojourn was regressed on the direction (undermet or overmet) and the magnitude (extent of discrepancy) of the adaptation expectation-experience discrepancies. These analyses were conducted across time (at entry or 5 months into the sojourn), different types of adaptation (psychological and sociocultural adaptation), and different measures of well-being (stress and satisfaction with life). Across analyses, results indicate that the direction of mismatch appears to matter little for small mismatches. However, for larger mismatches a positive effect emerged for sojourner well-being when the experience was better than expected, but a negative effect when the experience was worse than expected. Overall, the results support a directional hypothesis.

My life here is kinda unexpected, a lot of surprises but I love it so much.
– *Indonesian sojourner in the USA*
It's pretty sad because I expected so many things from this year and now I see that they aren't happening.
– *Finnish sojourner in France*
I suppose I made one big mistake before I came here. I came with expectations.
– *American sojourner in Italy*

Introduction

The above quotes from international students in our study suggest that expectations color the experience of cross-cultural transition. This is not surprising as the key role that expectations play in psychological processes and outcomes has been highlighted in a

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range of classic theories in both psychology and communication, including theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), expectancy violation (Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005), and the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). That expectations "matter" is not in dispute: discrepancies between expectations and experiences have been shown to have implications for well-being in family, work, and health contexts (Carr, Gibson, & Robinson, 2001; Harwood, McLean, & Durkin, 2007; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Just *which* expectations matter and *how* their discrepancies from everyday experiences play out in the context of crossing cultures are less certain.

It is well known that sojourners, including international students and expatriates, and longer term immigrants face multiple challenges during cross-cultural transitions. These challenges involve both generic changes linked to migration, such as alterations in living conditions, social activities, and friendship networks, as well as more specific intercultural pressures, such as acquiring cultural knowledge, learning culturally appropriate skills and minimizing acculturative stress (Ward & Geeraert, 2016; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). As both generic and culture-specific factors may impede the process of adapting to an unfamiliar cultural milieu, acculturation research has tended to focus on expectations about managing the practicalities of daily living, engaging in effective and satisfying intercultural interactions, and ensuring psychological and emotional well-being. Studies have shown, however, that not all expectations play a significant role in predicting adaptive outcomes (Negy, Schwartz, & Reig-Ferrer, 2009; Weissman & Furnham, 1987).

Beyond the issue of *which* expectations are associated with cross-cultural adaptation is the question of *how* expectation-experience discrepancies are linked to psychological adjustment and well-being. Although there is neither a large nor systematically developed body of empirical research, two hypotheses have been explored in studies of international students, expatriates and immigrants. The first is the accuracy hypothesis, also known as the ideal point model, which states that realistic expectations will facilitate adaptation (Mähönen & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013; Ward et al., 2001). That is, when experiences are the same as expected (i.e., matched) sojourners will be more content and better adapted. The second is a directional hypothesis, also known as the disconfirmation model, which specifies that the outcome of a discrepancy between expectations and experiences depends on the direction of the mismatch (Mähönen & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013; Ward et al., 2001). Overmet expectations (a positive mismatch) will lead to better adaptive outcomes, such as greater satisfaction and well-being, while undermet expectations (a negative mismatch) will lead to poorer adjustment. In other words, according to the directional hypothesis, adaptation will vary as a function of the direction of the difference between expectations and experience.

Despite at least some evidence for both the accuracy and directional hypotheses, elucidating the role of expectation-experience discrepancies in sojourner adjustment is problematic for three major reasons. First, despite early studies on expectations and sojourner adjustment commencing more than three decades ago, there is a paucity of research on the topic. We have been able to find only nine published studies to date that examine expectations and experiences of cross-cultural transition and the well-being of sojourners or immigrants, even though we assume a broad definition of well-being, including general adjustment, life satisfaction, comfort, satisfaction with sojourn, general mood, and low levels of acculturative stress and psychological symptoms. Put simply, there is not a substantial body of research on this topic.

Second, no comprehensive theoretical framework has been advanced to describe, explain and predict sojourner well-being on the basis of expectation-experience discrepancies. Even though there are frameworks that can provide partial insights into these processes, there is no single theory that can serve as a basis for generating hypotheses about expectations, experiences and cross-cultural adaptation. Self-efficacy theory tells us that those who believe that they will be successful in a particular situation are more likely to execute a course of action that will lead to success (Bandura, 1989). Relatedly, self-efficacy has been implicated in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984, 1987) transactional model of stress and coping in that expectations and efficacy beliefs can shape the appraisal of threats and challenges and, in turn, the level of stress and subsequent coping responses (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995); however, neither line of theorizing directly addresses the outcomes of discrepancies between expectations and experiences. Cognitive dissonance theory describes the discomfort arising from discrepancies between beliefs and behaviors, in general, but does not deal with undermet or overmet beliefs and expectations, specifically. Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005) provides the most relevant theoretical base for interpreting sojourner adjustment in terms of expectation-experience discrepancies as it discusses both positive and negative violations of expectations and consequent positive and negative outcomes; however, EVT is specifically grounded in communication theory and refers to expectations about nonverbal behaviors in interpersonal encounters and their implications for outcomes such as attraction, credibility and persuasion. Beyond these theoretical underpinnings and consistent with the accuracy hypothesis, there is also the concept of met expectations arising from research on job performance and satisfaction in organizational psychology. The met expectations hypothesis asserts that congruency between expectations and experiences produces the most positive outcomes (Porter & Steers, 1973; Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992); however, the underlying mechanisms for the process and outcomes have not been elaborated. In short, there is no integrated theory that addresses the processes and outcomes of expectation-experience matches and mismatches in relation to well-being during cross-cultural transitions.

Third, there has been considerable variation in the research methods used in investigations of expectation-experience discrepancies and cross-cultural adjustment, making it difficult to reconcile findings across studies. Moreover, some of the research designs have been fundamentally flawed, calling into question issues of reliability and validity. These issues are elaborated in the next section where we describe the research findings.

Expectations, experiences and well-being

Research findings on the accuracy and directional hypotheses have been highly variable. Neither Weissman and Furnham's (1987) study, which surveyed American expatriates both pre-departure and post-arrival in London, nor Rogers and Ward's (1993) research

with international students during their overseas sojourn and after return to their home country found support for the accuracy hypothesis. In contrast, more recent and robust research by Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013) found conditional support for the accuracy hypothesis. Surveying Ingrian-Finnish immigrants before departure from Russia and again 3–15 months after arrival in Finland, their findings revealed that immigrants had the most positive well-being outcomes when they expected and experienced low levels of social difficulties and discrimination. At the same time, however, they also found support for the directional hypothesis: psychological well-being was lower when immigrants anticipated fewer sociocultural difficulties than they actually experienced and higher when stress was lower than anticipated. Support for the directional hypothesis was also reported in a parallel study by Mähönen, Leinonen, and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013), which examined the social and economic expectations in Ingrian-Finnish immigrants. In this instance it was found that the greater extent to which social expectations were exceeded, the higher the levels of life satisfaction and positive mood.

One reason that untangling the accuracy and directional hypotheses has been difficult is that diverse methods and measurements have been employed across studies. Negy et al.'s (2009) research examined the expectations and experiences of Latino/a immigrants in the United States in four domains, i.e., communication, safety, finances and racism. They classified the differences between immigrants' expectations and experiences into three categories- positive, negative or no discrepancies- or in other words, overmet, undermet and met expectations. Then the level of acculturative stress was compared across these groups. With the exception of communication expectations, there were no significant differences in acculturative stress between the met and overmet expectations groups; however, those with met expectations about safety and racism had lower levels of acculturative stress than those with undermet expectations. The findings provide some support for the directional hypothesis and draw attention to variation across expectation domains. Similar findings were reported by Black and Gregersen (1990) in their research with American expatriates, which examined expectations and experiences of living conditions in Japan. In this case, however, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which their expectations had been met on a 1 (*very undermet-less than expected*) to 5 (*very overmet-more than expected*) scale while overseas. The results revealed that overmet expectations (positive mismatches) were related to greater general satisfaction. Black's (1992) study of repatriation yielded the same pattern of findings. American expatriates who had overmet expectations about returning home had the highest level of post-return adjustment, followed by those with met expectations; those with undermet expectations had the lowest level of adjustment.

Martin et al.'s (1995) approach to testing the directional hypothesis with American students used a different analytical approach. Discrepancy scores for students' expected and experienced difficulties before and during a semester abroad were computed, producing a continuous variable ranging from negative (undermet) to positive (overmet) scores. Findings showed that participants generally reported more favorable experiences than anticipated and that a positive, albeit weak, correlation was observed between the extent to which expectations were overmet and satisfaction with the sojourn. Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, and Burgi (2001) adopted the same approach in their study of multinational expatriates on overseas assignments across 29 countries. They found that cross-cultural adjustment varied as a function of the extent to which expectations about intercultural interactions, cultural differences and "culture shock" were overmet.

Reviewing the limited literature on expectations, experiences and well-being in the context of cross-cultural transition, it appears that there is stronger support for the directional, compared to the accuracy, hypothesis. Before reaching this conclusion, however, there are three important issues to consider across these studies. These are: the discrepancy measures and statistical analyses used for hypothesis testing; the data collection procedures; and the characteristics of the samples.

On the first count, only three studies have investigated both *magnitude* (extent of match/mismatch) and *direction* (positive mismatch vs. negative mismatch) of expectation-experience discrepancies. Although using different analytical approaches, all found support for the directional hypothesis (Mähönen et al., 2013; Rogers & Ward, 1993), and one also found conditional support for the accuracy hypothesis (Mähönen & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013). The early study by Rogers and Ward (1993) simply used absolute difference and discrepancy scores for expectations and experiences of social difficulties and correlated these with the psychological adaptation of international students on re-entry. The more robust studies by Mähönen and associates used polynomial regression and surface response analysis to test the effects of expectations and experiences on psychological well-being (Mähönen & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2013; Mähönen et al., 2013). We propose a third, parsimonious but powerful, approach to assess the magnitude and direction of expectation-experience discrepancies and their effects on well-being outcomes. This involves the computation of a separate continuous magnitude of discrepancy score and a dichotomous direction of discrepancy score for each research participant. Both the independent and interaction effects of these two variables can then be examined through linear regression, providing an unambiguous and thorough test of the accuracy and directional hypotheses.

Second, most of the studies (Black & Gregersen, 1990; Black, 1992; Caligiuri et al., 2001; Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995; Negy et al., 2009) have relied on retrospective reporting for either expectations or experiences. This is problematic as studies of hindsight bias demonstrate that knowledge of outcomes shapes recollections of the past, calling into question the accuracy of retrospective reporting (Erdfelder, Brandt, & Bröder, 2007). More broadly, research in cognitive psychology has suggested that retrospective reporting can undermine the internal validity of studies involving auto-biographical memory (Schwarz & Sudman, 2012). In addition, empirical agreement between prospective and retrospective measures is often poor (for a recent example see Baldwin, Reuben, Newbury, & Danese, 2019). Consequently, longitudinal designs are required to ensure reliable and valid research on expectation-experience discrepancies.

Third, many of the studies have relatively small sample sizes (i.e., $N < 80$; Black & Gregersen, 1990; Caligiuri et al., 2001; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Weissman & Furnham, 1987). These smaller samples limit the statistical power and reliability of the findings. Moreover, with the exception of Caligiuri et al. (2001), all studies relied on cross-cultural travelers either coming from and/or going to a single country. As country of origin and country of destination are both known to exert influence on sojourners' psychological and

sociocultural adaptation (Geeraert, Li, Ward, Gelfand, & Demes, 2019), this may account for at least some of the inconsistencies in research findings. We address these limitations in the current research.

The present study

The present study builds on previous research to examine the accuracy and directional hypotheses using data from a multinational longitudinal sojourner project (see Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Geeraert et al., 2019). Sojourners' expectations about their psychological and sociocultural adaptation in their host country were assessed approximately one month before they travelled and their experience of adaptation two weeks (entry stage) and five months after arrival in the host country. The extent to which sojourners' expectations and experiences differ will be examined through correlational and mean comparison testing.

The accuracy and directional hypotheses are examined by assessing the extent to which expectation-experience discrepancies influence sojourners well-being on entry and five months post-arrival to the host country using a new analytical approach. Possible relationships between the adaptation expectation-experience discrepancy and well-being are shown in Fig. 1, distinguishing between direction (positive vs. negative mismatch) and magnitude (small to large). Statistically, these components are operationalized as the absolute difference score of the discrepancy for magnitude and as a simple contrast to indicate direction (1, −1).

For an *accuracy effect* to occur, a larger discrepancy would be related to poorer well-being, regardless of the direction of the discrepancy. Thus, when decomposed into magnitude and direction, the accuracy hypothesis would be supported by the presence of an effect of magnitude, in the absence of an effect of direction. In contrast, a *directional effect* would occur if a greater discrepancy is related to lower well-being only when there is a negative mismatch or to higher well-being only when there is a positive mismatch. In sum, the directional hypothesis would predict a combined effect of magnitude and direction (i.e., a statistical interaction).

Method

Design and participants

Data were analyzed from a longitudinal acculturation project (see Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Geeraert et al., 2019)[1], in which 2480 young adults (age: $M = 17.0$ years, $SD = 1.4$ years; 70 % female) participating in an intercultural exchange program, were surveyed over an 18-month period, from 2 months before to approximately 6 months after the exchange. All participants were registered with AFS Intercultural Programs, a non-profit, volunteer-based organization offering international exchange programs. Typically, students are placed with a host family for the duration of their 8- to 10-month stay abroad, and during this time they enroll at a local high school. Each sojourner in this study was traveling from 1 of 46 different home countries (or regions) to 1 of 51 different host destinations (see Table 1).

Participants and their parents were informed about the study prior to participation, with consent obtained from participants and their parents (for minors). Ethics for the study was granted by the University of Essex' Ethics Committee.

Sojourners were surveyed a total of nine times, but for the purpose of the current research, we focused on data collected during three waves (t2, t3, and t5) because our measures of interest were assessed at only these times. Waves occurred approximately 1 month before (t2), 2 weeks after (t3), and 5 months after (t5) arrival to the host country. At each wave participants were invited by e-mail to visit the project website, log in, and complete an online survey.

Psychological and sociocultural adaptation to the host country and well-being were measured at each wave. Crucially however, adaptation was operationalized as *expected adaptation* pre-sojourn (t2) and as *experienced adaptation* at the start (t3) and 5 months into the sojourn (t5). Few studies have examined expectations and experiences of adaptation, and none have done so over time.

Participants needed to have completed the pre-departure survey (t2) and at least one of the critical surveys during the exchange (t3 and t5), resulting in a final sample size of 1762. Samples vary slightly across analyses ($N_{t3} = 1700$, $N_{t5} = 1471$, $N_{t3\&t5} = 1409$).

Measures

Surveys were administered in 10 different languages (English, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai, and Turkish), covering those most commonly spoken among participants. More than 20 different concepts were recorded through the online surveys, but here we concentrate on only those measures relevant to the present research questions. Questions were personalized to the participant with regards to the host and home culture.

Well-being

Positive and negative indicators of well-being were operationalized through measures of satisfaction with life and perceived stress. The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was administered at each wave. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a 7-point scale (1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), on items such as "on the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Reliability was good at all waves (α's > .80).

[1] The ESRC funded project was created to examine different aspects of the acculturation process. Earlier papers have looked at stress trajectories (Demes & Geeraert, 2015) and the impact of looseness – tightness on adaptation (Geeraert et al., 2019). The current study on expectations has a different focus, yet like the other topics was planned at the design stage.

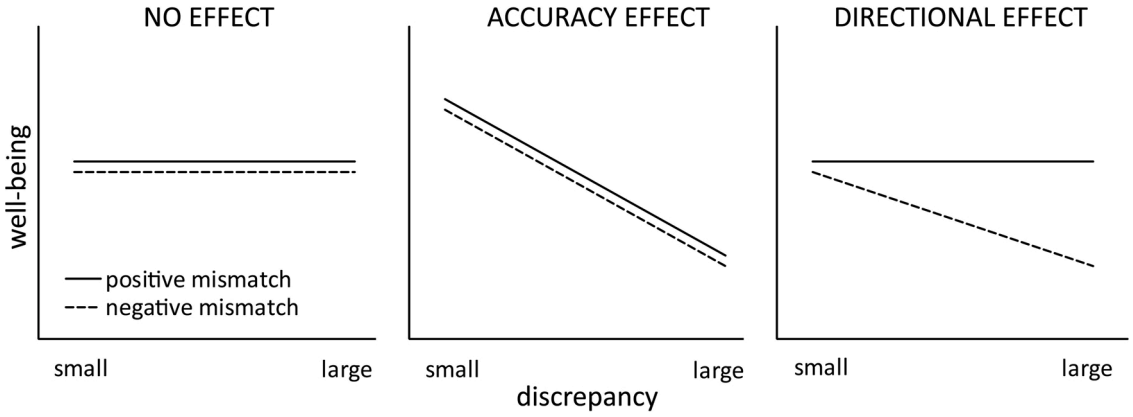

Fig. 1. Possible effects of the expectations – experience mismatch on well-being.

A short 4-item version of the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) was administered at each wave. Participants were asked to indicate frequency on a 7-point scale (1= never, 7 = always) on items such as "In the last 2 weeks how often have you felt you were unable to control the important things in your life." Reliability was good at all waves (α's > .70).

Cultural adaptation

Two scales were used to assess sociocultural and psychological dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990). Crucially, these scales assessed sojourners' general expectations pre-travel (t2) as well as experiences at entry (t3) and 5 months into the sojourn (t5).

The 12-item Brief Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (Demes & Geeraert, 2014) was adapted to measure sojourners' expected (pre-sojourn) and experienced (during the sojourn) ease of behavioral adaptation to social and cultural elements of the host country. The stem of the scale was subtly different at t2 ("Think about living in [name of the host country]. How easy or difficult *do you think it will be* for you to adapt to …"), compared to t3 and t5 ("Think about living in [name of the host country]. How easy or difficult *is it* for you to adapt to …"). Thus, participants indicated their expected / experienced difficulty using a 7-point scale (1 = very difficult, 7 = very easy) on items such as "practicalities (getting around, using public transport, shopping)", and "social norms (how to behave in public, style of clothes, what people think is funny)." Reliability was good at all waves (α's > .80).

The 8-item Brief Psychological Adaptation Scale (Demes & Geeraert, 2014) was adapted to measure sojourners' expected (pre-sojourn) and experienced (during the sojourn) emotional and psychological aspects specific to a cultural relocation. Again, the stem of the questions was subtly different at t2 ("Think about living in [name of the host country]. *How often do you think you will feel …*") and t3 and t5 ("Think about living in [name of the host country]. *In the last 2 weeks how often have you felt …*"). Thus, participants were asked to indicate their expected / experienced frequency on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always) on items such as "excited about being in [name of the host country]" and "homesick when you think of [name of the home country]". Reliability was good at all waves (α's > .70).

Data analytic strategy

Data analyses are conducted through a series of steps. First, the nature of the relationship between expectations and experiences is examined statistically through a series of correlations and mean comparisons to establish whether participants' experiences deviate from their expectations. Next, the effect of adaptation expectation-experience discrepancies on sojourner's well-being on entry (t3) to the host country is assessed using a moderated regression approach. Controlling for pre-travel well-being, the independent contributions of entry well-being and the magnitude (absolute difference scores) and direction (positive/negative difference) of expectation-experience discrepancies are tested, followed by the inclusion of the interaction term of magnitude and direction. Finally, the same analyses are conducted to examine the effect of the adaptation expectation-experience discrepancies on well-being 5 months after arrival (t5). Assumptions for moderated regression were met in all analyses[2] .

With regards to significance testing, the large sample size of the study ($N > 1400$) increases the chance of Type I error, that is, incorrect rejection of the null hypothesis. Some scholars have argued that α should be adjusted to minimize the overall chance of

[2] Magnitude, computed as the absolute score of a normally distributed variable centered around 0, was expected to be positively skewed (i.e. a Poisson distribution). This was confirmed to be the case through visual inspection of the magnitude predictor variable. Although MLR has assumptions around normality of the criterion, crucially no such assumptions are made for predictor variables. The assumptions of MLR were tested for each analysis through inspection of the residuals and normality tests. These analyses confirmed 1) the outcomes (stress and satisfaction with life) and their residuals were normally distributed, 2) the relationships were linear, and 3) there was no issue with heteroscedasticity. In addition, multicollinearity statistics were conducted and are reported in the text.

Table 1
Sample size (N) and proportion of the sample (%) per country travelled from (home) and country travelled to (Host). Countries and regions are grouped by continent and listed alphabetically.

	home		host	
Countries	N	%	N	%
Africa				
Egypt	0	.0	5	.3
Ghana	7	.4	2	.1
Kenya	0	.0	1	.1
South Africa	0	.0	10	.6
Tunisia	0	.0	3	.2
Africa total	7	.4	21	1.2
Asia				
China	37	2.1	53	3.0
Hong Kong	18	1.0	5	.3
India	11	.6	8	.5
Indonesia	7	.4	2	.1
Japan	38	2.2	71	4.0
Malaysia	8	.5	11	.6
Philippines	3	.2	5	.3
Thailand	237	13.5	23	1.3
Turkey	36	2.0	12	.7
Asia total	395	22.4	190	10.8
Europe				
Austria	46	2.6	17	1.0
Belgium	48	2.8	58	3.3
Czech Rep.	5	.3	14	.8
Denmark	18	1.0	47	2.7
Finland	43	2.4	32	1.8
France	60	3.4	35	2.0
Germany	244	13.8	177	10.0
Hungary	11	.6	21	1.2
Iceland	2	.1	12	.7
Italy	332	18.8	87	4.9
Latvia	0	.0	5	.3
Netherlands	1	.1	17	1.0
Norway	76	4.3	36	2.0
Portugal	3	.2	18	1.0
Russia	3	.2	27	1.5
Spain	10	.6	11	.6
Sweden	7	.4	20	1.1
Switzerland	47	2.7	43	2.4
Europe total	956	54.3	677	38.4
North America				
Canada	10	.6	48	2.7
USA	89	5.1	434	24.6
North America total	99	5.6	482	27.4
Oceania				
Australia	6	.3	18	1.0
New Zealand	47	2.7	44	2.5
Oceania Total	53	3.0	62	3.5
Latin America				
Argentina	12	.7	75	4.3
Bolivia	2	.1	11	.6
Brazil	85	4.8	47	2.7
Chile	50	2.8	29	1.6
Colombia	16	.9	6	.3
Costa Rica	21	1.2	34	1.9
Dominican Rep.	8	.5	28	1.6
Ecuador	8	.5	15	.9
Honduras	4	.2	12	.7
Mexico	23	1.3	17	1.0
Panama	3	.2	19	1.1
Paraguay	8	.5	12	.7
Peru	2	.1	13	.7

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

	home		host	
Countries	N	%	N	%
Venezuela	10	.6	12	.7
Latin America total	252	14.3	330	18.7

committing either a Type I or Type II error (see for instance Mudge, Baker, Edge, & Houlahan, 2012). For these reasons, the significance threshold was adjusted to a stricter level of $\alpha = .005$.

Results

Contrasting expectations with experiences

First, the relationship between sojourner's pre-travel expectations about adaptation and their actual cultural adaptation on entry and 5 months after arrival were examined by means of bivariate correlations. Results show that pre-travel adaptation expectations (at t2) were significantly and positively correlated with adaptation experience at both time waves, for both sociocultural (t3: $r = .52$, $p < .001$, t5: $r = .35$, $p < .001$) and psychological adaptation (t3: $r = .42$, $p < .001$, t5: $r = .29$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that participants who had higher pre-travel expectations were seemingly more adapted, both on entry and 5 months after arrival.

Next, to examine the extent to which expectations and experience differed, repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted for adaptation across the 3 time waves (t2 *vs.* t3 *vs.* t5). For sociocultural adaptation, the analysis revealed an effect of time, $F(2, 2816) = 156.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Results showed that compared to pre-travel expectations ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .91$), sojourners reported higher levels of sociocultural adaptation both at entry ($M = 4.87$, $SD = .94$, $p < .001$) and 5 months after arrival ($M = 4.91$, $SD = .94$, $p < .001$). According to our criteria, the difference between the latter time points was not deemed significant ($p = .02$).

The same analysis for psychological adaptation also revealed an effect of time, $F(2, 2816) = 90.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Compared to pre-travel expectations ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .65$), higher levels of psychological adaptation were observed at entry ($M = 4.81$, $SD = .96$, $p < .001$) and 5 months after arrival ($M = 4.88$, $SD = .99$, $p < .001$), with no difference between the latter time points ($p = .08$). Taken together, these results indicate participants were overall more adapted than they expected to be. Put differently, sojourners underestimated how well adapted they would be on entry and 5 months after arrival.

Although these findings suggest a positive mismatch at the mean level, visual inspection of the data nevertheless showed an occurrence of both positive and negative mismatches with varying magnitude. Next, we explore whether variation in the degree to which expectations were met or not, had implications for sojourners' well- being on entry to the host country.

Preliminary analyses

The discrepancy between pre-travel adaptation expectations and adaptation experiences was decomposed into its magnitude (absolute difference) and direction (positive/negative) components. For each type of adaptation and at each time point (t3, t5), adaptation was regressed on adaptation expectations (t2). From this analysis, the standardized residuals were saved for sociocultural ($min = –4.93$, $max = 3.42$) and psychological ($min = –4.26$, $max = 2.84$) adaptation, representing the difference between adaptation during the sojourn and the values predicted by the pre-travel expectations.

The magnitude and direction variables were derived from these discrepancy scores. The absolute value of the discrepancy score for sociocultural ($range_{t3} = [0, 4.77]$, $range_{t5} = [0, 4.93]$) and psychological ($range_{t3} = [0, 4.26]$, $range_{t5} = [0, 3.40]$) adaptation serves as a measure of magnitude of the expectation-experience discrepancy. Small scores represent minor deviations in experience from expectations while larger scores represent greater deviations. Direction is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the discrepancy between expectations and experience is positive or negative. Positive discrepancy scores indicate that participants were more adapted than expected and negative scores indicate that participants were less adapted than expected. Therefore, a positive mismatch was coded as 1, and a negative mismatch as -1. In summary, the *magnitude* variable describes the degree of the discrepancy between expectations and experience or the absolute difference, and *direction* indicates whether the discrepancy was in a positive or negative direction.

Implications for perceived stress

Using a series of moderated regressions, the influence of magnitude and direction of expectation-experience discrepancies on sojourners' stress was examined. Each analysis consisted of a series of steps. First, pre-travel baseline of the dependent variable was entered. Second, the magnitude and direction variables for the relevant adaptation measure were added. In the third step, the product of magnitude and direction (the interaction term) was added. Prior to conducting these analyses, predictors were centered as appropriate for moderated regression. In terms of multicollinearity, none of the predictors were strongly correlated (all r's $<.25$), and a further inspection suggested no issues with multicollinearity in any analyses (all Tolerance's $> .90$, all VIF's < 1.10). Separate analyses were conducted for sociocultural and psychological adaptation and for each timewave (t3, t5) resulting in four analyses in total (see Table 2).

Table 2
The effect of the expectation - experience mismatch on perceived stress. Results of four moderated regression analyses are shown, examining the role of magnitude and direction, for sociocultural and psychological adaptation, at entry (t3) and 5 months after arrival (t5). Betas, significance levels, and summary statistics are provided for each analysis.

	sociocultural adaptation						psychological adaptation					
	at entry (t3)			5 months after entry (t5)			at entry (t3)			5 months after entry (t5)		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
baseline	.48**	.45**	.43**	.40**	.37**	.36**	.48**	.41**	.40**	.40**	.35**	.33**
magnitude		.08**	.04		−.01	−.04		.10**	.03		.10**	.03
direction		−.27**	−.27**		−.27**	−.27**		−.41**	−.41**		−.40**	−.41**
interaction			−.21**			−.22**			−.30**			−.31**
R^2	.23	.31	.35	.16	.23	.28	.23	.40	.49	.16	.34	.43
F	502.38**	249.40**	227.83**	280.03**	145.85**	141.26**	502.38**	383.22**	405.20**	280.03**	248.49**	274.13**
df	1, 1698	3, 1696	4, 1695	1, 1469	3, 1467	4, 1466	1, 1698	3, 1696	4, 1695	1, 1469	3, 1467	4, 1466
ΔR^2		.08	.04		.07	.05		.18	.09		.18	.09
ΔF		95.07**	113.49**		66.30**	98.44**		249.97**	281.20**		195.62**	233.13**
Δdf		2, 1696	1, 1695		2, 1467	1, 1466		2, 1696	1, 1695		2, 1467	1, 1466

Note. † $p < .01$, * $p < .005$, ** $p < .001$.

Sociocultural adaptation

Looking at stress on entry (t3), baseline stress (t2) accounted for 23 % of the variance. The addition of magnitude and direction accounted for a further 8 % of the variance. For magnitude, bigger expectation-experience discrepancies were related to an increase in stress compared to baseline ($\beta = .08$, $p < .001$). For direction, a negative effect ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .001$), indicated that stress was negatively associated with positive mismatches and positively associated with negative mismatches. Importantly, the addition of the interaction term explained a further 4% of the variance in stress. The significant interaction ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) indicates that the effect of magnitude was qualified by direction in support of a directional hypothesis. Subsequent simple slope analyses (see Fig. 2, top left graph) revealed that a larger discrepancy was associated with a decrease in stress on entry when the mismatch was positive ($B = -.28$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), but exacerbated stress when the mismatch was negative ($B = .42$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$).

These analyses were repeated for stress at t5 (5 months after arrival). Controlling for baseline, direction, but not magnitude, was associated with lower stress. This effect was again qualified by an interaction between magnitude and direction ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$). Simple slope analyses (see Fig. 2, bottom left graph) showed a larger discrepancy was associated with a decrease in stress when the mismatch was positive ($B = -.47$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), but exacerbated stress when the mismatch was negative ($B = .34$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$).

Psychological adaptation

For psychological adaptation magnitude and direction accounted for an additional 18 % of the variance in stress on entry. Again, magnitude ($\beta = .10$, $p < .001$) and direction ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$) were both significant explanatory variables. The addition of the magnitude-by-direction interaction accounted for a further 9% of the variance. Simple slopes analyses (see Fig. 2, top right graph) showed again that the size of the discrepancy was associated with a decrease in stress when the mismatch was positive ($B = -.46$, $SE =$

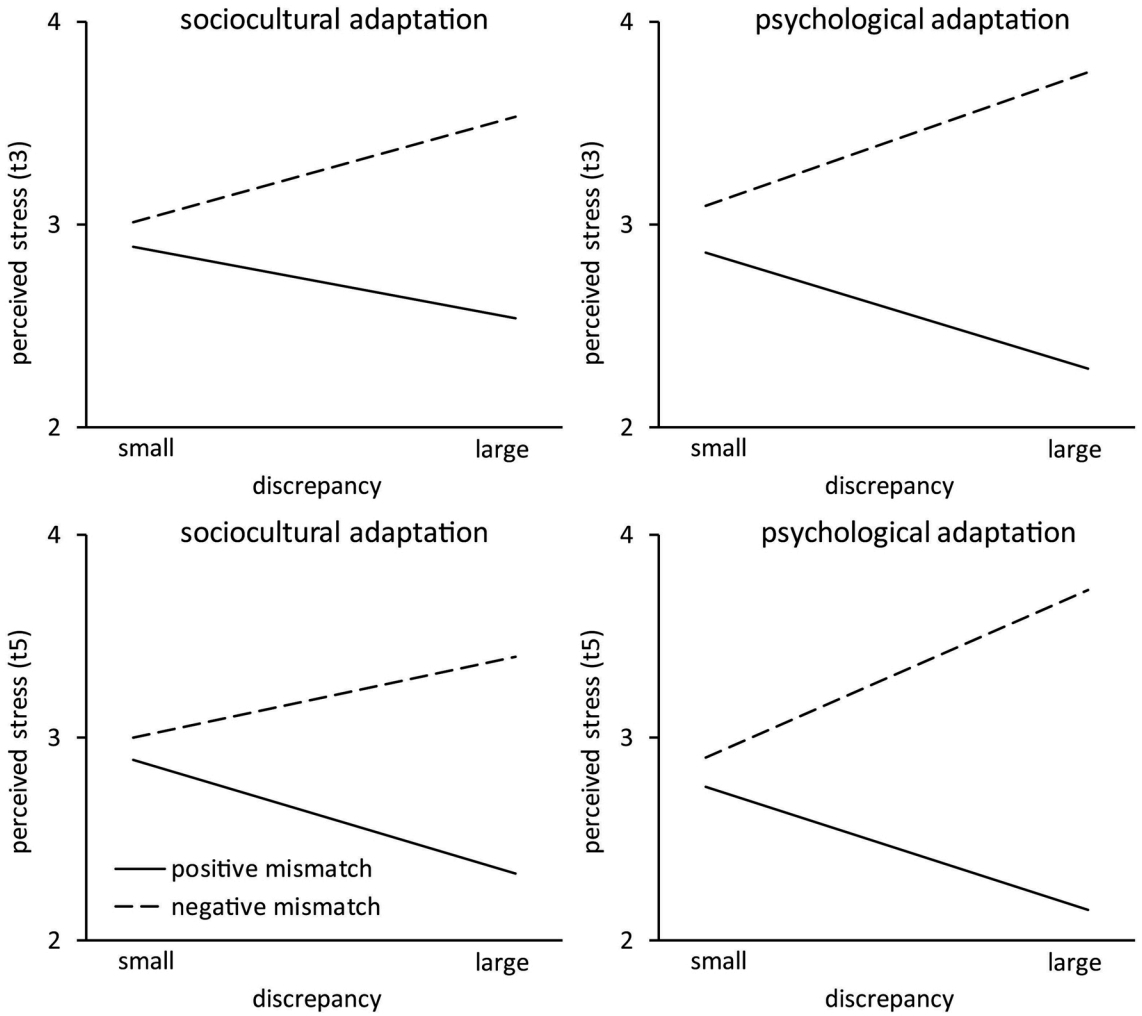

Fig. 2. Simple slope analyses showing levels of perceived stress at entry (t3, top panels) and 5 months after arrival (t5, bottom panels) as a function of magnitude (small to large) and direction (negative vs positive mismatch) of the discrepancy between expectations (t2) and experience of sociocultural (left panels) and psychological adaptation (right panels).

Table 3
The effect of the expectation - experience mismatch on satisfaction with life. Results of four moderated regression analyses are shown, examining the role of magnitude and direction, for sociocultural and psychological adaptation, at entry (t3) and 5 months after arrival (t5). Betas, significance levels, and summary statistics are provided for each analysis.

	sociocultural adaptation						psychological adaptation					
	at entry (t3)			5 months after entry (t5)			at entry (t3)			5 months after entry (t5)		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
baseline	.61**	.59**	.58**	.54**	.51**	.50**	.61**	.59**	.59**	.54**	.49**	.47**
magnitude		−.05†	−.02		−.06*	−.04		−.07**	−.02		−.10**	−.05
direction		.22**	.22**		.24**	.24**		.27**	.27**		.32**	.33**
interaction			.13**			.20**			.17**			.22**
R^2	.38	.43	.45	.29	.35	.39	.38	.45	.48	.29	.41	.45
F	1026.54**	423.64**	340. 41**	597.48**	262.72**	321.04**	1026.54**	470.59**	389.77**	597.48**	332.39**	300.76**
df	1, 1698	3, 1696	3, 1695	1, 1469	3, 1467	4, 1466	1, 1698	3, 1696	3, 1695	1, 1469	3, 1467	4, 1466
ΔR^2		.05	.02		.06	.04		.08	.03		.12	.05
ΔF		76.53**	51.67**		68.07**	88.81**		120.42**	80.84**		142.35**	122.98**
Δdf		2, 1696	1, 1695		2, 1467	1, 1466		2, 1696	1, 1695		2, 1467	1, 1466

Note. † $p < .01$, * $p < .005$, ** $p < .001$.

.05, $p < .001$) but an increase in stress when the mismatch was negative ($B = .55$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$).

An identical pattern of results emerged in the analysis of stress at t5. Simple slopes analyses (see Fig. 2, bottom right graph) showed that the scale of the discrepancy was associated with a decrease in stress when the mismatch was positive ($B = -.51$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) but an increase in stress when the mismatch was negative ($B = .62$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$).

As a set, these results for stress at entry and 5 months after arrival are consistent with the directional hypothesis. Suggesting that a mismatch can have both positive and negative implications depending on the positive or negative direction of the mismatch, respectively.

Implications for satisfaction with life

The analyses were repeated for satisfaction with life at entry (t3) and 5 months after arrival (t5). There were no issues with multicollinearity (r's $< .25$, Tolerance's $> .90$, VIF's < 1.10). Analyses were conducted separately for both sociocultural and psychological adaptation and timewaves (see Table 3).

Sociocultural adaptation

For satisfaction with life on entry (t3), the baseline (t2) accounted for 38 % of the variance. In the next step direction was independently associated with satisfaction with life on entry ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), but magnitude was not. The addition of the interaction term ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$) explained a further 2% of the variance. Simple slopes analyses (see Fig. 3, top left graph) revealed a conceptually identical (but reversed) pattern of results to that for stress, consistent with the positively valenced nature of the satisfaction with life measure. Specifically, when participants experienced a positive mismatch, a larger discrepancy between expectation

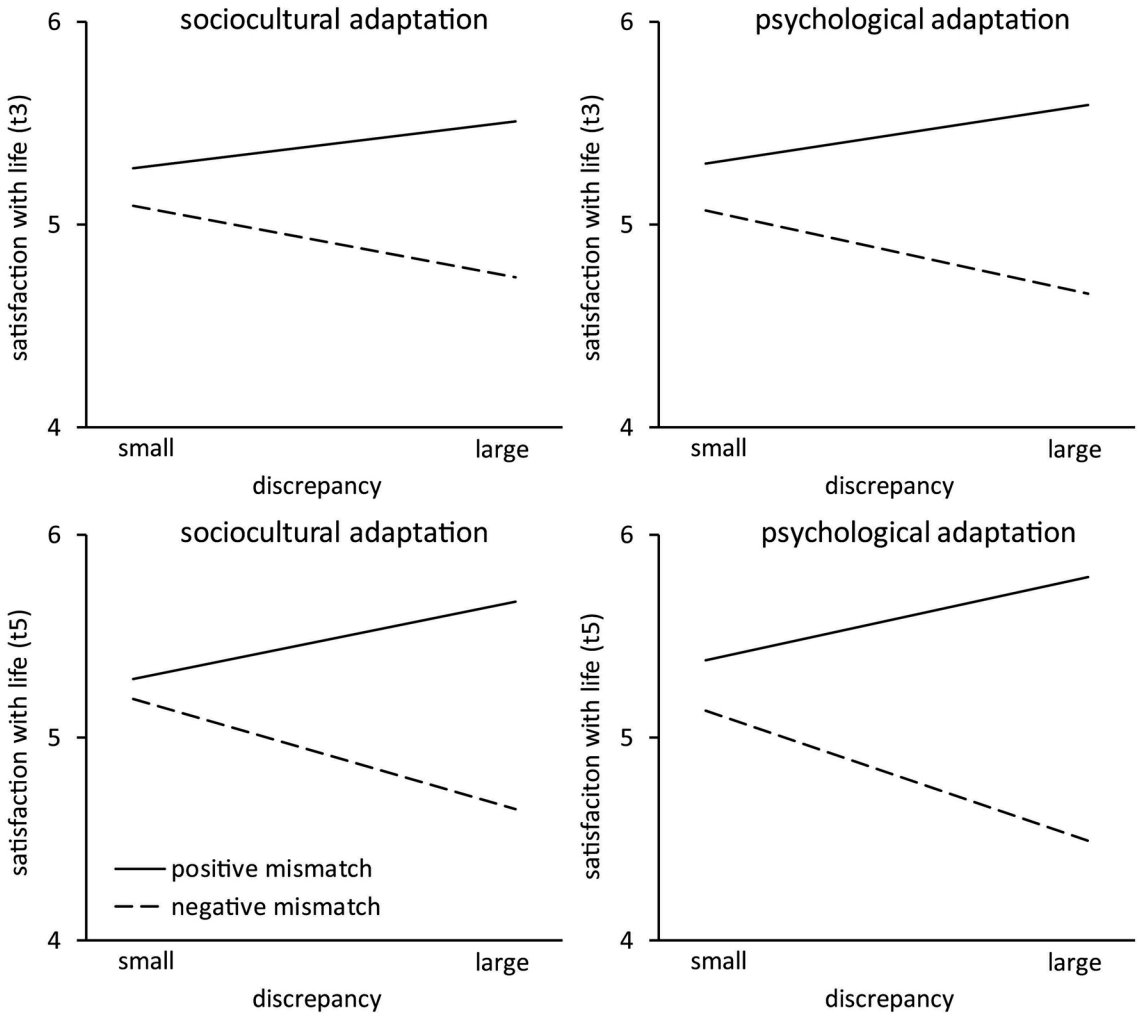

Fig. 3. Simple slope analyses showing levels of satisfaction with life at entry (t3, top panels) and 5 months after arrival (t5, bottom panels) as a function of magnitude (small to large) and direction (negative vs positive mismatch) of the discrepancy between expectations (t2) and experience of sociocultural (left panels) and psychological adaptation (right panels).

and experience was associated with an increase in well-being ($B = .18$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). However, when the mismatch was negative, a large discrepancy was associated with lower well-being ($B = -.28$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$).

The analyses were repeated for satisfaction with life at t5. Again, the interaction was significant ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$). Simple slopes analyses (see Fig. 3, bottom left graph) showed an identical pattern of results. A larger discrepancy between expectation and experience was associated with an increase in well-being for a positive mismatch ($B = .31$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) but a decrease in well-being for a negative mismatch ($B = -.45$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$).

Psychological adaptation

After controlling for baseline (t2), the magnitude and direction of the expectation-experience discrepancy for psychological adaptation accounted for 8 % of the variance in satisfaction with life on entry. Larger mismatches were related to a drop ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .001$), and positive mismatches were related to an increase in satisfaction with life ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$). The significant interaction term ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$) eradicated the effect of magnitude, but not of direction. Simple slopes analyses (see Fig. 3, top right graph) showed that the relationship between satisfaction with life and size of the discrepancy was positive when the mismatch was positive ($B = .24$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) but negative when the mismatch was negative ($B = -.34$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$).

An identical pattern of results emerged in the analysis for life satisfaction at t5. Simple slopes analyses (see Fig. 3, bottom right graph) showed that the relationship between satisfaction with life and size of the discrepancy was positive when the mismatch was positive ($B = .34$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) but negative when the mismatch was negative ($B = -.53$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$).

Taken together, the results of these analyses show strong and consistent support for a directional effect of adaptation expectation-experience discrepancies on satisfaction with life. When mismatches are small, the direction of mismatch appears to matter little; however, for greater mismatches the direction matters.

Sensitivity analyses

To ensure the findings were robust, a number of additional analyses were conducted. Specifically, age and gender were analyzed as an individual level control variable. First, a series of analyses was conducted in which adaptation and well-being were regressed on age and gender. These analyses revealed that compared to females, males reported higher levels of sociocultural (at t2, t3, t5) and psychological (at t2, t3) adaptation and lower levels of perceived stress (at t2, t3). No effects of age emerged. Next, the adaptation difference score was regressed on age and gender. Interestingly, in contrast to females, males at entry (t3) reported higher levels of experienced adaptation compared to expectations. This occurred for both sociocultural and psychological adaptation (both p's $< .001$). No other effects emerged. Finally, age and gender were added as control variables to all main analyses. Crucially, the addition of the control variables did not alter any of the patterns in any way.

Discussion

Using data from a longitudinal sojourner project the relationship between expected and experienced adaptation was examined. Although both correlated, AFS sojourners' pre-travel expected psychological and sociocultural adaptation was lower than their experienced adaptation during the sojourn. This differs in part from findings by Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013) in their longitudinal research with ethnic immigrants to Finland who expected significantly more acculturative stress but less discrimination than they actually experienced despite being fairly accurate in their sociocultural adaptation expectations. A companion study reported that these immigrants had higher quality of life expectations in social and economic domains than they experienced after arrival in Finland (Mähönen et al., 2013). Across studies these findings point to variations in the pattern of relationships between expectations and experiences by group characteristics and expectation domains. Certainly, the AFS sojourners from our study are different from other acculturation populations in a number of ways. As one of the leading exchange organizers, AFS prides itself in giving its participants the best possible preparation, this will include setting realistic, not overly optimistic, expectations. Another notable feature, is the support received from host families, which will help sojourners in their adaptation process. Thus, our participants will have had increased awareness of challenges before going overseas and will have had support in place to minimize them post-arrival.

More importantly, the degree to which expectations were met (or not) was associated with sojourners' well-being in the host country. Using a novel approach, well-being was regressed on the direction and magnitude of the adaptation expectation-experience discrepancies. Analyses conducted across time, types of adaptation, and different measures of well-being showed a consistent pattern. Compared to small discrepancies, large discrepancies were associated with increased well-being for positive mismatches and decreased well-being for negative mismatches.

The finding that the relationship between unmet expectations and well-being varies as a function of the direction of expectation-experience discrepancy is clearly in line with the directional hypothesis. Although Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti's (2013) study revealed partial support for the accuracy hypothesis, most others have provided evidence of a directional effect of the expectation-experience mismatch on sojourner and immigrant adjustment. Indeed, studies have provided evidence for both the positive effect of overmet expectations (Black & Gregerson, 1990; Martin et al., 1995) and the negative effect of undermet expectations (Negy et al., 2009; Rogers & Ward, 1993).

The findings of the present study can best be interpreted by the Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005). According to the theory, individuals assess behavior in light of prior expectations. Expectation violation or expectation-experience discrepancy will lead to arousal. In turn, the arousal will cause the individual to initiate a process of cognitive appraisal of the violation. Thus, sojourners with better than expected adaptation are likely to appraise 'the violation' positively. Yet,

when the adaptation is worse than expected, the evaluation process would lead to a negative appraisal. Naturally, other mechanisms may also be at play. For instance, having overly positive expectations can result in negative consequences. Research on optimism has shown that underestimating one's risk of experiencing negative health outcomes can lead to a failure to engage in preventative measures (Bränström & Brandberg, 2010). Furthermore, pre-performance optimism may lead to greater disappointment if expectations are not met (Sweeny & Shepperd, 2010). In the context of sojourning, overestimating how easy adaptation would be, may result in both inadequate pre-travel preparation and a lower ability to cope with the psychological and practical challenges of adaptation.

In contrast, sojourners who expect adaptation to be more difficult may have worked hard to prepare and thus arrive in the host country able to cope both psychologically and practically. Other research has also shown that pleasant surprises can result in positive reactions. For example, Mellers, Schwartz, Ho, and Ritov (1997) found, in research on emotional reactions to the outcomes of risky decisions, that unexpected positive outcomes are more elating than expected positive outcomes. Shepperd and McNulty (2002) also found that research participants expected characters described in hypothetical scenarios to feel happier about unexpected positive outcomes than expected positive outcomes. In the present case sojourners may have felt extra satisfaction with the fact that adapting was easier than they expected and therefore reported an increase in satisfaction with life.

In terms of practical implications, our findings clearly suggest that sojourners do not benefit from overly positive expectations. Instead, having realistic expectations with an awareness of the challenges ahead may be crucial for long term adaptation. However, providers of overseas educational or work programs routinely portray sojourning as an exciting and pleasurable experience. Yet, budding sojourners would be better served by having more realistic expectations. Thus, sojourners should be made to reflect on likely challenges and avoid inflated expectations ahead of their travels, further emphasizing the important role sojourner organizations play in preparing sojourners.

Strengths and limitations

Addressing some of the limitations of past research, this study had a number of notable strengths. With nearly 1800 participants travelling to and from 50 different countries, the sample size and cultural diversity of the present study are clear strengths. Such a large and diverse sample will make the results on this topic more generalizable across cultures than previous studies. The longitudinal design allowed for expectations to be measured prior to travelling and experiences to be assessed soon after entry to the host country. Assessing expectations and experience as a current measure (as opposed to retrospectively) addresses important shortcomings of previous research. In addition, life satisfaction and perceived stress were recorded across timewaves, which allowed the examination of changes in well-being. A novel data-analytic approach was a further strength of the study. By decomposing the expectation-experience discrepancies into direction and magnitude, the independent contributions of each component could be explored.

In terms of limitations, it is unclear to what extent these findings can be generalized to other culturally mobile groups. Our sample consisted of a single particular type, exchange students, and thus caution should be taken in generalizing these results. However, we can speculate that these findings might be similar with other cross-cultural travelers such as expatriates or migrants (Black & Gregerson, 1990; Negy et al., 2009). Thus, future studies could examine whether these findings replicate in other samples. In addition, further research may wish to explore the external validity of these findings and examine possible moderators of the directional effect.

Conclusion

Building upon classic theories of expectancy violations (Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005) and stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and using robust methods and analyses, the current study provided evidence of the directional effect of an expectation-experience mismatch in the context of cross-cultural adaptation. Evidently, sojourners coped well with an unexpected positive experience, yet 'negative surprises' were more detrimental. In sum, expectations clearly matter, and thus the cross-cultural traveler can hope for the best, yet should prepare for the worst.

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