

Ups and Downs of the Expatriate Experience? Understanding Work Adjustment Trajectories and Career Outcomes

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We examine changes in work adjustment among 179 expatriates from 3 multinational organizations from predeparture through the first 9 months of a new international assignment. Our 10-wave results challenge classic U-shaped theories of expatriate adjustment (e.g., Torbiorn, 1982). Consistent with uncertainty reduction theory, our results instead suggest that expatriates typically experience a gradual increase in work adjustment over time. Two resources that expatriates bring to their assignments (previous culture-specific work experience and core self-evaluations) moderate the trajectory of work adjustment. Trajectory of adjustment predicts Month 9 career instrumentality and turnover intention, as well as career advancement (job promotion) 1.5 years further. Implications for theory, as well as for changes in expatriate management practices, are discussed.

Keywords: expatriate adjustment, core self-evaluations, uncertainty reduction, career instrumentality, job promotion

As global markets continue to open and merge, there has been steady growth in organizations assigning employees to work abroad (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2012). These overseas assignments remove employees from regular routines, colleagues, friends, and the security of home. Newly relocated expatriates must adapt to novel task environments in unfamiliar locations and are often inundated with different social or cultural standards and customs (Anderson, 1994). Because of the challenges involved in such experiences, along with the monetary and

career-related costs of failing to thrive in an overseas assignment, there is a great deal of research on *expatriate work adjustment* (the extent to which assignees adapt to and feel comfortable with work assignments and tasks in the host country; Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). It is widely considered to be a central, if not *the* central variable in expatriate research, as it has well-established links to a host of critical outcome variables (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Takeuchi, 2010).

This body of theory and evidence has recognized—even stipulated—that work adjustment is a dynamic process, unfolding and varying over time. Yet, with few exceptions (Firth, Chen, Kirkman, & Kim, 2014; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Horn, 2002), research has examined expatriate experiences from a static, rather than a dynamic perspective. Collectively, the lack of time sensitivity in expatriate investigations has prevented scholars from fully explaining the phenomenon. While available research provides a good understanding of the correlates of between-individual variation in expatriate work adjustment, it tends to ignore time-based aspects of the phenomenon, including how adjustment unfolds over time within individuals, what factors affect the speed of adjustment, and to what extent expatriate differences in adjustment trajectories matter to work outcomes. The incorporation of time into research allows a richer development of theory by allowing insight into how individuals develop, perform, and grow over time (Ployhart, Holtz, & Bliese, 2002), and can “change the way theoretical constructs and the relationships between them are conceptualized and . . . the propositions that derive from a theory” (George & Jones, 2000, p. 658). After reviewing 66 recent expatriate studies, and finding only three with

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more than one wave of data, with only one of those tracking adjustment changes past the initial assignment stage, Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005) were especially vocal about the need for understanding time-based patterns. They concluded, “although saying ‘more longitudinal research is needed’ might sound trite, we would say it is desperately needed in the expatriate area, especially with respect to mapping the pattern or stages of adjustment” (p. 274). Firth and colleagues (2014) took a step in this direction by examining expatriates longitudinally for their first 3 months overseas in four Western host countries. They call for studies over a longer period in a more diverse set of cultures to get “a more complete account” of how expatriate adjustment evolves, what moderates this evolution, and why it matters (p. 297).

There has also been a notable scarcity of research that aims to understand the expatriate experience from a career perspective (Hemmasi, Downes, & Varner, 2010; Stephens, Bird, & Mendenhall, 2002; Takeuchi, 2010). A major reason that individuals take international assignments is their expected *career instrumentality* (perceived value of the experience for professional goals) and *career advancement* (e.g., job promotion; Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011; Feldman, Folks, & Turnley, 1999; Fried, Grant, Levi, Hadani, & Slowik, 2007; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002). Organizations emphasize international experience as important to leadership development and as a prerequisite to moving into higher levels of responsibility (e.g., Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014). Studies suggest it is typical to begin an international experience with high expectations that the assignment will benefit one’s career (Stahl et al., 2002). For example, expatriates indicated they anticipated greater employment opportunities and wage growth than a comparison sample of domestic employees without international experience (Benson & Pattie, 2008). Yet, postassignment, individuals are often disappointed, with some characterizing their stint overseas as a major career misstep (Collings, Doherty,

Luethy, & Osborn, 2011). Descriptive estimates suggest only 20–30% of repatriates report assignments as having a positive career impact (Riusala & Suutari, 2000). It is quite common to quit the expatriating firm after returning home (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012). Decision to quit or *turnover intention* (from the organization, not the assignment) is thus another reflection of one’s career outcome and of great importance to the study of expatriation.

In the current study, we synthesize and address these lesser known but demonstrably important aspects of expatriate experience: trajectories over time, moderators of these trajectories, and a career perspective on the individual criterion space. Our study offers important empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions to the literature. With respect to empirical contributions, we employ one of the most extensive repeated-measures investigations on this topic to date. We survey expatriates from three large multinational organizations beginning at predeparture, and then once a month for the first 9 months of their assignment. We address three primary questions: How does work adjustment evolve from the point of departure through the first year? How do key resources (specifically, previous culture-specific work experience and core self-evaluations [CSE]) affect the shape of that trajectory? And, finally, what are the career-related consequences of the trajectory? A conceptual model portraying the relationships we will examine is shown in Figure 1.

Theoretically, we extend current conceptualizations of the expatriate experience by drawing upon uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and resource theory (Hobfoll, 2002) to develop and test predictions about the shape and moderators of expatriates’ work adjustment trajectory over their first year. We also argue that elucidating how expatriate adjustment unfolds over the multiple months of the assignment is an essential piece to understanding elementally longer term, more distal career out-

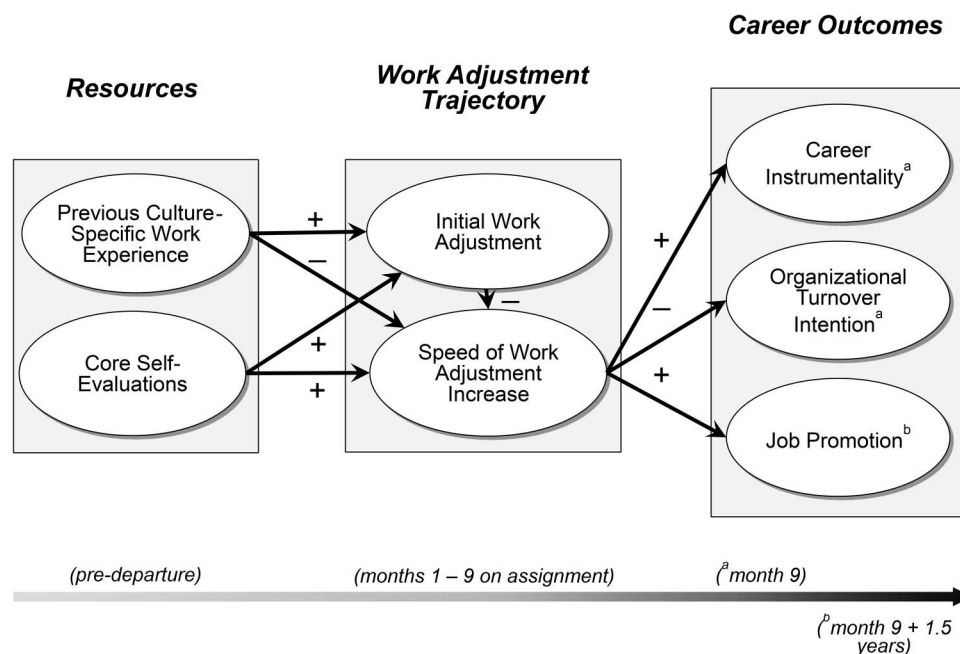


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

comes of the experience, proposing and examining consequences of work adjustment trajectory on expatriates' later career instrumentality, turnover intention, and career advancement. The findings based on this rich data collection have organizational selection (e.g., by enhancing the understanding of predictors of adjustment over time) and intervention implications (e.g., via a deeper understanding of what is happening over time for the expatriates). The findings are also informative to expatriates, providing a narrative on how one can expect adjustment to evolve over time after arrival overseas, what personal characteristics may help with the involvement and how the involvement may link to their career outcomes.

Theoretical Development and Hypotheses

Extant Research

The dominant narrative within the expatriate literature is that adjustment to working abroad unfolds in four stages, following a U-curve (Black, 1988; Oberg, 1960; Torbiorn, 1982). In the first "honeymoon" stage, shortly after arrival, expatriates are predicted to go through a period of high perceived adjustment, during which they are excited and energized by the new culture, and do not realize that their "habits and behaviors are inappropriate in the new culture" (Black, 1988, p. 278). Next, employees experience the down of "culture shock"; adjustment drops as they begin to cope with unique and difficult cultural demands. In the "adjustment" stage, individuals modulate their behavior and expectations more successfully, with a notable upward movement in adjustment. In the last stage, labeled "mastery," individuals experience incremental increases in the ability to function and therefore, adjust, to the new setting.

Despite its popularity, empirical evidence for the U-curve view is mixed. Black and Mendenhall (1991) concluded there was some support for the perspective, if findings related to adjustment from different cross-sectional cohorts were pieced together. They noted that only two of 18 studies used longitudinal designs, methodological rigor in many studies was suspect, and operationalizations of adjustment varied widely (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). In a meta-analytic investigation, Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005) plotted aggregate levels of cultural adjustment for expatriates in 20 studies against aggregate levels of assignment duration within each study. Their estimated adjustment trajectory fit some features of a U-curve, but it was flatter and more distended. Firth and colleagues (2014) studied expatriates at each of the first 3 months of their assignments. Work adjustment declined on average, and especially among those whose starting level of work adjustment was high and whose work did not involve opportunities for personal challenge and growth. Their evidence fit the first half of a U-curve, but only if the "honeymoon" stage could be argued to be extremely short (<1 month). Firth et al. cautioned generalization to adjustment processes that may unfold over a longer period of time.

Other research suggests different adjustment trajectories. For example, Kealey (1989) combined cross-sectional and longitudinal data to portray five adjustment patterns for expatriates over time: 35% showed an upward linear trend of adjustment, 30% were continuously high, 25% were continuously low or moderate, and only 10% showed a U-curve pattern. One of the few longitudinal

studies available (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002) compared adjustment of domestic and international students in Months 1, 3, and 6 of an academic year. Both types of students had a linear, positive pattern of adjustment over 6 months, but the adjustment of domestic students was consistently higher than that of the international students.

On balance, we contend that the lack of dependable empirical support for the U-curve conceptualization stems from both methodological and theoretical shortcomings. In terms of method, expatriate adjustment is an inherently dynamic, within-person process, but the bulk of the evidence in the literature has been derived from static or cross-sectional between-person designs. From a conceptual perspective, the U-curve conceptualization is best seen as an anecdotal or preliminary narrative as opposed to a formal theoretical or empirically derived statement. In concluding their summary of empirical evidence for a U-curve, Black and Mendenhall (1991) noted that the biggest downfall of the U-curve theory is that it "is more a description of phases of adjustment . . . what seems to be needed is a theoretical discussion of the cross-cultural adjustment process. For example, what is the nature of the cross-cultural adjustment process?" (p. 232). As of yet, there is a lack of theoretical framework predicting the shape of within-individual adjustment trajectories or differences across individuals in observed adjustment trajectories.

Uncertainty Reduction and the Trajectory of Expatriate Work Adjustment

We first invoke uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) to posit expectations about the average within-individual trajectory of work adjustment among expatriates over time. Developed in the context of transitions into new interpersonal relationships, uncertainty reduction theory delineates how individuals (a) anticipate reactions to their behavior in a new context and (b) adapt their behavior over time as reactions fit or misfit those predictions. The theory portrays uncertainty to be at its peak at the beginning of encounters in a new context, decreasing over time as cycles of information acquisition, communication, prediction, behavioral selection, and observation of behavioral reactions converge on sets of actions that violate or confirm what had been uncertain social prescriptions.

The expatriate experience can be similarly viewed as a process of uncertainty reduction, although frequently more daunting and widespread than from a single interpersonal relationship (e.g., Stock & Genisyurek, 2012). Uncertainty emanates from new tasks, new coworkers, new bosses, new subordinates, new suppliers and customers, and importantly, a new cultural or environmental system in which they are all embedded—a system whose language and rules for governing the interacting parts and determining their acceptable ranges of behavior may be fundamentally different from what the expatriate had known before (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010). In early experience, therefore, uncertainty is high because of all these new contingencies that must be learned; expatriates need to predict and explain their own and others' behaviors to reduce and manage their uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995). Through verbal communication, nonverbal expressiveness, information-seeking, prediction, behavioral selection, and observation of behavioral reactions, the initial knowledge gap and associated feelings of uncertainty are steadily resolved (Ren, Shaf-

fer, Harrison, Fu, & Fodchuk, 2014). Levels of uncertainty are linked to expatriates' adjustment experience in the literature, with expatriates reporting higher adjustment levels when their uncertainty is lower (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black & Mendenhall, 1990). This process of uncertainty reduction is consistent with the conceptualization of cross-cultural adjustment as a learning process by some researchers (Gong & Fan, 2006; Wang & Takeuchi, 2007). When expatriates learn job-related knowledge, acquire information and skills related to their new tasks, new roles, performance standards, norms and expectations of the host company, their uncertainties are reduced and adjustment level increases (Ashforth, 2012). Based on earlier discussion, we expect an average work adjustment trajectory that is lowest upon arrival when uncertainty is at its highest. It should increase over time as uncertainty levels are reduced and expatriates become proficient in their new work environment.

Hypothesis 1: Expatriate work adjustment follows a positive trajectory, increasing over the time of the assignment.

The premise of uncertainty reduction also suggests that the average newcomer will in due course reach a "threshold" of adjustment, a point when command of a new situation or task accrues and learning and adjustment begins to level off (Ashforth, 2012, p. 175). This does not preclude individuals continuing to "discover depths and nuances in their work" nor does it mean that individual and contextual variables are not relevant to the speed of adjustment (Ashforth, 2012, p. 180). Instead, consistent with learning curve theory (Ebbinghaus, 1885; Ritter & Schooler, 2002), when in a novel situation or given a novel task, individuals experience the largest jumps in learning early on. As command of the new situation or task accrues, there is a phase of diminishing returns and, on the average, learning and adjustment begin to taper. This notion is consistent with that of Black and Mendenhall (1991), who suggest there may be a "mastery" phase that reaches a ceiling of adjustment for expatriates at some point when uncertainty is maximally reduced (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). In alignment with this literature we will also assess as a supplemental analysis whether expatriate adjustment follows a positive adjustment curve that levels off over time.

Consistent with this research, we hypothesize that expatriates' initial level of adjustment will have implications for their experienced trajectory of adjustment. Many newcomers, for example, will experience lower initial levels of work adjustment (Ashforth, 2012). Ashforth's (2012) discussion of socialization dynamics suggest that putting other individual differences aside, on the average, individuals who start lower on adjustment have more room to grow, and can be expected to experience steeper adjustment trajectories over time. Other individuals begin their new roles at a more advanced level of adjustment. According to Ashforth (2012), these individuals have a head start on aspects of socialization and will experience less steep adjustment trajectories. Supporting these expectations, Firth et al. (2014) proposed and found an inverse relationship between expatriate initial adjustment levels and the slope of adjustment over four time points. These authors explained their finding via a control theory perspective (Carver, 2003, 2006). Specifically, if individuals begin lower on adjustment, control theory suggests they will perceive a discrepancy between desired and actual progress and divert more of their

resources toward improving adjustment. As such, individuals beginning lower in adjustment will be more likely to attend to and show greater improvements in adjustment over time. On the other hand, for individuals beginning higher in adjustment, control theory suggests individuals will perceive that progress is on target or ahead of target (i.e., a positive discrepancy) and divert their personal resources to other (e.g., nonwork) areas in which they feel require more attention. Based on this discussion, we expect a negative association between initial level and speed of increase in work adjustment.

Hypothesis 2: Initial level of expatriate work adjustment (the intercept) is negatively related to the speed of change in work adjustment (slope), in that expatriates with higher (lower) initial work adjustment will experience a slower (faster) subsequent increase over time.

Anticipatory Resources: Shaping the Ups and Downs of the Work Adjustment Trajectory

We have drawn upon uncertainty reduction theory to posit what we expect to observe as a typical expatriate adjustment trajectory. Yet, acclimation into any new role is "inherently interactionist" (Ashforth, 2012, p. 165) and expatriate researchers have long recognized that individual differences play a substantial role in how the overseas experience is interpreted and acted upon (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black & Ferzandi, 2006). As suggested by the previous conflicting findings described above, it is similarly unrealistic to expect that one trajectory of work adjustment fits all. Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou's (1991) conceptual framework suggests several factors that facilitate adjustment. We evoke resource theory (Hobfoll, 2002) to posit how two such resources (culture-specific work experience and CSE) are important for expatriates' trajectories of work adjustment.

Hobfoll (2002) defines resources as broad commodities an individual has that are either a direct means to satisfy valued needs (e.g., social support, information, or knowledge) or more fundamentally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem). Under the broad framework of resource theory, key resource theories posit that these commodities allow individuals to be more capable of meeting difficult demands and to adapt to new, stressful, or even traumatic situations (Hobfoll, 2002). Individuals who possess more resources, such as self-efficacy, optimism, and control, feel less strain, have higher physical well-being, and are more capable of navigating difficult situations (see, e.g., Bandura, 1997; Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992; Skinner, 1996). Conservation of resources theory also posits that individuals with higher resources are better prepared to retain, protect, and foster resources and well-being over time (Hobfoll, 2002, 2011). To the extent individuals have lower resources, when repeated stressors strike, it is easier for them to enter a downward spiral or loss cycle. Drawing upon this resource theory framework, we examine how two psychological commodities (culture-specific work experience and CSE) act as resources affecting work adjustment from the very start of the expatriate experience as well as over the first year.

Culture-specific work experience. Previous international experience is an anticipatory factor that helps with expatriates' preparation, allows more accurate expectations and helps reduce

initial uncertainty about the cross-cultural transition process (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black et al., 1991). Previous *culture-specific work experience* (experience specific to the host country) is most helpful for work adjustment compared to nonwork related or culture-general experience (Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). Resource theory suggests that people with relevant experience can better anticipate future available resources and engage in anticipatory coping for stress over time (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Hobfoll, 2002). Such an experiential resource contributes a mastery component to any major work role transition within a culture, including facility with group norms in that environment, novel patterns of task coordination, and unique expectations about how to interact with others inside and outside one's firm to achieve goals. Previous culture-specific work experience also gives individuals an advantage in understanding subtle but sometimes critical inner workings of a culture, such as whether, when, and how to apologize for mistakes; coping effectively with conflict; norms for collaboration; what constitutes early, on time, or late; how to give both feedback and respect to supervisors and subordinates; the sharpness of membership boundaries surrounding units or businesses; what is funny or cringe-worthy; and what constitutes reasonable disclosure of personal information to work colleagues (Black, 1988; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black et al., 1991; Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). That is, having prior learning *in the culture* should initially prepare expatriates with the resource of prior in-country knowledge, reduced uncertainty about establishing new routines, coordination with others with dissimilar backgrounds, and sharing a prior assumptions about the best ways to get things done, relative to expatriates who have no such experience (cf. Bell & Harrison, 1996). In terms of trajectories, this implies a higher initial level, intercept, or "head start," putting such expatriates at an advantage in adjustment early on.

With respect to promoting longer term adjustment, the resource value of this kind of knowledge has limits, because it is inherited or crystallized in only a particular sets of tasks or persons (Hobfoll, 2002). Despite an initial boost of knowledge or reduced uncertainty that might stem from prior familiarity in the host country, narrowly gauged norms and assignment-specific role changes will reveal themselves for everyone (Nicholson, 1984). In other words, those with less knowledge at the beginning will catch up and gain this knowledge. Over time, the benefits of familiarity wane (Harrison, Mohammed, McGrath, Florey, & Vanderstoep, 2003). Supporting this notion, research has shown there are shallower learning curves for performance among job switchers who have prior, similar task experience (Deadrick, Bennett, & Russell, 1997). Within the expatriate domain, Takeuchi et al. (2005) found that expatriates' current assignment tenure was less positively associated with work adjustment among those who had higher amounts of international experience and more strongly positively related to work adjustment among expatriates who had less international work experience. We propose the following:

Hypothesis 3: Previous culture-specific work experience is (a) positively related to the initial level but (b) negatively related to the speed of change in expatriate work adjustment. Specifically, expatriates with more culture-specific work experience will have a higher initial level of work adjustment, but will then experience a slower increase in work adjustment over

time than individuals with less culture-specific work experience.

Core self-evaluations. In contrast with the resource of culture-specific work experience, CSE is a broad dispositional trait that reflects bottom-line, valenced assessments that individuals hold about themselves (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). CSE incorporates aspects of self-esteem (e.g., self-perceived value), generalized self-efficacy (e.g., self-evaluation of how well one can perform across a variety of situations), locus of control (e.g., perceived control over life events and situations), and emotional stability (e.g., tendency to be confident, secure, and steady, and to focus on positive aspects of self; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). It represents a *fundamental* trait, in that it has higher interconnectivity with other dispositions, perceptions, and beliefs than other constructs and it is developed over a lifetime rather than from a single span of experiences (Packer, 1985). It also has a broad *scope*, in that it is presumed (and has been shown) to affect functioning in a wide array of circumstances rather than in a limited or targeted range. Finally, CSE is *evaluative* rather than descriptive. Those who are higher in CSE feel better about themselves and how they operate on their environments.

Resource theory suggests that people with rich key resources such as positive self-evaluations are better able to develop and retain resources, and that these resources protect and buffer against threats (Hobfoll, 2002). Although there is healthy debate about how these fundamental, scope, and evaluative features allow aggregation of the four CSE dimensions noted above (Chen, 2012), there is little argument that CSE sparks more robust and fluid approaches to stressors and career challenges, as well as heightened success (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012). Higher CSE facilitates energy, eagerness to develop new skills, and initial career success, all of which facilitate learning and uncertainty reduction (Ferris et al., 2011; Judge & Hurst, 2008). Individuals with high CSE experience more optimistic and assured emotions, are less sensitive to negative stimuli, and cope better with uncertainty (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011). In literature focused on international human resources management (e.g., Wang & Takeuchi, 2007), positive self-evaluations have been highlighted as especially important to having a successful expatriate experience (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2004; Shaffer et al., 2006). When expatriates high in CSE are challenged by expectations or demands that are inconsistent with their beliefs or behavioral norms, they feel more able to adapt and modify their views to reduce the dissonance aroused from such inconsistency (Maertz, Hassan, & Magnusson, 2009). Hence, adjustment should be higher during initial periods for those with higher versus low CSE taking assignments overseas.

Beyond these initial advantages that CSE can provide, resource theory as well as the general psychological literature suggests that positive self-evaluation helps to boost resiliency and individuals' ability to cope with stressful life events *over time* as well as their overall adjustment capacity (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014; Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis & Jackson, 2003). Individuals with lower resources may not be able to sustain repeated stressors over time. In contrast to individuals with lower resources, or more specific resources such as culture-specific work experience, high CSE allows individuals to be more proactive, confident, and perseverant (in learning and reducing uncertainties) across time and

myriad situations (Chang et al., 2012; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Research has shown that CSE boosts the ceiling of individuals' overall career success as well as their progression over time. For example, a recent study by Judge and Hurst (2008) found that individuals with higher CSE begin their work careers with more positive experiences, and then experience steeper growth over time in pay, occupational status, and job satisfaction than individuals with lower CSE. This effect is explained in part by the tendency of high CSE individuals to stay healthy, and seek out and "savor" more favorable experiences as opposed to settling or plateauing (Judge & Hurst, 2008; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). Expatriation involves persistent, lingering challenges, including stronger disconnections from old friendships, changes in family dynamics, and heightened work stressors (e.g., Lazarova, Westman, & Shaffer, 2010), issues that require more than "just" previous experience. The threshold or overall capacity for adjusting or dealing effectively with ongoing, stressful task pursuit may well be elevated for those high in CSE because of their larger motivational reservoir: stronger feelings of internal control (the environment is not perceived as determining one's own experience), and greater confidence in overcoming or resolving any lingering uncertainty. In alignment with this theory and research, we further expect that individuals with high CSE will experience a faster upward movement in adjustment than those lower in CSE. We propose the following:

Hypothesis 4: Expatriates' levels of CSE are positively related to a) the initial level and b) the speed of change in work adjustment. Specifically, expatriates with higher CSE will have a higher initial level of work adjustment, and then experience a faster increase in work adjustment over time.

Work Adjustment Trajectories and Career Outcomes

Expatriate experiences have been the main focus of prior research, but a primary justification for investigating them has been their presumed consequences for individuals, particularly those involving assignment success and repatriation transitions (Harrison et al., 2004; Kraimer et al., 2012). In the current study we emphasize the latter, future-oriented, career perspective rather than the former, present-oriented, assignment perspective on criteria for adjustment. In doing so, we examine three distal outcomes: career instrumentality, turnover intention from the expatriating firm, and job promotion. Career instrumentality captures how much expatriates perceive their assignments to be valuable to desired future jobs or occupational states. Turnover intention is a strongly entrenched criterion in the expatriate literature, but is typically oriented toward early return from an assignment (e.g., Shaffer & Harrison, 1998), rather than from the expatriating firm (Ren et al., 2014). Job promotion, representing career upward movement, embodies a distal outcome that is often-touted as the primary reason expatriates take such assignments (e.g., Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014; Doherty et al., 2011). Despite its frequent mention within the literature, job promotion has been rarely examined as an outcome in expatriate research. Linking adjustment trajectories to these career outcomes, therefore, provides a novel and substantial contribution to the literature.

Research on summary assessments of experience and behavioral decision making (Ariely & Carmon, 2003) lends insight into how

and why time-based trends of work adjustment might affect these distal outcomes. This research suggests that overall evaluations of experience, which unfold through a series of transient states (e.g., a pleasant experience becomes more or less pleasant or even unpleasant over time), serve as inputs for future decision making. When individuals form an overall evaluation of their experiences, they do not simply average prior episodes of feeling or activity. Instead, they evoke gestalts of their experience *profile* over time, such as slopes of change in the pleasurable or painful intensity of ongoing episodes (see also Ariely & Carmon, 2000; Hsee & Abelson, 1991; Kahneman, 1999). Hausknecht, Sturman, and Roberson (2011) applied this gestalt characteristics theory to the workplace, finding that trajectories of (in)justice predicted distal outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment beyond the effects of the static level of (in)justice at one point. The same theory is also used in scholarship on time and performance, where authors have found that performance trends explained additional variance in evaluators' ratings and eventual turnover beyond mean or aggregate performance (Harrison, Virick, & William, 1996; Reb & Cropanzano, 2007). Within the expatriate domain, Firth et al. (2014) found that rate of adjustment provided prediction of job satisfaction and premature return intention over and above initial or average work adjustment.

Drawing from these perspectives and results, we expect that the trajectory of work adjustment over time will be related to expatriate attitudinal and behavioral outcomes including perceptions of career instrumentality, turnover intentions, and job promotions—beyond the initial or average level of work adjustment. Specifically, when expatriates evaluate their overall job situation on an assignment, they are likely to reflect on how quickly they adjusted to the assignment. Discrepancies from an initial reference point and the speed at which the discrepancies occur are most meaningful (as opposed to an absolute or average level) for individuals to form expectations about how their careers may unfold in the future (Chen, Ployhart, Thomas, Anderson, & Bliese, 2011; Firth et al., 2014). Trajectories matter psychologically and behaviorally; rather than reflecting where an expatriate is, they serve as a directional arrow pointing to where they are likely to be. This, in turn, serves as a foundation for expected career consequences. Rapid learning and jumps or improvements in uncertainty reduction feed steeper upward trajectories in work adjustment and portend for a rosier future within the firm, hence, a more positive prospect of upward advancement and a stronger intention to stay. The converse is also critical. Flat or decreasing slopes of adjustment are likely to be interpreted as a failure to resolve uncertainties, suggesting murkier career prospects and higher likelihood to leave.

We argue further that expatriates who experience a faster increase in work adjustment enjoy a higher likelihood of job promotion. Ups and downs in learning and affective experiences can promote or diminish motivation—and then performance—at work (Fisher, 2002; Latham & Pinder, 2005; Seo, Barrett, & Bartunek, 2004). Individuals with (increasingly) positive evaluations of their expatriate experience will see greater efficacy in, and make more efforts to, achieve higher visibility and performance (Bandura, 1986; Tsai, Chen, & Liu, 2007), a process consistent with the virtuous (rather than vicious) cycles of confidence and mastery experienced by those higher in CSE (Judge & Hurst, 2008). To the extent this motivation and effort in the form of more energy devoted to tasks is effective and noted by performance evaluators,

expatriates on a steeper adjustment curve are more likely to be promoted to higher positions on assignment and in their firms (Cleveland, Murphy, & Williams, 1989; Lyness & Heilman, 2006).

Hypothesis 5: The trajectory of expatriate work adjustment is positively related to perceived career instrumentality. Expatriates who experience a steeper positive trajectory perceive their assignment to be more beneficial for their career development.

Hypothesis 6: The trajectory of expatriate work adjustment is negatively related to organizational turnover intentions. Expatriates who experience a steeper positive trajectory have a lower intent to leave their firm.

Hypothesis 7: The trajectory of expatriate work adjustment is positively related to job promotion. Expatriates who experience a steeper positive trajectory have a higher likelihood of later, upward promotion.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Future expatriates from three large, multinational organizations based in the United States were invited to participate in our study. These firms represent a variety of industries including petrochemical, packaged consumer foods, and medical equipment manufacturing. Individuals had to be anticipating a minimum of a 9-month assignment to qualify for participation; short duration assignments do not require the same need to adjust and settle in as do longer duration assignments. Recruitment for expatriates came from firms providing names and e-mail addresses for eligible expatriates directly to the research team as new expatriate assignments were confirmed, as well as face-to-face pitches given at expatriate orientation sessions.

Enrollment occurred on a rolling basis, over a span of 4 years (assignments began in any one of several months across a 4-year period). A total of 237 expatriates were invited to participate. They were offered a \$150 e-gift certificate for Amazon.com if they completed a baseline survey before departure and a monthly survey for the first 9 months into their assignments. Of the invited, 188 completed the baseline survey, providing an enrollment rate of 79%. Enrolled participants were then sent online surveys at the end of every month for the first 9 months of their assignments. For each monthly assessment, nonrespondents were sent two e-mail reminders 7 and then 12 days after the survey sending date. Response rates to each monthly survey ranged from 88% to 97%, averaging 92%. Among the 188 enrolled, nine individuals did not remain in the study past the baseline. The 179 who completed at least one monthly survey constitute the final sample (Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). On average, the sample completed eight out of nine monthly surveys, with 81% completing all nine surveys.

We sought out individuals prior to the start of their assignments (Ashforth, 2012). Research on expatriate adjustment as well as general socialization to new jobs suggests that the learning and other socialization processes that occur for newcomers are most important in the first several months of organizational entry (Ash-

forth, 2012; Black & Mendenhall, 1991). Careful consideration was given to the duration of the study, and our 10 measurement points were chosen to be particularly thorough in providing assessments through the greater part of the first year on assignment. Theoretically, some newcomer (nonexpatriate) research suggests that there is instability in adjustment for the first several months of an individual's tenure (Ashforth, 2012). While it would have been ideal to follow individuals over an even longer period of time, substantively, organizations are most interested in "swift socialization," or the extent to which individuals are able to adapt over the first several months of a job (Ashforth, 2012). The U-curve perspective in the expatriate context suggests that individuals would spend at least 2 months in each of the four stages of the U-curve (Black & Mendenhall, 1991), amounting to an 8-month period for adjustment. Interviews with HR managers suggest that it typically takes expatriates 2 to 6 months to feel adjusted (Firth et al., 2014). Methodologically, Ployhart and Vandenberg (2010) suggest that a combination of sufficiently frequent assessments and reasonable length of study duration will capture a trend accurately. Hence, our monthly assessments are theoretically and methodologically suited to our construct.

Of the 179 expatriate participants, assignment duration included 9 months to 1 year (13%), 2 years (14%), and 3 years or longer (73%). The expatriates were from 25 different countries, with a majority from the United States (72%). Their assignments were in 38 different host countries, including Angola, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Indonesia, Kuwait, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. The expatriates had an average of 16.5 years of full time work experience ($SD = 9.05$). Seventy-three percent were male, 80% were married, and 77% had a partner living with them on assignment. Sixty-five percent had children, and 44% had at least one child living with them on assignment.

Previous culture-specific work experience and CSE were assessed in the baseline survey along with control variables and demographics. Work adjustment was measured in each of the monthly surveys. In the Month 9 survey, we also measured career instrumentality and turnover intention. About 1.5 years after the Month 9 data were collected, we contacted participants with a short follow-up survey to assess if they were still with the same company and if they received a job promotion. Out of the 179 contacted, 97 returned full information on the study variables. Among the 97 respondents, 60 were still on their original assignments. Of the 37 who were done with their assignments, three individuals changed employers. A total of 23 individuals received promotions either on or postassignment.

Resources Individuals Bring to the Assignment

Previous culture-specific work experience. Following Takeuchi et al. (2005), individuals were first asked if they had worked or lived/studied abroad before. The former was coded as *previous international work experience* (0 = No, 1 = Yes), and the latter was coded as *previous international living experience* (0 = No, 1 = Yes)—both were used as control variables. Individuals who had worked abroad before were asked to list the country name of each of their previous international work experiences. *Previous culture-specific work experience* was then coded as the number of times the individual had prior work experience in

the country of their upcoming assignment (Takeuchi et al., 2005). Nine percent of the expatriates in the sample had one previous work experience in the same country.

Core self-evaluations. This personal resource was measured before departure with the 12-item Core Self-Evaluations Scale (Judge et al., 2003). Items (e.g., “When I try, I generally succeed,” “I determine what will happen in my life”) were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Dependent Constructs and Control Variables

Work adjustment. This was assessed in the Month 1 through 9 surveys using three items developed by Black and Stephens (1989). This is the most extensively validated (Shaffer et al., 1999) and widely used expatriate instrument in the literature (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Respondents rated the extent to which they felt comfortable with different aspects of their work (e.g., “specific job responsibilities”) in the host country on a 7-point scale (1 = *very unadjusted*, 7 = *very adjusted*). Coefficient alpha ranged between .92 and .97.

Career instrumentality. We assessed career instrumentality in the Month 9 survey with 14 items from Feldman and Thomas (1992). These items assess the extent to which individuals believed there was a synergy between their overseas assignment and the direction in which they would like their career to go (e.g., “All in all, this expatriate assignment will be good for my career in terms of advancement or mobility”; “I can see how the skills I’m developing in this assignment will be useful to me later in my career”). Expatriates completing the surveys responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Coefficient alpha was .92.

Turnover intention. We assessed turnover intention in the Month 9 survey with three items (e.g., “I often think about leaving my current employer”) adapted from Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). Responses were provided on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Coefficient alpha was .87. We also measured actual turnover in the follow-up survey 1.5 years later after the Month 9 survey, but the low base rate in the sample—only three out of 97 expatriates left their original organizations—makes it unacceptable as a fully modeled dependent variable. As a validity check, we ran correlation between turnover intention and actual turnover on the smaller follow-up sample, and they were correlated at .34 ($p < .01$), providing evidence of convergent validity for using turnover intention as the criterion variable.

Job promotion. In the follow-up survey conducted 1.5 years after the Month 9 survey, we asked expatriates to indicate if their current job was at the same level, higher level, or lower level than when they were on their assignments during the first year. We created a dummy variable *job promotion* where 1 = have a higher level job or received a promotion, 0 = do not have a higher level job or did not receive a promotion.

Control variables. We included control variables shown to be relevant to expatriate adjustment. Whether *intercultural training* was provided before departure (0 = No; 1 = Yes) and *tenure at the home company* (number of years) were controlled, given training and factors such as connections and knowledge that are facilitated by more tenure at a company can facilitate adjustment (Black & Gregersen, 1991). *Cultural novelty* was controlled due to

evidence that novel cultures, as opposed to similar cultures, are more difficult for individuals to adjust to (e.g., Andreason, 2003; Aycan, 1997; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 1999; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004). Respondents compared their native country to the host country on eight items (e.g., “everyday customs that must be followed”) from 1 = *very similar* to 5 = *very different* (Black & Stephens, 1989). We added one more item, “security and safety,” per the advice of an expatriate relocation firm. *Assignment duration* was controlled given this may also affect individual adjustment. We included two dummy variables—assignment length of 2 years and assignment length of 3 years and longer (0 = No; 1 = Yes), with the reference group having an assignment duration of 9 months to 1 year. *Voluntariness of assignment*, suggested to affect the difficulty of role transitions (Ashforth, 2012), was assessed with two statements (“I really wanted to go overseas and volunteered for this assignment” and “This wasn’t really an ideal time in my career for me to be sent overseas” [reversed]) on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*; Feldman & Thomas, 1992). *Language fluency* was controlled given greater proficiency in the host country language makes it easier to obtain information needed for adjusting to work (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 1999). Participants were asked about their degree of confidence in using the host country’s language with respect to writing, speaking, reading, listening, and in general from Takeuchi, Yun, and Russell (2002). The five items were rated on a scale of 1 = *not at all confident* to 5 = *highly confident*. Because the expatriates in our study were from three different firms, two dummy variables were included as controls for *company*. Finally, *still on assignment* (0 = No; 1 = Yes) was controlled in the analyses of job promotion as some individuals had completed their assignments while others were still on assignments at the time of the follow-up survey.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported the distinctiveness of our measures. First, we conducted a CFA on all the multi-item measures in our baseline survey: CSE, cultural novelty, language fluency at departure, and voluntariness of assignment. In order to achieve a sufficient ratio between sample size and the number of estimated parameters (Bentler & Chou, 1987), we generated item parcels instead of using individual items for CSE by randomly assigning the 12 items into three parcels, with four items per parcel, and using the average score of the items within each parcel as the parcel score. We used individual items for culture novelty, language fluency and voluntariness of assignment. We entered the parcels and items for these variables into a CFA model with four separate but related factors. The data fit the four-factor model well ($\chi^2 = 327.03$, $df = 146$, comparative fit index [CFI] = .94, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .08). The target model fit significantly better than alternative models by constraining two or three of the factors to correlate at 1.0 ($p < .001$).

We furthermore conducted CFAs on the key study variables at Month 1 and Month 9: CSE, work adjustment, career instrumentality, and turnover intention were distinct variables. Similar to above, we used item parcels for CSE and career instrumentality and individual items for work adjustment and turnover intention. To generate item parcels for career instrumentality, we randomly

assigned the 14 items into three parcels, with two parcels having five items and one having four items. Average scores of the items within parcels were used as parcel scores. We entered the parcels and items for these variables into a CFA model with four separate factors. The data fit the four-factor model well for both Month 1 measure ($\chi^2 = 59.02$, $df = 48$, $p < .001$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04) and Month 9 measure of work adjustment ($\chi^2 = 56.52$, $df = 48$, $p < .001$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03). Constraining any two factors to correlate at 1.0 or constraining multiple factors to correlate at 1.0 into any other competing models all produced poor and significantly inferior fit ($p < .001$).¹

Measurement Invariance Test

Before examining its trajectory, we first tested measurement invariance across time of work adjustment to make sure that the changes we find in the trajectory are not due to changes in the meaning or measurement of the construct (Chan, 1998). We followed the procedure specified in Chan (1998; pp. 432–433) and did the test in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2012). First, a measurement model in which factor loadings of the three items administered over time and item-specific errors were freely estimated was fitted to the data. Second, a constrained model in which factor loadings of the same items were fixed to be equal across time and estimated was fitted to the data. The reduction in fit from the first (free loadings) model to the second (equal loadings) model was not significant, $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 16) = 20.7$, *ns*, indicating equality of factor loadings and, thus, providing evidence of measurement invariance of work adjustment.

Analyses for Hypothesis Tests

A small portion of missing data (i.e., three cases) from the predeparture survey was imputed with mean substitution for one control variable.² The data have a hierarchical structure with repeated measures (Level 1) nested within individuals (Level 2). Moreover, expatriates who were sent to the same host country subsidiaries were nested within common locations (Level 3). We used three-level random coefficient models (frequently also known as linear mixed models or hierarchical linear models or HLM; Bliese & Ployhart, 2002) to examine Hypotheses 1–4. The dynamic repeated-measures variable (i.e., work adjustment) was analyzed at Level 1, the time-invariant moderators and control variables were analyzed at Level 2, and a random-effect intercept-only model was specified at Level 3 to control for the nesting effect of common host subsidiaries. The analyses were performed by SAS PROC MIXED procedures for linear mixed models (Fitzmaurice, Laird, & Ware, 2004). We centered Level 2 scores around the sample mean of the corresponding variables (“grand-mean centering”; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). For testing of Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7, we first followed the procedures described in Chen et al. (2011) and obtained the Empirical Bayes estimates of the linear slope of work adjustment for each individual from the random coefficient models, and exported them into a between-individual data file. We then ran two-level random coefficient models to examine Hypotheses 5 and 6 where career instrumentality and turnover intention were the dependent variables with a random-effect intercept-only model at Level 2 to control for the nesting effects of common host subsidiaries. Job promotion is a binary

variable so we used generalized linear models with binomial distribution, logit link function, and clustering effects (to account for the nesting effects of common host subsidiaries) using SAS PROC GENMOD procedures to test Hypothesis 7.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas of work adjustment across the 9 months. Null model of a three-level HLM on work adjustment indicates that 48.53% of the variance in work adjustment resided within individuals, 45.57% of the variance resided between individuals, and 5.90% of the variance resided between host subsidiaries. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and between-individual correlations for all of our measured variables in this investigation as well as the empirical Bayes estimates of the intercept and slope values of work adjustment. We have nine waves of measures for work adjustment and this creates an extensive number of unique correlation values. For illustrative purpose, we present only the correlations for the first month’s assessment of work adjustment.

Identifying Trajectories of Expatriate Experience

We examined the trajectory of expatriate work adjustment from Month 1 to Month 9 of the assignment using unconditional HLM by estimating random effects of the intercept and the linear (i.e., *month*, coded as 0 for the first month, 1 for the second month, 2 for the third month, and so forth), quadratic (*month*²), cubic (*month*³), and quartic (*month*⁴) term of time in polynomial models. We compared different variance-covariance structures to test autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity in the error variances of work adjustment (Bliese & Ployhart, 2002). Differences in fit indices Akaike information criterion and Bayesian information criterion indicate that, first-order autoregressive structure AR(1) fits the data best. Therefore, we adopted AR(1) variance-covariance structure in all analyses where work adjustment was the dependent variable. The *month*⁴ term was not significant and was not carried into further analyses. Table 3 shows the estimated coefficients and variances of the terms in the polynomial models.

Hypothesis 1 states that expatriate work adjustment follows a positive trajectory and increases over the time of the expatriate experience. Results in Table 3 show that there was a positive linear effect ($\gamma = 0.32$, $p < .001$) and also a negative and significant quadratic effect of time ($\gamma = -0.03$, $p < .001$) in the trajectory of work adjustment, indicating a positive concave function (Aiken & West, 1991: 66). As both the coefficient and variance were marginally significant for the cubic term, we adopted the quadratic change pattern. Figure 2 illustrates that work adjustment follows a

¹ More details regarding the CFA analyses as well as CFA results for Months 2–8 are available from the first author upon request.

² Three missing values were replaced for the variable “cultural novelty” using the mean reported cultural novelty from the individuals who shared the same host country and home country. For example, one individual who had missing data on this variable was from the United States and sent to Ireland. The mean reported cultural novelty from other individuals who were also from the United States and assigned to Ireland was used to replace this individual’s missing value. Reanalyses indicated that all results were substantively identical without these three individuals who had the missing data replaced.

Table 1
Means, SDs, and Coefficient Alphas of Expatriate Work Adjustment Over Time

Variable	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7	Month 8	Month 9
Mean	4.79	5.17	5.36	5.54	5.59	5.77	5.63	5.69	5.75
SD	1.33	1.19	1.31	1.19	1.12	1.11	1.18	1.27	1.12
Coefficient Alpha	.94	.92	.96	.96	.97	.95	.92	.95	.94

positive nonlinear curve: increasing faster at the start of the assignment, then attenuating in its rise with diminishing returns over time. Adjustment steadily improved, on average gaining about 0.85 SD (pooled standard deviation) over the first 9 months overseas. Hypothesis 1 is supported, although adjustment begins to level off on the average at approximately 6 months.

Furthermore, Table 3 also shows that the between-individual variance of the intercept and the linear term of time for work adjustment were both significant, indicating there is significant variability in work adjustment trajectory, which supports our tests of the moderators in the later hypotheses. The analysis of the random-effect model also revealed that there was a negative covariance between the intercept and the linear term (covariance estimate = -0.192, SE = 0.04491, $p < .001$). This indicates that there was a negative association between the initial level and the speed of change in work adjustment, supporting Hypothesis 2. Figure 3 indicates that individuals with lower initial adjustment (i.e., 1 SD below the mean) experienced a steady increase over time and the adjustment began to level off at about Month 7. Individuals with higher initial adjustment (i.e., 1 SD above the mean) mostly stayed at their initial high levels and showed a rather flat trajectory.

We subsequently obtained estimates of the linear slope coefficient of work adjustment for each individual from the above unconditional HLM for tests of Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7 later. Because of the extremely small scale of the estimated coefficients, we standardized them in later analyses for ease of interpretation.

Role of Resources

In testing the moderating hypotheses, we included the linear term of time (*month*) and its quadratic term (*month*²) in the model because it is the average trajectory we identified in testing Hypothesis 1 and hence the correct model specification. The inclusion of *month* and *month*² served two more purposes. For testing Hypotheses 3a and 4a, their inclusion allowed us to predict the effects of previous culture-specific work experience and CSE on the *intercept* or initial level of work adjustment. For testing Hypotheses 3b and 4b, the interaction between the resource variables and the linear term of time allowed us to test effects of previous culture-specific work experience and CSE on the *slope* or speed of change of the work adjustment trajectory (see Aiken & West, 1991, p. 69).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	n	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Tenure at the home company	179	11.29	9.65																		
2. Company-provided cultural training (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	179	.79	.41	.12																	
3. Cultural novelty	179	3.28	.80	.04	.11	(.85)															
4. Assignment length of 2 years	179	.13	.34	-.10	-.04	.15*															
5. Assignment length of 3 years or longer	179	.73	.44	.23**	-.03	-.04	-.65**														
6. Voluntariness	179	4.55	.59	-.09	.16*	.16*	-.14	.08	(.63)												
7. Language fluency at departure	179	2.96	1.75	-.11	-.18*	-.42**	-.08	.04	-.16*	(.99)											
8. Company 1	179	.60	.49	.27**	.60**	.20**	-.02	.18*	.12	-.11											
9. Company 2	179	.22	.41	-.06	-.53**	-.14	-.05	.17*	-.12	.06	-.65**										
10. Previous international work experience (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	179	.54	.50	.10	-.03	.04	-.07	.00	-.03	-.05	-.06	.02									
11. Previous international living experience (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	179	.43	.50	-.25**	-.09	-.11	-.01	-.11	.00	.14	-.22**	.12	.12								
12. Previous culture-specific work experience (number of times)	179	.09	.29	-.13	-.03	.00	-.07	-.08	-.07	.06	-.07	-.07	.29**	.08							
13. Core self-evaluations	179	4.12	.41	.02	.16*	-.05	.01	.14	.23**	-.03	.12	.09	-.05	-.08	.06	(.78)					
14. Month 1 work adjustment	176	4.79	1.33	.05	.02	-.23**	-.14	.03	-.03	.09	.00	.04	.05	.03	.18*	.19*	(.94)				
15. Estimated intercept value of work adjustment trajectory	179	4.72	.97	.08	.04	-.25**	-.13	.08	.01	.13	.09	.01	.08	-.02	.19*	.22**	.88**				
16. Estimated slope value of work adjustment trajectory	179	.32	.20	-.05	-.01	-.03	.05	.01	.14	.07	.01	-.02	-.12	-.06	-.16*	.20**	-.46**	-.44**			
17. Perceived career instrumentality	161	3.93	.64	-.04	.07	-.06	-.01	.10	.20*	.12	.07	.08	-.07	.00	-.09	.23**	.09	.15	.22**	(.92)	
18. Turnover intention	152	1.84	1.27	-.15	-.08	.09	.18*	-.28**	-.09	-.09	-.13	-.10	-.02	.17*	.02	-.31**	-.21**	-.25**	-.22**	-.41**	(.87)
19. Job promotion (0 = Not promoted, 1 = Promoted)	97	.24	.43	-.32**	.01	.00	-.04	-.09	.18	.07	-.27**	.09	.00	.13	.06	.16	-.06	-.09	.24*	.13	-.12

Note. For illustrative purpose, we only present the correlations for work adjustment measures based on the first month's assessment. Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test.

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Table 3
Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Intercept and Slope of Work Adjustment

Variable	Linear model			Quadratic model			Cubic model		
	Estimate	SE	~R ²	Estimate	SE	~R ²	Estimate	SE	~R ²
Intercept									
Coefficient	4.98***	.10		4.72***	.11		4.66***	.12	
Variances	1.01***	.15		.11***	.18		1.25***	.20	
Linear term of time (month)									
Coefficient	.11***	.01		.32***	.04		.43***	.08	
Variances	.01***	.00	.36	.04***	.01		.27**	.11	
Quadratic term of time (month ²)									
Coefficient				-.03***	.00		-.06**	.02	
Variances				.00	.00	.42	.02*	.01	
Cubic term of time (month ³)									
Coefficient							2.97E-03 [†]	1.73E-03	
Variances							9.70E-05 [†]	6.20E-05	.49
Model fit									
AIC	3,690.7			3,671.8			3,670.8		

Note. ~R² = pseudo R², computed by comparing to the intercept-only model. SAS Proc Mixed analysis was used with random effects and first-order autoregressive variance-covariance structure for work adjustment. Entries corresponding to the predictors in the first column are estimates of fixed effects, γs.

[†] p < .10. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Hypothesis 3a and 3b propose that expatriates with more previous culture-specific work experience will have a higher initial level of work adjustment but then experience a slower gain in work adjustment over time. Results in Table 4 show that previous culture-specific work experience was positively related to the intercept of work adjustment (γ = 0.75, p < .05), and the interaction between previous culture-specific work experience and the slope of work adjustment was significant and negative (γ = -0.10, p < .05). Supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3b, expatriates who had previous work experience in the host country started with a higher initial adjustment than individuals without such experience, and had flatter growth trends over time (see Figure 4).

Hypotheses 4a and 4b suggest that expatriates with higher levels of the personal resource of CSE will have a higher initial level of work adjustment and then experience a faster increase in work

adjustment over time. Supporting both of these hypotheses, Table 4 shows that CSE was positively related to the intercept of work adjustment (γ = 0.43, p < .05), and the interaction between CSE and the slope of work adjustment was positive (γ = 0.07, p < .05). As shown in Figure 5, expatriates with higher CSE started higher and experienced a steeper increase in work adjustment over time.

Hypotheses 2, 3a, and 4a together indicate that initial work adjustment may mediate the relationships between previous culture-specific work experience and CSE and the slope of work adjustment trajectory. We tested these mediation effects by first obtaining the Empirical Bayes estimates of the intercept and linear slope of work adjustment for each individual from the random coefficient models as we did for the tests of Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7. We then ran two-level random coefficient models and followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) three steps to test the mediation with a random-effect intercept-only model at level 2 to control for the nesting effect of common host subsidiaries. The results showed that initial work adjustment fully mediated the relationship be-

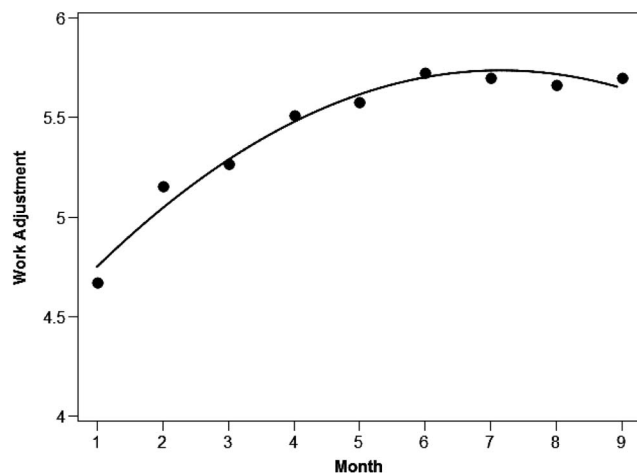
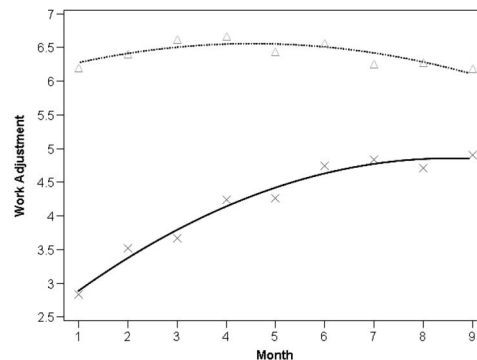


Figure 2. Average trajectory of expatriate work adjustment across individuals.



..... high initial level of work adjustment — low initial level of work adjustment

Figure 3. Work adjustment trajectories for expatriates with high and low initial work adjustment (±1 SD).

Table 4
Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Expatriate Work Adjustment

Variable	Estimate	SE	$\Delta \sim R^2$
Intercept	4.86**	.30	
Controls and static predictors			
Tenure at the home company	.01	.01	
Company-provided cultural training (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.25	.22	
Cultural novelty	-.29**	.09	
Assignment length of 2 year	-.33	.27	
Assignment length of 3 years or longer	-.24	.23	
Voluntariness	.11	.12	
Language fluency at the departure	.06	.04	
Company 1	.44*	.22	
Company 2	.16	.24	
Previous international work experience (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.03	.14	
Previous international living experience (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.07	.14	
Previous culture-specific work experience (number of times)	.75*	.30	
Core self-evaluations (CSE)	.43*	.22	
Monthly predictors			
Month (linear term)	.32***	.04	
Month ² (quadratic term)	-.03***	.00	
Moderators			
Previous Culture-Specific Work Experience \times Month	-.10*	.04	
CSE \times Month	.07*	.03	.12 ^a

Note. $\Delta \sim R^2$ = pseudo R^2 change. $N = 1,415$ observations. SAS Proc Mixed analysis was used with random effects and first-order autoregressive variance-covariance structure for all models. Entries corresponding to the predictors in the first column are estimates of fixed effects, γ_s .

^a This is the additional percent of variance explained by the moderators and interactions compared to the model with only the control variables and monthly predictors.

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

tween previous culture-specific work experience and the slope of work adjustment (the coefficient of previous culture-specific work experience went from $-0.12, p < .05$ to $-0.05, ns$, after including initial work adjustment), but did not mediate the relationship between CSE and the slope of work adjustment (the coefficient of

CSE went from $0.10, p < .05$ to $0.14, p < .001$, after including initial work adjustment).

Distal Outcomes of Trajectories

Hypothesis 5 predicted that the slope of the trajectory or speed of change of work adjustment was positively related to perceived

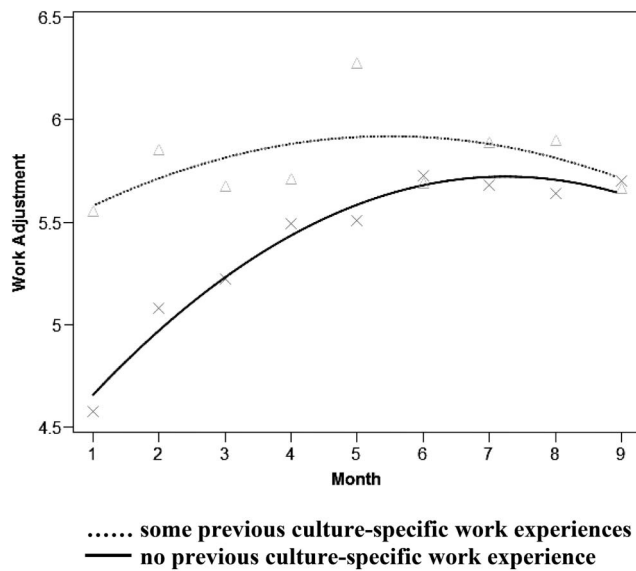


Figure 4. Work adjustment trajectories for expatriates with high and low previous culture-specific work experience.

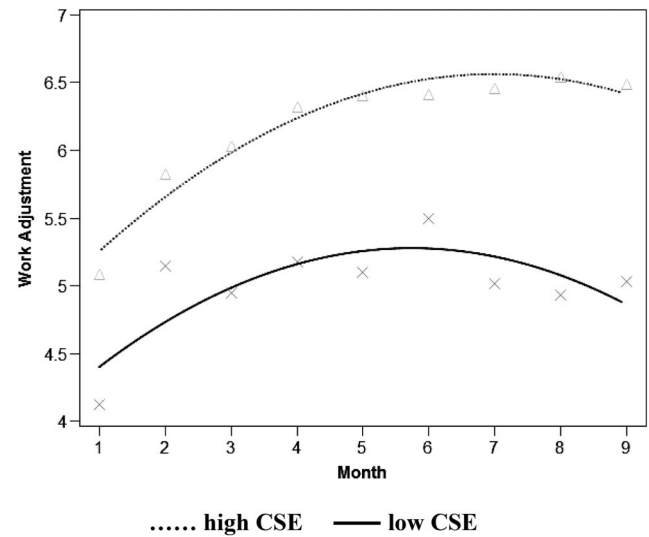


Figure 5. Work adjustment trajectories for expatriates with high and low core self-evaluations (CSE; ± 1 SD).

career instrumentality. Results in Table 5 support this hypothesis, showing that, after controlling for the average level of work adjustment across the 9 months, the slope of work adjustment was positively related to perceived career instrumentality in Month 9 ($\beta = .10, p < .05$). This indicates that expatriates who experienced steeper trajectory or faster increase in work adjustment reported higher perceptions that their assignments were going to be beneficial for their career development at Month 9.

Hypothesis 6 predicted that the slope of the trajectory of work adjustment was negatively related to turnover intention. Results in Table 5 support this hypothesis, showing that, after controlling for the average level of work adjustment across the 9 months, the slope of work adjustment was negatively related to turnover intention in Month 9 ($\beta = -.28, p < .01$). This indicates that expatriates who experienced steeper trajectory or faster increase in work adjustment reported lower intention to leave their organizations at Month 9.

Hypothesis 7 predicted that the slope of the trajectory of work adjustment was positively related to the likelihood of job promotion; results in Table 5 support this hypothesis ($\beta = 0.90, \text{Exp}(\beta) = 2.47, p < .05$), suggesting that expatriates who experienced steeper trajectory or faster increase in work adjustment were more likely to have been promoted 1.5 years after the trajectories were estimated. Specifically, one standard deviation increase in the slope of work adjustment was associated with 147% increased likelihood to have been promoted 18 months later. (We also ran the same analyses for the three distal outcomes controlling for the initial level instead of the average of work adjustment, and results were substantively identical).

Supplementary Analysis

Our theorizing dealt with work adjustment, but it is reasonable to extend the positive trend to the other dimensions of expatriate adjustment as well given the focus on the tripartite conceptualization of adjustment dimensions in the expatriate literature (e.g., Black & Stephens, 1989; Wang & Takeuchi, 2007). We tested the trajectories of *general adjustment* (adapting to general living conditions, food, transportation, and other services in the host country), and *interaction adjustment* (adapting to social interactions at work and in the community), two other dimensions of expatriate adjustment (Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001). General and interaction adjustment were assessed using measures developed by Black and Stephens (1989). Both of these additional measures of adjustment were included in the nine monthly surveys. Our results showed that both general and interaction adjustment followed similar positive curvilinear trends as work adjustment (see Figure 6). Furthermore, we tested the moderating effects of the two resources on these trajectories and if the trajectories predicted the career outcomes. Results showed that previous culture-specific work experience did not predict the initial level of general adjustment ($\gamma = 0.24, ns$), but negatively moderated the slope of general adjustment ($\gamma = -0.09, p < .05$). In contrast, CSE positively predicted the initial level (intercept) of general adjustment ($\gamma = 0.46, p < .05$), but did not moderate its trend ($\gamma = 0.02, ns$). For interaction adjustment, CSE positively predicted the initial level ($\gamma = 0.84, p < .001$), but neither of the resources predicted the slope of interaction adjustment ($\gamma = -0.05, -0.05$, respectively,

Table 5
Results for Distal Outcomes of Trajectories of Work Adjustment

Step and variable	Career instrumentality ^a			Turnover intention ^b			Job promotion ^c			
	β	SE	$\sim R^2$	β	SE	$\sim R^2$	β	SE	Exp(β)	QIC
Intercept	1.43*	.67		5.92***	1.33		-15.24***	4.40	.00***	
Step 1									1.00	
Tenure at the home company	.00	.01		.00	.01		-.09***	.02	.92***	
Company-provided cultural training (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.20	.17		-.05	.34		2.34*	1.06	10.40*	
Cultural novelty	.02	.07		.00	.14		.52	.34	1.68	
Assignment length of 2 year	.18	.21		-.01	.42		-.66	1.49	.52	
Assignment length of 3 years or longer	.17	.17		-.47	.36		-.04	1.34	.96	
Voluntariness	.14	.09		.00	.18		.44	.57	1.55	
Language fluency at the departure	.04	.04		.03	.08		.03	.22	1.03	
Company 1	.19	.18		-.62	.38		-2.30**	.79	.10**	
Company 2	.34	.20		-.88*	.42		-.61	.76	.54	
Previous international work experience (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.03	.10		-.14	.19		1.13*	.50	3.09*	
Previous international living experience (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.07	.10		.21	.20		.77	.64	2.16	
Previous culture-specific work experience (number of times)	-.17	.18		.13	.38		-1.07	.91	.34	
Core self-evaluations	.07	.13	.05	-.21	.27	.08	1.99*	.90	7.30*	
Still on assignment (0 = No, 1 = Yes)							-.62	.79	.54	105.94
Step 2										
Average work adjustment over nine months	.17**	.06	.10	-.42***	.12	.11	.37	.41	1.45	106.25
Step 3										
Slope of work adjustment (standardized)	.10*	.05	.13	-.28**	.10	.19	.90*	.37	2.47*	93.92

Note. $\sim R^2$ = pseudo R^2 , computed by comparing to the intercept-only model; QIC = quasilielihood under the independence model criterion, a fit criterion for generalized estimating equation (GEE) method for model comparison, analogous to the Akaike information criterion statistic for likelihood-based methods. The smaller statistic is preferred.

^a $N = 161$. ^b $N = 152$. In both models, two-level random coefficient modeling was used with a random-effect intercept-only model at Level 2. ^c $N = 96$. Generalized linear modeling with binomial distribution, logit link function, and clustering effects was used.

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

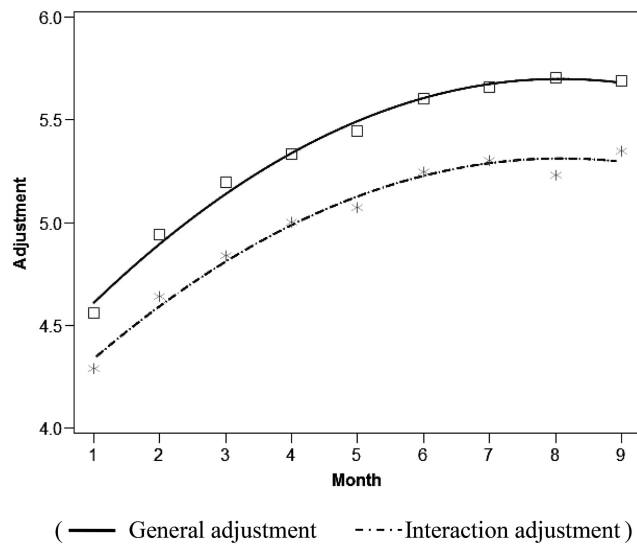


Figure 6. Average trajectories of expatriate general and interaction adjustment across individuals.

ns). The slopes of both forms of adjustment had no bearing on any of the career-related outcomes.³

Discussion

There is little doubt that expatriate adjustment is important. Arguably, it is the most often-studied variable in individual-level, international management research (Takeuchi, 2010). Much has been learned about its dimensionality, antecedents, and outcomes, but nearly all of that understanding is based on differences between individuals, assessed at a single time (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). A necessary step is to extend the understanding of expatriate adjustment into a dynamic framework and to examine vital questions such as: how does expatriate adjustment change over time, why do some individuals have different adjustment trajectories than others, and how do those trajectories affect distal outcomes? It is also essential to expand the criterion space in expatriate research to variables comprising a career perspective.

Our time-sensitive investigation of 179 expatriates working in widely varying industries in dozens of host countries provides information relevant to these questions. First, our results show that for the typical expatriate, work adjustment increases gradually over time from the start of their cross-cultural transition, beginning to level off at about the sixth month. That trajectory fits the notion of a steadily decreasing level of uncertainty or an unremitting learning curve, rather than U-shaped downs and then ups. Second, the early positive slope for adjustment is steeper among those who begin their experience with low adjustment. Expatriates who start their experience with higher adjustment tended to hold that high level over time. Third, the starting level and shape of the work adjustment trajectory depends on having resources such as previous culture-specific work experience and CSE. Fourth, a steeper increase of work adjustment over the first 9 months of an assignment is associated with (a) higher subsequent evaluations of career instrumentality, (b) lower intentions to leave the company, and (c) a higher likelihood of receiving a job promotion 1.5 years after the

last survey. These findings have significant implications for theory, research, and practice.

Implications for Theory

Trajectories do not follow a U-curve. Our first contribution to theory is that our results challenge current thinking in the expatriate literature about the likely trajectory of expatriate adjustment over time. The assumption that has been repeatedly cited in the literature depicts a U-curve (Black, 1988). While the description of the U-curve makes intuitive sense, it is a notion that as far back as 1991 was described as having fragile supporting evidence (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). Our analyses, including moderator findings, reinforce these doubts; evidence here does *not* support the U-curve. The prominent trend we observed is for most newly assigned employees to gradually adjust. These findings are consistent with our theoretical discussion involving learning new roles and continuing to reduce uncertainty about how to deal with one's novel, starkly different work environment over time. Theoretically, our findings are consistent with recent formulations about similar processes over time for those who are not expatriates. For example, one of the main notions in current thinking about general newcomer socialization is that there is a steady but diminishing reduction in uncertainty that assists adjustment (Ashford & Nurmohamed, 2012). More time spent in a new position means accumulating opportunities to clarify one's new role, and allows for practice and refinement of expected behaviors, while simultaneously making mistakes and learning how mistakes violate expectations.

As described in the literature review, evidence from former research suggests various other adjustment trajectories. It is interesting to contemplate why the average adjustment trajectory experienced by individuals in those studies differ. Firth et al. (2014) found, for example, that over the first 3 months of expat assignments, work adjustment *declined* on average. The Firth et al. study focused on expatriates from one company and assignments located in four countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia), with the majority of the sample located in North America. It is possible that something unique about the company or the similar host cultures in that study was partly responsible for the findings. For example, with regard to the company, it is possible that an unknown company-wide change ranging from a decrease in stock price to the appointment of a new leader in the midst of data collection could have resulted in a negative impact to adjustment. This is highly speculative and we really cannot know what explains the differences in findings.

One dominant conclusion we can draw is that *there is substantial between-individual variation in work adjustment changes*. Consistent with our findings, scholars in the socialization literature have concluded that stage-based models of adjustment are too simplistic. For example, after an in-depth discussion of models that suggest new employees proceed through predictable socialization phases, Ashforth (2012) concluded that while newcomers on the average will continually adjust over time until reaching a threshold of adjustment, at the individual level adjustment likely follows numerous paths, depending, in part, on individual and contextual

³ Additional information about these analyses are available from the first author upon request.

differences. What is needed now is additional theory and data about the heterogeneity of adjustment trajectories that might be experienced by different expatriates, in different cultural transitions. Internet tracking of both a non-self-report measure of learning or uncertainty and the focal psychological variable, in extremely broad samples, would allow the greatest power for detecting the trajectory-determining variables at the country, firm, team, assignment, supervisor, and individual levels (see [Chen, 2005](#), for an application to adjustment in work teams).

Importance of resources. A second theoretical contribution of our study is the application of resource theory to understand variability in experienced trajectories of work adjustment. Previous research had established that culture-specific work experience is related to static levels of work adjustment ([Takeuchi et al., 2005](#)). Yet, reliance on between-individual differences ignores that adjustment can unfold over time in different ways from person to person, and prior experience may guide that process. Our results suggest that individuals with less (vs. more) culture-specific work experience spend their first few months on assignment with lower initial adjustment. But, these individuals then show steeper improvements over time, catching up with experienced individuals' adjustment levels around Month 9. These trends are consistent with continuing uncertainty resolution as the mechanism of adjustment. Seasoned expatriates have less initial uncertainty to resolve. Rookie expatriates have more to learn, but they eventually reach the level of their veteran counterparts. Marrying the one-time assessment of the anticipatory resource of prior experience with multiple assessments of dynamic resources (e.g., language facility; numbers of friends at work) would enrich understanding of this process.

We also identify CSE as a key disposition for expatriates; higher CSE is associated with higher initial as well as accelerated work adjustment. Although individual differences are modestly associated cross-sectionally with expatriate experiences, emphases in prior research have been on the five-factor model ([Mol, Born, Willemssen, & Van Der Molen, 2005](#); [Shaffer et al., 2006](#)). Although we do not explicitly compare the performance of the Big Five to CSE in our study, our findings suggest that theory regarding expatriates may benefit from higher order configurations of dispositions, such as CSE. Broader, aggregated constructs such as CSE have been shown to improve the prediction of behavior across situations and time ([Judge, 2009](#)).

Comparing the findings for the two resources we included in our study, we suggest that as a context-general disposition resource, CSE seems to raise the threshold or capacity for adjusting and heighten the overall resistance to uncertainty. Although we cannot make full causal inferences, CSE seems to elevate the "floor" as well as the "ceiling" of adjustment, thus, boosting both the intercept and the slope of the trajectory. Consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of the construct, our findings suggest that CSE may be an engine for growing the capability or capacity for (positive evaluation of) effective functioning on ostensibly difficult tasks or transitions. Indeed, mediation tests showed that expansion and elevation of the range of improving adjustment, works directly from the portability of CSE, rather than through a set point of initial adjustment. In contrast, as a task-specific resource created in prior exposure to some elements of the same environment, previous culture-specific work experience provides some transition skills, but it does not seem to change the maximum level of

adjustment because location or assignment-specific uncertainties that the typical expatriate sees as out of personal control still remain. Its effect is captured by the initial (higher) adjustment level of those with such experience, but does not seem to broaden later capacities to adjust. That is, with a constant upper asymptote, the slope of adjustment is shallower over time for expatriates with previous experience. Such findings also contribute to the understanding of how resources have differential capacity to help individuals cope over time. To date, resource theory is only beginning to address such issues (e.g., [Hobfoll et al., 2009](#)).

Trajectories matter in the short and long term. Finally, we contribute to theory about dynamics of expatriate experience by linking the time-based trajectories of work adjustment to career-related distal outcomes. Shape and form—beyond average level—of experience matter. In addition to serving as conduits for the effectiveness of personal resources, they *help to predict individual consequences months and even years down the career road*. Our results suggest that for two expatriates who report the identical mean levels of work adjustment over 9 months, the one who experiences steeper or faster increases has a more positive prospect for the career benefits to the assignment, lower intention to leave the organization, and is more likely to be promoted 1.5 years later. Along with burgeoning findings in other areas (e.g., [Chen et al., 2011](#); [Harrison et al., 1996](#)), we find that time-based trends in psychological constructs uniquely contribute to behavioral end states.

Although this might seem unsurprising at first blush, if we describe the findings in another way, they seem less so. Our results suggest that expatriates that begin their assignment fairly well adjusted, without attaining much growth in adjustment over time, have reduced career outcomes relative to those who start lower but experience more growth on the adjustment curve. Why is this so? In addition to the general psychology of learning curves, it may be that the latter expatriates are on an advancement track (realized by themselves and their evaluators). It is also possible that they had particularly challenging assignments. Extensive literature describes the dramatic personal and career growth (and recognition) that can result from work experiences that provide the most challenge ([McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988](#)). More pre- and postassignment observations of expatriate careers will help us understand this finding in greater detail.

Strengths, Limitations, and Research Directions

Our study has a number of strengths. The extensiveness of our 10-wave monthly repeated-measures design, starting before expatriates departed, along with a follow-up survey 1.5 years later, has allowed us a more comprehensive examination of how expatriates' experiences unfold. This design allows powerful tests of the nature, (resource-based) moderators, as well as critical outcomes of experience trajectories. The robust sample size, along with the breadth of expatriates' "assignment vectors" ([Harrison et al., 2004](#))—coming from 25 home country cultures and being placed in 38 host country cultures—also allows some confidence in the international generalizability of our results.

Our study also has limitations. First, all of our measures are self-reported (although promotion is a verifiable outcome and unlikely to be affected by response bias, particularly with 18 months separation between it and any other parts of our data

collection). Second, resource constraints proscribed us from following expatriates for more than 9 months. Although no available theory definitively states so, it is possible to argue that trajectories would change appreciably when tracked for 2 or 3 years or more. As one check against this possibility, we tested for and found no moderating impacts of assignment length on trajectories. Third, as is true of all field-based designs, we cannot firmly establish causal mechanisms. Still, the nature of our longitudinal design allows us to rule out some of the simplest reverse-causation possibilities that have beleaguered much of prior research (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

Perhaps more importantly, our study raises questions, both by virtue of what we found and by noting what we chose *not* to study, that await answers. Besides career instrumentality, turnover intention and job promotion, it would be useful to examine the extent to which faster work adjustment enhances the quality and speed of on-the-job performance and subsidiary or headquarter perceptions of the success of the assignment. Moreover, examination of dynamics could and should be expanded to other expatriate variables and processes. For example, we have highlighted uncertainty resolution as one of the primary pathways underlying expatriate experiences, but there are other, potentially powerful mechanisms that have been implicated in expatriate scholarship. One is *social identity development* (Kraimer et al., 2012; Olsen & Martins, 2009; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Investigations of how newly transitioned expatriates answer questions about “who am I, now?” might be just as interesting and consequential as how they answer questions about adjustment (“how am I doing?”). Another, more recent mechanism, is *cross-cultural dissonance reduction* (Maertz et al., 2009). Uncertainty resolution could paradoxically sharpen the perceived misalignment between one’s own values, beliefs, and behaviors and the same variables in one’s cross-cultural environment; reduced uncertainty can provoke some kinds of dissonance and perceived misfit. This might drive adjustment downward in some stages of assignment progression, at least until expatriates adopt some coping form (Maertz et al., 2009). This might also signal a situational moderator—cultural distance—of the shape of adjustment trajectories. Higher distance should mean greater likelihood of uncovering misalignment, and perhaps declining adjustment as one learns. Although our data did not support such moderating effect, future research can examine this possibility further. Finally, we have not examined the *source* of uncertainty reduction. Ren et al. (2014) and Farh et al. (2010) examined personal proactivity and in-country social network ties as empirical and theoretical means (respectively) through which expatriates seek information to facilitate adjustment.

In addition to examining other trajectories, it will be beneficial in future research to deepen the identification of the most important variables that affect the speed of expatriate adjustment. Such information is highly valuable for the development of comprehensive models of the expatriate experience, and helps to explain why previous studies have reported different types of expatriate trajectories (e.g., Firth et al., 2014), as well as for informing and choosing expatriates. Although we included several situation-based variables and controls in our study (e.g., cultural novelty, assignment length, whether the assignment was voluntary, whether training was provided predeparture), a variety of other resources and contextual variables are potentially relevant to expatriate dynamics. Possibilities include the extent to which one’s friends and

family support the overseas assignment, the complexity of the expatriate job, and conflicting perspectives among socialization agents in the host and native countries (Ashforth, 2012).

Finally, we provide the caveat that our trajectory results reside around the variable work adjustment. Our supplemental analyses showed similar trajectories over time for general adjustment and interaction adjustment. Although conceptualizations of the U-curve theory originated and are translated around the broad concept of “adjustment,” the language used within the discussions of what happens over time within the expatriate experience often uses specific terms that are affect-laden, such as “frustration,” “disillusionment,” and “fascination” (Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p. 226). Future research regarding the refined role of positive and negative affect over time in the expatriate experience would be valuable.

Implications for Practice

Given the emphasis that most multinational companies place on international work experience to develop their talent pipeline, we expect that organizational leaders will find these empirical findings useful. It is valuable, for example, for organizations to know that initial work adjustment can be expected to be relatively high for individuals with previous work experience in the same or similar culture. This finding suggests it is useful to emphasize previous experience in selection decisions for assignments that involve trouble-shooting or quickly getting “up to speed.” While we find that expatriates with and without relevant cultural experience tend to attain similar levels of adjustment near the 9-month mark, our results suggest accelerating adjustment for individuals with less experience will reap positive benefits. Research based on onboarding of individuals beginning new jobs in general suggests that despite its importance, coworker and manager support tends to start strong but wane quickly (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013). As such, especially for individuals with less culture-specific work experience, we suggest it would be valuable for home country managers, coworkers, and/or human resources to check in with individuals with less experience *frequently and consistently* (e.g., at least once a week, similar to weekly meetings with direct reports in a regular work setting) in the first year of the assignment. This check in can involve touching base on challenges being faced, reassurance that it takes a bit of time to navigate the new situations being encountered, and encouragement that they will gain higher comfort levels over time.

Our findings also prompt us to encourage international management practitioners to consider inclusion of CSE in selection criteria because this trait may be an engine for amplifying adjustment capability. It may ease the transition experience for the expatriate, putting less strain on the expatriate and the host country employees working with him or her. Although expatriate selection processes typically include previous work accomplishments along with assessments of ability and future potential, these factors often outweigh personality and dispositions. Importantly, using CSE in the selection process has value above and beyond previous experience. Likely because it contributes to the ability to cope with unique situations, CSE may amplify initial and sustained work adjustment beyond previous culture-relevant experience. Our results also help inform practitioners about circumstances under which it may be of value to place an individual with less experience in the assignment.

In particular, if individual development is more important than getting individuals up to speed quickly, then it may be useful to select individuals with less culture-specific work experience.

Conclusion

Our study builds and extends theory in a literature replete with strong calls for research that takes a dynamic perspective. Drawing upon uncertainty reduction theory, we develop and examine expectations about the evolution of expatriate work adjustment over time. Our findings, based on 10+ waves of data before, during, and after expatriate assignments, challenge the commonly accepted U-curve of adjustment and suggest expatriates experience a gradual increase in work adjustment over time. We also extend theory by drawing upon resource theory to posit and illustrate how individual resources play a role in the experienced trajectory of work adjustment. Illustrating the relevance of a dynamic approach to distal outcomes, our findings show that the trajectory of work adjustment relates to later career instrumentality, turnover intention and promotion. We encourage more research on the dynamics of expatriate experience.

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