Violated Expectations and Acculturative Stress Among U.S. Hispanic Immigrants

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Expectancy violation theory (EVT) was tested with 112 Hispanic immigrants living in the United States by determining whether discrepancies between their retrospectively recalled premigration expectations about life in the United States and their postmigration (actual) experiences in the United States would predict their levels of acculturative stress. Discrepancies were assessed in 4 domains (ability to communicate with English speakers, perceiving their communities and the United States as safe, obtaining adequate employment, and experiencing racism). Overall, the results indicated that discrepancies between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences were associated significantly with acculturative stress, although some of the findings were counter to EVT. Also, on the basis of a hierarchical regression analysis, the discrepancies significantly, albeit modestly, contributed to the prediction of acculturative stress beyond the predictive ability of general demographic variables and postmigration experiences. Implications for clinical interventions and research opportunities with EVT and Hispanic immigrants are discussed.

Keywords: expectancy violation, acculturative stress, Hispanic immigrants

Individuals who decide to relinquish the familiarity of their country and culture in exchange for a new life in the United States may be inclined naturally to envision their future in the United States on the basis of a set of preconceived ideas. Prospective immigrants may have high or unrealistic expectations about life in the United States based on little first-hand knowledge or experience. Various forms of media may portray distorted, or even inaccurate, positive images of life in the United States that may create favorable impressions on viewers in other countries (Bhattacharya & Schoppelrey, 2004). Likewise, immigrants already living in the United States may convey a positive picture of life in the United States to their family and friends still living in their country of origin. Thus, prospective immigrants contemplating a move to the United States may expect that they will experience little or no difficulty in adjusting to new surroundings, obtaining better housing, suitable employment, and so on, after arriving in the United States.

According to a report issued by the U.S. Census Bureau (Larson, 2004), as of 2003, there were approximately 33.5 million foreign-born residents in the United States, representing nearly 12% of the total population. There are multiple reasons why people choose to migrate to the United States, which may include escaping poverty, evading political unrest or persecution, and pursuing a higher quality of life. It also is possible that the desire to relocate to the United States is cultivated by the pervasiveness of migration from one’s country of origin (Kandel & Massey, 2002). Immigration trends in the United States suggest that the country’s strength in attracting immigrants lies in its international reputation as a land of opportunities, relative economic and political stability, and some freedoms that may not exist in other countries (Hirschman, 2005).

Nevertheless, the reality for most immigrants who choose to relocate to a new country is that they likely will encounter a mixture of positive and negative experiences in their host country. The positive experiences or changes may contribute to their overall personal or psychological development. For example, successful adaptation to a new culture may enhance self-esteem and a sense of intercultural competence (Berry, 2006; Searle & Ward, 1990). By contrast, premigration reasons for having immigrated and encountering negative experiences or challenges may become “psychological burdens” related to the process of having to adapt to the host country (Berry, 1997; Rocca, Horenczyk, & Schwartz, 2000). This adaptation—commonly referred to as acculturation—may be experienced as stressful, particularly when the changes are perceived as aversive or coercive.

The pressures to acculturate likely are experienced differently across individuals and, for some, may create an intra- and interpersonal stress syndrome referred to as acculturative stress (Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002). For Hispanic immigrants in the United States, acculturative stress may result from struggling to communicate with English speakers, from perceived cultural or value incompatibilities between the local cultural context in the United States and their culture of origin, and from having a heightened awareness or concern over their foreign status. Acculturative stress affects individuals differently and has been found to correlate with psychological symptoms and behavioral problems such as anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse, and eating disorders (e.g., Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000; Hovey &
Magana, 2002; Perez, Voelz, Pettit, & Joiner, 2002). Some research has found that Hispanics who have achieved a bicultural orientation have lower rates of psychopathology (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Berry (2006) has speculated that possessing well-developed coping skills ought to help mitigate the negative effects of acculturative stress.

An array of variables has been linked to acculturative stress. For example, higher levels of social support (Hovey & King, 1996), ethnic identity (Sanchez & Fernandez, 1993), self-esteem (Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987) and self-efficacy (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004) have been found to be associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. By contrast, general life stressors (Dona & Berry, 1994), a perceived absence of choice to have immigrated (Hovey, 1999), and perceived discrimination based on minority or immigrant status (Gil & Vega, 1996) have been found to be associated with higher levels of acculturative stress. Moreover, sometimes it is difficult to disentangle general life stressors from stress related to acculturation. As one example, although marital strife among immigrants may occur independently of acculturative pressure, relationship conflict may occur as a direct result of acculturation issues, such as when spouses disagree on their respective dyadic roles due to having discrepant levels of acculturation.

One potentially contributing variable to acculturative stress that has been largely ignored by researchers (see Bhattacharya & Schoppelrey, 2004, as an exception) is the degree to which experiences in a host country correspond with what immigrants had expected before having immigrated. When postmigration experiences fail to live up to expectations immigrants may have had about life in a new country, they may experience frustration and despair (Hovey, 1999). This phenomenon is captured by Burgoon’s (1978) expectancy violation theory (EVT). In general, EVT posits that when people’s expectations are unmet or violated, the result often is a negative psychological reaction. EVT also accounts for positive psychological reactions when experiences exceed expectations. In the context of immigration to the United States by Hispanics, those who find that life in the United States has not lived up to their premigration expectations theoretically would be expected to experience relatively higher levels of stress stemming from pressures to change or acculturate to the United States. By contrast, those who find that life in the United States has been better than what they had imagined before immigrating would be expected to experience relatively less acculturative stress.

Conceptually, EVT shares similarities with classic coping and stress theory that was developed originally by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Both theories acknowledge the variation across and within individuals in the way they appraise and react to potentially stress-producing events or situations. Additionally, the situation must be judged to be problematic for the situation to trigger a stressful reaction. However, there is an appreciable distinction between EVT and the classical coping paradigm. A critical aspect of coping and stress theory occurs during the appraisal process whereby individuals perceive a mismatch between the seriousness of a problematic situation and their available resources for responding effectively to the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By contrast, EVT entails the appraisal of a situation in light of previously held expectations, thereby adding a nuanced, yet important layer of complexity to this phenomenon relative to classic coping and stress theory. More specifically, EVT emphasizes the disillusionment that may result from unfulfilled expectations that were formulated and anticipated well in advance of a prospective situation, such as the vicissitudes related to living in a new country. EVT also includes the converse, which is when experiences exceed previously formulated expectations and thus lead to positive appraisals and reactions to situations. It is this characteristic of EVT that makes it relevant to the study of acculturative stress among Hispanic immigrants and, thus, the focus of the present study.

EVT has been examined in other contexts such as marketing (Brandt, 1988; Sirgy, 1984), marital/relational satisfaction (Joyce, Ogrodniczuk, Piper, & McCallum, 2003; Kelley, 1991), causal attribution (Kanazawa, 1992), counterfactual thinking (Sanna & Turley, 1996), and the anticipation of pain from surgery (Arntz, vanEck, & Heijmans, 1980). Without specifically alluding to EVT, Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey (2004) used structured interviews to examine premigration expectations and postmigration experiences in the United States among South Asian immigrants. Because their study was qualitative, Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey did not measure or statistically analyze relations among these variables but discussed how potential discrepancies between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences might influence the immigrants’ hopes for a better future for their children. The present study represents an effort to fill this void in the literature.

There are theoretical and practical reasons for investigating the potential influence of violated expectations on Hispanics’ acculturative stress levels. In terms of causal agents of acculturative stress, the focus of many studies tends to be on environmental or external sources of stress related to adjustment to a host country (struggling with a new language, encountering xenophobic-based discrimination, experiencing pressure to conform to new social norms, etc.). If violated expectations were found to underlie a portion of acculturative stress among Hispanic immigrants, our understanding of acculturative stress theory would broaden by the etiological addition of this intrapsychic source of acculturative stress. Acculturative stress theory also would benefit empirically from researchers expanding their scope of inquiry to include attitudinal antecedents and ramifications of acculturative distress. From a clinical perspective, knowing that violated expectations contribute to immigrants’ acculturative stress would create an additional point of entry for intervention by professionals treating Hispanic immigrants and other minorities for adjustment concerns that are stress related.

In this study, we sought to determine whether discrepancies between Hispanic immigrants’ retrospectively recalled premigration expectations about how life would be in the United States versus their postmigration (actual) experiences in the United States would predict their levels of acculturative stress. EVT theoretically could lead to two distinct outcomes. Immigrants with relatively high premigration expectations about life in the United States may be disappointed to find that life in the United States is not as positive as they had anticipated. Unfulfilled expectations—relative to actual experiences—were hypothesized to be associated with increased acculturative stress. Conversely, immigrants with either low or relatively realistic premigration expectations about life in the United States may find that life in the United States is better than they had imagined before immigrating. Experiences that
exceed premigration expectations were hypothesized to be associated with decreased acculturative stress.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample comprised 112 (65 female, 47 male) Hispanic or Latino/a Americans residing within the greater central Florida region. To qualify for the study, participants had to (a) be born in a Latin American country and be of Hispanic ancestry, (b) have emigrated from their country of origin as an adult of at least 18 years of age, and (c) have migrated to the United States within the previous 5-year period. The choice to make 5 years the maximum amount of time participants could have lived in the United States was based on the assumption that more time residing in the United States might minimize the accuracy of participants’ retrospectively recalled expectations about life in the United States and be associated with less stress related to the pressures to acculturate to U.S. culture. Graduate and undergraduate students working in a multicultural psychology research laboratory assisted with locating potential participants from places within the general community, such as churches, school events, private gatherings, and so forth. Also, participants often provided referral information of other potential participants who were contacted by the researchers to inquire of their willingness to participate in the study. All student recruiters were directed to seek broad representation of Hispanics across diverse socioeconomic strata and were prohibited from recruiting members of their own immediate family but were free to draw on their own personal and organizational contacts in the community. Research assistants provided participants the study rationale, obtained informed consent, and administered all the questionnaires to the participants in their homes. Participants were not provided any feedback regarding their responses to the questionnaires but were encouraged to contact the supervising researcher if they had any questions or concerns. On completion of the questionnaires, all participants received a $15 gift card from a local department store as compensation.

Regarding country of origin, 56 participants reported they were from South America (22 Colombians, 15 Venezuelans, 9 Ecuadorians, 5 Peruvians, 2 Chileans, 2 Brazilians, 1 Argentinean), 8 from Central America (4 Hondurans, 2 Panamanians, 1 Salvadoran, 1 Nicaraguan), 29 from Puerto Rico, 15 from Cuba, 3 from Mexico, and 1 from the Dominican Republic. Puerto Ricans are not immigrants in the United States from a legal standpoint (see Arbona & Virella, 2008). However, many Puerto Ricans’ experiences in the United States are similar to those emigrating from other Latin American countries, thereby warranting their inclusion (e.g., speaking Spanish, maintaining interdependent family relations, holding parents and elders in relatively high regard). Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 64 ($M = 35.37$ years, $SD = 9.30$). The range of time they had resided in the United States was from 6 months to 5 years ($M = 3.96$ years, $SD = 1.06$). The sample consisted of a moderately educated group, with a mean number of years of education totaling 14.97 ($SD = 3.68$; total years of education = 3–21 years). Their annual incomes varied from <$10,000 to >$70,000, with 71% reporting an average family income of over $40,000. Fifty-two percent were married, with 60% having at least one child living with them. Regarding acculturation, their average score on a measure of acculturation toward the American culture (the Bidimensional Acculturation Scale for Americans [BAS-American], discussed later) was 2.86 ($SD = 0.73$), whereas their average score on a measure of enculturation toward the Hispanic culture (Bidimensional Acculturation Scale for Hispanics [BAS-Hispanic], discussed later) was 3.57 ($SD = 0.45$), suggesting that, on average, the participants tended to have a multicultural orientation, although they likely were more adept in their culture of origin. Regarding acculturative stress, their average score on a measure of acculturative stress (Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale [SAFE], discussed later) was 2.09 ($SD = 0.58$), indicating that their average responses to SAFE questions corresponded with “somewhat stressed.” Approximately twice as many participants elected to complete the questionnaires in Spanish than in English (63% vs. 37%, respectively).

**Measures**

All questionnaires were translated into Spanish using the Brislin (1970) technique. Both language versions of all of the instruments were found to have adequate reliability (reported later). Participants completed the following instruments:

- **Demographic sheet.** A demographic sheet asked participants to provide their age, gender, ethnicity, place of birth, number of years living in the United States, religious affiliation, marital status, educational level, annual income level, and occupation.
- **SAFE.** The SAFE (Mena et al., 1987) is a 21-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess an individual’s level of acculturative stress. The SAFE yields a total score and individual scores on its four subscales (Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental). For this study, the total SAFE score was used, except where noted otherwise. Each SAFE item is a statement to which participants respond using a 5-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from not stressful (1) to extremely stressful (5). On the basis of the present sample of participants, the SAFE was found to have Cronbach reliability alphas of 0.87 (Spanish version) and 0.89 (English version).
- **BAS-Hispanic** (Marín & Gamba, 1996). The BAS provides an acculturation score for two major cultural dimensions that are considered to be orthogonal: acculturation toward the larger U.S. or American culture and enculturation toward the Hispanic culture. The scale consists of 12 items per cultural dimension that measure three language-related areas (language use, linguistic proficiency, and electronic media usage). Participants responded using a 4-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from almost never (1) to almost always (4). On the basis of our sample of participants, the acculturation toward the American culture subscale obtained Cronbach reliability alphas of 0.94 (Spanish version) and 0.93 (English version). The subscale measuring enculturation toward the Hispanic culture obtained Cronbach reliability alphas of 0.86 (Spanish version) and 0.90 (English version).
- **Premigration Retrospective Expectations and Postmigration Experiences Survey (PREPE).** The PREPE is a 24-item self-report instrument that we developed to assess respondents’ appraisals about life in the United States in two timeframes (premigration and postmigration) and in four domains (communication, safety, employment/finances, and racism). The four domains and accompanying items constituting the four PREPE constructs were
selected and developed on the basis of previous literature that has identified common concerns and challenges for many Hispanic immigrants and minorities (Clachar, 2000; Gil & Vega, 1996; Hernandez, 2005; Hovey & Magana, 2002; Mena et al., 1987; Rodriguez et al., 2002). The intent of the PREPE was to assess, on the basis of retrospective recall, how the respondent imagined life would be like in the United States before immigrating (i.e., premigration expectations) and how life currently is experienced in the United States (i.e., postmigration experiences). Participants respond to statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). For each of the four constructs, the following instructions prefaced the premigration expectation items:

The following questions inquire about your beliefs and expectations PRIOR to immigrating to the United States. Please indicate your response to each item by circling one of the choices.

The premigration expectations statements were written in the imperfect tense. Sample items for each construct include the following: “Prior to moving to the United States, I expected to communicate easily with English-speaking people” (communication). “Prior to moving to the United States, I expected the United States to be safer than my country-of-origin” (safety). “Prior to moving to the United States, I expected to find employment fairly easily in the United States” (employment/finances). “Prior to moving to the United States, I expected to experience prejudice and/or discrimination in the United States” (racism).

For each of the four constructs, the following instructions prefaced the postmigration experiences items:

The following questions inquire about your CURRENT beliefs and experiences in the United States. Please indicate your response to each item by circling one of the choices.

The postmigration experiences statements were companion items to the premigration expectation statements and were written similarly but in the present tense. A sample item for the communication construct is, “Currently, I am able to speak easily with English-speaking people.”

The original communication construct comprised eight items total (four premigration, four postmigration). However, because of unacceptably low reliability estimates (e.g., less than .60), two items were discarded, resulting in a six-item construct that obtained Cronbach reliability alphas of 0.75 (premigration, Spanish version), 0.75 (postmigration, Spanish version), 0.84 (premigration, English version), and 0.82 (postmigration, English version), respectively. The safety construct had six items total and obtained Cronbach reliability alphas of 0.70 (premigration, Spanish version), 0.78 (postmigration, Spanish version), 0.80 (premigration, English version), and 0.77 (postmigration, English version), respectively. The original employment/finances construct had 16 items; because of reliability concerns, six items were discarded. The result was a 10-item subscale that obtained Cronbach reliability alphas of 0.68 (premigration, Spanish version), 0.87 (postmigration, Spanish version), 0.67 (premigration, English version), and 0.86 (postmigration, English version), respectively. The racism construct originally had four items, but due to reliability concerns, two items were discarded, and the two companion items that most directly assessed experiences with racial discrimination were retained and included for analysis.

Although no validity data external to the present study are available to support the PREPE, various correlations between PREPE constructs and other study variables offer preliminary support for the validity of the PREPE instrument. For example, participants’ current ability to communicate in English (as measured by the postmigration communication construct) correlated positively with the years they had lived in the United States ($r = .21$), level of education ($r = .15$), and acculturation toward the U.S. culture ($r = .75$). Scores on the postmigration safety construct correlated positively with education ($r = .18$), possibly because better educated immigrants, having more fluency in English, perceive themselves to have more resources at their disposal to feel safe in their respective neighborhoods. Scores on the postmigration employment/finances construct correlated with income ($r = .21$). Finally, participants’ experiences with racism (as measured by the postmigration racism construct) correlated negatively with the years they had lived in the United States ($r = -.23$), years of education ($r = -.15$), and acculturation toward the U.S. culture ($r = -.25$).

In the context of immigration, expectancy violation occurs when postmigration experiences either fall short of, or exceed, premigration expectations, thereby representing a discrepancy between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences. Scores reflective of a discrepancy were derived in the following manner: For each of the four PREPE constructs, a total score was obtained for the premigration expectations and for the postmigration experiences by adding the items of each respective construct and then dividing by the number of items. The premigration expectations total score was subtracted from the postmigration experiences total score for each domain, yielding a score representing the discrepancy score for that construct. This formula allowed the valence of the discrepancy score ($+/−$) to correspond with the respondents’ subjective appraisal of the situation. That is, a negative discrepancy score (reflective of actual experiences not living up to high premigration expectations) corresponds with a respondent perceiving the discrepancy in a negative or disappointing manner. By contrast, a positive discrepancy score (reflective of experiences exceeding premigration expectations) corresponds with a respondent perceiving the discrepancy in a positive manner (e.g., being “pleasantly surprised”). Discrepancy scores hovering close to zero suggests that respondents’ actual experiences in the United States are close to what they had expected to experience prior to immigrating. This approach to defining and measuring discrepancies between expectations and experiences allowed for a full range of continuous discrepancy scores in both positive and negative directions.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the means and standard deviations and the intercorrelations of the study variables, respectively. Before testing the hypothesis, two standard multiple regressions were performed predicting acculturative stress from the four PREPE premigration and postmigration constructs (communication, safety, employment/finances, and racism) to determine whether premigration expectations and postmigration experiences—when examined separately—would predict acculturative stress without consideration of other variables. Examination of indicators suggestive of problems with collinearity among the predictor variables (e.g., small
Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables (N = 112)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>35.29</td>
<td>9.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in the United States</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (in years)</td>
<td>14.99</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income*</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAS-Hispanic</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAS-American</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAFE</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premigration communication b</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmigration communication b</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication discrepancy b</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premigration safety b</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmigration safety b</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety discrepancy b</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premigration employment/finances b</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment/finances discrepancy b</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premigration racism b</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmigration racism b</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism discrepancy b</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. BAS-Hispanic = Bidimensional Acculturation Scale, measuring enculturation toward the Hispanic culture; BAS-American = Bidimensional Acculturation Scale, measuring acculturation toward the American culture; SAFE = Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress scale.

*Annual income brackets were as follows: 1 = <$10,000; 2 = $10,000–$20,000; 3 = $20,000–$30,000; 4 = $30,000–$40,000; 5 = $40,000–$50,000; 6 = $50,000–$60,000; 7 = $60,000–$70,000; 8 = >$70,000. b Measured by the Premigration Retrospective Expectation and Postmigration Experiences Scale (PREPE).

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of acculturative stress scores obtained by participants with positive, negative, and no-discrepancy PREPE scores. As predicted, participants with negative discrepancy scores obtained higher acculturative stress scores than participants with positive discrepancy scores on all four constructs, with differences on the constructs of safety and racism reaching statistical significance, t(88) = 6.93, p < .001. The individual PREPE discrepancy constructs significantly predicted acculturative stress (multiple R² = .21), F(4, 105) = 6.93, p < .001. The individual PREPE discrepancy constructs that reached statistical significance were communication (β = −0.25, t = −2.73, p < .01); and racism (β = −0.30, t = −3.47, p < .01). Safety approached, but did not achieve, statistical significance (β = −0.16, t = −1.79, p = .078). The more participants struggled to communicate in English and experienced prejudice or discrimination contrary to their premigration expectations, the more acculturative stress they reported.

To test further the hypothesis that discrepancies between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences would be associated with acculturative stress, we performed a standard multiple regression predicting acculturative stress from the four PREPE discrepancy constructs. This analysis included data from all participants. Taken together, the four PREPE discrepancy constructs significantly predicted acculturative stress (multiple R² = .21), F(4, 105) = 6.93, p < .001. The individual PREPE discrepancy constructs that reached statistical significance were communication (β = −0.25, t = −2.73, p < .01); and racism (β = −0.30, t = −3.47, p < .01). Safety approached, but did not achieve, statistical significance (β = −0.16, t = −1.79, p = .078). The more participants struggled to communicate in English and experienced prejudice or discrimination contrary to their premigration expectations, the more acculturative stress they reported.

To determine whether violated expectations would add to the prediction of acculturative stress above the predictive ability of general demographic variables and postmigration experiences, we performed a hierarchical multiple regression on the data, predicting acculturative stress from three blocks of variables. Data from all participants were included in this analysis. At Step 1, the demographic variables (age, years in the United States, level of education, annual income, acculturation toward the American culture, and enculturation toward the Hispanic culture) were entered into the prediction equation. Taken together, the demographic variables significantly predicted acculturative stress (multiple R² = .28), F(6, 106) = 6.45, p < .001. The individual demographic variables that reached statistical significance were age (β = −0.21, t = −2.09, p < .05); income (β = −0.22, t = −2.22, p < .05); and acculturation toward the American culture (β = −0.46, t = −4.40, p < .001). The younger, lower earning, and less acculturated participants reported higher levels of acculturative stress. At Step 2, with postmigration constructs scores added to the prediction of acculturative stress by demographic variables, R² = .34, F(10, 106) = 4.87, p < .001. Adding postmigration experiences to the equation did not result in a significant change to R² (ΔR² = .06), F = 2.08, ns. The individual variable that reached statistical significance was income (β = −0.19, t = −2.03, p < .05). At Step 3, with violated expectations (based on discrepancy scores) added to the prediction of acculturative stress...
by demographic and postmigration variables, $R^2 = .41$, $F(14, 106) = 4.64$, $p < .001$. Adding violated expectations to the equation resulted in a modest, but statistically significant change to $R^2$. The $\Delta F = 3.02$, $p < .05$. The individual variables that reached statistical significance were income ($\beta = -0.22$), $t = -2.34$, $p < .05$; and the violated expectation construct of racism ($\beta = -0.36$), $t = -3.16$, $p < .01$.

A remaining question was whether the PREPE discrepancy scores would correlate with the SAFE subscales that are similar conceptually. Two of the four PREPE constructs (communication and racism) were conceptually similar to two of the SAFE subscales (Social, which assesses stress related to difficulty in communicating with others in English, and Environment, which assesses stress related to real or perceived discrimination). With postmigration communication experiences parialed out, the PREPE discrepancy construct of communication correlated significantly with the SAFE Social subscale ($r = -2.22$, $p < .05$). With postmigration racism experiences parialed out, the PREPE discrepancy construct of racism correlated significantly with the SAFE Environmental subscale ($r = -0.29$, $p < .01$).

**Discussion**

On the basis of EVT, it was hypothesized that Hispanic immigrants who perceive life in the United States to be less satisfying than what they had expected before immigrating would experience more acculturative stress and, conversely, those who perceive their lives in the United States to be more satisfying than they had expected would experience less acculturative stress. Overall, the results supported the hypothesis. Analyses comparing only immigrants with negative versus positive discrepancies between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences revealed that those who were disappointed in their postmigration experiences reported more acculturative stress in the areas of community safety and racism compared with those whose experiences had exceeded their premigration expectations. Specifically, individuals who had expected to live in safe neighborhoods in the United States (yet may not) and had underestimated the extent to which they would experience real or perceived racism reported higher levels of acculturative stress. By contrast, individuals who discovered after immigration that their communities are safer than they had expected, and that they had not experienced a level of racism they expected, and that they had not experienced a level of racism they had anticipated before immigrating to the United States, reported lower levels of acculturative stress.

When immigrants with no discrepancy between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences were examined, the findings became more mixed, including some that were counter to our expectations. For example, although immigrants with no discrepancy on the construct of communication and employment/finances had higher acculturative stress scores than those with positive discrepancies (which is in line with our hypothesis), they also had higher acculturative stress scores than those with negative discrepancies (which is counterintuitive). Moreover, immigrants with no discrepancies on the construct of safety had lower acculturative stress scores than those with positive discrepancies, whereas those with no discrepancies on the construct of racism had acculturative stress scores comparable with those with positive discrepancies.
discrepancies. We believe that these counterintuitive results reflect the complexity and subjectivity inherent to this phenomenon (Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999). Discrepancies between expectations and experiences—including the absence of discrepancies—may not always predict acculturative stress consistently in a uniform way. As an example, individuals who had expected to experience higher levels of racial discrimination in the United States and who, after arrival, indeed experienced high levels of racial discrimination (and thus had “accurate” expectations; i.e., no discrepancy) ought to experience higher levels of acculturative stress compared with individuals who had not expected racial discrimination yet have experienced mild levels of discrimination (and thus had a negative discrepancy between expectations and experiences).

Violated expectations significantly added to the prediction of acculturative stress beyond the predictive ability of demographic variables and postmigration experiences. On one hand, the discrepancies only explained a modest amount of variance in acculturative stress scores. On the other hand, we believe that this finding is noteworthy in light of the predictive ability of violated expectations on acculturative stress after the predictive contribution of demographic variables and actual postmigration experiences. Additional support for the import of expected violations on acculturative stress beyond the predictive ability of demographic variables and postmigration experiences is provided by findings from our study included the relations between acculturative stress, age, income, and acculturation to the American culture. It is not surprising that immigrants who were more acculturated toward the local cultural context in the United States would experience less acculturative stress, particularly in light of how acculturation was measured in this study (based primarily on perceived competence in English). Increased mastery of English (along with native mastery of Spanish) should offer Hispanic immigrants greater flexibility and ease of transition between English and Spanish-dominant social contexts. Of greater interest were the negative correlations between age, income, and acculturative stress. The pattern indicated that older immigrants and those with higher incomes experience relatively less acculturative stress.

In general, children and adolescents acculturate more rapidly to the local cultural context of the United States than older individuals, such as their parents (Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines, & Arnalde, 1978). Thus, younger individuals ought to experience less acculturative stress than older individuals (Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006). However, that pattern may vary when considering adults exclusively, such as our sample of adult immigrants. Among adults, a confluence of variables likely determines their acculturation to a host country, such as their reason for immigration (Hovey, 1999), quality of social support (Hovey &

### Table 3

**Means and Standard Deviations of Acculturative Stress Scores (SAFE) by Immigrants as a Function of Discrepancy Scores on PREPE Constructs (N = 112)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREPE construct</th>
<th>Discrepancy type</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>No discrepancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(and SD)</td>
<td>(and SD)</td>
<td>(and SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.15 (0.40)</td>
<td>2.03 (0.57)</td>
<td>2.30 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.30 (0.61)</td>
<td>2.04 (0.52)</td>
<td>1.87 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employment/finances</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.11 (0.56)</td>
<td>2.01 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.24 (0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.23 (0.64)</td>
<td>1.79 (0.49)</td>
<td>1.76 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SAFE = Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress scale; PREPE = Premigration Retrospective Expectation and Postmigration Experiences Scale.

¢ Positive discrepancy significantly differed from no discrepancy (p < .05). b Positive discrepancy significantly differed from negative discrepancy (p < .05); no discrepancy significantly differed from negative discrepancy (p < .01). c Positive and no discrepancy significantly differed from negative discrepancy (ps < .01).
King, 1996), and their education and income (Negy & Woods, 1992a, 1992b). Generally, education prepares individuals for responding more effectively to life’s challenges, including changes in one’s status in life. Also, education moderately correlates with income, and both have been found to correlate significantly with Hispanics’ acculturation toward the U.S. culture (Negy & Woods, 1992b). Higher incomes often inoculate individuals from problems that can be solved with financial resources. Thus, having more money for both necessities and recreation ought to be associated with less stress, including acculturative stress.

We do not want to overstate the role of violated expectations on acculturative stress. Violated expectations about life in the United States is one among many variables that may influence acculturative stress, as evidenced by the array of findings obtained in this study. Other variables, such as self-efficacy, personal attributes, intercultural competence, and so on that were not included in this study also may influence acculturative stress (Torres & Rollock, 2004, 2007). In all likelihood, variables may interact to exacerbate acculturative stress more than any one variable may cause on its own. Complicating this situation is the subjective element inherent to experiencing stress.

EVT is an understudied area within acculturative stress research. This study adds to the literature on acculturative stress by drawing attention to a relatively ignored potential source of stress related to the pressures to acculturate. The role of violated expectations on acculturative stress was examined from different angles, and the findings generally supported the importance of violated expectations on acculturative stress. Moreover, our findings lay the groundwork for fruitful areas to be explored in future studies on how violated expectations influence—either alone or in conjunction with other variables—immigrants’ and minorities’ acculturative stress.

We believe that these results are notable in light of the amount of homogeneity present within our sample of participants. The immigrants in this study, on average, reported having a strong command of English, including having expected to be able to communicate with English-speakers before immigrating to the United States. They also reported a high level of perceived safety in their respective communities, including having expected to live in safe neighborhoods in the United States. These levels of English competence and perceived community safety likely reflect the area of the country where this study took place (central Florida, in which there are ample middle-class Hispanic neighborhoods), as well as the selection bias common to convenience samples (Negy & Snyder, 1997). Still, there was enough variation in PREPE scores on these constructs to achieve findings that generally supported EVT. With a more diverse sample of Hispanic immigrants, discrepancies between premigration expectations and postmigration experiences might be greater in magnitude and, therefore, more predictive of acculturative stress.

The findings, taken together, suggest that immigrants with unusually optimistic or unrealistic expectations about life in the United States may predispose themselves for undue stress as they endeavor to adjust to life in the United States. This situation may be compounded by the fact that many Latin American immigrants lack comparative data on living in a new country. That is, before immigrating to the United States, many, if not most, immigrants have never lived in another foreign country and, as a result, may personalize erroneously some of the challenges or problems they experience in the United States related to the pressures to acculturate. The pressures to learn a new language, laws, customs, and so on, including experiencing some degree of social alienation, typically are experienced by all immigrants who find themselves, for whatever reason, living in a new country (Huang & Spurgeon, 2006; Zlobina, Basabe, Paez, & Furnham, 2006).

EVT, including the present findings, has implications for clinical interventions and research opportunities. In the context of therapy, immigrant clients whose presenting problems include, or overlap with, stress related to acculturative demands may benefit from receiving an orientation to the phenomenon of violated expectations. Specifically, mental health professionals, community leaders, and clergy offering guidance to distressed immigrants may wish to provide psychoeducational information on how unrealistic expectations about life in the United States may lead to problems or exacerbate their stress levels as they endeavor to carve out a new life in this country. Immigrants who are flexible in response to problems and who adopt realistic expectations may experience better psychological adjustment. We suggest that interventions based on an understanding of the phenomenon of violated expectations be proffered in conjunction with contemporary forms of coping skills training that focus on problem-solving skills and culturally tailored competencies that increase immigrants’ abilities to negotiate social demands stemming from their host culture, their culture of origin, or both (Torres & Rollock, 2004, 2007). Such interventions may be extended to couples therapy, as expectancy violations may underlie relationship strife among Hispanic immigrant couples who differ in their levels of acculturation. Acculturative discrepancies between partners may lead to discrepant role expectations (Negy & Snyder, 1997). When one partner violates the other partner’s role expectations (or both partners violate), conflict may ensue—conflict that may be reduced by helping couples understand the impact of violated expectations on relationships specifically because of partners’ discrepant acculturation levels.

EVT may be useful in exploring other aspects of immigrants’ adaptation to life in the United States. Areas of future research include investigating the ways in which frustrated immigrants respond to the awareness that postmigration experiences have not lived up to their premigration expectations. Such research should examine whether specific coping responses (e.g., positive reframing) seem more adaptive than others with regard to modifying expectations to be in line with the reality of their lives in the United States. Also, it would be useful to determine whether alcohol or substance abuse among Hispanic immigrants is linked to a recognition that, in various ways, their lives in the United States are not commensurate with their premigration expectations. On a positive side, for Hispanic immigrants whose postmigration experiences exceed their premigration expectations, it would be of interest to determine whether such a revelation serves to motivate them to take advantage of available opportunities in the United States (e.g., holding higher expectations for their children to excel in school and pursue higher education). Do Hispanic immigrants whose postmigration experiences exceed their premigration expectations become more involved in community activities; develop a deeper attachment or sense of loyalty to the United States; or take an active interest in local, state, or national politics? These questions represent a handful of areas of new inquiry that may be undertaken in the context of EVT among Hispanic immigrants.
Finally, the present study had limitations. As indicated earlier, there are many variables that influence the impact of acculturative stress that were not included in this study. Also, the instrument used to measure acculturative stress (the SAFE) assesses stress only in response to pressure to acculturate toward the American culture, whereas the instrument used to assess acculturization (the BAS) assesses acculturization toward the American culture and enculturation toward the Hispanic culture. The SAFE may not have been sensitive enough to assess stress related to the pressure to enculturate toward the Hispanic culture. Various limitations are related to the PREPE scale. The PREPE assessed domains of concerns that, as discussed by Rodriguez et al. (2002), may or may not reflect concerns directly related to acculturative stress (e.g., economic problems). The PREPE also included a small number of items constituting the constructs (e.g., the Racism scale), and validity information on the PREPE is absent beyond validity data based on the present data. Furthermore, as stated earlier, there is an element of subjectivity in participants’ responses to items on scales (Klonoff et al., 1999), including the PREPE. Discrepancies of a similar magnitude but that differ in their location on a continuum of discrepancies may have different meaning across individuals and thus may be related differently to acculturative stress.

Our sample of immigrants was selected on a voluntary, nonrandom basis. As a group, they also were somewhat more educated than the average Hispanic adult currently residing in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). These findings, therefore, may not generalize to other cohorts of Hispanic immigrants in the United States. Perhaps the most notable limitation of this study was the reliance on retrospective recall of the participants’ expectations about life in the United States before having immigrated to this country. Whenever participants are required to report their history of beliefs or behaviors in a retrospective manner, the reliability of their recollection tends to diminish (Negy & Snyder, 2006). In a related manner, the participants’ postmigration experiences may have biased—in either a negative or a positive direction—their recollection of their premigration expectations. Last, although the discussion of these results was approached from the perspective that violated expectations likely lead to acculturative stress in a causal way, causality among the study variables is uncertain because of the correlational nature of this study (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). It could be, for example, that acculturative stress influenced, in a causal way, how participants reported their premigration expectations, postmigration experiences, or both.

References


functions of relational expectations. Human Communication Research, 18, 40–69.


