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# **Adjustment in Western European overseas assignments: Do France and Germany pose differing challenges to expatriate managers?**

## **I. Introduction**

Expatriate adjustment has been argued to be a central issue for ensuring expatriate success and avoiding failure (Mahajan and De Silva, 2012). In this regard, much has been written on individual antecedences for expatriate success and failure. Expatriate success has for example been related to personality traits (Shaffer et al 2006; Selmer and Luring, 2013), training (Okparaa and Kabongo, 2011) and early intercultural experiences (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013). Expatriate research has also examined contextual factors such as family relations (Gupta et al., 2012; Schütter and Boerner, 2013), networking (Farh et al., 2010) and organizational support (Takeuchi et al., 2009). Fewer studies, however, have been conducted with regard to the country context. One of the papers that has compared countries is Wang and Nayir's (2006) article on European expatriates in China and Turkey. In this study, the authors found that European expatriates developed stronger network ties in China. This was explained by expatriates being further from their home country networks. Selmer, Chiu and Shenkar (2007) compared German expatriates in America and American expatriates in Germany and found that the Germans were more adjusted. These studies show relative differences between countries in relation to the home country of the relocating group. However, there could also be differences in absolute terms due to specific country characteristics. Selmer and Luring (2011), for example, found that it was more difficult for expatriates to adjust in Finland compared to Norway due to the difficult Finnish language. In a different study, Selmer (2006) found that, because of the general development level, it was easier for expatriates adjusting to Singapore compared to China. Hence, only few studies have compared countries in terms of expatriates' failure and success, and new knowledge in this area can provide business organizations with insights into what can be expected in terms of adjustment and how to deal with this.

Much research looks at expatriates assigned to destinations outside their region of origin. In this regard, Asia has been, and still seems to be, a major geographical scope regarding the

assignment destination of such research (e.g. Froese, 2012; Froese and Peltokorpi, 2011; Lin, Lu and Lin, 2012; Wu and Ang, 2011). There is, however, increasing interest in previously dominant regions of expatriate origin (North America, Europe) as ‘emerging markets’ of foreign assignments from e.g. Asia (Kittler et al., 2011; Li and Scullion, 2010).

As such, research focusing on traditional corporate expatriates adjusting to the European cultural context is limited. Although there has been a number of investigations involving foreign assignments in European countries (e.g. Brewster and Bennett, 2010; Demel and Mayrhofer, 2010; Hippler, 2010; Kittler et al., 2011), the number of studies on adjustment of corporate expatriates assigned to Western European countries remains rather scarce (see however Breiden, Mohr and Mirza, 2006; Mohr and Klein, 2004; Suutari and Brewster, 1998). Despite the wide acceptance of differences on various dimensions, exemplarily reflected in economic indicators or even numerical values attached to dimensions of variation across national cultures (e.g. Hofstede, 2001), comparative studies on expatriate adjustment across Western European destinations are in short supply. Therefore, we examine business expatriates assigned to two of the leading countries in the European Union (EU); France and Germany.

Focussing on France and Germany, our study shifts the geographical scope not only to two traditional immigration countries in Western Europe (Bail, 2008), but to two of the major economic powers on the European continent as well as leading nations of the European Union (EU). The current political discussions associated with the Euro crisis underpin the importance of these countries for Europe, but also their economic role on a global scale. The global importance of both countries is also well reflected in major economic indicators. In 2010, both countries were found in the global Top 5 for nominal GDP, following the United States, China and Japan (e.g. World Bank, 2012b). For the period of 2001 to 2010, both countries were prime destinations of FDI inflow ranked 6th (France) and 8th (Germany) in average annual inflows across all countries worldwide (e.g. World Bank, 2012a). The high amounts of FDI inflow are argued to make both countries central destinations of overseas assignments from foreign competitors. A historical perspective also highlights the importance of comparing these two neighbouring countries. They have politically and economically cooperated peacefully for half a century where in the past enmity dominated between them as they were involved in several wars against each other, most recently in the two world wars.

Influenced by the Cold War, cordial relations between the countries became the key to European integration. Henceforth, the bilateral economic cooperation has been substantial and that may have contributed to transform both countries from previous adversaries to successful economic powerhouses attracting many business expatriates on a global scale. This increased interaction may have affected the two countries so that they may no longer fit the traditional stereotypes generally depicted in national comparisons (e.g. Stahl and Cerdin, 2004).

The purpose of our study is to examine adjustment and time to proficiency for business expatriates in France and Germany. By distinguishing common elements from differences suggested by existing literature and hypothesizing on expatriate adjustment and time to proficiency in France and Germany, this paper aims to contribute to our understanding of expatriate adjustment in Western Europe.

## **II. Expatriate adjustment and time to proficiency**

Research on international assignments sees expatriate adjustment as the vital construct underlying the success and failure of expatriate experiences to individuals, their families and their firms (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). In the following we outline different adjustment variables.

### *2.1 Sociocultural adjustment*

The sociocultural notion of adjustment is based on cultural learning theory and highlights social behaviour and practical social skills underlying attitudinal factors (Selmer, 2004; Hemmasi and Downes, 2013; Isakovic and Whitman, 2013). A pivotal concept in the extant literature on expatriate adjustment is the sociocultural concept by Black and colleagues (e.g. Black and Mendenhall, 1991; Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991). Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) argue that the degree of sociocultural adjustment should be treated as a multidimensional concept rather than a unitary phenomenon, as was previously the dominating view (Oberg, 1960). In their proposed model for international adjustment, Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) make a distinction among three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment: (1) general adjustment (adjustment to the general non-work environment), (2) interaction adjustment (adjusting to interacting with locals, both inside and outside of work) and (3) work adjustment (adjustment to the work context).

## *2.2 Psychological adjustment*

In addition to the prominent sociocultural conceptualization of expatriate adjustment, there is also a psychological perception which corresponds to the theoretical concept of subjective well-being. The latter has been well-developed in domestic contexts (e.g. Karasek, 1979) and empirically associated with sociocultural adjustment of expatriates (e.g. Arnetz and Anderzen, 1992; Aryee and Stone, 1996; Fenner and Selmer, 2008; Wang and Kanungo, 2004). Nicholson and Imaizumi (1993) even provide an early (and rare) look at Asian expatriates in a Western European context (Britain). Compared to sociocultural adjustment, the concept of psychological adjustment is based more on a problem-oriented view, focussing on attitudinal factors of the adjustment process. In other words, while sociocultural adjustment relates to the ability to 'fit in' or to negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture as measured by the amount of difficulty experienced in the management of everyday situations in the host culture, psychological adjustment deals with subjective well-being or mood states (e.g. depression, anxiety, tension, and fatigue) (Ward and Kennedy, 1996).

## *2.3 Time to proficiency*

One of the conceptual approaches to study how individuals come to master a new job is linked to the construct of time to proficiency. Pinder and Schroeder (1987) define time to proficiency as the period it takes for an employee in a new job to reach an acceptable performance level. The shorter this period is, the more efficient the transition into the new job or work role. Considered vice versa, time to proficiency could be seen as a conceptualisation of maladjustment, representing a lack of timely progress in skill acquisition (Harrison and Shaffer, 2005). This concept could also be applied to the international assignment context as expatriates who early become proficient in their new jobs abroad might also perform better. In this regard, Waxin (2004) has used an adapted version of time to proficiency in connection with expatriation and interaction adjustment.

The time which expatriates use to become proficient after transfers may have several important implications both for themselves and their organizations. For the expatriates, disruption in patterns and routines, both on the job and in their private lives, may produce anxiety and stress (Brett, 1984). Expatriates' time to proficiency can also be an important issue for the organization. Typically, the total costs derived from a transfer for an

organization exceed an expatriate's total contribution for some time during a post-transfer period of settling-in. Hence, the longer the time to proficiency, the greater the balance of costs for the organization. Therefore, it would be in the interest of both the expatriate and the assigning organization to keep time to proficiency as short as possible (Pinder and Schroeder, 1987).

### III. Development of hypotheses

Although being neighbouring countries with comparable demographic and economic parameters, the literature generally portray France and Germany as quite different in terms of cultural and societal characteristics. An initial look at Hofstede's (2001) cultural indices already reveals major differences in the scores for the two national cultures across three of the five dimensions. France displays higher scores than Germany for power distance (France: 68; Germany: 35) and uncertainty avoidance (F: 86; G: 65) and a lower score for masculinity/femininity (F: 43; G: 66). According to Hofstede, the two countries are rather similar regarding individualism/collectivism (F: 71; G: 67) and long-/short-term orientation (F: 39; G: 31). Even though these scores do not replace a more in-depth look into both countries, they could give a first indication that differences exist and will be incorporated in our discussion of hypotheses below.

Based on reviewing existing literature, our general proposition is that due to inclusive, general and explicit cultural norms, adjustment will be relatively easy for corporate expatriates in Germany. On the other hand, expatriates transferring to France could face a more difficult integration due to linguistic practices and the existence of more implicit cultural norms which are often determined by an individual's acquired position in society. This view could for example be supported by Hall's (1976) framework of different levels of contextualization in communication. Hall (2000) argues that the level of context determines everything about the nature of communication and sees context as the foundation of subsequent behaviour. While in low context cultures, most of the information is vested in the explicit code, high context transactions feature pre-programmed information that could be found in the setting and the receiver. Thus, low context communication is more straightforward and easier to understand for individuals from outside this culture than high context communication. In his seminal book on context in communication (*Beyond culture*), Hall (1976) categorizes Germans as low-context while France has subsequently been

categorized as middle to high context (Biswas, Olsen and Carlet, 1992; Park, Pan and Kim, 1998; Rosch and Segler, 1987). A better understanding enhances an individual's ability to 'fit in' and therefore should allow for better sociocultural adjustment. However, in addition to this underlying assumption, we also see a need to discuss more recent sources describing relevant differences between France and Germany for each of the sociocultural adjustment dimensions in more depth below.

### *3.2 Sociocultural adjustment to the general non-work environment*

The general environment of everyday life in Germany and France shows some similarities. As discussed above, both are major EU countries with similar levels of welfare. The gross domestic product at purchasing power parity per capita in France and Germany only shows little differences in living standards (IMF, 2012). We make a similar observation for healthcare, where both countries spend comparable amounts of their GDP, (11.6%, for both countries OECD, 2012) and offer universal health coverage (Brubaker et al., 2011). As expatriates are likely to be provided with private health insurance in Germany or private health supplements in France, as part of their compensation package, we argue that potential differences in healthcare delivery would be considerably small.

However, both countries differ in other non-income dimensions such as leisure. Looking at data from 1980 and 2005, Germans spend more on recreation and culture, as well as for eating out, than the French at both points in time. While the German expenditure for leisure has increased significantly over the past decades, it has been considerably stable in France. The share for eating out has decreased in both countries (Gronow and Southerton, 2010). The quality of accommodation was ranked higher for Germany than for France in a recent expatriate study with 2155 expatriates across four continents (Farquhar, 2009). We therefore hypothesize:

***Hypothesis 1:*** Expatriates assigned to France show lower degrees of general adjustment than expatriates assigned to Germany.

### *3.3 Sociocultural adjustment to interacting with locals*

Language is considered a central element of interaction which facilitates (or limits) interaction with other individuals within or outside the work context (Kittler, 2010;

Klitmøller and Luring, 2013; Luring and Selmer, 2012). On most assignments, expatriates are exposed to a second language different from their own language and have to either use English as a lingua franca or the native language of the host country; in our study French or German. Differences in language policies and the acceptance of English as lingua franca across both countries is argued to interfere with the adjustment to interacting with locals (Selmer and Luring, 2011; Luring, 2008). Language policies in France dictate an official stand of language purity which gives the French language a specific status in cultural life. This tradition has introduced very high demands of language fluency before foreigners can be accepted as true French speakers. Less purism is expected from foreigners in Germany (Wiese, 2009).

In existing literature it has been argued that in France, interaction between individuals is often determined by social position in society (d'Iribarne, 2009). Germans have a more general conduct in interaction that does not relate as much to positions in society and social background. Nonetheless, it is argued that in Germany, rules for interaction are very formal which is evident in the frequent use of titles. As the rules seem to be more explicit in the German context, this could make it easier to understand and adjust to host country interaction patterns in Germany than in France. This clarity applies to non-work as well as to work settings. In a work context, assignments will be designated to individuals according to their field of expertise and experience, following a participative element (Hinner, 2009). Hence, teamwork is encouraged and an individual's position depends more on the knowledge he or she can provide to the group and less on the societal role argued to be more important in France (Agourram, 2009; Communal and Senior, 1999; Stahl and Cerdin, 2004). Due to linguistic practices and the general rules in interaction we hypothesize:

***Hypothesis 2:*** Expatriates assigned to France show lower degrees of interaction adjustment than expatriates assigned to Germany.

### *3.4 Sociocultural adjustment to the work context*

The work contexts differ significantly between both countries. According to the literature elitism is strongly valued in France – in particular through its elitist education system (Stahl and Cerdin, 2004). In Germany the elite concept has been perceived more critically. Despite the recent attempt to also establish elite universities in Germany, as part of the government-

funded “Exzellenzinitiative” launched in 2005 and leading to the announcement of eleven “Elite-Universitäten” in 2012, there is little evidence that this initiative has led to a significant change to international companies located in Germany. In contrast, it is maintained that key positions in French companies tend to be filled with recruits from the “grandes écoles” (Communal and Senior, 1999). This would make it hard for foreigners to advance in the French system. According to Crowley-Henry (2007), this is particularly the case for those employees working in a France-based international company where the top management team is dominantly locally recruited. In Germany, the aim of education is still focused mainly on ensuring equal opportunities as part of the “Sozialstaatspostulat” (welfare state principle) incorporated in the German constitution (Hinner, 2009).

The management style in France is argued to be authoritarian with little room for a people-sensitive orientation. Emphasis is on direct and close supervision. Managers are often referred to as “les cadres” which describes the emphasis on the bureaucratic ethos of hierarchy and discipline (Communal and Senior, 1999). In Germany leaders are argued to be neither bureaucratic nor authoritarian, but open to concepts like delegation, participation and empowerment as characterized by the “competence first” principle (Brodbeck, Frese and Javidan, 2002). Hence, German managers are argued to see their role primarily as specialists who have taken on more responsibility than their colleagues (Communal and Senior, 1999). Managerial values thus rest on the equality of rights and opportunities (Stahl and Cerdin, 2004). This could make it easier for expatriates to adjust to work life in Germany. Thus, we hypothesize:

***Hypothesis 3:*** Expatriates assigned to France show lower degrees of work adjustment than expatriates assigned to Germany.

### *3.5 Psychological adjustment*

Psychological adjustment has been argued to be conceptually related to the sociocultural adjustment discussed above (e.g. Selmer, 2004). Thus, we follow our discussion for the development of the hypotheses above and assume that an easy sociocultural adjustment process may not jeopardize feelings of subjective well-being or invoke detrimental mood states as much as a more difficult process of adjustment. In addition, we include findings on the relationship of (ethnic) discrimination and psychological distress (e.g. Wamala, Boström

and Nyqvist, 2007) into our consideration.

Taking a historical perspective, France and Germany are seen as ‘old’ immigration countries of Western Europe where immigration began in the post-war period (as compared to newer immigration countries of Western Europe and emerging immigration countries of Southern and Eastern Europe) (e.g. Bail, 2008). Post-war labour recruitment has attracted Southern Europeans, Turks and Moroccans to France and Germany – added by postcolonial migration to France. This immigration was followed by significant second generation populations, and today’s environment in both countries is subsequently shaped by different ethnic groups and immigration – which is argued to have affected the two countries in different ways and led to different symbolic boundaries constructing notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

In France internal forces such as the education system, state linguistic and cultural policies seem to have created a sense of unity and national identity. In consequence, the French are often perceived as taking great pride in the national identity and the positive achievements of France (Kelly, 2001). Germany seems to show less pride in their national identity. Particularly the consequences of two World Wars could be seen as a reason for a great desire for stability and transparency. Accordingly, German institutional ideals and cultural conduct are relatively simple to follow as foreigners could more easily become aware of the underlying rules (Hinner, 2009). Germans are also characterized as good hosts of foreigners due to the ‘extreme helper syndrome’ in trying to gain a more favourable reputation in the eyes of outsiders (Wolf, 2008). For outsiders, the image of France seems less favourable. A number of studies have shown the French society to be discriminatory to foreign workers, particularly from the Middle East (Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010). The previous discussion would suggest that expatriates from abroad feel more welcome in Germany than in France. Thus, we hypothesize:

***Hypothesis 4:*** Expatriates assigned to France show lower degrees of psychological adjustment than expatriates assigned to Germany.

### *3.6 Time to proficiency*

Researchers have noted that a transition may be abandoned if the individual has difficulties in executing the new role, or in adopting the underlying perspective consistent with the new

role, or both. While there are many factors that are likely to affect the ease or difficulty of a transition and subsequent adjustment to the new role, we focused on a comparison between two different assignment destinations in Western Europe. In line with the domestic idea that the time to proficiency following a job change depends on the degree of difference between the old and the new position (Pinder and Schroeder, 1987), we assume that the differences highlighted above for sociocultural and psychological adjustment will also impact on time to proficiency. Consistent with our discussion of psychological adjustment, Pinder and Schroeder (1987) argue that the amount of stress experienced will increase directly with the degree to which life circumstances at the new location differ from those in previous locations and thus might require longer time to proficiency. Similarly, an easy process of adjusting to work in a host country should make the time for an expatriate to reach proficiency shorter.

Our discussion of existing literature leading to hypotheses 2 and 3 proposing a lower degree of interaction adjustment and work adjustment for expatriates in France could also be argued to have an impact on time to proficiency. Toh and Srinivas (2011) maintain that the amount of time needed for newcomer expatriates to achieve proficiency in their tasks could potentially be reduced if local organizational insiders help expatriates to better understand the norms of the organization as well as learn their work roles. In line with our discussion on interaction adjustment above, we expect those cultural insiders in France may be less open to share intimate knowledge of their culture than local colleagues of expatriates assigned to Germany. Therefore, we present the last hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5:** Expatriates assigned to France show longer time to proficiency than expatriates assigned to Germany.

## **IV. Methods**

### *4.1 Sample and data collection*

The data for this study originates from corporate expatriates on assignments in two major Western European economies; Germany and France.

Expatriates were identified as potential participants using French and German business

directories as a starting point of our data collection. In addition to e-mailed invitations to our online survey, several other means were employed to solicit participation. Particularly, personal contacts and the networks of identified expatriates who were willing to participate in our study were used to further stimulate participation. It should be noted that this approach involves a degree of convenience sampling and does not allow us to calculate a comprehensive response rate. However, this was considered a tolerable limitation to our sampling approach to try to achieve an adequate participation in our study.

When approaching participants for consent to participate in our study, alternative formats of the questionnaire (e.g. a paper based version) were also offered and applied upon discretion of the potential respondents. In order to ensure corporate expatriate status (e.g. compared to self-initiated expatriates), a screening question was used to determine whether the respondents belonged to our target group. After the screening process, 130 usable returns were included in our data analysis, 61 of which came from corporate expatriates in France and 69 came from corporate expatriates in Germany.

The average age of the expatriates in France was 46.8 years ( $SD=12.2$ ) and on the average, they had spent 5.6 years in the host country ( $SD=5.3$ ). On average, they had worked as an expatriate for 11.0 years ( $SD=7.7$ ), including France, and had an average tenure with their company of 14.5 years ( $SD=9.2$ ). The respondents in our subsample assigned to Germany show a very similar profile. Expatriates in Germany were on average 47.9 ( $SD=9.0$ ) years of age and had spent 6.0 years ( $SD=7.2$ ) of average assignment time in Germany. On average, they had worked as expatriates for 10.3 years ( $SD=8.1$ ) and had an average tenure with their company of 16.2 years ( $SD=10.3$ ).

As shown in Table 1, and consistent with other studies of corporate expatriates (e.g. Selmer and Leung, 2003), a general characteristic of our sample is that the overwhelming majority of the respondents are male and married expatriate managers with only some variation in the subsamples. Regarding the gender distribution, there were fewer female expatriates in Germany as compared to the French subsample. The marriage frequency was similar in both subsamples. The distribution of organizational positions and education level were also similar for both groups of expatriates. All but one of the respondents was a manager and most of the respondents were CEOs of their foreign operations. More than half of the respondents were

university graduates. A One-way ANOVA did not show any inter-group differences for any of the background variables, except for gender. Hence, only this variable was used as a covariate in the inter-group comparisons.

Insert Table 1 about here

#### 4.2 Measures

The scales aimed at assessing widely accepted constructs employing self-evaluations of sociocultural adjustment (e.g. Black and Stephens, 1989), psychological adjustment (Goldberg, 1972) and time to proficiency (Pinder and Schroeder, 1987) were adopted from the extant literature. The reliabilities for all of the three constructs were acceptable as they were above the  $\alpha=.70$  recommendation (Nunnally, 1978). Below, constructs and scales are described in more detail.

*Sociocultural adjustment.* Expatriates completed Black and Stephens' (1989) 14-item scale to assess sociocultural adjustment. This scale has been criticized for being merely a statistical construct with elements that are not well-defined or discrete (see e.g. Thomas and Lazarova (2006) for a critical discussion). Others have even proposed their own scale (cf. Haslberger, 2005), but such measures still need more research to corroborate their usefulness. The scale applied here is designed to measure the three dimensions: general adjustment (7 items,  $\alpha=.87$ ), interaction adjustment (4 items,  $\alpha=.87$ ) and work adjustment (3 items,  $\alpha=.81$ ). The respondents indicated the degree to which they were adjusted to their respective host location on a scale ranging from 1 = very unadjusted to 7 = completely adjusted. Sample items are the degree of adjustment to 'Food' or 'Health care facilities' (general adjustment), 'Interacting with host nationals on a day-to-day basis' (interaction adjustment), and 'Specific job responsibilities' (work adjustment).

*Psychological adjustment.* Expatriates' psychological adjustment was measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) developed by Goldberg (1972). This scale is commonly applied to assess minor psychiatric symptoms, but it has also been extensively used to monitor levels of well-being in community and organizational samples (Forster, 2000), as well as to measure expatriates' subjective well-being (Anderzén and Arnetz, 1999). Containing a number of questions concerning how people have been feeling recently, it

includes sleeping difficulties, feelings of unhappiness, and the respondents' ability to enjoy everyday experiences. Respondents were asked to think about how they had been feeling over the past few weeks (sample item: 'have you recently felt that you are playing a useful part in things?'). Responses ranged from (1) 'not at all' to (4) 'much more than usual'. Reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha=.82$ ).

*Time to Proficiency.* The time required by an individual to become proficient at the new job abroad was assessed by four items introduced by Pinder and Schroeder (1987). The construct involves two different response formats. Two of the items were semantic differential items asking respondents on a five-point scale how quickly they became proficient/comfortable in their new job after relocating (sample item: 'Overall, how quickly do you feel you became proficient at your new job (starting from the day you arrived in the host location)?'). The scale ranged from 1 = very quickly to 7 = very slowly. The other two items were ratio-level scaled and directly asked how many months it took for the respondents to become effective at their new jobs (sample item: 'How many months did it take you to become effective at your new job abroad (counted from the day you arrived in the host location)?'). Due to the different scales involved, standardized z scores were used to compute a mean score. The reliability of this scale was acceptable ( $\alpha=.74$ ).

## V. Results

Table 2 displays sample means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations. All sociocultural adjustment variables are significantly interrelated. There is a significant negative association between work adjustment and time to proficiency ( $r=-.32$ ;  $p<.01$ ) suggesting, not surprisingly, that expatriates who are less well adjusted to their work also take longer to reach an acceptable performance level in their new work assignment. There is also a negative correlation between psychological adjustment and time to proficiency ( $r=-.23$ ;  $p<.05$ ) also unsurprisingly indicating that expatriates who are less well-adjusted mentally are slower to perform at a satisfactory level.

Insert Table 2 about here

To test hypotheses 1 to 5, assuming country specific differences for sociocultural adjustment, psychological adjustment and time to proficiency, between-group differences were examined

through 5 x 2 Multivariate Analyses of Covariance (MANCOVA) with the only background variable indicating a significant inter-group difference, gender, as a covariate. Table 3 displays a significant overall effect detected for the two groups of corporate expatriates ( $F=3.56$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Uni-variate F-tests indicated a significant between-group difference for general adjustment ( $F=5.02$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and for work adjustment ( $F=10.23$ ;  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that the corporate expatriates in Germany had a lower mean score for these variables than their counterparts in France. There were no other statistically significant between-group differences. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 3 were rejected while the rest of the hypotheses did not find any empirical support.

Insert Table 3 about here

## VI. Discussion

### *6.1 Main findings*

We examined sociocultural and psychological adjustment as well as time to proficiency for expatriate managers assigned to France and Germany. Contrary to our expectations, we found that general adjustment and work adjustment were higher in France than in Germany. This finding is important since the construct of general adjustment encompasses much of everyday-life circumstances in the host country and the concept of work adjustment is closely associated with the very reason expatriate managers are sent abroad: to accomplish certain work tasks. There is therefore some chance that there will be more successes and fewer failures among expatriates in France than in Germany. Furthermore, these findings would initially discard our general proposition that it is easier to adjust to a country with what has been described as more inclusive and explicit cultural norms than to a country where behavioural patterns are implicit and to a higher extent dictated by positions in society. This could suggest that the stereotypical picture of Germany and France outlined in existing literature could be outdated due to globalization forces and the extensive interaction and subsequent acculturation between the two countries. An explanation for our results could also be that the weather and the food may have a positive effect on the general adjustment of expatriates assigned to France compared to Germany.

The image of the French organizational climate, as less transparent and open to foreigners than the German, could also be an over-exaggerated stereotype. At least our finding suggested that it is actually easier for expatriate managers to adjust to the job context in France.

Another rather unexpected finding was the absence of statistically significant inter-country difference in terms of interaction adjustment. Interactions with HCNs outside work are to a large extent contingent on a common language. That could be the local language, or, perhaps, English. Although not measured within this study, it can be speculated that the extent of host country language proficiency of the respondents may not have differed much between French and German. Hence, the absence of a country difference regarding interaction adjustment may simply reflect similar language proficiency issues. Another interpretation could be that the higher societal level of an expatriate manager in a key position of an international firm may compensate for differences in linguistic, racial or religious boundaries which are assumed to be higher in France than in Germany. This interpretation could be supported by the observation that the managers in our sample appear to be older and more senior than in many other studies on expatriate adjustment (e.g. Selmer and Leung, 2003).

Similarly unexpected, there were no differences in the psychological adjustment and time to proficiency between expatriates in France and Germany. Other circumstances than the noted country difference in sociocultural adjustment may have contributed to equalize the extent of subjective well-being or mood states experienced by the expatriates in the two countries.

### *6.2 Limitations*

As our study shows some rather unexpected findings (hypotheses 2 and 3), which could stimulate further academic discussion, any interpretation of our findings needs to consider some potential shortcomings associated with our investigation. First, adjustment is a process over time, but the method employed here used measures of the average level of adjustment at a certain point in time. However, this is a limitation of most studies on expatriate adjustment (Thomas and Lazarova, 2006) and longitudinal studies as a potential alternative would come with other inherent serious methodological challenges (see Menard, 1991).

Second, the two country subsamples of expatriates are relatively small. Although the

MANCOVA indeed indicated a significant overall inter-group difference, it is likely that the country differences in expatriate adjustment represent a conservative estimate of such differences between France and Germany. Similar to most statistical tests, the results of our multivariate analyses are contingent upon, among other things, the sample size. While it has been claimed that it could be quite problematic to identify effects, if they actually exist, in smaller sample sizes than 50 (Hair et al., 1995), our subsample from Germany was below that level. However, the sample size of this study is larger than or similar to other central articles comparing expatriate adjustment and work outcomes across countries (see Wang and Nayir, 2006; Selmer et al. 2007; Selmer, 2006).

Third, we did assume a degree of homogeneity within Germany and France. This is also an implicit element in major studies on national cultural differences, such as those by Hofstede (2001) and House, Javidan and Dorfman (2001). Europe, however, could also be described as a part of the world that is not only diverse on the international level but also on the intra-national level (Bail, 2008). Intra-national differences could be at least as substantive as international differences. Unfortunately, we have no data to ameliorate our findings in this respect and that fact should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of the study. Nonetheless, we did find some significant differences between the two countries with regard to expatriate adjustment.

Finally, the expatriates in our sample also seem to be slightly older and more senior than some other samples in the extant literature. They have also been in the host country for a relatively long period of time. There are relatively few women in the sample, especially in Germany. Although critical for the interpretation of the findings, it is not known to what extent the potentially less representative sample of expatriates may have biased the results of the study. The difficulty of collecting data in international mail surveys of business respondents, with notoriously low response rates, especially in France and Germany (see Harzing, 1997), contributed to the use of convenience sampling by various means.

### *6.3 Implications*

The present findings may hold important theoretical implications as well as lessons for business firms assigning expatriates to France or Germany.

In terms of theory, focusing on differences in adjustment between countries could provide information on how contextual factors affect expatriate success and failure. This is highly relevant for theoretical development of the expatriate research field since most of the work regarding expatriate adjustment has been linked to individual factors. Hence, the finding that there are indeed differences in adjustment between countries could point to important contextual factors that need to be taken into account when predicting expatriate outcomes. This, however, requires further exploration by use of a larger sample and a more directly assessing of contextual factors thus avoiding the most prominent limitation of this exploratory study. The unexpected country differences we found may also have important theoretical implications. Although France, at a first glance, appeared as a more demanding and harder-to-adjust-to destination for expatriate managers than Germany, this initial assumption was not supported by our study. Our results show that expatriate managers are even better adjusted to the general environment and the work context in France than in Germany. This could point to the fact that the stereotypical picture of the European nations, as portrayed by existing literature, needs to be revised and updated. Finally, while our study does not encompass all of Western Europe, the focus on two of the major economic players, and therefore central destinations of many international assignments, solves at least a piece of the larger European puzzle, underpinning the relevance of this research (Gulati, 2007), and our results are of interest to a wide practitioner audience.

In practical terms, our study suggests that differences across Western Europe need to be acknowledged and assessed regarding their potential impact on expatriate adjustment and other performance-related antecedents. There may simply be some countries that are more difficult to adjust to than others. Hence, expatriates going to difficult countries in terms of adjustment may need more training and more organizational support to thrive. In this study, it seems that it could be more difficult to adjust to Germany than to France. Hence, HR officials need to pay more attention to expatriates going to Germany. Future research could focus on what it is about a country that makes it more difficult to adjust to for expatriates.

## **VII. Conclusions**

This study contributes to the literature on overseas assignments by focussing on expatriate

adjustment in Western Europe, comparing adjustment in France and Germany. Few studies have dealt with expatriates adjusting to Western European countries and no other studies have compared the adjustment of expatriates in Germany and France. Unexpectedly, since Germany is generally described as a more transparent, open and welcoming country, we found that expatriates assigned to France show higher degrees of work adjustment and general adjustment than those in Germany. The results may thus challenge stereotypical conceptions of national differences and indicate that globalization processes are gradually changing country specific conditions.

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TABLE 1: Background of the Subsamples (N= 130)

<b>Background Variables</b>	<b>Expatriates in France (n = 61)<sup>1</sup></b>		<b>Expatriates in Germany (n= 69)<sup>1</sup></b>	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender:</b>				
<b>Male</b>	52	85.2	67	97.1
<b>Female</b>	9	14.8	2	2.9
<b>Married</b>	51	83.6	63	91.3
<b>Position:</b>				
<b>CEO</b>	35	57.4	49	72.1
<b>Manager</b>	26	42.6	17	25.0
<b>Non-Managerial</b>	0	0	2	2.9
<b>Education</b>				
<b>Postgraduate</b>	15	24.6	11	16.2
<b>Graduate</b>	35	57.4	48	70.6
<b>Professional</b>	3	4.9	3	4.4
<b>Other</b>	8	13.1	6	8.8

<sup>1</sup> Frequency totals may be less than 61 and 69, respectively, due to missing values.

TABLE 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among the Variables<sup>1</sup>

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
<b>1. General Adjustment</b>	5.77	.91	1.00				
<b>2. Interaction Adjustment</b>	5.38	1.21	.71***	1.00			
<b>3. Work Adjustment</b>	5.58	1.04	.68***	.60***	1.00		
<b>4. Psychological Adjustment</b>	2.96	.40	.19	.29**	.37***	1.00	
<b>5. Time to Proficiency</b>	.03	.78	-.20	-.17	-.32**	-.23*	1.00

<sup>1</sup> N=90 due to missing answers

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

TABLE 3: MANCOVA and ANCOVA for Adjustment by Host Nationality<sup>1,2</sup>

	<b>Expatriates in France Mean (SD) n=50</b>	<b>Expatriates in Germany Mean (SD) n=40</b>	<b>Multi- variate Effect</b>	<b>Uni- variate F- Ratios</b>
<b>General Adjustment</b>	6.01 (.74)	5.46 (1.02)	3.56**	5.02*
<b>Interaction Adjustment</b>	5.63(1.11)	5.06 (1.28)		3.61
<b>Work Adjustment</b>	5.91 (.78)	5.16 (1.17)		10.23***
<b>Psychological Adjustment</b>	2.94 (.37)	2.97 (.43)		.19
<b>Time to Proficiency</b>	.02 (.84)	.06 (.70)		.04

<sup>1</sup> N=90 due to missing values.

<sup>2</sup> Covariate: *Gender*.

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