

“If it makes you happy ... it can't be that bad”: An explanatory study of students' well-being during international exchange

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This study reports on adolescents' experiences as exchange students in the Rotary Youth Exchange program. Based on a literature review and multivariate analysis of original survey data collected from 408 exchange students from 40 home countries that had spent a year in one out of 37 destination countries, the study concludes that students' perceived social support during the exchange and students' proficiency in mastering the destination country's language impacted their well-being during the exchange. Neither cultural distance between the student's home country and destination nor the student's adventurousness as a personality trait had an impact on well-being during the exchange. These empirical findings suggest that the students' social support and ability to interact during the exchange play an important role in enabling exchange students to reap the benefits of international and intercultural exchange in their formative years.

Keywords: international exchange, cultural distance, student exchange, well-being

INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly globalizing societies, more and more adolescents spend longer periods in host countries to develop cross-cultural understanding and intercultural competencies (Alemu & Cordier, 2017; Daly, 2011; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017; Soong, 2020; Tran & Gomes, 2017). Various programs exist that offer adolescents opportunities to live and study abroad for a specific period (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Tran & Gomes, 2017). For instance, in Europe, the Erasmus Plus program allows students to study abroad for periods varying from a couple of weeks up to two semesters. Singapore, to name another example, presents itself as a “global education hub” in an attempt to recruit “foreign talent” from Asian developing countries (Soong, 2020). In China, the China Scholarship Council provides funding for Chinese students to study abroad and for foreign students and scholars to study in China (Akhtar et al., 2015). Young adolescents may also participate in one year exchange programs offered by commercial or not-for-profit exchange initiatives that claim to offer authentic opportunities for personal development through cultural immersion (Fordham, 2006; Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Tran & Gomes, 2017).

The topic of adolescents' experiences with exchange initiatives has attracted considerable attention in literatures at the corner stones of sociology, education science, and international relations. In most cases, studies focus on describing and/or explaining how students experience the exchange. Comparative studies of students staying at home and exchange students have demonstrated that exchange students display increased levels of independence, intercultural development, and academic performance after returning home (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Stone & Petrick, 2013). Akhtar et al. (2015) identified factors explaining well-being of African students enrolled in Chinese universities. Other studies have emphasized how exchange students connect and reconnect with their roots (Soong, 2020) and, in doing so, how students are confronted with complexities of immersion across national and cultural boundaries (Yang, 2014).

Academic literatures on adolescents' cross-cultural experiences are characterized by two distinguishing features. First, much of the academic literature on adolescents' exchange experiences focuses on either inbound or outbound South-East Asian or Anglo-Saxon adolescents' experiences in formal educational programs (i.e., exchange programs facilitated by schools and universities) (Alemu & Cordier, 2017; Daly, 2011; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017; Soong, 2020; Yang, 2014) with, for instance, Eastern European and Latin American adolescents' experiences being underreported. Second, with few exceptions (van 't Klooster et al., 2008), many if not most studies use qualitative methodologies and give rich verbal accounts of specific students' exchange experiences, arguably at the expense of testing what specific factors affect the students' exchange experiences in larger samples of exchange students.

This article complements the existing international student exchange literature in two ways. First, it adopts a deductive, quantitative methodology in which specific hypotheses regarding exchange experiences are examined with original survey data. More particularly, as we explain in section two, we test which of the factors discussed in the literature are related to students' well-being during exchange. Second, using data gathered from a sample of 408 participants from 40 countries who had, for up to twelve months, stayed in one of 37 destinations we are able to draw on a greater diversity of experiences than other studies have done.

The study was made possible by utilizing data from the Rotary Youth Exchange (RYE) program run by Rotary International (RI), which is an international fraternal networking organization with more than two million participants from 150 countries. The RYE program allows local branches (called districts) to solicit, recruit, select, and prepare outbound students in their formative years for a visit to a country of their preference (whenever possible). Although going to a local school is a requirement for participants in the program, the program emphasizes experiential learning (Ritchie, 2003); it challenges participating students to deal with new social and geographic settings, differences in national cultures, and with different educational institutions. Participating students stay with three different host families and, during their stay abroad, participate in local volunteer programs that address local social causes. Districts that expatriate participants are expected to host inbound exchange students coming from districts from around the world, not necessarily the outbound student's destination. Since its conception in the early 1970s, hundreds of thousands of participants have used the Rotary network to live in a different country for a period of one year. In general, in the jargon of the RYE program, participants are referred to as exchange students and, although participants are generally High School students (or adolescents that take a "gap year" between finishing High

School and enrollment in subsequent vocational or academic studies), in the remainder of this article we refer to participants as “exchange students”.

The structure of this article is as follows. In section two, hypotheses are to examine RYE students’ experiences in terms of the constructs and variables identified in the student exchange literature. Section three documents how variables were measured and how data were gathered and analyzed, with results of the tests of hypotheses reported in section four. Section five discusses the study’s findings, and conclusions are presented in section six.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exchange experiences and well-being

Traveling to other countries for the purpose of leaning and development has a long tradition. In sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, scholars and artists traveled to meet influential peers and experience other cultures; members of the British elite sent their sons on the Grand Tour to venture across continental Europe (Stone & Petrick, 2013; van 't Klooster et al., 2008). In a review of the literature on exchange students’ experiences, Stone and Petrick (2013) identified a wish to travel and to learn a new culture or language as the main motivation for students to study abroad. Other studies emphasize global engagement, intercultural development, and intellectual and cultural growth of knowledge as either intended or realized outcomes (van 't Klooster et al., 2008).

Studies that explain students’ experiences in programs facilitated by schools or universities often use actual or perceived attainment of learning goals (such as improved competencies and skills (van 't Klooster et al., 2008)) as measures for quality of student experience. Alemu and Corbier (2017), however, in their study of inbound international exchange student’s experiences in South Korean universities, used student satisfaction (i.e., whether students managed to reap the perceived benefits of exchange programs) as the dependent variable.

Students’ experiences in exchange programs that are less associated with schools and universities, such as the RYE program, with its focus on experiential learning, are, arguably, not well described and assessed by learning-goal measures because formal teaching and learning environment plays less of a role. We, therefore, follow Ward et al. (2004), and Akhtar et al. (2015) in conceptualizing RYE students’ experiences in terms of well-being. We assume that since RYE students are driven by intrinsic motivations related to personal growth and development, good and bad experiences are reflected in and can be adequately measured by the concept of well-being, which has been used implicitly and explicitly in studies documenting the experiences of exchange students. For instance, Abrams (1979) found that more than half of a group of students that traveled abroad said it was one of the most important experiences in their lives, with another 26% saying it was a great experience.

The academic literature has been relatively silent concerning deductive approaches in which there is a quantitative analysis of the relative magnitudes of impact of various factors on exchange students’ well-being. Below, we explore various studies that, taken together, contribute to an understanding of the influences that are at play during a RYE student’s time abroad. We generally draw upon the Pizam et al. (1991) framework of

socio-cultural barriers to exchange students' well-being and use constructs and lines of reasoning from the more encompassing student exchange literature to develop more precise hypotheses.

Cultural distance

Several studies have identified a role for cultural distance as a determinant of adjustment in a foreign country. Cultural distance, in this context, reflects proximity of social frameworks, power distributions and societal values between an exchange student's home and host country. The line of reasoning that links cultural distance to student well-being runs as follows. Cultural proximity theory, (Johnson et al., 2006; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) and the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Ng et al., 2007) posit that cultural distance negatively affects international students' satisfaction while they reside in a host country (Alemu & Cordier, 2017) because larger cultural differences between home and host countries result in stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and, eventually, diminished levels of satisfaction and well-being (Ng et al., 2007; Reisinger & Turner, 1998). This line of reasoning was supported in early student exchange studies: Galchenko and van de Vijver (2007) found a significant relationship between cultural distance and psychological issues and adaptation problems in a group of visiting students in Russian universities. In a study of Iranian students' experiences abroad, Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) noted a negative correlation between cultural distance and students' ability to interact and adjust to life in Scotland. Van 't Klooster et al. (2008) tested the hypothesized negative influence of cultural distance on learning outcomes in an international group of university exchange students and found no support for such a relationship. More recently, in a study of international students visiting Singapore, Soong (2020) reported that nationality is an identity marker to locals, and historical-socio-political complexities may confront international students with feelings of rejection and failure.

In this study, building on cultural proximity theory and the similarity-attraction hypothesis, we develop the following hypothesis.

H1: The larger the cultural distance between an exchange student's home country and host country, the lower the exchange student's well-being will be during her or his exchange period.

Social support

Another influence on exchange students' well-being can be found in access to and support from resources that provide assistance and psychological comfort whenever things get tough mentally (Tran & Gomes, 2017). For exchange students, access to assistance and psychological comfort is far from trivial (Tran, 2020); in their study of international and local student's experiences at an Australian university, McKenzie and Baldassar (2017) found that many local students see friendships with exchange students as "unnecessary". If, however, friendship ties and social relationships develop, studies suggest this will result in a sense of belonging (Sam, 2001) and satisfaction among exchange students (Alemu & Cordier, 2017). This pattern was also found in an earlier study of American students' interactions with locals during a visit to the Soviet Union in the Cold War era: actual interactions yielded positive changes in American students' attitudes (Pizam et al., 1991).

In this study, we use the concept of social support, defining it as having access to immaterial resources of support provided by host families and local peer groups. We hypothesize that social support has a positive influence on an exchange students' well-being during her or his time abroad. Therefore, the second hypothesis can be formulated as follows.

H2: The more social support an exchange student experiences, the higher the exchange student's well-being will be during her or his exchange period.

Language skills

Perhaps surprisingly, the academic literature displays a gap in its account of whether proficiency in the language spoken in the host country influences an exchange student's well-being. The literature reports that (1) especially for exchange students from Anglophone monolingual countries like the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, foreign language competence may act as a barrier to going abroad, while at the same time, (2) for many students, a lack of a second language is a motivation to study abroad and to develop proficiency in a second language (Daly, 2011).

Apart from language proficiency being a motivation for, especially, young people to go abroad, scarce empirical evidence exists with respect to what role proficiency of a local language plays in students' well-being. In Alemu and Cordier's (2017) study of international students visiting South Korea, it was found that visiting exchange students' understanding of the Korean language was positively associated with individual students' satisfaction with the exchange. In the context of the current study, it is hypothesized that proficiency in the local language contributes to an exchange student's well-being. The third hypothesis, therefore, can be formulated as follows.

H3: The more proficient an exchange student is in the local language of the host country, the higher the exchange student's well-being will be during her or his exchange period.

Personality traits

In their study of international exchange students in Moscow (Soviet Union, now Russia), Galchenko and van de Vijver (2007) found that students' personality traits were significantly related to students' reported adjustment to the host environment. These findings were consistent with a psychological view on acculturation and learning (Akhtar et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2004). Empirical findings reported by Ward et al. (2004) suggest that higher levels of extraversion, agreeableness and lower levels of neuroticism are associated with higher levels of adjustment and adaptation. Furukama's (1997) research among returning international students show that specific personality traits are correlated with a person's ability to adjust and readjust to changing circumstances. Furukama concluded that this eventually explains an exchange student's mental health, which can be seen as the mirror image of well-being, the central variable of interest in the study this article reports on.

In this study, we focus on one's adventurousness as a trait of an exchange student's personality. It is assumed that if one is more adventurous, the exchange student is better able to deal with uncertain outcomes, and better able to cope with inevitable surprises and risks. This line of reasoning leads to the formulation of the fourth hypothesis.

H4: The more adventurous an exchange student is, the higher the exchange student's well-being will be during her or his exchange period. students.

Conceptual model as a summary of the line of reasoning

The line of reasoning developed in the review of the literature on exchange students' adjustment and adaptation to the social setting they are confronted with in their host country leads to the formulation of four hypotheses. The level of *observation* in the hypotheses is the individual exchange student; levels of *analysis* are the macro level of culture difference between the home and host country, the meso, interpersonal level of an exchange student's access to resources and social support, and the micro level of an exchange person's personality traits.

Figure 1 summarizes the main line of reasoning with its depiction of one dependent variable, well-being, four independent variables, and four hypotheses.

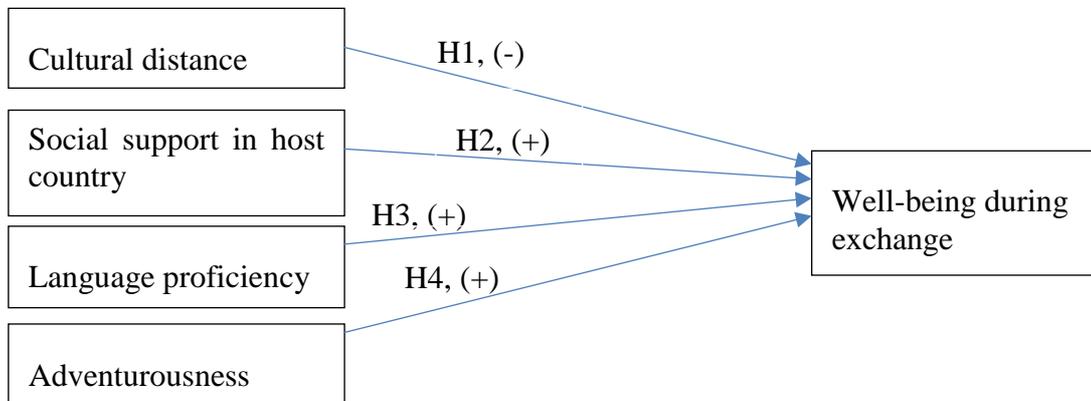


Figure 1: Conceptual model with hypotheses

METHODOLOGY

Data gathering and sample characteristics

The data with which the hypotheses were tested were gathered from a population of former RYE students (called “rebounds” in RI jargon) using an online survey with mostly closed questions, in line with the overall quantitative, deductive ambition of this study. Invitations to fill out the survey questionnaire were distributed in closed Facebook and WhatsApp groups frequented by rebounds, to which one of the researchers involved in this study had negotiated access. Data were collected between 18 and 22 September 2019, well before the 2020–2021 Covid pandemic severely complicated traveling in general and going on exchange in particular.

According to Van Voorhis and Morgan (2007), a required sample size for testing multivariate hypotheses with some robustness is about 30 observations per independent variable, which would require 120 observations. We gathered responses from 408 respondents which meets the minimum sample size requirement. Respondents came from 40 countries and had, together, visited 37 countries (see Appendix B for a list of home and host countries in the sample). Of the respondents, 84% were females. The mean age

was 18.2 years ($SD = 1.52$). Respondents spent a year abroad in 2018/2019 (35.8%), 2017/2018 (29.2%) and prior to 2017.

Questionnaire design and measurement

The questionnaire consisted of a general section to record home country, host (destination) country, year of birth, gender, and year of exchange. For each respondent, a culture distance score was calculated based on her or his reported home and host country (see section **Error! Reference source not found.** for more on this). For the other variables, existing scales were marginally adapted to fit the target population and research objective, thus largely retaining the validity of the existing scales.

For the measurement of well-being, we used the *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)*,¹ (Tennant et al., 2007). WEMWBS is a 14-item scale measuring affective-emotional, cognitive-evaluative, and psychological dimensions in a form which is short enough to be used in surveys targeting adults of 16 years and older. An example of a WEMWBS-item is “During my exchange, generally I was feeling cheerful”. As a proxy measure, respondents were also asked to rate the overall experience of their exchange period on a scale of 1 to 10.

Language proficiency is ideally measured using a language test in which a qualified native speaker tests a respondent’s ability to read, speak, and write in a specific language. In the context of a survey, however, feasibility of such an approach is limited. Therefore, we adopted the existing Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire scale (LEAP-Q), which is a valid, reliable, and efficient tool for assessing the language profiles of multilingual, neurologically intact adults in survey research designs (Viorica et al., 2007). Language proficiency is measured by asking respondents to indicate how well they master the local language in terms of understanding, speaking, reading, and writing in day-to-day situations using a five-item Likert scale. An example of an item is: “At the end of my exchange, I was able to understand the local news on television”.

Social support was measured by slightly adapting items from an existing five-item Likert scale to measure social support in professional, organizational settings (Price, 1997). Given the context of the study, formulation of items referred to social support in local peer groups. An example of an item is “During my exchange, my local friends were willing to listen to my exchange-related problems”.

Adventurousness as a personality trait was conceptualized in relation to Hofstede’s cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, where adventurousness is defined as the inverse of uncertainty avoidance. Yoo et al.(2011) operationalized uncertainty avoidance for use at an individual level of analysis and constructed a four-item CVSCALE scale. In the context of this study, items from the CVSCALE were slightly adapted to better fit the context of RYE rebounds. An example of an item is “I prefer predictability in daily life (as opposed to a life full of unpredictable changes)”.

¹ The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale was funded by the Scottish Executive National Programme for improving mental health and well-being, commissioned by NHS Health Scotland, developed by the University of Warwick and the University of Edinburgh, and is jointly owned by NHS Health Scotland, the University of Warwick and the University of Edinburgh.

Using the item formulations for demographics and travel histories, and items for well-being, language proficiency, social support and adventurousness, a questionnaire consisting of 38 items was constructed (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was phrased in the English language and, before the questionnaire was sent out, it was piloted among five RYE rebounds. As a result, some item formulations were adapted for improved understanding among members of the target population.

Construction of the culture distance index

The testing of the first hypothesis necessitates a quantification (in the form of an index) of the concept of “cultural distance”. A commonly used index is Kogut and Singh’s cultural distance index (Cuypers et al., 2018; Kogut & Singh, 1988), with which cultural distance is measured as the Euclidian distance between two nations’ scores on Hofstede’s dimensions of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. Although there is criticism on the validity of the index (for instance, Kogut-Singh index’s symmetry suggests that a Dutchman visiting Brazil faces the same cultural distance as a Brazilian visiting the Netherlands, and it assumes cultural homogeneity in countries as large as Brazil, with big regional differences, see also Konara & Mohr (2019)), its practicality has made it the preferred index to be used in quantitative studies of international joint ventures (Kogut & Singh, 1988) and tourists’ travel experiences (Ng et al., 2007), as well as of exchange students’ experiences (Alemu & Cordier, 2017; van ’t Klooster et al., 2008).

Mathematically, the Kogut-Singh index for cultural distance, calculated based on six dimensions of culture, can be formulated as:

$$CD_{A,B} = \sum_{i=1}^6 ((I_{iA} - I_{iB})^2 / V_i) / 6$$

with:

- $CD_{A,B}$ = cultural distance between two countries A, B
- I_{iA} = country’s A score on Hofstede’s i ’s cultural dimension
- I_{iB} = country’s B score on Hofstede’s i ’s cultural dimension
- V_i = variance of i ’s cultural dimension

The Kogut-Singh index can *theoretically* range from 0 to 17.93; however, Ng et al. (2007), using existing data sets with four dimensions, observed ranges from 0.02 (Australia and the United States) to 8.22 (Japan and Sweden). In this study, using the reported home and host country’s values for six culture dimensions, each respondent’s culture distance score was calculated using the formula described above.

FINDINGS

Descriptives and scale construction

Consistency of scales was evaluated by inspecting the Cronbach alpha statistic for well-being, language proficiency, social support, and adventurousness (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Because consistency of the adventurousness-scale was unsatisfactory, one item was removed and the scale was constructed on the basis of three items.

Table 1: Scale consistency statistics

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Well-being	14	0.834
Language proficiency	5	0.861
Social support	5	0.889
Adventurousness	3	0.656

Descriptives of all variables, and correlations between the four independent variables are presented in **Error! Reference source not found.**

Table 2: Descriptives including correlations between independents and VIF statistics

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	<i>VIF</i>
Gender (1=male)	0.16	0.38				
Age	18.76	1.52				
Well-being (1-5)	3.93	0.46				
1. Cultural distance (0-17,93)	1.72	0.90				1.059
2. Social support (1-5)	3.78	0.84	0.018			1.034
3. Language proficiency (1-5)	4.37	0.72	0.236**	0.202**		1.096
4. Adventurousness (1-5)	3.33	0.79	0.011	0.026	0.015	1.001

(* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$)

The mean rating of the overall experience, measured with a single item, was 8.84 ($SD = 1.4$). The dependent variable well-being (measured using the WEMWBS scale) was found to be significantly correlated with the overall experience measured with a single item ($r(403) = 0.510$; $p < 0.01$), suggesting a valid measurement of the dependent variable “well-being”.

Regression model assumptions

Before the actual regression was implemented, we checked the following model assumptions for multiple regression analysis. Multicollinearity was checked by inspecting the correlations of the independent variables and by inspecting the VIF values (**Error! Reference source not found.**). As none of the correlations are above .7, and all VIFs were below 4, this assumption is met. Homoscedasticity was checked using a scatterplot of standardized residuals and predicted values; no anomalies were found. Independent errors were checked using the Durbin-Watson statistic and the value of 1.850 revealed no problems associated with this assumption. The assumption of normally distributed errors was tested via inspection of unstandardized residuals. Although the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality ($SW = 0.972$, $df = 1572$, $p < 0.01$) suggested normality was not met, inspection of the Q-Q plot revealed a relatively normal distribution, and we concluded that this assumption was also met. Overall, these findings suggest multiple

regression analysis is a suitable statistical technique to test the hypotheses using the data that was gathered with the online survey.

Regression results and hypotheses testing

A significant regression equation was found for cultural distance, language proficiency, social support, and adventurousness, controlling for age and gender ($F(6, 376) = 11,121$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.151$). Coefficients and significance levels of the various independents are reported in **Error! Reference source not found.**

The coefficient and significance level of cultural distance ($\beta = -0.060$, $p = n.s.$) indicate that no support was found for hypothesis one. Controlling for other variables, exchange students facing larger cultural distances between their home and host countries do not display higher or lower levels of well-being than exchange students facing smaller cultural distances between their home and host countries. Hypothesis two was supported ($\beta = 0.311$, $p < 0.001$): controlling for other variables, exchange students reporting higher levels of social support displayed higher levels of wellbeing than exchange students reporting lower levels of social support. Hypothesis three was also supported ($\beta = 0.141$, $p < 0,01$): exchange students reporting higher levels of language proficiency displayed higher levels of wellbeing than exchange students reporting lower levels of language proficiency, controlling for other variables. Finally, hypothesis four was not supported ($\beta = 0.027$, $p = n.s.$): controlling for other variables, exchange students reporting higher levels of adventurousness did not display higher levels of wellbeing than exchange students reporting lower levels of adventurous. Overall, standardized regression coefficients indicate that the impact of social support on well-being is larger than the impact of language proficiency on well-being.

Table 3: Regression results (standardized regression coefficients) with well-being as dependent variable

	Model 1	Model 2
Independent variables	β	β
Gender (1= male)	0.093	0.098*
Age	0.031	0.044
Cultural Distance		-0.060
Social Support		0.311***
Language proficiency		0.141**
Adventurousness		0.027
<i>D-W</i>		1.850
<i>F</i>	n.s.	11.121***
ΔR^2	0.01	0.141

(* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$)

DISCUSSION

The results of the multivariate analyses merit further discussion considering the findings of other studies. A first striking finding is that hypothesis one was not supported,

contradicting similarity-attraction theory (Ng et al., 2007) and cultural proximity theory (Alemu & Cordier, 2017). The finding is also at odds with evidence from qualitative studies that emphasize how cultural distance, more particularly ethnic distance, causes alienation and distress (Soong, 2020), but it is consistent with findings from a quantitative study on AISEC students' experiences while on exchange (van 't Klooster et al., 2008). These apparent contradictions may be better understood by a closer inspection of conceptualizations of "culture" in various studies. In our study, we have made a distinction between cultural distance (conceptualized as composite measure of home and host countries' scores on collectivism–individualism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and avoidance, thus excluding linguistic similarities) and a respondent's language proficiency. Other conceptualizations of culture often include language proficiency or language resemblance (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Spradley & Phillips, 1972). West and Graham (2004) even explicitly use linguistic distance as a measure of cultural difference. This study's distinction between cultural distance and language proficiency – and the support for hypothesis two and three, and lack of support for hypothesis one – suggest that it is access to social support and the student's language proficiency that explain an exchange student's well-being, regardless of the cultural distance she or he is confronted with. This inference is an important theoretical contribution considering similarity-attraction theory and cultural proximity theory, which will be discussed in the conclusion section.

Another finding that merits further discussion is the lack of support for hypothesized association between an exchange student's adventurousness and her or his well-being while abroad. One interpretation that comes to mind is that predeparture recruitment and training procedures may intentionally or unintentionally select the more adventurous prospective exchange students, leading to a selection bias in the empirical results. While the existence of such a form of bias cannot be excluded, the distribution of the adventurousness variable ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.70$, skewness = -0.098 , kurtosis = -0.312) suggests that either prospective students were not selected based on adventurousness or that even in the face of selection bias adventurousness is quite normally distributed in the sample. Both circumstances rule out the rival explanation that the lack of support for hypothesis four is due to a left or negatively skewed distribution of adventurousness. Apparently, controlling for other variables, adventurousness as a personality trait is not associated with well-being.

An overall reflection suggests that social support and language proficiency are components of what we can define as *immersion* in a potentially unknown, new environment. This study's results suggest that the degree to which an exchange student (or arguably also a sojourner, lecturer or even tourist) is immersed into a new surrounding explains whether she or he is happy in this environment. A further reflection on this notion of *immersion* draws attention to other aspects of this environment that may improve the explanation of a student's experience while on exchange. One perhaps obvious candidate emerges from Fordham's (2006) observations about class and socio-economic status in the RI organization. Fordham argues that RI membership requires considerable expenditures in time and capital, and that while American Rotarians are typically among the middle-class, Rotarians outside the United States are often among those countries' upper-class elites. The socio-economic distance between home and host social surrounding may be relevant for an improved understanding of adjustment and adaptation problems during exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

Main findings and theoretical contribution

In an era where globalization is a reality and international exchanges of young adolescents and students have become more commonplace and intense, this article analysed which factors contribute to the experiences of exchange students, more particularly RYE students during a one year long exchange. Whereas existing studies have focused on inbound exchange students' experiences in specific locations (Alemu & Cordier, 2017; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017; Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005; Soong, 2020), or on behavioural outcomes experienced by exchange students that departed from a specific university (Daly, 2011; Pan, 2012; van 't Klooster et al., 2008), this study is one of the few, if not the first study, that analyses the experiences of adolescents that come from a large number (40) and variety of countries, and spent one year abroad in one of 37 countries in our research sample. By doing so, the study extends and tests insights from previous studies that focused on specific, in practice often Anglo-Saxon or South-East Asian, home countries or specific destinations (locations or universities).

Findings indicate that neither cultural difference between an exchange student's home and host countries nor the exchange student's adventurousness personality trait affect a student's well-being while on exchange. Experienced social support and the student's ability to master the host country's language, however, does impact the student's well-being during the exchange.

Implications for research and practice

Although considerable caution should be exercised when extrapolating and generalizing findings of this study of RYE students' experiences to other, more mainstream segments of students exchange initiatives and programs, we think it is possible to signal a number of implications of our study.

A first implication applies to volunteers or professionals involved in soliciting, recruiting, selecting, and preparing exchange students for going abroad. The findings of this study suggest that whatever the travel destination, or the cultural distance between home or host country, and even regardless of the prospective exchange student's sense of adventure, it ultimately is the exchange student's (1) motivation and (2) capacity to learn a foreign language, and the capacity of host families to provide support for dealing with inevitable adjustment and accommodation problems that impact the exchange student's experience. This suggests that diagnosing a prospective exchange student's motivation and capacity to learn a new language and monitoring the capacity for providing social support in host families before and during the exchange are vital components of a successful exchange program.

A second implication is relevant for academics studying sojourners and exchange students in particular. This study suggests that quality of immersion is a key variable and this suggests that other variables related to students' access to resources should be considered in future research, such as socio-economic distance between a sojourner's home situation and host setting, or urban-rural differences between home and host situations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire

What is your gender	Dropdown menu {Female, Male, Other}
What year were you born	Dropdown menu
What year did you go on exchange	Dropdown menu
Before my exchange I was living in	City, Country
I went on exchange to	City, Country
During my exchange, I generally felt optimistic about the future	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally felt useful	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally felt relaxed	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally was interested in other people	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally had energy to spare	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally dealt with problems well	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally thought clearly	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally thought good about myself	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally felt close to other people	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, I generally felt confident	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, generally I was able to make up my own mind about things	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, generally I was feeling loved	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, generally I was interested in new things	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
During my exchange, generally I was feeling cheerful	1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time
At the end of my exchange, I was able to ask a stranger for directions	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
At the end of my exchange, I was able to understand the local news on television	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
At the end of my exchange, I was able to communicate with my host family without hesitation	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree

At the end of my exchange, I was able to completely read and understand the local newspaper	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
At the end of my exchange, I was able to write a formal email containing at least 15 lines	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
During my exchange, my local friends were willing to listen to my exchange-related problems	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
During my exchange, my local friends showed a lot of concern for me at my school	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
During my exchange, my local friends could be relied on when things got tough	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
During my exchange, my local friends were helpful to me in getting my goals achieved	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
During my exchange, my local friends cared about my wellbeing	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
I am rarely the first one to try out new things	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
In general, I follow up on rules and agreements and I do not like to take risks	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
I wouldn't describe myself as someone who enjoys taking risks	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
I prefer predictability in daily life (as opposed to a life full of unpredictable changes)	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
Before I travelled to my host family, I had clear expectations of my exchange period	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
In the year prior to actual departure to my host family, I found it hard to choose between various destinations.	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
Before I travelled to my host family, I found the Rotary's rules and information on exchange purposes to be clear.	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
When you think back to your year abroad with Rotary, would you recommend the same experience to others?	1=totally disagree, 5 = totally agree
How would you rate your overall experience during your exchange	1 ... 10

Appendix B: Respondents' home and host countries

Home countries in the data set	Host countries in the data set
Argentina	Argentina
Australia	Australia
Austria	Austria
Belgium	Belgium
Bolivia	Bolivia
Brazil	Brazil
Canada	Canada
Chile	Chile
Colombia	Columbia
Czech Republic	Czech Republic

Home countries in the data set	Host countries in the data set
Denmark	Denmark
Ecuador	Ecuador
Estonia	Finland
Finland	France
France	Germany
Germany	Hungary
Guatemala	India
Hungary	Indonesia
Iceland	Italy
India	Japan
Indonesia	Mexico
Italy	Netherlands
Japan	New Zealand
Lithuania	Norway
Mexico	Paraguay
Namibia	Peru
Netherlands	Poland
New Zealand	Romania
Nigeria	Russia
Paraguay	Slovakia
Peru	South Korea
Poland	Spain
Slovakia	Sweden
South Africa	Switzerland
Sweden	Taiwan
Switzerland	Thailand
Taiwan	United States
Turkey	
USA	
Venezuela	