

## Judging the unexpected: Disconfirmation of situation-specific expectancies

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### *Abstract*

*People's interactions with others typically take place in specific situations. Therefore, it is likely that expectancies of others are often situation-specific. In two studies, we examined when and how this situation-specificity of expectancies affects judgment. We showed that situation-specific expectancies ("Michael is kind at work") lead to surprise and contrast effects when incongruent behavior refers to the same specific situation (work), but not in other situations (general or home), whereas general expectancies ("Michael is kind") lead to such surprise and contrast effects, regardless of the target situation. These results suggest that people sometimes are "situationalists" and do not always show dispositional biases. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Most if not all of our interactions with others take place in a restricted, specific set of situations. We see our students in the classroom, not in our bathtub; we talk to our loan officer at the bank, not at the ballpark; we watch our children play in a sandbox, not in a Hollywood film, and so on (see Swann, 1984). Because of this situational specificity of typical social interactions, the expectancies we form about people's behavior are likely to be specific in a similar way. Sometimes, our expectancies about our students, loan officers, and children can be accurately generalized to other situations ("She is really quite creative"), but often these expectancies are specific for the situation where they are based on ("In the sandbox she can be quite creative"). That is, people do not always behave consistently across situations (e.g., Bem & Allen, 1974; Mischel & Peake, 1982) and this is probably why a surprise encounter with a colleague at a party often turns out different than expected because colleagues often are very different at parties than our work experience may have led us to expect.

An important question is then whether our overall evaluation and impression of this colleague will be affected after his unexpected party behavior (e.g., dancing passionately). In the present paper, we will address this issue. One of the main questions we examine in the present paper is what determines whether (situationally) unexpected information is surprising and influences subsequent judgments. When and how does the situation-specificity of expectancies affect subsequent person judgment? Will we really see our colleague as a different person after seeing him dance the night away or are we able to take the situation (this is a party, not the office) into account?

Literature on expectancy violation shows that target impressions may indeed be affected by unexpected behavior. That is, targets are typically evaluated more extremely when they have violated expectancies (see e.g., Bettencourt, Dill, Greathouse, Charton, & Mulholland, 1997; Burgoon, 1993; Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). In these previous studies, however, the induced (and violated) expectancies are typically quite general and category- or group-based (see Roese & Sherman, 2007). We will argue and show, however, that general expectancies will influence judgments differently than situation-specific expectancies.

By definition, general expectancies ("Michael is kind") could apply to all situations, whereas situation-specific expectancies ("Michael is kind at work") only apply to a specific subset of (work related) situations. Because of this,

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expectancy-incongruent behavior is more likely to be perceived as such when expectancies are general rather than specific. After all, that Kirsten acts unassertive *at home* is expectancy-incongruent when you have a general expectancy that she is an assertive person, whereas this is not the case when you have a specific expectancy that she is likely to be assertive *at work*.

Central in this idea is that incongruent behavior is most likely to be perceived as incongruent and surprising when there is a clear *match* between expectancy and reality, thus, when expectancy and reality refer to the same situation. That is, when there is a situational match, incongruent behavior stands out more than congruent behavior, whereas when there is no situational match, the incongruent behavior is one of several differences and therefore it is unlikely to stand out more than congruent behaviors. Thus, we argue that whether or not there is a situational match determines whether situation-specific expectancies lead to a focus on congruent versus incongruent target behavior and affect behavior accordingly.

In more specific words, we predict that when expectancies refer to a certain situation (“Michael is kind at work”) and behavior is incongruent to this expectancy (Michael acts unkindly), this behavior is more likely to stand out and focused on in a situation that is similar (work situation) than in a situation that is dissimilar (home situation). Thus, situation-specific expectancies will elicit surprise and lead to expectancy-contrastive judgments when target behavior is incongruent with this expectancy in the specific situation where the expectancy refers to (work, not home). When there is no match between a situation-specific expectancy and the target situation, there is no clear incongruency. When this is the case, expectancy-incongruent behavior will not stand out and people are more likely to focus on the congruent behaviors they expect to see and judge the target accordingly, that is, assimilate to the expectancy rather than contrast away from it. This reasoning implies that we would not judge our colleague as a different person after unexpectedly seeing him dancing passionately at a party. Rather, we mainly see what we expect to see and our judgments will be colored by our expectancy (“he dances, moves, and talks in a computer-geeky way”).

Several researchers have shown that expectancies are most likely to affect judgments on the specific domain where they refer to. For example, Moskowitz and Skurnik (1999) showed that primes regarding a trait only affect judgments along that dimension, but not other dimensions (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). Banaji and colleagues showed that stereotype information only affects judgments of targets that belong to the relevant social category (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993; see also Stapel & Koomen, 1998). And Hilton and von Hippel (1990) showed that ambiguous behavior will be assimilated toward the expectancy when a target is highly entitative, but not when a target is nonentitative. To our knowledge, however, we are the first to examine the effects of *situation-specificity*.

As we will argue and show, this implies that when people observe behavior they are able to take the situation into account, and do not necessarily make dispositional inferences. Below we will outline how the predictions regarding the impact of situation-specific expectancies versus general expectancies on subsequent judgments relate to previous research on the relation between expectancies and judgment, as exemplified by Trafimow (1998) and Stapel and Schwarz (1998; see also Biernat, 2005; Manis & Paskewitz, 1984a, 1984b).

## SITUATION-SPECIFIC EXPECTANCIES

Research by Trafimow (1998) supports the idea that people may form situation-specific expectancies and store them in memory as such. Consistent with this notion, in his studies Trafimow (1998) found a situation-specific incongruity effect (Wyer & Srull, 1989): memory was better for incongruent behaviors than congruent ones, but only if these behaviors pertained to the situation specified in the expectancy. When people were led to believe that Joe is kind at work, unkind behaviors were better recalled than kind behaviors only if they were performed at work, not when they were performed at home. In contrast, when people had general expectancies (“Joe is kind”), the incongruity effect extended to both work and home settings: then recall of unkind behaviors was better than recall of kind behaviors, regardless of the situation.

Although not interpreted in these terms, Trafimow’s (1998) situation-specific incongruity effects nicely support our logic concerning the effects of situation-specific expectancies on judgment: when people have situation-specific expectancies, incongruent behavior is most likely to grab attention and be recalled better when it refers to the same specific situation. When people have general rather than situation-specific expectancies, this recall incongruity effect is not limited and applies to all kinds of situations. Trafimow’s (1998) studies, however, did not look at surprise effects or how situation-specific expectancies affect judgment.

To answer the question how situation-specific expectancies affect judgment, research by Stapel and Schwarz (1998) on the impact of expectancies on person judgments provides us with a paradigm that may help us. Stapel and Schwarz (1998) investigated how general (non-specific) expectancies may affect person judgments and showed, similar to other general expectancy violation research (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 1997; Burgoon, 1993; Jackson et al., 1993; Jussim et al., 1987), that when people are confronted with target behavior that has both expectancy-congruent and -incongruent features (you think a person is trustworthy and honest, but you see her engage in honest as well as dishonest acts), people are likely to contrast their judgment away from their expectancy because expectancy-incongruent behavior is relatively attention-grabbing and thus receives preferential processing (Biernat, 2005; Manis & Paskewitz, 1984a, 1984b).

When translated to the present focus on the impact of situation-specific expectancies on subsequent judgments, the logic of the Stapel and Schwarz paradigm can be used to test the present thesis that target judgments are most likely to be contrasted away from what is expected when the expectancy and target behavior match situationally. When expectancy and reality do not refer to the same type of situation, incongruent target information is unlikely to stand out and be given extra attention and expectancies are more likely to simply lead to a focus on congruent information perception.

## CONDITIONAL PERSONOLOGY

Our perspective on situation-specific expectancies and how they could influence judgment implies that people are able to take a situation into account when judging others. That is, it implies that people will not always make dispositional inferences (Paula is an aggressive woman) when confronted with trait-implying behavior when this behavior is specific to a particular setting (Paula shouts at her computer) and incongruent with expectancies in different settings (Paula is very kind to children and animals). Interestingly, on a global level this may be taken to imply that the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1979; Ross, 1977) may not be as prevalent as is often thought (see also Krull & Erickson, 1995). The correspondence bias suggests that when people observe behavior, they spontaneously make dispositional inferences—even when a situational analysis would suggest they should not. Thus, people are relatively likely to think movie actors have the personality and expertise of the characters they play, people think essay writers really believe what they write even when they know the opinions were assigned to them, and people are more likely to attribute a nervously acting job candidate's behavior to her personality, even when they are aware about the nervousness-eliciting nature of the situation (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Jones & Harris, 1967).

The correspondence bias thus suggests that people are likely to make general dispositional inferences when confronted with situation-specific behavior. Thus, when your colleague behaves in a friendly and kind manner at work, you are likely to infer that she is a friendly person. In other words, “Kirsten is assertive” is inferred from “Kirsten is assertive at work.” As a result, any behavior that is different to this expectancy would be incongruent, regardless of the situation. We would like to argue that people are not always “dispositionalists” or “personologists” (see Gilbert, 1998). When situational information is salient and relevant for person perception, people can be “situationalists” who are able to take situation-specific information into account and form non-generalized, situation-specific expectancies that will be taken into account when making judgments (see also Malle, 2006; Trope & Gaunt, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

In two experiments we will test the notion that the impact of situation-specific expectancies on subsequent judgments depends on whether or not the target behavior situationally matches the expectancy, whereas the impact of general expectancies is not so restricted. We hypothesize that situation-specific expectancies lead to surprise and contrast effects when behavior is different in the same situation (match), but not in other situations (no match), whereas when behavior is different from a general expectancy this would always lead to surprise and contrast effects.

<sup>1</sup>The main difference between the present approach and previous research on the correspondence bias is that the formation of (situation-specific) expectancies is a necessary precondition for our situationalist effects to occur. As Trafimow (1998) showed, people form situation-specific expectancies and once formed, people are likely to use these expectancies in judgment, resulting in “situationalistic” judgments.

## EXPERIMENT 1

In Experiment 1, we tested how expectancies will affect judgments of a target who shows mixed (expectancy congruent and incongruent) behavior. We hypothesize that when people have a general, situation-independent expectancy about a person's behavior ("Michael is kind"), incongruent behavior will stand out more than congruent behavior, elicit surprise and lead to contrast away from the expectancy. These effects will occur independent of whether the target behavior refers to a general or specific (work, home) situation. However, when people have a situation-specific expectancy ("Michael is kind at work"), contrastive judgment will result mainly when the target behavior refers to the same type of situation (work) as the specific expectancy (work). When there is no such situational match, incongruent behavior elicits less surprise and target judgments are more likely to be based on the congruent behaviors and show assimilation to the expectancy.

### Method

Participants were 171 undergraduate students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19$ ), who were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a  $2$  (expectancy type: general, work)  $\times$   $2$  (expectancy valence: positive, negative)  $\times$   $3$  (target situation: general, work, home) design.

#### *Expectancy Induction*

Participants received a booklet in which they were informed that they would be participating in an experiment about impression formation. We told participants that they would judge a particular person, namely Michael. Before they received more detailed information about Michael, we induced an expectancy about him. To induce this expectancy of the target person, participants were asked to unscramble sentences (reorganize word groups into meaningful sentences). This task consisted of a page of 22 scrambled four- or five-word groups. In the *positive expectancy conditions*, six-word groups contained the following terms: good, warm, honorable, truthful, faithful, kind (e.g., "Michael kind is are"). In the *negative expectancy conditions*, six-word groups contained the following trait terms: bad, cold, dishonorable, untruthful, treacherous, unkind (e.g., "Michael a characterized dishonorable person is"). The remaining word groups contained constructs not applicable to the target stimulus (e.g., "Michael the takes train am"). In the *general expectancy conditions*, we told participants that all sentences pertained to Michael, allowing participants to form a general expectancy about Michael over the various sentences presented to them (see for a similar procedure, Stapel & Schwarz, 1998; see also Banaji et al., 1993). In the *work expectancy conditions*, we told participants that all sentences pertained to Michael *at work*, allowing participants to form a work-expectancy.

#### *Target*

After participants had completed unscrambling sentences, they were asked to read a description of Michael. The target descriptions consisted of adaptations of the mixed behavior descriptions used by Stapel and Schwarz (1998; see also Carlston, 1980). The target descriptions consisted of episodes implying *kindness* and episodes implying *dishonesty*. We constructed three different versions of the target descriptions, each describing a different target situation (general, work, or home). In the general target, the behaviors were described in general terms; in the work and home target the same kind and dishonest behaviors were described, but they were specified in a work situation or a home situation. That is, in the general kind episode, Michael was described as kind to several girls he knew, whereas in the work kind target Michael was described as kind to his secretaries, and in the home kind target he was described as kind and dishonest to his brothers and sisters. The same was true for the dishonest episodes in the general dishonest episode, Michael was dishonest within a group of girls, whereas in the work dishonest episode, he was dishonest within a group of colleagues, and in the home dishonest episode he was dishonest to his wife and neighbors. All descriptions started with the same general introduction, in which we kept Michael's age and background constant.

### Dependent Measures

After participants read about Michael, they were asked to indicate their impression of Michael (from 1 = negative to 9 = positive). Furthermore, participants were asked to rate whether Michael's behaviors were as expected ("Michael's behavior was as I had expected," from 1 = extremely to 9 = not at all).

### Results

We conducted a 2 (expectancy type: general, work)  $\times$  2 (expectancy valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  3 (target situation: general, work, home) ANOVA on the judgment and unexpectedness scores.

#### Judgment

For judgments of Michael we predicted that participants would contrast their judgments away from the expectancy valence when expectancy type and target situation match. An expected three-way interaction on judgment between expectancy type, expectancy valence, and target situation was found,  $F(2,159) = 7.78, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$ . We also found a main effect of expectancy valence,  $F(1,159) = 8.02, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ , a two-way interaction between expectancy valence and target,  $F(2,159) = 6.38, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$  and a two-way interaction between expectancy valence and expectancy type,  $F(1,159) = 34.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ . To interpret the three-way interaction, we separate analyses for the general expectancy part and work expectancy part of the design (see Table 1).

In the *general expectancy* condition, we predicted that participants should contrast their judgment away from the expectancy valence, regardless of target situation. The results confirmed these predictions. We found a main effect of expectancy valence on judgments,  $F(1,159) = 33.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ . Participants judged Michael less positively after a positive expectancy ( $M = 5.0$ ) than after a negative expectancy ( $M = 6.6$ ). Separate comparisons of the conditions revealed the same significant pattern of results. Thus, as expected, in the general expectancy condition participants contrasted their judgments away from their expectancy, regardless of the target situation.

In the *work expectancy* condition, we predicted that participants would contrast their judgments away from the expectancy valence only when the specific work expectancy matched a work target, whereas participants would assimilate their judgments to the expectancy valence after reading the non-matching general or home target. This is indeed what we found, that is, an interaction effect between expectancy valence and target situation on judgment occurred,  $F(2,159) = 11.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ . We also found a marginal main effect of expectancy valence,  $F(1,159) = 3.73, p = .06, \eta^2 = .02$ . When participants had a positive expectancy and read about Michael at work (match), they judged Michael as more negative ( $M = 5.0$ ), compared with participants who read a general ( $M = 6.8$ ) or home ( $M = 6.5$ ) description of Michael, respectively,  $F(1,159) = 15.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$  and  $F(1,159) = 10.65, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$ . When participants had a negative expectancy and read about a work situation (match) they judged Michael as more positive

Table 1. Impression and unexpectedness as a function of expectancy valence, expectancy type, and target

Expectancy type	Expectancy valence		Target situation		
			General	Home	Work
General	Positive	Impression	4.9 <sup>a</sup>	5.0 <sup>a</sup>	5.1 <sup>a</sup>
		Surprise	4.0 <sup>a</sup>	4.5 <sup>a</sup>	4.0 <sup>a</sup>
	Negative	Impression	6.8 <sup>b</sup>	6.6 <sup>b</sup>	6.5 <sup>b</sup>
		Surprise	4.1 <sup>a</sup>	4.1 <sup>a</sup>	4.2 <sup>a</sup>
Work	Positive	Impression	6.8 <sup>b</sup>	6.5 <sup>b</sup>	5.0 <sup>a</sup>
		Surprise	2.6 <sup>b</sup>	2.2 <sup>b</sup>	4.5 <sup>a</sup>
	Negative	Impression	5.0 <sup>a</sup>	5.2 <sup>a</sup>	6.4 <sup>b</sup>
		Surprise	2.4 <sup>b</sup>	2.6 <sup>b</sup>	4.5 <sup>a</sup>

Note: Means in rows with different superscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$ .

( $M = 6.4$ ) compared to participants who read about Michael in a general ( $M = 5.0$ ) or home target ( $M = 5.2$ ), respectively,  $F(1,159) = 8.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$  and  $F(1,159) = 5.78$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Thus, as expected, in the work expectancy condition, contrast effects were obtained when a work target followed a work expectancy, whereas assimilation effects were obtained when a work expectancy was followed by a general or home target.

### Unexpectedness

We predicted that people would judge the target information as more unexpected in conditions in which contrast effects on judgment occurred than in the conditions in which assimilation occurred. This is exactly what we found. The expected two-way interaction on unexpectedness occurred between expectancy type and target  $F(2,159) = 15.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ . As one can see in Table 1, in the *general expectancy* conditions, there were no differences between conditions (all effects,  $F$ 's  $< 1$ ) and all participants judged the target information as relatively unexpected ( $M = 4.15$ ). In the *work expectancy* condition, we obtained a main effect of target,  $F(2,159) = 29.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$ . When participants had a work expectancy, they judged Michael as more unexpected after a work target ( $M = 4.5$ ) compared to a general ( $M = 2.5$ ) and home target ( $M = 2.4$ ), respectively,  $F(1,165) = 55.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .19$  and  $F(1,165) = 59.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .21$ . Thus, in the work expectancy condition unexpectedness effects were obtained when a work expectancy matched a work target, compared to a work expectancy, which was followed by a general or home target. In sum, we found higher unexpectedness scores in the conditions where contrast effects were obtained, which are the conditions in which expectancy and target situation match.

Thus, we found support for our hypothesis that when confronted with incongruent behavior, people with a general expectancy about a person's behavior think the information is unexpected and contrast their judgments away from the expectancy independent of whether the target's behavior is general or situation-specific. Participants with a work expectancy, however, only contrast their judgments away from the expectancy when the target's behavior refers to a work situation. They think the target's behavior is less unexpected and they show assimilation to the expectancy when the behavior is general or refers to a home situation.

## EXPERIMENT 2

In Experiment 2, we further tested the robustness of our main hypothesis. We did this by using the same logic as in Experiment 1, but using different materials. Compared to the first experiment we made the following changes.

First, to be sure that our findings are not restricted to a work situation *per se*, we changed our situation-specific expectancy from a work-expectancy to a home-expectancy.

Second, we tested our hypothesis using different behavioral dimensions. In Experiment 1, we induced a positive or negative expectancy about Michael with *several* positive or negative traits, and subsequently participants were asked to read a mixed story with episodes implying *kindness* and episodes implying *dishonesty*. With this procedure, the positive expectancy is inconsistent with dishonesty and the negative expectancy is inconsistent with kindness. This inconsistency between expectancy and target is *evaluative* (e.g., a positive expectancy, negative target) as well as *descriptive* (e.g., kind expectancy, dishonest target). To fully test our hypothesis, it is desirable to replicate our effects with an expectancy and target that are descriptively consistent (such as kind-unkind).

A third modification in the paradigm of Experiment 2 is that we changed our expectancy manipulation. In Experiment 1, we induced the expectancy relatively subtly by asking participants to perform a scrambled-sentence task (see Stapel & Schwarz, 1998). In Experiment 2, we used a more explicit manipulation. We gave participants some background information about the person they are about to judge. This information implied kindness or unkindness and referred to a specific situation (home) or not (general). Note that with this procedure we *describe* behaviors implying a trait, and not explicitly say, for example, "Michael is kind at home." We deliberately chose this procedure, because of our conjectures regarding conditional personology (see the Introduction Section). That is, we posit that when situational information is salient and relevant for person perception, people are able to take situation-specific information into account and form non-generalized, situation-specific expectancies that will be taken into account when making judgments. Classic attribution

research suggests, however, that people are likely to make general dispositional inferences when confronted with situation-specific information. By describing behaviors that imply a trait rather than explicitly giving people specific expectancies, we can test whether people can also spontaneously extract situation-specific expectancies from behavior.

Finally, we used different dependent measures than in Experiment 1. First, in order to more directly measure “surprise” we did not ask whether the target’s behavior “was as expected,” but explicitly measured surprise. Second, from Experiment 1 we cannot draw conclusions about what caused the obtained contrast effects. That is, we argued that people are likely to use their expectancy as a *comparison* standard against which target behaviors are then contrasted. Another possibility is, however, that the obtained contrast effects are produced by *correction* processes: people could realize that their impressions of the target may be “contaminated” by their expectancies and then decide not to be led astray by these expectancies and judge the target accordingly (see e.g., Stapel, Martin, & Schwarz, 1998). To address this issue, it is interesting to know how participants judge Michael on specific traits (instead of an overall impression), and specifically, how participants rate Michael on target-relevant and target-irrelevant traits. That is, when our contrast effects are due to comparison, participants should contrast their judgment on target-relevant (i.e., relevant comparison standard) but not on target-irrelevant dimensions (i.e., irrelevant comparison standard). When judging how *smart* Michael is, the expectancy that he is *friendly* is unlikely to be used as a relevant comparison standard. However, when the contrast effects are due to correction, participants should be more likely to contrast their judgement on most, if not all evaluative dimensions (i.e., contrast away from the valence of the expectancy, regardless of evaluative dimension). After all, when one feels one’s judgments may be contaminated it is best to correct all judgments for unwanted influences (for more details about this logic, see Maringer & Stapel, in press; Stapel et al., 1998).

In Experiment 2, we hypothesize that when people have a general, situation-independent expectancy about a person’s behavior (“Michael is kind”), incongruent behavior will stand out more than congruent behavior, elicit surprise and lead to contrast away from the expectancy. These effects will occur independent of whether the target behavior refers to a general or specific (work, home) situation and will only occur on the target-relevant judgment items. However, when people have a situation-specific expectancy (“Michael is kind at home”), contrastive judgment will result mainly when the target behavior refers to the same type of situation (home) as the specific expectancy (home), and only on the target-relevant items. When there is no situational match, incongruent behavior elicits less surprise and target judgments are more likely to be based on the congruent behaviors and show assimilation to the expectancy.

## Method

### *Participants and Design*

Participants were 241 undergraduate students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.4$ ), who were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a 2 (expectancy type: general, home)  $\times$  2 (expectancy valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  3 (target situation: general, home, work) or a control condition in which they received no expectancy information and judged the general, work, or home target.

### *Expectancy Induction*

Participants received a booklet in which we informed them that they were participating in an impression formation study. Participants were told that they were going to read a text about Michael, but before they read this text we wanted to give them some background information about Michael. With this background information we induced the expectancy about Michael. In all the conditions we started with neutral information about Michael’s age and place of residence, that he has a brother and a sister and that he lives together with his girlfriend and daughter in a beautiful house near a river. In the *positive general expectancy conditions* we added information implying kindness, described in a general way (“Michael is a man who is always there for others, when people ask for his help, he does the best he can, he frequently gives money to charity, and he is a social person”). In the *negative general expectancy conditions*, we described behaviors implying unkindness (“Michael always thinks of himself only, when people ask for his help, he rarely does something, he never does something without some advantage for himself and when people do not do what he says, he gets angry”). In the home-expectancy conditions, we specified the behaviors to a home situation. In the *positive home expectancy conditions*, we

described Michael as kind, specified to a home situation (“Michael is always there for his family, he always helps his daughter with her homework, he helps a lot around the house because he thinks that you do those things together and he frequently brings flowers for his girlfriend”). In the *negative home expectancy conditions*, we described unkind behavior, specified to a home situation (“Michael never thinks of his family, he never has time to help his daughter with her homework, he does not do anything around the house and he almost always forgets the birthday of his girlfriend”).

### Target

After participants read the background information about Michael they were asked to read the text. These were mixed target descriptions, which consisted of two episodes implying kindness and two episodes implying unkindness. We constructed three different versions of the target descriptions, each describing a different target situation (general, home, work). In the general target, the behaviors were described in general terms, in the work and home target, kind and unkind behaviors were specified in a work situation and a home situation. For example, in the general target, Michael is described as a person who decides to keep an old woman company, whom he sees oftentimes all alone in the park (kind episode), and when Michael drinks a cup of coffee with several guys at the gas station, he makes jokes about the unattractive appearance of one of the guys, even though Michael is aware that it makes him uncomfortable (unkind episode). In the work target, these behaviors are specified for a work situation. That is, to make a new colleague feel welcome, Michael buys him lunch (kind episode), and when he finds out that his secretary made a mistake, he shouts that she is not capable of doing anything right and that her haircut is awful (unkind episode). In the home target, the behaviors are specified for a home situation. That is, to relax his girlfriend who is stressed because she just started a new job, Michael buys her tickets for the theater (kind episode), and when Michael finds out that the neighbor did something wrong, he shouts to her that she is not capable of doing anything right and that her haircut is awful (unkind episode).

### Dependent Measures

After participants read about Michael, they were asked to indicate their impression of Michael on the items *intelligent, kind, emotional, helpful, competitive* (from 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely). Two of these items were target-relevant (kind, helpful) and three were target-irrelevant (intelligent, emotional, competitive). Subsequently, participants were asked to give a general impression of Michael (*positive*, from 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely). Finally, they were asked how they felt after they read the text (*surprised*, from 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely).

## Results and Discussion

We conducted a 2 (expectancy type: general, home)  $\times$  2 (expectancy valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  3 (target situation: general, home, work) ANOVA on the judgments and surprise scores.

### Judgment

First of all, we conducted an ANOVA on the target-irrelevant items, which showed, as predicted, no significant effects (all  $p$ 's  $>$  .12). Then, to test our predictions regarding the target-relevant items, we conducted an ANOVA, treating scale, the ratings on the relevant judgment items (positive, kind, helpful) as a within- and expectancy valence, expectancy type, and target as a between-subjects factor. This revealed a main effect of scale,  $F(2,183) = 33.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ , but no significant interactions with the experimental factors (all  $p$ 's  $>$  .14). For ease of presentation, we therefore report analyses using the mean score on all relevant scales ( $\alpha = .95$ ) as the main dependent variable. Separate analyses for each of the relevant judgment scales showed a comparable pattern of results.

We predicted that participants would contrast their target judgments away from the expectancy valence when expectancy type and target situation match, but only on the target-relevant items. An expected three-way interaction on

judgment between expectancy type, expectancy valence, and target situation occurred,  $F(2,183) = 18.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ . We also found a main effect of expectancy valence,  $F(1,183) = 19.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , a two-way interaction between expectancy valence and target,  $F(2,183) = 20.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ , and a two-way interaction between expectancy valence and expectancy type,  $F(1,183) = 70.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .20$ . To interpret the three-way interaction on target-relevant judgment, we separate analyses for the general expectancy part and home expectancy part of the design (see Table 2).

In the *general expectancy* condition, we predicted that participants should contrast their judgment away from the expectancy valence, regardless of target situation. The results confirmed these predictions. We found a main effect of expectancy valence on judgments,  $F(1,183) = 61.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .26$ . Participants judged Michael less positively after a positive expectancy ( $M = 4.50$ ) than after a negative expectancy ( $M = 6.58$ ). Thus, as expected, in the general expectancy condition participants contrasted their judgments away from their expectancy, regardless of the target situation. As you can see in Table 2, all individual cells differed from the control condition at  $p < .05$ .

In the *home expectancy* condition, we predicted that participants would contrast their judgments away from the expectancy valence only when the specific home expectancy matched a home target, whereas participants assimilate their judgments to the expectancy valence after reading the non-matching general or work target. This is indeed what we found, that is, an interaction effect between expectancy valence and target situation on judgment occurred,  $F(2,183) = 25.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .21$ . We also found a main effect of expectancy valence,  $F(1,183) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . When participant had a positive expectancy and read about Michael at home (match), they judged Michael as more negative ( $M = 4.40$ ), compared with participants who read a general ( $M = 6.39$ ) or work ( $M = 6.51$ ) description of Michael, respectively,  $F(1,183) = 24.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$  and  $F(1,183) = 26.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . When participants had a negative expectancy and read about a home situation (match) they judged Michael as more positive ( $M = 6.65$ ) compared to participants who read about Michael in a general ( $M = 4.57$ ) or work target ( $M = 4.21$ ), respectively,  $F(1,183) = 23.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$  and  $F(1,183) = 35.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Thus, as expected, in the home expectancy condition, contrast effects were obtained when a home target followed home expectancy, whereas assimilation effects were obtained when a home expectancy was followed by a general or work target. As you can see in Table 2, all individual cells differed from the control condition at  $p < .05$ .

### Surprise

We conducted an ANOVA on the surprise scores. We predicted that surprise scores would be higher in conditions in which contrast effects on judgment occurred than in conditions in which assimilation occurred. This is exactly what we found. We found an expectancy type  $\times$  target interaction,  $F(2,183) = 32.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .15$ , a main effect of target situation,  $F(2,183) = 25.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ , and a main effect of expectancy type,  $F(1,183) = 133.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .31$ . To

Table 2. Impression and surprise as a function of expectancy valence, expectancy type, and target

Expectancy type	Expectancy valence		Target situation		
			General	Home	Work
General	Positive	Impression	4.5 <sup>a</sup>	4.4 <sup>a</sup>	4.6 <sup>a</sup>
		Surprise	4.7 <sup>a</sup>	4.4 <sup>a</sup>	4.6 <sup>a</sup>
	Negative	Impression	6.4 <sup>b</sup>	6.5 <sup>b</sup>	6.8 <sup>b</sup>
		Surprise	4.3 <sup>a</sup>	4.3 <sup>a</sup>	4.4 <sup>a</sup>
Home	Positive	Impression	6.4 <sup>b</sup>	4.4 <sup>a</sup>	6.5 <sup>b</sup>
		Surprise	2.2 <sup>b</sup>	4.4 <sup>a</sup>	2.3 <sup>b</sup>
	Negative	Impression	4.6 <sup>a</sup>	6.6 <sup>b</sup>	4.2 <sup>a</sup>
		Surprise	2.4 <sup>b</sup>	4.3 <sup>a</sup>	2.1 <sup>b</sup>
Control	Control	Impression	5.4 <sup>c</sup>	5.4 <sup>c</sup>	5.4 <sup>c</sup>
		Surprise	1.9 <sup>b</sup>	2.0 <sup>b</sup>	1.9 <sup>b</sup>

Note: Means in rows with different superscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$ .

interpret the effects, we did separate analyses for the general expectancy part and home expectancy part of the design (see Table 2).

In the *general expectancy* conditions, surprise scores showed no effects (all  $F$ 's < 1): All participants were relatively surprised (see Table 2). In the *home expectancy* condition, we obtained a main effect of target,  $F(2,183) = 32.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .26$ . When participants had a home expectancy, they were more surprised after a home target ( $M = 4.4$ ) compared to a general ( $M = 2.3$ ) and work target ( $M = 2.2$ ), respectively,  $F(1,189) = 180.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$  and  $F(1,189) = 88.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .20$ . Thus, in the home expectancy condition surprise effects were obtained when a home expectancy matched a home target, compared to a home expectancy, which was followed by a general or home target. In sum, we found higher surprise scores in the conditions where contrast effects were obtained, which are the conditions in which expectancy and target situation match. Because we only found effects on the target-relevant items, and not on the target-irrelevant items, we can conclude that the obtained contrast effects are probably caused by comparison, and not by correction (see Stapel et al., 1998).

Together, Experiments 1 and 2 show that people are able to take situation-specific information into account when making judgments. As noted in the introduction, an assumption in our theorizing is that surprise is an important emotion that co-occurs with contrastive judgments when target behaviors are unexpectedly incongruent. That is, we assume that when people have a situation-specific expectancy, incongruent behavior is more likely to elicit surprise and contrast effects (away from the expectancy) when this behavior refers to the same specific situation. When there is no such match, surprise is less likely and assimilation is more likely.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Because most of people's interactions with others take place in specific situations, it is likely that often the expectancies people have about others are also situation-specific. The present studies examined when and how this situation-specificity of expectancies may affect social perception. The question was how general versus specific expectancies guide and influence the perception and judgment of target behavior. In two experiments, we asked participants to judge a target person who showed mixed (positive and negative) behavior after a (positive or negative) expectancy about this person was induced. In Experiment 1, we demonstrated that participants who were given a situation-specific expectancy ("Michael is kind at work") were surprised and contrasted their judgment away from their expectancy when the target showed incongruent behavior that situationally matched the expectancy (unkind behavior at work). However, when the target behavior did not situationally match the expectancy (unkind behavior in general or at home), participants showed less surprise and assimilated their judgments toward their expectancy. In contrast, when participants had a general expectancy ("Michael is kind"), their scores showed surprise and contrast, regardless of the situation (general, work, or home). In Experiment 2, we replicated these findings using different expectancy-induction techniques and different target materials and measures.

The findings from the reported studies support our notion that the impact of expectancies on perception and judgment depends on the specificity of the expectancy (Is the expectancy general or specific?) and the relevance of the expectancy for the target behavior (Do they refer to the same situation?). Unexpected behavior is most likely to elicit surprise and influence subsequent judgments when "all else is equal:" when the unexpected behavior is the only thing that is different and thus stands out. When expectancy and target behavior are similar except for the relevant incongruity, this incongruity is most likely to influence judgment, our results suggest.

The findings of the current studies also suggest that people are able to form situation-specific expectancies and take these into account when judging others. As noted in the Introduction Section, this seems to be discrepant with a strict interpretation of the well-known correspondence bias. The present findings support the notion that people do not always or necessarily make dispositional inferences when they see trait-implying behavior. When judging others, people can and do take into account the situational constraints of the behavior they engage in. They know that a CEO who is bossy at work is not necessarily a bossy mother at home. Because of this, people are not necessarily surprised when at home this CEO shows non-bossy behavior. In other words, even though decades of research on attribution theories have shown that people typically behave like dispositionalists and personologists (see Gilbert, 1998), the present studies suggest that sometimes, people can also act as situationalists.

It is also important to note that the effects we found in the present studies may be moderated by the restrictiveness of the primed traits. That is, Trafimow (2001) showed that the generalizability of situation-specific expectancies depends on the restrictiveness of the trait dimension (Reeder & Brewer, 1979). People do not generalize partially restrictive traits (symmetrical traits, like kindness) from one situation to another, but negative behavior that is hierarchical restrictive (asymmetrical traits, like loyalty) is likely to be generalized to other situations (disloyalty indicates disloyalty, no matter what). Future studies may want to examine whether the effects of situation-specific expectancies on judgment depend on trait type, as Trafimow's (2001) work suggests.

Furthermore, one might wonder, based on our theoretical conceptions and findings, whether the results on our judgment measures are mediated by surprise. Although we find that people are more surprised in the conditions where we find contrast effects (where expectancy matches outcome), and we find that people are less surprised in the conditions where we find assimilation effects (where expectancy does not match the outcome), exploratory mediation analyses did not show a consistent mediation pattern (i.e., in some cells we do find mediation, but in other cells we do not). We think there are at least two methodological reasons that might explain this absence in mediation. That is, the way and moment we asked for surprise ratings might have lowered the strength and variance in the surprise scores, which makes it more difficult to find mediation. Specifically, we asked participants to indicate how they felt after they had read the target text, thus referring to this text as a whole; including both congruent and incongruent behaviors. Second, we asked the surprise question at the end of the experiment, which possibly lowers the strength of the surprise ratings as participants already completed judgment questions and had had some time to make sense of the encountered incongruity.

In spite of these possible methodological reasons for the absence of mediation, the question nevertheless arises whether surprise is the causal variable that underlies our judgment results or not. It seems reasonable to conclude that surprise is an important variable, as we find clear and strong parallel judgment and surprise results, but the absence of mediation might also be an indication that there is more going on than people being surprised by incongruent behavior, resulting in a contrastive judgment. What could this be? As indicated in our Introduction Section, we assume that behavior that is incongruent to an expectancy is more likely to stand out and focused on than behavior that is congruent to an expectancy. Due to the fact that this incongruity stands out, it receives more weight in the subsequent judgment (i.e., a contrast effect). We also assumed that the behaviors that are incongruent to the expectancy elicit surprise, however, it could be that behaviors that stand out are not necessarily surprising. That is, the degree to which behavior stands out might underlie both the judgment results as well as the surprise results. Consequently, the judgment and surprise findings might be mediated by the extent to which incongruities stand out, whereas the judgment results are not mediated by surprise. This is an intriguing possibility that may direct us to future research avenues.

## **Relation to Other Theorizing**

The literature on social perception is extensive and it would be too much to mention everything that is related to our findings. However, two related lines of research on when and how people integrate and compare reality with their expectancies seem to be especially relevant to the current findings, even though this research did not focus on situation-specific expectancies and surprise effects as we did.

First, Manis and Paskewitz (1984a, 1984b) developed a model of assimilation and contrast effects in which they argued that cognitive accessible exemplar information (e.g., expectancies) may affect target impressions in two parallel ways: by providing a basis for comparison when we have to judge the target (contrast) and by guiding the interpretation and categorization of the target (assimilation) (see also Stapel, 2007). Thus, expectancies can be used in different ways: to integrate and make sense of a target, or to compare and evaluate a target. Especially interesting in relation to our findings is that the Manis–Paskewitz model suggests that comparison between expectancy and target only happens when they are sufficiently similar. Although in the Manis–Paskewitz model (1984a, 1984b) surprise and incongruity processes are not used to explain the effects, they showed that when participants judged the psychopathology of patient descriptions, they contrasted their judgments away from the expectancy when the target was from the same domain as the expectancy induction (e.g., vocabulary definitions), whereas this contrast effect was not obtained when the target was not from the same domain as the expectancy induction (e.g., handwriting samples).

Second, Biernat's (2005) research on local expectancy effects is also in line with our findings. Biernat has shown repeatedly that often times, social categories are compared to their own local norms (see Biernat, 2005). When judging, for

instance, males and females or blacks and whites on an attribute (e.g., leadership quality, financial success, athletic performance, or verbal skills), judges have lower standards for groups stereotyped as deficient on that attribute. The low expectancy inherent in the stereotype means that less is required to meet the standard and thus, that the standard for comparison shifts for different stereotypes, and as a consequence, the meaning of the endpoints of a rating scale, and thus judgments made on this scale, change. Translated in our terms, the low expectancy inherent in a female stereotype is a stereotype-specific expectancy (women are less financially successful than men) that results in a stereotype-specific comparison standard (the expected distribution of financial success results in higher end-anchors for women than for men) and in corresponding effects on judgments (she is quite successful—for a woman).

In sum, our findings are related to previous theorizing in the sense that when judging the unexpected, expectancy and reality have to be comparable for incongruent information to stand out and for contrast to occur. A situation-specific expectancy will only affect surprise and judgment when unexpected behavior is specifically and clearly related to that expectancy. Because similarity breeds comparability, odd behavior does not stand out when there are many other things that are different. It is therefore unlikely that people's impression of their geeky colleague will change after surprise exposure to his unexpectedly passionate dancing behavior at a party. After all, not only social psychologists, but also real people know that often behavior is situation-specific.

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