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The global chameleons: the impact of early life international exposure on the career capital of adult third culture kids

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the present study is to explore the effects of early life international exposure on the career capital (CC) of adult third culture kids (ATCKs).

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a qualitative research design, based on 34 semi-structured interviews with ATCKs who have had international exposure in their childhood as a member of an expatriate family.

Findings – The results show that a globally mobile childhood has extensive long-term impacts on ATCKs' CC in the areas of knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom. Additionally, their early international experience also had several negative impacts across these aspects of CC.

Originality/value – This paper provides a novel understanding about the long-term impacts of early life international exposure on ATCKs' CC, and is the first study to use the CC-framework among an ATCK population.

Keywords Career capital, Career development, International assignment, Adult third culture kids, Expatriate children

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Expatriation has been found to be a very transitional and developmental experience, both for expatriates (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Mello *et al.*, 2022) and their family members (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021; Tan *et al.*, 2021). The majority of expatriates have children, and most take their families abroad with them (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2007). There are thus a significant number of adults who have developed international expertise during their parents' international assignment (De Waal and Born, 2020; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013) when living abroad during their developmental years, when people are at a highly receptive age (Pollock *et al.*, 2017). One of the greatest human resource challenges in multinational organizations lies in finding skilled people for international roles (Kirk, 2021), and it has been recognized that such people could be an important recruitment pool for multinational corporations or companies (MNCs) (Nash, 2020; Westropp *et al.*, 2016). The global mobility literature often centers on expatriate experiences, and family has been typically presented only when their actions are linked to an expatriate's performance

(Lazarova *et al.*, 2015). However, there has been a recent increase in studies focusing on partner experiences from perspectives such as acculturation (Stoermer *et al.*, 2021), well-being (Kanstrén and Mäkelä, 2020), career capital development (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021), and career impacts (Mutter and Thorn, 2019). Nonetheless, the experiences of expatriate children have been studied much less through the lens of development or future career (Abe, 2018; Luring *et al.*, 2019; Nash, 2020). Consequently, it has been argued that we need more research on the experiences of such expatriate children, and the long-term impacts these experiences have on their lives and careers (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022), concentrating on their positive traits, strengths and competencies (Tan *et al.*, 2021).

The experiences of expatriate children have also been analyzed in cross-cultural (see e.g. Purnell and Hoban, 2014; De Sivatte *et al.*, 2019; Banerjee *et al.*, 2020; De Waal and Born, 2021), international education (see e.g. Fail *et al.*, 2004; Poonoosamy, 2018; McKeering *et al.*, 2021), and psychology literature (see e.g. Hervey, 2009; Davis *et al.*, 2010; Mosanya and Kwiatkowska, 2023). There, expatriates' offspring are referred to as 'third culture kids' (TCKs), and as 'adult third culture kids' (ATCKs) when they come of age. The main focus of TCK-research has been on the challenges associated with a globally mobile childhood (Tan *et al.*, 2021), from perspectives such as the ATCKs' identity (Cranston, 2017), their feelings of rootlessness and restlessness (Pollock *et al.*, 2017), loss and grief in transitions (Gilbert, 2008), cultural homelessness (Hoersting and Jenkins, 2011), and repatriation adjustment (Smith and Kearney, 2016). Another set of studies has underlined the advantages of a TCK background, such as their possible talent potential for becoming future expatriates as adults (Bonebright, 2010; Selmer and Lam, 2004; Westropp *et al.*, 2016). Research on the development of TCKs has mainly focused on the development of cross-cultural competences (De Waal and Born, 2020; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013). However, we could expect that their time abroad offers a wider scope of developmental experiences for expatriate children, similar to those reported among expatriates (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Jokinen, 2010) and their partners (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021), and which can also have long-term impacts on their later work life and career choices (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022).

The career capital (CC) gained from international assignments has often been explored through career capital theory (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Dickmann and Doherty, 2008;

Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). The CC theory is based on three ways of knowing: ‘knowing-how’, ‘knowing-whom’, and ‘knowing-why’ (Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007) which are seen to impact on careers and the career success of individuals. While CC theory has been used among expatriates (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Jokinen, 2010; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007) and their partners (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021), it has not yet been utilized to understand the development of TCKs.

In light of this background, the aim of the present study is to increase our understanding of CC among ATCKs by answering the following research questions: *Does early international experience develop the knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom career capital of ATCKs, and if so, in what ways?* Especially, we report ATCKs’ perceptions at a career stage when they have already started their adult careers, and are thus able to reflect on how their early international experiences have influenced them from the CC perspective. It is noteworthy that the participants of the study reflect on their childhood international experiences which are based on their memories, and therefore, the descriptions of their experiences might be biased (Sikkel, 1985). Moreover, this study differs from earlier studies where the main focus has been on the experiences of TCKs abroad (Hartman, 2022). Thus, by adopting such a broad CC-perspective, the current study contributes by expanding our knowledge beyond the development of cultural competences, which has previously been the main focus of research in this area.

Literature review

Existing research on third culture kids and adult third culture kids

A third culture kid (TCK) has been defined as “a person who spends a significant part of his or her first eighteen years of life accompanying parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one parent’s passport country(ies) due to a parent’s choice of work or advanced training” (Pollock *et al.*, 2017 p. 404). In this approach, the ‘first culture’ is the parents’ home or passport country. The ‘second culture’ is the one where the family has moved to and lived, while at the same time belonging to a ‘third culture’ which is not a physical culture, but more a lifestyle and shared experiences with other individuals living in a similar way (Pollock *et al.*, 2017). Since the third culture is a created culture, it has been described as a “culture between cultures” (Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009 p. 755).

An adult third culture kid (ATCK) refers to an individual who has had such international experiences, meaning that an ATCK “is someone who grew up as a TCK” (Pollock *et al.*, 2017 p. 404), and is thus able to reflect on the impacts that their experiences have had on their later lives and careers.

Previously, TCK experiences have been analyzed from a variety of perspectives, including childhood adjustment (Banerjee *et al.*, 2020; De Sivatte *et al.*, 2019; Weeks *et al.*, 2010) and coping (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2007) abroad. Further studies have focused on how expatriate children establish relationships during international transitions (Adams, 2016; Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Research conducted on globally mobile children has also covered their perceptions of being international (Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004), their international mindedness (Poonoosamy, 2018), global awareness (Sheard, 2008), their sense of belonging to the home country (Nette and Hayden, 2007), and adolescents’ stress reactivity and depressive symptoms (Thomas *et al.*, 2021); and scholars have shown interest in TCKs’ future career interests when they are still young (Gerner and Perry, 2000; Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004). There has also been some research on the educational experiences of TCKs which raised that these may differ depending on the school type the person attended. Some may study in international schools such as International Baccalaureate (Dickson *et al.*, 2018) or European Schools (Housen, 2002), while some may study in local schools (Groves and O’Connor, 2018).

While most research has examined the experiences of TCKs abroad, the number of studies on their adulthood experiences has been gradually increasing. Initial studies have examined ATCKs’ cultural identity (Greenholtz and Kim, 2009; Moore and Barker, 2012; Rounsaville, 2014; Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009), insecurity of identity (Cranston, 2017), and cultural homelessness and identity (Hoersting and Jenkins, 2011). The wellbeing of ATCKs has been analyzed from perspectives such as their life satisfaction (Mosanya and Kwiatkowska, 2021), depression, anxiety and stress (Davis *et al.*, 2010; Davis *et al.*, 2013), levels of prejudice (Melles and Schwartz, 2013), and loss and grief experiences (Gilbert, 2008). Research has also covered ATCKs’ transitions to college (Smith and Kearney, 2016; Hervey, 2009) and university life (Purnell and Hoban, 2014), their adulthood expatriate adjustment (Lauring *et al.*, 2019; Selmer and Lauring, 2014), as well as their repatriation experiences (Bikos *et al.*, 2009; Peterson and Plamondon, 2009). A range of studies have analyzed the competencies found among ATCKs

(Bonebright, 2010; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016). But although ATCKs have been studied from different perspectives, the understanding of the CC they gain (and lose) during their early international experiences and the longer term impacts of such developmental experiences has been highlighted as needing further attention (Abe, 2018; Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022; Luring *et al.*, 2019).

We next discuss the development of CC abroad by applying the CC-framework to analyze these developmental experiences during early life international exposure.

Career capital development abroad

Career capital theory includes the idea of three forms of knowing, and provides a framework for understanding how changing conditions affect an individual's knowledge, skills, and career interests (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). It consists of three key aspects of CC; individual beliefs, values and identities relating to 'knowing-why', gained skills and knowledge relating to 'knowing-how', and the network of personal relationships and overall contacts relating to 'knowing-whom' (Defilippi and Arthur, 1994). Importantly, CC is seen to have transferability across organizations, industries and national borders, creating economic benefit.

Expatriation has been found to be a highly developmental experience both for expatriates and their family members, and thus the CC-framework has been seen as a means of analyzing such developments. Expatriation offers opportunities for self-reflection and learning, and has an extensive developmental effect on CC among both expatriates (Cappellen and Janssens, 2008; Dickmann and Cerdin, 2018; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Suutari *et al.*, 2018; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007) and their partners (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021). However, far less research on development and the long-term career impacts of such development has been conducted among former expatriate children. While the main focus of the present study is on the CC-development experiences of ATCKs, we will also briefly discuss findings on the development of CC among expatriates and their partners, since they all share the experience of living abroad.

Knowing-why

Knowing-why CC answers the question of 'Why?', and consists of a sense of purpose, values, identity interests, and career motivations (Cappellen and Janssens, 2005; Defilippi

and Arthur, 1994) that enhance learning and performance (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021). Expatriation has been found to increase the knowing-why CC of expatriates and partners with regard to self-awareness, self-confidence, the understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the understanding of work-related values, career-related preferences, and motives (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Notably, individuals are found to become aware of these personal drivers, since expatriation is often perceived as a journey into oneself (Jokinen, 2010).

While the CC-framework has not been similarly applied in ATCK research, there are some relevant findings that can be connected with this framework. The accompanying children also experience a major life change of adjusting to a new culture that has been found to lead to the development of a multicultural identity (Tan *et al.*, 2021), cultural open mindedness and a global mindset (Weeks *et al.*, 2010; Westropp *et al.*, 2016), and a desire for an international career and travel (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022). As studies have typically utilized TCKs as informants, we still lack an understanding of the CC of ATCKs who are able to reflect on their CC-development abroad after entering work life. Furthermore, research has paid less attention to the broader issue of ‘knowing-why’ development, and focus has been placed on international orientation though other aspects such as self-confidence and self-awareness which could develop quite similarly among TCKs as among expatriates and partners. However, in addition to the positive development of knowing-why, some more negative changes have been reported, and due to their multicultural identity, ATCKs have been found to face cultural struggles, anger and depression (Smith and Kearney, 2016), to feel rootless (Pollock *et al.*, 2017), and to face challenges with fitting into their home country culture after their return (Bikos *et al.*, 2009).

Knowing-how

Knowing-how CC reflects the skills, expertise and knowledge which a person draws into a career, and these skills may be technical, interpersonal, or conceptual (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). Such capital may be transferrable to new positions across countries, but is sometimes also partly organization- or country-specific (Jokinen, 2010). International experience has been noted to develop knowing-how CC with regard to general competencies such as social skills and coping, as well as international competencies,

therefore increasing the individual's capabilities for international and domestic careers (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Similar findings have also been reported among partners, but the extent of their development varied depending on the situations of their partners (e.g. their family and job situation abroad) (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021).

With regard to the development of TCKs, the focus has often been placed on analyzing the cross-cultural skills and sensitivity that these children develop abroad (De Waal and Born, 2020). A TCK background is also connected to the ability to cope in cross-cultural transitions (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2007; Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009), and having good language skills (Pollock *et al.*, 2017; Haneda and Monobe, 2009).

Global mobility has been found to develop broader social and communication skills among expatriates (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008) and their partners (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021). Thus, similar development could be expected to take place among TCKs, and to be present in their adult work life. Some of the developments that take place among adults naturally relate to their work experiences abroad, while children may have developmental experiences, stemming for example from the schools they attend abroad. Consequently, further research is needed on TCKs' knowing-how development when studying abroad, and on the transferability of such CC to their career. While most development can be considered as a positive CC development, ATCKs may also face obstacles due to decreasing competencies in areas such as their home country language skills and their understanding of home country culture (Smith and Kearney, 2016). Thus, further research with international samples would help to further investigate this aspect.

Knowing-whom

Knowing-whom CC includes the relationships, attachments, and sources of information that people gather along their careers (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). The CC-framework highlights the importance of knowing-whom for an individual's career success (Inkson and Arthur, 2001), and an expatriates' networks have been noted to be crucially important for their career progress (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Linehan and Scullion, 2002). Diverse social relationships were also found to be important to expatriate partners, and often their social activity was beneficial to expatriates by way of opening up new networks abroad (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021). From the TCK perspective, it is known that they often enjoy

an expatriate-centric lifestyle during their parent(s)' international assignment (Weeks *et al.*, 2010), and thus have other expatriate families in their social network. It has further been found that individuals with a globally mobile childhood are good at forming meaningful relationships with other TCKs (Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009), also after their time abroad (Peterson and Plamondon, 2009). However, we still lack an understanding of what kinds of networks TCKs form abroad, how long-term the relationships are, and how useful such connections are in their future career.

TCKs may also face challenges due to the specific nature of their knowing-whom CC. First, TCKs have been found to face challenges in forming relationships with non-TCKs who do not have an international childhood background, because they lack similar worldviews, values, and experiences (Choi *et al.*, 2013). They also have fewer international connections with locals than might be expected (Weeks *et al.*, 2010), and relationships formed abroad might also be challenging to maintain in the long-term, since a typical pattern for TCKs is to form less emotional relationships if they have formed new relationships due to relocation (Choi *et al.*, 2013). However, more information is needed on how TCKs are able to re-enter their home country networks after repatriation, and how this impacts their careers as ATCKs.

Method

Data collection

The current study adopts a qualitative research method with 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which enables studying individuals' subjective experiences (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2015). Such a qualitative approach was applied because quantitative methods do not necessarily offer sufficient tools to illuminate peoples' subjective experiences and how they make sense of and interpret them (Angen, 2000).

To participate in the research, participants were expected to have relocated before the age of 18 from their primary passport country at least once for a period of a year or more, due to their parent(s) work. Additionally, participants were expected to have work experience after their early life experience as TCKs. The first interviewees were found from the first author's personal network as she comes from an expatriate family herself. Further

participants were found via the snowball method, where respondents provided contact information for other individuals who fitted the selection criteria of the study (Metsämuuronen, 2006). It is acknowledged that this may be considered as a limitation to the generalizability of the findings because a snowball sample selection is often inherently biased (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). But in turn, such an approach enabled the collection of rich qualitative data which included ATCKs with international experiences from around the world. All of the interviewees fulfilled the original selection criteria.

The data collection was conducted during April and May 2020, and started with two pilot interviews (Majid *et al.*, 2017). All of the interviews were implemented through Zoom video meetings as face-to-face interviews were not possible during the Covid-19 pandemic. Even so, face-to-face interviews would still have been very difficult to arrange even in normal circumstances, as many of the interviewees lived abroad at the time that the interviews took place. All of the interviews were video-recorded and permission for the recording was gained from each interviewee at the beginning of the interview session. The interview duration varied from 50 to 110 minutes (average 70 minutes). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and the verbatim quotations of this paper have been translated into English by the authors. Careful attention was paid to the translation process in terms of sense making and reconstructing meanings. After this, a native English speaker checked that the translations are accurate in terms of language, while respecting the ‘tone’ of the interviewee.

The interview questions regarding CC were based on the three aspects of knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom. Participants were asked to openly reflect on their experiences, and each theme was thoroughly discussed during the interview. The interview questions were purposefully wide, such as “Do you feel that you have changed somehow due to the international experience? In what way?”, “What kind of skills did you develop during your childhood time abroad?”, and “What kind of networks did you belong to during your childhood international experience?”. ATCKs were also asked to evaluate and explain whether and how the developed CC impacted them and their careers. Sequel questions which were not planned in advance were asked throughout the interviews. While it is recognized that the retrospective style of questioning about previous experiences abroad might incur some degree of memory bias (Sikkel, 1985), in

order to study the perceived long-term impacts of a childhood international experience, it is necessary that ATCKs reflect on their experiences over a longer term.

The ethical approach that guided the research design and practices involved several issues. First, it was stressed that participation to one-on-one interactive video interview was voluntary and the interview could be terminated whenever they wanted. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, all of participants got a list of the interview questions before the interview session, and were asked whether they were willing to take part to the research. This was also necessary due to snowball method, so that those contacted did not feel any pressure to participate in the research and would have the chance to withdraw from the research after seeing the questions. As the participants discussed and described sensitive family experiences, they were interviewed in a private environment and anonymity of the participants was ensured in all following stages of the research. Thus, this work refers to the participants in a way that they cannot be identified, and only a limited number of facts about them are given in the sample descriptions. Also, participants were reassured that their confidentiality would be respected, and that any personal information would not be divulged to anyone outside of the research group.

The research procedures were arranged so that no potential harm would be caused to participants, and that the results of the study would be presented in a way that subjected no harm or inconvenience to the study participants. In Finland, research with human participants must follow TENK guidelines (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity). According to TENK, research is to be conducted in a way that the dignity and autonomy of human research participants is respected, and “the research does not cause significant risks, damage or harm to research participants, communities or other subjects of research” (TENK, 2019). The University of Vaasa Human Science ethics committee issued the judgement that since the TENK guidelines were followed in the research procedures of the current study, no additional ethical review by the university ethics committee was required. Finally, ethical research standards have been followed by describing the research design in a transparent way.

Sample

The data includes 13 male and 21 female Finnish participants, and their ages varied from 21 to 41 years of age (average 26.5 years) at time of interview. The participants had lived in different countries across the globe, and had experienced between one to five international relocations due to their parents work. Table 1 illustrates the participant data (Age; Gender; Countries and lengths of stay abroad before the age of 18 (years); Education attended abroad) and how they fit Pollock et al.'s (2017 p. 404) definition of an ATCK. During the childhood time abroad, most participants (71%) had parents working as business expatriates in the private sector, and 29% working in the public sector (e.g. for the EU). Also, noteworthy is that many of the parents were in high level positions in their organization. The average time spent abroad was 7.25 years, and all of the respondents had stayed abroad for at least two years. The participants of the study were all studying or working at the time of interviews. They had an average work experience of six years across varying positions. Those who had longer work experience typically already held more senior expert or managerial level positions, and often in an international setup.

The participants were found to be highly educated since most of the participants (24 out of 34) had a master's level degree or were about to graduate to a master's level degree (two of the participants with a master's level degree were about to graduate to a doctoral level degree). This number can be considered to be relatively high since 13.5 percent of the Finnish population with educational qualifications have a master's level degree (OSF, 2019). Furthermore, 9 participants had or were about to graduate to a bachelor or equivalent level degree. 5 participants had worked after their bachelor's degree and were about to apply for master's level studies. Typically, participants who had studied in an international school (IB) or European School had continued their studies in foreign universities after that.

Moreover, 28 of the 34 participants had lived abroad after their childhood experiences abroad with their parents. Some of these had lived abroad only once, while some had done so even up to four times. Since most of the participants were still in the primary stages of their career, such numbers are relatively high. At the time of the interviews, many of the participants were living abroad due to educational or work reasons. However, some who

had been abroad for internships, work or educational reasons had returned to Finland temporarily due to the globally critical Covid-19 situation, and some had needed to delay their international work plans or even cancel already made work agreements due to the pandemic.

Insert Table I around here

Data analysis

The data was analyzed through qualitative content analysis which enables a trustworthy analysis of qualitative data (Elo *et al.*, 2014), and a systematic analysis of interview transcripts, aiming to summarize and generalize the experiences of the research participants (Sarajärvi and Tuomi, 2017). It is defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 24). Therefore, content analysis was deemed to be a suitable approach for the current analysis as it has the potential to yield reliable and replicable findings of the phenomena under study (Krippendorff, 2018) that lack previous understanding.

The data analysis process already started during the data collection, since careful notes of arising themes were made during the interviews. The interviews and their transcription were carried out by the first author. The data were processed using NVivo software, which enabled advanced data analysis by coding the transcripts and organizing the material by way of similar meanings, themes, and keywords (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). Coding started with “values and self-perceptions”, “skills” and “relationships” that reflected the core idea of the three CC aspects of knowing. In the next stage, subcodes were used under these three ways of knowing as more specific subtopics emerged from the data (e.g. the categorization of specific skills that were part of knowing-how career capital). These codes advanced the effective analysis of the data. In addition, color coding was used within the coding process to separate different depths of experience.

Finally, many steps were taken to increase the research validity and reliability of the study. First, the participants of the study had a range of different backgrounds, ages, time spent abroad, and host locations. Also, the expatriate parents represented both the private

and public sectors. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted since the topics were mainly outlined beforehand, and participants' experiences were covered in a way that the interview questions were not able to be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' response (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2015). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are suited to the examination of sensitive topics and when the study focuses on participants' evaluations, ideals and arguments (Metsämuuronen, 2006), and the questions allowed the participants to speak freely and deeply about the impact of their early international experience on their later CC. In addition, pilot interviews were initially conducted to test the interview questions, so as to further increase the reliability of the research (Eskola and Suoranta, 1998).

Thirdly, as previously mentioned, the interviews were conducted through Zoom video communication, which given that the Covid-19 pandemic had restricted the use of face-to-face interviews, increased the level of trust between the interviewer and the research participants (Oliffe et al., 2021). As all of the respondents had been working virtually during the pandemic, they were already used to working via video communication tools, which diminished any technical difficulties in the data collection process. Finally, the interview transcripts were compiled in full, and sent to the interviewees to check the accuracy of the transcripts and to offer them the opportunity to give feedback to the researchers. Only a few of the interviewees wished to change or add details to their transcripts. The transcripts were saved for possible later checks, and the data stored on a personal computer which requires an access code to ensure the sensitive interview data is stored safely.

Findings

ATCKs uniformly felt that their early international experience had an extensive and long-term impact on their CC across all three dimensions of CC. While the impacts were mainly reported to be very positive, some experiences were not seen as positive in nature. In the following sections, we report our findings across the three identified aspects of CC. In each section, we start from the dominating positive developmental impacts of international exposure that emerged from the data, following up with some of the negative impacts that ATCKs had experienced.

Knowing-why CC

An international childhood was connected to ATCKs' identity formation, since respondents saw that their time abroad had shaped their views on who they were as a person. Early international experience was perceived as a 'journey into themselves', which fostered their *self-awareness*, for example, by helping them to understand their personal strengths and weaknesses.

When other cultures are experienced this way, you begin to realize that there is more than one way to do things. In that process, I started learning more about myself. (Female 31 years, two years in China)

By becoming aware of their personal strengths, participants have been able to use them to their own benefit during their studies and early careers. As ATCKs have gained their international experiences during childhood when people are at a highly receptive age, the experience had modified their *identity and values*.

In general, there have been many benefits [from childhood international experience]. I do not believe that I would be the person I am today without these international experiences. They have changed me so much. For example, they have shaped my values, open-mindedness and general understanding of the world. I am not an expert, but I can see [the world] from more than a Finnish perspective. (Female 23 years, four years in Sweden and USA)

Participants also developed a strong *international orientation* when they saw themselves as global individuals who blend into international settings easily, and have strong international career related preferences.

I see myself as an international person. International experience has been a significant part of my life. I believe that I will carry an international identity with me for the rest of my life. (Female 30 years, nine years in China and Switzerland)

Reflecting their international orientation, some respondents had international experiences in their early career stages from foreign companies or from international voluntary work. Later on, many participants had been working in international teams and projects, been responsible for international customers, and had experienced active work travel. Many of them had self-initiated their expatriation, but while they had such an orientation, their specific future career aspirations were found to vary significantly (e.g. marketing, academia, and project management). Thus, international experiences seem to drive ATCKs towards different international setups in their careers, but do not seem to steer their work-lives into particular occupations or industries.

The respondents also saw changes of their living environment, as well as new schools and friends to be major life changes that developed their *self-confidence*. Some even described having a ‘survivor attitude’, which was seen as a state of mind which they used to navigate new/difficult and uncertain situations in their later work life. Some participants explained that this increased self-confidence, together with realistic expectations of living and working abroad, are important assets for their future employment.

I would generally say that it [the international experience] has had a positive impact on my self-confidence. Maybe because I have proved that I have been in awkward and difficult situations, I have got over them, which brings the self-confidence that I have good tools in use. Whatever the situation in the future, I will dare to go and figure it out. (Female 23 years, four years in Sweden and USA)

ATCKs also saw themselves as having a high *stress tolerance* in adulthood because of their childhood experiences of moving and living abroad. They explained that having faced stressful situations during their developmental years, they now tolerate stress well in work life.

Relocating abroad was a single most stressful experience. As I survived that and came out of it undamaged, I realized that I have nothing to worry about in many other stressful situations, when put into perspective. (Male 26 years, two years in China)

Moreover, the ATCKs’ constant exposure to uncertain situations was found to develop a *tolerance of uncertainty*, since they felt it easier to adjust to new situations and environments.

Such uncertainty tolerance and being able to adjust to changing circumstances is quite vital in today’s working life. (Female 36 years, eleven years in Colombia and Chile)

They also explained that their time abroad had fostered an *openness to experience*, and developments such as becoming more open-minded were emphasized among the participants.

It [international experience] changed me substantially. I certainly became a more open person because of leaving for such a different culture than I was used to. I became more open and open-minded. [...] In that way it has changed me. This probably also applies to other situations: I am open-minded and I want to try and see different places. (Male 26 years, two years in China)

Finally, an international childhood was also linked to some negative changes from the CC perspective. These experiences were connected with the ATCKs’ international orientation, and thus part of their CC. In particular, those respondents who stayed for a considerably longer time abroad during their childhood were found to see themselves as

international, but also *rootless*. They felt that they ‘do not belong anywhere’ as they do not have a country to call home. Furthermore, even ATCKs who had spent only a few years abroad perceived similar feelings of rootlessness, and these feelings were also experienced during adulthood, despite them having tried to settle down back into their home country or into some other country. Repatriates also discussed that although they were again able to speak their home country language, they still did not feel fully familiar with their home country culture. For example, their time spent abroad meant that ATCKs often missed some experiences that were typical for their generation in their home country. But when they lived abroad, they similarly did not feel that they belonged to the host country either. These experiences were thus found to increase their feelings of rootlessness, and diminish their development of (passport nationality) identity.

I introduce myself as an expatriate Finn living in Paris, whose hometown is Brussels. It determines me. I still cannot say where my home is. Brussels is the hometown, but although I have lived abroad, I had a Finnish cultural upbringing. I do not feel myself as Belgian or French. This has impacted me a lot as I still cannot say where home is. (Female 25 years, over fifteen years in Belgium)

As an outcome of such experiences, ATCKs were found to become *restless* individuals who need to change their jobs and locations in order to keep themselves motivated. Some even mentioned having a ‘commitment phobia’ as they choose to switch their jobs. Particularly, as they were used to a globally mobile childhood, they felt comfortable aiming for a similar lifestyle in their future life and career.

The most important thing is to learn something new, to develop myself and my versatility. I cannot be in the same country for many years in a row before I get itchy feet again. I need a lot of change. (Female 25 years, four years in Belgium)

International schools were seen to offer a high quality education, where the system was felt to set very high standards for student performance. Some respondents felt that the demands had been overwhelming, and that such experiences had raised their own *achievement expectations* significantly high for their future career.

It [school] was really strict and ambitious. IB-School was an extremely tough experience. I was also a bit overachieving, then during the final exams in the spring, I sort of burnout. If I had gone to school in Finland, I think I would not have got the fixation about the necessity of success and high achievement. (Male 27 years, fifteen years in USA, Switzerland and Belgium)

Knowing-how CC

All of the respondents saw that their experience had also developed their knowing-how CC. First, they saw that their international experience had developed their *language skills*. As an outcome, all of the participants were fluent in more than one language, and some participants spoke three, four, or even five languages fluently. Their experiences had also increased their overall motivation to study foreign languages.

In the USA, my English skills became very strong. Then when I moved to Switzerland and I noticed that as no one here uses English, I had to learn French. Then, after learning French and moving to Belgium, I thought about which language I would choose as I had both options in primary school. I chose French since it was my stronger language at that time. Then I noticed that my Finnish and Swedish skills started to deteriorate. In secondary school I strengthened my Finnish, but Swedish was still not that strong. That was one of the reasons why I chose to start studies at Hanken [Swedish School of Economics]. (Male 27 years, fifteen years in USA, Switzerland and Belgium)

International experience was also found to develop various *cross-cultural competencies* such as being open and aware of different views, having a positive attitude and respect towards cultural differences, and overall cross-cultural skills.

I consider my strengths to be that from childhood I have already been used to co-operating with different languages, and with people from different backgrounds. That is an advantage in quite many jobs, or actually in all jobs. (Female 24 years, twelve years in Germany, Japan and UAE)

Participants also perceived that the development of general *social skills* was significantly linked to their experience. Such skills as overall communication and teamwork were developed through daily interaction with individuals who have different backgrounds. They also explained that their time abroad had developed other social skills such as an interest in helping others, a non-judgmental approach to new people, higher empathy, and conflict avoidance skills. Some even mentioned their social skills had developed so significantly that they considered themselves as ‘social chameleons’ who are able to blend in across different social situations. Therefore, they often experienced that they had become important individuals in their work teams as they were seen to understand different people from various language groups and cultural backgrounds, and were tying people together.

Social skills and social intelligence. These have come from a multicultural environment where one needs to adjust quickly and interact with different people. These skills have for sure helped in work life. (Male 27 years, fifteen years in Belgium)

Their experiences were also found to have helped develop important *academic skills* such as writing and presentation skills, and capabilities for independent working.

In that school, we put a lot of effort into academic learning styles. We were encouraged for our own critical thinking, and not just learning by heart. I needed to work hard to get decent grades. These experiences have impacted so that producing text in Finnish and English is really natural, also in work life. (Male 27 years, fifteen years in Belgium)

Life abroad was also seen to develop ATCKs' *coping skills*. ATCKs learned to cope easily with new challenging situations because they had been used to being outside their comfort zone during their developing years.

I have been thrown into the deep end, outside the comfort zone. I have the confidence to manage well in new environments, and to adjust to them. Now that I have work experience, I have noticed that I cope easily in new situations. (Female 25 years, seven years in Spain, Belgium and Switzerland)

The interviewees also saw that ATCKs develop a special *knowledge of international markets* while living abroad.

I work a lot around marketing, and by nature can think broadly. I am not just following what companies do in Finland, but I follow the global phenomenon. It is useful to have friends all over the world to have things on my social media feed that friends have liked. Therefore, I might know about Chinese trends or Korean makeup trends. Typically, Finnish people would not know about these issues. (Female 30 years, nine years in China and Switzerland)

With regard to more negative CC-impacts, some repatriates had faced difficulties with their *domestic languages* of Finnish and Swedish, if they had not studied the languages abroad. Challenges regarding their mother tongue often related to academic difficulties of not being familiar with specific terms, for example in mathematics. It was also typical that participants faced challenges with not speaking the second national language so well when entering work life in Finland, especially in jobs that include customer service which are typical in the early stages of a career. Some challenges in school following repatriation were also linked to differences in educational systems, since some respondents faced a situation where their competences were not adequate when the education content taught abroad differed to what was taught in the home country. Consequently, ATCKs tended to gravitate towards international studies and jobs, both domestically and abroad.

I would not be able to do many jobs in Finland as I have an international degree [similar degree but with studies composing different content]. I would need to get the degree confirmed in Finland and learn Swedish. My international childhood has caused these challenges, but if I think about the big picture, these international experiences have opened more doors than they have closed. (Male 24 years, eight years in Canada)

Knowing-whom CC

The development of knowing-whom CC took place with regard to two separate areas: *host country school relationships* and *expatriate community relationships*. All of the ATCKs saw that the host country school was the most significant community when forming their social relationships, and relationships were built with other expatriate children from all around the world. In addition to peers in their own class, international schools offered a large amount of after school activities, which developed networks that expanded as they got to know students from different classes.

All my networks were from the school, and also from the hobbies that were arranged in school. There were also students from the same grade but from different classes in the same dance group. There were not really other opportunities to get to know new people. (Female 26 years, three years in Belgium)

The relationship development also differed according to the type of the institution, as international school (IB) classes are generally composed of international expatriate children from around the world, and the teaching is in English. In European Schools, students are from EU member states, but children are divided into classes according to language. In these schools, young children receive teaching in their own mother tongue, even though the schools are international. Therefore, the networks of these ATCKs consisted mainly of other Finnish students. Furthermore, ATCKs who had studied in local schools had typically lived in English-speaking countries, but these children also tend to network with other expatriate students. ATCKs also discussed that internationally developed knowing-whom CC was significant in their adult career. Already having a wide international network when entering the job market often advanced their employment. These networks were actively utilized when many ATCKs later studied abroad, or had relocated to take on expatriate assignments in their early career.

The friends that I spent free time with had an expat background, and most of them were Finnish adolescents. My friends who studied in European Schools were the children of EU parliament employees, meaning that all were expats. [...] I also started to do judo in Belgium. Later, one of my judo friends was working in a software company, and that is how I heard about the employment possibility and decided to apply. I have been working there for several years now, and if I would not have done judo in Belgium, I would not be working here. (Male 28 years, thirteen years in France and Belgium)

Moreover, the parents' work and expatriate community related networks were found to be another important means for extending TCKs' social networks during their time abroad. They built relationships with other expatriate families' children (both Finnish and

international), and some participants also mentioned that they had formed relationships with parents' business acquaintances and their children. Overall, expatriate children tend to live an expatriate-centric lifestyle, which participants often called 'the expat bubble' which is typically a privileged life compared to the life of the host community. Participants explained that they, for example, lived in guarded compounds, attended expensive private schools, and went to expatriate churches. These connections were found to be important for many ATCKs in their early career stages as they knew people from multinational companies which often helped to advance their first employment.

We got many new family friends through the expat community and from father's work network. The network supports me, and all the relationships would be easily activated if I needed help. (Female 23 years, four years in USA and Italy)

But beside getting into new, international networks, the findings also raise some challenges that time abroad generates related to knowing-whom capital. First, ATCKs tend to lose their *personal social network in their home country* when they are relatively young.

Maybe the downside [of having an international childhood] is that I do not have many childhood friends anymore. As I left Vaasa and had experienced a lot in between, after returning back to Vaasa everything felt different. Returning to the last grade of high school was a really tough experience [...] maybe that was a disadvantage. I have been used to building new relationships, and not necessarily on the top of old ones. (Female 28 years, three years in China)

It also appeared that childhood time abroad can negatively impact on first employment opportunities after repatriation, because ATCKs (and sometimes also their parents) had limited networks in their home country, due to their globally mobile lifestyle. However, these obstacles appeared to be mainly temporary challenges, since ATCKs had learned to be active in building new networks.

Those first jobs were so hard to get. I did not have that much work experience because I had not lived in Finland. It was difficult to get those first work opportunities without [Finnish] networks. I had no networks here, but neither did my parents because we had been away such a long time. (Female 24 years, twelve years in Germany, Japan and UAE)

Discussion and conclusions

The present study analyzed ATCKs' perceptions on whether and how early international experience has impacted their knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom career capital. The respondents shared the view that childhood years abroad were a significant

event for their development, and that such development has long-term impacts on their CC as adults. In our sample, the respondents perceived their developmental experience as something with which they could differentiate themselves positively in the job market, while earlier research has focused more on challenges regarding their later career development (Bikos *et al.*, 2014). They were also proud of their international background and what they had learned abroad. Overall, the findings indicate that ATCKs build CC in many similar areas as expatriates and/or expatriate partners, even though they were children during their time abroad.

Regarding *knowing-why* CC, the international experiences developed self-confidence and raised a self-awareness of ATCKs' personal capabilities. This self-awareness was described as a 'journey into themselves' that helped or was felt to help with future career moves, where they had developed stronger self-confidence and a clearer understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as more realistic expectations about international careers. It has also been reported that expatriates' have similar experiences of a strengthened self-awareness that has helped in their future career moves (Jokinen, 2010). This novel finding highlights ATCKs possibilities to benefit from their developed CC in their later studies and also in their adult career.

Many ATCKs felt that their international experience had 'changed them as a person'. However, these impacts might actually be lighter on expatriates and their partners, since during their childhood/adolescence, TCKs are most receptive to change (Selmer and Lam, 2004). Overall, the time spent abroad during childhood was found to have long-term effects on the development of an international identity, values, broad-mindedness, courage, flexibility, stress and uncertainty tolerance, and the desire for an international career. Moreover, our study supports the earlier finding that international experience fosters ATCKs' openness to new experiences (Westropp *et al.*, 2016), and was also connected to ATCKs' increased tolerance of uncertainty (i.e. how they tolerate working in uncertain situations and new environments) which has also been reported among partners (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021). ATCKs were also seen to have developed a strong international orientation during their childhood years that guided their future education decisions and career choices (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022). Their high amount of international experience after being a TCK is a significant finding, since many of the ATCKs were still in the primary stages of their career. Noteworthy is that they were

studying and working in different sectors, meaning that early international experiences drive ATCKs to find an international aspect to their career, but this does not drive them towards certain occupations or industries.

Besides positive developmental experiences, ATCKs often felt themselves to be rootless, which is a rather typical perception in the ATCK community (Fail *et al.*, 2004). This rootlessness seems to last a long time, since many of the respondents did not feel much belonging or familiarity with either their home or the host country(ies). ATCKs also missed out on experiences that were typical for their passport country generation (Pollock *et al.*, 2017), which were sometimes linked to challenges in their identity formation. While rootlessness has already been discussed in literature, the current study contributes by recognizing the outcomes of such feelings among ATCKs, as they described that they needed regular relocations and changes in work tasks to keep themselves motivated. This restlessness was explained to originate from their earlier relocation(s), which is similarly experienced by global managers (Suutari, 2003). However, restlessness was perceived as a special characteristic that they have, and not in a way typically presented in the literature where restlessness is seen to have negative effects on ATCKs' education, work life, and family (Pollock *et al.*, 2017). Instead, ATCKs saw that their restlessness was pushing them to apply to foreign universities and higher organizational positions in a rational way which had supported their career development.

The current study reveals that ATCKs gain various kinds of *knowing-how CC*, which they have been able to utilize in their later career. As ATCKs had developed this form of CC during their childhood, they had also been able to direct their educational and vocational decisions in a way which fits with their developed CC (see also Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022). Thus, they may be better able to avoid the typical problems faced by expatriates who have found that companies often undervalue their developed CC (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2016), and that repatriates often face challenges in finding jobs that fit with their developed CC (Mello *et al.*, 2022).

Language and cross-cultural skills were perceived as easily transferrable to later educational setups and their work life as adults, similar to expatriates (Jokinen, 2010). Such competences are typically raised when ATCKs' suitability as expatriates is discussed (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016). In addition, our findings

indicate that many other types of CC were developed abroad. In particular, ATCKs strongly highlighted the importance of their developed general social skills and the transferability of their CC to their later work life. Such skills and an overall confidence in facing new social situations in work and life was seen as a major learning gained from being abroad. When combined with language and cross-cultural skills, it enabled them to feel like a ‘chameleon’ as they felt able to interact easily with people from different backgrounds. Previous studies have also recognized ATCKs’ abilities to interact with people who have different cultural backgrounds. However, as the study participants have often been fairly young (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016), little has been understood as to if and how they have benefited from such skills in work life.

Interestingly, ATCKs considered their social skills to be their most important asset, as they could stand out from their peers when applying for jobs. ATCKs also saw that they were a sort of ‘glue of the team’ due to their good social skills and their ability to understand the viewpoints of people from different backgrounds. This is a significant finding since Smith and Kearney (2016) reported that US TCKs felt that they were an invisible and uninteresting population in the USA. In the present study, ATCKs actually found people to be fascinated about their international experiences, for example in job interviews. This indicates that ATCK experiences may differ across different countries, and thus stresses the need for further research, and also from outside the USA.

The literature has recognized ATCKs’ high educational achievements (Cottrell, 2002), and TCKs’ needs for academic success (De Sivatte *et al.*, 2019; Weeks *et al.*, 2010). However, the literature far less recognizes the long-term specific skills and capabilities developed at school(s) abroad. The current study revealed that the time abroad was found to develop a variety of academic skills which ATCKs could benefit from during their later studies, as well as in their jobs later on. This is an important finding because not much is understood about (A)TCKs academic competencies (Rounsaville, 2014). The findings indicated that due to having such competencies, ATCKs were given projects and positions in their organization that require not only cross-cultural skills, but also for example, good presentation skills. Additionally, many ATCKs saw that they have gained a variety of opportunities from their organizations already from the beginning of their career due to their effective independent working (e.g. problem-solving, planning, and organizing) and writing skills in foreign languages. All of these findings indicate that ATCKs’ capabilities

in work life should be understood more broadly than just comprising their cross-cultural abilities. The analysis also shows that ATCKs learn to cope relatively easily in new life situations, and are therefore ready to take on international positions in the future (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022). Knowledge of certain markets and the experience of living abroad as an expatriate family were also skills that some participants had been able to harness to benefit their work life in positions such as international sales or international HRM positions. Thus, ATCKs had developed specific CCs that had helped them in gaining employment, without actually having working abroad.

While the time abroad developed ATCKs' CC, they also faced decreasing knowing-how CC in some areas. As an example, decreased skills in languages that were not used abroad were discussed, and therefore, ATCKs typically gravitated towards university studies abroad or towards English language programs if they studied in the home country. Also, from a learning perspective, they felt that they had missed out on certain knowledge or subjects compared to their home country education. While Smith and Kearney (2016) found challenges with classroom practices among repatriated TCKs in the USA, the present study indicated that content-related gaps (e.g. in knowledge about history, religion, geography, native and second national languages, or certain other study subjects) were seen to be more critical for later studies. However, these challenges were often short-term, and ATCKs had tended to overcome them after some years. It was also typical that despite facing challenges, the participants were highly satisfied with their experiences abroad. These findings are similar to those found among expatriates who highly value their developmental experiences abroad, even if they might have been dissatisfied with their company's repatriation practices (Tung, 1998) or sometimes less satisfied with their career progression (Mello *et al.*, 2022).

ATCKs' most important source of *knowing-whom* CC is mainly developed in their foreign schools, similarly as expatriates are known to form their social networks mainly from the workplace (Jokinen, 2010). An interesting novel finding is that ATCKs knowing-whom CC development is linked to the type of educational institution they attended, as their student populations and class arrangements differed. Especially, IB students were already able to benefit from their international networks in their early career, whereas ES students' connections were most valuable when searching for vocational and career opportunities in Finland, or among Finns living abroad. As

international schools offer after school activities, this further narrowed any interaction with the host country nationals, and so tied their life around an expatriate-centric lifestyle (Tanu, 2016). While the establishment of friendships by ATCKs has received some research attention (Choi *et al.*, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016), this study revealed that they are also active in building wide networks within the expatriate community, as they got to know their parents' business acquaintances and their families.

Furthermore, the study provides new evidence that knowing-whom CC developed abroad during childhood was indeed relevant for the careers of many of the participants, as they considered it to be important for their current career success, and it was also predicted to provide future career opportunities several years after their childhood time abroad. For example, they reported that they had connections to a variety of multinational corporations where their international connections now worked. If they had already moved abroad again for employment reasons, they sometimes had someone living in the host country, or a friend knew someone else working in the country who could help them with their expatriation. The childhood experience thus provided them with access to broader international networks that were seen as being useful in their career. However, the usefulness of such networks is often missing in earlier findings, since these studies have typically been conducted among students or otherwise young ATCKs whose work experience is still very limited (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016).

An important element in the knowing-whom CC of ATCKs is the learned activity and skills in building new social networks, as new relationships need to be developed abroad and during the repatriation stage. Similar to expatriate partners (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021), ATCKs also felt that they had developed these skills. ATCKs connect particularly well with other people who have similar international experiences (Westropp *et al.*, 2016), which further developed their networks among internationally-oriented people. Social media platforms were found to be important in maintaining their international network, and for being able to get the full benefit out of their global connections. However, several participants (as well as their parents to some extent) had lost some of their social connections in their home country when living abroad over the long-term, and this complicated ATCKs' efforts in finding jobs after repatriation.

Theoretical contributions

The present study has contributed to TCK-literature by indicating that the TCK experience has a life-long impact on their CC. As most earlier studies have been carried out among TCKs when they were young (Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004), this adds new insights on how relevant such experience is to their CC also as adults. We identified three aspects of CC in which ATCKs reported long-term CC developments, and the present study is the first study to apply the CC-framework to understand such developments in this context. As this framework is very comprehensive (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021), we have been able to provide new insights across three aspect of CC, as already discussed in detail above.

ATCKs carry an international identity (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022), and their experience is rooted deeply in who they are as individuals, and what kind of CC and career preferences they have. Although their experiences may involve challenges, ATCKs were pleased with their international background, since they considered themselves to have greatly benefitted from the CC they had developed abroad. This is a significant extension to earlier research, which has often highlighted a negative connection between a TCK background and later life (see e.g. Fail *et al.*, 2004; Hervey, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2021).

From the angle of career capital theory, we have provided a new insight on how transitional childhood experiences may impact on the CC and career success of adults, as this tradition has focused on the career experiences of adults. The current study also contributes to the expatriate family literature, since the findings on the CC-development of expatriate children complement the view on the impacts of expatriation for expatriate families.

Limitations and future research

As in any study, there are some limitations to be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of the current study. First, interviewing with a retrospective style about experiences that have occurred in an ATCK's childhood may run the risk of memory bias. Especially, those who had relocated in earlier childhood years may remember their experiences less clearly compared to participants who had experienced their time abroad

in late teenage years. As memory is not a replica of reality, it is also possible that the interviewees may have connected certain early international experiences to their later CC development more strongly than it actually was. Moreover, as the ATCKs were typically extremely proud of their globally mobile childhood, the impacts of such experiences to their later CC development and career may even be glorified in their memory.

As a qualitative study, the sample size of the study is somewhat limited and thus limits making any extensive generalizations. Future quantitative research is therefore needed to provide broader evidence of CC development among TCKs, and on the long-term utilization of developed CC among ATCKs. Furthermore, longitudinal studies would also be useful to analyze the link between ATCKs' CC development, and their employability and career paths. Another limitation of the present study lies in the homogenous nature of the sample, since all of the interviewed individuals were Finnish, and thus had the same home cultural background. Therefore, future studies could include more diverse samples, as well as individuals with different kinds of international experience beside expatriation. For example, the CC development of exchange students or international degree students could be analyzed, since limited international exposure has already been found to impact on the development of CC (Felker and Gianecchini, 2015). Moreover, as many schools have lately offered remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be good to analyze how this has impacted on the extent of CC developed abroad.

Practical implications

Our findings also have several practical implications. Increasing the awareness of ATCKs' CC is important, since recruiting a talented workforce is crucial for a firm's long-term survival and competitiveness (Kerr, 2020). This study supports the view that CC can be developed before entering the job market (Felker and Gianecchini, 2015). As the development of CC already happens among young TCKs, they are able to offer their internationally developed CC to companies from the beginning of their careers. ATCKs also saw that companies were able to provide them with more challenging tasks in their early career stage, due to their readiness to take on new challenges. As their personal growth took place outside home country they became internationally minded adults. Thus, ATCKs might be ideal employees for a culturally sensitive international work

environment (Pollock *et al.*, 2017) or a valuable asset for small and medium sized companies that are expanding their operations abroad, by facilitating communication and co-operation with international partners, due to their cross-cultural intelligence and global networks. Also, being familiar with different countries and cultures might lead to identifying new business opportunities and building stronger customer relationships abroad, as well as a better understanding of customer needs in different regions. ATCKs could also be ideal bridge builders in a variety of organizational operations between home organization and foreign locations.

Living and studying abroad due to parent(s)' work, exposes TCKs to a wide variety of different people, languages and cultures due to their social interaction with students from all over the world. This might later translate to strong leadership competencies that are needed in international teams and organizations. Therefore, organizations seeking to recruit people for international work or their talent management programs could look into hiring ATCKs, since they might need less support and training for international positions. Recruiters might locate these individuals by contacting foreign schools and universities with international programs (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013). Also, if organizations are able to recognize the special career development needs of their employees and 'restless' ATCKs by offering interesting career paths, it might lead to their longer-term commitment. Otherwise, the organization might lose ATCKs' international talent to other organizations. It should also be highlighted that ATCKs themselves should articulate their special skills, needs and career expectations to their employers. From the employer point of view, only by recognizing the skills that ATCKs have already in the early phases of their career can employers utilize their full potential.

Finally, women are still underrepresented in international assignments which might jeopardize their professional development and career paths to firms' top positions (Bastida *et al.*, 2021). Thus, families are a solid resource to promote the development of career capital of their girls abroad than might be available within companies later on, in order to support their careers. However, this study also concludes that gender did not play a role in ATCKs international orientation or career preferences, and they felt that early international experiences have created competitive advantage for them, and if they would apply for an international job, they would have good chances of being successful. But overall, the majority of the interviewed ATCKs had already built adulthood international

experiences and they considered themselves to have achieved remarkable job positions considering that many were in primary stages of their career. So according to this study, regardless of gender, ATCKs are ready to work hard to accomplish the high-level international careers they often desire.

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