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## [Adult] Third Culture Kids: Why Do Early Life International Experiences Matter?

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# [Adult] Third Culture Kids: Why Do Early Life International Experiences Matter?

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## **Abstract**

An increasing amount of studies have been conducted on children with early life international mobility, i.e. on third culture kids (TCKs). In this article, we review how TCKs appear in the existing research through the TCKs' migration journey. We include TCK research that is reported within different disciplines to form a wide perspective on the experiences of this population. We cover different stages of the mobility from pre-departure preparation to cross-cultural adjustment, and further on to the repatriation stage. Finally, we discuss the longer-term challenges and benefits of being an adult third culture kid (ATCK). The review indicates that the time spent abroad has a significant impact on the ATCK's worldview, education decisions, identity, and future career. It thus highlights the importance of supporting TCKs in the different stages of mobility, despite such practices often still seeming to be overlooked. As an outcome of the review, a future research agenda is suggested to help improve our understanding of TCKs' international experiences, and the long-term impacts they have on the later life and career of ATCKs. As an implication, it is raised that TCKs offer an attractive pool of employees for companies looking for staff with international competencies.

**Key words:** Expatriation, Migration, Expatriate family, Third culture kid, Adult third culture kid

## **Introduction**

Owing to the increasing globalization of business life and societies, increasing numbers of individuals are moving across borders during their lives. Due to the importance of the topic for both companies as well as for individuals and their families, expatriation has become probably the most widely studied area within international human resource management. Some expatriates are sent abroad for a few years by their employers as assigned expatriates (AEs) for reasons such as control, coordination, knowledge transfer, or personal development (Suutari, 2003). Others head abroad on their own initiative and seek work abroad as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (Brewster, Suutari & Waxin, 2021; Doherty et al., 2011). A common factor affecting all kinds of expatriates is that many of them have families who follow them abroad (Shaffer et al., 2012). It is therefore important to note that moving and living abroad is at least as challenging for partners and children as it is for the expatriates themselves (Shaffer et al., 2001; Richardson, 2006; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021).

In the light of such evidence on the centrality of family concerns to successful expatriation, expatriate children are seen to be an increasingly important part of the entire expatriate discussion (Lazarova et al., 2015) though their personal participation in such studies is still often missing (see e.g. Shah et al., 2022). While the experiences of partners during the expatriation process are becoming increasingly understood, it has been stressed that more research is needed on the experiences of the children, and the impacts such experiences have on them during their time abroad and also in the long term (Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller, 2010; Lazarova et al., 2015; Adams, 2016; Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022).

The experiences of such children have also been discussed in the cross-cultural management literature, where globally mobile children are often referred to as *third culture kids* (TCKs) and later when they come of age, as *adult third culture kids* (ATCKs). The term was coined by Ruth Useem, who was active in studying American expatriate families living in India already since the late 1950s. We adopt a definition by Pollock et al. (2017, p. 404) who define a TCK 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’. However, there is no standardized definition of a TCK (Dillon & Ali, 2019) which would help clarify the use of the term. Also, what constitutes a ‘significant time abroad’ during the developmental years has not yet been defined, and varies significantly since scholars have used time periods from less than a year up to six years (Tan et al., 2021), or in some cases the time spent abroad has not even been presented (see e.g. De Sivatte et al., 2019).

In the literature on TCKs, the ‘third culture’ is often described as an expatriate culture which is neither like the home or host country, but has blended elements from the person’s home or passport culture (the ‘first culture’) and the host culture where the family has moved to (the ‘second culture’) (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 17). TCKs have been known to build relationships with various cultures, despite not having full ownership of any of them (Useem, 2001). The term TCK has been commonly applied to study children who are raised by parents from different sectors such as corporate expatriates (Selmer, 2003; Lam & Selmer, 2004), missionaries (Bikos et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2010), foreign service and military personnel (Pollock et al., 2017), and others such as sports, education, and non-profit workers (McNulty et al., 2017).

Given this background, the present paper looks to review the existing research on TCKs, and based on the findings, to develop a future research agenda that can help to further increase our understanding of TCKs. When carrying out the review, we searched Google Scholar, and the Web of Science, EBSCO and SCOPUS databases. In our search, we used the terms ‘third culture kid’, ‘TCK’, ‘expatriate children’, ‘adult third culture kid’, ‘ATCK’, ‘third culture individual’, and ‘global nomad’. We searched for empirical studies in which the selected terms were used without imposing any specific time limits with

regard to the length of the experience abroad as a TCK as that had been seen to vary across studies. Finally, we included only full English text articles from peer-reviewed academic journals and books. As an outcome, our review covers research carried out within different disciplines, in particular research in international business, education and psychology. On the basis of our review findings, we have organized our review into two different sections. First, we discuss the findings on TCKs and their experiences during their stay abroad by following the expatriation cycle from the pre-departure stage to repatriation. Second, we review the findings on the longer-term impacts of such experiences, and divide such impacts into the challenges and benefits associated with a TCK background, as both were reported in studies among ATCKs. In the last section, we discuss the key findings from the review and identify future research avenues, as well as discussing the implications of our findings for expatriates, their expatriate families, and also companies.

### **The TCK journey – facing early international exposure during childhood**

There has been a gradually increasing amount of research on TCKs, especially when seen in comparison with expatriates. Such research has been carried out across different stages of the TCK-journey, from their pre-departure expectations and preparations, further on to their adjustment abroad, and finally to repatriation. These stages form an appropriate base on which to structure our review.

Starting from the *pre-departure views or expectations of children*, it can be noted that such views have not attracted as much attention as have experiences abroad, despite that stage being a very important part of the cycle (see e.g., De Sivatte et al., 2019). While the evidence is limited, it has been suggested that it would be important to involve children in the family-level decision-making process concerning the move abroad, because the decision affects the lives of all of the family members (Chew & Zhu, 2002). It has also been raised that the decision-making process is quite different among AEs and SIEs as AEs need to follow an organizational logic (e.g. timing, length, host country, type of job), while SIEs can decide these issues on their own and thus may be in a better position to take into account the family needs (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013). An issue that has received considerable research interest in the pre-departure stage is the difficulty of leaving friends behind (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), as this strongly impacts on TCKs' willingness to move abroad. The age of the TCK impacts such feelings, since younger children deal better with these relocations due to having less significant friendships before the move when compared to adolescents (De Sivatte et al., 2019). They have also been used to following the decisions of the parents, but gradually start to have more independent personal views and expectations when they become older. Therefore, the pre-

departure views or expectations of children are important as they are connected with the later adjustment abroad (Pollock et al., 2017).

De Sivatte et al. (2019) found in their interviews that previous international experience and language fluency were pre-departure viewpoints that supported TCKs' later adjustment abroad, since subsequent relocations routinized the globally mobile lifestyle and having inadequate host country language skills was seen to pose difficulties. In turn, Weeks et al. (2010) did not find any evidence that language fluency before a move would be a significant issue for the adjustment of TCKs, although in their study the participants already spoke the school language before their relocation. However, school language proficiency may be significant for non-native speakers who need to learn the destination school language, as well as being able to cope in everyday situations with the local language.

The importance of training and support for TCKs has also been widely discussed in literature. Existing research indicates that it would be wise for organizations to provide in-depth pre-departure training for TCKs (Weeks et al., 2010), so as to facilitate their language abilities and cross-cultural adjustment. For example, Rosenbusch and Cseh (2012) stress the importance of such cross-cultural training, and their case study highlights the importance of building programs where the whole expatriate family may receive training before departure, during an assignment, and also in the repatriation phase (see also Okpara & Kabongo, 2011). Interestingly, Selmer (2001) reported that families would have preferred post-arrival cross-cultural training in the host country, since their motivation to learn is seen to be stronger abroad than in the pre-departure period. The reason for this might be the intense nature of the period before relocation, as all of the practical arrangements for the move have to be addressed. Therefore, there might not be enough time to concentrate on deep cross-cultural learning. Although the importance of training and support has already been addressed for some time in the literature, proper pre-departure training of TCKs is still almost non-existent (Banerjee et al., 2020), even within multinational corporations (MNCs) that have expatriate programmes. Among those who leave to go abroad on their own initiative and search for a job abroad, both expatriates and their families are likely to be beyond the scope of corporate practices like family training and support (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013). Thus, families must deal with most of the challenges they encounter on their own. Consequently, it is not surprising that parents have reported stress and emotional pain arising from relocating their children abroad (McLachlan, 2005).

TCKs' *adjustment abroad* (see e.g., Alston & Nieuwoudt, 1992; Weeks et al., 2010; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Banerjee et al., 2020) has already received more research attention than the topics of pre-departure experiences and expectations. It has now been increasingly recognized that moving abroad poses a significant change for TCKs (Weeks et al., 2010;

Banerjee et al., 2020). Recently, De Sivatte et al. (2019) have reported findings on the factors impacting the adjustment of TCKs. They build their work on the model by Weeks et al. (2010) who have studied the adjustment of students. Their model consists of three key factors affecting teenagers' adjustment: individual factors (open-mindedness, freedom, and academic success), environmental factors (cultural differences and living conditions), and interpersonal relationships (friends, family, and repatriation training). De Sivatte et al. (2019) expanded such work by recognizing additional factors such as social and academic self-efficacy, the type of international school, academic system differences, and the different academic requirement levels that were found to affect the adjustment of TCKs.

The social adjustment of children is affected by the nature of their relationships. Expatriate parents have reported that their children's friendships become more casual when they lose their original friendships (McLachlan, 2005), and that they tend to approach new relationships cautiously (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). When TCKs are in international schools, there are always new people arriving and leaving owing to the limited lengths of stay in the host country. Thus, expatriate children regularly face the fear of losing their friends, which also concerned their parents (McLachlan, 2005) as their children may already have at least to some extent lost connections with their friends in the home country owing to expatriation (Banerjee et al., 2020).

There is also a separate track of research on TCKs that focuses on their education abroad. While such studies could be connected with the adjustment perspective outlined above, they are introduced here as a separate area of interest as it appears as a separate discussion also in the literature and research on TCKs. In such discussions, the main focus has been on the specifics of the education in international schools across countries. Children of assigned expatriates are often found to study in private institutions where the tuition fees are paid by the expatriate's employer (Wilkins, 2013), and in a few cases by the parents themselves. However, the same might not be applicable to TCKs of SIEs since SIEs typically sign local contracts and do not have such benefits for their children that are common among assigned expatriates (Suutari et al., 2018). Other examples of schools that TCKs attend are European Schools (schools for children of EU staff), or local schools in the host country. While research exists on the experiences of TCKs in these international schools (McLachlan, 2005; Tanu, 2016), much less research can be found relating to those who have studied in local schools.

These different types of schools offer quite different study environments for students to become integrated into. The major reason for using an international school for TCKs' education during their time abroad is language (Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 16). English is the dominant language in the international schools around the world, and in some countries, the local children are not even allowed to attend these schools (Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 16). While there are also international schools that operate in

languages other than English, it is still typical for non-native English-speaker expatriate parents to value their children learning to speak English almost as well as their own mother tongue (Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 17). By studying in English, it may also be easier to continue their studies in another country if a family constantly relocates.

Small nuances can have a significant effect on TCKs' adjustment to an education institution. For example, Japanese expatriate children in the USA felt good about their American school because the homework was relatively easy for them compared to that assigned in their Japanese schools (Miyamoto & Kuhlman, 2001), and such an experience also eased their initial adjustment. From an opposite perspective, De Sivatte et al. (2019) reported that a harder academic requirement level of the host country negatively impacted the adjustment of TCKs. However, in spite of a harder academic level, students with high academic capabilities might still be able to raise their academic abilities in the host country rather quickly, although further research is needed to confirm this. After adjusting to local requirements, TCKs typically achieve above-average grades compared to their home country peers (Wilkins, 2013), and they are often motivated students and eager to start their higher education (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). One reason for this might be that their parents are typically well-educated professionals, have high expectations towards their children, and are also able to support them in their education and adjustment abroad.

TCKs' experiences of their *repatriation stage* have not yet been analyzed in great detail (Gambhir & Rhein, 2021; Smith & Kearney, 2016). However, there is some evidence on missionary kids' repatriation experiences (Bikos et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2013), and some studies have been conducted on their repatriation experiences to college and university (Purnell & Hoban, 2014; Smith & Kearney, 2016); all demonstrating how difficult the process of repatriation adjustment can be. It has been found that TCKs often face a reverse culture shock on repatriation because they feel themselves as foreigners in their home country after living abroad (Fail et al., 2004; Gambhir & Rhein, 2021). Thus, TCKs are sometimes positioned as "hidden immigrants" since they look alike but think differently. Particularly, while they often view life through the lens of a 'foreigner', people around them tend to consider them to share similar a worldview due to them looking like they belong to the dominant cultural group (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 74). As an outcome, TCKs may end up with the sense of not being understood in their home culture (Hervey, 2009), and such struggles have been found to correlate with a changed sense of identity for TCKs (Smith & Kearney, 2016; Kortegast & Yount, 2016).

After studying in a foreign language for several years, TCKs sometimes find it difficult to continue their studies in their home country education system in the TCK's mother tongue. For that reason, some children choose to attend an international school in their home country after repatriation (Kierner & Suutari, 2018). However, TCKs are often interested in

both international study programs in their home country and also studies abroad, due to their international background (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022).

Repatriation support and training for TCKs has not been studied to any extent, although it has been stressed that TCKs should receive proper preparation for their repatriation from their school and parents (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). Also, family related studies have highlighted the importance of individual proactive strategies together with corporate sponsored repatriation programs, in order to ensure realistic expectations, since inaccurate expectations are often seen as the biggest challenges in repatriation (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005).

### **Adult Third Culture Kids – impacts of early life international exposure on later life**

While the main focus of TCK-research has been on the experiences of TCKs abroad, there has also been an increasing amount of research on ATCKs (Adult Third Culture Kids) to complement the view on the impacts of early life international exposure on individuals in the longer term. We group these studies into two categories; those that have focused on the challenges faced by ATCKs, and those that have focused on the more positive sides of a TCK background.

#### *Challenges associated with a TCK background*

ATCKs are found to face a number of challenges due to their international background. First, their identity formation is often influenced by several different cultures that they face along their journey (Pollock et al., 2017; Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2023). From an identity perspective, individuals with an international background often have difficulties with their sense of belonging due to feelings of being disconnect from a place (Fail et al., 2004; Westropp et al., 2016; Jeon, 2022). Also, insecurity is associated with their identity (Cranston, 2017) as well as their grief for the loss of their personal identity (Gilbert, 2008), and their identity challenges have been seen to involve feelings of being rootless and restless (Pollock et al., 2017). Such feelings are typical among ATCKs who may still be exploring their personal identity, as they often do not feel as if they have full ownership of the different home/host cultures they have lived in. They also often have difficulties with answering seemingly simple questions such as “Where are you from” (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 185) since they might have lived abroad for a significant part of their life, while not fully owning the home culture identity (Hervey, 2009). This cultural homelessness has been found to be connected with a lower degree of self-esteem (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011), and interestingly, recent findings also show that TCKs tie a stronger identity bond to their host culture compared to their home culture (De Waal & Born, 2021).

In turn, a sense of restlessness derives from the learned life-style of moving around, especially if one has experienced several such moves. Typically, ATCKs build their home in the current place of residence, even though they might stay there for just a limited period of time (Westropp et al., 2016) and are no longer satisfied with permanently living in a single location (Moore & Barker, 2012). Their significant life changes also increase the risks of mental health challenges (Thomas et al., 2021) such as depression, anxiety and stress (Davis et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2013). Thus, the wellbeing of ATCKs has raised attention among researchers (Abe, 2018; Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021). ATCKs may also feel grief from being separated from people living far away, and sometimes the losses of such relationships in the long-term (Pollock et al., 2017). This factor might explain why ATCKs often gravitate towards other individuals with a TCK background, as they have also experienced similar kinds of losses, and understand the feelings of grief associated with their support network (Gilbert, 2008).

#### *Benefits associated with a TCK-background*

While the time spent abroad often creates challenges for ATCKs, researchers have started to become increasingly interested about the longer-term benefits of such unique early international exposures to other cultures. From the perspective of skills such as social skills, ATCKs have been found to have a high degree of social sensitivity (Lyttle et al., 2011) and social intelligence, due to the experience of living in multicultural environments (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022).

ATCKs have been shown to have strong cross-cultural skills (Bonebright, 2010; Tarique & Weisbord, 2013), and thus, to be culturally adaptable (Selmer & Lauring, 2014) and able to fit in and survive in new cultures more easily (Westropp et al., 2016). ATCKs are also seen to be typically more open-minded towards different cultures than their home country peers (Westropp et al., 2016; De Waal & Born, 2020; de Waal et al., 2020) due to their globally expanded worldview (Pollock et al., 2017). Furthermore, good language skills and cross-cultural skills also facilitate future studies abroad, and may open up new international study options.

TCKs typically have clear plans for their future (Wilkins, 2013), and when becoming an adult are attracted to different international roles, work tasks and careers (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). They are typically suitable for expatriate work as well as other types of global work because they have special international capabilities (Westropp et al., 2016) which are not easy to be developed in any other way (Selmer & Lauring, 2014), and are therefore an interesting population for a variety of international jobs.

## **Conclusions and future research directions**

The aim of the present paper was to review existing research on TCKs in order to analyze what we know about their early life international experience and their later life as ATCKs, and as an outcome, frame a research agenda for future studies.

The focus of extant research on TCKs has mainly been on their experiences abroad, while the pre-departure issues that impact their experiences abroad have received less attention (see e.g. De Sivatte et al., 2019). Although the evidence is still very limited, anticipatory factors such as leaving home country friends, previous international experience, language fluency, and training and support have all been found to impact the adjustment of TCKs (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010; Pollock et al., 2017). With regard to pre-departure decision-making, people decide to expatriate for various reasons such as career development, employment, or financial reasons, but it is also evident that family-related motives and concerns are typically highly relevant to the process (Suutari et al., 2012). Family members have an active role in deciding whether to accept an assignment (Chew & Zhu, 2002), and determining what kind of assignments are considered. It has also been raised that the situation of SIEs differs from assigned expatriates as they have more autonomy to decide about matters surrounding their expatriation than those sent abroad by their employers (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013). The evidence on SIE families is still limited and we therefore need further research on such decision making processes of SIEs and their families before expatriation.

It is also widely understood that moving and living abroad presents a challenging time for family members (Shaffer et al., 2001; Richardson, 2006), especially if the children of the family are not willing to relocate. While expatriates' motives and expectations, and increasingly also the pre-departure views of partners (Chew & Zhu, 2002; Richardson & Mallon, 2005) are now better understood, we do not have a similar level of understanding of the motives, expectations or concerns of children before moving abroad, or the impacts they may have. Thus, further research is needed with samples from different contexts, in order to fully understand the role of these anticipatory factors in the experiences of TCKs abroad.

Family-related training and support practices have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Lazarova et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2022), but often the companies assigning expatriates appear to lack an understanding of the need for family training and support (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; De Sivatte et al., 2019), and do not arrange such support for TCKs (Banerjee et al., 2020). More investigation is also needed on the specific training and support needs of TCKs, as well as on the impact of different training and support activities on their adjustment before, during, and after the assignment. While we still have gaps even in understanding the training and support needs of TCKs of assigned expatriates, further

research is needed to build an understanding about which resources the TCKs of SIEs rely on and could benefit from, since organizational training and support is not generally available for them.

Within the research on expatriation, adjustment has historically received the most intensive attention. It is also widely agreed that family issues have a great impact on expatriate adjustment, and therefore, also on an expatriate's performance at work (e.g., Takeuchi, 2010; Cole, 2011). The existing research among TCKs highlights that the key concerns affecting the adjustment to a host-country scenario include the ability to make friends, social life in general, and children's academic success (Weeks et al., 2010; De Sivatte et al., 2019). In comparison to the extensive amount of research on the adjustment of expatriates, it may be concluded that research on TCKs is very limited, and more research is needed on their adjustment as well as the antecedents and outcomes of their adjustment. Furthermore, research on TCK adjustment among different types of families would add to the understanding of overall TCK adjustment (Banerjee et al., 2020).

One specific strand of the research on TCKs focuses on their educational experiences. The focus has mainly been on international schools as expatriate children are often sent to these schools owing to the language used for tuition (which is typically English: Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 16), although there are exceptions depending on the host country (Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). The popularity of international schools among expatriate families is understandable, especially if the family relocates on more than one occasion to different countries with different national languages (Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 16). Nevertheless, further studies that examine the experiences of TCKs from different kinds of schools and national education systems would be welcome.

While the overall research on repatriation has recently increased (Chiang et al., 2018; Mello et al., 2023), there is a clear lack of research on the repatriation experiences of TCKs. Therefore, further studies are needed on repatriation adjustment as well as its antecedents and outcomes (Smith & Kearney, 2016), encompassing the views of both children and their family members. Communication options have also improved significantly over recent years, and it is typical for adolescents to have their own smartphones and laptops, which makes their communication with friends at home easier. Accordingly, it would be interesting to see how social media platforms may support the repatriation of TCKs today. So, while the research suggests that repatriation training and support could ease the repatriation adjustment (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Smith & Kearney, 2016), we still need more evidence on what kind of repatriation practices would be most suitable for TCKs.

ATCKs present a population who have had to adjust to changes and challenges that non-expatriate children do not typically face in their lives (De Sivatte et al., 2019). This has been found to impact ATCKs in the long-term, although the evidence is still limited. It is

typical that after their international periods in childhood, ATCKs face challenges with the development of their personal identity (Gilbert, 2008) due to emotional detachments from their home culture (De Waal & Born, 2021). In addition, rootlessness and restlessness are often a reality for these 'hidden immigrants'. A TCK background has also been connected to a variety of later-life challenges, and consequently their psychological perspectives have attracted attention (see e.g. Davis et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2021). They may also become tired of constant relocations (De Sivatte et al., 2019), and face challenges in managing their networks. So, while we have increasingly come to understand the different difficulties and challenges associated with a TCK background, more research is needed to understand how long lasting these challenges are in ATCKs' lives. Moreover, there is lack of research on whether a TCK childhood might generate any long-term detrimental aspects for later studies or careers.

However, it is also important to highlight the need to further study the positive impacts of a TCK background on ATCKs. In a recent study, it was reported that ATCKs saw that the advantages of a globally mobile childhood outweigh the challenges related to their later career and life (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). This is important, as when many families consider whether to accept international assignments (Hartman, 2022), they estimate the possible negative effects that the time abroad may have on their children in the long-term. As ATCKs have been exposed to international experiences at a highly receptive age, they often obtain valuable international strengths, skills and knowledge that they are able to transfer to their later education, careers, and life (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). They have also been found to be eager to develop international careers (Westropp et al., 2016; Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). Nevertheless, we still need more information on where these individuals live and work in the long run, and on how they might have benefited from their early international experiences. But given that such research is very limited, any actual links from TCK experiences to later work life are often missing from the discussion.

Lately, expatriation research has been increasingly interested in more long-term global career perspectives, as high numbers of expatriates (and their families) are found to have multiple expatriation experiences during their career (Dickmann et al., 2018b). Thus, instead of repatriating, the expatriates and their families may decide to stay in the host country over a longer term and thus become permanent immigrants, or decide to re-expatriate somewhere else immediately after the previous expatriation or after staying for a while back in their home country (Ho et al., 2016; Mello et al., 2023; Suutari, 2003). It has also been found that such decisions are even more common among SIEs than among assigned expatriates, and overall, SIEs tend to stay longer abroad than assigned expatriates (Selmer et al., 2022). All of these different life and career choices by parents of TCKs create different circumstances for the TCKs who may have been living abroad for the whole or at least an extensive part for their youth. Existing studies indicate that work-life

balance issues are very challenging for such mobile global careerists and their families (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011; Mäkelä et al., 2022). However, the research on the experiences of TCKs in such circumstances is very limited. For example, there is currently little understanding about TCKs who migrate more permanently, and who may thus never return to their home countries. Furthermore, questions surrounding the educational decisions, career paths and life choices of these individuals are currently unanswered, as are those relating to how their migration or longer term mobile lifestyle through frequent re-expatriation across countries impacts them, their wellbeing, and their career success in the long run.

TCKs are claimed to be ‘cultural hybrids’ (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009), and therefore ideal future business expatriates (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013). However, more knowledge would be useful on how cross-cultural learnings transfer into different work and life contexts. Also, we should develop a better understanding of what kinds of overall skills and knowledge TCKs develop abroad, how the extent of their learning depends of the context of the experience, and how they benefit from these skills in their future life. Therefore, future studies could use for example *career capital theory* to find out whether early international experience develops a similar career capital for ATCKs as it does for partners and expatriates (see e.g. Dickmann et al., 2018a; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Theories previously used in expatriate research could also provide possibilities to study aspects of ATCKs’ career expectations, decision-making, career identities, tracks, and commitment. As a further related point, more research is needed on whether a TCK background develops unique strengths compared to peers without such experience, or those with different types of international exposure such as experiences as an exchange student.

While there is a need for the research perspectives noted above, gathering data from family members can be difficult (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012), and especially when the data concerns internationally mobile children. Such methodological challenges for studying TCKs might partly explain the limited amount of research that has so far been conducted among them, and accordingly, researchers should consider new and alternative ways of collecting data (see e.g., Bikos et al., 2009) such as email interviews, blogs, and different social media platforms that might offer potential for collecting data from TCKs around the world. We also need to consider the methodological challenges involved in conducting studies among TCKs themselves, especially if we involve very young TCKs. Such research efforts would clearly require cross-disciplinary cooperation and the involvement of specialists in studying childhood experiences. It would be good to include both the views of TCKs as well as the views of their parents in studies, so as to offer a broader view of the TCK experience and the overall family experience related with parenthood during international relocations. But more generally, we also need more longitudinal studies among TCKs, in order to better understand the process they go through and to gather

stronger evidence on the causal relationships between such experiences and different outcomes.

### *Practical implications*

The current review suggests practical implications for both organizations and families. First, according to the reviewed literature, organizations have overlooked support and training (Banerjee et al., 2020) in relation to the anticipatory, in-country, and repatriation phases of expatriation assignments. Proper training programs may have a significant impact on the realistic expectations surrounding the coming life abroad. Therefore, sending organizations could arrange groups on social media where TCK experiences could already be exchanged in the anticipatory phase, or where the platform can be used for distributing digital content (as suggested by Banerjee et al., 2020). Adolescents could be shown videos with TCKs discussing their life abroad (Weeks et al., 2010). In addition, as organizations may have families who have carried out assignments in the same location, they could even arrange training sessions with previous TCKs and new departing children together, in order to promote positive attitudes, answer specific questions, and explain matters of life abroad. Departing children could also benefit from having TCK ‘mentors’ who could support and advise them along the way. As SIEs’ typically do not receive training and support from their employer (Suutari et al., 2018), the parents have a highly important role in arranging proper training and preparation for their children, as well as in supporting them in their overseas adjustment.

As a second consideration, organizations could look into hiring ATCKs since they have special international strengths, skills, and knowledge. In light of their international capabilities, the reviewed literature highlights that ATCKs might be ideally placed to become future expatriates, and if they are individually suited for expatriate assignments, then they might be ideal for a variety of jobs that have an international perspective. By hiring ATCKs, organizations might gain an employee who would be suited for multinational teams or serving customers from various countries, due to their specially developed cross-cultural and social skills. However, it is also recognized that while ATCKs might present a restless population which organizations could use to their benefit, they could periodically ensure that their interests in changing locations or any other desired new aspects of their work are considered.

### **Author biographies**

Mireka Caselius is a Ph.D. candidate in The School of Management, Human Resource Management research group at the University of Vaasa, Finland. Her research interests are

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Vesa Suutari is a professor at the University of Vaasa in Finland, and has studied international HRM-topics such as expatriation and global careers for 25 years. He is one of the permanent organizers of the EIASM Workshop on Expatriation and the EURAM track on Global Mobility, as well as an Associate Editor of the International Journal of HRM. He has also co-edited books on topics such as the Work-life Interface in the International Career Context (Springer, 2015), the Management of Global Careers (Palgrave, 2018), and Self-Initiated Expatriates (Routledge 2021).

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