

Mireka Caselius

From international roots to global wings

Adjustment experiences, career capital
development, and the career interests
of (adult) third culture kids



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Tiivistelmä

Tämä väitöskirja tarkastelee kolmannen kulttuurin lasten (third culture kids) sopeutumista kohdemaahan, ulkomaankokemuksen pitkäaikaisvaikutuksia heidän urapääomaansa sekä uraintressejään ja uravalintojaan aikuisina. Väitöskirja koostuu neljästä itsenäisestä artikkelista. Ensimmäinen artikkeli on kirjallisuuskatsaus kolmannen kulttuurin lapsista tehtyyn tutkimukseen, heidän kokemuksiinsa aikuisina ja aikaisempien tutkimusten tuloksiin. Kirjallisuuskatsaus on tehty kartoittavan katsauksen menetelmällä (scoping review). Tutkimuksen laadullinen aineisto kerättiin pilottivaiheessa kirjallisesti 12 vastaajalta ja täydentävä aineisto 34 puolistrukturoidulla haastattelulla. Näistä saatu aineisto analysoitiin sisällön-analyysimenetelmällä ja tulokset raportoitiin kolmessa itsenäisessä artikkelissa.

Tulosten perusteella voidaan todeta, että vanhempien työn vuoksi ulkomaille muutto on lapsille käänteentekevä muutos elämässä. Ulkomaille sopeutumiseen vaikuttavat useat yksilölliset tekijät, ihmissuhteet ja ympäristön ominaispiirteet. Nuorena ulkomailla asumisella on myös monia pitkäaikaisvaikutuksia urapääomaan aikuisena, sillä kokemus edistää itsetuntemuksen, kulttuurituntemuksen ja sosiaalisten taitojen kehittymistä. Varhainen kansainvälinen kokemus vaikuttaa myös (aikuisen) kolmannen kulttuurin lasten pitkäaikaisiin uraintresseihin ja uravalintoihin. Nuoruutensa ulkomailla viettäneet aikuiset ovat kiinnostuneita kansainvälisistä työtehtävistä eri aloilla ja suuntaavat koulutus- ja uravalintansa kohti päämäärää, jossa he voivat hyödyntää monipuolisesti ulkomailla kehittyntä osaamistaan. Tutkimuksen tulokset painottavat lasten tukemisen tärkeyttä ulkomaille sopeutumisessa sekä korostavat ulkomailla kasvaneiden kansainvälistä osaamista, jota monikansalliset yhtiöt voisivat hyödyntää kansainvälisessä toiminnassaan.

Asiasanat: ekspatriaatio, (aikuiset) kolmannen kulttuurin lapset, sopeutuminen, urapääoma, uraintressit ja -päätöksenteko

Abstract

This dissertation explores third culture kids' adjustment to their host country, the long-term impacts of international experience on their career capital, and their career interests and choices as adults. The dissertation comprises four independent articles. The first article is a literature review conducted using a scoping review method on third culture kid research, their adult experiences, and the findings of such research. In the pilot phase, the qualitative data were collected in written form from 12 participants, and the main data were collected through 34 semi-structured interviews. The data collected were subjected to content analysis and the results reported in three independent articles.

The study's findings indicate that moving abroad due to their parents' work is a life-changing experience for children. Many individual, interpersonal relationship, and environmental factors influenced their host-country adjustment. Living abroad at a young age has many long-term impacts on career capital during adulthood. These effects result from the time abroad contributing to developing self-awareness, as well as cross-cultural and social skills. Early international experience also impacts (adult) third culture kids' long-term career interests and choices. Adults who have spent their youth abroad are interested in international work in various fields and build their educational and career decisions toward a goal where they can make use of their competences developed abroad. The findings of the study emphasize the importance of supporting children in adjusting to a host country and foreground the international competence of those who grew up abroad, which multinational corporations could use for their benefit in international operations.

Keywords: expatriation, (adult) third culture kids, adjustment, career capital, career interests, and choices

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Amelia and Oliver, this dissertation is dedicated to you. I love you with all my heart and soul—more than words can ever say.

Vaasa, 1 July 2025

Mireka Caselius

To all (A)TCKs navigating life around the world and balancing the emotions that come with belonging to many places at once, remember to embrace your unique journey!

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Abbreviations

AE	Assigned expatriate
ATCK	Adult third culture kid
CC	Career capital
CCK	Cross-cultural kid
ES	European school
HR	Human resources
IB	International Baccalaureate
SCCT	Social cognitive career theory
SCT	Social cognitive theory
SIE	Self-initiated expatriate
TCK	Third culture kid

Publications

This dissertation is based on four individual papers:

- [1] Caselius, M., & Suutari, V. (2023). [Adult] third culture kids: Why do early life international experiences matter? In A. I. Mockaitis (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of global migration in international business* (pp. 205-224). Palgrave Macmillan.
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- [2] Caselius, M., & Suutari, V. (2025). Pulling on the same rope: Factors affecting third culture kids' adjustment abroad. *Community, Work & Family*, 1–27.
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- [3] Caselius, M., & Suutari, V. (2023). The global chameleons: The impact of early life international exposure on the career capital of adult third culture kids. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 11(4), 530–553. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-03-2023-0021>. Copyright © 2023, Emerald Publishing Limited.
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

Individuals move across borders during their working life for personal, professional, and economic reasons. Some people are sent abroad by their employers as assigned expatriates (AEs) for reasons of control, coordination, knowledge transfer, or personal development, while others seek a job abroad on their own initiative and are thus self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (Mello et al., 2023a; Selmer et al., 2022). The high number of people working abroad has increased the interest in family matters during that expatriate experience (Goede & Holtbrügge, 2021). Most expatriates move abroad accompanied by family (Shaffer et al., 2012), meaning a growing number of expatriate offspring have lived abroad during the first eighteen years of their lives (Pollock et al., 2017). Therefore, expatriate children are a relevant aspect of the expatriation discussion (Lazarova et al., 2015). While scholarly research on the experiences of partners during expatriation is now well-established (see, e.g., Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021; Stoermer et al., 2021), research on expatriate children remains relatively scarce. Accordingly, scholars have called for more research on the impact of moving abroad on children, including examples documenting longer-term effects (Adams, 2016; Jones et al., 2023; Lazarova et al., 2015; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2024; Weeks et al., 2010).

The offspring of these expatriates are referred to as *third culture kids (TCKs)*. These individuals have lived abroad in a country different from the one issuing their parents' passports in their developmental years due to one or both parents having an expatriate job (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 404). When these TCKs become adults, they are referred to as *adult third culture kids (ATCKs)* (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 404). Research on expatriation has been criticized for being too expatriate-centric (Goede & Holtbrügge, 2021) since living abroad is at least as challenging for other family members as it is for the expatriates themselves (Richardson, 2006; Shaffer et al., 2001). Accordingly, scholars have become increasingly interested in the experiences of TCKs. Examples include studies of their adjustment (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), coping (Van der Zee et al., 2007), international mindedness (Poonoosamy, 2018), perceptions of being international (Lam & Selmer, 2004; Selmer & Lam, 2004), and of global awareness (Sheard, 2008). Another set of studies addresses the challenges related to a TCK background (Gilbert, 2008; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009) and has addressed issues such as rootlessness (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011), restlessness (Pollock et al., 2017), and culture shock (Miyamoto & Kuhlman, 2001). Scholars have also increasingly become interested in the advantages

of a TCK background, with the focus shifting to cross-cultural competences (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013) and the potential to produce future business expatriates (Lam & Selmer, 2004; Selmer & Lam, 2004; Westropp et al., 2016).

The current dissertation is based on four individual articles. The first paper reviews TCK and ATCK literature and uses the findings to present a future research agenda (Article 1). The empirical focus of the current dissertation is first on the TCKs' adjustment experiences (Article 2), which is also historically a solidly researched topic among expatriates and their partners. The present study builds upon the work of Weeks et al., who identified several individual factors related to TCKs' adjustment, including open-mindedness, freedom, and academic success. Weeks et al. (2010) also addressed interpersonal relationship factors, including friends, family, and repatriation training, as well as environmental factors such as cultural differences and living conditions. The study is theoretically based on adolescent development concepts. Due to limited existing research on the adjustment of TCKs, the current adjustment study looks to deepen the understanding of the factors connected to TCKs' adjustment abroad through a broader lens (e.g. through the involvement of a pre-departure stage in the analysis and through analyzing TCKs' experiences from three different school systems and in diverse cultural contexts).

The empirical focus in the next stage involved studying TCKs' early international experiences and their impacts on later life. Prior research on TCK development has focused on enhancing cross-cultural competences (De Waal and Born, 2020; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013). However, it is reasonable to expect that TCKs' time abroad offers a broader range of developments. These were likely to have some similarities with development reported among expatriates (Dickmann et al., 2018; Jokinen, 2010) and their partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021); however, differences could also be expected owing to age and different contexts (work vs. school experiences). The abilities and resources of TCKs appear to accumulate from their childhood spent abroad, which raises questions about the career capital of ATCKs. To analyze the development that occurs, this study applies the career capital theory. This theory is useful when aiming to understand how changes in surrounding conditions affect knowledge, skills, and career interests (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). The current dissertation is the first to use career capital theory among the ATCK population (Article 3). The research also identifies unanswered questions about how ATCKs have benefited from their early international experiences, if indeed they have. The focus is on their adult life career interests and choices (Article 4). Some research suggests TCKs could be ideal future business expatriates (Lam & Selmer, 2004; Westropp et al., 2016), but it is not clear just how transferable their learned experience is. Their international background also has some detrimental consequences for ATCKs, which offer another avenue for research.

In light of the above, this dissertation aims to first establish and expand the understanding of TCKs and ATCKs as presented in the existing literature. After that, the dissertation includes an empirical exploration of TCKs' adjustment experiences and the long-term impacts of international childhood on the development of career capital, career interests, and choices of ATCKs. No other qualitative study has empirically explored the work trajectory and career aspirations of ATCK populations older than student age. As the internationalization of businesses has created a need for internationally competent employees (Tahir, 2021), the international strengths of the ATCK population could play a meaningful role in global recruitment. Although remote work increased tremendously upon the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not expected to replace all international work (Wicht & Holtbrügge, 2023). However, it seems likely that expatriate work will incorporate more flexible and hybrid approaches. The shift means that companies will also need a competent international workforce in the future.

1.2 Purpose of the dissertation and research questions

The current study aims to increase the understanding of the adjustment experiences, career capital development, and career interests of (adult) third culture kids. The study relies on four research questions that guide the dissertation:

Article 1: What do we know about (A)TCKs in light of existing research, and what future research needs exist in the field?

Article 2: What factors affect third culture kids' host-country adjustment?

Article 3: Does early international experience develop the knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom career capital of ATCKs, and if so, in what ways?

Article 4: How do adult third culture kids perceive that their childhood international experiences affect their career interests and choices in their adult life?

This dissertation consists of an introduction and four individual articles that are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Purpose of the studies, sources of data, research approach, and theoretical groundings

	Article 1:	Article 2:	Article 3:	Article 4:
Title	[Adult] third culture kids: Why do early life international experiences matter?	Pulling on the same rope: Factors affecting third culture kids' adjustment abroad.	The global chameleons: The impact of early life international exposure on the career capital of adult third culture kids.	Expatriate childhood as the first domino: Does early international exposure lead to a later international career?
Purpose of the study	To review the existing literature on (A)TCKs and, based on the findings, to develop a future research agenda.	To deepen the understanding of the factors connected to third culture kids' adjustment abroad.	To explore the long-term impacts of childhood international exposure on the career capital of adult third culture kids.	To provide an understanding of whether and how adult third culture kids perceive their childhood international experiences to be linked to their career interests and choices in later adult life.
Source of data	Peer-reviewed articles and books about TCKs and ATCKs.	Pilot data: written replies of 12 Finnish (A)TCKs. Main data: semi-structured interviews with 34 Finnish ATCKs.	Semi-structured interviews with 34 Finnish ATCKs.	Semi-structured interviews with 34 Finnish ATCKs.
Research approach	Scoping review.	Qualitative content analysis.	Qualitative content analysis.	Qualitative content analysis.
Theoretical grounding		Adjustment theory (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Weeks et al., 2010).	Career capital theory (Inkson & Arthur, 2001).	Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994) is based on general social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

The first article was published in the *Palgrave Handbook of Global Migration in International Business*. The second article was published in *Community, Work & Family*. The third and fourth articles have both been published in the *Journal of Global Mobility*. The first three articles were co-authored with Professor Vesa Suutari, and the fourth with Professor Liisa Mäkelä. I took the lead role in all four articles. I was primarily responsible for conducting the literature review, suggesting the theoretical grounding of each study, and outlining the research strategies. I was fully responsible

for collecting and analyzing the data. I also took the lead in writing and structuring the articles. The co-authors/supervisors guided the entire process, provided feedback on the research at different stages, and assisted with the final composition of the articles before submission to journals and during the revisions related to the publishing processes.

1.3 Intended contributions

The four academic articles integral to this dissertation contribute to knowledge of TCKs and ATCKs. The first study reviews the existing literature on (A)TCKs and develops a research agenda to guide future research. The identified agenda guides the empirical stages of the study.

The intended contributions of Study 2 lay in its understanding of the TCK adjustment cycle. The study aims to understand the adjustment experiences of non-native English-speaking TCKs abroad. An outcome of the study is the identification of a new set of factors influencing TCK adjustment. In addition, the study reports on the differences in experiences associated with diverse types of schools, something typically neglected in earlier studies. Finally, Study 2 contributes by analyzing how pre-departure factors are connected to TCK adjustment.

Study 3 aimed to deepen understanding of how early international experience develops ATCKs' knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom career capital. The study reports ATCKs' perceptions in adulthood when they are able to reflect on the influence of their early international experiences from a career capital (CC) perspective. Applying a broad CC perspective, the study contributes by expanding knowledge beyond the development of cultural competences, which has often been the focus of ATCK research.

Study 4 expands the understanding of ATCKs' perceptions of how their early international experiences are linked to their career interests and choices in the longer term. While previous studies have mainly focused on the work interests of student-aged (A)TCKs, Study 4 contributes by investigating career interests in adulthood and actual career choices. The study aims to broaden understanding of how ATCKs narrate and explain their career-related socially developed cognitions through the lens of social cognitive career theory (SCCT).

1.4 Key concepts of the study

Third culture kid

The term *third culture kid* 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).

Adult third culture kid

An adult third culture kid (ATCK) has been defined as “someone who grew up as a TCK” (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 404).

Adjustment

Cultural and psychological changes (Wu et al., 2023) appear when individuals within distinct cultural groups come into contact (Berry, 2005). Cultural learning involves the loss of certain cultural behaviors over time, causing individuals to become better adjusted to the host society (Berry, 2005). When psychological and sociocultural changes occur among individuals, the chosen course of action is called adjustment (Ward et al., 2005).

Career capital (CC)

Career capital refers to “the career assets that we bring to our successive employment settings” (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). It has three aspects: knowing-why, which encompasses the beliefs and identities of individuals; knowing-how, which refers to acquired skills and knowledge; and knowing-whom, manifesting as a professional network and personal contacts (Defilippi & Arthur, 1994).

Career interests and choices

Career interests and choices refer to individuals’ preferences for certain occupations and decisions made regarding their professional paths, shaped by career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting (Lent et al., 1994; Lent et al., 2000).

1.5 The structure of the dissertation

The current dissertation comprises five chapters, followed by four associated articles. First, the introduction outlines the background of the study, the purpose of the dissertation, its research questions, intended contributions, key concepts, and the

structure. The second chapter presents the study's theoretical background, which includes the definitions and existing research on TCKs and ATCKs. In addition, the chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the empirical studies: adjustment theory, career capital theory, and social cognitive career theory.

The third chapter discusses methodological considerations. The chapter starts by addressing philological considerations, and the later segment is tripartite. First, the research strategy, data collection, and data analysis of the scoping review (Article 1) are presented. Second, the research strategy, data collection, sample description, and data analysis of the empirical studies are presented (Articles 2, 3, 4). Third, the trustworthiness of the conducted qualitative research is evaluated.

The fourth chapter summarizes the four articles. The fifth chapter includes a discussion and the dissertation's conclusions. The chapter presents the articles' theoretical contributions and the research's practical implications overall. In addition, the limitations and future research directions are discussed. In the final part of the dissertation, the four individual articles are attached.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The current chapter presents the theoretical background of the dissertation and is structured into three main sections. First, the chapter starts by defining the TCK concept and existing research on the subject. The second part of the chapter adds a definition of an ATCK and reviews the existing ATCK research. Finally, the third part of the chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the empirical studies: adjustment theory, career capital theory, and social cognitive career theory.

2.1 Third culture kids

2.1.1 Definition

The term *third culture kids* was first introduced in studies of American expatriate families in India in the 1950s (Useem & Cottrell, 1996). The *third culture* part of the term derives from the first culture being the home or passport culture of the expatriate parents. The second culture is the host culture where the family has moved to, leading to a third culture, an international way of life that differs from the home and host culture but comprises a lifestyle shared with an expatriate community (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 17). Therefore, the third culture is created among others who live in a similar way, leading to it also being described as “[a] culture between cultures” (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009, p.755). A TCK is “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).

There is no consensus among researchers on what constitutes *a significant part* of TCKs’ first 18 years. However, Pollock et al. (2017, pp. 23-24) hold that anything over one year outside of the passport country can be significant. The term TCK is used interchangeably with terms like “expatriate children” (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Wilkins, 2013) and “cross-culturally mobile children” (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). Nevertheless, the current study uses the terms TCK and ATCK for the children of expatriates, as these are the labels most widely used for the population for the past half century (Tan et al., 2021).

It is essential to clarify that TCKs are a distinct subgroup within the broader category of globally mobile children, cross-cultural kids (CCKs), who also include domestic TCKs, international adoptees, children of refugees, children of immigrants, children of minorities, educational CCKs, children of “borderlanders”, mixed-heritage children, and bi/multicultural children (Pollock et al., 2017). What unites all CCKs is their

experience of navigating multiple cultures. The current study focuses solely on individuals with a TCK background, as this allows a more precise examination of their unique experiences, challenges, development, and long-term career aspirations, which may vary notably from those of other CCK subgroups.

2.1.2 Existing research on TCKs

Moving overseas triggers considerable changes for children (Weeks et al., 2010) as they navigate different cultures during their formative years. It is typical for them to face various adjustment challenges (Banerjee et al., 2020) that cause stress in the new life situation (Jones et al., 2023). Studies on the *pre-departure experiences* of TCKs reveal that leaving friends in their home country is a key obstacle in the pre-departure phase for children and is something that markedly impacts their willingness to move abroad (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). While expatriate motives and expectations, and increasingly also the views of partners (Chew & Zhu, 2002; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021; Richardson & Mallon, 2005), are now better understood, we do not have a similar level of understanding of the motives, expectations, or fears of children before moving abroad. For example, in a study conducted by Lazarova et al. (2015), school-aged respondents saw a need for more support for children than had been available to them. The respondents had seen their parents busy making all the necessary arrangements for an assignment abroad, which had diminished support. Lazarova et al. also reported that children experienced relocation stress related to issues like changing schools more keenly than their parents might have realized.

In addition, TCK *adjustment* has received some research attention. Alston and Nieuwoudt (1992) conducted pioneering research on expatriate children's adjustment problems. The study shows that stress related to relocation, that is, loss of a physical environment and social support from the home country, caused adjustment difficulties among the children. The study also acknowledged the challenges in researching expatriate children from diverse language groups, as some struggled with the English language. The study was based on a small dataset (N=10) and prompted interest in the phenomenon; however, it also called for further studies on the subject. Later scholars found that TCKs face somewhat similar issues around adjustment abroad as expatriates and their partners, but interestingly, Weeks et al. (2010) also found factors unique to TCKs. The last study concludes that teens are concerned mainly about making friends, their social life, and academic success.

In contrast, language fluency and cultural understanding seem to be more important for expatriates and their partners. However, Weeks et al. only interviewed students who spoke English fluently, and therefore, the research offers no insights into

adjustment among TCKs from other language groups. Banerjee et al. (2020) explored the adjustment of adolescent expatriate kids from South Asia in light of sociopolitical stigma. They identified that South Asian expatriate kids face social stigma and social isolation while assimilating with a host culture. However, participants were found to cope well with such issues by using technical resources (i.e., online social networks).

Researchers have also attempted to identify factors explaining TCK adjustment. Weeks et al. (2010) provided a model on student-aged TCK adjustment, where individual factors (open-mindedness, freedom, and academic success), environmental factors (cultural differences and living conditions), and interpersonal relationships factors (friends, family, and repatriation training) explain TCK adjustment. Moreover, Sivatte et al.'s (2019) mixed methods study revealed that factors affecting TCKs' adjustment include fitting in with other children, children's social skills, academic self-efficacy, the host-country school's academic level, and family support. Experience from prior international assignments, host-country language fluency, and cultural distance proved less important. More recently, topics related to TCK well-being have been raised in the adjustment discussion, especially highlighting the link between stress relating to TCKs sociocultural adjustment and their mental health (Jones et al., 2023). Actually, family cohesion has been found to be the strongest predictor of sociocultural adjustment and quality of life abroad (Van der Zee et al., 2007).

The training and development needs of expatriates are widely discussed in the literature on expatriation. The discussion includes the role of family training and support (Schell & Solomon, 1997; Riusala & Suutari, 2000; Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005; Van Erp et al., 2013; Lazarova et al., 2015; Dang et al., 2022). Existing research indicates that organizations would be wise to provide in-depth *pre-departure training* for expatriate children (Weeks et al., 2010) to facilitate their adjustment. For example, Rosenbusch and Cseh (2012) stress the importance of such cross-cultural training and call for programs providing the whole expatriate family with training before departure, during an assignment, and on repatriation (see also Okpara & Kabongo, 2011).

A significant aspect of the TCK experience stems from attending different *educational institutions*. International schools are often privately funded and offer a curriculum that usually differs from that found in the host country (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). An example of an international school is the International Baccalaureate (IB) type, which offers expatriate children around the world an internationally transferable education (Dickson et al., 2018). The IB school curricula enhance critical thinking skills, cross-cultural appreciation, and global awareness (Dickson et al., 2018). The teaching in IB schools is often provided in English, French, and Spanish (IBO, 2024).

The popularity of international schools among expatriate families is understandable, especially if the family relocates on multiple occasions to different countries with different national languages (Hayden & Thompson, 2008, p. 16). The children of staff of the European institutions typically receive education in European Schools (ES), which are primarily designed for them. These public institutions controlled by European Union (EU) Member States offer most of the education in a student's first language (Housen, 2002). In addition to different educational institutions primarily meant for globally mobile children, some parents prefer their children to attend local schools to advance cultural immersion and language skills (Groves & O'Connor, 2018). Although expatriate children have to adjust to a new learning environment, they still often achieve above-average grades compared to their home country peers: they are motivated students and often eager to proceed to higher education (Wilkins, 2013). However, one reason for this might also be that expatriate parents typically have well-paid managerial positions and are well-educated themselves, and, therefore, they have high expectations for their children's education.

Finally, there has also been research interest in TCK *repatriation* (Ra et al., 2023; Smith & Kearney, 2016). Nevertheless, understanding of the topic remains sparse, and there is more to learn about the factors that help TCKs adjust. Living abroad and studying in a foreign language for several years might make it difficult to continue studies in the home country's education system in the children's mother tongue. Therefore, some TCKs choose to attend an international school in their home country after repatriation (Kierner & Suutari, 2017). In addition, TCKs typically perform well at school and, therefore, have a greater chance of achieving their educational ambitions, such as attending top universities worldwide (Wilkins, 2013) and the opportunity to channel their unique international experiences to the benefit of their later life.

2.2 Adult third culture kids (ATCKs)

2.2.1 Definition

Those people who grew up in an international setting as TCKs with parents working abroad are called adult third culture kids (ATCKs). Pollock et al. (2017, pp. 404) define an ATCK as "someone who grew up as a TCK" (Pollock et al., 2017, pp. 404). This means that ATCKs have been exposed to one or several international relocations during their childhood.

2.2.2 Existing research on ATCKs

The majority of expatriates have families that accompany them on foreign assignments (Dang et al., 2022; Van der Zee et al., 2007), meaning that each year, a growing number of individuals enter adulthood with such an international background. Growing up in multiple cultures can trigger some complexes in ATCKs, but scholars have also increasingly become interested in the positive aspects of such a background. However, the evidence for such positive aspects remains quite limited (Nash, 2020; Westropp et al., 2016). Overall, the experiences of ATCKs have already been analyzed from several angles.

First, ATCKs' identity development has attracted research interests due to their unique cultural exposure. Such experiences shape an individual's identity and sense of belonging since they often feel disconnected from a place (Jeon, 2022). They also grieve the loss of their personal identity (Gilbert, 2008) due to the mobile lifestyle and immersion in various cultures during their developmental years. Therefore, they have been found to have difficulties in answering simple personal questions such as "Where are you from?" (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 185). Frequent moves in one's youth are often linked to an underdeveloped cultural identity.

Earlier research has also found that an international past creates other long-term emotional impacts on ATCKs, such as rootlessness and restlessness. An ATCK might not settle for living in a single location (Moore & Barker, 2012). Additionally, employees with international work experience are often found to be dissatisfied with purely domestic jobs in their later careers (Suutari & Taka, 2004). They are, therefore, typical candidates for foreign assignments (Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Dickmann, & Tornikoski, 2018). They have also been found to have emotional challenges with unresolved grief as they may have repeatedly left important people behind due to repeated relocations (Gilbert, 2008). However, such relocations in life may also cause later mental challenges such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Davis et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2013), which have directed research interest also to their overall well-being (Abe, 2018; Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021).

Apart from these negative impacts, the early international experience can also nurture special international capabilities (Lam & Selmer, 2004), which are not easily produced in any other way (Selmer & Lam, 2004). Interviewed ATCKs consider their background enhanced their cultural understanding and consider themselves more open-minded to new cultures than their peers (Westropp et al., 2016). The ATCKs blend into unfamiliar cultural scenes in a chameleon-like manner and develop friendships easily from niche social groups, preferably with a similar background (Westropp et al., 2016). They also typically have a considerable number of relationships worldwide that they strive to maintain (Pollock et al., 2017).

Finally, the impacts of TCK experiences on future studies and career interests have received some research attention. The findings indicate that ATCKs often have clear plans for their future (Wilkins, 2013), which include educational achievement (Cottrell, 2002). They are also frequently keen on securing jobs with a meaningful international component (Westropp et al., 2016). They are genuinely interested in careers involving independence, expert-level positions, and leadership (Cottrell, 2002). However, ATCKs' actual career-related views (see Cottrell, 2002; Wilcox, 2017) and career development (see Bikos et al., 2014) are still under-researched. However, these studies indicate, for example, that ATCKs have the potential to become successful expatriates because of their positive attitude toward international relocation or the skills and knowledge related to their background. However, Westropp et al. (2016) also question whether early international experience could guarantee adjustment and fit to an alternative location in the future.

Moreover, it has also been found that an openness to divergent cultural experiences is related to the willingness to accept international assignments among university students (Froese et al., 2013). Thus, it seems likely that exposure to international relocation in any phase of an individual's life may have the potential to affect the decisions and actions they make later on. More research would be required to fully understand the longer-term impact of early international experiences on ATCKs.

2.3 Theoretical foundations of the empirical studies

This chapter discusses the theoretical foundations of the empirical articles of the dissertation: adjustment theory, career capital theory, and social cognitive career theory.

2.3.1 Adjustment theory

Adjustment has historically attracted the most intensive research attention in expatriation literature. Research has examined the adjustment of both expatriates (see e.g., Tahir, 2018; Wu et al., 2023) and their partners (Gupta et al., 2012; Tahir, 2020), while far less research has focused on TCKs' adjustment, the factors affecting it, and on the outcomes related to the level of adjustment (see Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). Moving and living abroad is widely understood to be a challenging time for all family members (Richardson, 2006; Shaffer et al., 2001), especially if the children of the family are not keen on relocating. Understanding TCKs' adjustment experiences is essential for providing targeted support and is also important since children have a meaningful role in the successful

adjustment process of the whole family in the host country (see, e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991; Caligiuri et al., 1998; Dang et al., 2022; Lazarova et al., 2010).

Work on adjustment has its roots in foreign-student literature (Lysgaard, 1955; Nikelly et al., 1964), but approximately 20 years later, scholars became interested in expatriate adjustment, and the classic adjustment theories emerged (Black, 1988; Black et al., 1991; Black & Stephens, 1989). In Black's models, adjustment is categorized into general adjustment (non-work environment), interaction adjustment (interaction with host nationals), and work adjustment. The adjustment discussion builds on acculturation (Wu et al., 2023), a cultural and psychological process that occurs when people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact, and as a result, they adapt to the host society (Berry, 2005). The process is termed adjustment as the sociocultural and psychological changes are formed in acculturating individuals (Han et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2005).

Because TCKs are minors during their time abroad, work-related issues are not relevant. Therefore, the current study builds on Shaffer and Harrison's (2001) model, which aims to understand expatriate partner adjustment during international assignments. Their model is based on Burke's (1991) theory of identity disruption, which argues that shifts in cultural environment or the adaptation of new roles can disrupt the ongoing process of identity formation (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). On such occasions, individuals must modify their actions, and behavioral changes act as driving factors in developing a revised self-concept, which facilitates improved adjustment (Burke, 1991).

Shaffer and Harrison (2001) carried out their study in two stages. First, they conducted a qualitative examination of partners who had either positive or negative experiences abroad via ten in-depth interviews. Their analysis indicated three adjustment dimensions: interaction and cultural dimensions (see Black, 1988) and personal change. *Interaction adjustment* refers to "relationships or interpersonal associations with host country nationals," and *cultural adjustment* is the "adaptation to various environmental and situational conditions, such as local customs and transportation" (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). A noticeable number of inward-looking statements did not fit either of those categories, and thus, they named the third dimension *personal change*, which is defined as "a sense of becoming part of, belonging to, or feeling at home in a foreign environment" (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Based on the analysis, they developed a conceptual model of spouse adjustment.

In the second stage, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) tested the model using a questionnaire administered to 221 international assignee couples residing in 37 countries. The model groups factors that are connected with partner adjustment into three main categories: individual factors (language fluency, change in employment

status, general self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy), interpersonal relationship factors including family (extended family support, expatriate adjustment, parental demands) and social network (network size, breadth of support, depth of support from host-country nationals, depth of support from non-host-country nationals), and finally environmental factors (cultural novelty, favorable living conditions, assignment duration certainty). Later, Weeks et al. (2010) applied Shaffer and Harrison's (2001) model when studying teenage TCKs. Their findings indicated that the adjustment of partners and children is sufficiently similar, which justifies incorporating the model into the current research. Next, the individual, interpersonal relationships, and environmental factors that are found to impact the adjustment of TCKs are presented in more detail.

Individual factors are attributes that remain attached to individuals when they move abroad (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001) and play a key role in how the person adjusts. The TCK self-efficacy dimension (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Van der Zee et al., 2007) includes social and academic self-efficacy. In addition, cultural open-mindedness has been associated with TCK adjustment (Weeks et al., 2010). Moreover, De Sivatte et al. (2019) found that prior international experience was associated with TCK adjustment, a finding similar to that suggested in expatriate adjustment models (e.g., Black et al., 1991). Interestingly, the role of language skills does not feature in TCK research (Weeks et al., 2010), despite language skills being recognized as important for adults (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020). Previous empirical studies highlight that TCKs are aware of the importance of forming new relationships abroad during their adjustment, and thus, researchers have concluded that social integration is more important for TCKs than learning the host-country language (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). Overall, TCK research includes little discussion of language (Jones et al., 2022), which might be because previous TCK studies mainly focus on native-English-speaking children. Non-native-English speakers might face different challenges, such as learning the school language (often English in international schools) alongside the host-country language.

Interpersonal relationship factors refer to people's social connections with one another. Shaffer and Harrison (2001) reported that the two interpersonal relationship factors among partners are family (including extended family support) and a social network (including network size, breadth of support, depth of support from host-country nationals, and depth of support from non-host-country nationals). Family is highly important to the adjustment of TCKs (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Van der Zee et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2010). Strong family cohesion has been found to be a positive predictor of TCK adjustment (Van der Zee et al., 2007), and family plays a key role in helping TCKs navigate the complexities of their new lives abroad. In addition, social networks have been found to be crucial for TCKs' adjustment (Mosanya &

Kwiatkowska, 2021), with friends playing a central role in this process (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). They feel the need to fit into social networks and actively try to avoid loneliness (Banerjee et al., 2020). The reported social challenges are often associated with leaving friends behind (Banerjee et al., 2020; Weeks et al., 2010), although over the past decade, these obstacles have been reduced in severity by the advent of social media (Banerjee et al., 2020).

Environmental factors are closely connected to both individual and social factors (Ogden, 1995). Shaffer and Harrison (2001) presented three environmental factors that impact TCK adjustment: cultural novelty, favorable living conditions, and assignment duration certainty. Previous TCK studies have confirmed that cultural novelty (the perception of how different the home and host cultures are) relates negatively to TCK adjustment (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019). However, similar or better living conditions have been reported to advance TCK adjustment (Weeks et al., 2010). According to current knowledge, the surrounding environment is relevant to TCK adjustment; however, there is limited evidence on the effect of specific environmental factors. In addition, the existing evidence on environmental factors relies on a limited number of studies with often small samples, making strong conclusions and generalizations difficult. New comprehensive research would be needed on the factors that facilitate or hinder TCK adjustment across continents.

2.3.2 Career capital theory

Career capital theory provides a framework to understand how people develop their careers in changing circumstances (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Moreover, it explains how different and changing conditions in an individual's life affect their knowledge, skills, and career interests (Inkson & Arthur, 2001) and thus helps analyze such developments (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008). The knowing-why aspect of CC includes motivation, beliefs, values, and identities. The knowing-how form encompasses skills and knowledge acquired, and the knowing-whom aspect covers the network of personal relationships and contacts (Defilippi & Arthur, 1994). Accordingly, the CC dimensions play a crucial role in shaping career trajectories, developing professional growth, and long-term career success. Individuals must work to develop their CC to remain competitive in the labor market and achieve their career aspirations (Mäkelä et al., 2016). Researchers have also found the CC framework relevant when analyzing expatriates' developmental experiences (Jokinen, 2010; Mäkelä et al., 2016) and those of their partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Nevertheless, this dissertation is the first study to apply the CC framework among the ATCK population.

Knowing-why CC consists of a sense of purpose, values, identity interests, and career motivations. It answers *why* questions (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005; Defilippi &

Arthur, 1994). When applied to expatriates and their partners, the knowing-why career capital has been associated with increased self-confidence, self-awareness, understanding of individual strengths and weaknesses, understanding of work-related values, career motivation, and preference (Dickmann et al., 2018; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). While the CC framework has not previously been used among ATCKs, some research on expatriates' children is relevant. It is known that individuals with a TCK background develop a multicultural identity (Tan et al., 2021), a desire for an international career (Westropp et al., 2016), cultural open-mindedness, and global mindedness (Weeks et al., 2010; Westropp et al., 2016). Previously, the focus has been on international orientation rather than knowing-why in a broader sense.

The knowing-how dimension of the CC framework encompasses the skills, tactical and explicit knowledge, and expertise a person absorbs from their career (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-how skills can be technical, interpersonal, or conceptual (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). The knowing-how capability is flexible and often transferable across countries (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Jokinen, 2010), but it may be organization- and country-specific (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Global experiences foster the development of different kinds of skills and competencies. For example, such experiences develop coping and social skills and international competencies that increase the capability to excel in both global and domestic career paths (Dickmann et al., 2018; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). Similar findings have been found among expatriate partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Their international exposure encourages expatriates and their partners to broaden their communication and language skills (Dickmann et al., 2018; Jokinen et al., 2008; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). The development of CC among TCKs could be anticipated to be somewhat similar to that of their parents due to their exposure to various cultures and schooling abroad.

Further research is needed on the development of TCKs' knowing-how CC and how transferable their experiences are to later careers, since the main focus of the earlier research has been on analyzing TCKs' ability to cope with cross-cultural transitions (Van der Zee et al., 2007; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009), and acquire language skills (Pollock et al., 2017; Haneda & Monobe, 2009), cross-cultural skills and sensitivity (De Waal & Born, 2020). Importantly, TCKs could also find their competencies in some areas of knowing-how decreasing, such as home country language skills and familiarity with home country culture (Smith & Kearney, 2016). However, more research would be welcome to understand (A)TCKs' knowing-how perspectives and how these improve or diminish due to early international exposure in their youth.

Knowing-whom CC relates to internal and external organizational relations, professional and social relationships, attachments, and sources of information that

people gather during their careers (Defilippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Networks proved important for career progression, particularly in an international career context (Dickmann & Cerdin, 2018; Linehan & Scullion, 2002). However, expatriates do not always consider their personal networks from a CC and career progression perspective (Jokinen, 2010). In addition, partners create valuable networks due to social activities abroad, and such relationships benefit working expatriates (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Similarly, TCKs build meaningful relationships during their time abroad (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009), often with other TCKs, who are known to enjoy the expatriate-centric lifestyle (Weeks et al., 2010). However, more knowledge is required on how beneficial TCKs' international connections are in adult working life, if they are at all. Third culture kids also face challenges in forming relationships with their non-TCK peers due to differing worldviews, experiences, and values (Choi et al., 2013). Choi et al. (2013) also found that TCKs are likely to form vaguer emotional relationships with their international peers due to active relocations. We still lack understanding about TCKs' relationships and how beneficial those are in their later careers.

2.3.3 Social cognitive career theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) was adopted as a theoretical framework for the fourth article. It provides a conceptual basis for researching ATCKs' career interests and choices through three SCCT mechanisms established as key factors in becoming self-directed concerning career decision-making: career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting (Lent et al., 1994). The theory also identifies factors that shape career interests (Bozionelos et al., 2015; Sheu et al., 2010), providing a constructive framework to build a novel understanding of ATCK career-related decisions. Moreover, SCCT is a relevant theory for predicting occupational interest and choice aspirations among high school students (Lent et al., 2010), student activist perceptions and expectations of their employment after college (Ansala & Uusiautti, 2017), as well as international graduate students' interests in international careers. In addition, SCCT has been found to be a valuable theory for studying individuals pursuing international careers (Bozionelos et al., 2015).

Social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) was based on social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986). According to general SCT (Bandura, 1986, 2002, 2012), people, their behavior, and the environment influence each other differently (Albert & Luzzo, 1999). Self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal representations are relevant to career interests and choices (Sheu & Bordon, 2017). The SCCT framework is a suitable tool for researching how career interests and choices are

shaped and also identifies factors that develop such interests (Bozionelos et al., 2015; Sheu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2022).

The first social cognitive mechanism, *self-efficacy* development, relates to the concept of self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2022), defined as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). It deals with a person’s response capabilities, for example, how s/he reacts to the question “Can I do this?” in different situations (Lent et al., 1994), and therefore the individual’s belief in their capacity to influence their future (Ansala & Uusiautti, 2017; Wang et al., 2022). According to the theory, self-efficacy can be developed through performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and social influences, and physiological states (Bandura, 1986, p. 399).

Performance accomplishments that can bolster self-efficacy provide information about experiences of personal mastery (Bandura et al., 1975), that is to say, how a person performed in similar situations previously (Lent & Brown, 2019). Success promotes mastery expectations, and repeated failure lowers them (Bandura et al., 1977). However, repeated success promotes a strong sense of self-efficacy, which means that occasional failures are more unlikely to cause a major shift in a person’s assessment of their own capabilities, given that they are likely to look for situational factors explaining the failure (Bandura, 1986, p. 399). Moreover, self-efficacy assessment is also influenced by vicarious experiences since, for example, seeing similar people operating successfully can cause the observer to believe that they have the capabilities necessary to master the activities in question (Bandura, 1986, p. 399).

Verbal persuasion and social influence occur in situations where the individuals themselves have not personally experienced or witnessed similar experiences but are convinced that they could acquire the capabilities necessary to achieve whatever they are aiming to (Bandura, 1986, p. 400). People might also believe they can overcome issues that previously overwhelmed them (Bandura et al., 1977). The final self-efficacy dimension of the psychological state affects people’s judgment of their own capabilities (Bandura, 1986, p. 401). From an emotional arousal perspective, people judge their anxiety and vulnerability to stress (Bandura et al., 1977), and typically, high arousal tends to reduce performance since people are inclined to think of themselves as less capable when feeling tense or agitated (Bandura et al., 1977).

The second social cognitive mechanism is *outcome expectations* (Wang et al., 2022). It builds from beliefs of the consequences of performing in certain ways, for example, “If I do this, what will happen?” (Lent et al., 1994, 2015). The difference between self-efficacy and outcome expectations is elucidated by asking, “Can I do it?” and “What will happen if I try?” (Lent and Brown, 2013). According to Bandura (1986), there are

three types of outcome expectations: physical, social, and self-evaluative. Previous direct and vicarious learning experiences cause people to act in a certain way and, therefore, affect future outcome expectations, particularly regarding the sensitivity to physical and emotional arousal in performing certain activities and observing other people's actions that cause certain outcomes (Lent et al., 2002). In addition, strong self-efficacy beliefs positively shape outcome expectations since people who are confident in their abilities typically expect positive career outcomes (Lent et al., 2010; Lent & Brown, 2019).

The third mechanism is *goal setting* (Wang et al., 2022). That refers to the self-regulation of behavior (Lent et al., 1994). By setting goals, "people help to organize and guide their behavior, to sustain it over long periods of time even in the absence of external reinforcement, and to increase the likelihood that desired outcomes will be attained" (Lent et al., 1994). Goals address an important question of "how much and how well do I want to do this?" (Lent, 2013, p. 119). According to the theory, goals are divided into choice-content goals (the type of career an individual wishes to accomplish) and performance goals (the performance level that the individual plans to achieve within a given task) (Lent, 2013, p. 119). Hard or otherwise challenging goals lead to stronger performance than if easier, more vague goals were set (Lent & Brown, 2019; Locke et al., 1986), and high self-efficacy has been found to affect setting more challenging goals in career activities (Waung et al., 1995). Whether one is progressing toward achieving goals can influence future choices (Lent, 2013, p. 119). Moreover, individuals set goals for academic and career activities that align with their personal interests, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations (Ansala & Uusiautti, 2017; Sheu et al., 2010; Shi, 2023). More SCCT research adopting qualitative research approaches has been called for (Wang et al., 2022).

In the present study, social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) offers a promising framework for studying how ATCKs' career interests and choices are influenced by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting (Sheu & Bordon, 2017). In addition, studying ATCKs' career paths through an SCCT lens would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their professional work trajectories.

3 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The current chapter starts by outlining the dissertation's philosophical considerations and the researcher's personal background related to the topic under study. Later in this section, the strategy, data collection, and data analysis shaping the literature review are presented. In addition, the research strategy, data collection, sample description, and data analysis are presented as they relate to the dissertation's empirical studies. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the qualitative research is discussed.

3.1 Philosophical considerations of the dissertation

Certain philosophical bases, ontology, epistemology and methodology, guided the current research; it is grounded in *an ontological relativist* position, guided by *an interpretivist epistemology* with a *constructivist and transactional* approach, and employs *phenomenological hermeneutic* methodology (Lincoln et al., 2011: 98; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Schwandt, 1998). *Ontological relativist* perspectives assume that reality is not singular or objective, but rather multiple and constructed through human experiences, cultures, and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011: 13; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 110-111). This means that people do not live in one shared, fixed reality but navigate multiple realities shaped by their surroundings, personal histories, and social environments (Lincoln et al., 2011). As a result, everyone contributes to the creation of knowledge based on their unique lived experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). This aligns with the study's aim to explore diverse lived experiences and understand how individuals make sense of their international experiences and their long-term impacts on their later careers and lives.

Accordingly, knowledge is viewed as co-created between participant and researcher, with meanings arising through interpretation. *Interpretivist epistemology* holds that multiple realities exist in the world, each shaped by its specific context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Schwandt, 1998). Moreover, the researcher's role is one of active interpreter, not just a neutral observer, resulting in data that is rich, contextual, and subjective (Schwandt, 1998). From an interpretivist perspective, it is assumed that there is no universal way in which TCKs and ATCKs view their experiences. Instead, the meaning of their words and experiences is interpreted during interviews (qualitative naturalistic method), and it is understood that each individual has their personal truth. *Constructivism* holds that knowledge is constructed by individuals based on their subjective experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 109). In this view, knowledge is seen as constructed rather than discovered, shaped by the unique

realities in which people live (Crotty 1998: 9). From a constructivist perspective, the current research examines how ATCKs retrospectively construct their childhood experiences abroad, and how they navigate and develop their subsequent educational and professional lives as ongoing processes shaped by their unique cross-cultural backgrounds. *Transactional* thought views knowledge as developing through the interaction between people and their environment (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). In this study, ATCKs' experiences are understood as shaped through interaction with varied social and cultural contexts.

The ontological and epistemological perspectives discussed above shape the philosophical basis of hermeneutics and phenomenology, which are central to the methodology employed in this study. A phenomenological hermeneutic method suits researching participants' subjective experiences with open questions and enables the collection of both written and oral data (Metsämuuronen, 2006, p. 170). In the present study, such perceptions were analyzed based on the data collected through a qualitative survey (pilot data) and interviews (main data). The phenomenological hermeneutic method is suitable for researching participants' lived experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004); therefore, the method aligns well with the aims of studying (A)TCKs in the current context.

The phenomenological hermeneutical method included several steps for interpreting the texts: transcription of the interviews, initial reading to form an overall understanding of the topic, text division into several sub-themes and main themes, reflection against literature to form a comprehensive understanding, and reporting results (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The method enabled the description of how ATCKs' lived experiences (phenomenology) and the interpretations of the meanings of those experiences (hermeneutics). Its capabilities explain why the method is widely used in disciplines that focus on the deep exploration of human experiences in different contexts (Lindseth & Norberg, 2022).

The phenomenological hermeneutic method provides individual perspectives and develops a broader contextual understanding of experiences (Vella, 2024). There is always a balance between description and interpretation, and a researcher's assumptions can affect the interpretation of the lived experiences of the study participants and how the data are understood, analyzed, and presented. The researcher's personal background, experiences, education, culture, and prior knowledge of the topic may thus affect the interpretation of the data. The researcher may unintentionally focus on certain themes in the data and unconsciously under-interpret some other parts of the data (Lindseth & Norberg, 2022). The researcher's background is presented next to enhance transparency, minimize bias, and improve the trustworthiness of the dissertation.

Researcher's background

The personal interest in the dissertation's topic developed during the period 2005–2007, stemming from being part of an expatriate family in China, at the age of 19, and studying at a Chinese university. These experiences abroad were the drivers that shaped later research interests and facilitated the development of a wide international network of expatriate families. While living the international lifestyle, it was clear that people possessed interesting experiences shaped by their globally mobile life. In addition, the developmental aspects of the international experience emerged as a compelling area of interest. Subsequently, the time spent abroad piqued an interest in understanding more about the fascinating adjustment experiences and how early international experience can shape future career choices and life in adulthood.

Early in the research process, it became evident that prior (A)TCK research typically concentrated on the challenges associated with being raised abroad. However, the time spent in China led to an understanding that globally mobile life also encompasses a wide range of positive developmental aspects, which demanded further exploration. The prior individual experiences provided foundational knowledge about the phenomena; however, not being a TCK fostered openness to further exploration of the topic. To develop understanding, the author examined relevant literature on TCKs, ATCKs, expatriates, expatriate partners, and expatriate families. That led to the selection of the themes of adjustment, career capital development, and the impacts of the TCK experience on subsequent career interests and choices. An interest in the topic from a broader expatriation perspective prompted a comprehensive review of the literature. Consequently, the articles cited in this dissertation reflect the review process by incorporating comparisons between research on (A)TCKs and on expatriates or their partners.

The background in the subject area and reviewing the existing literature facilitated the identification of the research gaps on the topic and the planning of the data collection. The network in the expatriate family community from China enabled a smooth start in finding the first study participants. It is important to reflect the researcher's role in the research process, due to having prior personal experience of living in an expatriate family, and the use of a personal network to recruit study participants. The familiarity with the subject may enhance the richness of the data by enabling contextually detailed questioning, fostering participant trust, and deep interpretation of the responses. However, it also carries the risk of over-interpretation or under-examination of assumptions. This balance was maintained through critical self-reflection and following the methodological procedures strictly.

The information about the author's international background was withheld from participants during the interviews to minimize the potential influence on their responses. That said, the majority of the pilot study participants were aware of this context. This approach proved beneficial during the main data collection, as participants often commented, "Oh, so you know these things yourself", upon learning about the interviewer's international experiences. While this familiarity occasionally aligned with the interviewer's background, it remained important for participants to articulate their experiences fully, without assuming the interviewer had prior knowledge. At the same time, the international background of the interviewer contributed to a deeper understanding and interpretation of the perspectives emerging from the interviews. The participants shared detailed experiences and reflections about their time abroad, providing a rich learning opportunity that deepened understanding of the complex impacts of international mobility.

3.2 Literature review: scoping review method

The first article is a literature review of work on the TCK journey from childhood experiences to adulthood career aspirations. Next, the research strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis methods used in this review are presented.

3.2.1 Research strategy

The first article reviewed existing research on (A)TCKs through the scoping review method. This form of review makes it possible to present an overview of relatively large and diverse literature on a broad topic (Munn et al., 2018), which is different from, for example, a systematic review, which attempts to present studies with a more narrow and focused research question (Munn et al., 2018). A scoping review was selected as the review method for the current study as it enabled the inclusion of a wide variety of topics covered in TCK/ ATCK research, as well as the experience to be reviewed from childhood to adulthood. The scope in question was views from pre-departure experiences to repatriation stages, including adult career and life experiences. The ATCK studies were grouped into two categories covering challenges and benefits associated with a TCK background. The method also supported identifying and analyzing existing research gaps in the field (Munn et al., 2018). The findings spurred suggestions for a future research agenda.

3.2.2 Data collection

The data collection started with searches of the Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO, and SCOPUS databases. The search incorporated the following terms: *third culture kid*, *TCK*, *expatriate children*, *adult third culture kid*, *ATCK*, *third culture individual*, and *global nomad*. Full English text articles from peer-reviewed academic journals and books were included in the review. The review encompassed research across different disciplines, in particular, international business, education, and psychology.

3.2.3 Data analysis

The current scoping review analysis aims to provide a broad view of the subject in question and to present what is already known about the topic. The review identifies unanswered questions and, thus, illustrates future research needs. A comprehensive reading of the material followed data collection. The analysis focused on finding patterns, categories, themes, and research gaps. The data were summarized according to themes to highlight the areas emerging from the analysis. The method made it possible to map the available research on the topic and identify the research gaps. Finally, the results were reported in written form. The review findings were organized into two main sections. First, TCKs' experiences span the range from pre-departure views all the way to repatriation. Second, the challenges and benefits ATCKs experience from their international background. The last phase of the review gave rise to a proposed future research agenda.

3.3 Empirical studies: qualitative research methods

This section presents the research strategy, data collection process, sample description, and specifies the steps of data analysis.

3.3.1 Research strategy

The study's research strategy is based on a qualitative research approach. The empirical studies looked to deepen understanding of TCKs' adjustment and development experiences abroad and the long-term impacts of such international experience on ATCKs' later working lives and careers. The qualitative research strategy with a qualitative survey (pilot data) and in-depth semi-structured interviews (main data) enabled studying individuals' subjective experiences (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015) and how they make sense and interpret those experiences.

3.3.2 Data collection

The empirical data collection was conducted over two stages. The collection of written answers constituted the pilot stage of the research, focusing on the children of assigned expatriates. Following the main data collection, which included in-depth interviews with ATCKs from a broader range of backgrounds. Participants included children of both assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the TCK experience across different types of international mobility. Below, both data collection stages are presented in detail.

Pilot stage: a qualitative survey

The pilot data were collected from 12 ATCKs whose families had all been on expatriate assignment in China for business reasons. The pilot data collection was organized by sending out questions on their backgrounds and experiences to individuals who were or had been abroad. To qualify for the research, the participants were expected to have had a minimum of a one-year stay away from their primary passport country before the age of 18 due to their parents' work. The study participants were typically contacted via email, but Facebook was also used to reach people. The majority of the participants were found via the author's expatriate family network or were identified using members of that network as intermediaries to facilitate access to suitable participants. The remainder emerged from applying a snowball method. The author was familiar with two of the study participants. The remaining participants were from the relatively large Finnish expatriate community, where the author has network connections, typically expatriates' partners, but no prior personal contact with the individuals who took part in the study. For the purpose of the pilot study, all individuals within this network who were relevant to the study's criteria were contacted and invited to participate. No further selection or screening was applied, reducing the risk of selection bias.

Any prior relation can influence participants' openness and potentially affect the authenticity of the data. To address these concerns, steps were taken to ensure consistency (i.e., same procedures and methods for all), confidentiality (i.e., data stored securely, limiting access to data exclusively to researchers, no identifiable details in publications), and reflexivity (i.e., reflexivity discussed openly in research) throughout the process. The researcher remained aware of how personal background and relationships might affect the data collection process and reflected those factors and took steps to minimize potential bias to enhance the study's credibility. In addition, phone calls, text messages, emails, and Facebook messages were sent back and forth to explain the research project and strengthen the trust relationship. As the participants had all experienced their parents' expatriate assignment in China,

sometimes even in the same city, strict anonymity was enforced owing to some topics of the research being sensitive. For this reason, detailed information about the participants concerned is not presented.

The survey employed open-ended questions to collect detailed responses that facilitated a deep exploration of the interviewees' perspectives and experiences. The questions were categorized to address pre-departure issues, such as: "How did you feel when you heard that your family was relocating to China, and why did you feel like that?" There followed some questions about life abroad: "Did life in China feel more challenging or easier than in your homeland? Why?" and "What caused you the most trouble or stress during the assignment?". Questions also addressed thoughts about the future, including: "How do you think living abroad may have influenced your life?" and "What are your plans for the future?". The respondents were asked to return their answers within two weeks and were contacted again if some information was missing or something was unclear in their written answers. The pilot data provided about 38 pages of text for analysis.

Main stage: semi-structured interviews

After collecting the pilot data, the main data collection took place in April and May 2020. This stage consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews with 34 Finnish ATCKs, with at least one parent employed as an expatriate in the private or public sector (e.g., for the EU). The respondents all met the selection criterion of having spent at least one year living outside of their primary passport country before the age of 18 due to the expatriate work of one or both parents. The second requirement related to their career situation, that is, they were expected to have work experience. This was necessary as they were expected to reflect the impact of their early international experiences on their later working life. The interviews were carried out through Zoom. The reason for using Zoom was not only because the study participants were located around the world, but also because restrictions on contact in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020 (Galanti et al., 2021) made face-to-face interviews impossible. Zoom video conferencing proved easy to use, facilitated accessibility to interviewees, and was time-effective while suiting discussions on personal topics (Gray et al., 2020). Only time differences had to be considered.

Pilot study participants were invited to the interviews, and seven participants were successfully re-contacted and agreed to participate. As outlined earlier, the author knew two of these seven pilot study participants. The overlap of the seven participants was primarily a practical decision to initiate the main data collection phase, as some of these individuals were accessible and willing to continue their

participation. While this overlap supported continuity and efficiency, it is important to acknowledge that researching the same individuals again could influence the findings by allowing them to reflect more deeply in the second round, potentially leading to more articulated or developed responses. The approach is not methodologically problematic but is reported here to support transparency of the procedures. In addition, two participants were found from a co-author's previous expatriate research project, some by using people from a personal network as intermediaries to facilitate access to suitable participants, and the rest emerged via the snowball method when participants recommended friends and acquaintances who met the research criteria. The method produced a sufficiently large dataset reflecting different intercultural experiences.

The interviews first elicited background information such as name, age, information about parents, details of past international experience, work experience, current residence, languages spoken, etc. Next, the participants were asked to candidly recount their adjustment experiences abroad, their perceptions on the development of their career capital abroad, and their career interests and choices after these experiences. The interview questions were loosely structured to follow adjustment theory (e.g., individual, interpersonal relationship, and environmental factors related to adjustment), SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals as three aspects of social cognitive mechanisms), and career capital theory (i.e., three areas of knowing: knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom). The interview questions included broad questions to facilitate rich discussions, such as "What does international experience mean to you?" In addition, participants were asked more detailed questions, including some on the influence of their childhood international experience on their working life in adulthood. The interview questions were sent to the participants prior to the interview to allow them to prepare their responses.

The role of the interviewer was to let the interviewees speak freely without interruption. However, follow-up questions were asked throughout the interviews to lead the discussion in the desired direction and keep sight of the research objectives. Therefore, the interviews did not strictly follow the order of the planned research questions. Nevertheless, all planned interview questions were addressed to ensure that all necessary themes were discussed. The interviews took from 50 to 110 minutes, and 70 minutes on average. Notes were made during the interview to highlight interesting themes, and the interviews were video recorded for later word-by-word transcription. The second data collection provided about 240 pages of text for data analysis.

3.3.3 Sample description

This chapter presents the sample of the study. The data were collected in two stages, and the description of the participants is divided accordingly.

Pilot sample

The pilot participants of the study had all studied in the same international school (IB program) in Suzhou, China. However, this was not an intentional aspect of the sampling process. During data collection, the 12 ATCKs were between 18 and 27 years old, with an average of 21.3 years. In addition, the dataset includes both genders, five men and seven women. The lengths of the assignments varied as the families were abroad for between 1 and 4 years (the average length being 2.6 years). Their families are homogeneous since almost all had nuclear families, except for one blended family structure. Moreover, the assignment in China was the first for all the participants. An interesting insight on the participants' expatriate parent was that most were in top management positions, which might influence the TCK experience abroad, for example, due to a privileged economic situation.

Main sample

In contrast to the pilot participants, the subsequent data collection included people with diverse experiences worldwide. The participants in the main sample also included ATCKs with experience in different schooling systems. See Table 2 for further details.

Table 2. Main sample description

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Countries and lengths of stay abroad before the age of 18 (years)</i>	<i>Education attended abroad*</i>
1	26	Female	China (2,5)	IB
2	26	Male	China (2,5)	IB
3	21	Male	Switzerland (4 ≥)	IB
4	26	Male	China (2)	IB
5	27	Male	China (2)	IB
6	27	Male	USA (3); Switzerland (2); Belgium (10)	Local & ES
7	23	Female	USA (1,5)	Local
8	28	Male	France (1 ≤); Belgium (12)	ES

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Countries and lengths of stay abroad before the age of 18 (years)</i>	<i>Education attended abroad*</i>
9	24	Female	Germany (3); Japan (3); UAE (6)	IB
10	28	Male	Belgium (3)	ES
11	27	Male	France (1 ≤); Belgium (12)	ES
12	22	Female	Vietnam (2 ≤); Bangladesh (2 ≤); Latvia (4 ≥)	IB
13	25	Female	USA (8)	Local
14	31	Female	China (2)	IB
15	23	Female	USA (2); Italy (2)	IB
16	23	Male	China (2)	IB
17	30	Female	China (5,5); Switzerland (3,5)	IB
18	27	Male	Belgium (15)	ES
19	24	Female	Germany (2); USA (2)	Local
20	25	Female	Sweden (2,5); USA (13)	Local
21	26	Female	Belgium (3)	ES
22	28	Female	China (3)	IB
23	23	Female	Sweden (2,5); USA (14,5 ≥)	Local
24	25	Female	Belgium (4)	ES
25	23	Female	Sweden (3 ≤); USA (0,5)	IB & Local
26	25	Female	Belgium (15 ≥)	ES
27	25	Female	Spain (2 ≤); Belgium (3); Switzerland (2)	ES & IB
28	41	Male	Germany (8)	Local
29	25	Male	France (1); Belgium (14)	Local & ES
30	28	Female	Germany (2); Switzerland (7)	IB
31	36	Female	China (2)	IB
32	36	Female	Colombia (3); Chile (8)	IB
33	23	Female	India (3)	IB
34	24	Male	Canada (8)	Local

*IB = international baccalaureate, ES = European school, Local = Local school (public or private)

The participants studied at International Baccalaureate (IB), European School (ES), and local schools (both public and private). The age of the participants during the interviews was between 21 and 41 years, with a mean of 26.5 and a median of 25.5. There were 13 male and 21 female participants. The participants all had work experience, on average, 5.6 years of it. In addition, the participants' time spent abroad varied considerably across the sample, contributing to the richness of the data. Their expatriate parent or parents worked for the public sector (29 percent) and private sector businesses (71 percent). The number of international relocations during the participants' childhood with their parents varied from one to five, and they spent an average of just over seven years abroad. Participants had lived in China, Switzerland, the USA, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, UAE, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Latvia, Italy, Sweden, Spain, Colombia, Chile, India, and Canada. In addition, some families had accepted expatriate assignments to the same country several times.

3.3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was selected as a suitable method for the data analysis since it enables systematic analysis of the collected qualitative data (Puusa & Juuti, 2020) and aims to summarize the research topic in question (Sarajärvi & Tuomi, 2017). A pilot study was conducted to identify areas warranting deeper investigation. It provided preliminary insights that helped shape the main data collection exercise. The pilot data findings highlighted the need for a more in-depth exploration of TCK backgrounded individuals' experiences across different countries to address the research objectives more comprehensively.

First, comprehensive notes were made during each interview (the main data collection stage) to highlight the themes that arose within the topics. The notes provided a general view of the findings. In the next phase, the video recordings of the interviews were transcribed. The data became familiar during the interview and transcription stages, and the essential themes were identified in the preliminary identification (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015). After that, all the written material (pilot data and main data) was read multiple times to ensure the author was thoroughly familiar with the dataset. In the analysis for Article 2, both pilot and main data were utilized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The analyses presented in Articles 3 and 4 are based on the main data; however, insights from the pilot findings guided the main data collection.

The pilot and main data collection provided about 278 pages of written data for further analysis. The analysis was conducted using content analysis, in which codes were developed inductively and iteratively. The themes were not imposed based on prior knowledge but allowed to emerge from the data itself. Next, the choice of

analysis software was carefully evaluated to ensure it was suitable for the content analysis method. NVivo software was used to analyze the relatively large volume of data since it enables the organization of written material according to keywords and similar meanings (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019) to facilitate interpretations of phenomena. In addition, color coding was used in NVivo to highlight the nuances and depth of the experiences.

In the analysis process, NVivo software enabled the pilot and main datasets to be managed effectively. The tool provided the option to analyze the pilot data and main data as separate datasets or as an integrated dataset, ensuring that any differences in data origin or context were preserved and accounted for during analysis. The flexibility of the software supported methodological rigor by allowing the researcher to maintain consistency and comparability while leveraging the full richness of the data. Throughout the data analysis, efforts were made to maintain analytical neutrality and critical self-reflection, to mitigate the possible biases arising from the researcher's familiarity with the context under analysis. The qualitative content analysis enabled maintaining researcher detachment throughout the analysis process by providing a systematic and structured approach to coding and categorizing the data, which helps to prevent subjective biases.

Systematic coding helps reduce the risk of researchers over- or under-interpreting certain aspects of the data. Furthermore, all participants were assigned numerical codes during the data analysis process to prevent any bias in data interpretation. In addition, the researcher's cultural background was the same as that of the respondents, which eased the interpretation of the data. The guiding principle of the analysis was to ensure that the participants' voices were authentically represented, minimizing the influence of the researcher, and maintaining the trustworthiness of the results. In the final stage, the findings were analyzed through the theoretical lens of each article, and conclusions were drawn. The findings of the study are situated within a specific social and cultural context, rather than being universally generalizable. Nevertheless, many of the emerging themes, such as positive outcomes of the early international experience, resonated strongly across diverse individuals within the studied ATCK population, lending credibility to their broader relevance.

3.4 Evaluating the trustworthiness of the qualitative research

To strengthen the trustworthiness and quality of the dissertation, credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity) were addressed in several ways (see Lincoln & Guba

(1985) on trustworthiness criteria for qualitative studies). In qualitative research methods, interviews are the most common way to gather data, and the researcher's role in the production should be transparent (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). The current study ensures transparency by providing a detailed description of the research practices applied.

First, the topic was researched through a literature review and empirical research. The literature review provided a solid theoretical understanding and ensured that theoretically relevant aspects were covered in the empirical studies. Second, the empirical data collection comprised two separate steps with separate datasets, and a detailed description of the data collection procedures used is provided to enhance transparency and support the confirmability of the research. The first pilot data strengthened the quality of the interviews by providing a broad understanding of the topic and strengthened the planning of the semi-structured interview questions.

Even though the interview topics are pre-determined in semi-structured interviews (Schmidt, 2004), the method still permits subsequent questions and enables exploring how participants made sense of their experiences. Importantly, the open-ended interview questions could not be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. The inductive interview questions were intended to encourage participants to share their experiences openly in their own words. While this approach helps generate rich and nuanced data, it also carries risks of unintentionally leading respondents toward certain topics or interpretations. To address this, the interviewer was conscious of the need to remain as neutral as possible, allowing interviewees to guide the conversation based on their own perspectives. The interview questions were also tested to ensure clarity and relevance to generate rich data aligned with the study's objectives (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). The questions were trialed with two participants in March 2020, enhancing the dependability of the research.

Third, before the actual data collection, phone calls, text messages, emails, or Facebook messages were exchanged with each participant to gain their trust and commit them to the research. Throughout the data collection phase, participants used their native language, Finnish, to avoid misinterpretations or losing nuanced meanings that only native speakers could understand. Fourth, to address the potential bias of the author knowing two study participants, a consistent interview guide was used to ensure that all participants were treated equally and asked the same questions. In addition, the data were coded and analyzed without participants' names to minimize associations with the respondents. The use of known networks raises the risk of potential bias, but it was the route to accessing the ATCK participants. However, it is important to note that, except for the two respondents, participants were selected without prior knowledge of their individual life histories

or outcomes, which supports the trustworthiness of the research. Moreover, the study's findings are strengthened by reflexivity, methodological transparency, and analytical consistency throughout the process. Fifth, research participants had varying backgrounds, ages, years spent abroad, and host locations worldwide; that diversity contributed to the transferability of the findings, as homogeneous groups pose a risk of sample bias. Additionally, the data includes participants who were educated in both private and public schools during their time abroad, which enhances the credibility of the research by capturing a broader range of experiences across various educational settings.

Sixth, while COVID-19 regulations restricted all in-person contact, using the Zoom meeting application to conduct the interviews rather than telephone calls helped increase trust. Trust is essential between interviewer and interviewee to foster open communication (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). In addition, Zoom video communication provided access to a diverse set of participants worldwide (Gray et al., 2020). It also revealed non-verbal expressions that eased communication and promoted engagement (Archibald et al., 2019). Seventh, the participant availability, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that restricted leisure-time activities in the spring of 2020, contributed to the research as respondents dedicated time to thoughtful conversations, which fostered detailed data collection and enhanced the dependability of the research. At the time, the participants were working and/or studying remotely, which increased familiarity with a videoconferencing tool and reduced the chances of technical difficulties.

Finally, the interviews were conducted in a quiet location to avoid any interruptions. This also made it possible to safeguard the interviewees' privacy and confidentiality (Gray et al., 2020). In addition, to increase the trustworthiness of the data collected, the participants were asked to review the transcripts and correct any inaccuracies (Puusa & Juuti, 2020). Only two participants made some minor adjustments to their transcripts, such as rephrasing or adding brief clarification, to improve the clarity of their expression. These changes were not tied to any specific thematic areas. The modifications did not change the final analysis but allowed for more precise presentation of the participant's voice. The majority of the respondents did not provide feedback on the transcripts, while a few confirmed receipt and affirmed their accuracy. Although most chose not to engage further, this non-response can still hold meaning within the phenomenological hermeneutical approach, as it may suggest that participants felt their experiences were accurately represented and saw nothing to correct or any need to add information. Furthermore, the research participants were informed that the data would be carefully stored as the discussions delved into personal life and sensitive topics. Thus, the anonymity of the participants was

promised to be carefully fostered. The transcripts were stored for later checks, and the data were stored safely on a personal computer that requires password access.

4 SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES

This chapter presents a summary of the articles that comprise the dissertation. The current study presents four articles: a review article about TCKs' early life international experiences and the impacts of such experiences on ATCKs' later life (Article 1), factors affecting TCKs' adjustment (Article 2), early international exposure and its impact on ATCKs' career capital (Article 3), ATCKs' long-term career interests and choices (Article 4).

4.1 Review Article 1. [Adult] third culture kids: Why do early life international experiences matter?

Expatriation has become one of the most widely studied areas of international human resource management due to its significance to companies, expatriates, and their families. It is common for expatriates to be accompanied by their families, and scholars have thus become interested in expatriate families, including expatriate children as part of the picture. Cross-cultural management literature refers to these children as *third culture kids* (TCKs), and when these individuals become adults, they are called *adult third culture kids* (ATCKs). The article aimed to review the existing literature on (A)TCKs and develop a future research agenda based on the findings.

The literature review was conducted by searching the Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO, and SCOPUS databases. The search terms included *adult third culture kid*, *ATCK*, *expatriate children*, *third culture kid*, *TCK*, *third culture individual*, and *global nomad*. Full English text articles from peer-reviewed academic journals and books were included. The review covers research across different disciplines, in particular international business, education, and psychology. The review is built on two individual sections. The first covers TCK experiences during their stay abroad from pre-departure to repatriation. The second examines the long-term impacts of such early international experience, dividing the sections into the challenges and benefits of having an international background.

Pre-departure views are known to be an important part of the expatriation cycle. However, the expectations of children have not attracted much research attention (see, e.g., De Sivatte et al., 2019). It is known that leaving friends behind in the pre-departure stage impacts TCKs' overall willingness to move abroad (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). However, international experience and language fluency supported their later adjustment abroad (De Sivatte et al., 2019). Rosenbusch and Cseh's (2012) case study highlights the importance of training and support programs to the whole moving family before departure, during the time abroad, and in the repatriation phase. Although the pre-departure training

is still limited even within multinational corporations (MNCs) that have expatriate programs, those families that head abroad on their own initiative are likely to be in an even more difficult situation in the absence of corporate training and support practices (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013).

The topic of TCK *adjustment* has received some research attention (e.g., Alston & Nieuwoudt, 1992; Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). However, compared to the extensive number of studies on expatriate adjustment, the evidence is still very limited. Moving abroad and adjusting to a new environment causes various challenges for TCKs (Banerjee et al., 2020; Weeks et al., 2010). Weeks et al. (2010) found that individual factors (open-mindedness, freedom, and academic success), interpersonal relationships (friends, family, and repatriation training), and environmental factors (cultural differences and living conditions) are central to TCKs' adjustment abroad. Those findings were later expanded upon by De Sivatte et al. (2019) with additional factors that impact the adjustment of TCKs: social and academic self-efficacy, the type of international school, academic system differences, and the different academic requirement levels in the host country.

Finally, the *repatriation stage* warrants more research; however, the few studies on the topic show that it can be a challenging process for TCKs (Bikos et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2013; Ra et al., 2023). One description applied to TCKs is *hidden immigrants* in their home country. The label reflects how they look like the local population, but think differently, owing to their experiences gained abroad. A TCK returning home might tend to view life from a foreigner's perspective, but the people surrounding them consider TCKs to belong to the dominant cultural group (Pollock et al., 2017). The need for repatriation support and training is highlighted in the literature, but the topic is still under-researched. Promoting realistic expectations about life in the host country might overcome the challenges of repatriation adjustment.

In light of the existing evidence, *ATCKs' challenges* in their adult life include lacking a sense of belonging due to the time spent disconnected from a place (Fail et al., 2004), which can cause identity-related insecurity. The situation can continue into later life when ATCKs can find themselves rootless and restless (Pollock et al., 2017). Accordingly, they might struggle to live permanently in a single location (Moore & Barker, 2012) and stay in one location for only limited periods (Westropp et al., 2016) in their adult life. Moreover, scholars have increasingly become interested in the *longer-term benefits* of early international experiences. The ATCK cohort tends to have accrued social intelligence due to living abroad and being exposed to multicultural environments (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). They have also been found to have strong language and cross-cultural skills (Caselius & Suutari, 2023; Tarique & Weisbord, 2013), to be culturally adaptable (Selmer & Luring, 2014), fit easily into

new cultures (Caselius & Suutari, 2023; Westropp et al., 2016), and to be culturally open-minded individuals (De Waal & Born, 2020; Westropp et al., 2016). Accordingly, they are typically suitable expatriate candidates (Westropp et al., 2016) and form an interesting population for those recruiting for international jobs.

The research agenda for the future covers all phases of the TCK journey. The current understanding of their pre-departure issues, adjustment, and repatriation all need further studies to create as comprehensive a level of understanding as we have about expatriates and their partners. While ATCKs' challenges have already attracted some research interest, the review highlights the importance of studying the positive impacts of such global experiences because the advantages of time spent abroad may outweigh the disadvantages. The ATCK group has been exposed to different cultures at a highly receptive age and is known to build global careers (Westropp et al., 2016). However, the evidence is still very limited, and there is more to learn about how they benefit from their past international experiences in their early and later careers.

Research has also examined TCK experiences in circumstances where their parents have long-term global careers and became permanent immigrants or re-expatriates somewhere else, rather than repatriating to their home countries (Mello et al., 2023b). A TCK in that situation is likely to live abroad for most, or at least an extensive part, of their youth. Questions over ATCKs' educational decisions, career paths, and life choices remain unanswered. In addition, ATCKs have been referred to as *cultural hybrids* (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009) and ideal expatriate candidates (Bonebright, 2010; Westropp et al., 2016). However, more research on how transferable their internationally developed career capital is—in terms of the three ways of knowing—in their future careers would be welcome. In addition, ATCKs' career expectations, decision-making, career identities, career tracks, and commitment are avenues not well explored. Moreover, we need further research on whether ATCKs develop unique strengths abroad compared to their peers. From a methodological perspective, the scoping review offered a structured and transparent approach to mapping the existing research, providing a comprehensive foundation that identified key themes, gaps, and directions for future study.

4.2 Research Article 2. Pulling on the same rope: Factors affecting third culture kids' adjustment abroad

The primary purpose of Article 2 was to analyze factors connected with TCKs' adjustment. As an outcome, the study identified a set of new factors explaining TCK adjustment. Furthermore, the research includes participants who have attended

different types of schools abroad, an aspect largely neglected in prior research. There is extensive research on expatriate adjustment, and the volume of partner adjustment research has also increased. However, notably fewer studies have been conducted on TCK adjustment. Therefore, the article contributes by analyzing factors that impact TCK adjustment abroad, including how pre-departure factors influence their adjustment, enhancing the understanding of the full TCK adjustment cycle. Meanwhile, research on expatriate partners has already been conducted over a similar cycle (e.g., Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020).

The data consist of the pilot data and main data. The pilot data were gathered from ATCKs who had lived in China during their childhood. To extend the depth of the research, the main data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ATCKs who had international experiences from around the world. All the qualitative data were combined and analyzed.

The study continued the work of Weeks et al. (2010), who found individual factors (open-mindedness, freedom, and academic success), interpersonal relationships (friends, family, and repatriation training), and environmental factors (cultural differences and living conditions) to be central to TCKs' adjustment. The study identified a previously unknown set of factors: openness to experience, pre-departure knowledge, language fluency (knowledge of the school language), school systems, and an internationally mobile lifestyle.

The theoretical contributions of the study lay in deepening the understanding of the factors connected to TCK adjustment abroad and in developing a model that integrates these factors. The study confirms the importance of studying TCKs' pre-departure stage, as pre-departure experiences were found to impact the adjustment of TCKs abroad. Openness to experience was important since personal motivation and a positive attitude facilitated smooth adjustment. The personal motivation reflecting an eagerness to engage with different cultures, aligns with the concept of cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003). Moreover, according to self-determination theory, when relocation is self-determined, it tends to promote curiosity and openness to new experiences and personal growth (De Araujo, 2021). In addition, pre-departure knowledge, such as visiting the living environment and school, promotes realistic expectations about living abroad (see also Black & Gregersen (1991) on partner adjustment and pre-move visits).

It was evident that it is very important for TCKs to learn the school language for academic self-efficacy and social integration reasons (see also Shaffer & Harrison, (2001) on the importance of language fluency among partners). Moreover, school systems that specialized in educating TCKs were found to advance TCKs' adjustment (see also Shaffer & Harrison (2001) on expatriate partners and the situational

definition of self). In addition, an internationally mobile lifestyle was found to be connected to TCK adjustment since frequent family moves require TCKs to build new relationships in new locations and thus lose some friends in each relocation. Furthermore, TCKs with prior international experience tended to have more realistic expectations about the relocation process (see also Black et al., (1991) on the importance of expatriates' accurate expectations). They also constantly feared uncertainty about how long they or their friends would stay in the current location.

This second article incorporates a pilot study alongside the main set of interviews. This enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings; however, the sample size and context-specific focus limit generalizability, and future research is needed to examine these insights in broader and more diverse contexts. For instance, including other TCK groups (such as military and missionary offspring) could deepen the understanding of TCK adjustment and whether the same factors explain their adjustment. More should also be understood about TCKs who are home-schooled or attend boarding school. In addition, TCKs from blended families might face other challenges due to the missing parent. In addition, future longitudinal studies could investigate the special nuances of TCK adjustment. Finally, it would be important to study whether the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the expatriation practices that influence the adjustment of TCKs.

4.3 Research Article 3. The global chameleons: The impact of early life international exposure on the career capital of adult third culture kids

The third article examined the impact of early life international exposure on the career capital of ATCKs. There are a substantial number of adults who have developed international expertise while living abroad during their childhood due to their parents' expatriation. It has also been found that such early life international experiences have extensive impacts on TCKs (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), and such experiences also influence their career interests and career choices in the longer run (Cottrell, 2002). Since finding skilled people for international roles is one of the greatest human resource challenges facing MNCs (Kirk, 2021), ATCKs might form an important recruitment pool for international positions. In recent years, scholars have become increasingly interested in expatriate partners and their acculturation experiences, well-being, career capital development, and career impacts (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021; Mutter & Thorn, 2019; Stoermer et al., 2021). However, expatriate children have received much less attention from the development and future career angles (Abe, 2018; Nash, 2020).

The developments flowing from expatriation have often been explored through career capital (CC) theory (Jokinen et al., 2008; Suutari, Brewster, & Dickmann, 2018). The theory is based on three ways of knowing: knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why (Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). The CC concept has already been used among expatriates and their partners, but not to understand the development of expatriate children. The study aimed to answer the following research question: *Does early international experience develop the knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom career capital of ATCKs, and if so, in what ways?* The research interest was in ATCKs' perceptions of their adult working life, and also how they thought their childhood experiences influenced their career capital as adults. The study adopted a broad CC perspective, which expanded the existing knowledge beyond the development of cultural competencies, which has been dominant in ATCK development research.

A major finding is that ATCKs consider their early international experience to have had an extensive and long-lasting impact on their CC. The impacts were found to be mainly positive, but some experiences were also found to be less positive. The time abroad fostered experiences they were typically extremely proud of and could use to advance their careers. That is an important finding since earlier studies have focused on challenges associated with later career development (Bikos et al., 2014). Noteworthy is that ATCKs were found to build quite similar CC as expatriates and their partners, regardless of whether they were children during their time abroad. In turn, those working abroad naturally develop additional work-related competencies.

Regarding knowing-why CC, the time abroad bolstered self-awareness, modified their identity and values, and helped develop a strong international orientation and self-confidence (see also Jokinen (2010) on expatriates' similar experiences and strengthened self-awareness). They saw themselves as global individuals who work comfortably in international settings and have a strong preference for an international career overall (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). Moreover, they were found to develop good stress and uncertainty tolerance (i.e., how they handle uncertainty and new environments). A similar finding has been reported among expatriate partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). The ATCKs' early international experiences also encouraged an openness to experience (see also Westropp et al., 2016). However, childhood time abroad was linked to some negative aspects from the knowing-why perspective. The respondents who stayed abroad for a long time might describe themselves as rootless individuals as they do not belong anywhere (see also Fail et al., 2004). Many ATCKs experienced a diminished sense of familiarity with both their home and host country(ies). The ATCKs also often missed out on experiences commonly shared by their peers in their state of citizenship (Pollock et al., 2017). Such experiences also seeded restlessness in ATCKs, meaning they felt compelled to

frequently change jobs and locations to maintain their motivation levels (see Suutari, 2003, for similar findings on global managers). The demands of schools abroad during childhood raised their achievement expectations for their future career and life, which sometimes felt exhausting.

All of the respondents considered that their knowing-how CC developed during their time abroad. Similarly to expatriates, language and cross-cultural skills were easily transferable to ATCKs' later studies and working life (see also, Jokinen (2010) on expatriates; Caselius & Mäkelä (2022) on ATCKs). Accordingly, they may be able to avoid common issues expatriates face, such as companies undervaluing their cultural competencies and the struggle to find a suitable job upon repatriation (Mäkelä et al., 2016; Mello et al., 2022). In addition, ATCKs highlighted their internationally developed social skills as the most important asset since they could already benefit from them during their early career phases. They stood out when applying for jobs, and ATCKs saw themselves as a unifying force within teams, due to their well-developed social skills and ability to understand diverse perspectives. This is a valuable finding as Smith and Kearney (2016) reported that TCKs from the USA felt invisible and overlooked as a population. The ATCKs were also aware of the various academic skills that benefited them during later education stages and jobs. This finding is particularly important given the limited information on academic competencies among (A)TCKs in existing literature (Rounsaville, 2014). They were also found to cope easily and therefore be ready to take international positions in the future (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). Interestingly, ATCKs had often developed a knowledge of international markets that proved useful in working life. Regarding knowing-how CC, the respondents also had to come to terms with domestic languages if they had not studied them abroad (see Smith and Kearney (2016) on the challenges with classroom practices among repatriated TCKs in the USA). In addition, losing their personal social network in their home country was mentioned as a challenge that occurred due to international childhood.

The development of knowing-whom CC occurred in two separate areas: host-country school relationships and expatriate community relationships. Internationally developed knowing-whom CC proved valuable for ATCKs' later careers, as their access to personal international networks often facilitated career advancement. An ATCK network would often encompass both their peers and their parents' business acquaintances, whereas expatriates typically develop their social networks primarily with workplace connections (Jokinen, 2010). These networks of contacts within MNCs were especially important at the beginning of TCKs' working lives and often gave them an advantage in landing their first jobs. A negative aspect is related to having lost their social network in their home country. An ATCK applying for work in their home country could find a depleted network of restricted job opportunities (see

Mello et al. (2022) on expatriates' diminished satisfaction with their career progression after repatriation).

From a theoretical point of view, the study contributed to expatriate family literature by adding an understanding of the CC development of expatriate children in terms of knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom CC. Furthermore, it increases our understanding of how transitional childhood experiences influence ATCKs' careers and career success during their adulthood. In the future, longitudinal studies could broaden the view of the long-term utilization of developed CC. They could supplement the understanding of ATCKs' early international experience and their later employability and career paths. Finally, while women are still underrepresented among expatriates (Bastida et al., 2021), expatriate families provide international experience to their children, regardless of gender. Importantly, all ATCKs considered that the time abroad created a competitive advantage, especially when applying for international roles. From a methodological approach, it must be acknowledged that these largely optimistic findings are based on subjective self-reports, influenced by both context and the retrospective lens through which participants viewed their experiences.

4.4 Research Article 4. Expatriate childhood as the first domino: Does early international exposure lead to a later international career?

The purpose of the fourth article was to explore how ATCKs perceive their expatriate childhood to be linked to their later career interests and choices in adulthood work and life. The current article is the first qualitative study to empirically examine ATCKs' long-term career interests and choices among individuals with work experience. This research paper is based on 34 semi-structured interviews with Finns who have at least one year abroad in childhood or adolescence. Qualitative content analysis was selected for data analysis since it was a suitable method for a qualitative study (Puusa & Juuti, 2020). Moreover, SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) was adopted as the theoretical framework for the paper. Social cognitive mechanisms relevant to career interests and choices are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal representations (Sheu & Bordon, 2017).

The study explores the factors connected to ATCKs' development of confidence, the outcome expectations of their international childhood, and career ambitions. Third culture kids are known to desire international work (Lam & Selmer, 2004), and the current study confirms that the desire maintains long into their actual adulthood career. The findings conclude that an international childhood develops ATCKs'

confidence notably and drives performance accomplishments. The group was found to be confident about taking on international responsibilities in their early working lives because doing so was a familiar aspect of life. They had vicarious experience of operating successfully in international careers gained through observing their parents and other expatriate community members (see SCCT for vicarious experiences, Bandura, 1986). Accordingly, ATCKs are confident of mastering the capabilities needed to work in such a career. Several participants aimed to build careers similar to those of their parents, a finding that contrasts with those of Hartman's (2022) study on missionary children.

The ATCKs informing the current study did not highlight verbal persuasion as a meaningful factor in their vocational or career decision-making due to their strong self-efficacy (see Bandura (1986) on SCCT and verbal persuasion). Instead, they referred to their family members as more akin to sparring partners aiding decision-making. This aligns with earlier knowledge that higher self-esteem and stronger vocational identity are positively associated with greater career decision self-efficacy (Choi et al., 2012). Their childhood social influence played an important role in the subject ATCKs' long-term educational and vocational decision-making since IB and ES students were actively applying to foreign universities due to their influence in school. This choice is a meaningful long-term reflection of early life international exposure to ATCKs later in life. Finally, early life international exposure strengthened ATCKs' psychological resilience by inculcating high stress tolerance. This is a novel and important finding, as previous studies have typically associated a TCK background with increased stress in later life (Davis et al., 2010; Purnell & Hoban, 2014), rather than stress tolerance that is beneficial in adult life.

Strong self-efficacy is also connected to outcome expectations. That is because people who are confident about their capabilities typically consider the positive outcomes of their working lives (Lent & Brown, 2019; Lent et al., 2010). The physical outcome expectations of early life international exposure suggest that an international past remains influential in the later lives of ATCKs. Most participants considered that the experience benefited their current or past employment. Adulthood international experiences have been reported to spur more work opportunities compared to purely domestic experiences (Benson & Pattie, 2008). Similar to expatriates, TCKs' international experiences also drive more career opportunities, even though TCKs are children when abroad (see also Benson & Pattie (2008) on adult international experiences fostering internal and external work opportunities).

It appears that ATCKs have various work options early in their careers, as they are somewhat internationally qualified at that stage. Their work trajectories seemed to start without an international aspect, but they could quickly direct their career

toward international roles, such as international volunteering, working in global teams, or on international projects, frequent travel, or self-initiated expatriation. This is a noteworthy finding, as repatriates are often described as dissatisfied following their international experience (Brewster & Suutari, 2005). In contrast, early international experiences may provide a valuable foundation for ATCKs' later international careers, which they often describe in generally positive terms. This outcome appears to align with their expectation that their international background could support their future working lives. The social outcome expectations of ATCKs are expected to peak when people in their childhood international social networks reach higher organizational positions or when working in international positions themselves. From self-evaluative outcomes, ATCKs are expected to benefit from their internationally developed independence, self-confidence, habits of success, persistence, effectiveness, and diligent attitude (see also Ramaswami et al., 2016, about expatriates' internationally developed skills and future career aspirations).

Self-efficacy and ambitions are linked as they determine how much effort people are willing to invest into achieving goals (Bandura, 1986, p. 470). From the choice-content goals view, our respondent ATCKs had a strong desire to work in international positions since they were all open to international work in the future (see also Cottrell (2002) on ATCKs' international orientation). For some ATCKs, the international aspect was the most important when setting vocational goals. This is a notable finding, as earlier studies have emphasized various negative outcomes of an international background (Davis et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these individuals were children during their international experience, and their time abroad strongly influenced their later adult choices. In addition, ATCKs were found to set high-performance goals for themselves and often perform well in given tasks. This is rather typical for young adults, as possessing confidence in their ability to achieve set goals is essential when making career decisions (Dik et al., 2008). As international exposure is important to ATCKs, most had collected international experiences in adulthood, even though many were still in the primary stages of their career.

The article contributes to the literature by exploring the effects of early life international experiences on work-life decisions through a social cognitive lens. The number of SCCT studies in the international context remains rather low, so this study is also an important contribution to career decision-making from a theoretical perspective. This study highlighted ATCKs' interest in a variety of international roles and their aim to achieve high organizational positions. The practical contributions lie in guiding hiring managers to recognize how international background reflects ATCKs' solid education, strong language skills, intercultural competence, and eagerness to work in an international setup. This population has valuable

international strengths, skills, and knowledge that will be valuable to multinational companies since they need less training to operate in different cultural environments. Methodologically, the study captures participants' views at a single point in time, which limits the ability to understand how their early international experiences influence ATCKs' careers over the long term.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current section presents the discussion and conclusions of the dissertation. It starts with a discussion of the theoretical contributions of the review paper and empirical studies, and at the end, a summary of the overall contribution is provided. In addition, the practical implications, limitations of the study, and future research directions are reviewed.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

5.1.1 Article 1: Review of existing research on TCKs/ ATCKs and a future research agenda

The scoping review article aimed to map what is known about TCKs and ATCKs in light of existing research and, based on that, frame a future research agenda. The review identified the different steps of the TCK journey and found that the focus has been mainly on experiences gained abroad and, to some extent, also on subsequent experiences. However, the pre-departure issues have attracted far less research focus (De Sivatte et al., 2019). The current research landscape is interesting because the pre-departure issues of expatriates and their partners have attracted far more research interest (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020; Puck et al., 2008; Tahir & Chamas, 2023; Venkataiah, 2022). It is important to understand TCKs' motives, expectations, and concerns in the pre-departure phase and the impacts of these pre-departure issues on their experiences abroad. Despite the limited evidence on the subject, there are indications that previous international experience, language fluency, and pre-departure training and support impact TCK adjustment (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010; Pollock et al., 2017). The paper also contributed by recognizing that a family has an active role in the decision process around accepting a relocation (Chew & Zhu, 2002). As SIE families have more autonomy over relocation decisions than assigned expatriates (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2013), further research is needed, in particular, on SIEs' decision-making processes and pre-departure considerations. In light of this, future research could examine the unique challenges faced by TCKs of SIE parents and the potential long-term benefits of early cultural and social preparation. Moreover, studies could explore how such preparation influences their identity development, cross-cultural adjustment, and eventual career success, making a valuable contribution to the expatriate literature.

The importance of pre-departure training practices has been discussed for decades. However, companies still seem to lack understanding about the necessary training and support practices (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012), and TCKs

do not often get any company-provided training and support (Banerjee et al., 2020). The current review identified the need for future research on pre-departure support activities before, during, and after living abroad. Multinationals might consider investing in the preparation of TCKs. As employers, they could achieve potential returns in the form of long-term employee retention, increased family satisfaction, and improved overall assignment success. Future research could explore this aspect further by assessing the effectiveness of targeted training programs for TCKs and evaluating how parental support influences their future career outcomes. If the topic were better understood, SIE families, who do not have similar levels of support that assigning employers can provide, would benefit.

The adjustment issues of expatriates have been extensively researched over the years (Dang et al., 2022). Those of TCKs have already attracted some research attention (see e.g., Alston & Nieuwoudt, 1992; Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), but the research remains limited. Greater knowledge would help companies to develop comprehensive training programs for TCKs. In addition, I found no existing work on TCK adjustment issues among different family types. The educational context of TCKs when abroad is also interesting. Research exists on their experiences in international schools (Hayden et al., 2000; Hayden & Thompson, 2008). However, the current review paper addresses the importance of future studies to extend the knowledge on TCK experiences in different school systems. The conducted review also stressed the need to examine the antecedents and outcomes of TCKs' repatriation adjustment (Smith & Kearney, 2016). Understanding suitable repatriation practices would enhance the opportunities to develop repatriation training for TCKs.

The review paper also contributed by mapping the evidence on ATCKs' challenges and the benefits of their global background. For example, they were found to suffer emotional detachment from the home culture (De Waal & Born, 2021), challenges with the formation of a personal identity (Gilbert, 2008), rootlessness, and restlessness (Pollock et al., 2017). Other psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, have attracted scholars' research interests too (e.g., Davis et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2021). The review found a research gap relating to the long-term detrimental effects of an international background. However, the review highlighted the shift from researching ATCKs' challenges to studying the benefits of that form of childhood and adolescence. Adult third culture kids have strengths, skills, and knowledge that they transfer to their lives, education, and careers. The review also reported the absence of research on (A)TCKs who migrate permanently and never return to their home country. Many unanswered questions exist around ATCKs' long-term mobile lifestyles in different countries, including frequent re-expatriation experiences and adjustment.

It would also be beneficial to know more about ATCKs' learnings and how transferable they are to their later lives, education, and careers. The review suggested CC theory be used among ATCKs to gain a similar level of understanding about the development of CC abroad as we have for expatriates and their partners (see, e.g., Dickmann et al., 2018; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). It was also suggested that future studies could use the theories applied in expatriate research to extend understanding of ATCKs' career identities, decision-making, career expectations, paths, and commitment. Future research agenda could also include research about ATCKs' possible unique strengths compared to their peers with no international experience and individuals with other types of international exposure. The review suggested several ways to collect data about TCKs and ATCKs that could address known issues around data collection (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). Current technological platforms could provide new options for data collection.

5.1.2 Article 2: Factors affecting TCKs' adjustment abroad

The theoretical contributions of the second article enhance our understanding of the factors connected to TCKs' adjustment abroad. This study expanded the work by Shaffer and Harrison (2001) and Weeks et al. (2010) by providing new insights into TCK adjustment. An outcome is a revised model of factors impacting the adjustment of TCKs. The contribution of the present study connects with the following aspects: First, earlier studies have mainly concentrated on English-speaking TCKs, while participants in the current study were only non-native-English-speaking TCKs. Analyzing the experiences of such TCKs enabled the study to enrich the understanding of the adjustment experiences of different types of TCKs. These non-native-English-speaking TCKs, who studied in IB or local schools, were found to navigate the unique challenges related to language acquisition in multilingual environments and considerable pressure to acquire language skills promptly for social reasons and to foster their desired academic success.

Second, more research has been called for on TCKs' pre-departure experiences (Jones et al., 2022). The current study identified two new previously unreported pre-departure factors affecting TCK adjustment: openness to experience and pre-departure knowledge. Furthermore, some earlier studies have addressed the importance of open-mindedness in the TCKs' cultural adjustment (Van der Zee et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2010). The current study contributed by presenting an even more crucial finding about considerably broader openness to new experiences. Those TCKs who had a positive attitude to moving abroad and were enthusiastic about relocation had a relatively smooth adjustment in the host country. In addition, self-determination theory confirms that if a person's motivation to relocate is self-

determined, the person will likely embrace new experiences and personal growth (De Araujo, 2021).

Scholars have also raised questions about the links between family-level decision-making and TCK adjustment (e.g., Weeks et al., 2010). The current findings are important in indicating that TCKs' involvement in pre-departure decision-making is beneficial and eases adjustment. In addition, pre-departure knowledge—in the form of visiting the living environment and school—supported the respondents' adjustment. It was particularly important for these non-native-English-speaking TCKs to learn the school language promptly for both academic and social reasons. These are novel and important findings since earlier studies have reported that school language fluency would not relate to TCK adjustment (see De Sivatte et al., 2019). Furthermore, as an extension to the De Sivatte et al. (2019) study, the current study contributes to the understanding of the importance of previous international experience by reporting that short-term international traveling supports TCKs' adjustment, due to broadening their understanding of cultural differences in different countries.

Finally, the current study appears to be the first to identify adjustment differences among TCKs who experienced three different school systems. The participants who went to schools specialized in educating TCKs, which typically consider individual language skills, had a smoother adjustment. Those TCKs who attended local schools abroad felt rather like outsiders but interestingly adjusted to the local culture more satisfactorily than IB and ES students. The latter group of TCKs was typically surrounded by others with a similar lifestyle and could, therefore, be living in an expat bubble. In addition, the current study also found that the mobile lifestyle of the international population was related to TCK adjustment due to the realistic expectations about relocations. The finding is important because De Sivatte et al. (2019) reported that TCKs who were required to frequently relocate tired of the process. Finally, although TCK research has developed recently, and the current study provided more evidence on the topic, further research is needed to supplement the limited evidence available (Jones et al., 2022). The current research establishes that TCKs operate outside their comfort zones while adapting to life abroad. Future research could explore whether that experience impacts their subsequent career and life decisions.

5.1.3 Article 3: The impact of early life international exposure on the career capital of ATCKs

The third article contributed to ATCK literature by illustrating that early international exposure has a lifelong impact on CC. The current study was the first to apply the CC

framework among ATCKs. The framework has previously been used to study expatriates (Dickmann & Cerdin, 2018; Dickmann et al., 2018; Jokinen, 2010; Mäkelä et al., 2016) and their partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). The study contributed to our understanding of the developmental impacts of early life experiences abroad and reported new insights into ATCKs' career capital that they had developed as TCKs. A better understanding of ATCKs' CC development complements the entire expatriation research because family is such a crucial part of the entire discussion.

The study analyzed how ATCKs' international past influenced their knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom CC. Overall, the study identified that such experiences were extremely valuable for ATCKs and had long-term impacts on their CC as adults. Interestingly, ATCKs were found to build CC in quite similar areas as expatriates and their partners, even though they were not working abroad at the time. In addition, the participants reported that their backgrounds meant they could positively differentiate themselves in the job market, making their childhood time abroad highly meaningful for their later education, career, and lives.

Regarding *knowing-why* CC, the current study contributed by reporting that international experience had raised ATCKs' self-awareness and self-confidence about their capabilities, as reported among expatriates (Jokinen, 2010). During their time abroad, ATCKs built a clearer understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses and realistic expectations of an international career. The current study also contributed by reporting how their time abroad was a life-changing experience for ATCKs, and the interview excerpts included evidence that it had even "changed them as a person." This finding is important because the impact of such experiences might be expected to be much lighter on expatriates and their partners since people are most receptive to change during childhood and adolescence (Selmer & Lam, 2004). The study recognized that the time abroad fostered ATCKs' international identity, values, broad-mindedness, courage, flexibility, stress, uncertainty tolerance, and the desire for an international career. In addition, an important finding was that ATCKs quickly acquired international experience after their childhood abroad because it opened new international job opportunities for them.

The study also revealed that their backgrounds had negatively affected ATCKs' later lives. They were found to be rootless (Fail et al., 2004), which seemed to last long since the study participants did not often consider familiarity either with the home or host country and culture. They were also found to be restless and needed regular relocations and changes in work roles to maintain their motivation. This restlessness was also perceived as a factor pushing them to apply to foreign universities and higher organizational positions that supported ATCKs' career development.

The study also contributed by finding that ATCKs acquire a broad spectrum of *knowing-how CC* that proved transferable into their later education, career, and lives. They were able to avoid typical problems faced by expatriates, such as companies undervaluing their internationally developed CC (Mäkelä et al., 2016). The ATCKs had undertaken their knowing-how development during childhood and adolescence and could redirect their educational and career decisions according to that CC. Similarly to expatriates (Jokinen, 2010), ATCKs were able to transfer their language and cross-cultural skills to later educational situations and work. Furthermore, the current study reported that the time abroad developed strong social skills among TCKs, which they benefited from later in their work lives. The study also contributed by reporting that social skills were found to be their most important asset in later life. The acquisition of social skills combined with overall confidence in social situations was a major learning from a childhood abroad that notably affected their ability to stand out from their peers when applying for jobs. Their strong language, cross-cultural, and social skills make ATCKs act in a chameleon-like way with people from different cultural backgrounds. Previous studies have reported that TCKs have had difficulties being visible and expressing themselves as an interesting population in the job market (see, e.g., Smith & Kearney, 2016). However, the participants of the current study were extremely proud of their international past and considered it a great asset in the labor market. They had experienced that employers were highly fascinated by their international experiences in job interviews.

Prior research has recognized TCKs' emphasis on academic success (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010) and educational achievement (Cottrell, 2002). However, the current study complemented those results by identifying that TCKs also build a variety of academic skills that were transferable and important in their later education and working life. Due to their developed academic skills (such as presentation, independent working, and writing skills), they were offered demanding projects and positions even during their early careers. In addition, knowledge of certain markets and experience from the expatriate family presented opportunities at work. The major contribution lies in proving that ATCKs develop international CC that promotes their employability without actually working abroad.

It is important to acknowledge that ATCKs' CC also decreased in some areas. One example is language skills that diminished when abroad due to underutilization, typically the home country language(s). However, they did not consider that a major challenge because they gravitated toward international programs after repatriation to their home country, so they could continue to study (usually) in English. While Smith and Kearney (2016) found challenges with classroom practices among repatriated TCKs in the USA, the current study found only content-related gaps among repatriated TCKs (e.g., in knowledge about history, religion, geography, native

and second national languages, or certain other study subjects). However, as the current study focused on the long-term CC that ATCKs develop abroad, these content-related knowledge gaps were more short-term challenges and were overcome in just a few years. Overall, an important finding was that ATCKs valued their developmental experiences acquired abroad and how the CC they had developed was transferable to subsequent studying and working life.

The current study found that ATCKs developed *knowing-whom* CC during their international exposure. Their networks were mainly formed in schools abroad, similar to expatriates who develop their networks mainly in the workplace (Jokinen, 2010). A novel finding is that ATCKs' knowing-whom CC depends heavily on the type of educational institution attended abroad. IB students had wide international networks that they were able to benefit from early in their careers, whereas ES students benefited from their networks if they wanted vocational or career opportunities in Finland or among Finns living abroad. Moreover, some studies have discussed how ATCKs form friendships (Choi et al., 2013; Westropp et al., 2016). The current study found that TCKs also built wide networks while living expatriate-centric lifestyles with their parents' business acquaintances and their families. Therefore, the study provides evidence that ATCKs' childhood networks are relevant to career success and should provide career opportunities in the future. These novel findings are important as earlier studies have been conducted among students or ATCKs without much work experience (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013; Westropp et al., 2016). Earlier studies miss the usefulness of networks formed abroad. In addition, TCKs learn the activity of forming new social networks easily, similar to expatriate partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Social media platforms help maintain their wide networks that are easily activated if needed. While ATCKs were building global networks abroad, they simultaneously lost connections in their home country due to living abroad over the long term. Therefore, some participants reported some issues finding appropriate employment after repatriation. To deepen our understanding, future research is needed to provide broader and more generalizable evidence of CC development among ATCKs. It would also be useful to understand how they utilize those skills over time. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be a valuable route to examining the relationship between ATCKs' CC development and career trajectories.

5.1.4 Article 4: ATCKs' career interests and choices from a social cognitive perspective

The fourth article applied social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) to study ATCKs' career interests and choices. The focus was on understanding the links between ATCK's early international exposure and their long-lasting vocational desires and decisions. The current study shows that ATCKs' *self-efficacy beliefs*

developed due to their global immersion. Their experiences were valuable in the development of confidence and performance accomplishments. Some scholars have studied TCKs and found they have international career desires (Lam & Selmer, 2004; Selmer & Lam, 2004). The current study reported that these desires are long-lasting, and ATCKs have strong international identity and feelings of mastery when working in an international setup. Since ATCKs are raised internationally, they can observe surrounding adults pursuing international careers. Therefore, ATCKs' vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1986, p. 399) caused them to believe that they also mastered the skills necessary for a fruitful international career (e.g., language skills, cultural competence, and social skills). Some were drawn to undertaking their own expatriate assignments due to the familiarity of the "expat bubble", while others preferred more self-directed adventurous paths. The current study also reported that ATCKs are interested in careers similar to those of their parents, which is a novel finding, as a recent study discovered that no children of missionaries were keen on following their parents' careers (Hartman, 2022).

The ATCKs interviewed considered themselves to have strong self-efficacy in navigating their studies and life. As people are often convinced through verbal persuasion and social influence (Bandura, 1986, p. 400), the participants found their parents and family more as "sparring partners" than as convincing and shaping their educational or vocational decisions. However, this study also revealed that IB and ES schools had a strong social influence on them by convincing ATCKs to apply to foreign universities and supporting the process, which reflected the schools' long cooperation with certain universities. That was a novel finding and indicated a lasting influence of early international exposure on the study choices of TCKs. More should be understood about ATCKs' educational decisions since similar findings were not found from students who attended local schools.

Finally, the study contributed by discovering that ATCKs had a greater tolerance of work stress than their peers due to the stressful situations experienced in childhood (adjustment to a new environment, studying in unfamiliar languages, leaving friends behind, and creating new social networks). This finding contributes to the current understanding; earlier studies have reported that a TCK background creates stress in later life (Davis et al., 2010; Purnell & Hoban, 2014). The current study participants developed a stress tolerance that was subsequently useful at work, such as demonstrating resilience during high-pressure situations. This observation was highlighted by the fact that these ATCKs were keen on periodically changing organizations or teams, meaning they tolerate major life changes.

Regarding *outcome expectations*, the study highlighted the meaningful role of respondents' international backgrounds in their current and future careers. These

findings suggest that an international past can contribute positively to ATCKs' employment prospects. This insight could be valuable for expatriate families when considering the potential long-term benefits of expatriation for their children. Generally, people with international experience have access to more internal and external opportunities than their peers without such experience (Benson & Pattie, 2008). A TCK will likely build international options for their later working life, even though their international experience was accrued during childhood. A novel finding to complement the existing literature is that while young ATCKs might start with home-country-based jobs, they tend to redirect their working life to international roles and career paths later. The ATCKs in the study indicated that their early international exposure offered more advantages than disadvantages, and most reported that their childhood experiences had exerted a positive influence on their professional lives. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the subjects represent a relatively privileged group who generally attended high-performing schools and benefited from academic opportunities that could open doors in adulthood. They also described how their background set them apart from other applicants competing for employment roles and enabled them to collaborate effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds in the workplace.

Additionally, they identified advanced language proficiency and strengthened social skills, positively impacting their professional trajectories. From a social outcome expectation view, ATCKs benefit from their networks when their international peers are in higher organizational positions or work themselves into an international setup. Moreover, self-evaluations of outcome expectations indicate they expect to benefit from their independence, self-confidence in achieving success, persistence, effectiveness, and a hard-working attitude.

The study also contributed by reporting that all the studied ATCKs were open to international work in the future. Most interestingly, some explained that the international aspect of work is the defining factor when setting future vocational *goals*. Contrary to earlier findings on various negative outcomes of international exposure (Davis et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2021), the current study revealed that ATCKs had a strong desire for an international dimension to their working life. A pronounced interest in international mobility was evident, as 28 of the 34 participants had already lived in between one and four countries abroad following their childhood experiences. This is particularly relevant given that most participants were still at the early stages of their careers. Their moves abroad were motivated by both educational and professional opportunities. The study also reported that ATCKs set new goals after accomplishing previous ones. Therefore, high-performance goals (Lent, 2013, p. 119) were typical of ATCKs as they performed work tasks to a high level. The final contribution of the study lies in reporting the career interests and

choices made by the ATCK population. Social cognitive career theory studies are still limited in the international context (Bozionelos et al., 2015; Sheu & Bordon, 2017), and the current study contributed by adding understanding about ATCKs' career decision-making in the global career context. The participants typically aimed for top international positions and were interested in working for MNCs and in international teams. Moreover, they envisioned themselves in expert or managerial careers and spoke of making "bold moves" by applying for high-level positions internationally.

Building on current insights, increasing globalization has created many opportunities to acquire international experience. Therefore, it would be important to explore whether a TCK background uniquely distinguishes this group from others with international exposure. Additionally, comparing the extent to which ATCKs face similar or different developmental experiences to expatriates and their partners would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, broadening future research to include families with failed assignments would be valuable in understanding whether such experiences influence ATCKs' interest in pursuing international careers in the future.

5.1.5 Summary of the contributions

The dissertation reviews the existing research on TCKs / ATCKs and identifies gaps in knowledge and underexplored themes. Besides addressing critical gaps in the existing literature, it also paves the way for a deeper and holistic understanding of (A)TCKs. The empirical articles applied three theories in the TCK and ATCK context: adjustment, career capital, and SCCT theory. The dissertation contributes by engaging with these established frameworks and by proposing novel insights into the specifics of adjustment, career capital development, and career interests and choices in the TCK/ATCK context. This work also enriches the understanding of the lifelong impacts of an early international experience. Additionally, the dissertation contributes to expatriate family literature by adding a valuable dimension to the understanding of how expatriation affects the lives of the entire family. An improved understanding of TCK and ATCK experiences and development complements expatriation research because children and families are central to the entire discussion (Dang et al., 2022). The dissertation's empirical findings enrich the overall understanding of the TCK expatriation cycle from the pre-departure adjustment issues to adjustment in the country to internationally developed CC and their adulthood career interest and choices. The following section summarizes the main contributions of the four individual articles.

The first article utilizes a scoping review methodology to advance theoretical understanding. It maps the existing literature on TCKs and ATCKs, identifies the

challenges and benefits of having an international background, and also highlights critical research gaps. The article makes an important contribution by outlining future research directions, thus providing a foundation for future research to expand the current theoretical understanding.

The second article extends existing theoretical models on TCK adjustment by introducing previously unreported factors: openness to experience, pre-departure knowledge, language fluency (knowledge of the school language), school systems, and an internationally mobile lifestyle, which influence TCKs' adjustment process.

The third article expands CC theory by applying it to the context of ATCKs. The study findings demonstrate how early international experiences uniquely influence the development of CC and the career success of ATCKs. Although ATCKs were children during their time abroad, they were found to develop CC in many of the same areas as expatriates and their expatriate partners, despite differences in age and family role, due to similar experiences.

The fourth article contributes by identifying the career interests and choices of ATCKs. Since SCCT studies are rather limited in the international context (Bozionelos et al., 2015; Sheu & Bordon, 2017), the study also extends the theory by offering insights into career decision-making within the context of international careers. The findings highlight how ATCKs are confident of their international career potential and how a global childhood fosters international identity and capabilities. They also perceived that their international background enhanced their attractiveness in the global job market owing to their internationally developed skills and network. The ATCKs were also interested in international roles in their home country and abroad. They also expressed an interest in pursuing top management positions and in working for MNCs and globally oriented teams.

Finally, this dissertation provides nuanced perspectives on a globally mobile upbringing and provides a foundation for future scholarly research. It also offers a roadmap to aid in studying the complex experiences of TCKs and ATCKs. In addition, the study's findings illustrate actionable strategies for parents, educators, and employers working with TCKs and ATCKs. Specifically, the work underscores the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and skills of these individuals in both personal and professional contexts.

5.2 Practical implications of the study

The study findings have several practical implications for organizational practice relating to (A)TCKs and their parents and educators. According to the research

conducted, a TCK will face several challenges during the pre-departure phase and various adjustment challenges in the host country. This study also highlights the importance of including children in family-level decisions on expatriation. This aspect resonates with what is known about the importance of partner involvement (Richardson, 2006). Doing so could enhance TCKs' initial motivation to relocate and foster an openness to the experience. The dissertation's findings also emphasize the importance of providing TCKs with training and support; an area that remains neglected (see also Banerjee et al., 2020).

The TCKs could benefit from programs produced by organizations in the home and host countries, such as employers, expatriate communities, schools, and non-profit organizations. Mentorship programs (see Hansen & Rasmussen, 2016 on expatriates), and additionally social media groups and communities, blogs, vlogs (short for video blogs), and podcasts could be examples of incorporated delivery methods. These modern methods could advance TCKs to share experiences and/or connect with others with similar unique life experiences and ease the adjustment to the host country. These methods are suggested for the TCK context, since an expatriate case study revealed that social media can be an effective tool for language learning, building social connections, reducing culture shock, and advancing overall adjustment (Hammadeen et al., 2024). Human resources professionals could greatly improve the adjustment experiences of departing TCKs by championing special training programs and tailored support that reflect an understanding of their distinctive features. That suggestion aligns with findings on the importance of tailored support to expatriates (Tahir, 2022) and their partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). The investment would be worthwhile because family matters are known to be key concerns in the realm of expatriation (Goede & Berg, 2018). Providing such support could also minimize the risk of premature returns, as family issues are a common reason for expatriation not going as planned (Borici & Celepija, 2014; Dang et al., 2022).

The findings of the current study indicate that a major factor affecting TCKs' adjustment is being unfamiliar with the primary language of the school they will attend. That finding diverges from what has been reported among partners since, for the former group, learning the local language will be crucial to their adjustment (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). In addition, organizing pre-visits to the school and the new environment before departure and supporting the children with learning the school language could promote social integration and academic success in the host country. Moreover, open communication on the length of the stay abroad is recommended because children worry about the timescale of repatriation; a similar concern has been reported among partners (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). According to the participants, TCKs might benefit from connecting with individuals who have

experienced relocations during their childhood. Accordingly, MNCs could collect a pool of families who have (A)TCKs with international experience. These practices could be valuable as former TCKs share empathy that arises from similar experiences and naturally feel a connection with each other (Mizutani & Waalkes, 2024). Moreover, companies could consider connecting departing families with expatriate families already based at the destination, allowing the children to interact even before relocation and potentially easing the initial shock, since all interaction with peers will be crucial for their adjustment (see also De Sivatte et al., 2019).

One important finding of this study is that ATCKs consider the international element of their adolescence opened more doors than it closed during their career. In other words, they experienced more positive than negative aspects that affected their work and life in the longer term. A practical action parents could take would be to discuss the long-term advantages of an international experience, and that TCKs can develop various useful and transferable competencies, as well as potential future work opportunities arising from the CC built through international experience. This study also supports the view that individuals can develop transferable CC before commencing their professional careers (Felker & Gianecchini, 2015). Human resources professionals could be trained to recognize the potential of ATCKs attributable to their time spent in a global context. The current research reveals that companies assign former TCKs challenging tasks early in their careers, possibly due to their transferable CC and readiness to embrace new challenges. However, these results should be interpreted with caution due to the limited sample size, and further research would be required before any broader generalizations are feasible.

Adult third culture kids can provide a globally oriented, talented workforce that might also require less intercultural training than those without such experience. Therefore, they might be ideally suited to culturally sensitive international work and valuable assets to companies expanding operations abroad. As ATCKs develop their international competences during their childhood abroad, their skills are not industry or organization specific. Moreover, many of the respondents in this research had experience living in several countries, so they had country- and culture-specific skills from several locations when entering the labor market. Familiarity with several countries and cultures (see also Kadam et al., 2020) could offer an advantage in identifying new business opportunities and a more profound understanding of customer needs in different regions. In addition, ATCKs could be important links between the home organization and foreign locations. Their early international exposure might translate into the strong leadership competencies necessary in teams and organizations composed of international employees or involving international subsidiaries. Their various international strengths should mean that ATCKs are of interest to talent management programs hiring for international positions. While the

COVID-19 pandemic has passed, remote and hybrid working policies remain common. Adult third culture kids might be ideal employees for international remote work as their backgrounds lend them the necessary versatility to work in an international setup, such as an international virtual team with international clients.

Organizations seeking highly educated, internationally talented employees with strong language and social skills and intercultural competencies, who are comfortable with international relocation, should consider exploring the potential of hiring ATCKs. As a talented workforce is important for firms' competitiveness and long-term success (Kerr, 2020), the ATCK population might be an interesting talent pool for international recruitment for MNCs (Nash, 2020; Westropp et al., 2016) as long as recruiters recognize the special career needs of ATCKs, who are "restless" and may need changes to their tasks or roles periodically to keep them motivated and committed. Otherwise, companies might lose them to other organizations as they often make major career decisions in haste and are able to adjust to new work environments, typically in a chameleon-like fashion. In addition, ATCKs themselves could learn to explain their international upbringing in job interviews and demonstrate how their background played into their high level of education, multilingual proficiency, intercultural competences, and inclination to pursue careers in an international context.

One of the greatest HR challenges is finding skilled employees for international roles (Kirk, 2021). Hence, HR professionals could also be trained in the value and benefits of placing ATCKs in international positions. The HR profession should also recognize that there are several ways to find ATCKs, such as fostering close cooperation with international schools and universities (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013). In addition, the participants of the current dissertation are considered to have already achieved remarkable steps in their careers, even though many were in the early professional career phase. Regardless of gender, the ATCKs had already accomplished desirable international positions and were ready to pursue high-level international careers in the future. The study's findings on gender equality emerged as an important aspect, as women remain underrepresented in international assignments, which might hinder their future professional growth and progression to top management positions within companies (Bastida et al., 2021). Early international experiences can foster the opportunities available to talented ATCK women to secure international assignments and other international roles in their professional careers.

5.3 Limitations of the study and directions for future research

The current research reveals interesting insights into TCKs' adjustment experiences, ATCKs' career capital, and their career indications. Nevertheless, all research has limitations, and the following should be acknowledged. The dissertation includes qualitative empirical data, and most of the limitations present are typical of qualitative research. *First*, the sample size is somewhat limited, thus limiting the ability to draw extensive generalizations. However, the optimal sample size depends on the richness of the data, the purpose of the study, and the research questions (Elo et al., 2014).

Second, although interviews are a highly efficient way to expand understanding of a narrow subject, the method also has limitations due to participants' subjective self-reporting of their experiences (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Studying adults made it possible to study how ATCKs interpreted the effect of their international childhood on their work and lives in adulthood. However, reporting lived experiences and connecting such experiences to the situation today always carries a risk of memory bias (Sikkel, 1985). The memory does not replicate reality, and the interviewees may have overestimated the impact of their earlier international experiences on their subsequent CC and career choices. The respondents were typically extremely proud of their international background, and thus, they could be adopting an overly idealistic perspective on their remembered experiences. In turn, reporting early life experiences as an adult avoided the methodological challenges of interviewing children (see Banerjee et al., 2020). In the future, TCK experiences abroad could be further researched with methods tailored to studying children and by involving experts on child studies to complement the TCK adjustment views. *Third*, all the informants were Finns, meaning that the researched population is homogeneous, as all the participants have the same cultural background. Finland is a small but highly globalized country. Therefore, including research participants from various cultural contexts and nationalities would broaden the view of the impacts of global childhood. *Fourth*, instead of interviewing ATCKs once, longitudinal studies could reveal interesting insights and special nuances of ATCKs' long-term career paths. In particular, future research could account for the impacts of how adult life stage, family roles, and relational contexts also shape their paths.

Fifth, recruitment of participants through a personal network and snowball sampling could have inadvertently resulted in a sample comprising relatively privileged and successful individuals whose parents were typically highly educated and high-status employees working as business expatriates in the private sector or public sector (e.g., for the EU). A small number of individuals who were contacted either could not be

reached or chose not to participate in the study. It is possible that those who declined to participate may have had more complex or challenging experiences. If they had been included, they could have contributed to a more nuanced or less optimistic portrayal of ATCK outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that the ATCKs informing this study do not represent the broader ATCK population, which also includes individuals from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. Therefore, future research focusing on less privileged TCK groups could reveal interesting insights and enhance the generalizability of findings across a more diverse range of TCKs. Additionally, it would be important to research whether TCKs whose parents worked in other sectors (such as sports, education, and non-profit workers) acquired or lost similar forms of CC and if they later made similar career decisions. Moreover, increasing the knowledge of TCKs whose families' assignments failed would be valuable in future studies, as the experience may have long-term effects on ATCKs' own career interests and trajectories.

It is important to recognize that both prior and current research signal that typical (A)TCK challenges, such as rootlessness and emotional difficulties, remain. Nevertheless, future studies could examine whether the noteworthy positive outcomes identified in this study can be generalized. Moreover, future research could explore additional dimensions of TCK experience, such as being born abroad, having more than one nationality, and reduced autonomy in choosing schools, activities, or friendships owing to life in an "expatriate bubble". Future research could also examine TCKs' motivation later in life more extensively. That research avenue might address whether they are driven by the familiarity of the expatriate lifestyle or by the desire for challenge and personal development. It would also be interesting to explore whether they are more cautious and demanding in terms of corporate support, given their firsthand exposure to the challenges of global mobility. Investigating these areas would strengthen the ATCK literature by adding nuance to the understanding of how TCKs navigate their later careers and lives.

Comparative studies among ATCKs and individuals who have gained international exposure other than through a parent's expatriation could be an important direction for future research. For example, scholars might investigate ATCKs' and exchange students' later careers to see if their international past impacts their future career decisions in similar ways. Moreover, the experiences of children from other globally mobile populations, such as international commuters, flexpatriates, and international business travelers, should be considered. Investigating these groups could reveal unique challenges related to parental separation, frequent relocations, limited support structures, and reduced network advantages, thereby broadening our understanding of mobility-related outcomes across diverse contexts. Furthermore, future studies could also deepen the understanding of how similar the experiences

are among ATCKs, expatriates, and their spouses, even though TCKs are not working during their time abroad. Another further comparative study could involve ATCKs who become expatriates in adulthood, enabling a deeper understanding of the nuanced differences compared to expatriates without international experience during childhood. Additionally, more research would be welcome on ATCKs' expatriation experiences, including perspectives such as potential international fatigue and stereotyping, which remain underexplored.

Future studies could also explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced TCKs' host-country adjustment and if studying remotely influenced their development of CC while abroad. Moreover, the global pandemic forced companies to adopt virtual working and curtailed people relocating abroad (Brakman et al., 2021). Virtual assignments offer several advantages, including cost efficiency, enhanced flexibility, and the opportunity to stay in one's home country (Wicht & Holtbrügge, 2023). However, research has yet to establish if the long-term trend will shift from traditional expatriation to international virtual work or assignments despite cultural barriers, time differences, and engagement struggles. It remains to be seen if the ATCK population will prove uniquely important to MNCs if the pool of people with experience of living in a foreign culture diminishes.

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Publications

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

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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 et al., 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 et al., 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.

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). 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).

Given this background, the present chapter 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 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 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 programs. 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 (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022). 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). 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). 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). 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 toward 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 (see e.g. 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; Ra et al., 2023); 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 worldview due to them looking like they belong to the dominant cultural group (Pollock et al., 2017). 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 is underresearched, 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 lifestyle 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 well-being 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 toward 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 & Luring, 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 toward 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 (Caselius & Mäkelä, 2022), 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 & Luring, 2014), and are therefore an interesting population for a variety of international jobs.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

The aim of the present chapter 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 (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), 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). 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 well-being, and their career success in the long run.

TCKs are claimed to be ‘cultural hybrids’ (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009) and, therefore, ideal future business expatriates (Bonebright, 2010; Tarique & Weisbord, 2013; Westropp et al., 2016). 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 on 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 parent- hood 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.

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Pulling on the same rope: factors affecting third culture kids' adjustment abroad

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ABSTRACT

Third culture kids (TCKs) are individuals who spend a significant portion of their developmental years abroad. This research aims to expand the understanding of factors affecting the adjustment of non-native-English-speaking TCKs during their parent(s)' expatriation. Recognizing individuals' experiences as TCKs acquired in different cultures around the world can help individuals, families, and organizations navigate international transitions. The study explores unique qualitative and two-phase data on the adjustment of non-native-English-speaking TCKs to life abroad, whereas previous research mainly focuses on TCKs who spoke English proficiently. The current research also encompasses the pre-departure experiences of TCKs. This work relies on data collected in 34 semi-structured interviews and observations from a small pilot study. The participants were all Finnish adults who retrospectively reported their adjustment experiences as youngsters in 18 different host countries. The data were content analyzed. The study unveils various factors connected with TCKs' adjustment to a move abroad and identifies a set of new factors unreported in earlier studies: openness to experience, pre-departure knowledge, language fluency (knowledge of the school language), school systems, and an internationally mobile lifestyle. The study has implications for firms providing support to smooth the adjustment of staff and their families to foreign postings.

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Introduction

There is increasing interest in family experiences during expatriation (Goede & Holtbrügge, 2021). Expatriates are typically accompanied by their families (Van der Zee et al., 2007), and time spent abroad can be challenging for both expatriates and their families (Richardson, 2006; Shaffer et al., 2001; Sterle et al., 2018). Accordingly, it is important for organizations deploying staff into expatriate positions to understand the factors connected to family adjustment (Shah et al., 2022). An expatriate returning prematurely from an assignment can be costly for an organization, jeopardize a project, damage

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relationships in the host country, and harm the company image (Mahajan & Toh, 2014). Expatriate family research to date has largely focused on spouses (Ali et al., 2003; Cole, 2011; Gupta et al., 2012; Mohr & Klein, 2004; Tahir, 2020), and although some studies have included both expatriates and spouses, they often overlook the children (Chan et al., 2022; Reiche et al., 2021).

The growing number of expatriates means that there is also an increasing number of expatriate children living abroad (Morales, 2017). Children who move abroad with their parents and grow up in cultures other than their home culture are called third culture kids (TCKs) (Tan et al., 2021). The current study uses Pollock et al.'s (2017, p. 404) definition:

A traditional third culture kid ... is 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.

They move from one country to another before they complete their development of 'forming a sense of their own personal, cultural, or national identity' (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 54). The TCK term is often applied to children who are economically privileged and whose parents work in the corporate, diplomatic, military, or religious sectors (Benjamin & Dervin, 2015; Pollock et al., 2017). A TCK's *first culture* is the parents' home or passport culture, and the *second culture* is the host culture where the family has moved to and combines into a *third culture*, which is a lifestyle with shared experiences with others living similarly (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 17). Ultimately, TCKs typically become familiar with the cultures they have lived in but lack a full connection with any (Tan et al., 2021).

Our study focuses on the adjustment of TCKs. Black and Gregersen (1991) define adjustment as 'the degree of a person's psychological comfort'. In adjustment theory, different factors impacting the adjustment have been identified. The current study adopts an adjustment model created by Shaffer and Harrison (2001) and later applied to study TCKs by Weeks et al. (2010). Shaffer and Harrison's (2001) research identifies factors facilitating or inhibiting spousal adjustment. Those factors were categorized into individual factors (language fluency, change in employment status, general self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy), interpersonal relationship factors including family (extended family support, expatriate adjustment, parental demands) and social network (network size, breadth of support, depth of support from host country nationals, depth of support from non-host country nationals), and lastly environmental factors (cultural novelty, favorable living conditions, assignment duration certainty). As mentioned above, Weeks et al. (2010) applied this model when studying teenage TCKs' adjustment and revised it to reflect the experiences of that group. Their findings also indicate that the factors explaining the adjustment of spouses and children are sufficiently similar to justify applying the same model.

Research on TCK adjustment to date has covered issues such as adjustment problems (Alston & Nieuwoudt, 1992; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010;), adjustment mechanisms (Banerjee et al., 2020), well-being (McKeering et al., 2021), and coping with cultural transitions (Morales, 2015; Van der Zee et al., 2007). In comparison with the extensive volume of research on the adjustment of expatriates and increasingly of partners, the number of studies on children remains very limited, and more TCK research has been called for to fully capture the expatriate family's experiences (Caselius & Suutari, 2023; Goede & Berg, 2018; Jones et al., 2022;). The lack of a proper theoretical basis for studying the adjustment of children has also been noted (Sterle et al., 2018). Children will likely face different

adjustment challenges than adults, and general adjustment models may not apply. Moreover, the knowledge of the adjustment of expatriate children is mainly derived from parents.

Few studies use TCKs or former TCKs as their informants (Goede & Berg, 2018), although some recent examples have (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; McKeering et al., 2021). Nevertheless, earlier studies have mainly concentrated on the adjustment experiences of English-speaking TCKs attending international schools. Accordingly, we would benefit from more information on the experiences of non-English-speaker children in different types. The teaching language in international schools is most often English, so non-native-English-speaking TCKs will face their own adjustment challenges, making them an important population for research.

Given this background, the current study aims to increase our understanding of TCKs' adjustment experiences by answering the following research question: *What factors affect non-native-English-speaking third culture kids' host-country adjustment?* The present study aims to contribute by studying the adjustment experiences of non-native-English-speaker TCKs from Finland with experience in 18 countries: China, Japan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Canada, the USA, Chile, Colombia, UAE, India, Switzerland, Latvia, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. The data thus represent TCK experiences from diverse political and social systems and cultures using different languages on four continents. The resulting findings are therefore globally relevant rather than region-specific. The study identifies a new set of factors connected with the adjustment of TCKs that include negative impacts of international experience as a TCK. In addition, while previous studies have neglected adjustment experiences from different educational institutions, this study includes individuals who attended different types of schools (International (IB), European (ES), and local schools).

Furthermore, this study contributes by analyzing how pre-departure factors impact the adjustment of TCKs, as earlier studies have devoted little attention to such issues. The current research thus enhances the understanding of the full TCK adjustment cycle in a way similar to studies of partners (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020). Finally, the study aims to provide future research directions and recommendations for TCK training and support. The study also provides insights into support that would benefit future expatriate families, schools with international students, and organizations dispatching expatriates and their families abroad.

Adjustment of TCKs

Historically, expatriate adjustment issues have attracted considerable research attention. Expatriate adjustment literature has its roots in foreign-student adjustment literature (Lysgaard, 1955; Nikelly et al., 1964), and about 20 years later, scholars became interested in expatriate adjustment and the classic expatriate adjustment theories familiar today were developed (Black, 1988; Black et al., 1991; Black & Stephens, 1989). The conceptualization of expatriate adjustment is often categorized into three interrelated facets: general adjustment (non-work environment), interaction adjustment (interaction with host nationals), and work adjustment (Black & Gregersen, 1991).

The expatriate adjustment discussions build on acculturation (Wu et al., 2023), a cultural and psychological change process that occurs when different cultural groups and their members come into contact (Berry, 2005). Acculturation is also discussed in the

context of spouse adjustment (Tahir, 2020), family adjustment (Sterle et al., 2018), and expatriate kids adjustment (Banerjee et al., 2020). Moreover, cultural shedding and culture learning involve selective abandonment or accidental or deliberate loss of behaviors (Berry, 2005). Over time, the change in behavior allows individuals to fit in with the host society (Berry, 2005), mostly due to people seeing themselves as expatriates (Pelto-korpi & Zhang, 2020). The process is termed adjustment since the adaptive psychological and sociocultural changes happen in the acculturating individual (Han et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2005).

Investigations centered on the adjustment of children who follow their parents abroad have revealed a range of challenges as they navigate different cultures in their formative years. Accordingly, there are adjustment challenges concomitant with TCKs' international lives (Banerjee et al., 2020) that are connected to perceived stress arising from a new life situation (Jones et al., 2023). Extensive interviews with 18 international school students conducted by Weeks et al. (2010) revealed that the time spent abroad can be challenging for TCKs. The way of life can expand a TCK's worldview but simultaneously hinder their personal development and cause cultural struggles around adjustment (Pollock et al., 2017). The experience of moving abroad means TCKs acquire very different experiences from their home-country peers and are therefore exposed to challenges such as feelings of loss (relating to people, pets, places, and possessions) and grief over those losses (Gilbert, 2008). Third culture kids also face social challenges that affect their adjustment to life abroad (Banerjee et al., 2020). A mixed-method study reported TCKs can struggle to form relationships in the host country (De Sivatte et al., 2019).

A qualitative study of 45 families revealed that TCKs' new relationships were vaguer than those forged in their original home country (McLachlan, 2005). McLachlan (2005) suggested that might be an effect of TCKs not wishing to become emotionally attached to their new social connections due to their mobile lifestyle and that of their friends. Moreover, TCKs face challenges adjusting to different school practices and requirements (De Sivatte et al., 2019). As a further consideration, a case study by Rosenbusch and Cseh (2012) reveals that international transitions have also been seen to cause adjustment challenges in cultural respects, such as the adjustment to a new environment and local culture. However, further research would be required to comprehensively capture the factors impacting TCK adjustment.

Factors impacting TCKs' adjustment

The present study focuses on identifying factors that impact the adjustment of TCKs. There has been extensive research on factors impacting expatriate adjustment (e.g. Tahir, 2018; Wu et al., 2023) as well as that of partners (e.g. Gupta et al., 2012; Tahir, 2020), while far less research addresses factors impacting TCK adjustment (e.g. De Sivatte et al., 2019). Since work-related issues are not relevant for children, the current study builds on the work by Shaffer and Harrison (2001), who devised an adjustment model to understand expatriate partner adjustment. This model builds on Burke's (1991) identity disruption theory, which states that the identity process is disrupted when people move to different cultures or adjust to new roles (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). People in that situation must adjust their behaviors to reduce distress. Such

changes in behavior then serve as causal inputs to the formation of a new self-concept that enhances adjustment (Burke, 1991).

The first empirical stage of Shaffer and Harrison's (2001) research relied on ten extensive interviews of expatriates' partners who had positive or negative experiences abroad. That groundwork led Shaffer and Harrison to develop a spouse adjustment model; a model subsequently tested using a survey of 221 international assignee couples living in multiple countries. The model groups factors impacting adjustment into three main categories: *individual*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *environmental factors*. Although the study is about spousal adjustment, Weeks et al. (2010) later found that similar categories can help clarify the factors impacting the adjustment of TCKs. Accordingly, the following paragraphs address individual, interpersonal relationship, and environmental factors in more detail.

Individual factors are attributes a person brings when moving abroad (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Self-efficacy dimensions associated with TCKs (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Van der Zee et al., 2007) include social and academic self-efficacy that are related to adjustment. Moreover, social cognitive theory indicates an individual's performance accomplishments define their perceived mastery of certain areas of life (Bandura, 1986, p. 399). Previous studies have also connected cultural open-mindedness with adjustment (Weeks et al., 2010). In addition, expatriate adjustment models (e.g. Black et al., 1991) recognize the influence of prior international experience, and De Sivatte et al. (2019) found it was a factor that also bolsters TCK adjustment. These findings indicate that both adults and children benefit from earlier international experience when moving abroad, although what constitutes earlier experience may differ between adults and children. Accordingly, further research exploring possible variations is required.

Although language skills are an important factor in well-being and adjustment among adults (Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2020), the role of language skills may not be so significant for children's adjustment (Weeks et al., 2010). Third culture kids' host-country language fluency ranked behind social integration (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). Such observations may reflect research tending to focus on native-English-speaking children, while non-native-English speakers may be in a situation where they need to learn English as the school language and sometimes also the host-country language. Accordingly, language skills may appear as a more central adjustment factor among non-native English speakers, and more research would be needed about the language obstacles and their impact on such TCKs' adjustment (Jones et al., 2022).

Interpersonal relationship factors refer to individuals associating with each other. Shaffer and Harrison (2001) found two interpersonal relationship factors among partners: family (including extended family support) and social network (including network size, breadth of support, depth of support from host country nationals, and depth of support from non-host country nationals). In line with that finding, family support has been found to impact children's adjustment (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Van der Zee et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2010) because high family cohesion is a positive predictor of expatriate kid's adjustment (Van der Zee et al., 2007). With regard to social networks, the role of friends is particularly significant for children's adjustment (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). That is a consequence of TCKs feeling the need to rapidly fit in with new social groups abroad to avoid loneliness (Banerjee et al., 2020). Accordingly, social integration challenges impact their adjustment abroad significantly (Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021). There is also qualitative evidence that leaving friends behind is

very challenging for expatriate children (Banerjee et al., 2020; Weeks et al., 2010), although the new generation of TCKs seems better equipped to counter these challenges through active social networking via social media (Banerjee et al., 2020).

Individual adjustment is based on both personal and social factors and interactions with external environmental factors (Ogden, 1995). Shaffer and Harrison (2001) identified three *environmental factors* that impact the adjustment of TCKs: cultural novelty, favorable living conditions, and assignment duration certainty. Cultural novelty is an individual's perception of how different the culture is between the home and host culture and has been found to relate negatively to TCK adjustment (Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019). Banerjee et al. (2020) found that TCKs from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh endured social ostracism due to their cultural backgrounds. The finding suggests that home-country culture may be relevant in addition to the novelty of the host country's culture. Finally, favorable living conditions refer to how close the living conditions are to the standards a person is accustomed to. Similar or better living conditions seem to advance expatriate children's adjustment (Weeks et al., 2010). However, the evidence on how environmental factors impact the adjustment of TCKs remains limited. We next address the research methods applied.

Method

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study since it permits exploring participants' interpretations of their personal views (Metsämuuronen, 2006, p. 88). In addition, the philosophical background of the research lies in the phenomenological hermeneutic method, which suits researching subjective experiences with open questions collected in both written and oral form (Metsämuuronen, 2006, p. 170). The current research was implemented in two stages, the first being a small pilot study preceding the main study. The pilot study's findings guided how the main study was conducted.

In both stages, adults related their adjustment experiences when they lived abroad as TCKs. It is important to acknowledge that TCK adjustment studies are often based on recall (e.g. Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019), although the method has drawbacks related to memory bias (Sikkel, 1985). For example, respondents might overemphasize positive or negative experiences or underemphasize their effects. They might also misremember the timing of events. In addition, people can generalize the effects of single events and view them as representative of their feelings during their entire time abroad.

All the participants were Finnish, so the pilot study and main stage interviews were conducted in the Finnish language. Consequently, we can be assured there were no linguistic comprehension issues. The Finnish term for *adjustment* includes both general and international context-specific meanings. The word is used in everyday language to refer to adaptation to changing circumstances and a fit to a new situation or location. The questions posed to the respondents contextualized the word to reflect TCKs' adjustment when abroad. The phrasing of the interview questions was piloted with two participants to ensure that the terminology was understood in a way that served our research purpose.

Pilot stage: a qualitative survey

A pilot study was conducted by emailing open-ended research questions to 12 former third culture kids to acquire an overview of their adjustment experiences as TCKs. The

chosen selection criteria anticipated that respondents had spent a year or longer abroad during their first 18 years due to their parents' work. The first author had lived in Suzhou, China as part of an expatriate family, so the initial cohort of respondents was identified within her personal network of Finnish expatriate families in China. That initial group was expanded when a friend of a network associate suggested other potential respondents, which became a limited snowball process. This particular research setup is special since Finland and China differ significantly in terms of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1982), and the language barrier is a significant challenge. Children of expatriates must usually learn two new languages. In China, the relevant languages are English for studying in an international school and a Chinese dialect to cope with everyday life.

Twelve people participated in the pilot study – five men and seven women. They had an average age of 21.3 years. The average time spent abroad during childhood was 2.6 years, and all had attended international schools that taught the International Baccalaureate program. The participants were all over 18 when surveyed and were thus relating their childhood experiences as TCKs retrospectively, as is common in TCK adjustment studies (see, e.g. Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019).

The questions sent to participants in the pilot study covered background information and experiences before and during a period abroad. For example, they were asked questions such as: 'How did you feel when you heard that your family was relocating to China, and why did you feel like that?' 'Did life in China feel more challenging or easier than in your homeland? Why?' and 'What caused you the most trouble or stress during the assignment?' If anything in their answers was unclear, they were asked to clarify the topics in more detail. The pilot study provided preliminary insights of use when planning the main data collection stage. The study also confirmed that more information on the nuanced adjustment experiences of TCKs in various countries would be required to address the research aims.

Main stage: semi-structured interviews

The main interview data were collected in the spring of 2020 via 34 semi-structured interviews among former TCKs. The data reinforced the information gathered in the pilot study and expanded the study context to countries beyond China (see Table 1). Seven participants from the pilot study also participated in those interviews. They met the selection criteria set and were available for further interviews. Some participants were identified after members of the first author's network recommended them. Moreover, two informants were known from another research project. The rest of the interviewees were found using a snowball process, when participants provided contact information for others meeting the selection criteria. This stage proved an effective way to extend the respondent cohort beyond members of a personal network.

A few possible candidates were excluded from the sample because they had spent time abroad in childhood for reasons other than their parents' work (e.g. travel or studying abroad). They were excluded because these different starting points of expatriation could have impacted their overall adjustment experiences as TCKs. The benefits of only interviewing former TCKs rather than including some informants under 18 included the group having cognitive maturity that enabled them to reflect sagely on their prior adjustment experiences. Other benefits were easier access to the participants without requiring

Table 1. Sample description.

	Age	Gender	Host country/ countries	Duration of stay in years before the age of 18	School attended abroad*
1	26	Female	China	2.5 years	IB
2	26	Male	China	2.5 years	IB
3	21	Male	Switzerland	4 ≥ years	IB
4	26	Male	China	2 years	IB
5	27	Male	China	2 years	IB
6	27	Male	The USA, Switzerland, Belgium	3 years in the USA, 2 years in Switzerland, 10 years in Belgium	Local & ES
7	23	Female	The USA	1.5 years	Local
8	28	Male	France, Belgium	1 ≤ year in France, 12 years in Belgium	ES
9	24	Female	Germany, Japan, UAE	3 years in Germany, 3 years in Japan, 6 years in UAE	IB
10	28	Male	Belgium	3 years	ES
11	27	Male	France, Belgium	1 ≤ year in France, 12 years in Belgium	ES
12	22	Female	Vietnam, Bangladesh, Latvia	2 ≤ years in Vietnam, 2 ≤ years in Bangladesh, 4 ≥ years in Latvia	IB
13	25	Female	The USA	8 years	Local
14	31	Female	China	2 years	IB
15	23	Female	The USA, Italy	2 years in the USA, 2 years in Italy	IB
16	23	Male	China	2 years	IB
17	30	Female	China, Switzerland	5.5 years in China, 3.5 years in Switzerland	IB
18	27	Male	Belgium	15 years	ES
19	24	Female	Germany, The USA	2 years in Germany, 2 years in the USA	Local
20	25	Female	Sweden, The USA	2.5 years in Sweden, 13 years in the USA	Local
21	26	Female	Belgium	3 years	ES
22	28	Female	China	3 years	IB
23	23	Female	Sweden, The USA	2.5 years in Sweden, 14.5 ≥ years in the USA	Local
24	25	Female	Belgium	4 years	ES
25	23	Female	Sweden, The USA	3 ≤ years in Sweden, 0.5 years in the USA	IB & Local
26	25	Female	Belgium	15 ≥ years	ES
27	25	Female	Spain, Belgium, Switzerland	2 ≤ years in Spain, 3 years in Belgium, 2 years in Switzerland	ES & IB
28	41	Male	Germany	8 years	Local
29	25	Male	France, Belgium	1 year in France, 14 years in Belgium	Local & ES
30	28	Female	Germany, Switzerland	2 years in Germany, 7 years in Switzerland	IB
31	36	Female	China	2 years	IB
32	36	Female	Colombia, Chile	3 years in Colombia, 8 years in Chile	IB
33	23	Female	India	3 years	IB
34	24	Male	Canada	8 years	Local

*IB = international baccalaureate, ES = European School, Local = Local school (public or private).

parental consent, ameliorated ethical concerns, and avoiding the methodological challenges involved in interviewing children.

Thirteen men and 21 women participated in the main data collection stage. Their average age was 26.5 years (see Table 1). The average time spent abroad during childhood was 7.25 years. The respondents had attended international schools teaching the International Baccalaureate (n = 18), European Schools, public institutions controlled by EU Member States offering education in students' first language (n = 10), and local schools (n = 10). The interviews commenced by collecting background information, including name, age, information about parents, international experience, and language skills. The semi-structured, open-ended interview questions asked in the main study were based on the learning from the pilot study and elicited the adjustment experiences of the TCKs. Typical questions regarding adjustment were: 'How do you think you adjusted to life abroad in your childhood?' 'Do you think your age influenced how you adjusted?' and 'Had you also lived abroad previously? – If so, how did the prior experience affect your

adjustment to the next one?' The interviews lasted between 50 and 110 min, the average being 70 min. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, owing to the restrictions imposed in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and were recorded for later transcription. The excerpts from the data were later translated into English by the author. Finally, all pilot and main data were combined for the final analysis.

Data analysis

The data were subjected to content analysis, a suitable method for analyzing written materials (Elo et al., 2014). It is particularly suited to qualitative studies where the researcher typically investigates a narrow topic; the overall level of analysis is deep (Sarajärvi & Tuomi, 2013, p. 92). This study employed a combined deductive-inductive thematic analysis (Azungah, 2018) in which the deductive stage was guided by existing adjustment theory with identified factors impacting adjustment (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Weeks et al., 2010). Additional factors were generated in the inductive stage directly from the data to identify additional recurring patterns and concepts. The analysis process started with a careful reading of the transcriptions to acquire an overview. The pilot study produced around 38 pages of written material, and in the interview stage, more than 240 pages of text for analysis. The main author became very familiar with the content through conducting the interviews and the transcriptions. The process involved noting emerging themes during data collection and transcription.

Data analysis identified central themes and elements (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015) related to TCKs' cross-cultural adjustment. The data coding was performed with the help of NVivo software since NVivo enables researchers to code nodes to categorize similar keywords together (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019) within the chosen factors. Coding started with previously recognized factors that were connected with the adjustment of TCKs, such as 'international experience', 'friends', and 'living conditions' (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), and continued with codes that emerged from the data such as 'openness to experience', 'pre-departure visit', 'knowledge of the school language', and 'relocations'. The process advanced the analysis and interpretations of the phenomena. During the qualitative analysis of the adjustment experiences of TCKs, it appeared that different aspects of adjustment, such as general adjustment and interaction adjustment, are closely related. Furthermore, the same factors explained TCKs' adjustment experiences in those aspects. Accordingly, it was not considered productive to separate different aspects of adjustment with reference to expatriates and partners as prior research has often done. Instead, the focus was on the adjustment of TCKs in general (see also Weeks et al., 2010).

Validity and reliability

To strengthen the quality of the study, validity and reliability were ensured in different ways. First, the topic is thoroughly explored by conducting data collection over two stages. The pilot study strengthened the quality of the semi-structured interviews by increasing the understanding of the topic and thus enabling the thorough planning of the interview questions. Second, the semi-structured interviews explored pre-determined topics (Schmidt, 2004) but permitted follow-up questions to investigate how the participants made sense of their adjustment. Third, the data were collected via open questions

requiring some elaboration, thus providing a nuanced understanding of the topic. Moreover, all the participants involved in the study used their native language. We thus avoided misinterpretations or losing nuanced meanings only a native speaker could fully understand.

Fourth, in addition to the pilot study, the semi-structured interview questions were tested with two participants in March 2020 to improve their reliability (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). Fifth, a researcher exchanged telephone calls, text messages, emails, or Facebook messages with each participant before the data collection. The aim was to inform participants about the research project and gain their trust. They were informed that the data would be carefully stored, and since the research might expose sensitive topics, the anonymity of participants would be preserved.

Sixth, a Zoom meeting was more suitable for conducting the interviews than a telephone, for instance, as it helped to increase the trust between the interviewer and interviewee by revealing non-verbal expressions, which eased communication and promoted engagement (Archibald et al., 2019). In addition, the Zoom platform enabled access to a larger and more diverse range of participants located around the world during the interview (Gray et al., 2020). Furthermore, the participants in the study were all familiar with working and/or studying remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced any technical difficulties. Finally, the transcripts of the interviews were emailed to the participants to elicit comments and increase the reliability of the data (Puusa & Juuti, 2020).

Findings

All study participants described their move abroad as a significant change in their lives. In line with earlier research, the participants reported facing adjustment challenges abroad (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). The challenges varied from minor inconveniences to major adjustment issues significantly affecting their lives.

The first six months abroad were difficult. There were thousands of students in the school, and many different languages were spoken. [In the school] there were very different practices compared to Finland. I was a timid child; I did not know how to ask about ordinary things; I did not know how to ask what I needed to bring to lessons or what I needed to do next. I just tried to survive, but I did not really succeed. Basically, really concrete things seemed really difficult in the beginning. (Male, 3 years in Belgium, European School)

Importantly, all participants considered they had adjusted well over time and were thus able to overcome the difficulties. The participants described that they had adjusted to a new life abroad, in particular when being able to communicate using the language of the school, when forming new relationships, and when being able to perform academically at the desired level.

When the initial shock passed, and I got used to the school and the language, I considered myself adjusted. Of course, the fact that I made friends was also significant [for adjustment]. (Female, 9 years abroad in Germany and Switzerland, International School)

The main goal of the present study is to analyze the factors that impacted the adjustment of TCKs. Following the Shaffer and Harrison model (2001) and later work on TCKs (Weeks et al., 2010), the identified factors connected with adjustment are

categorized into three main categories: individual factors, interpersonal relationship factors, and environmental factors. Next, the identified factors within each category are presented in detail.

Individual factors

The study participants described that *openness to experience* is important for TCKs' adjustment since those who were curious and excited about the coming international experience typically had a smoother adjustment process in the host country. Participants who were open to the global experience often looked forward to the new experience. Overall, their positive and open attitude to the experience expedited the TCK's adjustment process.

I was open to relocation. I think that advanced my adjustment because I was excited about the opportunity and the experience, so I went for it with an open mind and not thinking, "This will not work." (Female, over 3 years abroad in Sweden and the USA, International School and local school)

However, not all the participants had positive feelings when their families decided upon expatriation. Some experienced anxiety, nervousness, and fear. They worried about life changing radically and the uncertainty of their future. Not being open to the new experience hindered their subsequent adjustment. Several participants described the momentous impact of the news of their impending move abroad. Many participants who were not open to the international experience also had difficulty leaving close friends, siblings, and pets behind and also having to abandon hobbies. Those respondents' adjustment to the host country was delayed. Many of the participants said that they directed their anger and disappointment toward their parents, which exacerbated challenges to adjustment and tension in family relations.

I was not willing to move. I was heavily against it. It really had an impact on my host country adjustment. I was more closed; I was not willing to accept the new situation. (Female, 9 years abroad in Germany and Switzerland, International School)

I did not want to move. It was really tough for me when I was told about it. I started crying. We had just moved into a new house [in my home country], and I had just got friends in that area. I remember that feeling; it felt like a rug had been pulled from under my feet. It affected my adjustment. (Male, over 4 years in Switzerland, International School)

Most participants discussed how their *age* at the time of the move was significant for their adjustment. Some emphasized that young children live in the moment and are hostage to their parents' choices. The participants who relocated before they were teenagers focused fully on their life abroad and did not miss their home-country friends and life as much, which advanced their adjustment. It was often mentioned that the ideal time to relocate is in an education transition stage, such as when a child starts or is about to change school.

Somehow, it felt that it [the adjustment] was really easy. I had good friends in Finland, but as I was so young, the relationships were not that significant, for example, compared to relationships in my teenage years. At that age [10], it is just easy to fit in. I saw the contrast as I have a big brother who is two years older than me. For him, adjusting was not as easy. (Female, 3 years in Belgium, European School)

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The participants explained that *language fluency* and, more precisely, knowledge of the school language advanced their adjustment. Students who started learning the language of the school with little or no previous knowledge of it considered it quite a tough experience. Interestingly, a common unique feature of TCKs is that they seem to adjust rather quickly. Interestingly, knowledge of the host-country language was not as important as knowledge of the school language. Some participants explained that a lack of host-country language skills initially caused minor difficulties due to the low level of English among local people.

Going to an English-speaking school after learning English [in Finland] for three years was rather a rough experience, but after two months, the difficulties of the beginning were forgotten. (Female, 2.5 years in China, International School)

The adjustment went really well, though I did not speak the language much at the time. I was thrown in at the deep end; it was not an international school, just an ordinary American school. I was there among others [local peers]. My parents said that after three months, I was able to communicate. I adjusted really fast. (Female, 8 years in the USA, local school)

Participants reported that *academic self-efficacy* (i.e. an individual's personal belief in their academic performance) was important for their adjustment. Often, TCKs were frustrated with their academic progress in the beginning but later considered themselves to have adjusted well in school. Those who had been high-achieving students in their home country improved their academic capabilities quite quickly.

Before, I had always got good grades. I also wanted to do well in school abroad. It was a must, and after that [academic success], I adjusted. (Female, 3 years in China, International School)

Respondents also described that *pre-departure knowledge* of the new living environment was important for their adjustment as they were concerned about their future life abroad. Third culture kids were typically more excited about the move abroad if they had sufficient information about the new environment, and especially if they had the opportunity to visit the area in which they would be living and their future school.

We had a pre-visit about six months before the actual move. I remember that I was most excited about the big houses that we visited. We also visited my school; it was new and fancy. [After the visit] I was excited to start a life abroad and be able to experience something new [which had a positive effect on later adjustment]. (Male, 2 years in China, International School)

Third culture kids' *previous international experience* is closely linked to their adjustment. Some participants felt that prior periods of living abroad and traveling during childhood aided their adjustment as they had developed more realistic expectations of life abroad.

We had traveled a lot before the assignment, and I already understood the benefits of living abroad. (Female, 3 years in China, International School)

In California, [adjustment] was eased by the fact that we already had that prior Swedish experience. At that age, I was able to reflect that I had experienced this once before, and I had a good time and survived it, and I made new friends. I thought that I would survive this the second time. (Female, over 3 years abroad in Sweden and the USA, International School and local school)

Experienced participants pointed out that they learned to make new friends, even those who considered themselves introverted. Some even considered constant relocations part of their family identity, meaning that relocating and adjusting to new environments was part of their family's way of life. Third culture kids also came to understand the long-term benefits of an upcoming international experience if they had spent time abroad previously.

If you are used to relocations when you are young, it will be much easier to adjust to new places in the future. (Male, 15 years abroad in the USA, Switzerland, Belgium, local school, and European School)

Interpersonal relationship factors

Family support was found to be important to the adjustment. The respondents thought it was important to make the relocation decision together as a family. For example, a female participant reported that her parents did well in preparing her for the assignment and managed this by making an effort to support her. The parents asked her to write a pros and cons list, and she noticed that the issues mentioned in the pros list were important factors for her future. Her parents instilled the idea that she had actually made the initial decision about moving, which helped her adjust. Participants also saw that a close family relationship advanced their adjustment, and the time abroad brought their family significantly closer. In addition, it was mentioned that the absence of hobbies (for both the children and parents) made it possible to spend more time with the family and support the children in their schoolwork and their new life situation. Moreover, siblings supported and encouraged each other, which advanced their adjustment.

Most importantly, our parents had a positive attitude to the new experience and never complained about life in China. That had a huge impact on our attitude to living in China and advanced our adjustment. (Female, 3 years in China, International School)

It is certainly a special situation for a child to adjust to. At least I had a twin brother in the same class. That fact helped adjustment. (Male, 15 years in Belgium, European School)

In turn, the absence of family support caused some adjustment challenges. For example, some missed their older siblings who had not moved abroad with the family. Some participants also explained that one of the factors negatively affecting their adjustment was a lack of family support when the parents or siblings found adjusting challenging. Parents' adjustment challenges often also impact their relationship in a negative way, which further impacts the children's adjustment.

My older sister stayed in Finland, and that influenced the whole family. It affected my adjustment since I was sad and missed her a great deal. (Female, 3 years in China, International School)

After a year, my big brother moved back because he did not adjust there. Dad also did not enjoy being there at all. He was quite depressed. My mom liked living there because she was working. I really believe that this also impacted my own adjustment since half the family was quite unhappy there. (Female, 1.5 years in the USA, local school)

Friend support was one of the most crucial factors in TCKs' adjustment. Most participants described how they found new friends quite quickly because other children arriving were

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in the same situation and were interested in forming new friendships. The other TCKs were also supportive because they remembered being in the same situation, and therefore, they created a welcoming atmosphere for the newcomers. Third culture kids also wanted to stay in touch in the long run as the other TCKs understand the feelings experienced during relocations and can offer support in different life stages.

I found friends, and school started; that helped. We were in an international school where people come and go. Others had just arrived, so I had peer support; I was not adjusting alone. Even though there were no other Finns, there were students from elsewhere who were in the same situation, and that had a significant impact on adjustment. (Female, 3 years in India, International School)

Everyone came to talk to me [it was an important aspect of my adjustment], and everyone was pulling on the same rope since people were experiencing the exact same things. (Female, 2 years in China, International School)

Environmental factors

The current study shows that the type of *school system* attended abroad impacts TCKs' adjustment experiences as International Baccalaureate and European Schools mainly cater to expatriate children. Therefore, these schools have considerable experience in supporting the adjustment of TCKs (e.g. language training and support for social integration). In turn, the TCKs in local schools are in a different position because they must take greater responsibility for their own adjustment as they will receive less support from the school.

In the international school, there were a lot of people of the same age who were in the same situation. The biggest factors for adjustment were the school itself, making new friends, and supportive teachers. If they are able to make you feel welcome, that's it. (Male, 2.5 years in China, International School)

I got only some extra one-on-one lessons from an 'English as a second language' teacher. Maybe one hour a week. In the beginning, I got to sit next to a local student to see a little bit of what they were doing. That is how I learned everything. (Female, 8 years in the USA, local school)

The interviewees explained that classes in IB schools were populated according to the incoming children's age and language level. The system enhanced their adjustment since new students could study with peers at a similar level. Those who attended local schools, mainly in the USA, explained that learning the school language quickly and the local accent was important for their adjustment. The role of accents was not raised among those participants who attended international schools. Attendees and teachers at those schools come from multiple countries and do not share an accent. In European Schools, students start their studies using their native language. Those who studied for the IB in international schools and European Schools befriended other expat kids. Those who attended local schools often also made friends with other expat children whose lifestyles mirrored their own. Interestingly, those who studied in local schools engaged with the host culture to a greater extent than IB and European School students.

I was placed in a class with students who did not yet speak English well. So, I had time to learn English before I had to focus on anything else ... that made it a lot easier [to adjust]. (Male, 2 years in China, International School)

The adjustment was obviously difficult at first. I had an accent when speaking English, and I just wanted to fit in as soon as possible. I started in high school with a new culture and a new educational system. I would be lying if I said that adjusting was easy. (Male, 8 years in Canada, local school)

Participants related how *different academic requirement levels* across countries and different education institutions affected their adjustment, as they often struggled to succeed in schools abroad. For example, interviewees who attended an IB school considered the schools offered a high-quality international education with far more demanding standards than they had been used to.

My adjustment was affected by different issues that caused stress. For example, IB school was much more demanding than what I had been used to ... meaning that school there was way ahead of schools in Finland. (Female, 2.5 years in China, International School)

Favorable *living conditions* were also connected to TCKs' adjustment. The participants explained that their adjustment was smoothed by being included in the decisions around choosing accommodation (a decision that often reflected personal interests such as hobbies or pets). Many also enjoyed a higher standard of living than at home, as some lived in guarded compounds, had household support staff, and a company car and driver. In addition, participants described how things such as safety, enjoyable restaurants, and different amusements had advanced their adjustment. Many participants were from smaller Finnish towns with fewer leisure options for teenagers, and they found their new living arrangements provided them with exciting opportunities.

Our apartment was chosen because of the basketball court in the yard. My brother and I played basketball, which was nice for us and advanced our adjustment. (Female, 2.5 years in China, International School)

Cultural novelty was also connected to TCK adjustment. The participants often noticed the extensive cultural differences quickly after moving to the host country, as many had relocated to a country with a significantly different culture from their home culture. The TCK population seemed to form their own international culture and often remained somewhat distanced from the local culture. A major contributor to that situation was that TCKs often could not understand the local language, which meant they could not communicate freely with local people. However, the participants who had attended a European School abroad mentioned that they could maintain a connection with their Finnish culture due to the large surrounding Finnish community.

I went to a European School where there were students from different countries. I was also able to speak Finnish. It felt like I had one foot in Finland or the Finnish culture and the other foot there abroad. It certainly eased the adjustment. (Female, 4 years in Belgium, European School)

The cultural factors that affected TCKs' adjustment often seemed to be superficial challenges and observable behavioral issues such as being jostled in crowded places, being treated differently as a foreigner, different driving habits, and issues with different hygiene standards.

At first, I felt anxious since people wanted to touch me. I was a European blond child, and people would grab my hand in the street and start talking to me. Or they wanted to take

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pictures with me. It took a while before I got used to it. (Female, 3 years in China, International School)

About half of the participants had experienced several relocations during their childhood. They explained that their family's *internationally mobile lifestyle* affected their adjustment. When a family relocates frequently, TCKs must constantly build new relationships, and they will lose friends when families repatriate or move to other locations. Accordingly, the mobile lifestyle made TCKs' social lives somewhat unstable, and then moving to a new location tended to prompt anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of disconnection. The lifestyle did, however, entail forming new meaningful relationships abroad with peers who shared extraordinary experiences. A TCK has only a short time to cherish the experiences and memories of a life-changing chapter in their life. When they relocate to a new environment, all the complexities and uncertainties of relocation reappear. Accordingly, TCKs experienced constant anxiety and uncertainty about how long they or their friends would stay in a certain location. Interestingly, participants still considered frequent mobility a way of life, and adjustment became a little easier with each relocation.

We moved four times within the USA, and each adjustment was easier. However, each time, it felt like the world was ending and that I would definitely not find friends. Then, after a couple of months, I had again adjusted to a new state. (Female, 15.5 years abroad in Sweden and the USA, local school)

Discussion and conclusions

This paper aims to increase the understanding of the perceptions of factors affecting TCKs' adjustment to a host country. The study has a unique focus on non-native-English-speaker TCKs who had a range of adjustment experiences when abroad, owing to the different schools they attended. The study results indicate that the adjustment challenges of TCKs were significant, but ultimately, they generally adjusted well. The respondents considered their international experience to be life-changing.

The study's findings on the factors connected with the adjustment of TCKs were categorized into individual, interpersonal, and environmental factors, as suggested by the adjustment models of Shaffer and Harrison (2001) and Weeks et al. (2010). A set of specific factors were identified within these main categories, as summarized in Figure 1.

Individual factors connected to TCKs' adjustment

Third culture kids adjustment studies have typically neglected the anticipatory factors involved (Banerjee et al., 2020; Van der Zee et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2010), and more research has been called for in this area (Jones et al., 2022). The present study identifies important unique connections between TCKs' individual-level anticipatory factors in their adjustment. First, openness to experience was typically significant in ensuring a rapid adjustment to their new life abroad. Some earlier studies posit that cultural open-mindedness is key to adjustment (Van der Zee et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2010). However, the current study discusses openness from a markedly broader perspective. For example, a positive attitude to life changes, self-determination (De Araujo, 2021), and also enthusiasm for relocation were significant factors in TCK adjustment.

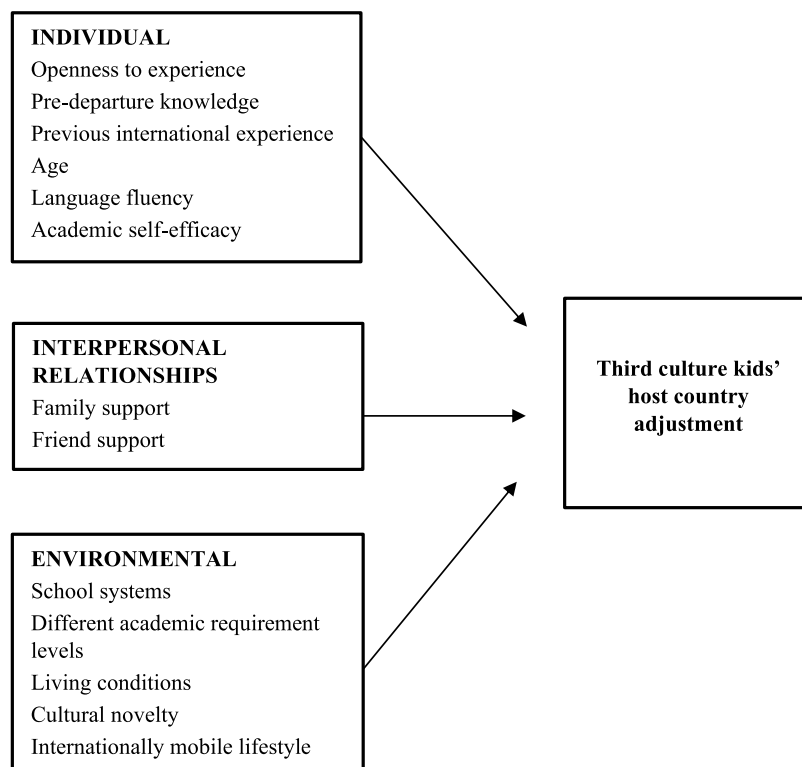


Figure 1. Key factors affecting TCKs' host country adjustment.

Leaving friends when relocating is difficult for TCKs (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), and therefore, participants who were not open to the international experience often had a hard time leaving their friends. Prior research has emphasized the role of friends; however, our study confirms leaving siblings, girlfriends or boyfriends, family pets, and having to abandon hobbies also causes distress. Of course, some were able to take up the same hobbies abroad, take their family pets with them, or adopt a new pet in the host country. Such issues were found to be extraordinarily important for a TCK experiencing significant life changes. Parents can foster their children's openness to new experiences if they recognize the relevant issues in the pre-departure phase.

The second novel anticipatory factor that emerged from the TCK experiences was the importance of pre-departure knowledge. That is important because Black et al.'s (1991) adjustment model posits that accurate expectations among expatriates promote adjustment. The current research confirmed that learning about the new environment before departure could provide TCKs with a structure to support their later adjustment. An important contributor was visiting the future location, school, and accommodation, which instilled positive expectations about the coming life abroad and prepared for smooth in-country adjustment. Morales (2015) also suggests that transitional programs can assist TCKs in adapting to multicultural international schools abroad and that well-qualified counselors with multicultural competences could ease TCKs' transition into international schools.

A third anticipatory factor, previous international experience, also facilitates TCKs' adjustment, as suggested by Black et al.'s (1991) model on expatriate adjustment. Previous relocation experience made new moves easier due to realistic expectations being instilled about future relocations. Each relocation was still found to cause disquiet at some level (Van der Zee et al., 2007), and fear about fitting in and adjusting to a new location remained. Interestingly, some participants with extensive international experience considered constant relocations a normal way of life that was quite easily manageable.

A fourth identified individual factor is the age of the TCK. Participants who had relocated before their teenage years considered their youth aided their adjustment. The respondents suggested that the ideal time to relocate is when the child starts school or is about to change schools. Furthermore, those who had relocated during their teenage years experienced more challenges in leaving their social life behind than younger TCKs. Similarly, De Sivatte et al. (2019) found qualitative evidence that relocation after ten years of age complicated establishing new friendships abroad. However, quantitative findings from the same study did not support the observation. Further research is therefore needed.

Fifth, acculturation theory indicates that language skills are important contributors to acclimatization to a new culture (Sam & Berry, 2010). Our findings also indicate that language fluency and, more precisely, a knowledge of the language of the chosen school were essential aspects of the adjustment of the study's respondents. Moreover, students who already speak the school language competently might benefit from being able to address academic tasks wholeheartedly. In contrast, less competent speakers must devote most of their energy to learning the language of their new school. In this study, the participants explained that knowledge of the school's language was closely linked with academic self-efficacy and fitting into social circles, which makes it one of the most important factors in the adjustment of TCKs with weaker skills in the language of the school.

Unexpectedly, a knowledge of the host-country language (if different from the school language) was not found to be significant for TCK adjustment. The finding is interesting, as knowledge of the host-country language is considered a significant factor in the adjustment of expatriates and their spouses (Black et al., 1991; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). In addition, the study participants did not report an urge to learn the local language for social reasons. The finding aligns with earlier findings about living an expatriate-centric life in the expatriate bubble (Weeks et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it differs from the findings of De Sivatte et al. (2019), which indicated that a deficiency in host-country language skills posed significant challenges for expatriate children's interactions with local people.

A sixth individual factor connected to TCKs' adjustment was academic self-efficacy (De Sivatte et al., 2019), as until they had developed their skills in the school language, many received lower grades than they were used to. The participants commonly considered having raised their academic self-efficacy to a desired level and achieving academic success to be measures of successful adjustment.

Interpersonal relationship factors connected to TCKs' adjustment

The study identified two interpersonal relationship factors, which refer to a setup where an individual is part of a certain group (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 283). First, family support

was considered highly important for TCKs' adjustment, both before relocation and during their time abroad. Study participants who had participated in the pre-departure decision-making with their parents reported that doing so had contributed positively to their adjustment. Families also became significantly closer, presumably reflecting their emotional reliance on the family unit in a new environment (Weeks et al., 2010). Interviewees also explained that having one parent at home and/or the family using local support staff freed parent(s) from domestic duties, permitting them to support the children in their new life situation.

Moreover, spillover effects from parents' and siblings' level of adjustment were recognized. The participants reported that the adjustment challenges experienced by parents and siblings negatively affected their own adjustment. These findings align with family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), which holds that individuals influence each other's actions. In close families, if one family member becomes depressed, the adjustment of the other family members is likely to be adversely affected. In the worst-case scenario, the family will return prematurely due to the adjustment challenges of a family member (Fukuda & Chu, 1994; Gupta et al., 2012).

Second, the adjustment of TCKs depended on whether they had received support from friends and, primarily, whether they had found new friends (De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010), given the disadvantages of being non-native English speakers. Interestingly, they built new social networks quickly because all the incoming TCKs were interested in forming new relationships. While McLachlan (2005) reported that new relationships are typically less solid than those forged in the TCKs' home country, the present study could not confirm that. We found that TCKs commonly establish lifelong relationships when abroad. An attribute common to TCKs was finding all their friends from school, whereas De Sivatte et al. (2019) report that 'expatriate children interact well, both with locals and with internationals, although it seems that making friends with other international children is easier'. Language barriers (knowing the school language but not the host-country language(s)) do not fully explain the absence of local friends, as the phenomenon was also visible in the answers of participants who had attended local schools. During their years abroad, participants gravitated toward other TCKs, enjoying the expatriate-centric lifestyle and sharing similar life experiences.

Environmental factors connected to TCKs' adjustment

Understanding of the environmental factors connected to TCKs' adjustment remains limited (e.g. Banerjee et al., 2020; De Sivatte et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). The present study does, however, unveil some new factors. The current research is unique in presenting the first factor: adjustment experiences from three different *school systems* (International (IB), European, and local schools). The informants who attended different types of schools had somewhat different adjustment experiences, as IB and European Schools (ES) provided special support to help TCKs adjust. The participants explained that the relevance of language skills depended on the type of school in terms of receiving education to a certain language level, mainly in their mother tongue, or the need to learn the local dialect quickly. Second, TCKs enrolled in IB and ES schools are surrounded by students with similar experiences of moving abroad in their formative years, which fosters a sense of belonging. A TCK in a local school will

feel more like an outsider because they lack experiences similar to those of their peers and will also probably not share local social norms and cultural reference points.

Third, the variance in the academic requirements of different cultures affected TCK adjustment. Specifically, those participants who had attended IB schools abroad considered them far more demanding due to the high quality of education (see, e.g. Wilkins, 2013). Fourth, favorable living conditions were important to adjustment, as found in studies on spouses (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). A common factor for all family members is that they would like their living conditions abroad to at least be on par with those in their home country (Andreason, 2008; Weeks et al., 2010). Typically, participants experienced an improved standard of living during their time abroad than they had in their home countries, often living in guarded compounds, attending private schools, and perhaps having access to a chauffeur-driven car.

Regarding the fourth environmental factor of cultural novelty, participants described how they experienced only minimal challenges. Third culture kids often remained somewhat distant from the local culture because of their international social circles and expatriate-centric lifestyle. The cultural obstacles connected to TCKs' lives were often surface-level ones, such as different social norms, traffic behavior, and general hygiene standards (Weeks et al., 2010). The current study contributes to TCK adjustment research by revealing a fifth environmental factor: The internationally mobile lifestyle shapes TCK adjustment. During their TCK years, some worried about their family accepting a new relocation and their good friends moving away. They were well aware of how overwhelming and stressful the process of adjusting to a new environment could be and thus suffered from stress and uncertainty. Nevertheless, those with experience of multiple relocations acknowledged that each move was a little easier. The uncertainty is also a feature of the mobile lifestyle that causes conflicts between work and private life among global careerists (Mäkelä et al., 2014) and also impacts the adjustment of their partners (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021).

Theoretical contributions

The findings of the current research contribute to our understanding of factors connected to TCKs' adjustment abroad. The current study is unique in several ways. It expands the work by Shaffer and Harrison (2001) that complements Burke's (1991) identity disruption theory. The former's adjustment model was later applied by Weeks et al. (2010) to study adjustment among teenage TCKs. Our study provides new insights into the factors impacting the adjustment of non-native-English-speaking TCKs, while earlier studies have mainly focused on English-speaking TCKs. Investigating this population unveiled the diversity of TCK experiences and expanded the understanding of their unique perspectives. Methodologically, the study utilizes two-phase qualitative data collection, which enabled the preliminary evidence to strengthen the theoretical contributions of the main data.

The main contribution is to build a more comprehensive model of the factors affecting TCK adjustment, something that has not previously been presented. As discussed above, the present study identified a set of new individual-level factors connected with the adjustment of TCKs. It is acknowledged that more research on TCKs prior to their relocation is needed (Jones et al., 2022). An important contribution of this study is identifying

two previously unreported pre-departure factors impacting the adjustment of TCKs: *openness to experience* and *pre-departure knowledge*. While a few earlier studies have stressed the role of cultural open-mindedness in cultural adjustment (Van der Zee et al., 2007; Weeks et al., 2010) and how personal motivation is linked to the desire to engage with other cultures (the concept of cultural intelligence: Earley & Ang, 2003), the current study contributes by indicating the considerably broader openness to new experiences is even more crucial. That is because if TCKs can cultivate a positive attitude to the major life change of moving abroad and enthusiasm for relocation, they are likely to experience a smooth adjustment when required later. The discovery highlights the importance of reinforcing a positive attitude in TCKs before they depart abroad. Self-determination theory holds that when the motivation to relocate is self-determined, it will likely foster curiosity and a willingness to embrace new experiences and personal growth (De Araujo, 2021). With regard to family support, TCKs' involvement in the pre-departure decision-making process eased subsequent adjustment. That finding is important as Weeks et al. (2010) raised the need for future research on possible links between family-level decision-making and TCK adjustment. In addition, the pre-departure knowledge was important for adjustment since any prior knowledge and visiting the living environment and school promoted positive expectations about life abroad and supported adjustment (see Black & Gregersen, 1991, on partner adjustment and pre-move visits). The current study also contributed new insights into the issue of *language fluency* among TCKs. Partner adjustment models (e.g. Shaffer & Harrison, 2001) indicate that becoming proficient in local languages is a highly significant factor in partners' adjustment. However, it was very important to non-native-English-speaker TCKs that they learned the school language promptly because doing so boosted academic self-efficacy and social integration. This finding is novel, given that De Sivatte et al. (2019) reported that fluency in the language of the school attended was unrelated to TCK adjustment.

Finally, the current research found that even short-term international travel supported the adjustment of TCKs, in that it broadened their understanding of cultural differences in unfamiliar countries. The finding aligns with social learning theory on learning behaviors and adjusting through observing and experiencing the environment and other individuals (Bandura, 1977). The current research thus offers a relevant extension of earlier studies because previous international experience has only been studied through the lens of extended periods abroad (De Sivatte et al., 2019).

Regarding environmental antecedents, this is the first study to identify differences in TCKs' adjustment experiences in three different *school system* contexts. Attending schools specializing in educating TCKs, studying in classes where the student's language fluency is considered, and receiving support from a social network smoothed TCKs' adjustment. In line with the discussion on expatriate partners and their situational definition of self (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), individuals in similar situations are likely to identify with each other. Accordingly, identification as part of an international student group supports the acquisition of behaviors that support the adjustment of TCKs. Our results showed that TCKs studying in local schools initially felt like outsiders; however, they ultimately adjusted to local culture on a deeper level than those at IB and ES schools, who mainly inhabited an expat bubble. That bubble meant context-related issues, such as the local culture, were not hugely significant to the TCKs. Finally, an *internationally mobile lifestyle* was found to be related to TCK adjustment, as more experienced

TCKs had more realistic expectations about relocation (see Black & Gregersen, 1991, on partner adjustment and pre-move visits). Some of them considered constant relocation to be a normal way of life. That is also a new finding since an earlier study reported TCKs who moved frequently grew tired of constant relocation (De Sivatte et al., 2019). While the study provided further evidence of TCKs' adjustment, the limited information on the topic suggests more research is needed (Jones et al., 2022).

Limitations and future research directions

All research has limitations, and the following points concerning the current study should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size may affect the generalizability of the current findings, and this should be considered when drawing conclusions. In addition, both datasets of the study were collected among Finns. Accordingly, future research could include people from different cultural backgrounds. Second, the study participants were already young adults, and thus, memory bias is possible when referring back to a past era (Sikkel, 1985). However, in reporting the early-life experiences of TCKs when they are adults, this study avoided the methodological challenges involved with interviewing children (see also Banerjee et al., 2020). Future studies of TCKs enmeshed in the adjustment process employing methods suitable for interviewing children to complement the view would still be useful. In addition, longitudinal studies could investigate the special nuances throughout the adjustment process. Third, the participants informing both datasets were privileged individuals whose expatriate parent(s) held important positions in the public or private sectors. Future research that includes children from other environments, such as military or missionary families, could deepen the understanding of TCKs' adjustment across different contexts.

More research on whether the children of self-initiated expatriates face similar or different adjustment processes to children whose families are sent abroad by their employers would be welcome. Since the current study revealed differences in TCK adjustment in various school systems, future research might shed more light on the adjustment experiences of TCKs who attend boarding schools or are home-schooled. Future research could also acknowledge TCKs with different family dynamics, for example, single-parent or blended families, because they might face different adjustment challenges. Fourth, while we decided to study the experience of Finnish TCKs of cultures around the globe, it would be interesting to analyze context-related experiences of people from particular cultures to refine the view of the specifics affecting them. Fifth, a future research agenda could review the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on TCKs' adjustment experiences and analyze if it caused some permanent changes to expatriation practices that affected their adjustment. Finally, TCKs were found to be operating outside their comfort zones when adjusting to life abroad. Future research might investigate if doing so influences later career and life choices.

Practical implications

As mentioned previously, TCK training practices are overlooked (Banerjee et al., 2020), and therefore, firm-provided education and support programs could substantially expedite TCKs' adjustment. Understanding the unique adjustment experiences of non-native-

English-speaker TCKs when abroad advances the understanding of the need for tailored training and support practices to ease TCKs' navigation through cultural transitions and relationships abroad. Programs could be provided by dispatching corporations, expat communities, schools, and various nonprofit organizations. Options might include programs to foster openness to experience, increase pre-departure knowledge, promote language and culture learning, highlight the importance of peer and family support, and offer transition planning. The initiatives could incorporate a range of delivery methods, such as mentorship programs, online courses, workshops, blogs, and podcasts. The key requirement is that such programs reflect the diverse needs of TCKs of different ages, which would probably require close collaboration with parents' organizations abroad. In particular, TCKs having the opportunity to learn the host school language prior to arrival could significantly impact their adjustment abroad by speeding social integration and the potential to accelerate academic proficiency.

A superior acclimatization program might even include arranging pre-departure visits to schools and accommodation abroad, and connecting children with children of a similar age who have experienced an expatriate childhood could establish realistic expectations about life abroad. Tailored transitional programs for TCKs run by schools (Morales, 2015) could be beneficial, especially for self-initiated expatriate families, since they cannot access company-run support and training for their children. The current unique study could provide guidance for TCK educators worldwide to implement TCK support strategies to foster a sense of belonging and advance TCK adjustment. In addition, parents can greatly impact their children's adjustment by making the initial decision about expatriation as a family and discussing the long-term benefits of the international experience. In addition, parents can advance their children's adjustment by understanding the challenges and nuances involved in the TCK adjustment experience abroad.

Furthermore, parents keeping their children informed about a forthcoming international move and the length of the stay and reassuring them that they will have good living conditions would ease TCKs' adjustment in the host location. The current unique research offers valuable practical implications for stakeholders; however, it is worth mentioning that TCK experiences will always be culture – and circumstance-dependent. The ideal would be to have tailored training programs for different school types and locations. Accordingly, empowered parents, dedicated organizations, and educators providing proactive support before, during, and after TCKs' time abroad could foster harmonious adjustment and bolster positive experiences, which is another avenue for research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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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 members 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 of the long-term impacts of early life international exposure on ATCKs' CC, and this paper 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 (CC) 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), which can also have long-term impacts on their later work life and career choices (Caselius and Mäkelä, 2022).

The CC gained from international assignments has often been explored through CC 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. 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 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 well-being of ATCKs has been analyzed from perspectives such as their life satisfaction (Mosanya and Kwiatkowska, 2021), depression, anxiety and stress (Davis *et al.*, 2010, 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; Lauring *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. 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.

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).

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. 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). However, further research is needed on TCKs' knowing-how development when studying abroad and on the transferability of such CC to their later 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 min (average 70 min). 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 (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity) guidelines. 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 judgment 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 European Union (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 a year and a half. 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% 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 International Baccalaureate (IB) or European School (ES) 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.

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 that lack previous understanding (Krippendorff, 2018).

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 CC). 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.

Table 1. Data description

	Age	Gender	Countries and lengths of stay abroad before the age of 18 (years)	Education attended abroad*
1	26	Female	China (2,5)	IB
2	26	Male	China (2,5)	IB
3	21	Male	Switzerland (4 ≥)	IB
4	26	Male	China (2)	IB
5	27	Male	China (2)	IB
6	27	Male	USA (3); Switzerland (2), Belgium (10)	Local and ES
7	23	Female	USA (1,5)	Local
8	28	Male	France (1 ≤); Belgium (12)	ES
9	24	Female	Germany (3); Japan (3); UAE (6)	IB
10	28	Male	Belgium (3)	ES
11	27	Male	France (1 ≤); Belgium (12)	ES
12	22	Female	Vietnam (2 ≤); Bangladesh (2 ≤); Latvia (4 ≥)	IB
13	25	Female	USA (8)	Local
14	31	Female	China (2)	IB
15	23	Female	USA (2); Italy (2)	IB
16	23	Male	China (2)	IB
17	30	Female	China (5,5); Switzerland (3,5)	IB
18	27	Male	Belgium (15)	ES
19	24	Female	Germany (2); USA (2)	Local
20	25	Female	Sweden (2,5); USA (13)	Local
21	26	Female	Belgium (3)	ES
22	28	Female	China (3)	IB
23	23	Female	Sweden (2,5); USA (14,5 ≥)	Local
24	25	Female	Belgium (4)	ES
25	23	Female	Sweden (3 ≤); USA (0,5)	IB and Local
26	25	Female	Belgium (15 ≥)	ES
27	25	Female	Spain (2 ≤); Belgium (3); Switzerland (2)	ES and IB
28	41	Male	Germany (8)	Local
29	25	Male	France (1); Belgium (14)	Local and ES
30	28	Female	Germany (2); Switzerland (7)	IB
31	36	Female	China (2)	IB
32	36	Female	Colombia (3); Chile (8)	IB
33	23	Female	India (3)	IB
34	24	Male	Canada (8)	Local

Note(s): *IB 5 international baccalaureate, ES 5 European school and Local 5 Local school (public or private). Source(s): Authors' work

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 (Olliffe *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 cooperating 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 typically 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 MNCs 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 CC. 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-

mindfulness, 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 were 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 USA 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 human resource management (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 MNCs 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 CC 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 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 CC 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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Expatriate childhood as the first domino: does early international exposure lead to a later international career?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper looks to study how adult third culture kids (ATCKs) perceive that their childhood international experience is linked to their career interests and choices in later adult life.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study is based on 34 semi-structured interviews analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The authors adopted social cognitive career theory as a theoretical framework for the work.

Findings – The findings indicate that regardless of the ATCKs field of expertise, their international childhood links to various international exposures and work experiences already in their early career. ATCK background can also be interpreted as an essential facet that promotes significant interest towards international roles, work tasks and careers because they are familiar with a globally mobile lifestyle. A global childhood was represented as a phenomenon that fosters stress tolerance, and ATCKs' unique international capabilities were perceived as an advantage for employment. The authors also found that they tended to set high goals for themselves in terms of education and career, in order to pursue high-end international positions.

Practical implications – ATCKs' value interpretations of their strengths, skills and knowledge highly relate to working in an international setup. When applying for jobs, ATCKs could find it beneficial to highlight their early international experiences and explain why this is valuable experience for organizations that are seeking highly educated, globally competent, and flexible employees. Also, information about ATCKs could be included in international business course curricula, in order to foster an increased recognition of the value and benefits of hiring individuals with a TCK background.

Originality/value – This paper is the first qualitative study which empirically examines ATCKs' longer term career interests and career decisions among individuals with adult work experience. This study contributes to the knowledge about how early life international experiences are interpreted in the context of work-life decisions from a social cognitive perspective.

Keywords International assignment, Childhood international experience, Career interest and choices, Adult third culture kids, Social cognitive career theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Due to high levels of internationalization, there is a need for internationally competent people (Tahir, 2021), and having people with the right talents in place is one way to remain successful in global competition (Beechler and Woodward, 2009; Kerr, 2020; Schuler *et al.*, 2011). The global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has severely reduced global mobility (Haak-Saheem, 2020) since March 2020. However, telecommunication is not expected to totally replace internationally mobile work (Arslan *et al.*, 2021), since international operations such as control over subsidiaries and the knowledge transfer of organizational routines and practices needs an expatriate local presence (Paik and Sohn, 2004; Patel *et al.*, 2019). But as long as there is a high risk of the virus continuing to spread, fewer international assignments are appointed and those who are sent abroad need to achieve success and adjust to the host location faster than previous expatriates (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020). This highlights the importance of finding skilled people who are willing to accept international roles, which has already been seen as one of the greatest human resource challenges (Froese *et al.*, 2013), even before the global pandemic.

It has been suggested that companies in need of expatriate candidates with success potential could look to former expatriate children (Selmer and Lam, 2004), often called adult third culture kids (ATCKs). ATCK refers to grown up people who have lived part of their first eighteen years in a country that is different from at least one of the parent's passport countries, due to a parent's work (Pollock *et al.*, 2017, p. 404). So far, research on ATCKs has mainly focused on their suitability as expatriates (Westropp *et al.*, 2016), adjustment issues (Hervey, 2009; Luring *et al.*, 2019; Selmer and Luring, 2014), an international childhood's connection to personality and well-being (Abe, 2018) and cross-cultural competence (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013), and some studies have considered their actual working life and career choices (Cottrell, 2002; Bikos *et al.*, 2014; Wilcox, 2017). However, we still know very little about ATCKs' perceptions about how and why their earlier international experience is related to their later work life (Nash, 2020), so further research is needed to study ATCKs actual adult career choices, in order to understand how long-lasting the childhood desire for an international career actually is (Selmer and Lam, 2004).

In the light of the above, we aim to expand the understanding about ATCKs' perceptions of how their international background (i.e. living outside their parents'

passport country during childhood) is linked to their career interests and choices in the long term. While previous studies have mainly focused on (A)TCK students' work interests (typically examining their possible future expatriate potential), this study contributes to the international career literature by studying adulthood international interests and actual career choices. Moreover, where earlier studies have mainly focused on personal traits, skills and knowledge developed when living abroad (Abe, 2018; Luring *et al.*, 2019; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013), our study broadens the view by exploring how ATCKs themselves narrate and explain their career-related socially developed cognitions. In particular, we study how they make sense of their childhood international experience's connection to their career related choices, their expectations for their later career, and their career ambitions. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent *et al.*, 1994) has been acknowledged as a suitable theoretical framework for qualitative career studies (Ansala and Uusiautti, 2017; Bikos *et al.*, 2014), and therefore we have adopted it in our study.

Adult third culture kids

People in a variety of professions in corporate, diplomatic, military or religious sectors work around the world and relocate with their children (Tanu, 2015). These children and adolescents have been called "third culture kids" (TCKs) which is a term coined by Dr. Ruth Hill Uusem who studied American expatriate families in India during the late 1950s. According to Pollock *et al.* (2017, p. 17), the "third culture" refers to a cultural setup with a shared lifestyle common to other people living an internationally mobile lifestyle. Particularly, it bases on blended elements of the person's home or passport culture as their "first culture", and the "second culture" seen where the family has relocated. The third culture is therefore seen as a way of life which is typically unlike life in either the home or host culture (Pollock *et al.*, 2017, p. 17). Pollock *et al.* (2017, p. 404) define TCKs as follows:

A traditional third culture kid (TCK) is 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.

When third culture kids come of age, they are referred to as "adult third culture kids" (ATCKs). ATCKs have been exposed to international relocations during their developmental years. They might have lived abroad for a long period of their childhood, or have had the experience of living in several countries during their childhood (Cottrell, 2002). However, an ATCK might have had only one year of experience of staying outside their passport country during their childhood years (Pollock *et al.*, 2017, pp. 23–24). Thus, it may be more valuable to consider the

individual experiences and how time has been spent during the stay abroad, rather than just measuring the length of stay (Lam and Selmer, 2004) or the amount of relocations.

ATCKs have a different background compared to people who are typically raised in a single cultural environment (Selmer and Laurant, 2014). By having experiences of a privileged globally mobile lifestyle in their childhood, ATCKs build a new cultural identity while not having full ownership of any specific culture (Bonebright, 2010). Therefore, they typically connect easily with individuals who have also spent their growing years in cultures different to their passport culture (Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009). In contrast, childhood cross-cultural mobility has also been found to foster rootlessness in ATCKs, as they find it difficult to answer the question "Where are you from?" (Pollock *et al.*, 2017, p. 184). In addition to rootlessness, ATCKs also find themselves to be restless, meaning that they are no longer satisfied with living in a single location (Moore and Barker, 2012). These kinds of experiences have been found to have an effect on people's lives in the long run, for instance on their intentions and on the decisions they make regarding their working life and career (Pollock *et al.*, 2017).

SCCT has been found to be a relevant theory for predicting occupational interest and choice aspirations among high school students (Lent *et al.*, 2010), student activist perceptions and expectations of their employment after college (Ansala and Uusiautti, 2017), as well as international graduate students' interests in international careers (Bozionelos *et al.*, 2015). In this study, SCCT is adopted as a framework to study the career interests and choices of ATCKs. As the international context plays an essential role in the ATCK's life, the literature concerning how international experience has been found to connect with people's career-related issues is presented next.

International experience, career interests and choices

ATCKs have gained their international experience as a child and/or adolescent and before they entered the labor market, and is a major difference to other populations who gain international experience for example from their working life. A comparative study on British expatriate adolescents (living in Hong Kong) and local Hong Kong teenagers showed that TCKs could be more culturally open-minded compared to their peers living in single culture (Selmer and Lam, 2004). The study also showed that these globally mobile children seem to have internationally mobile career preferences and travel interests (see also Lam and Selmer, 2004; Westropp *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, ATCKs have been found to have high educational achievements and a genuine interest in careers involving independence, expert level positions, and

leadership (Cottrell, 2002). Thus, while not much is understood about ATCKs' actual adult careers, employees with international work experience are generally perceived to have more internal and external opportunities compared to their domestic peers (Benson and Pattie, 2008). Whether ATCKs' could similarly use their early international experience to benefit their later employment still remains unanswered. However, researchers have often shown interest in the suitability of (A)TCKs for future expatriate assignments (Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016), since this population have been found to develop special international characteristics during their adolescent years abroad, for example, their cultural understanding (Westropp *et al.*, 2016). But links to their later work life are often missing from the discussion.

Tarique and Weisbord (2013) found that the extent of early international experience, language skills, family diversity, and the personality characteristic of being open to experience predicts cross-cultural competence among ATCKs. But as their study participants were students, the utilization of cross-cultural competences in an actual work setting was not evaluated. Also, the effect of international work experience on a career is somewhat contradictory, since repatriates (i.e. people who have relocated back to their home country after working and/or living abroad) have been found to be unsatisfied with their job after an overseas assignment (Brewster and Suutari, 2005), for reasons such as their overseas accomplishments being undervalued and a subsequent perception of lower job responsibility development in their career (Breitenmoser *et al.*, 2018). Thus, an examination of whether ATCKs consider their early international experience to advance their career development would be an interesting new dimension to add to the cycle of experiences of expatriate families.

Theoretical framework

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent *et al.*, 1994) has its roots in general social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), and is further developed with perspectives from career and academic interest, career choice, and performance literature (Lent *et al.*, 1994). General SCT (Bandura, 1986, 2002, 2012) states that people, their behavior, and environments influence one another in highly complex ways (Albert and Luzzo, 1999). In SCCT, social cognitive mechanisms that are relevant to career interests and choices are self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal representations (Sheu and Bordon, 2017). According to SCCT, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals help people to exercise personal agency, and so become self-directed in the area of career decision making (Lent *et al.*, 1994).

Self-efficacy and its development are essential for academic and career development (Lent and Brown, 2019), and can be developed through performance

accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and social influence, and also physiological states (Bandura, 1986, p. 399). *Outcome expectations* are a second social cognitive mechanism, and deal with the belief of consequences stemming from performing certain behaviors (Lent *et al.*, 1994, 2015). Bandura (1986) described three types of outcome expectations as physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes. In social cognitive theory, *goals* are important for the self-regulation of behavior (Lent *et al.*, 1994). Specifically, people's views of their own capabilities (i.e. self-efficacy) influence how much effort they mobilize to achieve their adopted goals (Bandura, 1986, p. 470). These goals can be distinguished into two different groups; choice-content goals (e.g. the type of career an individual wishes to accomplish) and performance goals (the performance level which the individual plans to achieve within a given task) (Lent, 2013, p. 119).

Research adopting the SCCT model in an international context is still limited (Bozionelos *et al.*, 2015; Sheu and Bordon, 2017), and in the ATCK context, only two studies can be seen to have been carried out (Bikos *et al.*, 2014; Wilcox, 2017). Bikos *et al.* (2014) studied missionary kids' (MKs: a sub-group of TCKs) career development through SCCT in their qualitative study. Their sample consisted of eleven US missionary kids who were repatriated back to the USA having spent a minimum of one year in an international Christian mission. MKs were found to face unique challenges regarding their later education and career development. Faith was found to intersect with college-age MKs' environmental variables, personal attributes, and overt behaviors, and the authors suggest that sending organizations offer career services to support MKs' educational and career paths. Wilcox's (2017) qualitative monograph dissertation uses SCCT to explore career decision making processes among college students with a TCK background. The data is based on 23 interviews with individuals holding both US and non-U.S. passports. Wilcox reports the outcomes of a TCK childhood as influencing their later selection of university, major, and potential career. The study participants were college age students who had their work career still ahead of them, and were found to be open to international assignments, in line with Westropp *et al.*'s (2016) findings about the suitability of ATCKs as expatriates.

A quantitative study adopting SCCT in the international career context based on a relatively small cross-sectional data set ($n = 139$) of international graduate students without a TCK background showed evidence that self-efficacy in working abroad and outcome expectancy are positively linked with international career interests (Bozionelos *et al.*, 2015). The study also reported that adjustment to international studies, and exposure and immersion to the international context (i.e. previous international travel and participation in international relations such as clubs and associations) had a positive relationship with having an interest in international

careers via self-efficacy in working abroad. As this research utilized cross-sectional data in relation to the study path models (mediation), no strong evidence of causality could be achieved. However, other (cross-sectional) studies have suggested a link between international exposure and expatriation willingness (Froese *et al.*, 2013).

All in all, links between an early international background and adulthood career interest/choices still remain scarce (see, e.g. Cottrell, 2002; Bikos *et al.*, 2014; Wilcox, 2017), even though finding skilled people for overseas assignments is one of the greatest HR challenges (Froese *et al.*, 2013). Empirical research on (A)TCKs career interests tends to be quantitative (Cottrell, 2002; Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013), but with rare exceptions (Westropp *et al.*, 2016). Also, studies typically concentrate on (A)TCK students' perceptions of their career interests (Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013), and often neglect individuals with actual work experience. Additionally, research on the occupational interests of Portuguese high school students revealed that students do not necessarily have crystallized occupational goals (Lent *et al.*, 2010), and similar findings about student activists' career goals have also been found (Ansala and Uusiautti, 2017). Therefore, studying ATCKs with actual work experience is an essential continuum to previous studies. In sum, the current knowledge mainly focuses on personal traits, skills and knowledge that are developed when living abroad (Abe, 2018; Luring *et al.*, 2019; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013), and studies giving voice to ATCKs' lived experiences and their interpretations of their international background and its relation to their career-related cognitions is rare. Our study broadens the literature in this regard.

Method

We adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with 34 Finnish ATCKs. These ATCK participants were expected to have had at least a one year stay outside of their primary passport country due to their parent(s) work, in the first eighteen years of their life. Furthermore, work experience was prerequisite to participation in the research. The interviews were conducted during April and May 2020 through Zoom video communication over the Internet. Video interviews were conducted since the participants were located all around the world, and because of the global Covid-19 pandemic situation, travelling and personal face-to-face interviews were not possible to arrange.

The first participants were found from the first author's network, two participants from the second author's previous expatriate research project, and the remainder were found via the snowball method, meaning that interviewed individuals provided new contact information (with permission) for people they knew who suited the

research inclusion criteria. In this way, it was possible to gather a significant dataset with interesting intercultural experiences from all around the world. Overall, the participants had had one to five international experiences with their expatriate parents abroad during their childhood.

The data presents experiences of different schooling systems; International Baccalaureate (IB), European schools (ES), and local schools (public or private). At the time of the interviews, the participants' ages were between 21 and 41 years (mean 26.5 years and median 25.5). In the data, 29% of the ATCKs had parents working for the public sector, and 71% working for the private sector as business expatriates. The interviews included 21 female and 13 male participants. On average, the participants had 5.6 years of work experience. The data includes TCK international experience from: China, Switzerland, USA, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, UAE, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Latvia, Italy, Sweden, Spain, Colombia, Chile, India, and Canada. On average, the participants had spent 7.25 years abroad, and some families had had more than one assignment in the same country.

The nature of the interviews was retrospective since the participants of the study were reflecting on their early international experiences' connections to their educational and vocational path. Therefore, this type of retrospective questioning regarding ATCKs' experiences and links to their future might be biased by their memory (Sikkel, 1985). However, our intention is not to analyze the data as factual evidence of their childhood and working life, but to give voice to ATCKs' own interpretations of how their international background influenced and impacted on their careers. Accordingly, we do not see the possibility of memory bias as a problem. Instead, we see the retrospective view as a distinguishing factor from earlier studies where the informants have been adolescents (see, e.g. Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004).

The interviews started with opening questions that elicited the participants' background information such as their name, age, information about their parents, details about international experience, work experience, place of residence, language skills, etc. The participants were invited to openly reflect on their career interests and choices, and the discussion was loosely structured on the sub-themes of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. However, these theoretical concepts were not explicitly adopted in the interview questions. The interview included broad questions such as "What does international experience mean to you?", so as to elicit a rich career narrative. Participants were lead into discussion with more focused questions about their early international experience's long-term effects on their views of their self-efficacy in work life, whether they believed that their international history was connected to their career, and about their career aspirations for the future. Sequel

questions were asked throughout the interviews to encourage the interviewees to elaborate on particular matters. All of the interviews were conducted in Finnish, and the quotations provided in this paper have been translated into English by the authors. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed into written form. The interviews lasted from 50 to 110 min, the average being 70 min, providing 117,664 words of data for analysis. ATCKs' career interests and choices are one part of the wider dataset, which also covers other insights into the phenomena of ATCKs being raised abroad.

The validity and reliability of the study was ensured in number of ways, in order to strengthen the quality of the research. First, semi-structured interviews were used in the study since the topics (career interests and choices of ATCKs) were pre-determined (Schmidt, 2004), but the method still enabled the exploration of thoughts and beliefs on the topic from a wide perspective. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews, and framed in a way that the questions were not able to be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" response (Metsämuuronen, 2006, p. 115). The questions were tested in March 2020 in two pilot interviews to increase their reliability (Eskola and Suoranta, 1998). Second, trust between the interviewer and interviewee is known to be important for conducting successful interviews (Eskola and Suoranta, 1998). Therefore, Zoom videoconferencing was used for communication instead of telephone, since Zoom enabled the parties to see each other's facial expressions which promoted engagement and trust (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). Since the interviews were conducted during a global pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not possible to arrange. However, it must be noted that due to the prevalent Covid-19 situation, a large proportion of the adult population (and also our participants) were working and/or studying remotely. That said; all of the participants were already familiar with using videoconferencing tools on a daily basis which diminished any possible technical difficulties. The interviews were video recorded so transcriptions were possible to obtain. A transcription of the interview was sent via e-mail to the interviewee to further increase the reliability of the data (Puusa and Juuti, 2020), and only two participants wished to change and/or add a few words to the transcript.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was selected as a suitable method of analysis for the qualitative data obtained (Puusa and Juuti, 2020). Qualitative content analysis enabled a systematic analysis of the transcripts derived from the interviews, and aims to summarize and generalize the research phenomena (Sarajärvi and Tuomi, 2017). First, the interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author of this study, and the data had already become familiar by this stage. Notes of emerging issues were

made throughout the data collection and preparation. Next, the data analysis continued with a careful reading of the data transcriptions. In that stage of analysis, a preliminary identification of the essential elements of career aspirations and choices, and whether participants linked their TCK experiences to these elements was conducted. Second, NVivo software was used to organize the collected material by theme, keyword and similar meanings to advance the data analysis (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). The emergent findings were then interpreted through the theoretical lens of SCCT.

Findings

Our interviewees described their prior international experience from their developmental years as significant for their development of confidence, capability and identity. They also highlighted their internationally developed self-efficacy to be meaningful in their later international career desires and directions. During the interviews, the majority of our participants brought up that they were keen to work in an international setting, and attributed this to their prior experiences. All of the participants expressed that they already considered their international experience to have had a direct or indirect connection to their educational and/or vocational decisions. ATCKs' early international experience was also described as fostering their employment, and to be useful in their work tasks, especially those that included an international aspect. We interpret these positive expressions as ATCKs being proud of their international background and being willing to represent it as a competitive advantage for their future career.

Next, we show in more detail how ATCKs' made sense of their international childhood experiences from the perspective of their careers. First, we discuss how ATCKs expressed their confidence development, and attributed it to their international background and linked it to their career decisions. Worth mentioning is that internationally developed confidence was the most dominant theme arising from the interviews. Second, we discuss the way how ATCKs talked about their expectations and ambitions in relation to their current or future career.

International experience in childhood as building blocks for confidence

According to social cognitive career theory, confidence can be built through vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1986, p. 399), and we found that the majority of the participants mentioned that observing their expatriate parent's work had made them consider an international direction in work life. ATCKs explained that they had similar skills to their parents which they perceived as being crucial in international

work and lifestyle, such as language skills, cultural competences, and social skills. Additionally, ATCKs talked about having had the possibility to observe people with international careers on a larger scale, and described the expatriate community, involving their parents' friends and their own friends' parents. They also described that they were "surrounded by expatriates" and mentioned that even their teachers in school were typically following an international expatriate career. Many of our participants explained that this kind of expatriate-centric social context and lifestyle raised their overall confidence and willingness towards international work. ATCKs explained that they came to consider international work to be normal, interesting and achievable, and a somewhat obvious choice already during their childhood. However, some participants raised that their parents were extremely stressed during their international assignment, and that this has led them to have some hesitation towards taking up a lifelong international career themselves.

While studying and making career choices, I reflected quite a lot on my father. I liked the opportunities he had had. I thought that if dad can do it, why could not I? (Female 25 years, 8 years in USA, local school)

I saw it so closely, not only from my own family, but also from the families of my friends, where one or both parents worked in the EU. It became so familiar, I think it will make it easier for me to accept international work. (Male 25 years, 15 years abroad in France and Belgium, local and European School)

Moreover, ATCKs nominated their parents and siblings as being the most influential people for their educational (and vocational) decision making, and many ATCKs described that this was because their families became significantly close during their time abroad and got used to making major decisions together. Most ATCKs presented their parents as a source of support and highlighted that they did not put pressure on them, for instance, when making choices about education or choosing a suitable career path. Some participants described their parents as their "sparring partners" in their educational and career choices. Although our participants did not explicitly talk about the differences in schools as a social context for their career decisions, an interesting observation arose from the ATCKs' interviews. We noted that participants with a background in International Baccalaureate and European schools often mentioned that it was typical that students from their school continued their studies at foreign universities, which also affected their own educational decisions. However, this was not visible in the answers of those participants who had been in local schools abroad, so it is possible that the type of school they went to when living abroad has played a role in their later educational decisions.

Dad has encouraged me a lot that I could become a good diplomat. I feel that they [both parents] have been encouraging me. It has been more of an encouragement,

not pushing me to any specific field, but rather in a positive way. (Female 26 years, 3 years in Belgium, European School)

It was not really even a question whether I would go to university or not. [...] All who graduated made university applications. It was never really questioned. It was the assumption that in the last year of high school one makes university applications. I thought I had always wanted international business myself, but yes, my family encouraged me for it. We saw that I would be good at it. (Female 24 years, 12 years abroad in Germany, Japan and UAE, International School)

ATCKs seemed to relate their early international experiences to their feelings of mastery (Westropp *et al.*, 2016), including the complex and stressful situations they faced in working life. Particularly, the interviewees represented their TCK experience as fostering stress tolerance, since they were used to stressful situations during their developmental years (i.e. the adjustment to a new environment, starting studies with an unfamiliar language, etc.).

I think social issues do not stress me. Or I feel less stress because of my international background. [...] I adjust more easily. I get along more easily with people because of my background. (Female 24 years, 12 years abroad in Germany, Japan and UAE, International School)

ATCKs also felt themselves to be more suited for international work which contains major life changes and new unpredictable situations, compared for example to their colleagues at work, and linked their high stress tolerance to this aspect.

Confidence, expectations, and ambitions for current and future career

International background represented as a competitive advantage. The ATCKs who participated in our study expressed being confident about applying for and accepting job offers that include international mobility, already at the beginning of their career. ATCKs voiced that their confidence stemmed from their familiarity of living abroad, international competence, and the feeling of having control in international contexts. Participants often mentioned their abilities to move and start from the beginning in a new location, and the social competences needed in work life. Some explained that it is for example easy for them to work in a team with international clients since they are used to working with people from different backgrounds. They also highlighted that internationally developed confidence and self-efficacy promotes independence, self-confidence in achieving success, persistence, effectiveness, and a hard-working attitude. Also, ATCKs expressed to have formed such a strong international identity

and capabilities, that occasional failures did not make them question their self-efficacy in terms of their capabilities to act internationally.

Social skills and social intelligence. I have got them from a multicultural environment where one has to adjust quickly and adjust to different kinds of people. It has definitely helped in working life. (Male 27 years, 15 years in Belgium, European School)

As I have lived abroad as a child, an international identity has grown for me. I think that I can move abroad. It has been a more natural path for me than staying in Finland to study. The international education background has also encouraged me to study abroad [again]. (Female 22 years, 8 years abroad in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Latvia, International School)

ATCKs brought up that they have benefitted from their internationally developed specific knowledge (such as language skills, knowledge of a certain market, general understanding about expatriation, etc.) in their career so far, and they also expected to benefit from these aspects in their future career. Moreover, when talking about expectations, ATCKs mentioned that their later career would benefit not only directly from the skills they developed abroad, but also through their internationally developed self-efficacy. For instance, some considered having a smaller risk of expatriate failure as they have realistic expectations about living and working abroad.

If I would be sent on assignment, then for sure, there would be a smaller expat fail risk since I have realistic expectations of what living abroad means and what it does not mean, and what challenges or other issues one might face. I assume that these issues would make me a strong candidate in [expat] decisions. (Female 36 years, 11 years abroad in Colombia and Chile, International School)

When talking about their expectations and ambitions in the longer term, ATCKs referred to the possibilities to benefit from their wide international network, and also possibilities to arrange worldwide collaboration in their work roles. Some younger participants highlighted that their international peers are still in trainee positions, meaning that later they will most probably be in higher positions in the company hierarchy, and then they expected to get an even stronger benefit from their international network. Also, ATCKs explained the possibilities of using their international network when searching for employment opportunities abroad, or otherwise aiming for international roles. Overall, the participants saw positive benefits from their early international experience for their careers, especially when targeting international roles. None of the participants expected that their international childhood would bring more disadvantages than advantages to their later career.

ATCKs also often highlighted that the social context in which they have previously lived has created a competitive advantage for them in the international job market, and they were confident that if they would apply for an international job, they would have a very good chance of getting it. Expectations to get the most use out of their early international experience related especially to the beginning of their career, and they interpreted their background as being a way to stand out when applying for jobs, and having already promoted their current or past employment.

[...] if there is a summer job with 10 open vacancies, more than 300 might be applying for it, with similar CVs and work experience, all with a similar education. One can stand out from the other applicants with experience of studying somewhere other than Finland. It is a great benefit in the early stages of your career. However, I believe that it [early international experience] will always be beneficial. (Male 26 years, 2.5 years in China, International School)

Longing for an international work context. During the interviews, most participants had an international aspect in their current or past jobs. This is interesting, as most of them said that their first jobs did not include an international aspect, meaning that they have had an active focus on directing their work life towards jobs that include an international dimension.

[In work life choices] the only constant has been the international aspect. (Female 25 years, 4 years in Belgium, European School)

Our participants also talked about active goal setting in their international career aspirations. Their drive to work in an international setup showed in that 28 participants out of 34 had already lived abroad in one to four countries, after their childhood international experiences with their parents. This number is high considering that most of the participants were still in the primary stages of their career. These ATCKs were/had been abroad for both educational and employment reasons. However, while some participants (mainly students) did not yet have or had not previously had any international aspect in their work life, they still talked about international career aspirations.

As a first international career move, some had undertaken foreign internships (corporate or research), or international volunteer work. Other participants had experience from working in international teams, and close co-operation with globally located departments. Some had worked in their home country, but had an international work aspect due to their providing services for international customers. Travelling was also often mentioned as being part of the participants work. Most often they mentioned having international experience from working on international projects and as self-initiated expatriates (i.e. self-initiated work abroad), and one

participant had experience from corporate expatriation. Moreover, almost all of the participants mentioned that if the possibility for an international assignment or other job in an international setup emerged during their career, they would be willing to accept it. Some participants explained that when they search for new work opportunities, they are particularly interested in multinational firms and international teams.

I am currently looking for jobs abroad. [..] I am searching for a job with an international aspect, a bigger company. Also to be able to work in an international atmosphere. That is what I am used to. I enjoy being able to speak English and to be with people from different backgrounds. [..] I look at big companies to get a global network, so that I could at some point get an international assignment. (Female 24 years, 12 years abroad in Germany, Japan and UAE, International School)

ATCKs often linked their aim for an international context to their childhood experiences, by which they have become used to a multicultural life. Some even mentioned that they were afraid of the possibility of working in a team consisting of only the same nationality.

International experience certainly affects [career goals]. Brussels has caused a chain reaction, but otherwise the importance of the Brussels experience decreases [due to adulthood international experiences], but it was the first domino to fall. (Female 25 years, 4 years in Belgium, European School)

[..] I still like to work here in Germany. I have been searching for jobs so that there is always an international view in it. They have usually been project-like, with a beginning and an end. (Male 41 years, 8 years in Germany, local school)

Even though many participants worked abroad during the interviews, some mentioned that while living abroad in their childhood, they also understood the positive side of living in Finland (as their home country). The reasons they mentioned for this were education and other public services, safety, and work-life balance (i.e. holidays). However, these participants were also still keen on setting career goals relating to different kinds of international roles, especially ones where one does not need to permanently live abroad.

As a further finding, ATCKs career aspirations were found to vary significantly, and many different occupations and industries were mentioned. So, an early international childhood does not necessarily seem to drive ATCKs' interests towards a specific field, yet the roles most often mentioned as being interesting were on an expert or managerial level, and most of our interviewees talked about their wishes to

accomplish a remarkably high-level career as they have the courage to make “bold moves”, meaning that they are ready to apply for high-level positions internationally. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic was represented as being a hindrance for achieving expectations related to an international career by some of the participants, because agreed international periods were uncertain or even cancelled, and there were premature relocations back to Finland. However, we interpret that ATCKs’ longing for an international context in their career is still strong, and they are likely to find many different pathways by which to fulfill their expectations.

Discussion

The current study develops our understanding of key factors connected to ATCKs’ development of confidence, the outcome expectations of their international background, and their vocational ambitions. Especially, adopting social cognitive career theory (Lent *et al.*, 1994) enabled us to research ATCKs’ international experiences and their long-lasting reflections on their vocational desires and decisions.

ATCK’s confidence for international work and career

Our findings show that ATCKs perceived their international childhood to be significant in their development of confidence and their performance accomplishments, which amounted to their experiences of personal mastery (Bandura *et al.*, 1975) yielding confidence for pursuing a career with international aspects already in their early work life. Lam and Selmer (2004) found that adolescent TCKs have international desires for their career, and the current study discovered that these desires seem to be long lasting, all the way into the ATCK’s actual work life in terms of a strong international identity and a feeling of mastery in working in an international context. ATCKs’ vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1986, p. 399) such as visually observing other people operating successfully in their international career, caused them to believe that they could also master the same capabilities such as the language skills, cultural competence and social skills needed for a successful international career. The current results show that vicarious experiences seem to develop ATCKs’ self-efficacy and willingness towards international work, since they were raised in an international setting where they were able to visually observe surrounding adults and people in the local expatriate community engaging in international careers. Additionally, several participants were keen on building a career similar to that of their parents, which is a significantly different finding from the MK study of Hartman (2022) which found that none of their respondents had chosen a similar (missionary) career as their parents.

People can be convinced through verbal persuasion and social influence to believe that they can attain the capabilities needed to pursue whatever they are trying to do (Bandura, 1986, p. 400). In this study, participants did not talk about verbal persuasion as an aspect that shaped their educational or vocational decisions, and while that does not mean it does not play a role in their everyday life, at least they were eager to represent themselves as people with strong self-efficacy concerning their ability to navigate studies and work life. These findings support earlier findings suggesting that higher self-esteem and vocational identity positively correlate with greater career decision self-efficacy (Choi *et al.*, 2012). Participants mentioned having their parents and siblings as “sparring partners” in major educational or vocational decision making, and the results suggest that social influence (i.e. school) might have been one of the influential factors for IB and ES students to apply to universities, and often to foreign universities. This finding is seen as a significant long-term reflection of early life international exposure. Particularly, international schooling systems have long traditions with certain universities, and according to the participants of this study, their schools supported the application process to these universities. Interestingly, these findings were not found with our study participants who had studied in local schools.

As a final theme defining confidence, the psychological state is linked with people’s judgement of their own capabilities (Bandura, 1986, p. 401). Interestingly, early international exposure fostered ATCKs’ psychological states in terms of a high stress tolerance. They explained that their childhood experiences abroad have pushed them into stressful situations, for example in making adjustments to a new environment (several times in some cases), studying in an unfamiliar language, leaving friends in the home country, and creating a new social life in a new environment. Due to their childhood international experiences, most of the participants considered themselves to have a higher stress tolerance compared to their colleagues. This finding is new and important since earlier studies have typically reported a TCK background to generate stress in later life (Davis *et al.*, 2010; Purnell and Hoban, 2014), and not that the international background would actually develop stress tolerance that benefitted adult work life. As an additional observation, the participants were also motivated to change organizations or teams domestically and internationally, which further highlights their tendency to tolerate major changes in life well.

ATCK’s expectations of their international background for their current and future career

The concept of *outcome expectations* deals with the beliefs of consequences for people who perform in certain ways (Lent *et al.*, 1994, 2015). Strong self-efficacy is connected to outcome expectations, since people who are confident in their

capabilities often expect positive outcomes from their careers (Lent *et al.*, 2010; Lent and Brown, 2019). Our findings show that the ATCKs' physical outcome expectations of their early international experience for their current or future career was significant, since more than half of the participants considered their childhood international experience to have promoted their current or past employment. This is a unique finding, and an important consideration for the long-term benefits of an international childhood. Participants mentioned their international past to be important when applying for jobs and when trying to stand out from large numbers of other applicants. Also, individuals with adult international experience have been found to have more internal and external opportunities compared to their domestic peers (Benson and Pattie, 2008), meaning that ATCKs' childhood experiences abroad seem to build similar kinds of possibilities for them in later life. Thus, they are already somewhat internationally qualified when they enter the job market.

The current study also contributes to the literature by touching upon ATCKs' career trajectories, which show that while they typically started with jobs without an international dimension, they quickly direct their work life towards a variety of international roles. The participants had experience stemming from work such as international volunteering, working in international teams, and active work travelling. Most often, ATCKs mentioned having international experience from working on international projects or as self-initiated expatriates. This is an important finding since repatriates are often reported to be unsatisfied following their international experience (Brewster and Suutari, 2005), meaning that early international experience can form a base for ATCKs' later international jobs, which they are extremely satisfied with. Almost all of the participants expected to benefit from their childhood international experience in their future work life, and according to the participants, the positive benefits of an international childhood are highlighted when aiming for international roles or an international work setup. Importantly, none of the participants expected their international childhood to bring more disadvantages than advantages to their later life or career. This is an important novel finding, and might be significant for families who are considering expatriate assignments with their children. It is also of important research interest, as scholars have previously raised questions about the long-term effects of an international childhood for later career (see, e.g. Selmer and Lam, 2004), and more recently have highlighted the need for understanding the specific benefits of a TCK background (Tan *et al.*, 2021).

Overall, the participants' longer-term expectation was to benefit from their wide international network at work. These social outcome expectations were expected to come to a point when their international peers are settled in higher organizational positions. They also expected to attain most benefit from their international network

when working in an international setup themselves. Moreover, from their self-evaluations of outcome expectations, ATCKs expected to benefit from their independence, self-confidence in achieving success, persistence, effectiveness, and their hard-working attitude. Adding to these self-evaluations, the wider utilization of internationally developed skills is seen to be important to expatriates' future career interests (Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016).

ATCK's career ambitions

Goals are important for peoples' self-regulation of behavior (Lent *et al.*, 1994). Strong self-efficacy is also linked to goals, since it influences how much effort people put in to achieving their adopted goals (Bandura, 1986, p. 470). When analyzing the type of career ATCKs wish to accomplish (i.e. choice-content goals: Lent, 2013, p. 119), the desire for an international career was plainly visible. All of the participants were open to international work in their future, and some underlined that the international factor in a career is actually the most important aspect when setting future goals for their working life.

Earlier literature discusses ATCKs' interests in maintaining an international dimension in their adult life (Cottrell, 2002). However, the current qualitative study has added a deeper understanding of how strong the need for an international dimension in work life is. The participants' drive for international goals was based on their internationally developed self-efficacy and outcome expectations, since they described an expectation of positive outcomes to come from their international background. This is a particularly unique finding, since previous studies have highlighted a variety of negative outcomes of an international background (Davis *et al.*, 2013; Thomas *et al.*, 2021). Despite being children during their parents' expatriate assignments abroad, the data indicates that this time was in fact significant in influencing these individuals' future choices. The findings are also similar to adults with international work experience who are known to be unsatisfied with purely domestic jobs (Suutari and Taka, 2004). A significant difference in expatriates' and ATCKs' career choices is that employees with adult international experience might return to a job where there is no career advancement resulting from their international experience (S'anchez Vidal *et al.*, 2008). However, ATCKs build their international skills during childhood or adolescence, and are therefore able to lead their education and career choices on a path where they might utilize their international skills to their future advantage.

The current study explores ATCKs' vocational desires and suggests that they might be ideal expatriate candidates, confirming the findings of earlier studies (Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*,

2016). However, despite the analysis showing that ATCKs are interested in a wide variety of different international roles, the study participants were also aware of the positive side of living in their home country, and the most often mentioned issues were the affordability of education and other public services, together with safety and work-life balance. Those participants who wished to live permanently in Finland were still keen to set career goals relating to international business travel, international projects, working in international teams, expatriate assignments, and various other international roles where it is possible to return back to the home country from time to time.

Previous research has shown that adult missionary kids often choose their field of interest (for example, education, medicine, social services) to be able to serve others, just as their parents have dedicated their work life to service as missionaries (Hartman, 2022). The current study shows that ATCKs are typically social individuals who are willing to help others, however, such information detailing their field of work interests was not visible in the current analysis. But, while ATCKs' career ambitions varied in terms of their general field of interest, the common factor among them seems to be a goal to work in an international role or international setup.

Lastly, the study participants were found to actively set new goals when old ones are reached, which seems to be a strong driver in their work life. Performance goals (Lent, 2013, p. 119) seem to be high since ATCKs typically tend to expect high performance levels in any given task. It is known that in general, when young adults make career decisions, it is important for them to have the confidence that their set goals can be accomplished (Dik *et al.*, 2008). In this study, the participants had a strong willingness for international roles, and 28 out of 34 had already gathered international experience (educational or work) after their childhood time abroad, even though many were still in the primary stages of their career.

To sum up, the contribution of this study lies in identifying ATCKs' career interests and choices. SCCT studies are still rather limited in the international context (Bozionelos *et al.*, 2015; Sheu and Bordon, 2017), therefore, the current paper also contributes to social cognitive career theory by adding an understanding about career decision making in the international career context. The study participants had a high level of confidence for their possibilities in the international job market, and simultaneously, an international childhood was seen to build a strong international identity and international capabilities. ATCKs' outcome expectations of their international background regarding their current and future career were centered on an increased international marketability due to their international skills and network. The findings of this study also provided a unique view on ATCKs' interests in various international roles, both domestically and internationally, and the

participants were found to aim for high organizational positions and to have a high interest in working for multinational firms and international teams.

Limitations and future directions

There are no studies without limitations, and although a qualitative research method enabled us to explore ATCKs' experiences about their career interests and choices, further studies would be needed to generalize the connection between ATCKs' early international experiences, and self-efficacy, outcome expectations and career goals. Especially, longitudinal data and a quantitative methodology would be the most suitable means of approach to fill this gap. In addition, our dataset only includes participants from Finland. Future studies should address this by expanding the sample to individuals with different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, since it must be noted that Finland is a small but highly globalized country. Another limitation worth mentioning is the absence of older participants in the data set. The oldest participant of the study was 41 years old, so the career paths recognized were not particularly long. Future studies could therefore include different kinds of samples, for example longitudinal studies that capture ATCKs' career paths over the entire career span. Also, there is a further need for comparative studies about ATCKs who have childhood international experience, compared to their peers with different backgrounds (e.g. those without international experience, or those with international exposure such as exchange students), so as to understand whether their development of SCCT mechanisms are similar or different. Due to increasing globalization, a variety of ways to generate international experience have arisen, and therefore it is important to understand whether a TCK background is unique in setting this population aside from others with international exposure. Moreover, it would be useful to compare to what extent ATCKs face similar and/or different developmental issues in international assignments compared to expatriates and their spouses, in order to generate a more holistic view of the phenomena. Also, it would be interesting to study whether ATCKs have similar (or different) long-term career trajectories to, for example, global leaders (i.e. after several international periods in life, and typically at an older age). Lastly, it would be useful to expand the current research to families with failed assignments, and to see whether or not this experience has an effect on ATCKs' later interests in an international career.

Conclusions and practical implications

The current study aimed to add understanding about the impact of early international experiences on ATCKs' later career interests and decision making through a social cognitive career lens. More specifically, the analysis concentrated on understanding

how ATCKs perceive their confidence relating to career decisions, the bridge between their international background and their current or future career, and understanding the goals that ATCKs set for their careers. First, the study showed that a TCK background can significantly change ATCKs' future educational and vocational paths. Specifically, an international childhood was found to advance their self-efficacy in terms of having the confidence to pursue international roles, work tasks and careers, since they considered international study and work to be something that belonged to their personal mastery. This is significant since families from different sectors around the world consider taking on expatriate assignments, and estimate the long-term effects a foreign assignment may have on their children. Secondly, a TCK background seems to have a significantly long-term effect and closely correlates with taking on international studies in adulthood, and an ambition to link their field of interest to a variety of international setups. Previous studies have mainly concentrated on how ATCKs might offer an ideal pool of expatriate talent (Bonebright, 2010; Lam and Selmer, 2004; Selmer and Lam, 2004; Tarique and Weisbord, 2013; Westropp *et al.*, 2016). However, the participants of this study were found to be interested in a variety of different international work, not just expatriate assignments. They also had other reasons for aiming for an international career, for example, some participants had a strong will to live abroad as they enjoy the lifestyle. This is significant since businesses are increasingly in need of skilled global leaders (De Waal and Born, 2020). As a third implication, the childhood time abroad seems to foster high career goals and performance expectations, and all of the interviewed ATCKs were interested in international work opportunities in various forms.

In light of this research, ATCKs present a population who have valuable international strengths, skills and knowledge produced during childhood when at a highly receptive age. Therefore, in job interviews, ATCKs could highlight their international background and explain how the experience reflects for example their high level of education, language skills, intercultural competence, and their strong willingness to work internationally. They might even benefit from developing a short elevator pitch for employers to explain why their early international experience would be valuable for the hiring company. Also, information about ATCKs could be included in international business course curricula, in order to foster an increased recognition of the value and benefits of hiring individuals with a TCK background among future hiring managers. ATCKs represent globally competent employees who might need less training for operating with different cultures. This might be highly important if the global COVID-19 pandemic extends, and multinational companies need employees who are flexible and interested in working internationally and/or remotely in an international setup where the team members or clients can be located internationally. As there is also some evidence that ATCKs have not had the possibility to utilize their international competence to the extent they would have

preferred (Cottrell, 2002), future research into ATCKs' life long career paths would shed light on those avenues that are not yet understood.

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