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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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Third culture kids; expatriate children; cross-cultural adjustment; expatriation

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.

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Host country/ countries</i>	<i>Duration of stay in years before the age of 18</i>	<i>School attended abroad*</i>	
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 (Sarj arvi & 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 (Hirsj arvi & 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)

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

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

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.

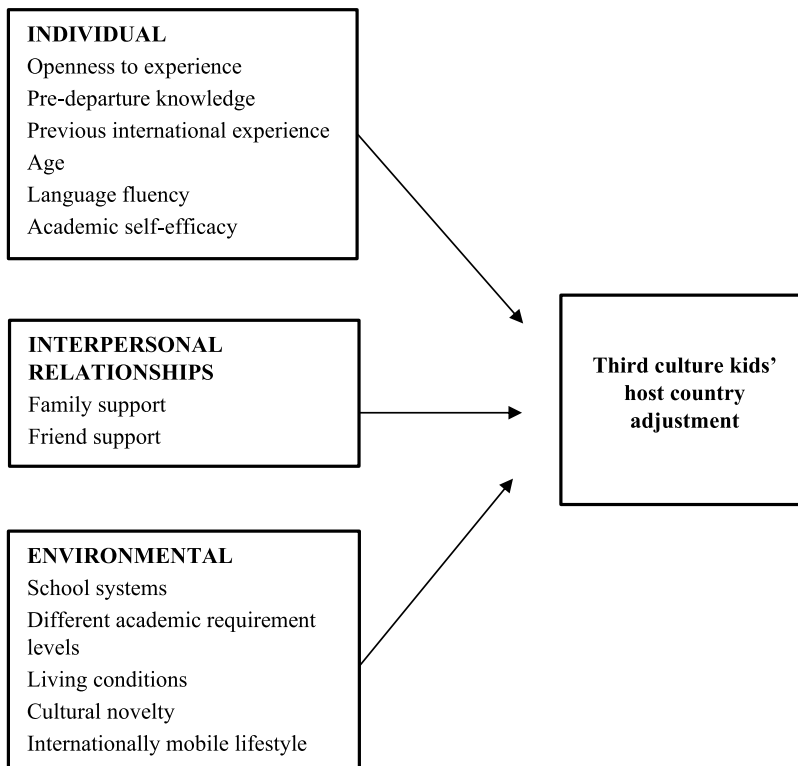


Figure 1. Key factors affecting TCKs' host country adjustment.

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

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