Are former "third-culture kids" the ideal business expatriates?
Hon Lam and Jan Selmer
Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Keywords  Children (age groups), Expatriates, Business administration, Hong Kong, United Kingdom

Abstract  Third-culture kids (TCKs) are adolescents who have lived at least one of their formative years in another country. This study compares survey data collected from British TCKs who were currently living in Hong Kong with those of their adolescent peers living in the UK and Hong Kong. The results unequivocally suggest that TCKs' perception of being international and their characteristics are different than that of their adolescent peers in the host and home country. More than the other adolescents, TCKs indicated that international experience, parental and institutional education, a second language, neutrality, open-mindedness and flexibility, attitudes towards other systems and cultures, respect for others, tolerance of others' behaviour and views, all contributed to the perception of being international. Similarly, TCKs had distinctive characteristics in terms of stronger family relationships, enjoying travelling to foreign places, acceptance of foreign languages, acceptance of cultural differences, and future orientation. Implications for international firms of these fundamental findings are discussed in detail.

Introduction
Many researchers have stated the importance of having the right people as the key to global competitiveness (Black et al., 1992). With the rapid globalisation of industry and trade, the number of expatriate executives that firms need to operate and run their foreign operations is expected to rise continuously (Black and Gregersen, 1999). However, there is a dearth of suitable business executive candidates with the necessary cross-cultural skills appropriate for international assignments. This makes finding the right expatriate candidates a challenge for international human resource professionals (Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998).

Literature review
Business expatriate executives
There may be many reasons for the lack of suitable business executives for international assignments. A common concern by any manager is the career implications if an overseas assignment, such as worries about promotional prospects after the assignment (Selmer, 1999). The fear of failure is also frequent among the list of doubts an executive would have when considering an overseas assignment (Franke and Nicholson, 2002). Cross-cultural training offered by in-house departments or outside consultants may increase the knowledge of expatriate executives' cultural understanding. But, whether or not the knowledge is applied in actual practice, is questionable (Kealy and Protheroe, 1996; Selmer, 2002). Even those who do accept an international
CDI 9.2

110

assignment may find the experience frustrating. The fact that managerial practices and skills are not universal could prevent them from completing the assignment successfully. Hence the phrase from the title of a well-read paper: “A successful manager in Los Angeles may not succeed in Hong Kong” (Black and Porter, 1991; see also Ralston et al., 1995).

However, Harzing (1995, 2002) found that previous claims of high expatriate failure rates cited in many studies have little empirical foundation (see Black et al., 1992). Nevertheless, the psychological and possible even physical scars, left by an unhappy and unsuccessful international assignment, are often neglected. Many firms lack the facilities to provide adequate in-country mentoring and repatriation arrangements to their returning expatriate executives (Black et al., 1992).

Third-culture kids

Third-culture kids (TCKs) are children, often adolescents, who accompany their parents to live and work in another country other than their home country (Useem, 2001). The term “third culture” used in TCKs was first conceptualised by Ruth and John Useem (mother and father of TCKs) to describe children who do not belong to an ancestral culture (this being the first culture), and do not belong to the host culture(s) that they have lived in (this is deemed to be the second culture). These children feel that they belong to all of the cultures that they have experienced. Therefore, these children have developed a third culture of their own (Useem, 2001).

The literature on TCKs comprises mainly anecdotal studies and investigations (e.g. Schaetti, 1999; Sutherland, 2000), but there is also an increasing amount of more rigorous empirical studies (e.g. Gerner and Perry, 2000; Gerner et al., 1992; Hayden et al., 2000). There is a general consensus among researchers that TCKs’ abilities can be described as being multi-cultural, diplomatic, speaking more than one foreign language, and having the sophistication to be accepted in any social circles (Useem, 2001).

Useem (2001) used a minimum period of one year’s stay in another country to qualify as a TCK. However, since TCKs are basically adolescents at a formative stage of their development, they may be flexible enough to adapt and change their skills very quickly (Hauser et al., 1991; Neilsen, 1996; Newman and Newman, 1997). Therefore, TCKs may be able to claim their third-cultureness even in a very short period of time. The essence of this third-cultureness is captured in Fail’s (1991) description of a TCK as:

...an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than that of the parents, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership to any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience.

It is important to note here that the length of time spent in another culture may not necessarily be the critical requirement for an adolescent to acquire a third
culture. Instead, it may be how the time is spent and what the individual experience that may have a greater impact than the length of time the individual has spent in another culture.

In a sense, TCKs are cultural marginals (Siu, 1952; Stonequist, 1935). Cultural marginality can be described to be either encapsulated or constructive (Bennet, 1993). Encapsulated marginality is a notion that depicts a TCK as having the ability to interact with people of other cultures but tending to act or role-play, as the situation requires (Bennet, 1993). TCKs have developed alternate frames of references from their cultural experiences just like any other cultural marginal but they are lost in their conflicting frame of references and may isolate themselves from their own reality.

On the other hand, the concept of constructive marginality portrays a similar picture of a TCK still having a conflicting frame of reference, but being able to experience wholeness among these references (Bennet, 1993). Furthermore, Yoshikawa (1987) describes this ability to hold onto their multiple frames of references as “dynamic in-betweeness”. Tending towards constructive marginality, TCKs may be able to involve themselves in a multi-cultural existence and to make decisions conscientiously and manage their alternative frames of references. Therefore, TCKs with constructive marginality develop an integration of their multiple cultural identities. Although recognising themselves as cultural marginals, they are able to come to terms with themselves (Bennet, 1993).

**Hypotheses**

From the literature on third culture kids, we may speculate that TCKs’ special abilities are affected by their international experience in some way. The original authors gathered statistical data on TCKs who had returned to their home country (Useem, 2001). Comparative studies, such as the one by Hayden et al. (2000), suggested that children from international schools had perceptions of being international that were different from those of their international school teachers. Similarly, authors such as Gerne et al. (1992) and Gerne and Perry (2000), using the same data set, compared TCKs with home country peers and sought to identify the characteristics of TCKs.

The international experiences gained by TCKs could be vital to their mental development, especially during the most important developmental period of life such as adolescence. Adolescence is a time of critical learning and profound changes, both physically and mentally, for children’s development to adulthood (Muuss, 1968). International experiences may contribute to the children’s amount of understanding and perceptions of how to deal with people from other cultures. TCKs could be internationally minded and realise that their international experience is important for them (Hayden et al., 2000; Sampson and Smith, 1957). They may be able to identify that parents with an international outlook and the kind of school they attend would provide them...
with experiences of being international (Stuart, 1992). TCKs could think that being competent in at least one other language is part of being international as well as being neutral in their cultural identity. However, TCKs may also insist that people understand that their third-cultureness is different (Bennet, 1993; Gerner et al., 1992; Schaeftl, 1999). Similarly, from their international and cultural attachments, TCKs would be open-minded, flexible in their thinking and way of doing things, and would also respect other people’s differences in terms of thinking and behaviour, including showing a strong degree of tolerance than what is common (Bennet, 1993; Schaeftl, 1999; Sutherland, 2000). Hence, TCKs could have a perception of being international that is different than their single country/culture peers. This presumption leads to our first two hypotheses:

**H1.** TCKs have different perceptions of being international than their home country peers.

**H2.** TCKs have different perceptions of being international than their host country peers.

Subsequently, characteristics of TCKs have been claimed to revolve around their international experiences (Gerner et al., 1992; Gerner and Perry, 2000; Useem, 2001). Owing to their international travelling, TCKs could have established a closer bond with their family members (Stuart, 1992). They may have higher preferences for travelling and visiting other countries (Gerner et al., 1992; Gerner and Perry, 2000). Similar to their perceptions of being international, TCKs could have characteristics that result in linguistic abilities and acceptance of other cultures (Gerner et al., 1992; Gerner and Perry, 2000). Much anecdotal evidence suggests that after returning to their home country, TCKs may find it difficult to re-adjust and may even become recluses (Werkman, 1972, 1979; Minami, 1993; Useem, 2001). Gerner et al. (1992) nevertheless found that while TCKs were abroad, they had aspirations of future international careers. Single country/culture adolescents may not have opportunities to experience the same kind of international interaction required to develop such characteristics. Our next two hypotheses examine the presumed different characteristics of TCKs:

**H3.** TCKs have different characteristics than their home country peers.

**H4.** TCKs have different characteristics than their host country peers.

**Methodology**

**Instrument**

We used two instruments for this investigation. The first scale was designed by Hayden et al. (2000) and used in their study of international school children’s and teachers’ “perception of being international”. There were 32 items in this
five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). The instrument formed nine subscales measuring:

(1) international experience and international-mindedness (six items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$);
(2) parental factors and type of institution attended (two items, icc = 0.29);
(3) second language competence (one item);
(4) neutrality (two items, icc = 0.50);
(5) open-mindedness, flexibility of thinking and action (five items, $\alpha = 0.79$);
(6) attitude towards other systems and cultures (five items, $\alpha = 0.75$);
(7) attitude towards own value system and culture (two items, icc = 0.26);
(8) respect for others (2 items, icc = 0.42); and
(9) tolerance of the behaviour and views of others (five items, $\alpha = 0.77$).

To a certain extent, Chronbach's $\alpha$ is a function of the number of items in a factor. Therefore, Nunnally (1978) recommends that for variables with two items, the inter-item correlation ( ICC) should be used instead as a measure of their reliability with ICC > 0.25 as a requirement. To improve the reliability, one item has been deleted from variable 2 (parental factors and type of institution attended) and another from variable 4 (neutrality).

For the second instrument we used Gerner and Perry's (2000) International Mobile Adolescent Questionnaire. This particular version of the instrument had 34 items with five subscales measuring:

(1) family relationship (nine items, $\alpha = 0.87$);
(2) travel orientation (six items, $\alpha = 0.77$);
(3) language acceptance (four items, $\alpha = 0.81$);
(4) cultural acceptance (four items, $\alpha = 0.79$); and
(5) future orientation (11 items, $\alpha = 0.71$).

The International Mobile Adolescent Questionnaire also uses a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1).

Location

The study was conducted in Hong Kong and the UK. Hong Kong is a metropolis with a wide range of modern facilities enabling many businesses to use it as a hub for their operations in Asia and, as a stepping stone into the markets of Mainland China (Weidenbaum and Hughes, 1996).

Sample

Three samples of adolescents responded to our survey. The first sample consisted of British TCKs living in Hong Kong. These respondents all had to be
born in the UK to qualify. Data were collected from 63 British TCKs of which 51 (81 per cent) were males and 12 (19 per cent) females. The sample had a mean age of 14.11 (SD = 1.63) years.

The second sample consisted of 88 local British adolescents living in the UK. Respondents with experiences of living abroad or who were born abroad did not qualify. This sample of British adolescents was made up of 26 (29 per cent) males and 63 (71 per cent) females with a mean age of 14.66 (SD = 1.41) years.

The last sample consisted of 103 local Hong Kong ethnic Chinese adolescents living in Hong Kong. To qualify, respondents must have been born in Hong Kong with no experience of living abroad. Because of the falling standard of English in Hong Kong, the age of the selected respondents in this sample was somewhat higher than that of the other two samples in the hope that deficient English abilities would not jeopardise the response to the questionnaire. The sample had 36 (35 per cent) male and 67 (65 per cent) female respondents with a mean age of 17.42 (SD = 0.99) years.

Using analysis of variance (ANOVA) we found that there were significant differences in terms of age and gender between the three groups of adolescents. Since the characteristics of adolescents may be associated with their age and gender (Neilson, 1996; Newman and Newman, 1997) these two background variables were used as covariates in the analysis of the three groups.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations of the 14 variables of the two instruments are shown in Table I. Both instruments use a five-point scale but with opposite polarity. We therefore reversed the polarity of the first instrument for easier interpretation (i.e. strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1)). All variables are positively correlated, except variable 13 (cultural acceptance), which did not correlate significantly with Variable 7 (attitude towards own value systems and culture). Except variable 14 (future orientation) with an overall mean of 2.94, all variables had means greater than the mid-point of 3.

Perceptions of being international

We tested $H1$ and $H2$ using a $9 \times 3$ multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), with the two significantly different background variables age and gender as covariates. The results in Table II show a significant overall effect for the three groups ($F = 10.03, p < 0.001$). The analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) revealed significant differences between the groups for each of the nine variables ($p < 0.001$). Post hoc multiple range tests indicated that the sample of TCKs consistently had higher mean scores than the other two groups of adolescents. The results of this analysis clearly support $H1$ and $H2$. 

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 International experience</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Parents and institution</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Second language</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Neutrality</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Open-minded and flexibility</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.73**</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Other systems and cultures</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.66**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Own value systems and culture</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Respect for others</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.56**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
<td>0.69**</td>
<td>0.37**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Tolerance of others' behaviour and views</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.56**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>0.48**</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Family relationships</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Travel orientation</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Language acceptance</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Cultural acceptance</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>0.74**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Future orientation</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
Table II.
Perception of being international

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Third-culture kids Mean</th>
<th>Third-culture kids SD</th>
<th>Local host adolescents Mean</th>
<th>Local host adolescents SD</th>
<th>Local home adolescents Mean</th>
<th>Local home adolescents SD</th>
<th>Multivariate effect</th>
<th>Univariate effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International experience</td>
<td>4.50^a</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>3.65^b</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>3.45^b</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>10.03^*</td>
<td>54.60^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and institution</td>
<td>3.83^a</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>2.90^b</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>2.77^b</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>34.10^*</td>
<td>34.87^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second language</td>
<td>4.54^a</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>4.08^b</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>3.58^b</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>34.10^*</td>
<td>31.70^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>4.13^a</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>3.12^b</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>3.19^b</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>10.03^*</td>
<td>45.29^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-mindedness and flexibility</td>
<td>4.43^a</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>3.54^b</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>3.49^b</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>44.34^*</td>
<td>24.46^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other systems and cultures</td>
<td>4.39^a</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>3.42^b</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>3.65^c</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>30.43^*</td>
<td>39.39^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own value systems and culture</td>
<td>3.66^a</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>2.92^b</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>2.85^b</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>30.43^*</td>
<td>39.39^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td>3.82^a</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>3.12^b</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>3.17^b</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>30.43^*</td>
<td>39.39^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance of others' behaviour and views</td>
<td>5.15^a</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>3.43^b</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>3.37^b</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>30.43^*</td>
<td>39.39^*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *p < 0.001; means with different superscripts differ significantly at p < 0.05 (multiple range tests)

International mobile adolescent questionnaire

H3 and H4 were tested through a 5 x 3 MANCOVA, again with age and gender as covariates. As displayed in Table III, results revealed a significant overall effect for the three groups of adolescents (F = 16.01, p < 0.001). The ANCOVA analyses indicated significant inter-group differences for each of the variables (p < 0.001). Again, post hoc multiple range tests showed that all mean scores of the TCKs were higher than those of the other two sub-samples. Therefore, these findings provide unequivocal support to H3 and H4.

Discussion

We used two scales to examine TCKs and their adolescent peers in the host country and at home. The results strongly suggest that TCKs' perception of being international and their characteristics are different than that of their...
adolescent peers in the host and the home countries. Our clear findings both support the ingenuity of the instrumental design and provide a valuable contribution to the literature on TCKs.

Our findings are in accordance with claims in the literature. Regarding their perception of being international, TCKs consistently revealed a tendency to agree with the item statements at a higher level for all nine variables than their peers at home or in the host country (see Hayden et al., 2000). TCKs indicated that international experience contributes to perceptions of being international (Hayden et al., 2000). TCKs think that parental and institutional education may influence one’s perception in being international (Fail, 1996; Hayden et al., 2000; Stuart, 1992). Having a second language is also perceived to contribute to being international (Kim, 1988). Furthermore, TCKs perceive that neutrality, open-mindedness and flexibility, attitudes towards other systems and cultures, respect for others, and tolerance of others’ behaviour and views also are integral parts of the perception of being international (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999; Schaetti, 1999; Useem, 2001).

Consistent with the literature, the International Mobile Adolescent Questionnaire also revealed TCKs’ characteristics to be considerably different than their peers at home or in the host country (Gerner et al., 1992). We found that TCKs tend to have stronger family relationships (Stuart, 1992). TCKs enjoy travelling to other foreign places, they accept foreign languages and they accept differences between cultures (Gerner et al., 1992; Schaetti, 1999; Sutherland, 2000; Useem, 2001). Also, TCKs have a future orientation and their focus is international careers (Gerner et al., 1992; Gerner and Perry, 2000; Schaetti, 1999).

Limitations
One potential limitation of the present study is the host location that was used. The fact that Hong Kong is a modern metropolis, with all the day-to-day conveniences one can expect to find in such a place, may have introduced some bias. TCKs may have shown a different response pattern if they had been located in a place lacking the convenience of modern facilities. Another possible weakness is that the data were collected using self-reports. Although the general condemnation of self-report methods could be exaggerated (Crampton and Wagner, 1994), we made an attempt to minimise potential method bias by randomising the items (Lord and Maher, 1991). Also, the cross-sectional nature of this investigation may restrict the value of the results. A longitudinal approach, may have increased investigative control (Menard, 1991). However, a longitudinal study takes time and commitment from the TCKs. They may not have been able to offer that as their expatriate business executive parents could be assigned elsewhere at short notice. Yet another potential limitation is that convenience samples were used to collect the data, like many other comparative studies of this type. Ackoff (1953) had noted that there may be statistical
limitations with such samples but the use of convenience sampling is justifiable in exploratory studies such as the current one (Ferber, 1977; Frankel and Frankel, 1987; Smith, 1983). A final possible weakness is that variable 3 (second language competence), from the Perceptions of Being International instrument, had only one item. Single-item variables are poorly defined and notoriously unreliable (Saranga and Knezevic, 2000; Scher, 1997; Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989; Tiffany et al., 2000). However, we decided to retain this single-item variable because in the second instrument, variable 12 (language acceptance) of the Internationally Mobile Adolescent Questionnaire, had a similar meaning yielding comparable results.

**Implications**

Despite the potential limitations of the study, there are nevertheless several implications of the results. A prime implication from our findings is that firms may want to recruit adult, former TCKs as business expatriates for overseas assignments. Franke and Nicholson (2002) generated an expert ranking of the most important criteria of business expatriates. These were:

- spousal support;
- communication skills;
- interpersonal sensitivity; and
- cultural and social interests.

It is obvious from our findings that TCKs fulfil several, if not all, of these criteria. Furthermore, TCKs have a future orientation in favour of working and living outside of their home country and would want to lead international careers.

Firms looking for potentially successful expatriate candidates could focus on adult, former TCKs as a source for their international human resources. Evidently, as executives with multi-cultural abilities fitting the experts’ opinions on staff suitable for successful overseas assignments, former TCKs almost seem to be the ready-made business expatriates (Selmer and Lam, 2002). On the other hand, TCKs’ strong sense of being international and their preference for international careers could promote their feelings of rootlessness and induce less parent corporate loyalty. Nevertheless, adult, former TCKs could be close to ideal expatriate candidates because they have gained their multi-cultural personal experiences in their formative adolescence and the cultural knowledge and skills that they have acquired may have been absorbed into their frames of references, creating a permanent impression. This is in stark contrast to the doubtful results gained from the artificial setting of lectures and short cross-cultural training programmes provided to executives in preparation for expatriate assignments (see Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Deshpande and Viswesvaran, 1992; Selmer, 2002). In this respect, former TCKs
may have unique advantages as business expatriates that could not be produced by conventional cross-cultural training of adult candidates.

Adult, former TCKs may even have some advantages working in their home country. For example, it could be worthwhile to make use of them as trainers for the organisation's in-house cross-cultural training programmes for departing expatriates and incoming inpatriates (Harvey and Buckley, 1997). Former TCKs could play the role of a mentor or as a point of contact for expatriate executives on assignment providing vital advice on cultural matters (Feldman and Bolino, 1999). Similarly, adult, former TCKs could be able to appropriately assess an expatriate executive's performance level taking into consideration the potentially detrimental effects of working in a different culture. Traditional performance measurement may not necessarily reflect any cultural impact on the expatriate (Black et al., 1992). Also, former TCKs could be useful in international negotiation roles as well as organisers for host function to important foreign visitors.

Conclusion
TCKs may have developed distinct special characteristics and perceptions of being international. These special cultural abilities could be the result of their daily interactions and experiences during their adolescence where mental and physical developments are prominent. Since these cross-cultural experiences may have become a permanent part of their frames of reference developed from a young age, adult, former TCKs could be able to make use of them appropriately during cultural encounters. Therefore, former TCKs could be more sensitive to cultural differences and probably also have a desire for internationally mobile careers. It may be worthwhile for globalising firms to consider recruiting this group of culturally adept individuals. This may minimise the need for cross-cultural training and at the same time eliminate many of the cross-cultural problems of assigning executives overseas. Therefore, it can be concluded that adult, former TCKs may be close to the ideal business expatriates.

References


**Further reading**