

Third Culture Kids: Social Competence and Sense of Belonging

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Abstract

The increasingly globalized world yields a growing population of Third Culture Kids (TCKs); youth who are born in one country and move to at least one other country amidst their developmental years. TCKs often live highly mobile lives, relocating frequently due to their parent's careers, and assimilating within communities of other TCKs and their ex-patriot families. With numerous relocations, TCKs are thought to develop high levels of social competence for meeting new people and integrating within diverse cultures. However, frequent relocation also fosters grief for lost relationships, disconnection, and difficulty establishing deep friendships. Social acceptance and relationships are recognized as foundational components of sense of belonging (SOB), an innate, psychological need necessary for optimal human development. Current literature suggests that TCKs develop high levels of social competence that help them become accepted in diverse social contexts, but frequent relocations thwart their ability to establish deep friendships. With little research to date on how TCKs establish SOB, this study analyzed how social competence correlates with SOB in TCKs who attend two international schools in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the moderation effect of low versus high relocation instances on the relationship between social competence and SOB was examined. Sixty-seven students aged 9 to 16 years participated in this study and completed the Social Skills Improvement System Rating scales (SSiS-RD 8-12; SSiS-RS 13-18), General Sense of Belonging Scale (GBS), and transitional questions regarding the number of times relocated. It was hypothesized that social competence would positively correlate with SOB and that a greater number of relocations would negatively affect the relationship. Data collection is ongoing. Preliminary findings will be discussed in light of understanding how TCKs develop SOB in their transitory life.

Third Culture Kids: Social Competence and Sense of Belonging

Globalization has created a transformed world, tightly intertwined by consistent exchanges of goods, ideas, and people across national borders. The increasingly globalized world yields more international migration, with 281 million international migrants in 2020, amounting to 3.6% of the world's population (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). The growing population of international migrants continues to increase at a faster rate than anticipated and, alongside, a new demographic of individuals is emerging. Third Culture Kids (TCKs) is a term used to refer to children who are born in one country and move to at least one other country amidst their developmental years (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Carroll, 2019; Dillon & Ali, 2019). Their birth country is the first culture, while the second is that of the host country they reside in. The third culture is considered an "in-between space", founded in communities of ex-pats and international schools that TCKs meet within due to their shared lifestyle of moving between cultures. This in-between culture is what connects TCKs and enables them to develop similar characteristics and commonalities (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

TCKs and Relocation

TCKs and their families often live in highly mobile communities of other ex-pats who share similar lifestyles composed of joining and leaving various cultural communities worldwide. As these mobile communities expand with the increased international migration, numerous schools with international curricula have opened to serve the growing TCK population (Hoerstring & Jenkins, 2010, Carroll, 2019; Dillon & Ali, 2019). Research has begun developing to understand the strengths and challenges that come from transitioning to new countries throughout childhood and adolescence. Frequent relocation affords TCKs a greater worldview, as they interact and form relationships with people of different cultures (Carroll, 2019). Furthermore, studies on expatriate families have found that children often develop secure attachments to their parents with whom they share significant life changes (Van Der See et al., 2007). However, they also must move away from friends and family members, as they transition and adapt to unfamiliar environments with cultural and language differences (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Van Der See et al., 2007; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014; Carroll, 2019; Dillon & Ali, 2019). Studies have found that frequent relocations during developmental years are associated with grief from leaving behind close relations, disconnection, vulnerability when integrating into new social environments, and difficulty establishing deep connections to others (Strayhorn, 2012; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014; Kwon, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020).

For many TCKs, the need to transition and adjust to a new society happens often throughout their developmental years. In a study conducted on TCKs at an international school in Thailand, seven of thirty

children between the ages of 10-11 had already moved between four and six times (Nette and Hayden, 2007). The impact of these transitions on TCKs is often overlooked as they are moved involuntarily in favour of their parent's career or financial gains (Mclachlan, 2007; Dixon and Hayden, 2008). The impact of transitioning on children is theoretically divided into five stages. The first is composed of leaving an established sense of belonging (SOB) within a current location, followed by the second stage where children distance themselves from social connections. Frequent parting with friends, relations, and communities leaves TCKs with more experiences of unresolved grief before the age of 20 compared to what their monocultural peers experience in a lifetime (Mclachlan, 2007; Nette and Hayden, 2007). In the third stage, feelings of crisis and chaos set in as all components of their daily life change (Pollock and van Reken, 1999). The fourth stage brings vulnerability and uncertainty as the child determines where they fit within the new society, which in turn breeds feelings of isolation. TCKs were found to experience an onslaught of worry regarding leaving behind old friends and wanting to establish new ones (Dixon and Hayden, 2008). For those children that can navigate the initial four stages, the eventual fifth stage emerges as children integrate into the new lifestyle and begin developing SOB (Pollok and Van Reken, 1999). These transition stages are commonplace in the life of a TCK and can cause great difficulty. However, transition experiences also offer more opportunities for TCKs to learn how to navigate novel social situations, integrate with new groups of people and develop social competencies that help them re-establish SOB in diverse contexts.

Sense of Belonging

SOB is the feeling of being connected, accepted, and important to a group, community, or place (Raman, 2014). Deci and Ryan's (2012) Self Determination Theory provides a framework for understanding foundational determinants, or basic psychological needs, that all humans need to be satisfied in order to experience optimal development. The three basic needs according to Self Determination Theory are autonomy, relatedness, and competence. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the latter two needs. Deci and Ryan's (2012) term "relatedness" overlaps with SOB. The satisfaction of this need is affected by the proximal and distal social context within which one lives. Without fulfillment, the need for SOB impacts one's intrinsic motivation, making them more susceptible to external pressures and limiting their individual intentionality (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Social acceptance and relationships have been studied as a foundational component of SOB, and essential for the overall well-being of both children and adolescents (Vaccaro et al., 2015; Vaccaro, 2016; Gempp & Gonzalez-Carrasco, 2021; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Johnson et al., 2020).

Longitudinal studies provide evidence that forming healthy social relationships is an important developmental task in middle childhood, and a determinant of long-term adjustment, well-being, and

psychological health (Schmidt et al., 2020). In early adolescence, social relationships become a primary focus, as youth venture away from the influence of parents in pursuit of forming friendships (Brown & Larson, 2009; Drolet & Arcand, 2013). Teens feel a need to be associated with others similar to them to develop SOB, and multiple reliable and close relationships with peers make them feel that they belong (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Researchers have found that TCKs report feeling that they do not belong anywhere, but that real belonging ensues only when they are around those who have similar experiences to them. They define belonging based on their personal relationships, namely with other TCKs, whom they meet within their ex-pat and international school community ((de Wall & Born, 2021; Pollock and Van Reken; 1999). TCKs feel more comfortable socializing with other international students who understand their backgrounds and share similar life experiences. Further, trust and familiarity help them develop friendships over a shorter timeframe (Kwon, 2019). This aligns with the need posited by monocultural peers, in that TCKs develop belonging through association with others similar to them.

Social Competence

The second of three psychological needs highlighted in Deci and Ryan's (2012) Self-determination theory is the feeling of competence. Competence is developed through environmental affirmations of one's ability to reach a desired goal. Similar to SOB, perceived affirmations of competence encourage the development of intrinsic motivation, while disaffirmations thwart it (Deci and Ryan, 2012). Social competence is the collection of behaviours that allow people to initiate and maintain social connections and is intrinsically motivated by the need for SOB (Demirci, 2020). Humans evaluate social competence based on their history of social interactions, which informs expectations for future ones (Demirci, 2020). As such, receiving affirmations from the environment about one's social competence heightens intrinsic motivation for socializing and developing relationships with others. Ezra (2003) provides evidence of the relationship between social competence and social acceptance, suggesting that social competence is positively correlated with the ease an individual has in being accepted within their social environment. This assertion is further supported by Drolet and Arcand (2012), who noted that adolescents with greater social competence are more likely to belong to a group of friends with higher respect from peers. Based on these findings, one would expect that TCKs with greater social competence are also more readily accepted in their social environment and find belonging within a social group.

With such frequent relocation, TCKs are thought to develop high levels of social competence because they need to adapt to new circumstances, cultures, and social expectations quickly and more often (Carroll, 2019; Cockburn, 2022). In a qualitative study on adult TCK's social relationships, participants reported being able to make friends quickly and with many people. They explained that they feel a desire to meet new people and seek out new friendships, as this is a pattern they have always grown

up with. In turn, they often open the conversation with others and enjoy connecting with many people (Choi and Luke 2011). TCKs who attend international schools are also considered to have greater intercultural sensitivity because of the diversity they are consistently immersed in (Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; Staffron, 2003; Willis & Enlone, 1990).

Integrating with others from different cultures provides social competencies for dealing with a large array of people and offers TCKs an expanded worldview with which they can understand and accept similarities and differences between themselves and others (Carroll, 2019). They often possess social competencies necessary for navigating differences with peers, such as patience, multilingualism, flexibility, and a diplomatic approach (Ezra, 2003). Therefore, the social competence that TCKs possess is expected to support them in being accepted within their social environment and developing SOB.

Relocation, Social Competence, and SOB

TCK's social competence allows them to develop many friendships worldwide, however, life in transit means that the friendships they make often do not last because of their inevitable next move (Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk, 2014; McLachlan, 2007). Research on TCK families has found that the relationships TCKs develop are typically more superficial, while deeper friendships only emerge when proximity allows over a longer time span (Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Therefore, the impending feeling of leaving may bring greater potential for negative social competencies that impact TCK's SOB.

Deci and Ryan discuss this in their Self-determination theory, noting that consistent difficulty in building deep social connections disaffirms one's social competence which results in reduced motivation. Regular transitions throughout school-age years pose a major difficulty and have been found to hinder students' social approach, and in turn their SOB. For example, a study by Johnson et al. (2020) on SOB in American foster care youth found that consistent movement diminished students' interest in establishing authentic and productive relationships with others whom they would likely leave. In turn, this thwarted their SOB in school (Johnson et al., 2020). Although TCKs move around with their parents and therefore differ from the experience of foster care youth, research on TCKs' social relationships yielded similar difficulty in building deep friendships. Reflecting the decreased motivation described in Self-determination theory, TCKs became hesitant to involve themselves in activities or invest in close relationships that could feed their SOB (Nette & Hayden, 2007; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Furthermore, the establishment of surface-level friendships helped to minimize the grief experienced when leaving friends behind (Carroll, 2019; Cockburn, 2002). Therefore, it is possible that as TCKs transition more frequently between communities, the variance in their SOB is less accounted for by their level of social competence.

Study Overview

To date, research on TCK populations and the strengths and challenges that come from relocating between cultures throughout their developmental years is still building. No study has been found that published normative data on any aspect of TCK's well-being. In particular, there is a need to understand what helps TCKs between the age bracket 8-16 develop SOB. Previous literature has considered how social competence contributes to developing social relationships, as well as how social relationships contribute to an individual's SOB. However, the relationship between social competence and SOB has yet to be studied in primary and secondary TCKs. Furthermore, there is limited research on how this relationship is influenced by the number of moves they experience during development. This study will investigate how child and adolescent TCKs perceive their social competence, and if this is related to their SOB. We will first examine how much variance in SOB is accounted for by social competence. Next, we will investigate how this relationship is moderated by the number of relocations experienced during developmental years. Based on the literature, it is expected that social competence will positively correlate with SOB levels in TCKs, while greater instances of relocation will negatively affect the relationship between social competence and SOB.

Methods

Participants

A sample of Third Culture Kids, aged 9 - 16 ($N = 67$), enrolled in two International Schools in the Netherlands participated in this study. The schools participating were the International School of Utrecht ($n = 20$) and the International School of Breda ($n = 47$). Of this sample, 40% of the participants were boys ($n = 26$), and 60% were girls ($n = 39$). The mean age of participants was 13.4 years ($SD = 2.11$). A G*power analysis was used to calculate the necessary number of participants for this study. The target sample size was found to be 55 based on a medium effect size $f^2 = 0.15$, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80 including one moderator and one independent variable.

Measures

Social Competence

Social competence was assessed using the social skills scales of the Social Skills Improvement Scales (SSiS-RS) 8-12 and 13-18. Social skills are behaviours that help people interact and engage with others, while social competence is the overarching quality of social interaction that a person exhibits. As such, the social skills a person has informs their social competence and a traditional method for assessing social competence is through self-report of one's social behaviours and relationships (Warnes et al., 2005). Therefore, the SSiS was selected as the tool for assessing social competence in this study. On the SSiS-RS, 46 items are used to assess 7 subscales of social skills: communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, and self-control. An example question from the 46 items is "*I stay calm when dealing with my problems*". Participants were asked to respond to each item on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not true) to 3 (very true). Participant scores from each scale were combined to form a total score of social competence, which could range from 0 to 141. The total scale for each age group showed high reliability with median alpha values at mid to upper .90s (Gresham and Elliott, 2008). Student participants completed the relevant questionnaire based on their age. Total scale reliability was assessed for this sample of participants, yielding high reliability with Cronbach's Alpha = 0.89.

Sense of Belonging

General Sense of Belonging is a twelve-item self-report questionnaire using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) which assesses Sense of Belonging. The scale shows high reliability in the original sample with Cronbach's alpha = 0.95 (Malone et al., 2012). Twelve items were included, and participants were asked to respond to each using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from. Items 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, and 11 were scored such that higher scores meant higher values of SOB. An example question from these items is: "*I have a close bond with family and friends*". Items 3, 4, 6, 7, and 12 were reverse-coded to account for scores indicating a lower value of SOB. An example question from

these items is “*I feel isolated from the rest of the world*”. With this coding method, scores from each question could be added together to form a total value that was used for analyses. Participant results could range from 12 to 84. Scale reliability was assessed for this sample of participants, yielding high reliability with Cronbach Alpha = 0.83.

Number of Relocations

Number of relocations was assessed under the Transitional Impact questionnaire. Via mix of 16 open-ended questions and questions with a Likert-scale, participants recorded responses to several transition-based questions. Topics included the number of times the participant had moved, the time spent in the current country post-transition, experiences of losing important others due to relocation, and the student’s identification of their home country. Two additional questions on how much the participant thought transitioning impacted them positively and negatively were included for students to assess on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (totally). For the purpose of this study, the question of the number of times moved was used.

Procedure

Prior to commencement, this study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University (registration number: 22-0350). Students and parents at participating international schools were informed of the project via school newsletter in January 2023. Following, the project was introduced to students in their mentor or mainstream classes by a research student from University Utrecht, providing a period for questions to be answered. At this time, students also received an envelope containing an information letter about the project and a consent form to be signed and brought back to school if they wished to participate. Approximately 280 consent forms were sent out at the International School Utrecht, while 130 were sent out at the International School of Breda. Approximately 14% of consent letters were returned complete stating that they wished to participate at the International School Utrecht, while 36% were returned complete at the International School of Breda. Once consent forms were brought back to school, the study representative provided a participant number to each student. The participant number was aligned across the student’s individual questionnaire, their parent’s questionnaire, and their teacher’s questionnaire. To keep responses confidential, only the supervisory school representative had access to participant codes.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.0. Assumption checks for linear regression were assessed in SPSS prior to the analysis of the data. To test the relationship between social competence and SOB in TCKs, a linear regression analysis was conducted between social competence (independent variable) and SOB (dependent variable). Following, a moderation analysis was

conducted using SPSS Version 29 Process Macro. Assumption checks for moderation were assessed in SPSS prior to the analysis of data. The outcome variable for analysis was SOB and the predictor variable was self-perceived social competence. The moderator variable was low versus high number of relocations.

Results

Social Competence and SOB: Descriptives and Preliminary Data-analysis

Means and standard deviations for the TCK sample on each variable are presented in Table 1. It should be noted that no reference groups are available for TCK youth for all questionnaires included in the current study as well as the broader study. Likewise, as far as we are aware, no study published normative data on any aspect of TCK's well-being. A single-sample t-test was conducted to compare SOB means and variances between the TCK sample in this study and a normal population of Turkish youth ($N = 26$, $M = 36.12$, $SD = 6.59$) (Demirtas et al., 2017). The test showed no significant difference between groups with $t(325) = 1.59$, $p = .11$. The same test was conducted for Social Competence using data from the SSiS norm sample of American youth ($N = 733$, $M = 97.56$, $SD = 19.72$) (Gresham and Elliot, 2008). The test also showed no significant difference between the samples with $t(776) = 1.07$, $p = .28$). The descriptive statistics of research variables for this study can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the study variables

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Social Competence	62	93.5	15.4	61	127
Sense of Belonging	66	34	10.9	17	58
Number of Relocations	67	2.6	2.2	0	11

A correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between number of relocations and both social competence and SOB, respectively. This was to consider if number of relocations had any effect on either of the two variables independently. Assumptions were assessed for each variable. Due to violation of normality, the number of relocations data was split into a dichotomous variable, where low number of relocations was defined as relocating 2 or fewer times ($n = 40$), and high number of relocations was defined as relocating 3 or more times ($n = 27$). Categorization was based on the mean number of relocations in the population ($M = 2.5$). Furthermore, the GSB scale data also violated normality based on Shapiro Wilk p value = .009, and a right-skewed distribution. Therefore, the GSB scale data was transformed into standard scores.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between number of relocations and social competence. There was no significant correlation between the two variables at both low number of relocations, [$r(36) = .026, p = .876$] and high number of relocations, [$r(22) = .366, p = .078$]. Following a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between number of relocations and SOB. There was no significant correlation between the two variables at both low number of relocations, [$r(37) = -.203, p = .215$] and high number of relocations, [$r(25) = .158, p = .432$]. results of the Pearson correlation can be found in table 2.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation for Number of Relocations, Social Competence and Sense of Belonging

Variable	<i>n</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Num. Relocations (low)	40	-	-	-.03	-.20
2. Num. Relocations (high)	27	-	-	.37	.16
3. Social Competence	62	-.03	.37	-	-
4. Sense of Belonging	66	-.20	.16	-	-

Note. * $p < .05$

Main Analysis

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict SOB in TCKs based on their self-perceived social competence. The results of the regression indicated that social competence explained 4.2% of the variation in SOB [$F(1,60) = 2.66, p = .108, 95\% \text{ CI } (-.399, .037)$]. These results were not significant at the $p < .05$ level, 95% CI. Therefore, the hypothesis that social competence will positively correlate with SOB levels in TCKs is rejected. The results of the regression can be found in Table 2.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients of Social Competence on Sense of Belonging

Effect	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		<i>p</i>
				<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Constant	1.26		.79	-.32	2.83	.12
Social Competence	-.01	-.21	.01	-.03	.00	.11
R^2	.04					

Note. $N = 62$

Moderation Effect

To investigate the moderation effect of number of relocations on the relationship between TCK's SOB and social competence, a moderator analysis was performed using SPSS Version 29 Process Macro.

The main model does not show that social competence significantly accounts for variance in SOB, however it is theoretically possible that relocation may have a moderating effect on the strength of the relationship and therefore we proceeded with the analysis. The outcome variable for analysis was SOB, the predictor variable was self-perceived social competence, and the moderator variable was low versus high number of relocations. The interaction of social competence with high versus low of number of relocations was not significant [$B = .003$, 95% CI (-.032, .037), $t(58) = .156$, $p = .877$]. Therefore, the hypothesis that a higher number of relocations will negatively affect the relationship between social competence and SOB, is rejected.

Table 4

Moderation effect of Num. Relocations on Social Competence and Sense of Belonging

Effect	Estimate	SE	t	95% CI		p
				LL	UL	
Constant	1.29	.10	1.30	-.70	3.29	.201
Social Competence	-.02	.01	-1.42	-.04	.01	.161
Low vs High Num. Relocations	.02	1.65	0.01	-3.28	3.32	.990
Interaction	.00	.02	0.16	-.03	.04	.877
R^2	.06					

Note. $N = 62$

* $p < .05$

Discussion

There is limited research to date on the unique development of the TCK population and the factors that contribute to their overall well-being. SOB is an innate foundational need necessary for optimal development and well-being. Therefore, it is important to understand how TCK's develop SOB in their highly mobile lives by considering what factors contribute to SOB development and how this differs in TCKs compared to mono-cultural populations. To do so, this study aimed to assess the relationship between social competence and SOB in primary and secondary school TCKs. We examined the correlation between TCK's social competence and SOB, and assessed how much variance in TCK's SOB is accounted for by their social competence. Further, we examined the effect of low versus high relocations on the relationship. It was expected that TCK's social competence and SOB would be positively correlated and that a greater number of relocations would negatively affect this relationship.

However, results from the regression analysis indicated that for the TCK youth participating in the current study, the level of SOB does not appear to be related to self-perceived social competence, nor is this relationship different for youth who have low versus high levels of relocation.

TCKs have a unique developmental experience, frequently moving to new locations and leaving behind social relationships. TCK families have reported that their life in transit prevents them from developing deep friendships that feed their SOB, and that TCKs experience challenges finding others they feel understood and connected to over an extended period of time (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Moreover, previous research on TCKs yielded evidence of decreased motivation and hesitancy when investing in close social relationships (Nette & Hayden, 2007; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014). This emerges due to the continued loss of friendships as TCKs relocate and serves as a protective mechanism for the grief experienced when leaving a location. From this perspective, it is plausible that variance in TCKs SOB would be less accounted for by social relationships and therefore social competence. Instead, TCK's social competence may help them integrate with others quickly and for a short time, instead of being used to establish the deep social relationships that other populations rely on for SOB.

As the relationship between social competence and SOB is insignificant, it was expected that the moderation would likely yield insignificant results, which was confirmed. As previous literature suggested, frequent relocation affords TCKs greater social competence, while simultaneously causing difficulty in establishing close friendships that support SOB. It is also possible that frequent relocations do not have as significant an impact on TCK's social competence or SOB development as expected. When compared to other norm samples of mono-cultural youth, TCK's mean values for SOB and Social Competence did not significantly differ. Therefore, both may develop as expected despite high mobility, but the factors contributing to each development may differ from that of normal populations. For example, in this study, social competence was assessed with a total scale score of seven social skill subscales. The underlying subscales may differ in terms of development for TCKs, with some developing at a higher rate and others yielding more difficulty. In total, they do not have a significant relationship with SOB, while individual subscales may have a stronger relationship or be more effected by higher numbers of relocation.

Future Directions

Findings warrant further questions regarding the establishment of TCK's SOB and their development of social competence. A further analysis to consider is taking a closer look at the social skill scales completed by TCKs. Prior studies suggested that TCKs develop social competencies due to their frequent immersion in diverse contexts (Carroll, 2019; Cockburn, 2022). However, no significant difference was found between the total social skills mean score from the SSiS norm data and TCK's data

for this study. Therefore, it would be relevant to consider the differences in the development of each social skill subscale between TCKs and their monocultural peers. Results could help guide social skill development programs in each population.

Secondly, it was assumed that total social competence underscored TCK's ability to establish friendships that in turn would account for significant variance in their SOB. However, another analysis to consider is the direct correlation between close friendships and TCK's SOB. It is possible that the social competencies TCKs develop are merely for adaptive purposes and less indicative of the close social relationships they form. Studying TCK's close friendships would also provide quantitative data regarding the difficulty suggested in previous qualitative studies that TCK's struggle to feel understood by peers and establish close friendships.

Finally, a third direction to consider is the other relationships that account for variance in TCK's SOB. TCKs report that secure attachment to their parents with whom they shared significant life changes, fostered deep bonds and commitment within the family unit and higher levels of adjustment to new contexts (Van Der See et al., 2007; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014). The need to rely more significantly on one's immediate family unit during transition fosters greater cohesion and attachment (McLauchlan, 2007). As such, it would be useful to assess the correlation between parental attachment and SOB in TCKs. The variance accounted for by parent attachment could be compared to that of close friendships. Doing so would provide more insight into the most important factors for helping TCKs establish SOB in their highly mobile lives.

Limitations and strengths

The results of this study are preliminary. Due to time constraints, the data used in the analysis is that which was available after one month of collection. The sample size meets the necessity indicated in the power analysis and continues to be broadened. However, the power did not allow for further examination of social skills subscales and their relationship to SOB in our sample of TCK's. The sample of students also comes from two international schools in the Netherlands, heightening the selection bias of TCKs who could participate in the research. As such, the experience of participating students may not be representative of the experience of TCKs in other areas of the world where the third culture space is more pronounced. Finally, to date, limited quantitative data on school-age TCKs exists. Hypotheses were based on research on typical populations and qualitative data collected on TCK adults. One study on school-age TCKs in Thailand was found to provide insight into the relocation experiences of TCK youth. Despite this, the measures used to assess variables had high internal consistency and therefore reliable measures of SOB and social competence. Therefore, this study serves as a relative starting point for research on TCKs and their SOB.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the relationship between social competence and SOB in a population of primary and secondary TCKs, while considering the effect of relocation instances. Surprising results emerged, indicating an insignificant relationship between TCK's social competence and SOB, thereby challenging our initial hypothesis. Moreover, the number of relocations did not have a significant moderating effect on the relationship, nor did it correlate with social competence or SOB individually. Notably, the levels of social competence and SOB in the current population do not appear to be related. In this population of TCKs, each construct shows typical levels, comparable to that of monocultural peers, and may be able to develop regardless of the other. This study contributes to the developing research on TCKS. It challenges the positive correlation between social competence and SOB found in other populations and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that influence TCK's SOB and their psychological well-being. This study and further research in this area will benefit teachers, practitioners, and policymakers who work with TCKs, in selecting and allocating support to meet their unique developmental needs.

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