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Examining the Impact of a Third Culture Kid Upbringing: Well-being, Attachment and Ethnic Identity Strength in Adult Third Culture Kids

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Abstract

Third Culture Kids (TCK) are children who spend a significant period living outside of their home country, but reside only temporarily in a host country. TCKs upbringing can lead to a number of negative psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, and identity and attachment issues. Accordingly, this quantitative study compares the self-report responses of adults who were TCKs, to non-TCK adults, on the measures of ethnic identity, well-being, loneliness, attachment, resilience and self-concept clarity (N = 489). TCK adults had weaker ethnic identity, greater resilience, and were less comfortable forming close relationships than non-TCK adults. Among TCK adults, having siblings was associated with reduced attachment anxiety and greater resilience, and practising a religion was related to increased ethnic identity. Findings indicate the need to raise awareness among parents, teachers and counsellors about the difficulties that TCKs might face.

Keywords: Third Culture Kids, Ethnic Identity, Attachment, Resilience, Belonging

Introduction

The majority of children spend their developmental years in their country of birth, or at least within a culture and society which determines where home is. However, in today's globalised world, a growing number of children are spending extended periods of time living outside of their home country due to their parent(s) employment (United Nations, 2019). According to the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs, there were 272 million people living abroad in 2019 (United Nations, 2019) and there are currently 11,000 international schools globally (The International School Consultancy, 2020). Children, who spend a significant period living outside of their home country, but reside only temporarily in a host country, have been labelled TCKs; an acronym for Third Culture Kids (Pollock et al., 2017). Ruth van Reken (1996; cited in (Pollock et al., 2017) developed 'The Third Culture Model' in order to break down the three cultures associated with the TCK label. The first culture refers to the home of the child's parents, the second links to the host country of the parents' employment, and the third relates to a community of individuals who grow up internationally.

Despite the TCK upbringing becoming more common, this population remains fairly underrepresented in the developmental literature. The limited research that has been conducted thus far however, has revealed a number of positive and negative psychological outcomes in both TCKs and in adults who grew up as Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs). Positive outcomes include attributes such as broad mindedness (Dewaele and van Oudenhoven, 2009), resilience (Abe, 2018; Moore and Barker, 2012) and cross-cultural understanding (Fail et al., 2004; Peterson and Plamondon, 2009; Straffon, 2003). But in a 2021 review of TCK research, Tan et al (2021) discovered that TCKs suffer from increased levels of depression and anxiety along with identity formation issues (Gilbert, 2008; Pollock et al., 2017), a lack of belonging (Barringer, 2000; Fail et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2008; Hopkins, 2015; Moore & Barker, 2012), unresolved grief (Barringer, 2000; Gilbert, 2008; Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2014) and attachment avoidance (Gilbert, 2008; Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2014). These findings indicate the psychological impact of TCK upbringing can be substantial, and a need for a better understanding.

Identity Formation

An individual's sense of self is theorised to begin in infancy, with childhood being a key stage in identity formation (Gillibrand et al., 2016). During the developmental years, family, culture and other contextual factors are all used as building blocks in identity development (Siegler et al., 2014). In his stage theory of identity development, Erikson (1968) suggests that adolescence is the most critical period in identity exploration, with many adolescents experiencing a form of identity crisis, until they develop a concept of self that they can commit to (Erikson, 1968; Martinez and

Dukes, 1997). TCKs are often living internationally during their adolescence (Selmer and Lam, 2004; Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009) or have returned home following a number of years spent abroad, and so navigating this critical period may be further complicated by identity formation issues (Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009) .

ATCK participants in a study by Moore and Barker (2012) reported to intuitively adapt their identity, both internally and externally, to suit their cultural surroundings. Moore and Barker (2012) suggest therefore, that TCKs develop bicultural or even multicultural identities instead of committing to one. However, their methodology, namely open-ended questioning and social interaction between the interviewer and the participant may have influenced the interviewee to respond in a way they felt might be preferable to the interviewer. This makes it difficult to generalise the findings. Pollock and van Reken (2001) theorise that TCKs identity development may not be complete until the third decade due to their cross-cultural and mobile upbringing. This would contrast to Erikson's Psychosocial Theory which states that the 'identity versus role confusion' crisis should be resolved by age 19 (Erikson, 1968). Pollock and van Reken's (2001) work is qualitative and exploratory in nature however, and coincides with more integrative approaches to identity development, which argue that identity formation is a fluid, context based, lifetime process rather than a series of biological stages to be overcome (Gillibrand et al., 2016).

Self-Concept and Belonging

Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory claims that individuals feel secure when they know who they are, and to what group they belong. They theorise that when there are discrepancies in belonging, this can lead to low self-concept clarity, insecurity, and low self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2003; Usborne and de la Sablonnière, 2014). TCKs may be more at risk of experiencing discrepancies than non-TCKs, due to forming their social identity whilst mobile and straddling various cultures. Adam et al (2018) conducted six studies with a total sample of 1874 general adult participants from various populations, and discovered that international living enhanced their self-concept clarity. They theorised that this was because living internationally encourages people to explore and reflect upon their culture and identity. However, Adam et al (2018) do not make clear if their general adult sample lived internationally as children or as adults, nor under what circumstances.

Many TCKs have stated that their return 'home' to their heritage country, after living internationally, is/was a very difficult period for them in terms of adjustment (Davis et al., 2013). Previous research has discovered that TCKs are often left with a foreign feeling despite being 'home' (Barringer, 2000; Fail et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2008; Moore and Barker, 2012; Pollock et al., 2017) describe this experience as the 'hidden immigrant' scenario. To our knowledge, the construct of self-

concept clarity has not been studied quantitatively in the TCK or ATCK population previously and will therefore be examined in this study.

Lack of Cultural Belonging, Poor Wellbeing and Loneliness

Hoersting and Jenkins (2011) found support for Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory in their online survey of 475 on adults who had spent more than two years of their childhood living in a country that was not their parents' culture. They were interested in the cultural identity and self-esteem of adults who had this type of upbringing. Using self-report scale measures, they discovered that participants who scored higher in cultural homelessness tended to have lower self-esteem. Likewise, Davis et al (2013) investigated depression, anxiety and stress levels in 186 missionary TCKs aged 17-21 who had recently repatriated to the United States, and discovered that more than 40% of participants had anxiety and depression ranging from mild to extremely severe. They theorised that their findings may have been caused by the losses associated with a TCK upbringing, and eventual repatriation, rather than to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Due to the focus of the study and the method chosen for data collection however, there is no way of knowing exactly what the reduced wellbeing levels experienced by the participants related to. The inclusion of a loneliness scale would have been a useful addition to the study, but their structured design limits their findings. Fail et al's (2004) qualitative study, using in-depth interviews with 11 ATCKs found participants feeling like their lack of belonging to one particular culture gave them a multicultural identity, which they perceived to be an advantage. To our knowledge, loneliness has not been studied quantitatively in relation to TCKs or ATCKs in any previous research. It will therefore be examined in the current study.

Attachment Avoidance and Unresolved Grief

In addition to issues regarding identity and belonging, the TCK/ATCK literature also reveals attachment avoidance and unresolved grief to be a common in this population (Barringer, 2000; Gilbert, 2008; Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2014). All relocations result in loss, but for expatriate children, an international move means the loss of home, neighbours, school and familiar places. Some expat children experience multiple international moves, and so this cycle of loss is repeated time and again.

Gilbert (2008) conducted open-ended interviews with 43 ATCKs between the ages of 19 and 61 about their experiences growing up as a TCK, and almost all of her study participants discussed feelings of loss and grief. Loss in terms of people and places, pets and grieving for personal identity, security, and a sense of 'home'. Davis et al (2013) and Gilbert (2008) theorise that many of the

negative psychological outcomes experienced by TCKs/ATCKs are linked to the cycles of loss and unresolved grief they experience.

Bowlby (1969, 1973) developed the internal working model of attachment theory to describe how our experiences in infancy and childhood impact our expectations about close relationships. Bryant et al (2017) supported this theory with their finding that adults who had experienced separation and trauma in childhood were significantly more likely to have an insecure/avoidant attachment style in adulthood.

Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014) researched ATCK commitment in social relationships using the Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique. This method allowed their participants to complete an autobiographical narrative of their life experience and memories as a TCK. They discovered the recurrent theme of their participants purposefully avoiding becoming too close to other people. It could be suggested that the mobility and loss associated with the TCK upbringing, may negatively impact TCKs attachment development. As previously discussed, much of the prior TCK/ATCK literature has been qualitative in nature which makes it much less generalisable.

To our knowledge, no previous quantitative research has been conducted on attachment anxiety in this population. It will therefore be examined in this study, with a focus on the extent to which the participant feels comfortable forming close relationships with others, the extent to which they feel able to depend on others, and also the degree of abandonment anxiety they experience.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity theory relates to an individual's experience of, and commitment to, an identity, ethnicity and culture. Phinney (1990, 1992) created a model for ethnic identity development using Marcia's (1980) identity status framework, which allowed general identity status to be measured empirically. Her stage model includes three ethnic identity phases; unexamined identity, identity exploration and identity commitment.

Phinney (1992) theorises that ethnic identity is not static, nor dictated like race, but rather derived from social identity, group membership, and a sense of cultural belonging (Phinney, 1990, 1992). She argues that ethnic identity is contextual, and can only be achieved through personal experience and commitment by choice (Phinney and Ong, 2007; Syed and Azmitia, 2008). Along with Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980) on personal identity formation, Phinney (1990) proposes that ethnic identity development begins in childhood and results in commitment taking place in young adulthood, with adolescence being a crucial period of exploration. Phinney (1990) theorises that moving successfully through the ethnic identity developmental phases is dependent upon each individual's circumstances, and that a sense of belonging is an essential ingredient in ethnic identity achievement (Phinney, 1992). It could be argued therefore, that ethnic identity formation could be hindered by the TCK upbringing, which is spent outside of the heritage country, and unable to

integrate into the host country community due to the temporary nature of the residency. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that individuals with an achieved ethnic identity are more secure psychologically, and as a result, experience much higher levels of wellbeing (Bracey et al., 2004; Keyes et al., 2012; Martinez and Dukes, 1997). A weak ethnic identity could therefore, be considered an important factor in the negative psychological outcomes TCK/ATCKs have experienced.

To our knowledge, the psychological construct of ethnic identity has not previously been studied in relation to TCK or ATCK populations. This study will investigate if there is any difference in ethnic identity strength between adults with a TCK upbringing and adults with a non-TCK upbringing.

Current Study

The limited research which has been conducted so far on the TCK/ATCK population has tended to be qualitative in design (Melles and Frey, 2014; Peterson and Plamondon, 2009). This current study will investigate whether there is a quantifiable difference between ATCKs and non-ATCKs on the constructs of ethnic identity, wellbeing, loneliness, attachment, resilience, and self-concept clarity. It will also examine whether there is a relationship between a number of descriptive factors and any of the psychological construct variables within the ATCK group.

If a significant difference was to be found between the ATCK and non-ATCK group on the psychological constructs under study, this would help raise awareness for the parents, teachers and counselling professionals who support this population both during childhood and on into adulthood. McNulty and Carter (2018) interviewed focus groups of international school teachers, staff and parents, and discovered that no guidance was given to them on how best to support the unique needs of TCK students in terms of their identity development or wellbeing. Any significant findings from this study, could therefore be used to help encourage international schools to offer TCK seminars which help inform both TCKs, their parents and all those who work with them, about the complexities involved with this mobile, often cross-cultural upbringing.

Hypotheses

H1 – There will be a significant difference between the ATCK and non-ATCK group on the variables of wellbeing, attachment, resilience and self- concept.

H2 – Ethnic identity strength will be significantly weaker in the ATCK group.

H3 - There will be no significant difference found between the ATCK and non-ATCK groups in loneliness.

H4 – There will be a positive correlation found between ATCKs who practice a religion and increased ethnic identity strength. This hypothesis is based on past findings of increased ethnic identity in immigrants who practised a religion (Foner and Alba, 2008).

H5 – The descriptive variables of 'total number of years spent abroad' and 'total number of moves experienced' will be found to negatively correlate with ethnic identity strength, close attachment and self-concept clarity, whilst also be found to correlate positively with resilience.

Method

Design

This study used a cross sectional, independent measures design with data obtained using an anonymous online self-report questionnaire. The independent variable 'Upbringing' had two levels 'ATCK' and 'non-ATCK' for between-group comparisons on the dependent variables of ethnic identity, wellbeing, loneliness, attachment, resilience and self-concept clarity.

Within-group correlational analyses were performed on the ATCK group in order to determine any relationship between a number of descriptive variables (age, gender, ethnic group, religion, siblings, number of years spent abroad, and total number of international moves) and a strength or weakness in any of the construct variables. This design and method was chosen because it enabled a fast, inexpensive and ethical way to obtain quantitative data that could be analysed statistically.

Participants

An a priori power analysis conducted before data collection commenced, using an alpha value of .05 and a power level of .80, suggested a sample size of 64 participants for each group were needed for a medium effect. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling using the researchers' network. Each participant was asked to forward the questionnaire to anyone they felt might partake in the research, and the questionnaire link was also posted to various ATCK, expat and military Facebook pages. Participation was voluntary with no incentive offered, and the only inclusion criteria was that participants must be aged 18 or over.

In order to place each participant in either the ATCK or non-ATCK group for research, the survey included a question asking if they had spent 3 or more years living outside of their home country between the ages of 3-18. If they responded 'yes', they were placed in the ATCK group, if they responded 'no', they were placed in the Non-ATCK group.

There has been some debate in the literature about what determines a child to be a TCK, with the overall conclusion being that they will have spent a significant amount of time between the ages of 0-18 living outside of their home country, determined as the parent's passport country and heritage culture (Pollock et al., 2017). For the purpose of this study, it was decided that 3 or more years spent living internationally between the age of 3-18 years would be used to determine if a participant should be allocated to the ATCK group. This age range was chosen because it could be argued that time

spent living internationally between the age of 0-3 years would not have had a strong impact on the construct variables being researched for this study (Siegler et al., 2014).

Although 666 individuals began the survey, 177 did not complete it in its entirety. It could be assumed that due to the survey length, time constraint may have been a reason (Kotera, Conway, et al., 2021; Kotera, Taylor, et al., 2022), but no complaint was received. Incomplete survey responses were removed from the data set, leaving 489 participants in total; 432 females and 57 males, with a participant age range of 19-74 (M = 44.65, SD = 10.32). The sample consisted of 44 different, self-identified ethnic groups, with 67% of participants declaring themselves to be White British. The participants being heavily weighted to female, negatively impacts generalisability, but for the purpose of this particular study, this was not considered to be detrimental to the research in question. Of the 489 individuals who took part in the study, 270 were determined to be ATCKs and 219 were Non-ATCKs.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this research study was obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to any data collection. The Qualtrics survey link was then disseminated in the researchers' network. It was also posted, with administrative permission, to various ATCK, Expat or Military Facebook pages, as well as the university's community site. Participants had to be 18 years or older in order to participate in the study. No incentives were offered for participation and no reason for withdrawal was required, as per our ethical guidelines.

Materials

Ethnic Identity

The construct of ethnic identity was measured using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R) (Phinney and Ong, 2007) The MEIM-R requires the participant to free type their ethnic group, rather than choose from a pre-determined list, in order to ensure that it is a personal declaration (Phinney and Ong, 2007). The instrument then proceeds with six Likert scale items covering ethnic identity exploration and commitment. The participant responds to statements such as, "I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group", on a scale ranging from 'strongly disagree', which is allocated a score of 1, to 'strongly agree', which is allocated a score of 5. Each item response is then totalled to give an overall ethnic identity strength score (maximum 30). The higher the score, the more committed the participant is to their ethnic identity. The MEIM-R was chosen because previous research has found it to have high reliability (.81-.89) and to be generalisable across the population in terms of age, gender, race, SES, and culture (Phinney and Ong, 2007).

Loneliness

The construct of loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3). This measure includes 20 Likert scale items with statements such as, "How often do you feel that you lack companionship?".

The participant is asked to respond on a scale ranging from, 'Never' which has a score of 1, to 'Always', which has a score of 4. The score on each item is then combined to calculate an overall loneliness score for each participant ranging from 20 to 80, with a higher score denoting more intense loneliness. Items 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19 and 20 consist of positive statements so as to avoid response set bias. It is therefore necessary to reverse score these items. This instrument has previously been found to be have high validity, and to be very reliable (.89-.94) across various populations (Russell, 1996).

Wellbeing

The psychological construct of wellbeing was measured using The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007), which includes 7 positively worded Likert scale items, which enquire about the participant's feelings and thoughts over the preceding two-week period. An example statement is, "I've been feeling optimistic about the future", to which the individual is required to choose a response ranging from 'None of the Time', which has a score of 1, to 'All of the Time', which has a score of 5. Each item's score is then totalled to provide an overall wellbeing score for the participant ranging from 7 to 35. The higher the score, the better the individual's wellbeing is considered to be. This instrument was chosen because it has previously been found to have good content validity, internal consistency and reliability (.89-.91) across populations (Tennant et al., 2007).

Attachment

The construct of attachment was measured using the Revised Adult Attachment Scale – Close Relationships Version (Collins, 1996). The original AAS concentrates on romantic relationships and so was considered inappropriate for this study. This instrument has 18 Likert scale items which comprise of three subscales of attachment type; Close, Depend and Anxiety. Each item asks about how the individual generally feels in important close relationships such as family, romantic partners and close friends. The participant then responds to various statements, for example, "I am comfortable depending on others", on a scale of 'Not at all characteristic of me', which has a score of 1, to 'Very characteristic of me', which has a score of 5. Items 2, 7, 8, 13, 16, 17 and 18 consist of negative statements so as to avoid response set bias, and so it is therefore necessary to reverse score these items. A score for each of the three subscales is then totalled for each participant. A secure person would be expected to score high on the close and depend scales, and low on the anxiety scale. Each of

the subscales on this instrument have previously been found to have good reliability; Close .82, Depend .80, and Anxiety .83 (Collins, 1996).

Self-Concept

The construct of self-concept clarity was measured using Campbell et al's (2003) Self-Concept Clarity Scale. This instrument contains 12 Likert style statements such as, "I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality". The participant is required to respond to each item on a scale of 'Strongly Disagree', with a score of 1, to 'Strongly Agree', with a score of 5. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12 consist of negative statements and so require reverse scoring. Each item response is then totalled to provide an overall self-concept clarity score for each participant. The higher the score, the stronger the clarity. This instrument has been found to be a very reliable measure (.86) in previous studies (Campbell et al., 2003).

Resilience

The construct of resilience was measured using the 6-item Likert style Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008). This particular instrument was chosen due to the fact that it measures resilience in terms of the individual's ability to thrive in stressful circumstances, or to bounce back after a stressful event. This was considered more appropriate for the present study because other resilience measures tend to concentrate more on the participant's coping mechanisms (Smith et al., 2008). Items include statements such as, "It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event", to which the participant responds on a scale of 'Strongly Disagree', which is allocated a score of 1, to 'Strongly Agree', which is allocated a score of 5. Items 2, 4 and 6 consist of negative statements so as to avoid response set bias. It is therefore necessary to reverse score these items. Each item score is then combined to provide an overall strength of resilience score for each participant, ranging from 6-30. The higher the score, the greater the individual's resilience. Previous studies have found this instrument to have high validity and reliability (.80-.91) across various populations (Smith et al., 2008).

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS version 26. Assumptions of normality were assessed using Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, with both found to be significant, therefore indicating that the data deviated from a normal distribution (Kotera, Gilbert, et al., 2019; Kotera, Green, et al., 2019) A Levene's test was also performed and found to be significant indicating that the data's homogeneity

of variance had been violated (Kotera and Fido, 2021). As a result, non-parametric tests were used for both the between-group and the within-group analyses.

Results

Between-Group Analyses (Testing H1-H3)

All between-group analyses of the relationship between the variable of upbringing, and the various psychological constructs under study, were conducted using a two tailed Mann Whitney U test. Medians, IQR and *p* values are shown for the ATCK and Non ATCK groups for each of the dependent variables in Table 1. A significance level of .05 was used to test all hypotheses.

Table 1: ***Between-group analyses of the self- report construct variable scores from the ATCK and Non-ATCK groups.***

Construct Variable	ATCK	non-ATCK	ATCK	non-ATCK	
	Median		*IQR*		*P*
Ethnic Identity	18	20	5	7	.004**
Well Being	22	22	5	5	.063
Loneliness	48	45	16	15	.232
Close Attachment	19	21	7	7	.030*
Depend Attachment	16	17	6	7	.092
Anxious Attachment	18	18	11	12	.732
Resilience	22	20	6	8	.002**
Self-Concept Clarity	36	35	17	14	.744

* p < .05 ** p < .01

H1 – Hypothesis 1 was part supported. It was hypothesised that a significant difference would emerge between the ATCK and non-ATCK groups on the variables of wellbeing, attachment, resilience and self-concept, but the scores between the groups on the variables of wellbeing, self-concept, and on the attachment subscales of depend and anxiety were not found to be significant when analysed.

There was a significant difference found between the groups on the construct of resilience (*U* = 24733.5, *p* = <.01, r = -.14). The median resilience score for ATCKs was 22 compared with 20 for Non-ATCKs, which suggests that ATCKs have a greater resilience than Non-ATCKs. Analysis also showed a significant difference between the close attachment scores in ATCKs (Mdn=19) and Non-

ATCKs (Mdn=21), with ATCKs found to be less comfortable forming close attachments to others (*U*=26206.5, *p* = <.05, *r* = -.10).

H2 – In support of Hypothesis 2, a significant difference was found between the strength of ethnic identity in ATCKs (Mdn=18) and Non-ATCKs (Mdn=20), with ethnic identity strength found to be weaker in ATCKs (*U* = 250555.5, *p* = <.01, *r* = -.13).

H3 – The results supported Hypothesis 3, showing no significant difference between the groups on the variable of loneliness.

Within-Group Analyses (Testing H4-5)

Correlational analyses were performed on the data from the ATCK group only. The non-parametric Kendall's tau-b test was used to determine if there was any relationship between the descriptive variables; gender, age, ethnic group, languages spoken, religious (y/n), siblings (y/n), number of moves, and number of years spent abroad between the ages of 3-18 years, and any of the construct variables.

The ATCK group consisted of 270 participants, 233 females and 37 males, from 24 different self-declared ethnic groups, with 76% identifying themselves as White British. The ATCK group of participants ranged in age from 19-74 (M = 46.32, SD = 10.50), 45% of this group spoke more than one language, 77% declared that they were not religious, and 93% stated that they had siblings. The ATCK sample reported spending an average of 10 years between the ages of 3-18 living overseas (M = 9.71, SD = 3.84), and 35% reported moving 5 or more times during that period. Table 2 demonstrates the two tailed correlation coefficients and significance values for the relationship between each of the predictor and outcome construct variables

Table 2: ***Correlation coefficients for the descriptive and construct variables within the ATCK group.***

Descriptive Variable	Construct Variable							
	Ethnic Identity	Well Being	Loneliness	Close Attachment	Depend Attachment	Anxious Attachment	Resilience	Self-Concept Clarity
Gender	-.058	-.009	-.002	-.032	-.031	-.063	.060	.055
Ethnic Group	.195**	.070	-.064	.052	.049	-.048	.022	.121*
Age	-.009	.054	-.008	-.032	-.036	-.026	.017	.066
Languages Spoken	.095	.093	.025	.056	.010	-.058	.074	.024
Religious	.218**	.066	.006	.099	.018	.022	.028	.097
Siblings	.070	.092	-.044	.097	.047	-.100*	.117*	.071
No. of International Moves.	-.025	.013	.064	-.035	-.048	.040	.065	.021
Total Years Spent Abroad	.034	.047	-.022	.013	.016	-.016	.003	.002

* $p < .05$ ** $p <. 01$

H4 – In support of Hypothesis 4, a positive relationship was found between ATCK participants who practised a religion and increased ethnic identity strength (r = .218).

H5 – It was hypothesised that both the total number of years an ATCK spent abroad, and the number of moves an ATCK experienced, would be found to negatively correlate with the variables of ethnic identity strength, close attachment and self-concept clarity, and to correlate positively with the variable of resilience. This hypothesis was rejected however, as no significant correlations were found between these variables when analysed.

Non-Hypothesised Findings

Although no hypotheses were offered for the following findings, the current study also discovered positive correlations between ATCKs who had declared themselves to be of an ethnic group other than White British, and both a stronger ethnic identity (r = .195), and a greater self-concept clarity (r = .121). ATCKs with siblings were also found to have lower attachment anxiety (r = -.100), and increased resilience (r =.117).

Although the correlations found were significant, their coefficients of determination demonstrate that only a very small percentage of the variance is shared by each of those particular variables. This indicates that there are more important factors involved in predicting the various construct variables under study.

Discussion

This study investigated a possible difference between psychological constructs in adults who grew up as third culture kids (ATCKs) and adults who spent their developmental years static, in their home country (non-ATCKs). This research also examined the relationship between those same psychological constructs and a number of descriptive variables within the ATCK group.

Although no significant difference was found between ATCKs and non-ATCKs on the attachment subscales of depend or anxiety, ATCKs were found to be significantly less comfortable forming close relationships than non-ATCKs. This finding therefore, part supports the H1 hypothesis, and is in line with previous research on both TCKs and ATCKs avoiding close attachment to others (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2014). Resilience was found to be significantly higher in ATCKs compared to non-ATCKs, which both supports H1, and converges with Pollock et al's (2017) findings, that a positive outcome of the TCK upbringing is often, increased resilience, in terms of the ability to bounce back. No significant difference emerged between the groups on the variables of wellbeing or self-concept, sits in contrast to the hypothesis and to previous research findings which have often discovered wellbeing to be reduced in the TCK population (Altweck and Marshall, 2015; Pollock et al., 2017). This finding may be explained by the fact that the average age of the participant sample, in the current study, was 45 years, and in comparison, much of the existing research on TCKs has been conducted on adolescent or college age participants. It could therefore be suggested, that the well-being and self-concept issues often experienced by TCKs may in fact resolve with age. Future research should consider conducting a longitudinal study to observe these particular variables.

As projected with Hypothesis 2, ATCKs were discovered to have a significantly weaker ethnic identity than non-ATCKs. This finding indicates that the commitment to an ethnic identity might be disrupted by the TCK experience. This is an important finding when considering the many

benefits found to be associated with having a strong ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990), and the various negative psychological experiences often reported by TCKs and ATCKs in previous research, such as identity issues and a lack of belonging (Altweck and Marshall, 2015; Moore and Barker, 2012). To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the construct of ethnic identity strength in the TCK/ATCK population and so further research would be necessary, but the current findings suggest that a more committed ethnic identity may help improve some of the negative outcomes TCKs and ATCKs experience.

As hypothesised in H3, no significant difference in loneliness levels were found between the ATCK and non-ATCK participants. This finding supports the previous research and theory of Useem and Cottrell (1996) and Davis et al (2013), who found that although TCKs and ATCKs often report feeling different, this did not equate to them feeling isolated. To my knowledge this is the first study to quantitatively study loneliness in the TCK/ATCK population and so no direct comparison is currently available.

In consensus with Hypothesis 4, a significant positive correlation was discovered between ATCKs who practised a religion and ethnic identity strength. This is in line with previous studies on immigrant populations which have shown that practising a religion can help an individual remain connected to their heritage culture and therefore strengthen their ethnic identity (Foner and Alba, 2008). This finding could be of use to parents, international school staff, and even counsellors of TCKs, as it indicates that TCKs who are religious, should be enabled and encouraged where possible, to practise their religion whilst in the host country, in order to help improve their ethnic identity development.

It was hypothesised that both the total number of years an ATCK spent abroad, and the number of moves an ATCK experienced, would be found to negatively correlate with the variables of ethnic identity strength, close attachment and self-concept clarity, and to positively correlate with the variable of resilience. However, no significant correlations were found between these variables when analysed. This was somewhat surprising as it was expected that multiple international moves and the more years an individual spends outside of their home country, the more they might struggle with both their ethnic identity and in forming close attachments. This finding would suggest however, that it is the TCK experience in general that impacts these variables, rather than the number of years or moves.

Lastly, although no further hypotheses were made, more correlational relationships were discovered during this study, which might be of interest in further research. A positive relationship was found between participants who were of an ethnic group other than ‘White-British’, and the constructs of both ethnic identity strength and self-concept clarity. Previous ethnic identity research has found ethnic identity to be more salient in groups that are of the ethnic minority in a context (Martinez and Dukes, 1997). It is not known if the non-White-British participants in this study, were of the ethnic minority in either their home or host countries. If they were, this could offer an

explanation for their increased ethnic identity strength. However, due to the fact that ethnic group was not a firm focus of this research, this information is not available.

As previously discussed, a stronger ethnic identity has been found to correlate with greater self-esteem (Bracey et al., 2004), and so the study finding that non-White-British participants had increased self-concept clarity compared to White-British participants may be related to the finding that they also had an increased ethnic identity strength. Future studies should consider researching ethnic group and its majority/minority status in the host countries of the TCK.

Limitations

The self-report questionnaire method used for this study could be considered a limitation due to the social desirability bias which may have impacted the participant responses (Kotera et al., 2020). A mixed-method study using scale questions followed up by open-ended interviews could be beneficial in future research in order to add depth to participant responses (Kotera, Gorchakova, et al., 2022) Using the researcher's personal network for convenience and snowball sampling could also be criticised for its risk of bias and low external validity. Despite the limitations associated to the recruitment methods used in this study, it should be acknowledged that obtaining a large, truly random sample of ATCKs would be difficult to achieve. The demographic outcome of 88% of the participants being Female and 67% White British is another limitation. Future research should attempt to gain a more varied sample in terms of gender and ethnic group. It would also have been beneficial to have included study questions which focussed on ethnic group, and minority status in both the home and host country of the ATCK, in order to investigate any possible relationship between ethnic group, home/host country, and any of the psychological construct variables, which could further inform different conceptualisations of TCK (Dillon and Ali, 2019). Lastly, the large number of dropouts (177 participants) can be a limitation. As no complaint or explanation was received (due to the ethical guidance (Kotera, Maxwell-Jones, et al., 2021)), it is difficult to know for sure why this was, but it could be argued that time constraint may have been an issue. Future research might consider reducing the number of psychological constructs under study.

Conclusion and Practice Implications

This study found ATCKs to have a weaker ethnic identity, and to be less comfortable forming close relationships than non-ATCKs. These findings demonstrate that TCKs, ATCKs, parents, education providers and mental health professionals would all benefit from further understanding of the psychological impact of the TCK experience on these constructs. We know from previous research and theory, that childhood and adolescence are critical periods for identity development, and that they can be a time of anguish and confusion, even when remaining in one's heritage culture (Erikson, 1968; Martinez and Dukes, 1997). It would therefore, be of no surprise that there may be even greater complications for an individual developing in a mobile environment, separated from

extended family and living temporarily between cultures. Pollock et al (2017) have even suggested that the TCK/ATCK population should be recognised as a minority or diverse group in their own right due to the complex nature of their upbringing.

Langford (2012) interviewed teachers and administrators from 41 different international schools and found that the majority felt TCKs develop differently to children who do not have a mobile upbringing. Most TCK/ATCK researchers are in agreement that more support should be on offer to this population (Barringer, 2000; Bates, 2013; Langford, 2012; Pollock et al., 2017). Yet, despite the several negative outcomes which have been found to be associated with the TCK upbringing, there is still a lack of awareness about it and a lack of support on offer to these individuals. The findings of the current study indicate the need to raise awareness among parents, teachers and counsellors about the difficulties Third Culture Kids might face. Programmes such as the 'Identity Project' from Umaña-Taylor et al (2018) which can help increase ethnic identity strength, along with access to informed counselling, both during childhood and on into adulthood, may help reduce some of the emotional consequences of this mobile upbringing.

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