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Left behind or moving forward? Effects of possible selves and strategies to attain them among rural Chinese children

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ABSTRACT

Are possible selves and strategies to attain them universally helpful even among children with few resources? We test this question in rural China. Rural Chinese children are commonly “left behind” (LB) by parents seizing economic opportunities by migrating, hoping the family will “move forward” and their children will attain their predestined better future. Media, teachers, and peers negatively represent LB children as unruly and undisciplined, with negative fates, making LB a negative stereotype that includes the idea of destiny or fate. Indeed, making the idea of LB salient increases children’s fatalism (Study 1 $n = 144$, Study 2 $n = 124$). However, having strategies to attain possible future selves predicts better in-class behavior, fewer depressive symptoms, and better exam performance even a year later and controlling for prior performance (Study 3 $n = 176$, Study 4 $n = 145$). Possible selves have mixed effects, not always predicting better grades and undermining LB children’s self-control.

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Left behind or moving forward? Effects of possible identities and strategies to attain them on rural Chinese children

“... the boys are lazy; they steal, rob, or kill. The girls also do not behave themselves.” “Students with bad grades basically are those whose parents leave to work in other places....” “They don’t like to study. They are too free-spirited and troublesome.” “They fight, they get into trouble, they are late or don’t come to the classes.” “Some of them steal, some rob, some stay in the cybercafé, and some date.” (Ren, 2008, p. 3, descriptions rural children and their teachers provide of “left behind” children, children whose parents migrate to find work but leave them behind in their rural communities).

Parents take desperate measures to help their children, sometimes choosing to sacrifice the comfort of being together for the hope that their children’s future will be brighter, that they will attain a better fate. In the current paper we focus on a particular group of such children, the children of internal rural-to-urban migrants in China whose parents leave to work in urban areas because of the dire economic circumstances and blocked opportunities of rural areas. Their children are officially described as “left behind” and constitute about 40% of children in many rural areas (All-China Women’s Federation [ACFW], 2013). Though timing and arrangements vary, parents typically leave their child in the care of a grandparent when their child

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reaches school age, though there are also reports of children being left on their own, perhaps because children often live at their school during the week (ACFW, 2013). Parents do not take their children with them because rural children cannot be enrolled in schools in communities other than their registered birthplace and without schooling children will have no chance to have brighter futures than their parents. Parents send home remittances but can only rarely visit – their wage are low, they work long hours, and their urban sojourn is far from their rural home (ACFW, 2013).

As detailed in our opening quotes, rural children and teachers have negative stereotypes about “left behind” children (Ren, 2008). Chinese media plays a role, mostly portraying them negatively; a content analysis of newspaper reports from 1998 to 2010 shows that less than a third of descriptions are neutral or positive (Qian & Qi, 2011). Left behind children are described as unruly, unmonitored and unsupervised (Zhou, Sun, Liu, & Zhou, 2005). Negative associations teachers have to “left behind” children contrast sharply with the positive associations they have to children more generally (Lu, Zou, Zhang, Jiang, & Lin, 2011).

Moreover, like other life events, being “left behind” can be a reminder that one’s fate is not in one’s hands (Li, Chen, Chen, & Wu, 2015). Belief in fate or destiny is a core Confucian value, common in Asian cultures, and applied especially as an explanation of life’s misfortunes (Heiniger, Sherman, Shaw, & Costa, 2013). The Chinese saying: “life is fated and fortune predestined” draws from the Confucian Analects (1893, English translation, Legge, 2015). This is understood to mean that trying hard and persisting effortfully are ways to reveal one’s fate; one may be fated to a better outcome but must work to attain it. At the same time little can be done to change the course of one’s fate, trying reveals whether one is fated to succeed. One’s destiny plays out in what appears to be luck, chance, or accidental happenings (Reid & Ware, 1974). Fatalism remains a basic element in current Chinese life, widely seen as the reason for success or failure in important life domains such as college, employment, marriage, finance (Zhang, Zhao, Yang, & Yu, 2000), illness and health (Liang et al., 2008; Straughan & Seow, 2000).

Given the shared negative representation of “left behind” and culturally sanctioned acceptance of fate, the very idea of being “left behind” is likely to accentuate children’s endorsement of fatalism rather than a wide open view that anything is possible. At the same time, if parents transmit the idea that moving forward is possible, their children may benefit from the motivating power of imagining a possible future in which they attain successes and avoid failures by engaging in current effortful strategies. We test both of these predictions in the current paper. In Studies 1 and 2 we test the prediction that if there is a “left behind” stereotype, then when it comes to mind, children will experience the future as less rosy and less in their control and that this sense of fate’s hand will at the same time cue possible future identities and strategies to attain them. In Studies 3 and 4 we test the prediction that having positive images of the identities they might attain and negative images of the identities they might avoid becoming in the future should bolster children’s school performance. To set the stage, in the next section we consider “left behind” as both a description and a stereotype with consequences for judgment (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995; Wheeler & Petty, 2001) and for possible future identities (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009, 2011).

“Left behind” as stereotype

Stereotypes are socially constructed knowledge networks (linked associations in memory) shared by those who are the targets of the stereotype and by others in the general population (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). Because it is a knowledge network, a stereotype, once activated by environmental cues, should influence perception and judgment whether or not one agrees with the stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Importantly, effects should not be limited to targets of stereotypes but should carry over to others for whom the relevant knowledge network exists (for a review, Wheeler & Petty, 2001). A large number of studies, summarized by Wheeler and Petty (2001) provide evidence supporting this assumption. For example, students perform better on trivia tasks and walk more slowly after stereotypes of professors (clever) and elderly people (slow) were subtly cued even though they themselves were neither professors nor elderly (for a review, Wheeler & Petty, 2001).

Whether activating a stereotype yields a stereotype-congruent response depends on what else comes to mind when the stereotype-relevant knowledge network is activated. This topic has been mostly investigated in the domain of racial-ethnic and gender stereotypes; an emerging literature focuses on whether a stereotype-congruent response (e.g., worse performance) occurs when gender or race-ethnicity is made salient (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Aronson et al., 1999; Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Using a variety of different techniques, these studies have demonstrated that whether performance matches stereotype depends on whether an alternative narrative counters the stereotype. For example, stigmatizing racial-ethnic or gender identities do not undermine school performance if students believe or are led to believe that academic attainment is congruent with their race-ethnicity or gender.

The implications for “left behind” are twofold. First, if “left behind” is a stereotype that includes negative images of children who are left behind as well as images of being left alone to one’s fate, then priming “left behind” status should cue concerns about what the future holds. Second, whether the performance of “left behind” children matches the stereotype should depend on whether other images of what is possible for the self also come to mind.

“Left behind” but also “moving forward”

The buffering process previously documented for racial-ethnic and gender identities should occur for “left behind” children if they include “moving forward” in their mental representation of why they are “left behind.” “Moving forward”

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