The association and mediating mechanism between poverty and poly-victimization of left-behind children in rural China

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ABSTRACT

Poly-victimization of children attracts increasing concerns in China, and a rapid growing number of cases on poly-victimization among left-behind children were reported. This study aims to test the association and mediating mechanism between poverty and poly-victimization of left-behind children in rural China. Representative survey data on left-behind children in rural China was analyzed in this study. Frequency and percentage were reported in descriptive analyses; Logistic Regression and mediating effects analysis were employed to test the association and detailed pathways between poverty and poly-victimization. About 27.50% of left-behind children suffered from at least one kind of victimization, and > 10% suffered from poly-victimization (at least two kinds of victimization in the present study). Regression results revealed that poverty was significantly and consistently associated with poly-victimization when controlling for covariates. Furthermore, the mediating mechanism analysis showed that, in the association between poverty and poly-victimization, it is the increased vulnerability from individual (individual psychological and behavioral health) and family (quality of family care) rather than vulnerability from surrounding interactions, plays a significant mediating role. This study stresses the importance of poverty alleviation in policy making for the protection of left-behind children from victimization in China. Also, support from family and school in protecting left-behind children should be paid additional attention.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of child victimization cases has increased rapidly all over the world, attaching broad social concerns. The Global Survey of Violence against Children (2013) issued by the United Nations stated about 40 million children under the age of 15 had been abused and neglected, and 133 million to 275 million children had witnessed violence (United Nations, 2013). Child victimization is of high frequency, and the prevalence of victimization among children varies between countries. National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) showed that the average number of child abuse and neglect cases in 2010 was 695,000 in the United States (Children's Bureau, 2017). While in China, the Girls Protection Research Report released by China Children and Teenagers' Fund claimed that > 770 cases of sexual abuse were reported publicly in 2016, and increased by nearly 30% than 2015 (China Children and Teenagers' Fund, 2016).

A part of children are exposed to various kinds of victimization, including physical and sexual abuse, bullying, exposure to community violence, and witnessing of domestic violence (Beil, Reisen, Zea, & Caplan, 2000). Child victimization is considered as a serious problem, especially for children at school age. Victimization would exert impact on children's health and well-being, and furthermore increase the longitudinal risks of emotional problems and antisocial activities (Due, Damsgaard, Lund, & Holstein, 2009; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). In addition, the experiencing of four or more types of victimization within the past year was defined as poly-victimization and the process usually lasts for a long period (Finkelhor, Ormrod, et al., 2005a). Compared with children experiencing a single form of victimization, children experiencing multiple forms are more likely to suffer from traumatic symptoms and be in worse physical and mental health (Finkelhor, Ormrod, et al., 2005a; Snyder et al., 2003). Poly-victimization among children needs more focus for its harmful consequence.

A body of research showed that poly-victimization among children was associated with various factors. The associated factors included characteristics of child, family, school, peer and community (Ernst, 2000; Wei & Ye, 2015). In terms of child characteristics, boys, as well as those children with worse academic performance and risky behaviors, suffered more from victimization (Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Finkelhor, Ormrod, et al., 2005b; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010). Some studies, focusing on factors located in family, revealed that vigilant parental monitoring led to decline in child victimization (Bifulco, Schimmenti, Jacobs, Bunn, & Rusu, 2014), while father's unemployment, continual conflicts and violence in family acted as risk factors of child victimization (Chaux & Castellanos, 2015; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2005). Community environment was another vital factor closely related to child safety (Hardaway, McLoyd, & Wood, 2012). There was a strong connection between child abuse and population density, social economic status and violent crime of community (Reed, 2006). As for peer support, positive peer relationship appeared to be a protective factor for its high-quality friendship and pro-sociality (Bowes et al., 2009). Unexpectedly, there were studies showing that children with higher level of community social economic status would possibly suffered from more victimization (Jin, 2004; Wong, Chen, Goggins, Tang, & Leung, 2009). Among all the risk factors, poverty was one of the key factors significantly associated with poly-victimization (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). The reason maybe that, poverty was related to vulnerability of children, which would further trigger the risk of suffering from multiple types of victimization (Lemstra, Nielsen, Rogers, Thompson, & Moraros, 2012).

In China, child victimization has drawn great concerns. A report released by Institute of Psychology of Chinese Academy of Sciences pointed out that abuses experienced by children existed universally in China, especially among left-behind children in rural China (Institute of Psychology, CAS, 2016). According to the overall investigation of left-behind children in rural China conducted by Chinese government, the number of left-behind children whose parents both or at least one (the parent left behind has no guardianship ability) migrated to cities for jobs reached 9.02 million in 2016 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016), which made victimization an urgent problem. For left-behind children living in impoverished family, they suffer double deprivation of parental care and poverty, which increases the risk of trapping into victimization and poly-victimization. One academic report, jointly issued by Peking University and China Academy of Social Sciences, found that 31.7% of left-behind children experienced abuse, and most of them belonged to poor households (Crowinc Home, 2016).

Double deprivation of parental care and poverty increases the vulnerability of left-behind children in rural China, attracting a series of research. However, there exist inadequacies in former studies from the following aspects. First, previous research on poly-victimization among left-behind children in China are in a limited number, let alone research on the association between poverty and poly-victimization. Second, measurements of victimization and poverty in majority of former studies were not based on standard scales, which was causal and nonstandard. Third, small samples and regional samplings were usually used in previous studies, leading to inadequate representativeness. Last, previous studies on the association between poverty and poly-victimization were lack of mechanism analysis and overlooked the mediating effects of factors.

Drawing on representative data, this study measured poly-victimization and poverty in accordance with Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) and the Bristol Deprivation Approach, respectively. And, this study controlled for variables which were selected on basis of ecological model. This study consists of two aims. The first is to identify whether there is association between poverty and poly-victimization. The second is to construct a conceptual framework of mediating mechanism and test the mediating effects.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data

The data used in this study was from Survey on Children and Old Adults Left-behind in Rural China organized by Ministry of Civil Affairs of People's Republic of China in 2016. Sampling scheme was designed by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and survey work conducted by Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University used Computer Auxiliary Personal Interviewing (CAPI) to collect information. The survey covered 26 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions of China, and stratified random sampling method was used to select one county in every province. Left-behind children and old adults from representative villages were investigated in every county. 1881 left-behind children (aged from 0 to 16) and 2885 left-behind old adults (aged 60 and above) were investigated together. Left-behind children were the children whose parents both or at least one (the parent left behind has no guardianship ability) migrated to cities in line with the latest definition of left-behind children from Ministry of Civil Affairs of China. The survey is of great representativeness, covering personal information, family information, social support and security status.

Only interviewers who had abundant experience in interview and great skill in addressing sensitive topics were chosen to participate in this survey. These interviewers had been given professional training in advance. The survey was conducted in a conscientious and responsible manner with the consent of guardians, and abided by the principles of voluntariness, anonymity and confidentiality.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections: the section of child information; the section of guardian and parents information. Child victimization (a part of child information) was measured with Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ, child self-report version). Interviewers asked a series of questions of JVQ and children reported themselves. Previous research showed children at school age had basic comprehension and judgment to answer questions on victimization, and JVQ was used worldwide to measure child victimization (Hamby, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004). Definition of each type of victimization in JVQ was designed in accordance with International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD-10) Version for 2010 published by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control of the Centers. During the survey, the interviewers introduced the definition of each type of victimization designed in the questionnaire and made detailed explanations for the interviewed children and guardians to understand these questions exactly.

Data of 1371 left-behind children at school age (aged 6–16) from 1881 left-behind children (aged 0–16) were finally used in this study.

2.2. Dependent variables and independent variables

2.2.1. Dependent variables

Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), especially the child self-report version, is a measurement instrument of child poly-victimization used worldwide. Compiled by Finkelhor et al., JVQ contains 34 screener items of victimization against youth that cover five modules: Conventional Crime, Child Maltreatment, Peer Victimization, Sexual Abuse and Witnessing Victimization (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005). JVQ (child self-report version) is answered in the form of "yes/no" and the answers are coded "1" for "yes", and "0" for "no". Although generally used, several screener items of JVQ are not appropriate for specific country, so it needs adjustments to adapt to actual situation (Hamby et al., 2004). Therefore, the survey designed the content of questionnaire based both on the basic framework of JVQ (child self report version) and the actual condition of child victimization in China (based on relevant research on child victimization in the CNKI database which is the largest Chinese electronic database including academic papers, newspapers and other literature).