



Migrant child phenomenon in China: Subjective happiness factors for assessing service needs

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ABSTRACT

In Tianjin, China, 476 migrant children responded to a survey on educational processes and family influences. These children reported a fair-to-good subjective happiness level. A sequential regression model shows that their subjective happiness will rise alongside nine improvements: (1) public school enrollment, (2) nondiscriminatory admission to education, (3) targeted assistance for higher grade students, (4) integrated local-migrant classes, (5) teacher-student interactions, (6) extracurricular activities, (7) academic performance, (8) parent-child communication, and (9) friends in the city. A comprehensive assessment index can be developed to incorporate school-home factors with a *dual focus*: migrant worker welfare and migrant child development.

In China, children who follow their parents to move from rural to urban living (“migrant children”) represent a special population of involuntary migrants due to their parents seeking or securing employment with a hope to end poverty or improve quality of life. These children are Chinese citizens but are displaced in an inequitable world and confronted with multiple economic, social, and cultural adaptation problems because of their parents' migration within the country for better employability (Xu, 2010). The authors call this a *migrant child phenomenon* due to the fact that the children were not immigrants or undocumented, but were by-products of the country's concerted effort to control provincial population movements. Since 2001, the China Central Government has implemented and enforced *dual-focus* (两为主) public policies: local governments addressing problems faced by migrant workers and local public school systems assisting migrant children to receive proper education. However, the policy impact has not been fully documented, particularly in relation to promoting a healthier life among migrant families.

Due to the *Hukou* (household registration) system in China, the identity of migrant children, though they have moved to and lived in the city, is not clearly defined. Therefore, these children are often discriminatorily labelled as children of *mobile population*. These children are treated as internal refugees due to the fact they are lacking a formal residence status in the city where they currently reside, not because they do not have a Chinese citizenship status. While their parents are

engaged in industrial labor work, their *Hukou* status may still be agricultural status based on their rural residence of origin. Many can only use services offered by the relevant policy in their rural hometown, leaving them without access to the resources governed by the provincial or city policy. To identify concrete factors that can be included in a subjective happiness index, this article reports the findings from a survey that obtained direct input from migrant children who recently moved to a large city. The *migrant child phenomenon* in China is connected to the country's effort to encourage internal migration for economy recovery and growth in large cities and to enhance social inclusion of the migrant families.

1. Migrant children and well-being

Currently, China lacks official statistics on the numeration of migrant children because of their frequent relocation to new places. The China National Statistical Office (2017a) has been collecting annual statistics at the “migrant workers” level. However, no clear indicators are available to measure the number of their children who follow these worker parents to move to urban living for employment. In this study, data of “migrant children” are based on estimates from national statistics. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2017a), there were 169.34 million migrant workers within China in 2016. The proportion of children aged 0–15 years at the end of 2016 accounted for

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17.7% of China's total population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017b). With these two statistics, an estimate based on 17.7% of the 169.34 million migrant workers would be 29.9732 million migrant children. However, this estimate may not factor in marriage rate, selective migration, and the rural-urban difference in fertility rate, as well as the proportion of left-behind children, etc. This study targeted mainly migrant children between 5 and 18 years old and even though the projected data show a large proliferation of migrant children, this number may still be underestimated. Nevertheless, having over 29 million migrant children move to a few popular cities represents an important policy matter, particularly for planning a comprehensive education system that will improve children's well-being.

Chinese scholars have recently studied factors addressing children's well-being including the multi-faceted aspects of social and economic issues due to family mobility, including: economic factors (e.g., parents' employment status, income level) (Fang & Sakellariou, 2016; Wu & Chen, 2010; Xing, 2011), social factors (e.g., education, life events, social support) (Ni, Chui, Ji, Jordan, & Chan, 2016; Zhang, 2009), demographic factors (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity) (Ni et al., 2016), cultural factors (e.g., family arrangements, traditional practice) (Ren & Treiman, 2016; Zhang & Shen, 2011), psychological factors (e.g., self-esteem, adjustment) (Wang, Zhou, & Heskth, 2017; Wang & Zou, 2010), and parent-child relationship factors (e.g., conflict and family education) (Wong, Chang, & He, 2009). A commonality among these studies is a positive correlation between economic, education and relationship factors, and the perceived well-being among migrant children. Closely related to the financial needs facing migrant families, Lu, Lin, Vikse, and Huang (2016) contributed children's negative educational outcomes to the migration and residency status of their parents. To further test these findings, a theoretical foundation has been built by Ni et al. (2016) to unravel the roles of "social support and identity integration" (p. 750) on migrant children's subjective well-being.

Another consideration to migrant children's adjustment is the impact of cultural factors. Zhang and Shen (2011) reported that belief in a just world has influenced the future outlook of children in rural China. Psychological factors can have a great influence on subjective well-being, including empathy (Huang, Su, & Jin, 2017), optimism (Wang & Zou, 2010), and self-esteem (Wu et al., 2015). Among the social factors, the influences of life events such as divorce (Zhao, Wang, Li, Zhou, & Hesketh, 2017) and the lack of social support such as relative deprivation (Jin, 2016; Ni et al., 2016; Zhang, 2009) have impacted a person's subjective happiness. Among these factors, the lack of support in education can be preventable and studied to identify direction for policy changes.

1.1. Research framework

In China, *subjective happiness* is a culturally-relevant concept representing both the positive perception and well-being of children based on their personal experiences (Chen, 2012). Subjective happiness is also regarded as *subjective well-being* with an emphasis on positivity in thoughts and actions (Ni et al., 2016). The immediate objective of this study is to address how educational factors (in school and at home) may be connected to or influence migrant children's well-being perception. While this study aims to hear directly from children, its long-term objective is to find a connection to support the importance of measuring subjective happiness as a main variable and collect evidence to determine what education and family factors are to be included in this measure when examining migrant children's well-being.

Education in China is a complex multi-level, multi-dimensional, temporal and horizontal cross-vertical system. This study's happiness analysis is based on the theoretical framework proposed by Michalos (2008) and the work by Husen and Postlethwaite (1990) on educational ethics. According to Michalos (2008), education has an impact on happiness in three operationalized terms: educational factors, family influences, and perceived happiness. Educational factors are defined

broadly to include both school and other types of learning including culture and social interaction; family influences are represented by the diverse support, such as financial and value-based backing, to link with one's education and motivation to learning; happiness is a feeling of security that can bring good life to a person, and also connected to education and family influences (Michalos, 2008). This school-home-happiness triangle links migrant children's perception about happiness to the process when these children walk through new changes of life that are influenced by the education they receive both in school and at home. Husen's Theory of Equal Opportunity elaborates on the dynamic structure and process of a country's educational commitment to ensure children's wellbeing; in that, the principle of educational ethics provides an additional base to analyze equality perception in three stages: 1) the starting point of learning with equal opportunities; 2) educational intermediary with equal treatment regardless of ethnicity and socioeconomic status; and 3) goal achievement with equal opportunity, equal treatment, and equality of achieving academic successes through social and educational measures (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1990). When Michalos' school-home-happiness triangle meets Husen's ethical analysis, it is suggested that the impact of education on migrant children's happiness be measured both in school and at home (Fig. 1).

1.2. Method

A survey was designed to collect data from 2012 to 2015 directly from migrant children in China to study its internal migrant phenomenon. Its implementation proposal was officially endorsed by the Civil Affairs Department of the Tianjin government and the use of the survey data was approved by the human subject protection experts after their review at the XX University (blinded for review purposes). Tianjin is chosen as the target city because, as the largest coastal city in northern China, it is one of the central municipalities directly under the Central Government. Since the 1990s, Tianjin has made progress in economic growth, urban construction and community development. With the development of Binhai New Area in recent years, Tianjin has experienced an increasing trend in its internal migration. Tianjin attracts a huge influx of migrant workers. According to statistics, the migrant population has contributed to the main population growth in Tianjin. By the end of 2016, Tianjin's migrant population has already reached 5.2 million, ranked fifth in the country (Tianjin Net, 2016). Following the growth of migration workers, populations of migrant children are exponentially increasing. This survey targeted Tianjin as it represents major cities in China with a high influx of migrant children.

1.3. Survey design

Based on the theoretical framework described above, this study analyzes what has impacted the subjective well-being of migrant children with three data points: 1) the educational starting point, 2) educational process, and 3) educational outcomes. Specifically, the starting point of education refers to the school enrollment of migrant children, including the placement of education as measured by the type of school and the difficulty experienced in school admission. The process of education is the intermediate stage of education, including education procedure variables such as teaching method, teaching process and participation, and teaching evaluation. Educational results are measured by the self-reported perception toward one's academic achievement in school. Home education results are measured by the family environment, parental care, parent-child communication, and parenting style.

A major question in this survey, "How do you feel about your current life in Tianjin?" measures subjective happiness (主观幸福感). To measure happiness as a dependent variable with a five-point scale (1 = very unhappy, 2 = unhappy, 3 = average, 4 = happy, and 5 = very happy), this child-friendly instrument aims to build a connection to the multiple school-home factors, from which an instrument

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