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# Social stress, locality of social ties and mental well-being: The case of rural migrant adolescents in urban China



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## ABSTRACT

By comparing rural migrant and urban native adolescents in Guangzhou, the largest city in south China, this study investigated the relationships between social stress, social ties that link migrants to their host cities (local ties) and to their rural home communities (trans-local ties), and the migrants' mental well-being. Non-migration social stress was more strongly related to poor psychological health than to weak self-efficacy in both migrant and urban native adolescents. This pattern also applied to the effect of migration-specific assimilation stress on psychological health and self-efficacy in migrants. Social ties directly enhanced these two well-being outcomes in both samples, with the effects of trans-local and local ties proving equally potent among migrants. Trans-local ties were somewhat more useful for migrants in moderating the effects of non-migration social stress and assimilation stress, whereas the stress moderation function of social ties was less pronounced in urban natives. These findings extend the migration, network and social stress literature by identifying how local and trans-local ties protect mental health and mitigate stress in migrants.

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## 1. Introduction

Economic reform in China over the past three decades has induced massive rural-to-urban migration. According to the 2010 National Population Census, an estimated 221.43 million rural residents had relocated from the largely poor, agriculture-dominated rural areas of the western and central inland provinces. These people had migrated to cities on the eastern seaboard, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, in search of better job opportunities and income (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Unlike most internal migration settings in which migrants enjoy relative freedom of movement, internal migration within China is plagued by substantial institutional barriers under the long-standing household registration (*hukou*) policy, with its rural–urban bifurcation (Tong and Piotrowski, 2012). The *hukou* policy has been somewhat relaxed in recent years, and some locales offer urban *hukou* to rural migrants who reach stipulated levels of wealth or college education. However, it remains very hard for rural migrants to acquire urban *hukou*, to settle permanently in receiving cities or to become entitled to the same social benefits as urban residents (Nielsen and Smyth, 2008; Zhang and

Treiman, 2013). Past studies have reported on the social stress created by rural-to-urban migration in China, particularly that emanating from marginalization due to the *hukou* system (Chen, 2011; Chen et al., 2011; Jin et al., 2012; Li et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2010) and the environmental hazards of urbanization (Chen et al., 2013), and the effect of this stress on the well-being of adult migrants.

For rural children who accompany their migrant parents to cities, migration is equally stressful because they share the fate of their parents in being treated as second-class citizens who are precluded from attaining urban citizenship (Hu et al., 2002; Wu, 2010). Currently, 20.8% of China's internal migrants are school-aged children, and their restricted access to subsidized schooling, health care and social safety net protection in host cities has generated much concern (Kwong, 2004; Liang and Chen, 2007; Mao and Zhao, 2012). A limited pool of studies, primarily carried out in Shanghai, has indicated that young migrants experience lower self-esteem and life satisfaction, and display more symptoms of depression, separation anxiety, generalized anxiety and hostility than their urbanite counterparts (Mao and Zhao, 2012; Wong et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2011).

In researching the mental health outcomes of migrants, however, it is no longer sufficient to explore the various facets of psychological well-being. The cognitive function of self-efficacy, which denotes the strength of one's expectation of producing

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effective courses of action in a given situation (Bandura, 1982, 1997), may also be a salient problem for migrant populations. Migration scholars have recently called for research to move beyond the often-examined health-related outcomes (e.g., physical health, body mass, mortality risk, psychological well-being) to include the understudied outcomes of cognitive functioning (e.g., reasoning, attention, memory, locus of control) (Hill et al., 2012). There is some overseas evidence suggesting lower feelings of self-efficacy among racial-ethnic immigrants (Verkuyten and Nekuee, 1999; Safipour and Emami, 2011), yet the knowledge of its determinants is even rarer. Understanding the determinants of self-efficacy is useful in the migration context, as stronger self-efficacy is conducive to migrant adaptation (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012). As illustrated in subsequent sections, social stress and social ties are two theoretically relevant correlates in managing the self-efficacy of migrants. This study represents one of the first attempts to compare the effects of these correlates on self-efficacy with those on psychological health, as these two well-being outcomes have seldom been considered simultaneously in migration research conducted in China and international settings.

Additionally, in seeking to deal with the mental problems of teenaged internal migrants in China, the above-mentioned studies have emphasized the health-promoting nature of social relationships (or social capital) with parents, teachers, peers and neighborhoods (Mao and Zhao, 2012; Wong et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2011). Nonetheless, these studies have not been sensitive to the distinction between the locally and trans-locally based relations of migrant children. Neither have they provided empirical data on stressful experiences or the relevance of locality of social connectedness for stress moderation among China's migrant children. More importantly, these research gaps exist not only in the context of China but also in the broader, international literature on migration. Based on the case of rural migrant youngsters in urban China, the present study intends to add to the substantive migration literature by enhancing the understanding of these migrants' mental well-being in terms of psychological health and self-efficacy, and of the relative importance of social stress, locality of social ties and stress moderation for well-being.

### 1.1. Social stress and migrant mental health

The social stress paradigm (Lin and Ensel, 1989; Pearlin et al., 2005; Thoits, 1995) has been widely applied for understanding the associations between socially induced stressors and their effects on the mental well-being of migrant populations (Noh and Avison, 1996; Vega and Rumbaut, 1991). The social stressors identified among migrants primarily involve assimilation and acculturation stress, language acquisition, identity change, social discrimination, income inequality, deprivation of opportunities for upward mobility, and a sense of marginality (Bankston and Zhou, 1997; Beiser and Hou, 2001; Cho and Haslam, 2010; Fu and VanLandingham, 2012; Gee et al., 2007; Kulis et al., 2009; Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012; Noh and Avison, 1996; Young, 2001). Along this line of work, direct correlations between social stress and psychological ill-health (depression, anxiety disorder, low life satisfaction, and poor self-esteem) and behavioral maladjustment (substance abuse and suicidal ideation) among migrant samples are generally acknowledged. Such consistent correlations can also be interpreted using the conservation of resources theory that emphasizes the importance of resources in sustaining mental health (Hobfoll, 2001). This theory suggests that certain populations, such as teenagers and migrants, are more susceptible to the adverse mental health consequences of resource loss stemming from social stress, as these people are at a disadvantage in terms of resource reserves (Hill et al., 2010).

Notwithstanding the sizeable literature on the migrant psychological outcomes of social stress, virtually no migration studies have queried whether social stress is negatively linked to self-efficacy, a cognitive functioning construct. According to Bandura (1982, 1997) who coined and popularized the self-efficacy paradigm, possibilities for effective performance and action are pivotal elements for a sense of self-efficacy. Regarding the migration context, Verkuyten and Nekuee (1999) and Young (2001) have noted the role of personal mastery/locus of control and argued that discrimination stress, for example, restricts the opportunities of migrants to experience themselves as in control of their life circumstances. The exposure to stressful circumstances may accordingly decrease the migrants' feeling that what happens to them is a consequence of their own actions, thus undermining their self-efficacy. In the present study, we extend investigation of the mental health sequelae of social stress by examining both psychological health and self-efficacy in migrant adolescents.

### 1.2. Main and buffering effects of local/trans-local ties on migrant mental health

Studies on the effects of social ties forged by migrants have largely been concerned with the role of social support and have produced converging evidence that social ties manifest both main and buffering effects on mental health (Fu and VanLandingham, 2012; Noh and Avison, 1996; Young, 2001). With respect to the buffering mechanism, the various models on social stress and coping (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Lin and Ensel, 1989; Pearlin et al., 2005; Thoits, 1995) affirm that social stress does not inevitably jeopardize well-being, as social support ties – perceived or actual – can offer a salient psychosocial resource to alleviate the detrimental effects of stressful conditions.

The migration literature focusing on social ties and mental health, while vast, still has at least two major substantive gaps. One major gap is the scant attention paid to the potential consequences of social support ties for the migrants' self-efficacy. As demonstrated by social psychology studies, social support ties are linked to better self-efficacy in general populations (Rees and Freeman, 2009; Saltzman and Holahan, 2002). Affective support and information guidance embedded in social ties directly encourage the possibilities for effective action and thus feelings of self-efficacy (Saltzman and Holahan, 2002). Social support can also modulate the effects of stressors on self-efficacy through the four channels of performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological response specified by Bandura (1997) (Rees and Freeman, 2009). That is, supportive others can promote self-efficacy by reminding of one's previous accomplishments of adaptation to stress, relating stories of their own or others' effective coping tactics, providing verbal support, or using distraction to reduce the physiological reaction to stress.

The other major gap is the dearth of studies addressing the locality of social ties or explicitly distinguishing how ties to a migrant's receiving community (local) and ties to the home community (trans-local) may affect health and moderate social stress (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006). Previous migration research has focused on the role of ethnic enclave/different-ethnic protective networks generated in transnational migration destinations (Bankston and Zhou, 1997; Cho and Haslam, 2010; Noh and Avison, 1996; Rumbaut, 1997), or on the role of native urban-based/co-villager migrant-based ties forged by internal rural migrants in urban destinations (Korinek et al., 2005). Some studies have tended to identify stress-buffering social resources in terms of their functional specificity (instrumental versus expressive) for social support (Fu and VanLandingham, 2012; Kulis et al., 2009; Landale and Oropesa, 2001; Young, 2001), with little attention to the network source of these resources. This study seeks to bridge the gaps in the migration, social support ties and social stress

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