

Letter to the Editor



Subjective Well-being and Family Functioning among Adolescents Left Behind by Migrating Parents in Jiangxi Province, China*

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We sought to identify the differences between adolescents left behind in their home villages/towns (LBA) and non-left behind adolescents (NLB) on subjective well-being and family functioning due to parental migration in south China. We used a stratified cluster sampling method to recruit middle school students in a city experiencing population-emigration in Jiangxi Province in 2010. Participants included adolescents from families with: (1) one migrant parent, (2) both parents who migrated, or (3) non-left behind adolescents (i.e., no migrant parent). To determine predictors of subjective well-being, we used structural equation models. Adolescents left behind by both parents (LBB) were less likely to express life satisfaction ($P = 0.038$) in terms of their environments ($P = 0.011$) compared with NLB. A parent or parents who migrated predicts lower subjective well-being of adolescents ($P = 0.051$) and also lower academic performance. Being apart from their parents may affect family functioning negatively from an adolescent's viewpoint. Given the hundreds of millions of persons in China, many who are parents, migrating for work, there may be mental health challenges in some of the adolescents left behind.

According to the *China Floating Population Development Report of 2012*, the number of migrants (the 'floating population') in China was estimated to be 253 million (17.5%) of 1.14 billion adults aged 15 or older in 2015^[1]. Correspondingly, adolescents who have been left behind (LBA) in their

home villages, towns, or cities may have special emotional needs. LBA has been defined as adolescents who stay at home with either one or both of their parents relocating elsewhere to work for at least six months. Investigators have speculated that LBA feel the deprivation of absent parents, even a sense of abandonment and a decline in their sense of subjective well-being (SWB), family functioning, and inadequate social-emotional attachments. One study found that LBA who were separated from their parents at a younger age had more symptoms of depression and anxiety, especially for those separated from their mothers alone or from both parents^[2].

SWB can be used to evaluate an adolescent's emotion and life satisfaction, reflecting their likely social functioning and adaptability. SWB involves a multidimensional evaluation of an adolescent's life, including cognitive judgments of life satisfaction and affective evaluations of emotions and moods in relation to life environments and experiences. Family functioning has been defined as the degree of family cohesion and positive communication, including parental involvement with an adolescent. In a household with migrant parents, it may be particularly difficult for a left-behind adolescent to define family roles and boundaries. Parents' migrating to work with periods of separation from children could affect family functioning regarding family members' intimacy, a sense of secure attachment, timely support for adolescents' needs, and effective communications with family members.

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Given the magnitude of the migration in China, the impact of parental deprivation on LBA needs far more investigation. We hypothesized that an adolescent being left behind, with possible parental deprivation, could reflect or predict incomplete family functioning. Suboptimal family functioning may diminish perceived happiness and ultimately affect adolescents' SWB. LBA with low SWB may be vulnerable to psychological adaptation problems, such as maladaptive behaviors and depression.

Many studies on migration have presented negative consequences for LBA. However, fewer studies addressed the influence of parental migration through the views of the adolescents. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first attempt to explore the associations between SWB and paternal migration *via* family functioning mediation among LBA in China.

A cross-sectional study was conducted in Gaoan, Jiangxi Province, a city with high rates of out-migration of adult labor in south-central China, from January to April 2010. When there is a relatively high population outflow compared to the population influx, we term these labor-sourcing areas as 'emigrating' cities/provinces. Given the high mobility and the unregistered status of migrants in China, it is difficult to obtain a random sample of migrants for a study. Sample size was determined by

$$N = \frac{U^2 \alpha \sigma}{\delta^2} \quad (1)$$

according to the result of the largest variance in Gu's study on family functioning and SWB ($\delta = 0.05 \times \sigma$, $\alpha = 0.05$)^[3], $N = 1,537$. In consultation with the local education department and local junior and senior high schools, we randomly selected two junior high (middle) schools out of 23 and one senior high school out of six to estimate the local prevalence of LBA. Students from the selected schools were stratified by grade level; we then randomly selected three classes of each grade in middle school and six classes of each grade in senior high school. The students were excluded from the survey if they refused to attend the survey or didn't have a basic understanding of the questionnaire or had a psychological problem unable to sit through the survey. There were no specific inclusion criteria. We have described the study design and participants in detail elsewhere^[4].

The study protocol was approved by the ethical review board of Peking University (IRB00001052-10025).

We collected information about socio-demographic characteristics, SWB and family functioning. The survey was administered by each participant in class with the help of trained research personnel.

The questionnaire was developed to collect the information on age, sex, grade, academic performance, left-behind status, family structure, household income, and whether or not the respondent was a single (i.e., an only) child. The question 'What do you think about your academic performance, compared with your classmates?' was used to self-report individual academic performance. The 'left behind' measure was determined by the following four questions: 'Is your mother/father working away from home?' and 'How long has your mother/father been working away from home up to now'. Clarifying which one parent, or both parents, would follow if the reply to the first question was 'yes', along with clarifying the length of time of being absent. We recognized adolescents as LBA if they had been left behind while their mothers and/or fathers traveled to distant areas and worked there for at least six months^[1]. Family structure included four types: extended family, nuclear family, restructured family, and single-parent family. This classification method was based on measures designed to assess 'health-related risk behaviors and their risk factors among adolescents in China'. Socioeconomic status (SES) was assessed combining education, household income, and employment status. According to the total score, SES can be divided into three levels: disadvantaged, average, and higher SES.

We measured SWB with the *SWB Scale* based on Diener's Happiness Scale and Scott Huebner's Multidimensional Student's Life Satisfaction Scale. A higher total score means a higher level of life satisfaction and happiness. The *Happiness Scale* instructed participants to rate to what extent they have experienced 14 different feelings or emotions (6 Positive and 8 Negative) during the previous week, using a 7-point Likert Scale^[5]. Adolescents' subjective perceptions of life satisfaction in 6 domains, including friendship, family, school, academic performance, freedom, and living environment constituted the 37-item *Life Satisfaction Scale*. The total score was the sum of the scores of the six domains and the score for each domain was the sum of the scores of all items. These instruments have been found to have adequate validity and reliability^[4].

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