

A Comprehensive Study on the Psychological Effects on Left-Behind Children and Parachute Kids

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ABSTRACT

Left-behind children (LBCs) and parachute kids represent unique groups of adolescents experiencing transnational parenting. LBCs are those left behind in their home countries as their parents migrate elsewhere, while parachute kids are sent abroad, primarily for educational purposes, with parents choosing to remain in their country of origin. This paper conducts a comprehensive literature review and investigation into the psychological effects and implications of these phenomena, focusing on East Asia and Latin America. The review uncovers a range of adverse psychological effects experienced by these adolescents, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to address root causes and provide holistic support systems for their well-being. Recognizing the overall negative impact of parental absence, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding and mitigating the challenges faced by LBCs and parachute kids. In addition to proposing suggestions to enhance the lives of these adolescents, there is a call for more formalized research and data collection on this topic. As the population of transnational families grows, it becomes imperative to gather comprehensive data to inform effective interventions and support mechanisms. This paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge surrounding transnational parenting, shedding light on the psychological well-being of left-behind children and parachute kids, and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of children living without their parents has increased rapidly throughout many countries including Asian and Latin American countries. Because of the strict policy of immigration, many families cannot move together at the same time, resulting in transnational parenting, which means that one or both parents migrate while leaving behind more than one child. Similarly, in China, many left-behind children (LBCs), who are mainly below the age of 16, are living in rural areas without their parents due to parents seeking better jobs in urban areas. (Yang) This internal migration phenomenon began during the 1980s when China underwent rapid industrialization and there is currently an estimation of 9.02 million LBC. (Yang) Simultaneously, the rising number of parachute kids, which means children sent by their parents abroad to pursue a better education environment, results from the competitive education culture in Asian countries. (Tsong) These parachute kids encounter the challenges of adapting to a new environment without any direct parenting guidance or support.

This research paper aims to analyze the psychological effects on children by examining their experience as LBC and parachute kids through literature reviews. This study also aims to provide a solid understanding of the impact of parental absence on children by examining both large and small-scale effects on the LBCs and parachute kids. The global growth in such cases highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding that

goes beyond statistics, as many children are impacted by it concurrently. We conduct it by untangling the confluence of social, economic, and cultural factors that influence these children's lives.

A deep understanding of the origin and the outcome of living without parents is vital for constructing an effective guide for children and parents to avoid negative effects if it truly causes problems for the children. The investigation of the internal migration in China and transnational parenting practices in many countries in Asia and Latin America will allow an extensive analysis. As we untangle this problem, we will provide valuable insights that could construct and facilitate intervention and support systems for LBCs and parachute kids.

Left Behind Children

“Left-behind children” (LBC) typically refers to children who are left behind in their home country or region while one or both parents migrate to another location for work or other reasons, these distances can be transnational or from rural to urban areas. Globally, many children are being left behind while their parents migrate to find work. The numbers are not clear in any of the literature; however, a review on left-behind children done by researcher Fellmeth shows that more than one-third of children in China, 27% of children in the Philippines, 36% of children in Ecuador are estimated to be left behind (Fellmeth et. al., 2018). Because the population of left-behind children is most prominent in China, the study will focus on the left-behind children in China and, without loss of generality apply to the global epidemic of left-behind children.

LBCs in China

During the 1980s in China, rapid industrialization occurred, leading to many Chinese facing the dilemma of internal migration. Urban jobs and new opportunities attracted many Chinese parents to leave the rural areas. Although many children migrated with their parents, there were also unintended separations of children from their parents. Children who were not able to migrate were called Left-behind Children. As urban economies thrived, rural areas suffered the disintegration of many families. These consequences persist as there are 9.02 million children currently left behind by their parents (Yang, 2022).

Government policies exacerbated this phenomenon. Hukou, a house registration policy in China, limits migrants' right to obtain health care, education, subsidized housing, and other social welfare. This left migrants struggling to find decent housing, forcing them to live in low-quality or even illegal housing. For example, half of migrant children didn't have study rooms in their houses. The risk of children being left behind increased when parents didn't have a stable place to live, which suggests how the policy obstructs the migrant parents from bringing their children along with them. This situation became worse due to the constant relocation of jobs because of its instability (Tong et. al, 2019). In addition, migrant children struggle to acquire the necessary resources for their children compared to local children (Mao et. al, 2020). For example, migrant children struggle to get an education compared to locals because rural immigrants are not able to receive free compulsory education (Mao et. al, 2020). These limits to access essential services led many migrants to leave their children behind.

Other factors that determine the parent's decision to leave their children are the geographical distance of internal migration and the destination of migration. Children are more likely to be left behind when parents migrate further. For example, parents moving outside of the province could decide to leave their children more than parents moving within the province. Parents migrating to the East have a higher chance of leaving their children behind than those migrating to the Midwest because the East is more economically developed, which means it has a high cost of living compared to other areas (Tong et. al., 2019).

To help encourage parents to bring their children to cities, the Chinese government created reforms in Hukou to help migrant children access public education and healthcare, which the migrants previously had

trouble accessing. These reforms were created to provide equal access to essential resources, potentially convincing parents to bring their children. Limited research found that migrant children have better access to education and infrastructure than LBCs (Tong et. al., 2019).

Psychological Effects and Challenges on LBCs in China

Despite government efforts, Left Behind Children (LBCs) in China still face challenges stemming from the absence of parenting. Research indicates that they are likely to have mental health issues and exhibit behavior problems. Alarmingly, when LBCs were compared with migrant children and children with their parents, LBCs had the highest prevalence of 18.8% of both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, suggesting that the absence of parenting causes behavioral problems in children (Hu et al., 2018). LBCs experience internalizing problems, such as schizoid and depression, and externalizing problems, such as aggressiveness and delinquency, revealing the variety and complexity of challenges that LBCs face. Also, the research discovered that parental absence leads to LBCs' exposure to loneliness, causing depression, alcohol abuse, and suicidal behavior. Moreover, the age of separation is a crucial factor that can affect the emotional toll experienced by LBCs. A study discovered that the younger the age of the separation is correlated with heightened anxiety symptoms among these children (Liu, Li, & Ge, 2009). Thus, the study that discovered preschoolers are likely to be left behind by their parents in China because of limited school opportunities in cities underscores these children's predicament. This problem is becoming more prevalent as the National Population Census discovered that the number of preschool-aged LBCs in China increased to approximately 23 million in 2010 (Tong et. al., 2019). Gender also affects the mental health of LBCs in China. When LBCs are left behind, they are cared for by relatives such as grandparents. Some Chinese grandparents have a traditional ideology, preferring boys over girls. This resulted in female LBCs having worse long-term mental health than male LBCs (Jiang et. al, 2023).

On top of the negative psychological effect, the LBCs face academic obstacles for various reasons. First, the absence of parents leads children to fail to concentrate during class because of the feeling of missing their parents. Second, the lack of direct parenting leads to reduced supervision, making children vulnerable to distractions such as the Internet while studying. Third is the lack of dedicated support, leaving LBCs to be raised without exposure to necessary guidance and encouragement (Zhang, 2021). Because of the following reasons, LBCs are found to have low cognitive and academic scores, leading to less chance to pursue higher education (Mao, et. al., 2020). Along with the psychological challenges, LBCs face physical adversity, worsening the emotional toll. Lack of direct parenting leads to neglect of hygiene and essential diet, while lack of medical facilities in rural areas exacerbates the problem (Jiang et. al, 2023).

Parachute Kids

"Parachute kids," or parachute children refers to adolescents who relocate to a different country or region to pursue residence and education, while their parents opt to remain in their country of origin. This migration pattern is characterized by the establishment of a long-distance familial structure, wherein the children, akin to parachuting into a new environment, typically reside with relatives, family acquaintances, or in boarding arrangements while attending educational institutions in the host country. The phenomenon is often observed in the context of migration from certain Asian nations to English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia. These adolescents encounter distinctive challenges, encompassing cultural adaptation, assimilation into the educational system of the host nation, and emotional coping mechanisms associated with the geographical separation from their parents.

The rise of the parachute children is closely connected to the fierce competitive culture in many Asian countries, such as Korea, China, and Taiwan. Thus, parents, motivated by academic achievement, began to send their children to America during the 1980s, to seek better education for their children (Tsong, Tai, & Chopra,

2021). However, only wealthy people can afford to send their children as it is estimated to cost about \$25,000 to \$40,000 in China to just consult and prepare the children, which is \$10,000 less than the average yearly salary in China (Larmer, 2017). Also, Parachute children are seeking an alternative path to education when children don't get into a good college (Schapiro, et. al., 2013). This phenomenon reveals that societies prioritize education as a crucial method for success, encouraging many parents to make a huge sacrifice for their children's prospects.

The political uncertainty also influences the decision to send their children abroad to the U.S. in many Asia countries. The political uncertainties factors such as compulsory military service, geographical tension, and instability drive many parents to send children to the U.S. for better education and to ensure safety. In Taiwan, for example, the dangerous relationship between China and Taiwan due to China's ambition to unify Taiwan with China led to compulsory military service, making many Taiwanese parents consider sending their children to avoid military service (Tsong, 2014). Likewise, in South Korea, mandatory military service was created due to the war with North Korea, prompting parents to send their children in the hope of a better future (Tsong, 2014).

These factors reveal the complexity behind the decision-making process of sending children abroad. Also, because of these reasons, the number of parachute kids is increasing rapidly as 60 times more Chinese students enrolled in 2014 than in 2005 (Larmer, 2017). The number of Chinese parachute kids is expected to rise as 83 percent of China's millionaires plan to send their children abroad (Larmer, 2017).

Psychological Effects on Parachute Kids

Parachute kids face significant distress during their adolescence as they have to adapt to a new culture and education system. Adolescence, a phase where children grow physically and mentally, faces challenges as these children suffer because of loneliness, guilt, and diminished self-esteem (Tsong, et. al., 2021). Separation of their parents causes sorrow and longing, exacerbating the pressure to acculturate and perform academically well. Moreover, the transition to a different country exposes parachute kids to diverse forms of xenophobia and discrimination, adding more stress to these children. Whether it is subtle or obvious discrimination, it has a profound effect on one's mental health, leading many people to develop clinically diagnosable mental disorders (Gordon, 2016). On top of the serious problem, language barriers and cultural differences could compound the feeling of loneliness, obstructing them from being part of the new community. Additionally, many accounts of parachute children show that they experienced performance stress and high expectations from their parents who spend large sums of money supporting them from abroad. Coupled with social isolation due to new social environments and cultural barriers, parachute kids tend to experience higher levels of stress than normal.

Despite the negative effects of sending children abroad, there are positive effects of being parachute kids. Some of them display exceptional resilience and adaptability, leading to many positive outcomes in their life in a foreign land. By embracing their different cultural experiences, they develop a bicultural identity, appreciating both their native and new cultures (Tsong, et. al., 2021). This bicultural identity also allows them to broaden their worldview, enabling them to be open-minded about culture outside of theirs.

General Consequences of Parental Absence & Transnational Parenting

Psychological Effects

Generally, parental absence exists in many forms such as divorce, death, or migration, significantly affecting the children's life. Despite the difference between these situations, for instance, children of dead parents experience more distress than children of alive parents, parental separation generally negatively affects the children living without their parents. Research consistently indicates the correlation between parental separation and the

risk of having mental problems such as emotional distress, behavioral problems, and academic difficulties. Whether the children are sent to foreign lands as parachute kids in pursuit of education, left behind by Chinese parents who are seeking to get a better job, or abandoned through a divorce, the separation from parents causes a lack of presence and guidance, profoundly affecting children both in the short and long term because children need help for different ages and fulfilling is crucial for their development (Jiang, Xiao, & Yang, 2023). However, it has been discovered that the shorter the period of separation resulted the less the long-term effect, shedding light on the hope to solve these problems.

Role of Remittance

Remittance plays an important role in parental separation as it is one of the many reasons for families to be separated. Remittance is money sent by parents from abroad to their families. It takes a huge part of the GDP of countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, and the Philippines. Remittance can mitigate the destabilizing effect of parental immigration, by providing money to prevent families from falling into poverty (DeWaard, Nobles, & Donato, 2018). Some parents also use it to maintain intimacy with their children. However, material reward teachers in Zimbabwe suggest that it is not enough to fill the void of love, doing more harm than good for the children such as feelings of abandonment (Kufakurinani, Pasura, & McGregor, 2014). In addition to such negative uses, it is used to discipline children as parents demand them to study in return for the money. The result of this is reflected through a statistic as the number of the grades of children who are provided with remittance was more than 2% of the average normal student's grade.

Caregivers Cannot Fully Replace Parents

When many children are separated from their parents, they are cared for by relatives or hired caregivers. These caregivers, while providing temporary benefits as they allow children to live without parents, often result in many negative effects on children's mental health as caregivers cannot fully replace the role of parents. The significant problem of caregivers is that they often fail to discipline the children as they cannot control them well (Dreby, 2007). In some cases, children developed contempt for their caregivers as the children had the knowledge that they relied on the remittance provided by their parents. This condition empowers them to exploit the situation, threatening caregivers by withholding the remittance to manipulate caregivers to do whatever they want to do (Kufakurinani, Pasura, & McGregor, 2014).

Suggested Solutions for Mental Health of LBCs and Parachute Kids

Social Support

Because the researches suggest being LBCs or Parachute kids are mentally unhealthy for children, it is crucial to aid these children. Establishing social support for children living without their parents is one of the many ways to do so. Social support provides material and psychological resources from social networks, helping people psychologically (Dragesetz, 2021). Research indicates that enhancing the social support system for these children is beneficial. Studies have found that the higher the social support is the less likely it is for children to develop depression, as a person with stronger social support is less likely to experience loneliness (He et al., 2012; Ai & Hu, 2014). Social support is also related to psychological resilience, as children who received a lot of social support were able to withstand difficulties in their lives better than the children who received little of it (Ai & Hu, 2014). Especially, the presence of social support is not only important but the belief that social

support exists is important too, revealing the crucial role of perceived support in developing resilience. (Fasihi Harandi, Mohammad Taghinasab, & Dehghan Nayeri, 2017) Children can construct social support in their school. They can volunteer, join clubs, and play sports. However, the role of teachers is different as they could encourage children to participate in those activities. Also, it was discovered that good peer relationships lead to higher school adjustment, showing the importance of social support of friendship in school (Zhang & Deng, 2022). Thus, it is crucial to establish a good social support system for children living without parents as social support improves their mental health and creates a sense of belonging without their parents.

Peer Relationships and Parent-Child Attachment

Healthy Parent-child attachment is another way to improve the lives of children living without their parents. When children with parents and children without parents were compared, the latter showed low parental attachment. Research reveals that the parent-child attachment is positively correlated to the school adjustment in children who are left behind in foster care. Mother-child attachment was more vital than father-child attachment as immigrant mothers led to more children not being able to adjust to their school. Moreover, attachment serves as a blueprint for the development of future social relationships, influencing peer relationships and school adjustment as good peer relationships can compensate for the unmet attachment need of parent and child relationships (Zhang & Deng, 2022). Conversely, good parent-child attachment can pay for the poor peer relationship. However, this result of shown only in China's left-behind children because research in Zimbabwe found no positive relationship between parents' absence and low parental attachment This is most likely influenced by the social norm that promotes communal child rearing, but not remittance and technology that facilitates communication as they exist in China too (Kufakurinani, Pasura, & McGregor, 2014). Therefore, nurturing good parent-child and peer relationships is crucial for children left behind in China.

Reunification

Reunification is also another way to support children who are living with their parents but the legal and economic situation restricts the timing. Premigration status is one of the crucial factors that impact the decision to reunify. Children expressed gratitude for their parents when the migration improved children's life. However, if parents migrate for a selfish reason or don't inform children about the migration, the children feel abandoned when they reunite. The type of reunification varies from heartwarming to cold. Also, children get disappointed in the harsh reality of racism, academic difficulties, and paid work. However, the long-term effect of the reunification is the key to helping these children as young adults expressed that they have warm relationships with their parents after the long separation reunification as they could appreciate the sacrifice of their parents more as they became parents (Schapiro, et. al., 2013). It also led to diminished mental illness as the time went on after reunifying as research saw the decrease of depression and anxiety post-reunifying.

Conclusion

The research findings suggest that children living without their parents overall negatively affects children's psychology. While positive outcomes exist, such as the development of bicultural identity, independence, and resilience have been shown through Parachute Kids, the negative outcome of other forms of parental absence outweighs the positive effects. Moreover, the negative effects highlight the urgency to help these

children as they are currently suffering. Through an extensive literature review, the review shows that certain elements could mediate the negative impact on children. Good peer relationships, secure parental attachments, social support networks, and the process of reunification are discovered to play a crucial role in improving the lives of these children. If these factors are considered during the development of interventions to help the children, it can potentially result in effective ways of aiding them.

Despite our findings, it is important to acknowledge the current study's limitations in this area. The central limitation is the lack of data available for the study. Most of the literature and past research done on these topics present their evidence with small groups of anecdotal evidence. To create a compelling conclusion and make a generalization across diverse cultures, a large number of samples and data is crucial due to the margin of error. Thus, the insufficiency of the diversity of samples hinders the process of making a comprehensive conclusion and generalizing. The scarcity of the samples also obstructs us from constructing supports or interventions for the children living without parents as we cannot fully understand their experience. As more research is done about the LBCs, parachute kids, and transnational parenting, it is important to address the limitations. Thus, future research should prioritize expanding the sample sizes, while including diverse demographics and cultural backgrounds. If future researchers can overcome the limitation, they can pave the way for creating more effective interventions for this complex problem.

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