SOCIAL CAPITAL AND FLOURISHING OF LEFT BEHIND CHILDREN IN RURAL CHINA

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Abstract - With dramatic change in China since the 1970s, industrialization and urbanization there have been progressing rapidly. This has been causing the most massive internal migration in human history. Due to this mass migration, many children of the migrants become left-behind children (LBC) in rural Chinese area. LBC are numerous and this has raised attention from various perspectives. Most of previous literature focused on the negative aspects of LBC, such as mental health symptoms. In contrast, this study aims to shift the focus from negative aspects to strength and protective factors. Herein, this study takes two steps. First, this study conducted a pilot study through semi-structured interview. Five interviewees shared their LBC experiences and feelings, revealing some protective factors, including social capital. The next step built on the results of the first step, surveyed children in Liaoning Province to examine the relationship between LBC and flourishing, and its mediation by social capital. Analysis of survey data obtained from 520 LBC and 475 non-LBC showed that LBC showed lower flourishing than were non-LBC. Importantly, this difference diminished after controlling for social capital. That is, social capital functioned as a mediator. Overall, the study adds some empirical findings about LBC.

Keywords - Left-behind children; Social capital; Flourishing

I. INTRODUCTION

In China, since the 1980s, left-behind children have drawn widespread attention from different perspectives including academics. According to the Women Federation (2008), left-behind children (LBC) refers to children left by their parent(s) in their original rural towns for more than six months. Meanwhile, there were about 61 million LBC estimated at the end of 2013. Therefore, facing this particular group, a great number of studies have concentrated on them through focusing on their mental status, physical development and educational aspects. With increasing concerns, most of research regard LBC as a vulnerable group suffering mental disorders, such as depression (E.g., Gao et al., 2010; Su et al., 2012). Nevertheless, few studies pursue to explore the potential protective factors sustaining LBC's well-being or flourishing. Herein, the objective of this study is to explore possible factors facilitating LBC's flourishing. To fulfill the objective, this study conducted two steps of which the first was semi-structured interviewing and the second one was a survey.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Flourishing means that the individual experiences positive feeling and functioning in life to integrates hedonic well-being, subjective functioning and social functioning (Keyes, 2002). First, hedonic well-being refers to enjoyment of life including happiness and satisfaction. Additionally, subjective functioning indicates aspects to fulfill personal goals, consisting self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environment mastery, purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). Last, social functioning shifts the concern to social criteria of one's life by combination five dimensions, social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization and social coherence (Keyes, 1998). In a word, flourishing is progressed direction of well-being, and the way to assess one's life.

With regard to LBC's emotional symptoms and well-being, there are numerous studies about it, and their results are controversial. In one aspect, most findings have shown that LBC experience psychological issues, and are in negative emotional conditions. For instance, Jia and Tian (2010) have found that LBC are at risk of negative psychological conditions, such as loneliness. Likewise, the study from Lee and Park (2010) has shown that LBC's psychosocial well-being is adversely influenced by parental migration, especially father's migration. However, on the other hand, some research has demonstrated that there is no link between LBC status and emotional symptom. For example, Ren and Treiman (2016) have concluded that with one or both parents migrated, the children are not lower in emotional health. Similarly, the study by Xu and Xie (2015) have examined four well-being factors between LBC and other children, showing that the emotional symptoms are not associated with living with parents or not.

In accordance to empirical literature, there is a wide variety of factors facilitating personal well-being, such as resilience or self-esteem. Among these protective factors, this study focuses on social capital, which refers to resources accessible from social networks. As one lives in society, it is imperative to interact with others and surrounding environments including the family and community. Obviously, social capital as the fabric affects the targets and ways of interaction (Halpern, 2005).

Social capital has two common elements: they all exist in social structures and they all promote the actions of

actors (Coleman, 2000). According to the foundation of social capital, there are three basic components, the social network, social norms and social trust (Halpern, 2005). First, the social network signifies the relationships that could vary from simple recognition to deep friendship, which features density and closure. Next, social norms refer to rules and values that characterize members in the same network, and influence the behaviors and actions of community members. Social trust means decreasing the complexity and instability of personal interaction. Thus, following the nature and basic components of social capital, it is common to consider it from two aspects, which are structural and functional ways.

Social capital could be beneficial to both the person and community, while this study only focuses on the effects on the individual's well-being and flourishing. From empirical findings, most of them stress that the people with higher social capital experience more positive well-being (E.g., Portela et al., 2013; Silva et al., 2005). To be specific, each dimension of social capital has a strong inverse association with personal mental illness. Likewise, for the linkages between social capital and children's well-being, many studies have addressed them. For instance, Morrow (2004) have found that the quality and quantity of friends are important emotional support for children. Additionally, parents, especially mothers, have also been an important for children's well-being.

Thereby, with such a literature review, this study proposes two hypotheses:
(1): Flourishing is lower in the LBC than in the other child.
(2): Social Capital mediates the difference between the LBC and the other child in flourishing.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed method by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach rested on interpretivism, which emphasizes the exploration of every person's life and mind, and the main target of the qualitative approach is to investigate and explain "how" and "why" of human behaviors in depth (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By contrast, the quantitative approach adhered positivism to build causal linkages among variables, and to generate universal results (Gray & Milne, 2015). These two approaches have adverse emphases, while both of them have limitations. The qualitative approach paid attention to personal world, thus claiming less objectivity and generalizability. On the contrary, the quantitative approach to some extent ignored individual feelings and interpretations. Herein, the mixed method applied to remedy the limitations of both (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Obviously, for this study, the mixed method could provide a better understanding. Moreover, this study used a sequential exploratory design. That is, conducting a qualitative study first and a sequent quantitative study used the qualitative findings to develop measurement instruments to validate and enrich the findings of the qualitative study (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Samples and Procedure

The snowball sampling approach was adapted to collect data for the qualitative study. There were five participants recruited in this study, and all of them had been LBC for over one year when they were in primary or senior high schools. Interviewees 1, 4, and 5 were male and Interviewees 2 and 3 were female. Meanwhile, the youngest participant was Interviewee 1, who was 18 years old, and the oldest one was interviewee 3 who were 27 years old. Except interviewee 5 who was a student in a university, others had been working for at least one year.

For the quantitative study, multistage sampling was adapted. First, six rural towns in five counties in Liaoning Province were selected. Next, in all towns, six schools were selected of which four schools were primary schools, and the others were senior high schools. Subsequently, in each school, according to the student roster, the study applied random sampling to select and survey, 520 LBC and 475 other children were recruited in this study.

Data Collection

The qualitative study proceeded with semi-structured interviewing. Comparing with other methods, semi-structured interviewing was more flexible, and could deeply explore significant issues (Bryman, 2012). That is, semi-structured interviewing preferred paying greater attention to interviewers. Furthermore, the self-report questionnaire approach was adapted in the quantitative survey. The child took about 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Measurements

Flourishing: The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) applied to measure children flourishing (Keyes, 2005; Guo et al., 2015). This Form has 14-item, and contains three dimensions, including hedonic well-being (3 items), personal functioning (6 items), and social functioning (5 items). Respondents assessed their feelings in the past week on a 6-point scale, with a higher score meanings higher flourishing.
Left-behind status: Left-behind status was identifiable with several questions. For instance, "did you change the caretaker in past six months?" and "who was your main caretaker in past six months?" They identified a respondent with no co-resident parent and parent-figure caretaker as LBC.
Social Capital: This study adopted the Personal Social Capital Scale (PSCS) to measure children's social capital (Wang et al., 2014). In accordance with the objective of this study, the study began the Scale with such questions as "Among your family members

and relatives, how many of them could you trust?" "Among people in your neighborhood, how many will definitely help you upon your request?" Respondents answered on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of social capital.

Data Analysis

For qualitative data, this study adopted thematic analysis to identify and report themes from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meanwhile, these themes generated from data could represent responses to research questions. Herein, according to the objective and research questions of this study, the themes of multiple dimensions of flourishing, and different components of social capital would serve as the framework to analyze the data.

For quantitative study, regression analysis was the principle statistical technique used. This analysis held flourishing as the outcome, social capital, background characteristics as predictors. Additionally, the analysis entered background characteristics as control variables in the first block, and social capital in the second block hierarchically.

IV. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Parental Migration: Parental migration to other cities resulted from a family decision. However, all of the participants recalled that their parents had not informed them about their decision of migration. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that their parents migrated when they were young, and normally the migrated cities were far away from their hometowns. In addition, referring to the reasons of parental migration, all of the participants realized that the main reason was to earn more money. Herein, all of the participants mentioned that they understood the reason for their parents' migration.

"I remember that my parents went outside to work when I was in Grade 2 until I was in Grade 5 in primary school. Then they went back to the city to work again when I was in a junior grade. "(Participant 2)

"My parents migrated to work when I was five years old. Actually I could not remember exactly at that time, but my uncle explained specifically when I was seven years old, and I could comprehend them. "(Participant 1)

Negative emotional symptoms due to parental migration: Although participants mentioned that they could be resilient to face parental migration, one of the themes emerging from the data was passive emotions. A common one was feeling lonely, especially when the participants were in troubles.

"I sometimes felt lonely, especially when I faced difficulties or was under the pressure of my studies." (Participant 5)

Likewise, participants also mentioned other negative emotions such as anxiety, diffidence and stress.

"My parents' migration took some negative emotions to me, such as stress. Although my grandparents took care of me in daily life, I had to handle relationships with other relatives, and needed to balance the life and study. Thus, I ever complained to my parents." (Participant 4)

The absence of parental companionship indeed had an adverse impact on the flourishing of LBC. Furthermore, the participants would have in better flourishing when their parents migrated when the participants were younger.

"I lived with my grandparents when I was a kid. Therefore, it was natural for me to grow up without parents. Therefore, I really adapted to my childhood life." (Participant 5)

"My parents went to work in another city when I was 15 years old. At that time, I could understand the reasons clearly, but I really disagreed to this decision. I was in a very particular stage, especially the emotional condition when I was in puberty. That is, I needed the guidelines and company of parents, while my parents were not there. "(Participant 4)

Positive Relationships: Even though parental migration brought some negative effects on emotion, participants believed that they had favorable relationships with their parents. This was another theme emerging from analysis of data. Meanwhile, the positive relationships with their parents included regular contacts, concern and support from each other, and cherishing the time of the family united.

"My parents had regular contacts with my uncle who was my caretaker, and my parents could know the recent condition both about daily life and study. Once I was there when they were on the phone, I would talk with them." (Participant 1)

"My home did not have a telephone at that time, and I did not have a mobile phone. So I used the telephone of my neighbors to contact my parents once a week." (Participant 3)

"My parents could not come back frequently, but during every spring festival they came back and brought many gifts, such as new cloths, stationeries and toys. Herein, although we could not meet each other, I knew that they loved me." (Participant 4)

In addition, participants mentioned that the relationships between them and their caretakers and siblings were also harmonious. Most of the caretakers were the participants' close relatives, including grandparents, uncles and aunts. Thus, they were already familiar with each other. This meant that both

the LBC and caretaker could adapt to the change promptly. About this, Participant 2 said:
"When I was a child and my parents did not migrate, my grandparents' and my aunt's family lived near to my family, and we had a tradition that every family had to unite together to have a meal for every festivals and birthdays. Thus, we were close to each other. When my parents migrated to work, it was natural for me to live with them."

Likewise, other participants mentioned something similar. For instance, Participant 5 indicated:
"I grew up with my grandparents, and I had a strong affection for my grandfather, because he was really cared about me. Finally, he died due to cancer, and then I experienced a dark period feeling helpless."

In addition, all of the participants had siblings, and they emphasized that the accompany of their siblings during the period of parental absence was supportive for themselves, especially in weathering emotional struggles. For instance, Participant 1 referred that his brother always persuaded him to understand their parents, and at the same time helped him to solve daily issues.

Furthermore, according to the theme generated from data, the peers and teachers were another group with whom the participants indicated they had good relationships. Evidently, the participants spent most of time in school with teachers and peers who gave a great number of support and help to the participants. Besides siblings, peers were the other group with whom the participants preferred sharing secrets. First, the participants trusted their peers, and friends. Meanwhile, some of their peers had the same experience as theirs. Herein, they had common topics to talk.

"When my parents were not at home, I always shared my life with my close friends. As both of us were left-behind children at that time, we could give suggestions and help to each other. This indeed helped me to reduce pressure, especially when I faced difficulties." (Participant 4)

Meanwhile, the participants mentioned that their teachers were aware of the situation clearly, and the teachers sometimes offered their support forwardly. For example, Participant 3 mentioned:

"At that time, I participated in math tutorial class after school, and it was compulsory to pay tuition fees per month. Nevertheless, due to the work of my parents, they could not send money on time causing there were twice I did not pay the tuition fees. By considering the condition of my family, the teacher did not ask me for the tuition fees. I was really appreciative to her, because she cared for me in financial and emotional aspects."

Active effects of positive relations: As mentioned above, the relationships between LBC and other groups of people are well-established, and these positive relationships could help LBC to alleviate their negative emotions. Taking the relationships with parents as an example, LBC knew that although their parents were far away from them, their parents cared about, loved, and supported them. Therefore, most of the LBC realized that they should behave in a better way, and do not cause troubles or bring burdens to their parents. Additionally, they also mentioned that because of parents' love, although they were lonely sometimes, they felt satisfied with their life.

"I knew that it was hard for my parents to work outside for earning more money for my family. My parents always gave the best they could provide to me, and I wanted to do better to make them happy. Actually, once time, I got a bad score in the final exam, and at that time, I felt guilty, but my father held my hands and told me it would be fine and he believed that I could do better in next time. I was really moved and felt fortunate." (Participant 2)

Beyond that, the relationships with caretakers, peers, and teachers are deserved a concern in the daily life of LBC. Herein, the support and trust from them have significant meaning for LBC.

"My teachers really cared about me, and due to her love and care, I would like to express my feelings and worries to her without doubt. Meanwhile, she gave me useful suggestions and solutions that made me feel less stressful from some extent." (Participant 1)

Overall, the positive relations and wide social networks could help LBC to relieve their stress and worry, and at the same time to mitigate their negative emotions to some extent.

V. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics: There were 995 participants in the sample. Among them, 52.3% were LBC, and 47.7% were non-LBC, with an average of 13 years in age (see Table 1). They included 559 boys and 420 girls. Most of them were under rural residents. Additionally, 11.1% and 12.6% of the participants reported that their yearly household income was over 120,000 and under 100,000 respectively. However, another 64.7% of the participants did not report their yearly household income. Moreover, the average of flourishing was 4.18, with a standard deviation of 1.01.

Effects of Left-behind status: As the only predictor, left-behind status showed a significant negative effect on flourishing (ß =-.072, $p<.05$, see Table 2). In addition, after controlling for demographic characteristics, the effects of left-behind status still

negatively existed (ß=-.074, p<.05). Likewise, yearly household income had a significant negative effect on flourishing (ß=-.074, p<.05). In addition, other background factors did not have any influence on flourishing.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics of sample

	N(%)	M(SD)
Age (years)		13 (1.49)
Gender		
Male	559(56.2%)	
Female	420(42.2%)	
Residence Status		
Urban Residence	85(8.5%)	
Rural Residence	884(88.8%)	
Left-behind Status		
Left-behind children	520(52.3%)	
Non-left behind children	475(47.7%)	
Yearly Household Income		
>120,000	110(11.1%)	
100,000-120,000	90(9.0%)	
<100,000	125(12.6%)	
Do not know	644 (64.7%)	
Others	1(0.1%)	
Flourishing		4.18(1.01)

Table 2 Result of Hierarchical Regression Analysis between LBC and Flourishing (N=995)

	Independent Variable	Standardized Coefficients
Model 1	Left-behind status	-.072*
Model 2	Left-behind status	-.074*
	Income	-.074*
	Residence status	.020
	Age	-.042
	Gender	.048

*p<.05

Social Capital between LBC and Non-LBC: At the very beginning, as the only predictor, left-behind status influenced personal social capital in a negative way (ß=-.082, p<.05, see Table 3). That is, LBC had less social capital. After controlling for background characteristics, the effect of left-behind status was no longer significant. Instead, yearly household income was the only factor that significantly influenced social capital in a negative way (ß = -.174, p < .05). Notably, the overall social capital included three sub-categories, and its reliability is .892.

Table 3 Result of regression analysis between LBC and Social capital

	Independent Variable	Standardized Coefficients
Model 1	Left-behind status	-.082*
Model 2	Left-behind status	-.056
	Income	-.174*
	Residence status	.055
	Age	.014
	Gender	-.044

*p<.05

Mediation Effects of social capital on flourishing: With regard to the mediation effect of social capital, after adding social capital, the negative effects of left-behind status and yearly household income on flourishing diminished and became insignificant. Moreover, social capital remained to show a significant positive effect on flourishing (ß = .299, p < .05, see Table 4). Herein, social capital played a mediation role.

Table 4 Result of Hierarchical Regression Analysis of mediation effects of social capital

Independent Variable	Standardized Coefficients	
	Step 1	Step 2
Left-behind Status	-.074*	-.057
Income	-.074*	-.021
Residence Status	.020	.004
Age	-.042	-.040
Gender	.048	.061
Social Capital		.299*

*p<.05

DISCUSSION

First, in accordance with the findings, obviously, LBC experience some negative emotions, such as loneliness and anxiety, and this agreed to our first hypothesis. It is consistent with most empirical studies indicating LBC suffer a great risk in psychological adjustment after parental migration (Chen et al., 2017). Parental migration means the absence of parents in daily life, although there are frequent connections between parents and LBC, the support and care from parents' decrease. Meanwhile, due to distance between parents and LBC, the parent's immediate supervision and help reduce and become less efficient. Herein, LBC experience more emotional symptoms, and social behavior issues (Chen et al., 2017). The study from Zhao et al. (2014) found that the LBC was worse in social anxiety than was the other child. Moreover, the LBC was in underprivileged living situation with lower parental education and family function. Additionally, other studies demonstrated the similar results that the LBC, especially when both parents migrated, suffered a higher degree of loneliness. (Ai & Hu, 2016; Su et al., 2012).

Second, notably migrated people pursue to find better jobs, and earn more money in big cities and areas (Fan et al., 2010). Likewise, the parents of LBC, aiming to improve the economic status of household and provide better living conditions, normally sent remittance to LBC monthly (Ye & Lu, 2011). According to our qualitative findings, LBC indeed are in better living conditions compared with the former. However, most of them are in a poorer living condition (Zhao et al., 2014). In addition, the quantitative finding illustrated that economic status had a negative effect on

flourishing of LBC, which is not consistent with some empirical studies (e.g., Chen, 2012; Fan et al., 2010;). Higher economic status means more potential resources, higher nutrition food, and better living environments, which would improve the flourishing of children. Nevertheless, for migrant worker, it is possible for them to work longer and harder to make more money, because most of them work in the manufacturing or service industry with limited ability and low education. Thus, it decreases the frequency of communication between migrated parents and LBC, and at the same time, LBC might feel neglected, thus eroding their flourishing (Zhao et al., 2014).

Next, LBC are in lower social capital than non-LBC. Although, as discovered in the qualitative study, LBC have close relationships and large social networks, the results generated from quantitative show that compared with non-LBC, LBC have lower social capital. At first, without the company of parents in daily life, LBC's family social capital is deficient, no matter in structural or functional aspects. Although most of LBC have caretakers, most of the caretakers are grandparents who are in old, having small social networks and low social support. Additionally, LBC had weaker community social capital including neighbors, teachers and peers. As the study from Chen (2012) has shown family social capital and community social capital are highly related. That is, higher family social capital indicates higher community social capital. Meanwhile, with the transition of Chinese society, monitoring from community and control from society also decrease to some degree (Chen, 2012). Thus, LBC might have lower community social capital. Many studies have examined family social capital and community social capital of LBC, and had the similar conclusions. For instance, the study of Jiang (2007) illustrated that LBC had lower social capital. Moreover, social capital from government and organizations is not thorough. Although there are a great number of organizations, policies, and institutions providing help for LBC, most of them could hardly protect the basic survival conditions, such as decreasing poverty (Wang et al., 2015).

Lastly, results support the second hypothesis that social capital mediates the effect on LBC's flourishing. Numerous empirical studies have found that social capital has a strong positive association with personal well-being, especially for children's and adolescents' health and well-being. For instance, the study of Cotterill and Taylor (2001) has maintained that active social interaction reduces loneliness and isolation. Meanwhile, Drukker et al. (2003) have highlighted the importance of community social capital in maintaining children's mental health and behavioral problems. In addition, from Chinese perspective, family social capital is strongly associated with children's personality development (Jiang, 2007). The present study shows the mediation role of social capital for reducing the negative effect of left-behind status, negative emotions, and improve flourishing.

CONCLUSION

LBC is a special group in rural China to deserve attention. This study aims to compare the flourishing between LBC and non-LBC, rather than focuses on the negative side of being LBC. Flourishing is a new concept of well-being by integrating hedonic well-being, personal well-being, and social well-being. In other words, flourishing is not only concentrates on the personal feelings, but also emphasizes personal psychological strengths and social functioning. Through the mixed method, this study finds some useful results. First, compared with non-LBC, LBC indeed experience lower flourishing, which indicates that they are weaker in emotional and personal social functioning aspects. Likewise, LBC have lower social capital, indicating that they receive less support and have smaller social networks. Finally, social capital could mediate the negative effect of left-behind status, and had a positive effect on flourishing. Therefore, based on these findings, this study proposes some recommendations for the family, community, school, institutions and government.

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