The alienation of affection toward parents and influential factors in Chinese left-behind children

Q. Dai a, G. Yang b, C. Hu c, L. Wang b, K. Liu b, Y. Guan d, R. Zhang b, S. Xu d, B. Liu b, Y. Yang e, Z. Feng b, *

a The Third Military Medical University, Department of nursing, 400038 Chong qing, China
b The Third Military Medical University, Department of psychology, 400038 Chong qing, China
c Chongqing Normal University, Key applied psychology lab, 401331 Chongqing, China
d The Normal University of Gui Zhou, Department of psychology, Gui Zhou, China
e Chongqing Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, 400020 Chongqing, China

ABSTRACT

Objective: Although alienation toward parents is important for children (for current mental health status or later interpersonal relationships in adulthood), it is undervalued and even lacks a standardized tool of assessment. Moreover, the large number of left-behind children in China is a cause of public concern. However, their experienced alienation toward their parents remains unclear, which may be important for early detection or intervention for behavioral problems in this population. Hence, the current study aimed to develop an alienation inventory for children and then use it to investigate the experienced alienation toward parents in Chinese left-behind children.

Methods: Two studies were carried out. Study 1 was designed to develop a standard inventory of alienation toward parents (IAP). In study 2, 8361 children and adolescents (6704 of them were left-behind status) of the Chongqing area, aged between 8 and 19 years old, were recruited for investigation. All participants were surveyed with a standard sociodemographic questionnaire, children’s cognitive style questionnaire, children’s depression inventory, adolescent self-rating life events checklist, and newly built IAP in study 1.

Results: In study 1, we developed a two-component (communication and emotional distance) and 18-item (9 items for maternal or paternal form, respectively) IAP questionnaire. In study 2, exploratory factor analysis indicated an expected two-factor structure of IAP, which was confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients showed a good reliability (0.887 and 0.821 for maternal and paternal form, respectively). Children with absent mother experienced the highest alienation toward parents. Boys as well as children aged 8–10 years old experienced higher alienation toward parents. Poor communication with parents (spare or no connection), level of left-behind condition (parents divorced, been far away from parents), and psychosocial vulnerability (stressful life events, negative cognitive style) were risk factors of alienation toward parents.

Conclusions: The current study develops a two-factor (communication and emotional distance) IAP, which offers a reliable tool to assess experienced alienation of affection toward parents in children aged between 8 and 19 years old. Our result is the first investigation of experienced alienation and potential influential factors in Chinese left-behind children. The findings that children with absent mother experience higher alienation toward parents, as well as three recognized risk factors for alienation of affection toward parents (poor communication with absent parents, worse left-behind condition, and psychosocial vulnerability), give valuable guidance for parents who intend to leave or who are already leaving as well as for government policymaking.
1. Introduction

During childhood, love from one’s parents cannot be replaced by any other type of affection [1]. Research confirms that in one’s early childhood, the love, support, and encouragement from parents help children to build a sense of trust and security, which highlights the important role of the parent–child bond in one’s life. To date, most studies about the parent–child bond have focused on parent–child attachment [2–4], the special affection bond between the child and mother or other main caregivers before 2 years of age, which is ranked according to the level of intimacy [5]. In fact, the parent–child bond is reflected not only in the intimacy between parent and child, but also in the distance between them. The former could be well indicated by parent–child attachment, whereas the latter might be mainly reflected by parent–child alienation, which is represented by negative feelings such as being emotional distant, possessive, even controlling, during the interaction with parents [6]. Just as happiness is not the negation of unhappiness (happiness means not only the absence of unhappiness, but also the presence of positive/active feelings, e.g., satisfaction, et al.) [7], love and hate belong to two dimensions of affection (four basic emotions in total: happy, sad, afraid, and angry) [8]; that is, “I do not love you” does not mean “I hate you.” Similarly, insecure attachment did not mean alienation toward parents, alienation was a separate dimension compared to attachment. More and more evidence suggests the importance of alienation in one’s life; studies indicate that alienation played an important role in social adaptation or mental health of adolescents [9–11]. However, as parent–child attachment was frequently attended by researchers [2–4], parent–child alienation was undervalued.

Although researchers in different countries tried to develop alienation questionnaires to assess experienced alienation in people [6,12,13], they varied a lot based on different theoretical constructions, among which, only one study attended to adolescents [6]. And, most importantly, none of these alienation questionnaires focused on parent–child alienation. Gardner explored the parental alienation syndrome in children [11], but did not intend to develop a questionnaire. As a result, to date, no standard tool could be used to assess the experienced alienation toward parents in children or adolescents. Thus, the first aim of the present study was to develop a questionnaire to assess the experienced alienation toward parents in children or adolescents, to explore the parent–child bond from a negative aspect. We do acknowledge that the positive (attachment [14], warmth, et al. [15]) or negative aspects (alienation [6], aggression, rejection, etc. [15]) of the parent–child bond are really complex. In order to better compare with the results of perceived attachment towards parents (a core component of parent–child bond), the present study focused on alienation, instead of a broader dimension. Moreover, referring to the alienation theories [6,12,13], alienation has different implications and dimensions. The first layer of implication is the core meaning of alienation, mainly represented by the negative emotions that are caused by distance or disharmony in relationships, while the second layer mainly stood for generated meanings of alienation, such as being controlled, governed, or possessed. The short version of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) was indicated to have higher reliability in attachment observation (the utilization of long version was weakened by its repetition in items or poor differentiation between factors [16]). Thus, the present study would like to focus on the first level of implication of alienation, to pursue a higher investigation power.

Meanwhile, many surplus laborers from rural China go out constantly to pursue a better life. The huge, constantly shifting population is a remarkable population phenomenon in China, which has huge influences on Chinese society, the economy, and politics. Many couples cannot take their children along with them, therefore thousands of left-behind children have emerged. Left-behind children are defined as children who are not living with their parents because one or both parents have left for work. Presently, there are more than 60 million left-behind children in China, 40 million of them younger than 14 years old, and the number is still increasing [17]. Chongqing is a combination of modern city and big rural area, and the number of left-behind children is more than 1.5 million, which is a concern for schools, families, and society.

A national investigation in China showed that 57.2% of these children had at least one parent absent, including 48.2% of them had both parents absent, which caused the neglect rate (lack of care, been neglected by parents or other caregivers psychologically) of left-behind children to reach as high as 70.2% [18]. Many issues might be caused by this, including:

- physical health problems: without considerable care from parents, safety and nutrition of left-behind children cannot be guaranteed, which leads to a higher incidence of accidents or illness [19,20];
- mental health problems: without parents’ presence as normal families, a variety of emotional or behavioral problems might emerge in left-behind children, such as depression [21], loneliness [22], poor mental resiliency [23], even higher suicidal ideation [19];
- social adaptation problems: without appropriate guidance in study or behavior, some left-behind children would show hate for school, fatigue in study, or poor interpersonal relationships.

Some of them might have problems like habitual lying, lack of love for others, irritability, and showing strong aggression [24]. These kinds of problems in left-behind children were so outstanding that they were a cause for concern for all of Chinese society.

Researchers thus investigated the mental health, family function, and peer relationships of this population [24,25]. Most of the literatures used in a conclusion that the parent–child bond played an important role in the behavioral problems of left-behind children [18,26]. Indeed, individuals with or without left-behind experience differed significantly in their attachment style in adulthood, with more insecure attachment (mainly focused on fear feeling) in left-behind group [27]. Importantly, separation from parents in left-behind children might hurt their affective bond with parents and cause the following problems: (1) personal issues: it was found that the left-behind children in rural areas of China had significantly higher loneliness or peer rejection, lower attachment to parents or peer preference compared with normal children [28]. (2) Family issues: recently, after a summer camp in HeNan province of China, educator of adolescents Lu said that: “During the communication with children, I have a terrible feeling, that is, the hate of left-behind children for their parents.” This phenomenon could be confirmed by several occurrences of murdered parents in recent years, which suggests the disharmony in left-behind families. (3) Social issues: it was indicated that high alienation was the main reason that was responsible for the behavioral problems or criminal phenomenon in adolescents [28,29]. Based on this evidence, it seemed like that left-behind children experienced higher alienation toward parents. However, no study to date has directly explored it. Thus, assessing experienced alienation toward parents in this population was important for early recognition, follow-up, or intervention for behavioral problems. Moreover, most studies that stepped into the parent–child bond focused on a population with the age range of 12–19 years old [16,30] or in young adults (19–25 years old).
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