Left-behind adolescents’ hopes and fears for the future in rural China

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the contents of future hopes and fears among Chinese adolescents left behind by one or both of their rural-to-urban migrant parents compared to those from rural and urban nonmigrant families. Data from 1083 participants (50.2% boys; Mage = 13.50 years; SD = 1.06) indicated that adolescents reported future hopes and fears in a variety of life domains, including future education, academics, occupation, marriage and family, parents’ and relatives’ wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, leisure activities, wealth and self-related issues. Adolescents from both-parent-migrant families reported more hopes and fears for interpersonal relationships and more fears for parents’ and relatives’ wellbeing than other adolescents. Moreover, boys from migrant families reported more hopes for occupation and fewer hopes for interpersonal relationships than girls from migrant families, whereas no gender differences were found among adolescents from nonmigrant families. These results suggest the important roles of parental migration in adolescents’ future thinking.

1. Introduction

With the sweeping trend of urbanization and the ensuing relaxation of migration restrictions by the Chinese government since the late 1970s, millions of labors have moved from rural to urban areas in hope of seeking better incomes to support their families in China. This movement has been called by some researchers the largest migration in human history (Wen & Lin, 2012; Zhang, 2000). The rapidly increasing number of rural-to-urban migrant workers in recent years has raised concerns about the consequences of migration for families left behind, especially for the children left behind. According to the most recent statistics, in 2010, there were over 61 million children aged 17 years or younger who have been left in their rural communities by one or both parents migrating in search of work in cities, which account for 21.88% of the Chinese child population (All-China Women’s Federation, 2013). Although rural-to-urban migrant workers leave their children to look for better jobs to sustain their families in the hope that their children’s future will be brighter (Bi & Oyserman, 2015; Zhao, Liu, & Wang, 2015), most of these left-behind children actually live in a situation lacking parental care, support, guidance and communication (Jia, Shi, Cao, Delancey, & Tian, 2010; Wen & Lin, 2012). It has been suggested that parents are children’s main partners in regard to thinking about their future in adolescence (Tynkkynen, Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 2010), and parents are able to influence adolescents’ thinking about setting goals (Dietrich, Kracke, & Nurmi, 2011). Thus, parental absence, as a consequence of parents’ rural-to-urban migration, might exert influences on adolescents’ thinking about the future.

Adolescence is a unique period of thinking about the future (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008; Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski, 1994), which is particularly pertinent for the establishment and development of adolescents’ identity and thus influences their later
adult life (Marcia, 1980; Zhang, Chen, Yu, Wang, & Nurmi, 2015). It has been conceived that thinking about future has been conceptualized in terms of two constructs: future hopes (approach goals) and future fears (avoidance goals) (Elliot et al., 2012). Future hopes focus on desirable prospects and guide adolescents to achieve them, whereas future fears focus on undesirable prospects and guide adolescents away from them (Dickson & MacLeod, 2004; Elliot et al., 2012). Previous research has consistently shown that the most common adolescent hopes and fears are related to education and occupation (Massey et al., 2008), which reflect major age-graded developmental tasks of adolescence (Nurmi, 2004; Seginer, 2009). Adolescents are also interested in other kinds of future goals, such as family-related issues (e.g., Nurmi, 1991), social relationships (e.g., Carroll, 2002; Knox, Funk, Elliott, & Bush, 2000), leisure (e.g., Zhang, Bécares, Chandola, & Callery, 2015, Zhang, Chen et al., 2015), and wealth (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 2001).

Despite these general patterns, the future goals that adolescents endorsed are influenced, to a certain degree, by social opportunities and constraints and previous life experiences (Massey et al., 2008; Nurmi et al., 1994; Zhang, Bécares, et al., 2015, Zhang, Chen et al., 2015). For example, having a working mother has been found to be related to adolescents' greater endorsement of career aspirations (Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994); Greater identification with the mother has been shown to be related to higher educational goals (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001); Adolescents with a low SES endorse materialistic goals to a greater extent than those with a higher SES (Cohen & Cohen, 2001; Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995). These studies indicate that adolescents plan their future according to their life circumstances and the social context that is open to them (Massey et al., 2008). While there have been an abundance of studies on the future thinking of adolescents from different social contexts in the past three decades (Massey et al., 2008), little information is available about left-behind adolescents' goal content and pursuit in rural China. We addressed this gap by describing left-behind adolescents' future hopes and fears and examining variations due to left-behind status and gender.

Adolescents' hopes and fears, particularly those related to education and occupation, may reflect changes in family economic gains and life aspirations caused by the parent's migration from rural to urban areas. According to household strategy theory (Stark & Bloom, 1985), voluntary migration was primarily a household strategy aimed at maximizing economic welfare at the household level. Parents' rural-to-urban migration in rural China often leads to economic gains for their families, which eases their economic burden (Wen & Lin, 2012). Evidence showed that families with migrants were economically better off than their nonmigrant counterparts (Zhang, Bécares, et al., 2015). Migrant parents also bring new educational and occupational information and life perspectives to their left-behind children through various channels of parent-child communication, thereby substantially broadening the children's horizons (Wen & Lin, 2012). Influenced by new information and perspectives and supported by more economic resources, left-behind adolescents might have a better understanding of the value of education and the opportunities of employment. Given these characteristics, we predicted that left-behind adolescents would have more goals related to education and occupation than adolescents from nonmigrant families in rural communities.

Adolescents' future goals may also reflect cultural characteristics (Nurmi, 1991; Seginer, 2009; Zhang, Bécares, et al., 2015, Zhang, Chen et al., 2015). With Confucianism serving as a predominant ideological guideline in China (Chen, Bian, Xin, Wang, & Silbereisen, 2010), filial piety is emphasized strongly in Chinese children's socialization, which includes respecting, caring for, and bringing honor to their families (Ho, 1996; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Existing literature indicated that Chinese adolescents reported more goals related to parental wellbeing (Zhang, Bécares, et al., 2015, Zhang, Chen et al., 2015), which have rarely been reported by Western adolescents (Massey et al., 2008). However, the rural-to-urban migration results in an increased geographic separation between migrant parents and their families, and consequently, the parents become more and more unavailable to fulfill filial obligations to their elderly parents in rural China, such as providing physical care and emotional support (Luo & Zhan, 2012). It was commonly believed that children formed filial beliefs in response to their parent's filial behaviors (Vedder, Berry, Sabatier, & Sam, 2009; Yeh & Bedford, 2004). Parental migration has thus possibly exerted negative effects on the transmission of filial beliefs to their left-behind children. There is some empirical evidence that left-behind adolescents reported a weaker sense of traditional filial piety than those from nonmigrant families to a certain degree (Yan & Xie, 2014; Zhong & Yan, 2015). Presumably, left-behind adolescents may mention fewer goals about parents' and relatives' wellbeing than those from nonmigrant families in rural communities.

Adolescents in migrant families may be faced with an extra challenge in formulating future goals because, with parental migration, patterns of interaction and family relationships were changed (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 2001). According to the statistics (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Bi & Oyserman, 2015; He et al., 2012), migrant parents send home remittances regularly but can only rarely visit their children in the rural home. It is reported that the approximately 10 million left-behind children can usually see their parents once a year, mostly during the Chinese Spring Festival. Parental absence caused by prolonged family separation disrupts a child's access to their primary attachment figures as havens of security and safety in times of distress, leading to undermined parent-child bonding (Wang & Mesman, 2015; Wen & Lin, 2012). According to Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) social provision theory, young people obtain different provisions from different types of relationships, and they are able to obtain a provision from more than one person in case someone is unavailable or unable to provide it. In this vein, left-behind adolescents may not only be eager to strengthen the bond with their migrant parent to satisfy their basic needs for intimacy or belonging (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999; Sullivan, 1953) but may also pay more attention to maintaining harmony and smoothing interpersonal relationships with others, such as left-behind guardians, peers and teachers, who serve as compensation for their social connections (Zhao et al., 2015). Thus, we predicted that left-behind adolescents would have more goals related to interpersonal relationships than those from nonmigrant families in rural China.

The location of residence may also affect adolescent's hopes and fears. Previous research has shown that adolescents' hopes and fears vary across urban and rural areas (Nurmi et al., 1994; Seginer, 2009). Australian urban adolescents reported a greater number of education and occupation goals and mentioned fewer fears related to marriage and family than rural adolescents; Finnish rural
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