

Impact of a Development-Oriented Summer Camp in Shifting Ways in Which Left-behind Children Describe Social Relationships

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Abstract: In the past decades, rapid industrialization in China guided migrant parents to leave their hometowns in search of job opportunities, leaving children alone in the care of relatives as left-behind children. Despite increasing research studying mental challenges faced by left-behind children, research into the social relationships of left-behind children, especially how boys and girls describe social relationships differently is still limited. Grounded on a sociocultural and ecological theory, this qualitative research connects how left-behind children describe social relationships to the interactions with other knowers and the social environment. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this study examines the effectiveness of a Development-Oriented Summer Camp provided by a non-government organization called ShiningStar. Eventually, these findings attempt to investigate the shift in describing social relationships and the differences in descriptions due to gender. Through understanding social relationships, this study can further provide a new perspective on the reasons behind the formation of mental and physical challenges.

Keywords: Social Relationships, Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Theory, Rural Left-behind Children, Development-Oriented Summer Camp

1. Introduction

With the rapid industrialization and urbanization of China in the past few decades, economic resources became massively concentrated in metropolis cities causing parents from less-developed cities to leave their hometowns, in search of job opportunities followed up with higher salaries. In this process, their children who are left alone in the countryside in the care of relatives or grandparents are known as “left-behind children.” This further expounds a common trajectory as the number of left-behind children exceeds 66 million in 2022, sharing 37.9 % of children in rural areas while the number of urban left-behind children experienced a 9 million rise in the past decade [1]. Considering parents as key mentors in life, many scholars have examined the mental and physical challenges faced by left-behind children during their learning process. For instance, the lack of communication and contact between family members leads to difficulties in building a secure attachment relationship [2]. The All-China Women’s Federation [3] further stated that 40.7 percent and 34.1 percent of left-behind girls and boys considered themselves inferior to others while 16.8 percent of them attempted to injure themselves, leading to the occurrence of depression, anxiety, and loneliness emotions.

In particular, social relationship refers to the connections between people that contain personal meanings, including family relationships, friendship, and other relationships that create significant influence [4]. In the case of left-behind children, it is assumed that the way they describe social relationship beliefs is associated with their social background. For instance, a stratified two-stage cluster survey conducted for 606 rural left-behinds shows that they are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from loneliness compared to others [5]. Moreover, while left-behind children are often excluded from parent's decision to migrate, this further impacted the way children have formed their own understanding of parental relationships where 39 percent prefer parents to stay home and 37 percent prefer parents migrate for money and better job opportunities [6].

While relevant investigation recognized the challenges left-behind children faced mentally and challenges reflected during the learning process [7], surprisingly little is known about the social relationship of left-behind children, especially how boys and girls describe social relationships differently. Without such knowledge, the research community lacks pivotal information about the reasons behind the formation of mental and physical challenges such as anxiety and depression. In this study, a development-oriented summer camp provided by a Guangzhou NGO called ShiningStar will be examined on how it changes the way left-behind children describe social relationships. By conducting interviews with left-behind children who participated in the summer camp and volunteering teachers, will further examine how gender influences the understanding of social relationships. The research is grounded by the following questions:

- How did a development-oriented summer camp shift the way left-behind children describe social relationships?
- What differences do boys and girls derive when describing social relationships?

Before describing the research methods, two theoretical frameworks of sociocultural and ecological perspectives will be explained. Then, a context section will provide an overview of ShiningStar who created this development-oriented camp, including its aim and description of courses. During the method, a combination of qualitative methods (interviews and observation) will be applied to conduct this investigation with more rigor. Eventually, the significance of interpreting this research and its implications for future studies on left-behind children will be examined.

2. Theoretical Framework

The investigation in how left-behind children describe social relationships is grounded on a sociocultural perspective that human development relies on social interaction with social groups to adopt values more appropriate to the cultural environment [8]. As children are not born with a unique identity, mentors influence their construction of knowledge through social interaction. In this rationale, it can be concluded that sociocultural change can affect how left-behind children describe social relationships. Followed by rapid modernization in China are the changes in culture and mind, for instance, the awakened sense of individualism and self-development [9]. However, while migrant workers sought work opportunities, their children experienced depression 3 times more than children living with both parents [10]. In addition, parental absence might further lead to feelings of loneliness and difficulties in forming secure emotional relationships [11]. As all mental challenges faced by left-behind children are shaped from a sociocultural perspective and their interaction with other knowers in forming their beliefs and values, this research studies how left-behind children who participated in a summer camp describe social relationships.

Furthermore, an ecological theory will also be applied to examine how boys and girls describe social relationships differently. An ecological perspective examines learning as a complex system affected by both immediate and larger environment that seems far away [12]. As Bronfenbrenner stated in 1979, changes in the environment have to occur to change behaviors, arranging five ecological systems (1977): Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and

Chronosystem. In this case, left-behind children's understandings and descriptions of social relationships are not only related to values from close relatives but also influenced by social media, or even the culture and policies. For instance, the biased belief that sons are better than daughters in China existed a hundred years ago but still influences the new generation. Specifically, The Seventh National Population Census in China [13] presents the gender ratio in Guangzhou as 53.07:46.93 (male to female). A relevant case study further demonstrated an increase in the phenomenon of rural left-behind girls suffering from abortions, getting married, and having kids between the ages of 17 and 18 [14]. In our study, an ecological theory is adopted to explain the differences in describing social relationships behind gender in relation to the larger environment, influenced by the media, culture, and relevant policies. In this process, the summer camp is considered a mesosystem, composed of school and community, creating a temporary learning environment.

3. Methods

The Development-Oriented Summer Camp examined in this study is provided by an NGO called Shining Star. As being chronically separated from their parents when they are young can have a huge impact on value building, founded in 2014, Shiningstar dedicates itself to supporting left-behind children by opening up a Development-Oriented Summer Camp [15].

The Development-Oriented Summer Camp lasts for ten days, containing a hobby class (basketball or dance) and a resilience course. By training university students as volunteers, the volunteer will be responsible for teaching resilience courses with the aim of developing a growth mindset when facing challenges. For instance, it includes courses related to hygiene and introducing sex education all try to enhance their awareness of self-protection [16]. For each camp, 10-20 volunteer teachers will be recruited to teach about 50 students where they participate voluntarily.

3.1. Methodological Approach

A qualitative research design is applied to measure the shift in social relationship beliefs of left-behind children during the Development-Oriented Summer Camp and differences in descriptions caused by gender. The approach of semi-structured interviews is chosen to gather a collection of data that is expressed by participants in their own words. The use of open-ended and follow-up questions further allows descriptions with more clarification and explanation. Participant observation, another qualitative approach, will also be applied to improve the understanding of social relationships and social background.

3.2. Sampling & Participants

A non-representative stratified random sampling strategy will be employed to select participants for interview either as left-behind children or volunteering teachers who attended the Development-Oriented Summer Camp. Instead of representing the behavior of all left-behinds, this study is non-representative and more of a case study to examine the impact and effectiveness of a particular summer camp activity. To ensure the triangulation of data, the target population also contains teachers, to emphasize diverse responses given from the stances of different perspectives. Through participant observation, the researcher also immerses and participates in these events, further building up the understanding of the social background and the theory grounded in the courses provided.

A total of 10 students and 10 teachers will be selected for the interview. The researcher will aim to interview girls and boys evenly, ranging from the age of 7 to 11 years, to investigate their descriptions of social relationships. In the research sample of all who participated in the summer camp, the final participants will be selected randomly due to time limitations.

3.3. Data Sources

Data will be collected through conducting semi-structured interviews and participating in participant observations. By conducting semi-structured interviews, adjustments can occur in the process, including the use of follow-up questions to explore more detail and expand on potential responses. Two sets of interview questions will be prepared for students and teachers. Specifically, students will start by answering basic information like their age and family background, followed by questions aimed at their experiences in this summer camp. Finally, the students are asked to describe their social relationship beliefs before and after the event. For teachers, the question focuses more on a view of observation, asking about some changes in behavior and participation spotted in the process. The interviews will be conducted privately to create a safe space and protect the personal information of participants.

For participant observation, the researcher will participate in the group's activities while observing the group's behavior and interactions [17]. Through immersing in classrooms, the learning environment of the summer camp will be experienced. As a supporting tool, two cameras will be set up from different angles. To investigate the shift in describing social relationships, specific attention should also be paid to participation in group discussions, class discussions, and friendship circles.

3.4. Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis is applied to analyze interview transcripts through common themes that came up repeatedly. After interviews and transcribing the data through digital software, certain phrases or sentences will be highlighted with labels summarizing their content and potential themes can be identified based on repetitive labelings and coding [18]. The use of thematic analysis is chosen as it reflects a clear structure of sorting information into themes while allowing flexibility of individual opinions.

At the same time, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is also chosen to analyze the researcher's personal experiences. As IPA focuses on individual perception and awareness, it will be used to investigate a small and purposive sampling of the researcher, on its experience and understanding after participating in the summer camp. Furthermore, IPA will also be used to analyze remarkable interview responses when the participants connect the follow-up questions with detailed descriptions of their personal experiences. As an individual research project, the researcher will be responsible for conducting the research and analysis through inductive thematic analysis and IPA in this study.

3.5. Limitations

While this study provides a deeper understanding of how left-behind children describe social relationships and the difference when boys and girls perceive social relationships, there are still some limitations. Firstly, due to time limitations, only 10 students and 10 teachers can be interviewed. Therefore, since all participants are left-behind children or teachers who participated in the development-oriented summer camp, this study can't be generalized to represent the whole population of left-behind children. Secondly, the rejection of interviewees could create a selection bias. As students might be sensitive or unwilling to participate in interviews, not every individual in the target population has an equal chance to be interviewed, the data might merely represent those who are willing to participate. Moreover, the responses might be biased when participants decide to give a popular answer rather than their true opinion. Therefore, all of those may influence the outcome of the study.

4. Conclusion

This research paper mainly investigates how left-behind children perceive and describe social relationships, and the differences boys and girls derive when describing social relationships. By examining a Development-Oriented Summer Camp provided by a Guangzhou NGO called ShiningStar, the researcher tries to investigate the changes left-behind children experience when describing social relationships. While various studies have recognized the challenges faced by left-behind children during the learning process [19], this could provide a new perspective on the reasons behind mental challenges by understanding their social relationships. Grounded in a sociocultural perspective, this connects understanding of social relationships to interactions with other knowers and in this case the experience in the summer camp. Moreover, this study also examines differences in how boys and girls describe social relationships due to the influence of a larger environment that seems unrelated. Therefore, all of this presents a relationship in the understanding of social relationships towards society.

Furthermore, this research can improve the understanding of similar summer camp activities. While the government has provided policies to support left-behind children financially, fewer policies are focused on helping left-behind children overcome social and emotional challenges. Therefore, if this summer camp demonstrates an improvement in describing social relationships, this study might introduce a new method to support the mental development of left-behind children. To build on the research project, a deeper analysis of the social background and the effectiveness of similar activities on a larger scale can still be carried out in future research.

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