Analysis of Mental Health Issue of Migrant Children in China Under Social Identity Theory

Tingqian Liang *

School of Foreign Studies, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

*Corresponding author: 20210231010@m.scnu.edu.cn

Abstract. China has seen a steady rise in the number of migrant children in recent years. Aside from focusing on educational barriers, the migrant-related public issue has shifted its attention to mental health. Previous discoveries on the state of migrant children's mental health in China has revealed a perceivable deviant trend along with multiple contributing causes. However, there are few studies concentrated on elaborating a consecutive course of migrant children's mental development under a dedicated psychological framework. Therefore, this study unfolded the progressing mental health status of migrant children within the framework of social identity theory. By expounding the flow of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison, this study enunciates that migrant children are categorized as social-outcasts and frustrated-adaptors under the influence of institutions and culture. Then they are tended to be subject to marginalized identification by community social capital. At the same time, there are promising mediating factors contributed by family and school, which render them identification of sense of belonging. It is followed by an inevitable phase of social comparison, during which upward comparison strengthens the positive effect of social support and spontaneous inclusion. This study also provided implications on the aspect of government, family, and school level to exert joint efforts to accelerate migrant children's adaptability into urban contexts with a well-off mental status.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory; Mental Health; Migrant Children; China.

1. Introduction

The education quality has long been a paramount priority on the government's agenda in China's path of development since 1949. Future generations matter a lot. In this scenario, how to implement a high-efficacy and equal educational system is the key to children's development. With 1.3 billion undergrads in 514,000 academic system, China has made global improvements in its educational system today [1]. Nonetheless, equality of education has endured countless hardships and remains a controversy in society nationwide. Hukou Policy, or the household registration system, was first introduced in China in 1951. It is a population registration system for categorizing citizens based on their residential place and are often associated with certain socioeconomic benefits [2]. Along with the policy development, a huge disparity gap had emerged between those with an urban Hukou and those with a rural Hukou. It was followed by an asymmetric system in which exist two different types of resource distribution systems. In general, migrant children are often reduced to the status quo as inadaptation, generating mental health issues. In this study, migrant children refer to any child who left their birthplace to seek education in the cities where their parents earn a living as migrant workers. According to recent statistics from the China Children and Teenagers' Fund, the country's 20 million rural migrant children under 15 make up 13% of all students enrolled in compulsory education [3]. According to China Labor Bulletin, Children who had relocated to cities accounted for 14.3 million of the pupils enrolled in compulsory school, according to the 2020 Statistical Bulletin for National Education Development. 10.3 million of these had entered elementary school, while 3.9 million had entered middle school. According to the NBS Migrant Workers Report for 2021, 88.2 percent of middle school-aged students and 84.4 percent of children of elementary school age, respectively, were enrolled in public schools. These data sets show that 1.61 million migrant students in primary school and roughly 470,000 migrant children in middle school did not attend public schools [4]. The concern that this generation of migrant children will evolve into China's first urban underclass gives birth to

the nationwide identification of rural migrant children's compulsory education as a critical issue in the domestic education reform system.

Many policies have been implemented to ease the situation, but there is still a long way to go. Numerous migrant children are refused admission to public schools in urban areas. While many of the treatments and circumstances are not favorable for migrant children, many concerns have extended to the psychological well-being of this unequally treated group. After all, the public views towards educational assessment shifted from the previous limiting point of academic performance. The overall development, whether of physical robustness or psychological decency, had entered the public stage. An increasing number of studies have identified the deteriorating mental health problem in migrant children. On the interrelation sphere, they are found to be less confident in dealing with peers and present a mind state of inferiority. Children from migrant households often struggle to integrate into metropolitan environments and experience social isolation and loneliness. They are more susceptible to external discrimination, which in turn generates lower self-esteem and stronger self-humiliation. In the worst scenario, some of them may unluckily fall victim to social injustice and develop anti-social tendencies, slipping into delinquency and crime. It might be argued that maintaining a stable and peaceful society goes hand in hand with safeguarding the mental health of immigrant children. Under this case, it is necessary to discuss and address the mental health issue affecting migrant children in a completely discreet manner.

Existing studies have infused copious analysis and data to make the mental health problem of migrant children highly visible, and the overall societal response has proved to be positive. Despite the growing body of materials that described the problem with migrant children's mental health, few studies have concentrated on construing the matter under the framework of social identity theory, which provides a typical psychological framework for analyzing the dynamics of Chinese migrant children's mental health status. Therefore, this study will proceed under the social identity theory framework, demonstrating the build-up of the mental health of migrant children and making suggestions for potential fixes.

Social identity theory is described as a segmented part of an individual’s self-concept. Meanwhile, a consistent perception of belonging in a specific social group serves as the foundation for one's sense of self. In the scope of social psychology, it represents the phrase interplayed between personal and conceived social identities [5]. In the following sections, this study will illustrate the dynamic process of migrant children's mental health development on the consecutive courses of social categorization, social identification and social comparison.

The results of this study will ultimately put a spotlight on drawing conclusions and outlining remedies for the psychological wellbeing of migrant children based on earlier research. Most importantly, the study outcomes will present an inter-relative deliberation on the mental health development of migrant children and put forward a rational reflection of the actions that need to be taken.

2. Framework Analysis

2.1 Social categorization

To unfold the dynamic process of how migrant children slip into deviant mental health status, the initial stage is called social categorization. Categorizing happen when several groups with different characteristic interact or are related in a certain spectrum. Individuals must define themselves according to social criteria and dimensions. Social categorization simplifies perspective and cognition bound with the social environment by observing inherent similarity and connecting relationships with structures [6]. Under this study, local city children and rural migrant children can be categorized into urban and rural scopes. These two groups were defined by various norms and criteria. These norms and criteria proved to be stiff and hindered the process of assimilating migrant children into urban public resources.

2.1.1. Institutional categorization

The fundamental institutional categorization is the role of social outcasts induced by Hukou Policy, which suggests a clear definition of the individual residential base. Conditioned by this institutional criterion, migrant children received their agricultural registration in their rural birthplace. After moving to live in the city with their migrant parents, they became a minority group. Hukou Policy contains an individual's basic demographic information like urban or rural status, legal address and sector of activities [7]. Due to different Hukou, migrant children often face obstacles when trying to get access to public resources. For instance, admission too many public schools requires urban Hukou that migrant children lack, therefore they are forced to compromise to enroll in private migrant school, where education resources are relatively failing, basic facilities and faculty forces are insufficient. They may also be denied from certain health care subsidy and supplies from state government. Worse off, food deficiency caused by needy household maintenance bring to an end of malnutrition which further deteriorates their mental issue [8]. The unbalanced resource allocation imposed by Hukou policy categorized migrant children from their city counterpart in a conspicuous way, inflict a categorization as social-resource outcast on this disfavored group.

2.1.2. Cultural categorization

Apart from institutional categorization, the geographical changes also give them an environmental categorization of frustrated-adaptors. Migrant children enduring long-distance migration are not just being merely physical movement, but more being psychological movement. The significant environmental change poses a huge challenge for them to smoothly adapt to the multicultural city life. Back in the rural area, children receive a one-dimensional culture sensation. It can mostly be perceived through their daily routine, during which the roles played by school and family are eloquent speakers. Schools to them are an additional task to provide a chance to contact with basic knowledge, rather than a golden ladder for upward mobility. On a regular school day, it is not until late afternoon that they began their major event of helping out the chores and tending the fields back at home. Since very young age migrant children were exposed a lot to family event and acted as a highly-integrated part of maintaining the flowing of the family. They dealt with a good many household chores, family-bonding activity, ancestor-worshipping convention, leading to a self-evaluation as a serviceable member to family. It makes sense that most of their cultural value was shaped by family, instead of other social environments. There so, they had become a singular cultural receiver of family. Also, they mainly consorted with fellows submerged in the same culture. A strong sense of cultural homogeneity steamed around their everyday lives. Once they migrate to the city, they may be inundated with iridescent city cultures. City has a more diverse population and minorities ethnic identities, which provide cultural heterogeneity, coming along with more tolerance. The nature of city life is under constant change because of the booming technology and media-industry. Migrant children may be out of their elements in urban environment due to their predominant cultural mindset and maladaptation of thriving culture mirrors.

2.1.3. Reaction yield from categorization

The ensuing reaction against social categorization from migrant children is a solidity of geo-cognation. Migrant children faced resistance to blending with the city group. An invisible gap was built between migrant and urban children. Fixed categorization inclines migrant children to stay within the same group where others also originated from parallel status, forming a sense of in-group cohesion along the way. They spend most of their time interacting with people with similar features and similar family background, which create a paradox that even if they migrate into the city, they still drift apart from the local city life circle.

2.2 Social identification

When migrant children complete the process of social categorization, he falls into a fixed group division and will be followed by a gradual phase of social identification. At the time when migrant

children now consider themselves as belonging to this social group, a sense of identity may come into being [9].

2.2.1. Marginalized identification

Self-identification is significantly influenced by community social capital. Social capital inlaid in the neighborhood indicates to adjacent connection in the residential pool, which provides a foundation of possible sources that people can make interaction, draw out benefit or exert influence as a whole [10]. Migrant children in large part only located in a remote community from the city center, where all the flourishing economic and social activity takes place. The decentralized location rendered migrant children a decentralized identity when doing self-evaluation. In the peripheral places, the living condition tends to be inferior and restricted, migrant children identify themselves as not connecting with the ongoing city activity, receiving less social support and passively being cut tie with the pivot movement. When looking into factors within the neighborhood community, a potent clarification can be revealed by referring to the urban community. Urban community is located near or in the city center, where resources are booming. Moreover, the overall communal atmosphere in urban community is a lot more amicable. When there are greater interpersonal ties, more defined social norms, and better levels of trust among neighbors, each resident of the urban community prefers to give more social aid to their personal family members in order to conform to the communal environment. As a result, urban children will benefit from a higher degree of social assistance, owning a feeling of being cared and inclusive [10], which is in sharp contrast of what migrant children feel in their community. Migrant children, being highly marginalized, have a community that lack of abundant resources and unfavored location that in return eliminate the chance of mutual assistance and relationship exchange. This leads to most of the people living in such distant community becoming mentally marginalized and excluded. It can be said that migrant children are being marginalized both be inside and outside of the community. Thus, migrant children stamped a marginalized identity on themselves.

2.2.2. Belonging identification

Despite the marginalized identity mentioned in the former context, the other type of identification generated from migrant children can in some way outlines an optimistic trend which possibly can exert implication for how to put effort into adjusting the mental issue of this unfavored group.

A group member is said to feel like they belong when they are included, accepted, and have a feeling of self. It occurs when a person is able to convey their authentic self to others [11]. More often than not, being assimilated in a social group and receiving social identity conduces to enhance a person's sense of identity [12]. That being said, only a small proportion of migrant children suffice to benefit from having belonging identification. To the other end of the spectrum, the sense of belonging identification can enhance migrant children's social identity in the urban environment. The belonging retained by migrant children can be most vividly seen on levels of family and school.

On the family level, a high degree of family support may conduce to a higher sense of family belonging and ultimately lead to a solid social identity. In consideration of migrant children have a decentralized status in the urban community, the role of family is likely to be the upmost important, which provide instrumental and emotional needs, alongside with educational aspiration [13]. Within the group of migrant children, there exist two subgroups that divided by the social-economic status (SES) of their families. Those whose family is at a relatively high SES is more likely to strengthen family support to children. In a pioneering study, family support was further sub-divided into human capital and financial capital [13]. According to this previous study, a tight connection has been revealed with factors. Children of migrants who have parents with better educational backgrounds—from postsecondary to elementary school, tend to be more confident in their ability to succeed academically and to aspire to further education. They are also more likely to develop cognitive skills, resulting in a higher self-resilience identification. Family factor like monthly household income shows a positive correlation with children's better mental health, mediating the defect of marginalized

community social capital. The overall family dimension reduces barriers of constructing a family-belonging identification for migrant children.

On the school level, a sense of school belonging remarkably impacts on migrant children psychologically. It has been proved that the impact of migrant children's social isolation was completely buffered by their school involvement [14]. This verification processed a structural equation model to estimate the relationship between social exclusion, sense of school belongings and migrant children's mental health. The framework comprised evaluative factors for the teaching and learning environment, school engagement, sense of intimacy, exclusion from extracurricular activities, study and friendship, all of which were scored using a five-point Likert scale. It was discovered that the effects of social exclusion on mental health were indirect and might be related through the mediating role of a sense of school connectedness. For migrant children, the most contactable environment is school, symbolizing a miniature social context for them. A higher sense of school belonging can work as an agent to reconnect "the breakdowns of social connections between people and society" [15]. Therefore, drawing on to this paper, the feeling of belonging at school can build up an inclusive social identity, which even has implications when migrant children left school for further city adaptation.

2.2.3. Social belonging identification

When migrant children undergo a flow of belonging both to family and school, they are expected to generate a stronger sense of social stickiness in the urban setting. Family and school together serve as a solid agent to drive out the social exclusion perception and build a strong social resilience in migrant children. The ultimate consequence has promise for an integral identification of belonging in the urban city.

2.3 Social comparison

Following the consecutive course of the social categorization and social identification, there land social comparison, an inevitable and essential characteristic of group life. It happens within fellow ingroup members or between outgroup members. Group norms, team composition, and intergroup connections emerge from these contrasts and provide the fundamental basis for group-based social-scale comparisons [16]. Social comparison is also the main basement for social identity theory for the theory is largely rest on people making relatively distinguishment wandering the scale of ingroup and outgroup. One can improve their self-awareness and gain a clear understanding of others through the process of discovering perceived similarities and contrasts between themselves and those around them. This helps one adapt to their social environment [17].

Notice should be taken that migrant children are susceptible to an upward social comparison. The "emblematic" individual with more tendency to be involved in social comparison is featured by certain characteristics, for example, augmented sensitivity to surroundings and behaviors of others, and a higher degree of doubt and loss of oneself, added with the increased desire to wipe out the uncertainty to gain self-worth [18]. In this context, for migrant children, social comparison is more likely to happen. Due to a huge physical movement and mental inadaptation, migrant children are generally low-self-esteem, weakened self-concepts, and uncertain about themselves. Social comparison is a two-way directional process, including both upward comparison and downward comparison. Specifically, upward comparison refers to the course in which individuals evaluate themselves to others who is relatively superior to them in a certain dimension. In this sense, downward comparison refers to the course in which individuals assess themselves in comparison to those who are inferior to themselves in a given aspect. Given the distinct circumstance faced by migrant children, this article only walks through the process of upward comparison.

2.3.1. Elements of social upward comparison

Upward comparison can happen when migrant children are socializing with their city counterparts. Parents' occupation may be put on the table in communication between urban and rural children. Migrant children may be aware of their parents' socioeconomic status is lower than the opposite party,

whose parents get a regular and profuse salary, and are located in a higher status of profession. While their parents only migrant to city in seek of a better treatment and wage, but still have much precarious factors looming near the hard-earned gig. Daily necessities like garments, study stationery, books or even lunch box can serve as multiple evaluating standards, from which migrant children may be more acknowledged of their inferior position and daily use-vacancy. Academic achievement also be prominent enough to drive a distinction. Due to a lack of pre-school tutoring and backward growing environment, migrant children didn't receive a formal education when they entered primary school, and their educational resources are rare which render more difficulty for them to build up a systematic learning system. In this case, migrant children may be at disadvantage on testing score or class performance in compared with their urban counterparts.

Migrant children are being constantly exposed to voluntarily or involuntarily comparison with urban children, on aspects concerning living conditions, academic performance, parental vacations, social supports. While the former three aspects are hard to strike a balance due to their long-term existence and solidified function, whose changes require extended efforts and readjustment? More reflection can be placed on the aspect of social supports. Social supports come in the sub-forms of family support and community support, both of which have their forces working on mental health of children of migrants.

For family support, the level of parental assistance given to migrant children is typically lower than that of their urban or rural peers [19]. Because the majority of migrant workers don't have enough time, means, or finances to give their kids the support they require. Sometimes immigrants who work long hours in hostile situations, are physically separated from their kids for extended periods of time, or don't stan in the educational role to support their kids' social or intellectual growth. Parallel to this, unlike their middle-class urban peers, most migrant workers are unable to afford the textbooks and extracurricular activities that urban students typically take for granted. They also spend far less time interacting with their children and supporting them with their schoolwork [20].

For community support, the comparison tends to be even sharp. The connection of locals was described as the source of their mutual trust, propensity to provide a hand, and feeling of security. In that sense, community involvement is a social structure that exists separately from the family and provides young people living in a community with resources and social control [21]. Migrant children had long been absent from communal mutual trust, motivation to assist, and security. Owning to their long-distanced migration, children may fail to adapt and gain acquaintance with the living community and still sealed themselves with a strong sense of alienation. This sense of distance brings about children's unwillingness neither to offer help nor receive help from the community. The community they live in is not as well guarded and lack of well-established system. More crime scenes can be around, threatening migrant children's safety. Children also miss proper custody from parents, more inclined to fall into juvenile misconduct.

2.3.2. Prerequisites of positive upward comparison

Using social supports as metrics of social comparison, give out the key to navigating upward comparison positively. One of the important prerequisites is that family and community should make great exertion to consummate social support to migrant children to large extend. Then when children perceive others are sincerely and devoted to lifting them out of the morass, they may probably diminish their subjective sense of alienation and isolation. They will become spontaneous to accept and seek for social supports. These migrant children need this social support, despite the fact that it is restricted and one-sided. They attempt to assimilate into society as a result, openly accepting the assistance provided by it [22]. Children of migrants making an upward comparison recognizing connections between oneself and the target of an upward evaluation, using individuals who perform better than themselves as a vision to reflect upon, and identifying urban youngsters who perform better may offer valuable idea that, in response, can enhance their performance [17]. By the tendency of spontaneous inclusion into the urban context, migrant children have large promise to be better adapting to current status.

3. Discussion

As this study mentioned in the section on social categorization, a policy like Hukou attached great barriers for migrant children to have an equal opportunity in education as their urban counterparts. However, it has to be admitted that government and educational departments have made meaningful efforts to help ease the situation.

Besides, section of social comparison should be given consideration. For upward comparison, migrant children could contrast their circumstances with those of others who are more fortunate and seek methods to get the same outcomes. They may often fail to keep pace to achieve similar results in the comparison process, being liable to lose the motive to move ahead, eventually grudging themselves and their original family.

In summary, for the theoretical framework, this study sheds light on future research direction. This study has linked the process of migrant children's mental health under social identity theory, shedding light on the once-negligible clue which can significantly define the status and flowing trend of mental health of this group. Concerning there are still some limitations that need further consideration, future studies can focus on how the complexity of institutional implementation affects migrant children's social identity in the urban area and how the double nature of social comparison sculptures their psychology. Research may go deep into the underlying elements of the policy is enacted and the relationship between the ultimate beneficiary and the implementer. Meanwhile, other risk factors can be taken into account to paint a full picture of migrant children's comparing mentation.

4. Conclusion

Due to a significant change in the living environment, which is followed by a series of conversions on spectrums concerning individual, family, community, and social intercourse, migrant children are bound to come through a vital mental transformation that leads to the danger of falling into deviant psychology, posing a great threat to their mental health problem. This study makes a thorough analysis of the undergoing process of mental development and formation based on social identity theory. Fathoming into the theory, progress was unfolded in the course of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison.

In the future, possible improvements in regard to government, family, and school levels should be suggested. Joint efforts should be made to adjust the marginal and vulnerable status of migrant children. Government plays its part in ensuring equal and sufficient public resources for migrant children's education and lives. The role of the family worked as physical and psychological support to children. In the meantime, schools, which represent a miniature society, construct the upmost adaptable environment, which mitigates the severe social exclusion and strengthen children's social identity in urban city. Overall, great implication exists in striving for a solid and integral social identity for migrant children, building up positive mental health.

References

[1] China’’s education: 40 years of epic achievements - Ministry of Education of the People’s Rep ublic of China [EB/OL]. [2022-11-26]. http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/201812/t20181224 _364525.html.

[2] Morrison W M. China’’s Hukou System: Overview, Reform, and Economic Implications [J]. 3.

[3] Jan 14 L P, Church 2013 Topic, Quarterly S I C, et al. China’’s Migrant Children – ChinaSource [EB/OL]//https://www.chinasource.org/.[2022-11-26].https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-migrant-children/.

[4] Migrant workers and their children [EB/OL]//China Labour Bulletin. [2022-11-20]. https://clb.org. hk/node/15437.

[5] Social identity theory | Definition, History, Examples, & Facts | Britannica [EB/OL]. [2022-11-20]. https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-identity-theory.

[6] Smelser N J, Baltes P B. International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences: Volume 11[M]. Elsevier Amsterdam, 2001.

[7] What Is the Hukou System in China? - Meaning, Pros, & Cons [EB/OL]. (2022-08-10)[2022-11-26]. https://nhglobalpartners.com/the-chinese-hukou-system-explained/.

[8] Guillot-Wright S, Cherryhomes E, Wang L, et al. Systems and subversion: A review of structural violence and im/migrant health [J]. Current Opinion in Psychology, 2022, 47: 101431.

[9] Wang S, Xu H. The impact of parental migration on social identity - A framed field experiment with left-behind children in China [J]. Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 2021, 187: 246-257.

[10] Wu Q, Tsang B, Ming H. Contributions of family and neighbourhood factors to the mental health of migrant children in China: implications for policy and services [J]. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 2012, 17(2-3): 113-129.

[11] Sense of Belonging | Cornell University Diversity and Inclusion [EB/OL]. [2022-11-20]. https://diversity.cornell.edu/belonging/sense-belonging.

[12] Resistance to Brand Switching when a Radically New Brand is Introduced: A Social Identity Theory Perspective - Son K. Lam, Michael Ahearne, Ye Hu, Niels Schillewaert, 2010[EB/OL]. [2022-11-26]. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1509/jmkg.74.6.128.

[13] Wu Q, Tsang B, Ming H. Social Capital, Family Support, Resilience and Educational Outcomes of Chinese Migrant Children [J]. British Journal of Social Work, 2014, 44(3): 636-656.

[14] Li C, Jiang S. Social exclusion, sense of school belonging and mental health of migrant children in China: A structural equation modeling analysis [J]. Children and Youth Services Review, 2018, 89: 6-12.

[15] Silver H. Social Exclusion and Social Solidarity: Three Paradigms [J]. International Labour Review, 1994, 133: 531.

[16] Hogg M A. Social Identity and Social Comparison [M]//Suls J, Wheeler L. Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research. Boston, MA: Springer US, 2000: 401-421.

[17] Guyer J, Vaughan-Johnston T. Upward and downward social comparisons: A brief historical overview [M]. 2018.

[18] Gibbons F X, Buunk B P. Individual differences in social comparison: Development of a scale of social comparison orientation [J]. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1999, 76: 129-142.

[19] Gong P, Liang S, Carlton E J, et al. Urbanisation and health in China [J]. The Lancet, 2012, 379(9818): 843-852.

[20] Migrant workers and their children suffer most in China''s turbulent economy [EB/OL]//China Labour Bulletin. [2022-11-26]. https://clb.org.hk/node/378.

[21] Embeddedness of Child and Adolescent Development: A Community-Level Perspective on Urban Violence (From Violence and Childhood in the Inner City, P 31-77, 1997, Joan McCord, ed. - See NCJ-172275) | Office of Justice Programs [EB/OL]. [2022-11-26]. https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/embeddedness-child-and-adolescent-development-community-level.

[22] Cui K, To S ming. Migrant status, social support, and bullying perpetration of children in mainland China [J]. Children and Youth Services Review, 2019, 107: 104534.