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Mental Health Status of Rural Female Left-Behind Middle School Students in Sichuan Province

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate the mental health status of rural left-behind middle school students in Sichuan province, and set some requirements for family, school and society. **Method:** This paper used Middle School Student Mental Health Scale (MSSMHS) developed by Wang to investigate the mental health status of 690 female left-behind middle school students and analyzed the data by using SPSS 20.0. **Results:** 38% of the rural left-behind middle school students had mental health problems; there were significant differences in compulsion, crankiness and hostility between junior school students and high school students; there were significant differences in anxiety and learning stress between only children and non-only children; there were significant differences in different workplaces of parents and different time spent with parents. **Conclusion:** The mental health status of rural female left-behind middle school students is not optimistic, and family, school, society and government should take effective measures to improve the mental health status of rural left-behind middle school students.

Key words: Mental health status; Left-behind middle school students; Rural areas

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INTRODUCTION

Left-behind children are the juveniles under the tutelage of one parent, grandparents, relatives, friends or compeers, whose parents or one parent work in the city for more than half a year (Gao, 2008). The previous research results showed that the mental health of left-behind children is not satisfactory due to the poor communication between the guardians and children, the improper ways of education, the lack of intimacy, and so on (Huang et al., 2010). The main mental health problems of left-behind children were inferiority, unsocial personality, fragility, self-sealing, sensitive to interpersonal communication, vengeful feeling, and even tendency of violence (Pan et al., 2009).

How about the mental health status of female left-behind children that accounts for 45.92% of all left-behind children? According to the research on left-behind children in rural areas of Shandong province, Song et al. (2011) found that there were some gender inequalities in implicit educational support. Guo et al. (2006) used Mental Health Testing (MHT) to investigate 1,369 rural children aged from 11 to 17 in Fujian province. The results showed that there were significant differences between the male left-behind children and female left-behind children in study anxiety, anxiety to people and terror tendency, and the score of female left-behind children was significantly higher than male left-behind children. Wu's research (2009) on the mental health status of 200 left-behind children by using the Symptom Checklist 90 (SCL-90) indicated that female left-behind children's scores in depression, somatization, anxiety and terror were all significantly higher than male left-behind children.

Taken together, the current mental health status of female left-behind children is equally worrisome, and differs from male left-behind children in some aspects. Sichuan province has the largest number of left-behind

children which accounts for almost 11.34% of all the left-behind children in China according to an official report of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in May, 2013. In the same way, Sichuan province has the largest number of female left-behind children. But how about the current mental health status of female left-behind middle school students and if there are some new changes? After a review of the relevant literature, we found that there were few researches on the mental health status of female left-behind middle school students in Sichuan province. Therefore, we used Middle School Student Mental Health Scale (MSSMHS) developed by Wang to investigate female left-behind middle school students in rural areas of Sichuan province, which aims to know about the current mental health status of female left-behind middle school students. Based on the results, we analyzed the causes and gave some relevant suggestions for family, school and society.

1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1.1 Participants

We chose 720 middle and high school students from six rural middle schools in Bazhong, Qionglai, Renshou, Sichuan province as participants and gave out 720 questionnaires. 690 questionnaires were recovered and the effective return ratio was 98.47%. Among the 690 questionnaires, there were 203 junior school students and 487 high school students, 374 only children and 316 none-only children, 276 students whose parents worked in Sichuan province and 414 students whose parents worked in other provinces, 503 students who spent with parents for 1 to 2 months every year, 137 students who spent with parents for 2 to 4 months every year and 50 students who spent with parents for 4 to 6 months every year.

1.2 Materials

We used Middle School Student Mental Health Scale (MSSMHS) developed by Wang to investigate the mental health status of female left-behind middle school students. The scale is made up of 60 questions required students to finish according to their recent mental status. The differential validity of the scale is between 0.4 and 0.76; the test-retest reliability of 10 subscales is between 0.716 and 0.905; the homogeneity reliability of 10 subscales is between 0.601 and 0.858; the split half reliability of 10 subscales is between 0.634 and 0.873; the correlation between subscales and total scale is between 0.765 and 0.873. Data show that reliability and validity of the scale are both good.

1.3 Procedure

The scale was carried out in strict accordance with the psychological test procedure. The instructions were unified before filling out the scale, and all participants were asked to finish scale independently.

1.4 Data Processing

All data were statistically analyzed by using SPSS 20.0.

2. RESULT

2.1 The Overall Mental Health Status of Different Types of Female Left-Behind Middle School Students in Rural Areas

According to the scoring principle of the scale, the student has moderate or serious mental health problem when the scores of each subscale are greater than or equal to 3 points. Table 1 reported the overall mental health status of different types of female left-behind middle school students in rural areas.

Table 1
The Overall Mental Health Status of Different Types of Rural Female Left-Behind Middle School Students

	Types (number)	Number and rate of mental health problem
Grade	Junior school students(203)	77(38%)
	High school students(487)	187(38%)
Only child or not	Only child(374)	150(40%)
	None-only child(316)	115(36%)
Workplace of parents	Sichuan province(276)	94(34%)
	Other provinces(414)	169(41%)
Time of spending with parents	a (503)	187(37%)
	b (137)	40(29%)
	c (50)	14(28%)

2.2 The Comparison of Mental Health Status of Rural Junior and High School Students in Factors

Table 2
The Comparison of Junior School Students and High School Students

Factor	Junior school students(<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>)	High school students(<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>
Compulsion	2.4044±0.543	2.2516±0.653	3.167**
Crankiness	2.0851±0.576	1.973±0.662	2.228*
Hostility	2.0857±0.713	1.962±0.758	1.987*
Average total Score	2.2106±0.495	2.1494±0.599	1.388

Note. * indicates $P < .05$, ** indicates $P < .01$, *** indicates $P < .001$.

According to the data analysis, we can know that the scores of female left-behind high school students were higher than female left-behind junior school students in learning stress and anxiety. But in other aspects, the scores of female left-behind high school students were lower than female left-behind junior school students (The table didn't list the difference that significance level was over .05). Significant difference was found in compulsion,

crankiness and hostility between junior school students and high school students reported in Table 2 ($P<.05$).

2.3 The Comparison of Mental Health Status of Rural Female Left-Behind Middle School Students Who Are the Only Children or Not in Factors

Table 3
The Comparison of the Only Child and Non-Only Child

Factor	Only child (M±SD)	Non-only child(M±SD)	t
Anxiety	2.425±0.863	2.277±0.714	2.461*
Learning stress	2.502±0.819	2.380±0.736	2.062*
Average total score	2.189±0.622	2.142±0.503	1.12

Note. * indicates $P<.05$, ** indicates $P<.01$, *** indicates $P<.001$.

Through *t*-test of the score of only children and non-only children, we found that all factor scores of only children were higher than non-only children except the score in compulsion, and the scores of only children were significantly higher than non-only children in anxiety and learning stress ($P<.05$).

2.4 The Comparison of Mental Health Status of Rural Female Left-Behind Middle School Students in Different Workplaces of Parents in Factors

The data of Table 4 showed that all factor scores of rural female left-behind middle school students whose parents worked in Sichuan province were significantly lower than the students whose parents worked in other

provinces ($P<.05$), and there existed very significant differences in compulsion, crankiness, hostility, interpersonal sensitivity and tension, depression ($P<.001$).

Table 4
The Comparison of Different Workplaces of Parents

Factor	Sichuan province	Other provinces	t
Compulsion	2.172±0.580	2.380±0.642	-4.335***
Crankiness	1.869±0.580	2.098±0.661	-4.683***
Hostility	1.842±0.688	2.103±0.767	-4.571***
Interpersonal Sensitivity and Tension	2.057±0.699	2.265±0.732	-3.716***
Depression	2.021±0.678	2.235±0.747	-3.821***
Anxiety	2.243±0.774	2.434±0.811	-3.088**
Learning stress	2.336±0.803	2.519±0.763	-3.027**
Maladjustment	2.043±0.643	2.188±0.672	-2.813**
Emotional stability	2.260±0.673	2.373±0.679	-2.143*
Mental imbalance	1.717±0.576	1.825±0.656	-2.217*
Total average score	2.056±0.538	2.242±0.580	-4.246***

Note. * indicates $P<.05$, ** indicates $P<.01$, *** indicates $P<.001$.

2.5 The Comparison of Mental Health Status of Rural Female Left-Behind Middle School Students Who Spent With Parents for Different Time of Factors

Table 5
The Comparison of Different Time Spent With Parents

Factor	Time	Different quotient	p	Factor	Time	Different quotient	p
Compulsion	a-b	0.19858*	.001	Learning stress	a-b	0.22806*	.002
	a-c	0.25441*	.006		a-c	0.14987	.195
	b-c	0.05583	.586		b-c	-0.07819	.544
Crankiness	a-b	0.19985*	.001	Maladjustment	a-b	0.20584*	.001
	a-c	0.21093*	.025		a-c	0.21659*	.027
	b-c	0.01108	.916		b-c	0.01075	.921
Hostility	a-b	0.18088*	.012	Emotional stability	a-b	0.15646*	.016
	a-c	0.08775	.427		a-c	0.20740*	.039
	b-c	-0.09313	.449		b-c	0.05094	.648
Interpersonal sensitivity and tension	a-b	0.22552*	.001	Mental imbalance	a-b	0.13460*	.026
	a-c	0.22409*	.036		a-c	0.14386	.121
	b-c	-0.00143	.99		b-c	0.00926	.929
Depression	a-b	0.21265*	.002	Mental health status	a-b	0.19800*	0
	a-c	0.17343	.106		a-c	0.18580*	.027
	b-c	-0.03922	.743		b-c	-0.0122	.896
Anxiety	a-b	0.23751*	.002				
	a-c	0.18963	.109				
	b-c	-0.04788	.716				

Note. * indicates $P<.05$, ** indicates $P<.01$, *** indicates $P<.001$.

A one-way ANOVA was carried out on the factor scores of different time spent with parents in table 5, which indicated that there existed significant differences in all kinds of factors. The significance levels in compulsion, crankiness, interpersonal sensitivity and tension, maladjustment and the total average scores were all below .001; the significance levels in learning stress, hostility, depression, anxiety, emotional stability and mental imbalance were all below .01; the significance levels in other factors were all below .05. In addition, significant differences were found in compulsion, crankiness, interpersonal sensitivity and tension, maladjustment, emotional stability and the total average scores aiming at the time horizon of a-b and the time horizon of a-b ($p < .05$), and significant differences were found in hostility, depression, learning stress and mental imbalance aiming at the time horizon of a-b ($p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

According to investigation of Zeng (2002), about 13% to 20% of middle school students had mental health problems. The results of this study demonstrated that 38% of rural female left-behind middle school students had mental health problems, which were higher than the percent of middle school students. Although it was perhaps inevitable that random factors like research instruments and samples would affect the final results, we should pay close attention to this problem.

The above results for the comparison of junior school students and high school students indicated that female left-behind junior school students had more mental health problems in compulsion, crankiness and hostility. The reasons may be that junior school students are in adolescence, and they are growing in physiological function and individual mentality. At the same time, faced with the rapid mature of psychology and physiology, junior school students could show higher vulnerability than high school students. Therefore, female left-behind junior school students had more mental health problems than female left-behind high school students.

As for the comparison of the only child and non-only child, the results showed that the only child had more mental health problems such as anxiety and learning stress. Meanwhile, the only child was more likely to feel nervous and anxious, hate homework, fear to be questioned, and so on. The reasons of the differences may be that parents always pay much attention to the only child, so that the only child will feel more pressure from parents, which is different from the non-only child's situation that parents need to pay attention to more than one child together. As a result, the only child will feel more anxiety and have more serious mental health problems.

The key factor affecting the time that rural female left-behind students spend with parents is whether the

parents of rural female left-behind students work in the province or not. The parents who work in the province can spend much more time with their children than the parents who work outside the province. Furthermore, our research showed that the students whose parents work outside the province had more mental health problem than the students whose parents work in the province; that is to say, more time spent with parents can promote mental health status of female left-behind middle school students. Based on the interview to a female left-behind middle school student, we knew that the girl felt very lonely and unhappy when her parents worked outside the province two years ago. Because her parents returned home only at the Spring Festival every year, and she had little communication with her parents. But when her parents worked in the province last year, her parents could go home and stay with her in holiday. Therefore, she could receive more care and kindness from parents.

Many researchers defined the time that the parents of left-behind children leave home to work, in order that similar researches could be carried out more conveniently. Lui (2005) thought the time that the parents of left-behind children leave home to work should be over six months every year. Ye (2005) defined the time that the parents of left-behind children leave home to work as over four months every year in his research to the left-behind children in the central and western China. Considering that some parents would bring their children to their workplace and take better care of them, we defined the time that the parents of left-behind children leave home to work as two months, four months and six months respectively and compared the differences of different time. This study demonstrated that female left-behind middle school students who spent with parents below two months every year had more mental health problem than the students who spent with parents over two months every year. The finding was consistent with the result of Wang (2006), which means that less time spent with parents for female left-behind middle school students may lead to more mental health problems. Further research revealed that longer interval time of going home might cause estranged relationship between children and parents, which was consistent with the finding of Zhang and Yang (2007). Therefore, parents should spend more time with children in order to improve children's mental health status and get closer to children.

SUMMARY

In terms of rural female left-behind middle school students who are in adolescence, mental health status will have an effect on their development in the future. At the same time, affected by the concept that men are superior to women, rural female left-behind middle school students

are in more adverse position, which will cause their more serious mental health problem and affect the healthy development of their personality. Therefore, family, school, society and government should take effective measures as soon as possible to improve the mental health status of rural female left-behind middle school students. For example, society can provide positive psychological support system and make them feel the warm and care, which will help them ease the anxiety and loneliness.

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