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Author(s)	Fu, Y; Law, YW
Citation	The 20th Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR 2016), Washington, DC., 13-17 January 2016.
Issued Date	2016
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/234299
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LIVING WITH PROLONGED PARENT-CHILD SEPARATION BY MIGRATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ABOUT LEFT-BEHIND LIFE FROM ADOLESCENT'S PERCEPTION

***Yao Fu, MSW**, PhD Candidate, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China*

Yik Wa Law, PhD, Assistant Professor, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE: In the context of a large flow of rural-urban migration in China, more than 61 million children and adolescents are left behind in rural areas by their migrant parents. While increasing studies find negative effects of left-behind life on children's psychological well-being, the understanding on how coping sustains left-behind adolescent's psychological well-being in the context of parental migration is lacking.

The purpose of this study is to fill the gap by exploring meaning and experiences of left-behind life from theoretical perspectives of meaning-focused coping and adolescent coping. Such knowledge is essential to develop interventions promoting left-behind adolescent's psychological well-being.

METHODS: This study adopted phenomenological method. Participants were recruited by purposive sampling method during home visits in two counties of southwestern of China. Semi-structure interviews were conducted with 17 left-behind adolescents (9 male, 8 female; Average age = 14). Eleven of them were stayed behind by both parents, 5 were stayed behind by migrant father and 1 was stayed behind by migrant mother. Almost all of these participants had experienced left-behind life for more than 10 years. Each participant was asked to responded questions including how they perceived their parental migration and how they coped with stress in left-behind life. Data was open coded and transformed to meaning units and then to themes in the Nvivo 9, guided by Colazzi's analysis method. Written notes were used for triangulation to support the trustworthiness of this study.

FINDINGS: Nine themes emerged and grouped into 4 categories. Three themes formed experiences of being left-behind: adaptation, detachment, and daily hassles. Although adolescents adapted to parental migration physically, they felt the emotional detachment to their parents while showing weak attachment to their caregivers (often grandparents) as well. Besides, they experienced more daily hassles than peers.

Two themes "sense-making" and "benefit-finding" showed ways through which adolescents found a positive meaning of parental migration. Two themes emerged within the category of coping strategies: internal coping and interpersonal coping. Adolescent's internal coping focused on regulating emotion by self-reliance and manifesting their cognitive efforts by utilizing positive beliefs about adversity as well as goal setting or goal reminding. Adolescent interpersonal coping relied heavily on peers to seek support.

Two themes "socialization of coping" and "self-learning" revealed pathways through which adolescent learnt coping. Finding suggested that the school system replaced the family as the most powerful context in which teachers and peers facilitated left-behind adolescent's

socialization of coping. Additionally, books and media were found as other resources for adolescent's self-learning about coping.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: Findings reveal ways in which adolescents utilize meaning-making and coping strategies to deal with parental migration, which can provide directions for further research and interventions promoting the psychological well-being of left-behind adolescents. Given the important role of peers in left-behind adolescent's coping, peer support is suggested to reinforce. Social workers also can facilitate adolescent's cognitive coping by meaning-making in adversities and helping them find purpose in life. Furthermore, schools are considered as protective networks to support left-behind adolescent's learning of coping.