

A Study on the Impact of Chinese Left-behind Children's Perceptions of Parental Absence on Their Self-Image and Social Identity

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Abstract: This paper delves into the impact of Chinese left-behind children's perceptions of parental absence on their self-image and social identity. Through analyzing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses of left-behind children, the study reveals the negative effects of parental absence on them. It is found that emotional neglect and absence of life by parents lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and other emotional issues in left-behind children, which in turn distort their self-image and social identity. The article further analyzes specific manifestations of left-behind children's social identity, such as social avoidance and low self-worth, and discusses influencing factors from the dimensions of family, school, and society. The research methods primarily include literature review, theoretical analysis, and case studies. The conclusion points out that to improve the social identity of left-behind children, it is necessary to strengthen family education guidance, improve the school care system, build social support networks, and strengthen policy support.

Keywords: Left-behind Children; Parental Absence; Self-Image; Social Identity; Emotional Neglect; Countermeasures and Suggestions

1. Introduction

With the rapid economic and social development of China and the accelerated urbanization process, a large number of rural surplus labor force has poured into cities, leading to an increasingly prominent issue of left-behind children [1]. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics' "China Statistical Yearbook 2023," in 2022, the number of left-behind rural children enrolled in primary schools in China reached 6.9 million, with 3.966 million enrolled in junior high schools, totaling approximately 10.866 million left-behind rural children at the compulsory education stage [2]. Behind this staggering figure lies the reality that countless children lack direct parental care and companionship during their growth.

Left-behind children refer to those who are left behind in their hometowns and cared for by other relatives due to their parents' long-term work away from home. Lacking direct parental care and companionship during critical periods of their growth, they face numerous psychological and social adaptation challenges. Emotional companionship from family is crucial for children's socialization process, but left-behind children struggle to obtain sufficient emotional support from their parents due to their prolonged absence. This emotional deficit can not only trigger psychological issues such as anxiety and low self-esteem in left-behind children but also profoundly affects their self-image and social identity [3].

Self-image refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their own value, abilities, and appearance, while social identity involves their perception of their status, role, and value in society. Both play a crucial role in children's mental health and social adaptation. Research shows that the intertwining of parental emotional neglect and absence creates implicit memories of left-behind trauma and negative emotional experiences in left-behind children, further distorting their self-image and social identity [4]. For example, due to the lack of parental love, left-behind children may feel inferior, leading to withdrawal and avoidance behavior in social interactions.

The issue of left-behind children is not only prevalent in China but is particularly prominent in major labor-exporting provinces such as Sichuan, Guangxi, and Hunan. The number of left-behind

children in these regions accounts for a high proportion of the national total, and they face multiple difficulties such as lack of education, emotional deprivation, and poor communication [5]. Additionally, left-behind children encounter more challenges in peer and family relationships, academic achievement, and early dropout. Therefore, in-depth research on how Chinese left-behind children perceive their parents' absence and how this perception affects their self-image and social identity is of great significance for formulating effective intervention measures and promoting social equity.

Given the severity and urgency of the left-behind children issue, this study aims to delve into the psychological and social adaptation problems of left-behind children in China, particularly how they perceive their parents' absence and how this perception affects their self-image and social identity. Through this study, we hope to provide a useful reference for research and practice on the issue of left-behind children.

2. Research on Left-behind Children's Perceptions of Parental Absence

2.1. The Intertwining of Emotional Neglect and Absence from Life

The intertwined emotional neglect and absence from life of parents shape the implicit memories of left-behind trauma and negative emotional experiences in left-behind children. This emotional deficiency leads to a severe lack of family emotional support for left-behind children, resulting in emotional depletion states such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and marginalization.

(1) Emotional Neglect and Absence in Daily Life

Left-behind children often experience profound emotional neglect and absence in their daily lives. They may find it difficult to share their daily joys and sorrows with their parents, who are often absent due to work commitments. When faced with challenges, these children lack immediate support and comfort, leaving them feeling isolated and unsupported. Holidays and special occasions, which are typically marked by family gatherings, often pass without the presence of their parents, exacerbating their sense of loneliness.

(2) Impact on Mental Health

The emotional deficiency caused by parental absence and neglect has a profound impact on the mental health of left-behind children. They may develop anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of marginalization. These negative emotions not only affect their current well-being but can also have long-lasting effects, transmitting intergenerationally and impacting their emotional lives and interpersonal relationships as adults.

(3) Gender and Age Differences

The perception of parental absence varies among left-behind children based on their gender and age. Girls may be more sensitive to emotional neglect, experiencing greater loneliness, while boys may be more concerned about the practical absence of their parents, such as the lack of companionship in sports or outdoor activities. Younger children tend to rely more on their parents for direct care and emotional support, while older children may seek role modeling and guidance for future planning from their parents.

2.2. The Impact of Parents' Migrant Work on Social and Psychological Health

Parents' migrant work significantly increases the probability of social and psychological issues in left-behind children.

(1) Specific Probabilities of Social and Psychological Issues

Research has shown that the probabilities of self-loneliness and social avoidance in left-behind children are 10.63% and 10.96% higher, respectively, than those in non-left-behind children. When mothers migrate for work, left-behind children are more prone to feelings of self-loneliness, and the younger they are, the higher the probability of such feelings. As they grow older, left-behind children are more likely to engage in social avoidance behaviors.

(2) Different Types of Migrant Work

The type of migrant work undertaken by parents also influences the perception of absence in left-behind children. For instance, children whose parents both migrate for work may experience a

greater sense of abandonment and emotional deprivation compared to those whose parents migrate individually. Long-term migration tends to have a more pronounced impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of left-behind children.

(3) Adaptation Strategies

Left-behind children employ various strategies to cope with their parents' absence. Some may develop close peer relationships to compensate for the lack of family affection, while others may adopt psychological defense mechanisms to manage their emotions. These strategies, while helpful to a certain extent, may not fully address the underlying issues of emotional neglect and absence.

(4) Impact of Communication Methods

The way parents communicate with their left-behind children also affects their perception of absence. Traditional communication methods, such as phone calls, may not be as effective in conveying emotional support and understanding as more personal interactions like video calls or letters. Effective communication is crucial in mitigating the loneliness and anxiety experienced by left-behind children.

3. Research on Left-behind Children's Self-Image and Social Identity

3.1. Lack and Cultivation of Self-Identity

Existing research on the lack and cultivation of self-identity in left-behind children reveals the severe challenges faced by this group in terms of self-identity and the importance of cultivation strategies. Studies show that due to the deviation of parental care, insufficient school care, and lack of social care, left-behind children encounter significant obstacles in forming self-identity. They often feel profound loneliness, helplessness, and confusion, making it difficult to build a positive self-image and social identity. This lack of self-identity not only profoundly affects the mental health of left-behind children but may also lead to a series of problems in their academic performance, daily life, and interpersonal relationships.

Regarding the cultivation strategies for left-behind children's self-identity, relevant research has put forward various suggestions. Schools should play a crucial role by offering systematic mental health education courses to provide a platform for left-behind children to cognize, accept, and enhance themselves. Meanwhile, families should provide more emotional support and practical care to left-behind children to enhance their sense of family belonging and security. Furthermore, society should strengthen its focus on left-behind children, offering them more growth opportunities and resource support through the joint efforts of the government, non-governmental organizations, and various sectors of society, thereby promoting the healthy development of their self-identity.

3.2. Deviant Behavior and Distorted Social Identity

There is a close and complex relationship between deviant behavior and distorted social identity in left-behind children. Research indicates that deviant behavior in left-behind children not only reflects their inadequate internalization of social norms but also reveals a distorted state of social identity. Left-behind children may seek external attention and recognition through misconduct, using it as a compensatory mechanism for parental absence and emotional deficiency. This behavioral pattern not only exacerbates the negative development of their self-image and social identity but may also have adverse effects on others and society.

Furthermore, research has found that the correlation between deviant behavior and distorted social identity in left-behind children is mainly manifested in their cognitive biases regarding self-worth and social roles. Due to the lack of proper guidance from parents and sufficient emotional support, left-behind children often struggle to form a positive self-identity and social role cognition. They may view themselves as marginalized groups in society, expressing dissatisfaction and rebellion through deviant behavior, further distorting their social identity. Therefore, when intervening in deviant behavior among left-behind children, emphasis should be placed on the restoration and reconstruction of their social identity, helping them establish correct values and social identity through psychological counseling, behavior correction, and social support.

3.3. Dilemma of Social Role Identity and Self-Positioning

Left-behind children face numerous challenges and dilemmas in terms of social role identity and self-positioning. Due to long-term separation from their parents, they lack necessary family support and emotional guidance, making it difficult to form a clear and stable social role identity and self-positioning. This lack of identity and positioning not only affects the mental health and personality development of left-behind children but may also lead to a series of problems in their social adaptation and interpersonal relationships.

Research points out that left-behind children often feel confused and lost regarding their social roles and status, finding it challenging to determine their positions and roles in society. They may simultaneously desire acceptance and recognition while fearing rejection and exclusion, this contradictory mindset exacerbating their difficulties in social adaptation. To address this issue, research has proposed various improvement suggestions. Families should strengthen communication and connection with left-behind children, providing them with more love and companionship. Schools should offer mental health education courses and social practice activities to help left-behind children understand themselves and society. Society should increase its focus on and assistance to left-behind children, eliminating prejudice and discrimination against them, and providing them with more development opportunities and resource support. Through these efforts, we can help left-behind children form a positive social role identity and self-positioning, promoting their healthy growth and comprehensive development.

4. Manifestations and Influencing Factors of Social Identity Among Left-Behind Children

4.1. Specific Manifestations of Social Identity

The social identity of left-behind children is specifically manifested in their perception of their status, roles, and values in society. In the context of parental absence, left-behind children often struggle to form a correct social identity due to a lack of sufficient family support and positive guidance. This deviation in identity may manifest as confusion about their self-identity and role, making it difficult for them to establish a positive self-image. For example, some left-behind children may view themselves as abandoned or unwanted individuals, a perception that further exacerbates their feelings of inferiority and loneliness. Additionally, left-behind children may exhibit withdrawal or avoidance behavior in social interactions, reflecting their social identity barriers to some extent.

The issue of social identity among left-behind children is not only related to their individual cognition but also closely linked to their mental health status. Existing research, such as the "Study on the Relationship Between Social Identity and Mental Health of Left-Behind Children" [6], points out that distorted social identity can lead to psychological problems such as inferiority and loneliness among left-behind children, which further impact their daily life and academic performance.

4.2. Analysis of Influencing Factors

The formation and change of social identity among left-behind children are influenced by various factors, primarily including family, school, and society.

(1) Family Factors: The absence of parents is a crucial factor in the distortion of social identity among left-behind children. The family is a crucial environment for children's growth, and parental care and companionship play an irreplaceable role in the formation of children's social identity. However, due to parents' long-term absence for work, left-behind children are unable to receive sufficient emotional support and correct value guidance from their families, directly leading to deviations in their social identity. The lack of a family environment not only affects the mental health of left-behind children but also exacerbates their social identity dilemmas.

(2) School Factors: Schools play a significant role in the formation of social identity among left-behind children. However, due to the uniqueness and complexity of left-behind children, schools often struggle to provide sufficient and targeted education and support. Issues such as insufficient educational resources and varying educational quality may also exacerbate the social identity dilemmas of left-behind children. Additionally, the lack of mental health education and extracurricular activities organization in schools may also impact the social identity of left-behind children. The absence of mental health education may prevent left-behind children from effectively addressing their

psychological issues, while the lack of extracurricular activities may limit their opportunities to expand their social circles and boost their self-confidence.

(3) Social Factors: The impact of the social environment on the social identity of left-behind children cannot be ignored. Prejudice and discrimination against left-behind children in society may cause them to feel inferior and excluded, further exacerbating their social identity dilemmas. Simultaneously, the lack of social support and care may leave left-behind children feeling lost and helpless regarding their social identity. Society should strengthen its attention and assistance to left-behind children, eliminate prejudice and discrimination against them, and provide them with more development opportunities and support.

5. Countermeasures and Suggestions to Strengthen the Social Identity of Left-behind Children

5.1. Strengthen Family Education Guidance

As the crucial environment for the formation of social identity among left-behind children, the reinforcement of family education guidance is vital for improving their social identity. Governments and social organizations should join forces to promote family education guidance, enhancing the educational awareness and capabilities of left-behind children's parents through regular family education lectures and training activities. Simultaneously, parents are encouraged to maintain close emotional connections and effective communication with left-behind children, ensuring they receive sufficient care and support. Additionally, a family education guidance service mechanism should be established to provide personalized educational guidance and support to left-behind children's families, helping them form a positive social identity within the family environment.

5.2. Improve the School Care System

Schools play a significant role in shaping the social identity of left-behind children. Schools should establish and improve files and care mechanisms for left-behind children, comprehensively tracking and recording their academic, living, and psychological conditions, providing targeted educational and counseling services. By strengthening school mental health education, offering mental health education courses and counseling activities, schools can help left-behind children build positive self-images and self-confidence. Organizing diverse extracurricular activities and club activities can expand their social circles, enhancing their sense of belonging and team collaboration abilities. Meanwhile, teachers' training and management should be strengthened to improve their professional competence and educational abilities, ensuring left-behind children receive sufficient care and support in the school environment.

5.3. Build a Comprehensive Social Support Network

Constructing a comprehensive and effective social support network is a crucial approach to improving the social identity of left-behind children. Governments and social organizations should mobilize forces from all sectors of society to participate in caring for left-behind children, establishing volunteer teams to provide learning tutoring, psychological counseling, and life care services. Fundraising and material support activities should be carried out to improve the living and learning environments of left-behind children. Media promotion should be enhanced to guide public opinion to focus on the issues of left-behind children, fostering a positive atmosphere of caring for them throughout society. Through these efforts, a multi-faceted and multi-level social support network can be constructed for left-behind children.

5.4. Strengthen Policy Support

The formulation and implementation of policies are fundamental guarantees for safeguarding the rights and interests of left-behind children and improving their social identity. The government should attach great importance to the issue of left-behind children, formulating and improving relevant laws, regulations, and policy measures to ensure the full protection of their legitimate rights and interests. Investments in public service facilities such as education and healthcare in rural areas should be increased to improve the living and learning conditions of left-behind children. A care and protection mechanism for left-behind children should be established to provide timely and effective assistance and protection services. Meanwhile, monitoring and evaluation of left-behind children's issues should be

strengthened, with regular reports on their conditions issued to provide a scientific basis for policy formulation and adjustment.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

This paper systematically explores how the perceptions of Chinese left-behind children towards their parents' absence profoundly influence their self-image and social identity. The study found that parental absence has a significant negative impact on left-behind children at the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels, distorting their self-image and social identity. Specifically, left-behind children experience anxiety, inferiority, and other psychological issues, leaving a profound mark on their social and psychological development.

Further analysis reveals specific manifestations of left-behind children's social identity, uncovering deviations in their social role cognition, self-worth evaluation, and social status perception. These deviations not only reflect the challenges faced by left-behind children in mental health but also point out obstacles in their social adaptation and interpersonal communication.

From the dimensions of family, school, and society, the root causes of distorted social identity among left-behind children are deeply analyzed, including the lack of family care, insufficient school educational resources, and societal biases and discrimination against left-behind children.

Based on the above analysis, countermeasures and suggestions for strengthening the social identity of left-behind children are proposed, aiming to create a healthier and more positive growth environment for them through various measures such as strengthening family education guidance, improving the school care system, building a social support network, and strengthening policy support.

Looking ahead, future research can delve deeper into the following aspects: firstly, conducting differentiated analyses of the social identity status of left-behind children in different regions and age groups; secondly, further exploring the formation mechanism of left-behind children's social identity; and finally, exploring more effective intervention measures and policy suggestions to comprehensively improve the social identity of left-behind children and promote their healthy growth and comprehensive development.

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