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Moderating role of hope in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction among left-behind children in China

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We examined the moderating role of hope in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction among left-behind children in China. Participants were 588 left-behind pupils at three rural primary schools, who completed the Children's Hope Scale, the Perceived Discrimination Questionnaire of the Left-Behind Children, and the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale. Results show that there were significant correlations between the perceived discrimination, hope, and life satisfaction of our participants. In addition, hope significantly alleviated the negative effect of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction. We can conclude that perceived discrimination and hope both significantly predicted life satisfaction, and hope moderated the effect of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction among left-behind children in China. Our findings have implications for school teachers and social workers to help reduce left-behind children's hurt resulting from perceived discrimination.

Keywords

perceived discrimination; hope; life satisfaction; leftbehind children; mental health; well-being

According to China's sixth census, more than 58 million Chinese children, accounting for 21.9% of all children, are left behind in rural areas because their parents are compelled to move hundreds of miles away to urban areas for work (F. Zhao & Yu, 2016); these are called *left-behind children* (Chang et al., 2011). Isolation from their parents for long periods may lead to mental health problems (Fan et al., 2010; Jia & Tian, 2010; X. Zhao et al., 2014) because left-behind children experience unpleasant situations, such as being looked down on and/or bullied by peers, and they feel discriminated against by other individuals or groups (Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005; J. Zhao et al., 2016). However, individuals may feel different levels of discrimination. *Perceived discrimination* refers to individuals' perception that they and their associated group (vs. other people) are receiving unequal treatment (Fresán et al., 2018). Such perceived unequal treatment gives left-behind children a negative emotional experience, which adversely influences their mental health and reduces their life satisfaction (Lan et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2016).

Life satisfaction is essentially a subjective assessment of individuals' quality of life (Peng et al., 2019; Wang & Peng, 2017). According to symbolic interactionism theory, individuals need to communicate with others and they use feedback assessments to build their self-concept (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). If people often experience discrimination, they internalize the discriminating evaluation and insinuating behavior into their self-concept. This will affect their self-values and further reduce their life satisfaction (Carter & Fuller, 2016), which is an important constituent of well-being (Zhang et al., 2014). Thus, researchers have pointed out in the rejection-identification model that perceived discrimination has a direct negative effect on

CORRESPONDENCE Xufeng Liu or Shengjun Wu, Department of Military Medical Psychology, Air Force Medical University, No. 169 Changle West Road, Xi'an 710032, People's Republic of China. Email: **lllfmmu@fmmu.edu.cn** or **wusj@fmmu.edu.cn** individuals' well-being (Yao et al., 2018). Researchers have documented the correlation between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction in many populations, including college students, immigrants, and ethnic minorities (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Peng et al., 2018; Stronge et al., 2016; Verkuyten, 2008). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived discrimination will negatively affect the life satisfaction of left-behind children.

Although the absence of parental care may affect, to some extent, the mental health of left-behind children, they do not all follow the unfavorable situation-pressure-maladaptation route (Dai & Chu, 2018). According to resilience theory, adverse circumstances and experiences do not necessarily lead to adverse developments (Masten, 2018). For example, Lan et al. (2018) found that belief in a just world moderated the effect of perceived discrimination on problem behavior in left-behind children. Further, Lan and colleagues (2019) reported that the self-esteem of left-behind children mediated the relationships between stressful life events and depression, and between stressful life events and nonsuicidal self-injury. According to conservation of resources theory, if left-behind children have sufficient psychological resources or capital to maintain a good status, they can relieve the harmful feelings caused by experiencing discrimination, and thereby adapt better (Brouer et al., 2011; Wang & Peng, 2017).

Hope is individuals' general feeling that their desires will be fulfilled, and it is a key factor of psychological capital. Goal-directed thinking, which is integral to hope, involves people's perceived capacity to find workable routes to achieve desired goals (pathways thinking) and the requisite motivation to use those routes (agency thinking; Bogler & Somech, 2019). Individuals with high (vs. low) hope are better at positive self-talk in the face of adversity, and they tend to see setbacks as opportunities for growth, and persevere to overcome difficulties (Levi et al., 2014; Snyder et al., 2002). Children with high hope can find future directions and identify clear goals, face failure positively and overcome it, and maintain trust in themselves (Sahranç et al., 2018; Vacek et al., 2010). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Hope will moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction among left-behind children.

In sum, although previous researchers have confirmed the relationships between perceived discrimination, hope, and life satisfaction, further clarity is needed. First, it is vital to explore the concurrent effects of perceived discrimination and hope on life satisfaction. To our knowledge, the moderating role of hope in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction has not yet been examined. Thus, we aimed to fill this gap in the literature, to better help children who are discriminated against. Second, as most researchers have examined perceived discrimination in the context of individualistic Western cultures, it is necessary to explore if their results possess cross-cultural homogeneity in a collectivistic Eastern culture, such as that of China.

Method

Participants

We distributed surveys to 598 left-behind children at three elementary schools in rural China, and received and validated 588 (98.32%) responses. Participants ranged in age from 8 to 13 years (M = 11.24, SD = 1.77). Of these participants, 297 were boys and 291 were girls, and 204 were the only child in their family, whereas 384 had one or more siblings.

Procedure

First, participants confirmed that they had volunteered to take part in this study, and we obtained verbal and written informed consent from them and from their parents. They then completed the paper-and-pencil survey in class, after which we gave each participant a ballpoint pen as a gift. The researchers and trained associates assisted participants who had difficulty filling in the survey. The Committee on Human

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Experimentation of the Air Force Medical University approved this study.

Measures

Perceived Discrimination Questionnaire of the Left-Behind Children

The six-item Perceived Discrimination Questionnaire of the Left-Behind Children was developed by Shen et al. (2009). The items are evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items are "I feel I have been treated unfairly" and "Compared with others, I have missed some opportunities." The scale has excellent validity and has been used successfully in previous studies (Lan et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2009). We analyzed the results using mean values. A higher score indicates that the child perceives more discrimination. Cronbach's alpha was .72 in this study.

The Children's Hope Scale

The six-item Children's Hope Scale was developed by Snyder et al. (1997). Items are assessed on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 6 = *all of the time*. Sample items are "I think I am doing pretty well" and "I am doing just as well as other kids at my age." The scale has been translated into Chinese and found to have adequate reliability and validity (B.-H, Zhao & Sun, 2011). Cronbach's alpha was .78 in this study.

Students' Life Satisfaction Scale

The seven-item Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991) was used to measure participants' satisfaction with life. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 4 = almost always. Sample items are "My life is going well" and "I have a good life." The scale has been translated into Chinese by Hou et al. (2009), and is widely used in China. Cronbach's alpha was .77 in this study.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using descriptive statistics, and conducted correlation and regression analyses with SPSS 20.0.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for each measure are presented in Table 1. Perceived discrimination was significantly and negatively correlated with hope. In addition, perceived discrimination and hope were both significantly correlated with life satisfaction. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 1. Correlations of Perceived Discrimination, Hope, and Life Satisfaction

| | М | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|------|-------|---|
| 1. Perceived discrimination | 2.37 | 0.87 | 1 | | |
| 2. Hope | 3.31 | 0.85 | 53** | 1 | |
| 3. Life satisfaction | 2.78 | 0.49 | 40** | .39** | 1 |

Note. ** *p* < .01.

Hierarchical regression was performed to test the moderating effect of hope in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction. Each variable was centered before the moderating effect was tested to reduce problems related to multicollinearity between the interaction term and the main term; life satisfaction was the dependent variable. In Step 1, perceived discrimination was entered into the regression equation and was found to predict life satisfaction. In Step 2, we entered the moderating variable of hope

into the regression equation, and it was found to be significantly related to life satisfaction after other variables were controlled for. In Step 3, the interaction of perceived discrimination \times hope was added, and a significant interaction was found, as predicted (see Table 2). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

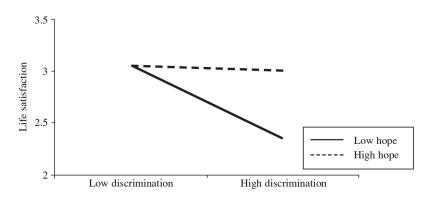
Table 2.
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Life Satisfaction From Perceived

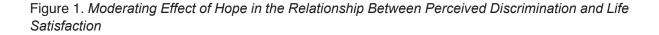
Discrimination and Hope
Image: Comparison of Comparison Comparison of Comparison Comp

| | β | t | F | R^2 | ΔR^2 | |
|---|-----|----------|---------|-------|--------------|--|
| Step 1: Perceived discrimination | 40 | -10.64** | 37.74** | .16 | | |
| Step 2: Hope | .25 | 5.76** | 38.18** | .20 | .04 | |
| Step 3: Perceived discrimination × Hope | .13 | 3.37** | 33.36** | .22 | .02 | |

Note. ** *p* < .01.

We conducted a simple slope regression analysis to further explain the moderating effect of hope in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction. Participants whose hope scores were one standard deviation above or below the mean were regarded as high- and low-hope participants, respectively. Compared to the high-hope participants ($\beta = -.08$, p = .39), the perceived discrimination of the low-hope participants significantly predicted decreased life satisfaction ($\beta = -.50$, p < .01; see Figure 1).





Discussion

In this study we explored the relationships between perceived discrimination, hope, and life satisfaction among a sample of left-behind children in China. We focused primarily on the moderating effect of hope in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction.

Our finding that perceived discrimination had a direct negative impact on the life satisfaction of left-behind children participants in China, aligns with the results of previous studies conducted with other populations (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Jamaludin et al., 2018; Safi, 2010). These findings are consistent with the theory of symbolic interactionism (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009), that is, as left-behind children internalize the negative effect of discrimination and subsequently develop a negative self-concept and a negative

perspective on their personal life, this decreases their life satisfaction. Our finding is significant because we have provided important evidence for the external validity of the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction in the collectivistic Eastern (Chinese) culture. This negative effect of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction may have universal applicability in different cultural backgrounds.

We also found that hope played a moderating effect in buffering and reducing the effect of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction. Zhang et al. (2014) pointed out that hope motivates individuals to set goals and initiate positive behavior. Hope is also a protective and psychological elastic factor enabling individuals to confront and address the problems and frustration that appear in goal-reaching endeavors (Ginevra et al., 2017; Schiavon et al., 2017). Our results show that hope was significantly correlated with both perceived discrimination and life satisfaction, and that hope significantly moderated the effect of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction. Thus, hope decreased the negative effect of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction. Thus, hope is an important protective factor for left-behind children (Vacek et al., 2010). In other words, hope is an important protective factor for left-behind children as they grow and develop (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). The parent–child separation involving parents' physical absence that results from children being left behind may cause severe problems for the children (Wilkinson, 2004). Nevertheless, the psychological capital of hope plays an important regulatory role, helping left-behind children make a positive subjective assessment of their life, and promoting their healthy mental development (Masten, 2018).

There are implications in this study for school teachers who have left-behind children in their class, and for social workers who help these children with their problems. Our results show that hope, as a psychological elastic factor, played an important moderating role in the relationship between perceived discrimination and life satisfaction among left-behind children (Levi et al., 2014). School teachers and staff members of public educational nonprofit organizations can reduce the negative effect of perceived discrimination on left-behind children to a certain extent by increasing their hope. Taking hope as an example, as we have pointed out, school teachers and social workers should consider left-behind children's potential and psychological capital, and help them develop and cultivate active psychological traits and positive resources (Snyder et al., 2002), so that they can improve their adaptability, face troubles and challenges positively, and thrive in unfavorable conditions (Lan et al., 2018).

There are several limitations in this study. First, participants were selected from left-behind children in elementary schools, ranging in age from 8 to 13 years, and they may differ to some extent from left-behind children of other ages. In addition, other children in the same age range as our participants may differ in their developmental stages, and their subjective perception of discrimination and life satisfaction may be different. Hence, our conclusions should be interpreted with caution. In future large-sample investigations, researchers could incorporate wider groups from different regions and of different ages, include other demographic variables, and take age group differences into consideration. This will improve the external validity of the findings. Second, we used self-reported scales, which may reduce the validity of the results. Third, because the study design was cross-sectional, we could not evaluate causal relationships. We recommend that future researchers conduct longitudinal and more comprehensive studies.

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