

Attachment, Psychological Wellbeing, and Educational Development among Child Members of Transnational Families

ABSTRACT

Objective: The current research investigated attachment styles, psychological wellbeing, and academic development among children in transnational family arrangements in Zimbabwe.

Methods: Purposive sampling was employed to select 57 children in transnational family arrangements and 41 children in conventional two-parent households aged between 8 and 14 years. Attachment Style Classification Questionnaire for latency-age children, Stirling Children's Well-being Scale, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and Questionnaire for Evaluation of Development and Behavior were applied.

Results: The results revealed that there were no significant differences in attachment styles, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and academic development between the transnational and conventional family groups. Social desirability and prosocial behavior were significantly lower in the transnational group. Children with both parents as migrants had significantly lower scores for psychological wellbeing and higher scores for emotional symptoms and literacy problems than children with one migrant parent or conventional families.

Conclusion: There was no difference in attachment styles and academic development, which may be a reflection of the strength of the extended family in substituting parental care. However, children in transnational family arrangements scored poorly on the prosocial subscale of psychological wellbeing, which is associated with family cohesion. Parental migration negatively impacts family cohesion, especially when both parents migrate. When both parents migrate, the children exhibited emotional symptoms, literacy problems, poor prosocial behaviors, and poor psychological wellbeing because children receive reduced social support. This study reveals that a child's age at the parent's departure, family cohesion, and economic security are integral to ensuring the wellbeing of children in transnational family arrangements.

Keywords: Attachment, mental health, child, education

Introduction

Human beings are heavily dependent on learning for development, especially during childhood. Physically, cognitive, and psychosocial developments rely on learning from the environment. Learning begins in the family context where the child establishes secure attachment.¹ A family is considered the basic unit of the society and is traditionally composed of two parents raising their offspring.² This definition has also grown to encompass various social units functioning as or equivalent to this traditional family structure such as single parenting, blended families, and transnational families. Methodologically and theoretically, families have always been perceived as nuclear and residing together, and geographical proximity was regarded as a prerequisite for family interaction.³ The advent of globalization brought about large-scale migration, which increased the popularity of the transnational family structure. McCarthy and Edwards⁴ define transnational families as family ties, membership, and



Gloria Manyeruke 

Yağmur Çerkez 

Aşkın Kiraz 

Ebru Çakıcı 

Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling, Near East University, Nicosia, Cyprus

Corresponding Author:

Gloria Manyeruke
✉ gloria.manyeruke@neu.edu.tr

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kinship that are sustained across multiple countries. Transnational families require the creation or maintenance of feelings of family connectedness, shared welfare, and a sense of belonging across two or more national borders.

“Save the Children” and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) indicate that approximately 25% of children in studied migrant-sending countries have at least one parent abroad.⁵ Stringent migration policies and personal preferences in societies that encourage child fostering have led to the increase of transnational families.⁶ The Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency estimate that 12.5% of children in Zimbabwe have at least one parent in the diaspora.⁷ Statistics from South Africa’s migration offices suggests that 45% of immigrant Zimbabweans leave their families behind.⁸ This percentage is even higher for host countries with stringent immigration laws. These statistics highlight the importance of research into transnational family arrangements.

The goal of this study is to investigate the effect of transnational family arrangements on children’s psychological wellbeing, attachment styles, and academic development.

Methods

This research was carried out as a cross-sectional study. It is a quantitative, comparative study where left-behind children (LBC) are compared with children in conventional family two-parent households.

Sampling

To collect data, three schools were selected from Masvingo district in Zimbabwe. These schools were selected on the basis of the assumed homogeneity of their student populations. Homogeneity was con-

sidered in regard to socioeconomic background and recruitment criterion. The participants were children who attended schools that cater to urban middle-class families. A sample of 57 LBC and 47 students from conventional households was purposively chosen. Table 1 depicts the sample’s demographic information.

Measures in the Students’ Questionnaire

Attachment Style Classification Questionnaire (ASCQ) for Latency-age Children: The ASCQ was designed by Finzi-Dottan.⁹ It has 15 items with a 5-point Likert scale. It measures the attachment styles of children aged 6-12 years. The scale has three subscales: secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment. It has a reliability coefficient of 0.733 Cronbach’s alpha. This instrument was also employed in a study conducted in Nigeria by Obikoya and Awujo¹⁰ who used measures of internal consistency to assert the reliability of the instrument. It has been proven to be reliable in both Western and Non-Western settings.¹⁰ The reliability test conducted for the current study revealed a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.55 for the secure, 0.55 for the anxious, and 0.51 for the avoidant subscale.

The Stirling Children’s Well-being Scale (SCWBS): The SCWBS was designed by Liddle and Carter¹¹ in 2015. It is a 15-item measure of psychological wellbeing scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The subscales are positive emotion, positive outlook, social desirability, and general wellbeing. It can be applied to children between the ages of 8 and 15 years. It has a reliability score of 0.75 Cronbach’s alpha. In this study, the positive emotion subscale had a reliability of 0.79 Cronbach’s alpha, positive outlook had a reliability of 0.70 Cronbach’s alpha, social desirability had 0.55 Cronbach’s alpha, and general wellbeing had 0.86 Cronbach’s alpha.

Measures in the Teachers’ Questionnaire

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for Teachers: The SDQ is a behavioral and emotional screening questionnaire that can be used for children between the ages of 3 and 16 years.¹² It is a 25-item questionnaire with five subscales, which are emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity or inattention, peer relationship problems, and prosocial behavior.¹² It has a reliability coefficient of between 0.59 and 0.81 Cronbach’s alpha. The SDQ was also used in research in Ghana and Nigeria.¹³ For this study, the emotional symptom subscale had a reliability of 0.79 Cronbach’s alpha, conduct problems had 0.69 Cronbach’s alpha, hyperactivity had 0.58 Cronbach’s alpha, peer relations had 0.19 Cronbach’s alpha, and prosocial behaviors had 0.74 Cronbach’s alpha.

Questionnaire for Evaluation of Development and Behavior (5-15R: Teacher’s Questionnaire): This 5-15R was designed by Kadesjo et al.¹⁴ The questionnaire was designed to measure the skills and behaviors of students in various developmental domains.¹⁴ It is applicable to children between the ages of 5 and 17 years. Cronbach’s alpha was between 0.86 and 0.96. In this study, four acquisition of academic skills subscales were used to measure educational development among the sampled students. The subscales are problem solving, reading and writing, arithmetic ability, and general learning. In this study, reading and writing had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86, arithmetic had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91, general learning had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.70, and problem solving had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86.

MAIN POINTS

- The research reveals that the migration of both parents as compared to either one of the parents migrating is associated with the left-behind child experiencing more developmental problems such as emotional symptoms, literacy problems, poor prosocial behaviors, and poor psychological wellbeing. These problems may arise as a result of loss of social support and family cohesion.
- The effects of parental migration on the left-behind child are based on environmental factors in the native country such as public perception of parental migration, gender roles and economic factors influencing migration.
- The research reveals that the child’s age at departure is an important factor that determines the child’s capacity to adapt to parental absence. Children that are older cope better with parental absence.
- In results of the study reveal that children of transnational fathers score higher on positive outlook than even children in conventional families, which may result from continued family cohesion ensured by the presence of the mother as well economic security offered by the migrant father. This is based on the gender roles in the society.
- The effects of parental migration on the left-behind child are based on environmental factors in the native country such as public perception of parental migration, gender roles and economic factors influencing migration. Therefore, the effects of parental migration are expected to differ from culture to culture.

Statistical Analysis

The data for this study were collected in adherence to the ethical principle of research by the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of Near East University which approved the research on January 22, 2019 (application number: YDU/EB/2018/282). The data was analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 24 (IBM Corp.; Armonk, NY, USA). The Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that the data were non-parametric. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the frequencies for demographic data. Chi-square was used to compare the attachment styles used by LBC and children in conventional families, and Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the psychological wellbeing of LCB with those of children in conventional family arrangements. The Mann-Whitney U test also enabled a comparison of the psychological wellbeing and academic development of LBC whose parents departed before the age of 5 years with those of children whose parents departed after the age of 5 years. To compare the psychological wellbeing and academic development of children in different transnational family arrangements, the Kruskal-Wallis test was employed, followed by pairwise analysis. Spearman's correlation analysis was used to measure the correlation between the child's age at departure and psychological wellbeing as well as academic development.

Results

The attachment styles of LBC and children living with their parents were compared using chi-square analysis, and no significant difference was found ($\chi^2 = 3.64$, difference = 2, $P = 0.162$). The dominant attachment style for both types of family arrangements is secure attachment, followed by anxious attachment and avoidant attachment styles.

The second objective is to compare the psychological wellbeing of the LBC with that of children raised in a conventional family. The SDQ and 5-15R were used to compare for two groups with Mann-Whitney U analysis (Table 2). There was no significant difference between groups on the subscales of positive emotion, positive outlook, and general wellbeing. However, the LBC score was significantly lower on the social desirability subscale ($P = 0.035$). The result shows no significant differences between LBC and the conventional family group on subscales of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and the overall psychological wellbeing score. LBC score was significantly low-

er than the conventional family group on prosocial subscale ($P = 0.011$) (Table 2).

Table 3 reveals that there are differences in psychological wellbeing according to emigrant parents on the subscales of the SCWBS, positive emotion ($P = 0.004$), positive outlook ($P = 0.002$), social desirability ($P = 0.001$), and general wellbeing ($P = 0.004$). On the 5-15R, significant differences were found on the subscales of emotional symptoms ($P = 0.037$) and prosocial behavior ($P = 0.001$). However, there is no significant difference in the subscales of conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and the cumulative score of psychological wellbeing. The further pairwise comparison revealed between which groups significant differences exist (Table 3).

The third objective is to examine the effect transnational family arrangements have on the LBCs' academic development. The results shown in Table 4 reveal that there is no significant difference in academic development according to which family member migrates in the transnational family on the subscales of problem solving, arithmetic, and general learning. Significant differences were found on the subscale of reading and writing problems ($P = 0.043$).

Spearman correlation analysis revealed a significant positive moderate correlation between the child's age at parent's departure and positive emotion, positive outlook, social desirability, and general wellbeing (Table 5). Spearman correlation analysis also shows that age at departure was highly correlated with all the subscales of the SCWBS, and moderately negatively correlated challenges with reading and writing. Mann-Whitney U analysis of children whose parents

Table 1. Frequency Table for the Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Demographic information		n (%)
Gender	Female	54 (55.1)
	Male	44 (44.9)
Family arrangement	Transnational	57 (58.2)
	Conventional	41 (41.8)
Transnational family arrangement	Emigrant mother	8 (14)
	Emigrant father	24 (42.1)
	Both emigrant parents	25 (43.1)
Place of residence	Boarding school	22 (22.9)
	At home	73 (76.1)

Table 2. Mann-Whitney U Comparison of Psychological Wellbeing According to Family Arrangements

	Transnational family arrangement			Conventional family arrangement			U	P
	n	Mean ranks	Sum of ranks	n	Mean ranks	Sum of ranks		
Positive emotions	55	45.59	2507.50	40	51.31	2052.50	967.50	0.317
Positive outlook	56	52.04	2914.00	40	43.55	1742.00	922.00	0.140
Social desirability	56	43.47	2434.50	40	55.54	2221.50	838.50	0.035 ^a
Psychological well-being	55	48.09	2645.00	40	47.88	1915.00	1095	0.970
Emotional symptoms	49	40.15	1967.50	34	44.66	1518.50	742.50	0.392
Conduct problems	49	40.77	1997.50	34	43.78	1488.50	772.50	0.562
Hyperactivity	49	40.87	2002.50	34	43.63	1483.50	777.50	0.602
Peer problems	49	42.86	2100.00	34	40.76	1386.00	791.00	0.695
Prosocial	49	36.45	1786.00	34	50.00	1700.00	561.00	0.011 ^a
Total	49	40.22	1971.00	34	44.56	1515.00	746.00	0.420

^a $P \leq 0.05$.

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis Comparison of Subscales of SDQ for Teachers and SCWBS According to the Transnational Family Arrangement

Subscales of the SCWBS	Emigrant parent	n	Mean rank	Chi	df	P	Significant differences
Positive emotions	Emigrant mother	9	41.33	13.509	3	0.004 ^a	3-2
	Emigrant father	23	60.61				3-4
	Both parents as emigrants	23	32.24				
	Conventional family	40	51.31				
Positive outlook	Emigrant mother	9	54.33	14.768	3	0.002 ^a	2-3
	Emigrant father	24	65.63				2-4
	Both parents as emigrants	23	36.96				
	Conventional family	40	43.55				
Social desirability	Emigrant mother	9	59.50	17.394	3	0.001 ^b	3-1
	Emigrant father	24	52.50				3-2
	Both parents as emigrants	23	27.78				3-4
	Conventional family	40	55.54				
Wellbeing	Emigrant mother	9	46.56	13.569	3	0.004 ^a	3-2
	Emigrant father	23	63.33				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	33.46				
	Conventional family	40	47.88				
Subscales of the SDQ							
Emotional symptoms	Emigrant mother	6	27.83	8.477	3	0.037 ^a	3-1
	Emigrant father	20	32.53				3-2
	Both parents as emigrants	23	50.00				
	Conventional family	34	44.66				
Prosocial	Emigrant mother	6	55.75	15.477	3	0.001 ^b	3-1
	Emigrant father	20	41.93				3-2
	Both parents as emigrants	23	26.65				3-4
	Conventional family	34	50.00				

Abbreviations: SCWBS, Stirling Children's Well-being Scale; SDQ, Strength and Difficulties questionnaire.

^a $P \leq 0.05$.^b $P \leq 0.001$.**Table 4. Kruskal-Wallis Analysis of Academic Development According to the Transnational Family Arrangement**

Subscales of academic development	Emigrant parent	n	Mean Rank	Chi	df	P	Significant difference
Problem solving	Emigrant mother	7	37.07	3.679	3	0.298	
	Emigrant father	19	36.08				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	48.13				
	Conventional family	31	38.32				
Reading and writing	Emigrant mother	6	24.50	8.144	3	0.043 ^a	3-1
	Emigrant father	18	35.17				3-4
	Both parents as emigrants	20	47.63				
	Conventional family	30	34.75				
Arithmetic ability	Emigrant mother	6	30.33	5.841	3	0.120	
	Emigrant father	18	35.58				
	Both parents as emigrants	20	46.05				
	Conventional family	30	34.38				
General learning	Emigrant mother	6	31.75	7.235	3	0.065	
	Emigrant father	18	32.78				
	Both parents as emigrants	20	46.28				
	Conventional family	28	32.93				

^a $P \leq 0.05$.

migrated before the age of 5 years in comparison with those whose parental migration was after the age of 5 years revealed significantly lower scores for positive outlook ($P = 0.006$), social desirability ($P = 0.024$), and general psychological wellbeing ($P = 0.060$) and significantly higher scores on the subscale of conduct problems ($P = 0.054$).

Discussion

The results show no significant difference in attachment styles according to family structure; the most common attachment style is secure attachment. This is against the assertion by Zhao et al¹⁵ that during long periods of separation from parents, children may devel-

Table 5. Spearman’s Analysis of the Correlation between Age at Departure and Subscales of the SCWBS and 5-15R

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Age at departure	r	0.409	0.478	0.386	0.464	-0.242	-0.310	-0.254	-0.258
	P	0.003 ^a	<0.001 ^b	0.005 ^a	0.001 ^b	0.109	0.052 ^a	0.113	0.108
Positive emotion			0.848	0.476	0.968	-0.197	-0.169	-0.187	-0.293
			<0.001 ^b	<0.001 ^b	<0.001 ^b	0.084	0.150	0.111	0.012
Positive outlook				0.480	0.954	-0.150	-0.099	-0.107	-0.239
				<0.001 ^b	<0.001 ^b	0.188	0.401	0.366	0.043 ^a
Social desirability					0.496	-0.130	0.085	-0.173	-0.197
					<0.001 ^b	0.253	0.472	0.141	0.098
Psychological well-being						-0.186	-0.144	-0.157	-0.283
						0.104	0.221	0.180	0.016 ^a
Problem solving							0.776	0.577	0.789
							<0.001 ^b	<0.001 ^b	<0.001 ^b
Reading and writing								0.778	0.845
								<0.001 ^b	<0.001 ^b
Arithmetic									0.637
									<0.001 ^b
General learning									

Abbreviations: SCWBS, Stirling Children’s Well-being Scale; 5-15R, questionnaire for evaluation of development and behavior; 1, age at departure; 2, positive emotion; 3, positive outlook; 4, social desirability; 5, psychological wellbeing; 6, problem solving; 7, reading and writing; 8, arithmetic; 9, general learning.

^aP ≤ 0.05.

^bP < 0.001.

op negative emotions that may result in disruptions in attachment. According to Zhao et al¹⁵, the attachment styles employed by children reflect their perceptions of parental migration.

Children’s perception of parental migration may be influenced by social norms and family dynamics. Sub-Saharan Africa has a long history of child fostering where child rearing is considered a communal responsibility.¹⁶ An ancient African proverb states that “it takes a village to raise a child.” Furthermore, technology enables children to maintain constant contact with migrant parents through video, voice calls, and instant messaging.¹⁷ Remittance is also a mode used by migrant parents to provide care to LBC.¹⁸ This helps transnational families maintain a sense of togetherness. Relationships in the transnational family are reconfigured to incorporate extended family members or co-present caregivers into the nuclear family, which enables them to substitute parental care.

The results of self-reports of psychological wellbeing and teacher’s reports reveal significant differences between LBC and children in conventional families on the subscales of social desirability and prosocial behavior. Social desirability scale is associated with providing socially acceptable responses. Similarly, prosocial behaviors subscale encompasses helping and being considerate of the feelings of others. According to Chernyak et al¹⁹, prosocial behaviors in children include altruism, co-operating, and sharing. Kufakurinani et al²⁰ describes LBC as delinquent, reckless, disrespectful, snobbish, and profligate, which is congruent with low prosocial behavior scores. Wen and Lin²¹ suggest that family cohesion and supervision promote prosocial behavior. Both are negatively impacted by parental emigration. Porta and Brown²² define family cohesion as the affectional bond shared within the family.

The results show differences in psychological wellbeing according to a transnational family arrangement, similar to studies by Mazzuca-to et al¹³ in Angola. Children with both migrant parents report lower

scores of psychological wellbeing, and teachers report this group to have more emotional symptoms than the group with an emigrant parent or conventional family settings. This may result from the trade-off between parental time input and financial input. Zhao et al¹⁵ allude that the emotional toll caused by parental absence negatively impacts the child’s psychological wellbeing because material gains fail to substitute care. According to Graham et al,²³ LBC report being sad, feeling lonely, and struggling with managing emotions. LBC are also more vulnerable because of neglect, poor emotional support, or reluctance to seek social support. Children are likely to detach themselves from absent parents, which decreases social support and isolates them.²⁴ Disruptions in power dynamics in the family cause a vacuum of authority figures and care; this is congruent with the term diaspora orphans used to describe LBC in Zimbabwe.²⁰ The term depicts their vulnerability and emotional struggle. When both parents migrate, LBC are likely to experience less family cohesion because the child loses more elements associated with the family such as the house, furniture, and neighbors, which may account for their poor prosocial scores.²¹

The emigrant father group scored significantly higher on the subscale of positive outlook than all the other family arrangements. According to Jampaklay and Vapattanawong,²⁵ children are more likely to have a positive outlook if they perceive the family to be supportive and functioning effectively. Children do not view paternal absence negatively if their mother is around to care for them.²⁶ Remittance provided by the emigrant father increase family income and changes how family income is distributed.²⁷ Jiang and Yang²⁷ assert that migration increases paternal bargaining power over family income, which leads to decreased investment in child-related expenses; however, Fialkowska²⁸ states that transnational fathers slowly disengage from emotional involvement with the family to function as a nominal father, which is also known as a father by the cheque. Mothers are more likely to expand more in investing in quality education, nutrition, and healthcare for their offspring. According to Fialkowska,²⁸ the

fathering role in a family is associated with authority, economy, and defense. These characteristics are threatened by the children's awareness of the unemployment and poverty prevalent in Zimbabwe.²⁹ Positive outlook and resilience are associated with the economic status of the family, flexibility, and effective communication.³⁰

The results of the teacher's assessment of students' academic development revealed no significant differences between the scores of LBC and those of children in conventional family arrangements. This may indicate the improved financial investment in education afforded by remittance and reduced child labor, which is associated with parental migration.³¹ However, when both parents emigrate, children have significantly more problems in reading and writing. This is another effect of the money-time substitution. Many research link parental involvement to improved academic performance because parents provide motivation and support for learning.³² Furthermore, parents reading with the child and teaching them are linked to the acquisition of literacy skills.³³ Problems in reading and writing are also negatively correlated with the child's age at departure, which reveals the importance of parents' involvement in early childhood literacy activities.

Age at the departure of parents was revealed to be highly correlated to psychological wellbeing. A UNICEF study in Moldova indicated that age at departure affects the child's acceptance of parental departure where younger children experience this as abandonment, but older children have a better understanding of the rationale that motivated parental migration.³⁴ Also, LBC whose parents emigrated before the age of 5 years were found to be at risk of psychological trauma.³⁵ Younger children externalize their emotions more.³⁴

This research investigated the attachment styles, psychological wellbeing, and educational development of children in transnational family arrangements. The attachment styles employed by LBCs suggest that they have a positive perception of their parent's migration. The age of the child at departure and the society's perception of parental emigration may contribute to the resilience evident in the LBC attachment styles and academic development. In consideration of psychological wellbeing, LBC were revealed to have challenges with prosocial behaviors because of loss of family cohesion, especially when both parents migrate. The migration of both parents has more negative effects on the child's psychological wellbeing than when either one of the parents migrates. As a result of social norms and gender roles, children cope better when their fathers migrate. Paternal migration is also associated with upward social mobility and financial security. The central issue arising is that parents should consider the emerging transnational family structure as well as the age of the child because they influence the child's ability to cope with separation and the acquisition of literacy skills.

The importance of this study is that it provides a resource for parents planning to migrate from countries in crisis, guardians of LBC, as well as teachers in countries in crisis. Many studies have been conducted on this phenomenon, however, most of them do not include the views of the developing child. In this study, children's views were compared and reaffirmed by teacher reports of both psychological wellbeing and academic development.

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size, which may inflate differences between the groups. The results cannot be gen-

eralized to countries with different migration trends. Further studies would benefit from getting the perspective of biological parents and co-present caregivers as well as qualitative measures. We would like to indicate that the concepts such as attachment are largely viewed as cultural, and it would be useful to conceptualize them for the African setting. Further validity studies should be carried out for the instruments to make the instruments more suitable for the sample. Despite this limitation, we believe that this article will contribute positively to the understanding of child development in the transnational family setting.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of Near East University (Approval Date: January 22, 2019; Approval Number: YDU/EB/2018/282).

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