

Social Work Research on Intervention of Rural Left-behind Children from the Social Support Network Perspective

Meijing Tang*

School of Ethnology and Sociology, Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610041, China

*Corresponding author: meijing_1990@126.com

Abstract: Rural left-behind children as a special vulnerable group, has aroused extensive public concern since 2004. Owing to the limitations of subjective and objective conditions, the demand of the rural left-behind children is difficult to meet, which consequently hinders their growth and development, and even may threaten their personal existence. As spokesmen for vulnerable groups of society, social workers should be responsible for the rights and interests maintenance of rural left-behind children and take action at once. Social support network theory is applied in this paper. The paper suggests that a major factor leading to the problem of rural left-behind children is the lack of their social support networks. It points out that the social support network should include two aspects: the personal-self support and the social support. In fact, the two aspects are mutually connected. The author emphasizes that social work should give full play to the professional strengths so as to build a safe, effective and comprehensive social support network for the rural left-behind children. The concrete actions should be initiated from the personal intervention of both internal and external dimensions.

Keywords: social support network; rural left-behind children; social work

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, a large-scale migration of labor flowing from rural areas to cities has started. According to the *Second National agricultural census key information Bulletin (No. 1)*, rural migrant workers have amounted to 132 million till the end of the year 2006. For those big labor-exporting provinces, such as Anhui, Henan and Sichuan, there are about 10 million labors working out each year. However, under restrictions of economic conditions, Household Register System, the difficulties of being enrolled in urban schools, etc., most of them have to leave their children at home, resulting in the situation in which parents and children stay apart. Then a large number of left-behind children are produced. According to the 2000 population census data, it was inferred that the total number of left-behind children aged between 0-17 years old, was 24 million that year, and they were highly concentrated in the provinces of Sichuan, Guangdong, Jiangxi, Anhui, Hunan, etc.. *The National Report on the Status of Rural Left-Behind Children*, released by the China Women's Federation on Feb 27, 2008, showed that on the basis of the 2005 national 1% sample survey, the number of rural left-behind children was about 58 million. The formation of the left-behind children in rural China is accompanied by a rural-to-urban migration in these 20 years, while the widespread concern on this huge special vulnerable group just began in 2004. Many media have unveiled the living conditions of children left behind in rural areas, and made this group known to the public. Since then people started to realize the seriousness of this problem. At the same time, the academia has also launched some investigations on this group. The government has attached great importance to this problem and has issued a series of policies and regulations to protect their rights and benefits. Nevertheless, the left-behind children's life and living conditions is still not very optimistic. As spokesmen for vulnerable groups, social workers should be responsible for this bad situation and take action at once. In this paper, the author will think about how to give full play to the role of specialized social work when dealing with the problems of rural left-behind children.

2. Main concepts and methodology

2.1 Social support network

Social support network theory is an important branch of the Western social system theory. Jiang Tao [1] mentioned that the social network, which originated from community psychology, was first proposed by the British anthropologist R-Brown. In the 1980s, social network was introduced to the study of social support, and gradually the formation of social support network theory was finished. Some scholars cited this theory to the related study of social work, especially in support of vulnerable groups. Consequently, it made some progress in social work practice.

Social support network contains two important concepts, "social support" and "social network". As to the definition of social support, previous studies have already certified that it is a multi-dimensional concept. Some of literatures divide social support into two parts: practical support and perceived support. Song Liyu [2] mentioned the comprehensive definition of social support made by Lin Nan in her paper. It said that social support was composed of "society" and "support". As for "society", social support included links of personal and social environment, which can be divided into three levels: communities, social network and intimate partners. In the "support" oriented, Lin Nan divided it into two categories: instrumental support and expressive support. According to the above analysis, social support was defined as: the perceived and actual instrumental or expressive supports provided by the community, social network and intimate partner.

Social network is not only a network of relationships among people, but also refers to the structural characteristics of social relations. David Popenoe [3] defined social network from the perspective of sociology: social networks were complicated social relations of one personal. To scholar He Zhaiping [4], social network was a relatively stable social relation between individuals within a certain field. Through the explanation of the social support network, people can use it to solve problems and crises existed in daily life, and maintain the normal operation of the daily life.

2.2 Left-behind children

About the definition of left-behind children, there is no clear and unified definition. Scholars also have their own opinions. Such as Fan Xianzuo [5] thought that left-behind children were left at home by one or both of their parents who had to work in cities or the economic developed areas. Cui Xuehua [6] pointed out that the left-behind children referred to those who were younger than 14 and both parents (or one of them) were migrant workers, at the same time, the children stayed in the domicile place and as such condition, they couldn't live together with their parents. Although these definitions have nuances, the key factor of them is same.

About the researches on rural left-behind children, different disciplines have different focuses. Such as demography, it mainly research the quantity, gender and distribution of left-behind children; Education is focused on the related education problems of them; Sociology mainly study the socialization and social interaction of left-behind children, etc; Psychology focuses mainly on the psychological status of left-behind children. General researches mainly study the living conditions and some problems of left-behind children from a comprehensive point of view. Zhou Lingang and Feng Jianhua [7] pointed out that the study of social support of the left-behind children was extremely rare in domestic academia. Among the existing social support research, most scholars' researches gathered in patients, the elderly, women, the unemployed, college students and other vulnerable groups. But studies of rural left-behind children from the perspective of social support network are relatively weak.

2.3 The significance of applying social support network theory to the analysis of social work intervention in rural left-behind children

Social support network theory emphasizes placing people's problems under the general social background. It analyzes personal problems with the perspective of the ecosystem. In this point, it is precisely the same with the concept "person-in-situation" of Social Work. The assumption of social support network theory is that men need to work together with others for survival, as well as rely on the assistance of others. It admits that the social network may have a negative impact on the individual. Generally speaking, it is important to personal basic survival that linking with others to construct a sense of social integration and to feel being part of the society. Some vulnerable groups' social support networks are very weak, so they require professional assistance to improve the support function of their social networks. Social support network theory focuses on the relationships between individuals, instead of only paying attention to the characteristics of individuals or groups. It emphasizes individual's subjective initiative and willpower. That is to say, people do not passively adapt to the

society, which is much stronger than individuals. Some scholars have studied the significance of social network theory being applied to the vulnerable groups' problems. Dong Bo [8] pointed out that the key point of social support network theory insisted that the problems of vulnerable groups was not caused by their own reasons, but because of the lack of the necessary social support, which includes the formal social support from the nation, government agencies and various social organizations as well as the informal social support from family members, relatives, friends, etc.. Rural left-behind children belong to the vulnerable group, so that the analysis made by Dong Bo can also be applied to them. Based on this network analysis, when trying to understand the situation of rural left-behind children, we should exclude the impact of the "labels", and analyze the status of their social support network. As for our country, the available social support of rural left-behind children is traditional, instrumental, and mostly mainly gets from the "acquaintance network" which is based on the relation of consanguinity and region. However, the support from the government or social organizations is very weak. Therefore, it needs professional intervention to build a better social support network. Social work is an important force of the professional team. Under the guidance of social support network theory, the intervention of social work in rural left-behind children emphasizes through constructing the support network to let them get access to social resources and consequently meet their needs.

Based on the social support network theory and the author's observation and reflection in social work practice, this paper tries to explore how social workers take action to build up a safe, effective and comprehensive social support network for rural left-behind children, so as to promote the healthy growth of them.

3. Results and discussion

In the framework of social support networks, some scholars believe that the left-behind children's social support networks should be divided into personal support network and group support network; some others also think it should be divided into formal support network and informal support network. Despite of different views, the content is unanimous. The author thinks that the social work intervention in the construction of the social support networks for rural left-behind children can start from two aspects, one is internal, and the other is external. There should be an interactive two-way relationship between social support networks and individuals. Social support networks provide resources for individuals, and individuals also need to take the initiative to adapt to and participate in the establishment and maintenance of the network.

3.1 The intervention of social work in the internal dimension

This way mainly refers to carry out professional social work services directly on individuals among rural left-behind children group, realize personal empowerment, and strengthen their ability to control the environment. The left-behind children in rural areas are struggling in poor living situation, which has generated a series of problems and resulted in a serious impediment to their personal development. For those left-behind children, their needs at all levels are not met, and individuals tend to have a variety of psychological conflicts, limited social interaction, they also doubt themselves easily. Someone who suffers most will even go to the extreme of crime. Public usually either feel sympathy for this group or just label them. Those thoughts turn out to have no positive impact on those children. Social work, however, thinks everyone is potentially valuable, and does not think that the problems of left-behind children in rural areas are only caused by themselves. Under the guidance of professional values, such as empathy, equality and respect, social workers try to help those children with casework, group work or community work, etc.

First of all, social workers should help left-behind children improve their awareness and form a rational understanding of their current situation, and let them realize that their problems are not simply caused by individuals. Social workers can work with those children to analyze their current conditions and find out the reason why their individual needs can't be satisfied. They should also help those children make a clear understanding of their existing and potential resources in order to explore the next-step action, and make sure there is a hope to change. Self-awareness is the prerequisite to all actions.

Secondly, social workers must pay attention to intervening in the psychological problems of some left-behind children and lead them form a healthy psychological mechanism, which is an important foundation of realizing personal empowerment. Many of them may have unhealthy feelings about themselves or other people, such as the sense of inferiority and isolation caused by discrimination from peer group, or the sense of resentment resulting from not understanding why they are abandoned by their parents, or the sense of injustice and powerless due to the poverty of their family, etc. All those unhealthy feelings or negative psychological reactions have bad effect on them, so it's necessary to be

dealt with by someone who has professional skills.

Finally, social workers can help enhance the left-behind children's ability while building the social support network. It is undeniable that under the limit of congenital and acquired conditions, the left-behind children in rural areas lack the access to resources and the ability to make use of resources, which is also part of the reason that their individual needs are not met. On the other hand, we should realize their potential and adopt an appropriate approach to mine the potential and make full use of it, so that we can enhance their self-identity and confidence about life.

In practice, the intervention in the left-behind children from the individual internal aspect focuses on the children themselves; however, it also needs the support from the external conditions. For example, dealing with a case work, social workers need to communicate with family members, peer groups and neighbors and ask support from them. Especially in group work, the left-behind children can achieve the promotion in the ability of self-help and mutual assistance through the cultivation of group dynamics. In short, no matter what method to use, we should always take comprehensive consideration of the social system which the clients are in. In addition, no matter what external forces are used to make the change, it should eventually be settled to enhance the power of the left-behind children. Throughout the whole helping process, social workers play the roles of educators, facilitators, companions and resource links.

3.2 The intervention of social work in the external dimension

The intervention in the external dimension mainly focuses on several aspects which have a close relationship with the left-behind children, including home networks, organization networks (such as the government, schools, companies, etc.) and community network. The reason to choose those aspects to intervene in is that it conforms to the characteristics of the left-behind children's living environment, and it is also consistent with the basic operation modes of social work. What's more, those networks have already provided some support to the left-behind children in rural areas, which make the basis of feasibility for social work.

Firstly, the professional intervention of social work should start from the family network. Family is the most important social space for children, and family education plays a crucial role for the growth of children. A warm, united and loving home is conducive for children to developing positive cognition, view of life, values, self-control and pleasant personality. However, for left-behind children, the family is incomplete, and the love they perceive is also incomplete. The intervention of social work can provide their families with more paths of communication and cooperation to improve the environment of their families. On one hand, social workers should work with the left-behind children's parents, let them realize the negative influence on their children's psychology caused by their departure, encourage them to create more opportunities for contacting with their children, develop common hobbies with children and fully understand children's needs in order to enhance mutual communication emotion. On the other hand, social workers also should mobilize the power of the guardians and remind them to communicate more with the parents, the teachers and other related persons, and try to understand children's performance as well as the way of interaction with others. When necessary, social workers can train or educate the guardians to make them better at communicating with children. Furthermore, the child, as a member of the family, is the key part of the home network. Social workers should start from children's demands, express understanding of their situations, provide emotional support and guidance during accompany, lead children to understand their parents' difficulties, and help develop their independence and problem-solving skills. Only if we fully mobilize the power of each family members and work together with them to build a loving home, can we give these left-behind children the warmest support. I believe that the home network is the core of the social support networks of rural left-behind children, which is especially important to meet their love and belonging needs.

Secondly, the involvement in the organizational network is also very important. The organization network here refers to a wide range of system including governments, schools, non-profit organizations, enterprises, etc. The construction of social support networks of rural left-behind children asks for support and unity of multiple parties. First of all, the government should take significant responsibility to meet the left-behind children's need. Some scholars consider the left-behind children in China as "institutional orphans". The government, however, support those "orphans" only in the level of material aid, and most of the so-called aid is just publicity stunts. Even if the government really delivers aid to these children, the effect is rarely poor, since the government aid is mainly one-way. The interests and rights of those left-behind children lack the protection of relevant laws, regulations and welfare systems. In addition, the government cannot shirk their responsibility, giving the fact that the very unsound infrastructure in rural areas is unable to meet the needs of the left-behind children. Social work intervention in governmental organizations is actually carrying out social administration. On one hand, it can make reasonable policy recommendations, and hope that through the system reconstruction

providing left-behind children a good and healthy environment to grow up. On the other hand, it can collaborate with the government to provide social services, which can learn from the model of the government purchasing public service in Guangdong province. In conclusion, we should prompt the government to play the leading role and provide strong support for the left-behind children. Secondly, the school, as the important education place for rural left-behind children, should become a significant part of the support networks. The current status of education in rural areas is that the educational resources (human, material and financial resources) are scarce; the educational system is backward and ineffective. What's more, it ignores protection for left-behind children. According to this situation, social workers can do something to make changes. On one hand, social worker can get more resources and support from the government and society to help schools in rural area; on the other hand, they can carry out school social work service directly. All the relevant parties, including teachers, left-behind children and other common children are incorporated into the service plan. In this plan, intervention measures are varied for different groups; but there is only one goal- to create a good learning and growing environment for left-behind children. To be specific, social workers can provide some lessons for school teachers in order to train some professional staff and recommend schools to establish a comprehensive profile of left-behind children. They can also set up some dedicated organizations to serve the left-behind children. It should be stressed here that it's important to take advantage of the positive impact of peer groups. Besides the support of the traditional power, we should try hard to develop the power of emerging organizations as well. From an international point of view, the non-profit organization (NPO), which has risen in the late 20th century, has become a new and main force of social support for vulnerable groups, in addition to a large number of volunteers. Social work agencies in essence belong to the non-profit organizations; social workers should not only play their own strength, but also encourage and guide other NPO to participate in the support to the left-behind children in rural areas, in which they need provide effective supervision and coordination. Finally, enterprises, no matter they are private or state-owned, should take their moral responsibility to vulnerable groups. In recent years, more and more companies participate in charity and support the poor rural areas through a series of charity activities such as donations, support for poor students and etc. Social work should aim at this momentum and encourage enterprises to support the left-behind children in rural areas and set off a wave of care for those children. In addition, we need help the enterprises to optimize helping modes and thereby achieve the optimal utilization of resources.

At last, social workers should also pay attention to the involvement of the community network. The rural community is an important living environment for left-behind children and has a significant impact on their physical and mental development. The Chinese traditional culture has created a special rural culture. Fei Xiaotong [9] described it in his book *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society* as below:

"People in rural China know no other life than that dictated by their own parochialism. It is a society where people live from birth to death in the same place, and where people think that this is the normal way of life. Because everyone in a village lives like that, distinctive patterns of human relationships form. Every child grows up in everyone else's eyes, and in the child's eyes everyone and everything seem ordinary and habitual. This is a society without strangers, a society based totally on the familiar."

In this familiar society, people get together to form an organic unity, in which the social mutual aid is quite common. However, with the accelerated process of market economy, political and economic influence of globalization has gone deep into the countryside, which destroys the traditional social relations and local culture gradually, and then community support of rural left-behind children also will be weakened, even marginalized. The intervention of social work is to carry out action in the community and promote community-based mutual aid. At the present stage, we should rely on the construction of the community network, to regain the local Chinese community resources, and try to avoid the situation in which the left-behind children are marginalized in the process of rural society disintegration [10]. In addition to the regain of "local culture", social workers should also fully mobilize the organizations existing in the community, such as the village committees, cooperatives, mutual aid groups, etc. to participate in the construction of social support networks for the left-behind children. We should adopt different strategies according to the reality of different communities. Through the intervention of several kinds of community work modes, such as community planning mode, regional development model, social action mode, etc., we can provide a healthier environment and basic conditions for the construction of social support network of rural left-behind children.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of social support network theory, everyone needs the support from others and

everyone should have a personal support network. The social support network for the left-behind children in rural areas includes the government, family, community, enterprises and other social organizations. What should be emphasized is that all those elements in this vast network are not mechanically separated, and no clear boundaries exist among them, instead, they are mutual penetrated and organic formed as a whole to become a strong support network for the left-behind children in rural areas. Social workers, in the process of constructing this network, are like a shuttle that center on the left-behind children in rural areas. It shuttles between separate points, and finally links them together to weave into a net surrounding the left-behind children so that children can be tightly protected by it. During this procedure, social work itself, of course, has become a significant important part of this network eventually.

At present, the development of social work in China is far behind the developed western countries. In China's vast rural areas, social work practice is very weak. In recent years, the left-behind children has caused widespread concern, and their living conditions have improved a lot, but compared with the left-behind children in city, the left-behind children in rural areas still exist great problems in their daily life. It is so clear that they also need more aid. To our relief, some professional social work services are carried out in rural areas. Our colleagues are constantly trying to make beneficial changes in order to improve the quality of rural left-behind children's life. I think that social workers can do more things to help those children in the future, not only just by intervening in the construction of social support network that mentioned as in this paper.

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