Psychosocial resilience among left-behind adolescents in rural Thailand: a qualitative exploration

Abstract (199/200)

When parents migrate they often leave children behind with relatives. Despite being at higher risk of socio-emotional problems, many left-behind children have good health and social outcomes, suggesting their resilience. We sought to understand how adolescents with internal and international migrant parents build resilience in Thailand. We conducted qualitative interviews with 24 adolescents aged 10-19, and six caregivers, parents and community leaders. Interviews were transcribed, translated and analysed, drawing on techniques from grounded theory. We found that resilience was built in a context where for many families migration was a financial necessity and the parent-child relationship was mainly phone-based. Adolescents built resilience using three key ‘resources’: warmth (love and understanding), financial support and guidance. Adolescents with insecure parent or caregiver relationships, or with caring responsibilities for relatives, were less likely to have access to these resources. These adolescents sought emotional and financial independence, prioritised friendships, and identified role models to obtain key resources and build resilience. The findings indicate practical and psychosocial barriers to building resilience among left-behind adolescents in Thailand. Further work could explore pathways to mental illness in this population, interventions that build peer networks and caregiver-child relationships, and the use of technology to support remote parenting.

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Introduction

Recent figures estimate a global population of 272 million international migrants and a far higher but unknown number of people migrating within their own country (International Organization for Migration, 2021). People mainly migrate for employment opportunities, but armed conflict and disasters
also drive people from their homes. Families may be separated by migration, and children are often left behind with grandparents or aunts. Although there are no global estimates of the number of ‘left-behind’ children and adolescents, the figure is expected to be greater than 100 million (Fellmeth G & Rose-Clarke K et al., 2018). Research has shown that, compared to those whose parents remain at home, left-behind children and adolescents are at increased risk of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, conduct disorder, substance use, and chronic and acute malnutrition (Fellmeth G & Rose-Clarke K et al., 2018). Potential psychosocial mediators of these outcomes include lower parental supervision and support, and weakened parent-child bonding (Wen & Lin, 2012). A study on left-behind children in the Philippines reported an ‘emotional gap’ between left-behind children and their migrant mothers (Parreñas, 2005).

Despite these risks many left-behind children have good health and social outcomes, highlighting their resilience in response to parental migration (Dong et al., 2019). In the field of child health and development there is no consensus definition of resilience. Early research defined resilience as the positive counterpart to vulnerability and suggested its dependence on protective psychosocial factors such as communication and problem-solving skills, parental support and academic ability (Werner & Smith, 1992). These factors were organised into a socio-ecological model of individual assets, and micro- (family, peer and school), meso- (community) and macro-level resources (society and culture) (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). More recently resilience has been viewed as a process or trajectory of adaptive functioning in response to adversity (Bonanno, 2012). Rutter (Rutter, 2006) describes resilience as relative resistance to environmental risks or the overcoming of stress or adversity. This definition recognises the heterogeneity in individual responses to comparable levels of adversity (Rutter, 2012). People with better outcomes following exposure to a stressor would be considered more ‘resilient’. Since resilience is no longer viewed as a static trait, it has been argued that research on resilience should focus on the underlying processes that drive individual differences in response to adversity (Rutter, 2006).
Research on resilience among left-behind children has demonstrated their capacity for resilience and agency as a result of shifting family configurations (Graham & Yeoh, 2013). At an individual level, left-behind children who understand their parents’ motivation for migrating (e.g. for economic prosperity), and who have agency to positively influence their lives, are able to build resilience (Hoang et al., 2015; Hu, 2017). Some left-behind children demonstrate independence by finding ways to cope with their problems themselves as they do not want to trouble their parents (Asis, 2006). At the family level, support of extended family members and perceived closeness to household members may buffer against the potential negative effects of parental migration (Lu, 2012; Xiao et al., 2019). Higher maternal education is positively correlated with left-behind children’s wellbeing, but there is no clear association between family income and wellbeing (Jordan & Graham, 2012; Xiao et al., 2019). Family social capital relates to the strength of the bond between parents and children and has been shown to mediate the effect between parental migration and children’s mental health (Wu et al., 2015). Caregivers may affect left-behind children’s resilience, for example poor mental health among caregivers can negatively impact children’s wellbeing (Jordan & Graham, 2012). Moreover, caregivers can help to support regular communication between the left-behind child and migrant parent, which is as an important strategy for promoting left-behind children’s outcomes (Su et al., 2012). Left-behind children’s wider social context, including schools and the community, can also influence their resilience. Community social capital is a measure of social connectedness within a neighbourhood and mediates the effect of parental migration on children’s mental health (Wu et al., 2015). In rural China, left-behind children with higher levels of teacher support reported better health outcomes, school engagement and life satisfaction (Wen & Lin, 2012). Friendships have also been found to positively impact emotional well-being (Zhao et al., 2015).

Resilience could be an important public health strategy to support the development and health of left-behind children. Although there is growing interest in the topic the literature is mainly based in China. Existing studies have primarily relied on quantitative cross-sectional data collected using international
resilience screening tools. Fewer studies have explored resilience among left-behind children qualitatively, or the processes and mechanisms children use to build resilience which could be targets for future intervention. Research is also needed to understand children’s agency and their perspectives on parental migration (Jampaklay & Vapattanawong, 2013).

We sought to fill this research gap through a qualitative study of resilience among left-behind adolescents in Thailand. An estimated 1.1 million Thais live abroad and migrant remittance inflows contribute 1.5% (USD 7.5 billion) of Thailand’s GDP (United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, 2019). Internal migration is more common in Thailand: in 2010 more than nine per cent of the population had migrated internally within the previous five years and 22% did not live in their place of birth (National Statistics Office, 2010b; United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, 2019). In 2012 an estimated 48% of internal migrants were women and they tended to remit more often and in larger amounts than men (UNESCO et al., 2018). One in five Thai children and adolescents aged 0-17 lives without their mother or father and rates are higher among poorer households (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2020). Through interviews with adolescents, caregivers and other community stakeholders, we aimed to understand the process and strategies left-behind adolescents use to build resilience, in which circumstances they employ these strategies, and the consequences for adolescents, their families and the wider community.

Methods

Setting

We conducted the study in the North-east region of Thailand because it has the highest percentage of children aged 0-17 living without either parent (36.0% versus the national average of 23.5%) (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2020). In this region, many children and adolescents are left behind due to internal migration and international migration of parents to countries such as South Korea, Israel and
Taiwan. Literacy rates among women and men aged 15-49 years are 94.5% and 95.2% respectively, and 56.5% of children complete upper secondary school (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2020).

Within the North-east region we worked in Udon Thani province, which has an estimated population of 1.3 million, 63% of whom live in rural areas (National Statistics Office, 2010a). Udon Thani is one of 20 provinces in the region comprising the Isan area, which has its own distinct cultural identity and language.

Theoretical framework

In line with recent research, we adopted a working model of resilience as a positive developmental trajectory or process influenced by interacting factors at multiple socio-ecological levels (Bonanno, 2012; Masten & Barnes, 2018). We drew on methods from grounded theory because it is preferable for studying action and processes. Existing research on the topic has neglected the voice of left-behind children: incorporating grounded theory approaches forced us to prioritise the experiences of left-behind adolescents and their families (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We developed a model of resilience based on the Paradigm Model, a Grounded Theory tool to help contextualise and model actions, interactions and strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Data collection and analysis

Data comprised transcripts from 20 interviews with adolescents aged 10-19. Of these interviews 17 were conducted with individual adolescents, two were conducted with two adolescent siblings in each interview, and one was conducted with three adolescent siblings in the same interview, hence the total number of adolescents interviewed was 24. The reason for conducting interviews with more than one adolescent at once was because these participants felt more comfortable being interviewed with their siblings than being interviewed alone. Data were also collected through interviews with six adults who
were caregivers, parents, or community leaders. Through interviews with adolescents we sought to understand concepts of resilience related to experiences of living without parents, health and social outcomes that signify resilience, and pathways to resilience. The topic guide included questions such as “How is life different for you compared to young people who are living with their parents?” “Can you share any problems you have faced because you do not live with your parents, and how you tried to overcome them?” “What helps you to do well in life?” We sampled adolescents whose mother and/or father were migrants and who were living with an alternative caregiver such as a grandparent or aunt. We aimed to sample an equal number of males and females from across the adolescent age range (10-19 years). Interviews with adults explored positive and negative aspects of caring for adolescents living without their parents, their concepts of young people “doing well” and how caregiver-adolescent relationships help or hinder young people’s development. Interviews were conducted in the local language, Isan, by two female research assistants native to the province whose mother tongue is Isan. Interviews were recorded, transcribed into Thai and reviewed by the last author. Transcripts were then translated into English so they could be read by non-Thai-speaking members of the research team. The last author checked the transcripts for accuracy and validity.

We collected data during October and November 2016. The first phase of analysis was conducted in parallel with data collection and involved daily analytical debriefs with the research assistants and first and last authors (Figure 1). During debriefs we discussed first impressions of the data and emergent findings, whilst comparing and contrasting interviews. To be reflexive, we examined and critiqued our own preconceptions of resilience. The first author wrote memos (detailed summaries) of these discussions. For the first interviews we used a sampling framework to capture diverse experiences of resilience and parental migration. However, during the debriefs we had analytical discussions about the data which guided subsequent sampling and informed revisions of the interview topic guide. For example, some of the discussions related to how parental marital status (married or divorced), caregiver
identity (grandparents, aunts and siblings) and the location of parents (Thailand or abroad) influenced adolescents’ experiences of being left behind. We sampled subsequent participants and added focussed questions and probes to the interview topic guide to better understand the role of these factors in building resilience. We interviewed two adolescents whose experience deviated from that of other participants. One had previously been left behind but both parents had since passed away. Another lived with both parents but her father had previously been an international migrant. We specifically sampled these participants to strengthen the analysis by enhancing sensitivity to the data through comparison with other cases. The technique (negative or deviant case analysis) is commonly used in grounded theory analysis to test or strengthen theoretical models. Village health volunteers, familiar with the migration status of families in their communities, helped us to identify potential participants according to our sampling criteria and approached them in the first instance to ask if they would be interested in participating.

The second phase of analysis followed data collection (Figure 1). The first and last authors read through the translated transcripts and the first author conducted open coding of all the transcripts using NVivo. During this stage we identified emergent codes and refined them through constant comparison between segments of data. We wrote early summary and analytical memos (total 33 memos) about these codes and transcripts. Early memos were discussed with members of the study team. The first author then carried out axial coding of the transcripts, identifying higher level categories (concepts) from the initial open codes and relating these categories to each other. This involved identifying the core category (a category appearing frequently in the data, related to all other categories, and growing in depth with the addition of each additional category), causal conditions, context, consequences and strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We used the Paradigm Model to help structure and theoretically link categories, and as a starting point for a model of psychosocial resilience among left-behind adolescents (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We conducted a member check of the final resilience model with the research assistants.
Ethical considerations

We obtained ethical approval for the study from Mahidol Institute for Population Research Institutional Review Board, and from University College London Ethics Board. Our ethical approach was informed by international guidance on collecting data from children and young people (Devries et al., 2016). Research assistants conducting the interviews received training on maintaining confidentiality, listening without judging, and building rapport. We obtained informed written consent from participants as well as consent from caregivers for participants younger than 18. We explained to participants that participation was voluntary, choosing not to participate would not disadvantage them in any way, and they could stop the interview or skip questions at any point. We conducted interviews in or around participants’ homes in a place where they felt comfortable and could not be overheard. We offered support to particularly vulnerable adolescents to help them access appropriate services.

RESULTS

We interviewed 13 female adolescents, nine male adolescents, and two adolescents who self-identified as katoey, meaning transgender or ‘third gender/sex’ (Jackson, 2000). All but one of the adolescents were enrolled in education including non-formal and vocational programmes. One adolescent aged 19 was not currently enrolled though they were planning to pursue further education. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of these adolescents. We also interviewed six adults: a village health volunteer, a village headman, three caregivers (grandfather, sister, and aunt) and a mother working abroad who had temporarily returned home. The duration of interviews ranged from 27 to 95 minutes (mean 58 minutes).

Figure 2 presents the model of psychosocial resilience among left-behind adolescents in Udon Thani. This section describes individual components of the model.
Context in which resilience develops

We identified social factors that differentiate the experience of resilience in this population from experiences in other contexts and appeared to shape the behaviour and actions of left-behind adolescents and their families.

Migrating out of necessity

“Because society changed the cost of living is higher. Making a living [...] like before isn’t going to be enough. [...] I think that [migrating is] the only solution to find money to support their family because the expense is high. You can’t just plant anything or go in the field and find some potatoes to eat like before.” Village health volunteer

Adolescent participants were at different ages when their parents migrated. An 11-year-old boy’s parents had left during the previous year. The mother of a 14-year-old girl left home when her daughter was less than three months old.

“[At 11 years old] I was old enough to understand that [Dad] had to go. There wouldn’t be money for school if he didn’t. So, it was okay. I stayed with my grandparents.” Female aged 14

Adolescents explained that their parents’ absence was necessary to pay for education, health care or, more generally, to earn money. An 18-year-old female described feeling pressure to study hard because her mother was working to support her daughter’s studies and could not return home until she had graduated. Adolescents perceived that working abroad was a quick way to earn a large amount of money and some aspired to work abroad like their parents. Adolescents perceived internal migration as less
lucrative: a 14-year-old katoey wanted their parents to work abroad instead of in Thailand to earn more money for the family.

The frequency of parents’ visits home was variable. A 14-year-old female said her parents visited from Israel every three years whereas a 15-year-old katoey with internal migrant parents stayed with their mother during the school holidays.

**Phone-based parenting**

When asked about the difference between adolescents living with and without their parents, a caregiver explained:

“No, [living without parents is] not different. Now the era has changed. The tradition has also changed a lot and I think now there are phones and well, it's all about the phone!” Grandfather

All adolescents had a mobile phone. Most had smart phones that enabled them to make video calls. Friendships, relationships between adolescents and their parents, and romantic relationships were carried out, at least in part, online. A 13-year-old female described how she was introduced by a friend to her future husband on Facebook.

The frequency of communication with parents varied from daily video calls to no contact at all. Communication was mainly via apps such as Facebook or Line, though some adolescents with parents living in Thailand were able to use landlines. Phone and video calls enabled adolescents to maintain relationships with their parents and provided a means for parents to care for their children remotely.
“If there’s an issue I would talk to my mom first and then my mom would talk to my grandparents.” Male aged 16

Remote care was apparently more transactional than care that might have been provided in person. Adolescents said they called their parents when they wanted money, a new phone or computer, or when they needed their parents as advocates. They also called them to talk about problems at school or home, to get help with homework, or to obtain permission to stay with friends or attend a pop concert.

**Care and control**

Prior to their parents’ departure most adolescents were already living with their caregiver in an extended family household. The absence of parents resulted in other family members taking over the day-to-day care of adolescents. This was beneficial for both parents and caregivers when caregivers received remittances from the parents.

“I’m the only one who sticks with her. I’m her shelter. I’m her bank. I’m like an ATM machine but available 24 hours with no card required.” Grandfather

Caregivers’ responsibilities included providing financial support, relationship and health advice, transport, help with homework, attending ‘parent days’ at school, and discipline. Adolescents described how caregivers sometimes used corporal punishment. An 11-year-old male described how his grandmother hit him when she discovered he had been smoking. Another male said his grandmother hit him when he teased his sister.

“[Living without parents is] not that difficult. Whether Mom is here or [abroad], my grandparents are the ones acting like my parents.” Female aged 14
Some adolescents perceived their caregivers as substitutes for their parents, in two cases referring to them as “Mom” and “Dad”. Other adolescents described how relationships with their caregiver and parents differed. The caregiver relationship was felt to be stronger in terms of emotional closeness, security, and support when the caregiver was the adolescent’s grandparent rather than another relative such as an aunt or uncle. Some adolescent and adult participants thought caregivers were more lenient than parents with regards to obtaining permission and spending time with friends, though counter evidence suggests this was not universal:

“We had to adjust our behaviour because when our grandma was here she wouldn’t let us use bad language; she would scold and hit us. She was stricter than our parents. If she was here today, if we had this many friends, we wouldn’t be able to hang out with our friends like this.” Katoey aged 15

Core category: building resilience by securing resources

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“The advantage [of living without parents] is that it makes me a fighter. It makes me know what hardship is and pushes me forwards to my dream and to my goal that I’ve set.” Female aged 19

We identified a core category related to building resilience through securing resources. Across the interviews, adolescents described a process of working to overcome difficulties to be ‘strong’ and ‘survive’, and to provide for themselves and their families. To do this they sought three key resources: warmth (ouboun in Thai, meaning love, understanding, and the absence of loneliness), financial support, and guidance.

Seeking warmth
Participants described how left-behind adolescents lacked parental warmth because they were physically separated from their parents. Warmth was perceived to influence adolescents’ mood. For example, a 14-year-old female blamed her friend’s mood swings on a lack of warmth from her family. Adolescents who were unable to obtain warmth from their parents sought it from friends and caregivers instead. An 11-year-old female with internal migrant parents described how she had as much warmth from her aunt, relatives, and grandmother as she would have had from her mother. Adolescents who sought warmth from a boyfriend or girlfriend were strongly criticised by adults and their peers:

“She goes everywhere, and boys always flirt with her and ask for her number and she always gives her number to boys. I wouldn’t. She gives them everything: her Facebook and Line [details]. My aunt says, ‘Don’t let me hear about you being like her […], meeting up with boys, going to market together and holding hands.’” Female aged 11

**Strengthening financial support**

Adolescents needed financial support to pay for their education, health care and day-to-day living costs. Being able to buy a phone and phone credit was critical to maintaining relationships with parents and friends. Many migrant parents sent remittances home and adolescents had varying degrees of influence on how these were spent. An 11-year-old male described how he was able to ask his mother to buy him a phone and motorbike. Some adolescents were able to ask their caregivers for money whereas others asked parents to advocate on their behalf, for example if they needed to pay for a school field trip. For some adolescents financial support from their family was unreliable or insufficient, and they had to find other ways to secure funds such as asking friends and teachers for money or taking on paid work. A 14-year-old katoey considered finding paid work but their mother had urged them to finish school. A 19-year-old female worked on a building site after school to earn money to support her family and pay off her mother’s debt.
"Those of us that don't live with our parents won't have anyone to ask for advice. [Those who] live with their parents get to ask them but for me I don't have that chance.” Female aged 14

“In terms of studying, it’s different [for us living away from our parents] because those who live with their parents, their parents might be strict about their education and teach them what to do.” Male aged 15

Adolescents sought guidance on matters related to school, employment and disputes with friends and caregivers. Some were able to obtain guidance from their parents and caregivers. Others could not due to a lack of contact with their parents and/or an insecure relationship with their caregivers. In this situation adolescents looked to other adult family members, such as aunts or uncles, or to adults outside the home such as teachers and neighbours.

Reasons for building resilience

Participants described three main conditions that prompted them to seek warmth, financial support and/or guidance: (i) when they perceived a duty of care to their families; (ii) if they had an insecure relationship with their caregiver; (iii) or if their parents were unavailable to visit or communicate with them in other ways. Conceptually these conditions were risk factors that made left-behind adolescents feel vulnerable.

Perceiving a duty of care
“Well, for the doctor’s appointment I’d take [my grandmother or aunt] and give them medicine, and when I’m home I’m the one who steams the rice.” Female aged 19

Five adolescents explained how it was (or would be) their duty to look after their caregivers or siblings. A 13-year-old female who lived with her grandmother and was married with a baby, refused to move in with her in-laws because there would be no one to look after her grandmother or help with her baby. Caring for caregivers negatively affected adolescents’ lives, for example by limiting education and career opportunities. A 19-year-old female wanted to experience living away from home but her family would not permit it because there was no one else to care for her grandparents.

**Insecure relationship with caregivers**

Some adolescents described insecure relationships with their caregivers that appeared to be a source of conflict rather than warmth and involved a breakdown in communication. In these relationships, caregivers had not assumed all the responsibilities of the adolescent’s parents, including providing financial support, transport, and advice. A 19-year-old female whose parents had died, described being angry and stressed when her grandparents and aunt accused her of ‘playing around’ and spending too much time with friends, although she felt unable to retaliate. A 14-year-old katoey described how arguments with their grandparents about problems such as sleeping late and staying out late escalated into “bigger and bigger” issues. A 14-year-old female described her grandmother as being too “old fashioned” to understand her problems. An 11-year-old female was afraid to disobey her aunt in case she was physically punished.

**Unavailable parents**

Adolescents who felt they had insufficient contact with their parents (i.e. a limited ‘phone-based relationship’) blamed their parents’ workload or the time difference (international migrants). Others said
it was because their parents had re-married and had new families. The parents of a 14-year-old female had left her with grandparents when she was a baby. They visited infrequently and the girl had tried and failed to establish regular communication with them. Her father had not been in contact since remarrying. Divorce and remarriage led some parents to divert all or part of the money to their new family, leading to financial insecurity and anxiety for existing children and caregivers.

**Strategies to secure resources**

Adolescents tried to secure warmth, financial support and guidance using a variety of strategies.

**Maintaining friendships**

“When I couldn’t think of a way out, I would talk to [my friend] about it. Her mom is really nice; she helped me out with everything. [...] We stayed and spent time together for three years so we were close. When something is going on I can always talk to her about it. The teacher helped too. She knew my family situation.” Female aged 19

Adolescents dedicated time and effort to maintaining close friendships. These friendships were particularly important to adolescents who lacked warmth and guidance because their parents were unavailable or because they had an insecure relationship with their caregiver. Adolescents described having a group of 10 or so friends but only one or two that they were close to. Talking with friends, especially with friends whose parents were absent, helped left-behind adolescents to overcome sadness and loneliness, and to diffuse stress. Whereas younger adolescents spent time with friends to distract them from worries, older adolescents had friends that helped them to work through problems and with their schoolwork. A 19-year-old female received financial support from her friend. A 14-year-old katoey described their grandparents as strict and felt unable to talk to them about their problems. They spent
time with their friends because they made them feel happy, though this further aggravated their grandparents. Maintaining friendships was also important for adolescents’ social status and personal safety.

“The bad [adolescents] hang out with their friends. They are afraid that if they get beaten up their friends won’t help them if they don’t hang out with the group. It’s like a dependent relationship.” Village health volunteer

**Learning to be independent**

“Mostly I just kept [problems] to myself and would go over [them] in my head. If it was about money, I managed myself about how much I would spend and how much I wanted to save. I like to keep a separate fund for emergencies so I can use it when I need to.” Female aged 19

Although maintaining friendships as a form of social support was important for adolescents, independence was also a key factor in building resilience. Adolescents with an insecure relationship with their caregivers or unavailable parents, or who perceived a duty of care to their family were willingly or unwillingly learning to be independent. Adolescents described becoming financially independent by earning their own income or saving. Others described having to learn how to cook and clean for themselves and that developing these skills was an advantage of living without parents. Developing emotional independence (being “strong” and “able to take care of oneself” and one’s family) and the ability to “choose what’s right and wrong” were also important for building resilience. Three siblings lived on their own without parents or adult caregivers whilst their mother worked in another province. The siblings had chosen this arrangement themselves so that they could remain together. They described how they shared the household chores (shopping, cooking, cleaning) and managed money from their
mother. The eldest worried about the welfare of his younger siblings but viewed the situation as an opportunity to “save money, be patient, and learn to cook”.

Engaging in school

School provided access to different kinds of support and resources. Obtaining an education was perceived to be a way of securing a job in the future that would enable adolescents to be financially independent and fulfil a perceived duty of care to their family. Adolescents described working hard on schoolwork in order to progress. Through school, they also broadened their horizons:

“When I was [at school] I learned many things and I read a lot. People who got scholarships to go abroad had different life experiences. I thought about how the foreign teenagers would save up, move out and live on their own. They had their own money and their own place. I wanted that too.” Female aged 19

When asked to recall their happiest memory, adolescents described participating in school events such as poetry, singing, drawing and dance competitions, and felt proud of their success. The social lives of adolescents centred on school and their classmates. Some described supportive teachers who nurtured their talents, encouraged their interests, and provided guidance. However, schools could also be violent places, especially for boys, and adolescents described being physically punished by teachers and beaten up by peers. Others were anxious about their grades and felt pressured by family to do well academically.

Identifying a role model

Adolescents described how certain individuals positively influenced their ambitions and behaviour and were a source of guidance. This was particularly important for adolescents with unavailable parents or insecure relationships with their caregiver.
“My uncle’s a teacher so my maternal grandparents want me to be a teacher as well and so do my parents. They think it’s a good stable job with money after retirement and everything, so they wanted me to be a teacher ever since I was little. When I went to school and saw the teacher’s uniform I thought it looked cool and wanted to wear it.” Female aged 14

Adolescents found role models in their relatives, teachers, neighbours, and others who had done well at school and had a well-paid and stable job. Whilst some adolescents wanted to become migrants like their parents, others aspired to remain in Thailand as teachers, doctors, or nurses.

Consequences

Adolescents and adults described a variety of consequences for left-behind adolescents which appeared to relate to how successful they were in deploying strategies to secure resources.

Aspiring to live a good life

“Some people think that kids without parents around would stray and not be good in schools. But I’m not like that.” Female aged 14

Adolescents aspired to be a “good person” and lead “a good life” (cheevit thi dee) in which, to varying extents, they were able to study hard at school, obey their parents and caregivers, help with household chores and agricultural work, and be a role model for their siblings and peers. Adolescents who were able to lead the good life were those with access to warmth and guidance from a parent, caregiver, or another positive adult figure such as a relative or teacher, and financial support to enable them to study. An 11-year-old male described a good person as “a plain person who doesn’t talk much” and others
described how good people would not disturb the village by playing loud music or riding motorbikes.

Both adults and adolescents inferred that obedience and conformity were highly valued in their communities, and the good life embodied society’s expectations of an adolescent.

**Agitators**

“Bad teenagers annoy society. They are addicted to drugs and do things that are against the law, brawl, like that [...] Sometimes they would ride their loud motorbikes in front of our house.” Katoey aged 15

Left-behind adolescents who were not engaged in school and did not have a positive role model were described as “wild” and violent. Caregivers and adolescents associated this group with activities such as riding around in gangs on motorbikes (dek wen), skipping school, hanging out with friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends, and staying away from home. The village headman and village health volunteer attributed adolescents’ negative behaviour to a lack of parental guidance, “coaching”, and employment opportunities. A male and female both aged 11 explained how they tried to stay away from such adolescents.

“Grandparents don’t want to scold their grandchildren. They are afraid of their grandkids, which is like they’re spoiling them. When the kids are in elementary class 4-5, they want their own motorbike. If their grandparents don’t buy them a motorbike it would be chaos [...]”. Village health volunteer

The village health volunteer described how adolescents formed ‘gangs’ and that violence between such gangs was a major community problem that required police and military intervention. Targeted community adolescent health activities, for example programmes on drug addiction and sexual and
reproductive health had been trialled but were perceived to be unsuccessful because adolescents were too embarrassed to attend.

**Focusing on the future**

“*At first I didn’t understand why this had to happen to my family. I looked around and saw my friends with their parents and I felt bad. I saw parents playing with their kids and thought, why can’t I have that too? Then I realised there was no point in me thinking like that. I wouldn’t get anything in return. I just have to live my life.*” Female aged 19

Some adolescents were unable to employ strategies to secure resources due to limited agency. They had come to accept that they had minimal control of their domestic and family circumstances. They accepted they had limited input into where and with whom they lived, when and where they went to school and saw their friends, and when and how they communicated with their parents. These adolescents focused on the future. Younger adolescents tended to focus on the near future and the next time they would see their parents, or a particular event such as a festival or holiday. Older adolescents focused on the distant future, planning higher education, a career path, and a family. For example, a 19-year-old female planned to study as a foreign language teacher so that she could “explore the world”.

**Discussion**

Our findings shed light on how adolescents in Udon Thani conceptualise resilience, and some of the strategies they use to build it: maintaining friendships, learning to be independent, engaging in school and identifying a role model. We describe a context in which migration is a necessity for many families, relationships between adolescents and their migrant parents are mainly phone-based, and caregiving responsibilities are redistributed to grandparents and aunts. Left-behind adolescents found themselves
striving to lead the good life with limited agency yet facing preconceptions that they lacked supervision and discipline. Our research fills an important gap by giving voice to the experiences of left-behind adolescents and their families, and prioritising these in the development of a model of psychosocial resilience.

The process of building resilience by securing resources that we have described can be framed in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child, ratified by Thailand in 1992 (UNICEF, 2015). Adolescents described seeking warmth (love and understanding), guidance (Article 5), and financial security to ensure an adequate standard of living (Article 27) and access to education (Article 28). The right to family life (Article 9 and 10), a cornerstone of the Convention, is particularly relevant for left-behind children, and threatened by the lack of local employment opportunities and social security in Thailand (Osaki, 2003). Some adolescents valued money above living with their parents. This is in contrast to the views of left-behind children in the Philippines for whom keeping the family “whole” was more highly valued than financial security (Parreñas, 2001). Money is more likely to be important for children from poorer families, and for those who desire luxury material goods such as smart phones. Other qualitative studies of left-behind children in Asia have suggested that more resilient children perceive parental migration as a family livelihood strategy which enables them to succeed in life (Hu, 2017; Lam & Yeoh, 2019).

Learning to be independent was a strategy for building resilience among left-behind adolescents in our study. Findings from the CHAMPSEA study in Southeast Asia suggest that left-behind children exercise agency to try to positively shape their lives within the constraints of their family circumstances, and that parental separation facilitates their ability to independently make decisions (Hoang et al., 2015). In the wider psychological literature, adolescents’ self-regulatory skills such as emotion regulation, concentration and self-discipline, are known to be important for building resilience (Masten, 2004).
These skills develop in late adolescence (15-19 years) and enable greater future orientation, decision-making capacity, and autonomy. During this period the importance of peer approval grows, family influence changes, and risky behaviours (drug and alcohol use, unprotected sex, poor diet and insufficient exercise) emerge (Albert et al., 2013; De Goede et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2009; Patton et al., 2016). In rural China, left-behind children’s ability to view migration positively, i.e. as a necessity due to limited local job opportunities, increases with age (Fu & Law, 2018). Where financial support from parents and caregivers is inadequate, older adolescents who can access paid work may be more resilient than younger adolescents. This suggests that experiences of left-behind life vary substantially by age and developmental stage.

We have developed a model of resilience that could be used to theorise why some adolescent groups might be more capable of building resilience than others. For example, compared to adolescents whose parents live abroad, adolescents with internal migrant parents may have greater access to warmth and guidance because their parents live relatively close by. Conversely, these adolescents may have less financial support if their parents are in low-paid work. Future research could explore the relative contribution of warmth, guidance and financial support in building resilience, and compare the process of building resilience between adolescents with internal versus international migrant parents. Moreover, although research tends to dichotomise left-behind children based on their parents’ migrant status (internal versus international), in reality their status changes over time. Recent work in China showed that children who were previously left-behind but now living with their parents had lower levels of depression than children without any experience of migration. This implies that the change in migrant status may be more important than the status itself for left-behind children’s wellbeing (Wu et al., 2015).

Globally, left-behind children are more at risk of depression and anxiety than children of non-migrant parents (Fellmeth G & Rose-Claire K et al., 2018). One plausible explanation could be an insecure
attachment (‘emotional gap’) between parent and child, or as described by adolescents in our study, a lack of warmth (Locke et al., 2012; Parreñas, 2008). In the psychological literature warmth has been conceptualised as the reward system responsible for close parent-child relationships and paternal investment in children, and as the dimension of social cognition that encapsulates friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and morality (Fiske et al., 2007; MacDonald, 1992). Resilience research has focussed on maternal warmth, including its protective effects against bullying on emotional and behavioural problems in children (Rutter, 2013). We found examples of parents and adolescents attempting to maintain a close relationship with their parents through phone and video calls, but the extent to which adolescents were able to access warmth and meet their developmental needs through these remote interactions remains unclear. Future research could explore experiences and patterns for the adolescents to seek warmth in their relationships with migrant parents, as well as caregivers and peers.

We found evidence that rural Thai communities perceive some left-behind adolescents as agitators, inadequately supervised and disciplined by their caregivers. A similar pattern has been described in Mexico where caregivers were more lenient with young children than parents and found it hard to retain authority as children got older (Dreby, 2007). Corporal punishment by caregivers was widely reported in our study and could be related to caregivers’ inability to assert their authority by other means. Issues of supervision, authority and discipline may partly account for the elevated risk of conduct disorder among left-behind children compared to their peers (Fellmeth G & Rose-Clarke K et al., 2018). Longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data are needed to understand pathways to mental ill health, and to explore the extent to which resilience can compensate for the effects of parental migration.

Our model focuses on interpersonal resources and relationships that contribute to building psychosocial resilience. Studies suggest that resources at the meso- (community) and macro- (societal and cultural) levels of the eco-social model are also important for resilience and child wellbeing (Fergus &
Zimmerman, 2005). In China, community social capital was found to mediate the effect of parental migration on child mental health (Wu et al., 2015). Research conducted among left-behind children in Angola, Ghana and Nigeria found that the country context influenced child wellbeing. They postulated that children in post-conflict settings such as Angola experience weaker family and community bonds, higher levels of family violence, overburdened care networks, and depleted resources, thus making them more vulnerable to the negative effects of parental migration (Mazzucato et al., 2015). Child-fostering norms may also affect the degree of stigma experienced: in contexts where it is common to be cared for by an unrelated adult, regardless of migration left-behind children experience less stigma (Mazzucato et al., 2015). In our study setting parental migration was common and normalised. However, the extent to which this promoted or undermined resilience processes among left-behind adolescents was unclear.

“Worldwide mobility is our future – regardless of laws and walls” (Abubakar et al., 2018). We need economic, social, health and education policies that support and protect the rights of left-behind children and their families. Policies that restrict the mobility of migrants will only serve to promote migration through informal and high-risk channels. Family reunification policies must protect children’s rights to live together with their parents in the same country, or apart in different countries with visiting rights and extended parental leave, especially for mothers of young children (UNICEF, 2015; UNICEF, 2016). The pervasive role of smartphones and social media in the lives of adolescents suggests digital interventions that promote resilience could be an acceptable and scalable approach in Thailand. In low- and middle-income countries, there is promising evidence that online self-help programmes can promote mental wellbeing, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and provide access to supportive online communities (Naslund et al., 2017). Interventions that support caregivers, improve parenting, and reduce corporal punishment are also needed. In Thailand, a family skills training intervention among Burmese migrant families with children aged 7 to 15 improved the quality of parent-child interactions (Puffer et al., 2017). Sports-based interventions delivered by teachers improved mental health outcomes among
left-behind children in China although evaluations were at high risk of bias (Wang et al., 2020). In South Africa, a parenting programme for adolescents aged 10 to 18 and their families, delivered by trained community members, reduced violence and improved parenting and family functioning (Cluver LD et al., 2018). Such low-resource approaches could be adapted and piloted for left-behind children and their caregivers in Thailand.

Strengths and limitations

Our model of resilience may be generalisable to left-behind adolescents in other communities in Udon Thani and could be used to explore resilience in other settings with high rates of parental migration. Although the model includes categories for “causal conditions” and “consequences” we do not imply causality in a positivist sense, rather we sought to represent participants’ beliefs, values and meanings related to the process of building resilience (Maxwell, 2012). We conducted three interviews in which adolescents participated together with their sibling/s. Although the sibling’s presence may have influenced adolescents’ interview responses, it also helped them to feel more comfortable and able to express themselves. Triangulation of data from interviews with adolescents and adults with diverse migration experiences, and a member check with research assistants enhances the research’s credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transparent and systematic analysis procedure ensured sensitivity to the data and therefore the dependability and confirmability of our findings. Although our study draws on grounded theory methods (e.g. constant comparative analysis, identification of a core category) it is not a grounded theory study in its truest sense (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We were unable to conduct theoretical sampling (concurrent data collection and analysis) due to time and resource constraints. These constraints also made it difficult to ensure theoretical saturation (the point in the analysis at which all categories are fully developed). However, we were able to conduct a high level of analysis by using a rigorous and focussed process where the sampling strategy and topic guide were revised iteratively based
on detailed regular debriefs (Phase 1), and data were initially analysed in an order informed by emerging concepts, and later reanalysed to fill gaps in developing categories (Phase 2).

Conclusions

Left-behind adolescents build resilience by securing warmth, financial security, and guidance through relationships with family, friends, and the wider community. We call for rights-based initiatives that help to maintain relationships between migrant parents and children, improve the quality of interactions between caregivers and children, and provide access to supportive peer networks that help to build resilience among left-behind children.

Data availability statement: Due to difficulties in fully anonymising qualitative data from this study and the sensitive nature of the topic data are unavailable.

References


Bonanno, G.A. (2012) Uses and abuses of the resilience construct: Loss, trauma, and health-related adversities, Social Science and Medicine, 74, 753-756.


Table 1: Characteristics of adolescent participants (N=24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Value</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median age (IQR, range)</td>
<td>14 (11-15.25, 10-19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>9 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>13 (54.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katoey</td>
<td>2 (8.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent</td>
<td>15 (62.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>3 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>4 (16.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>1 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>1 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s migrant status (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal migrant</td>
<td>14 (58.3)</td>
</tr>
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<td>International migrant</td>
<td>8 (33.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-migrant</td>
<td>1 (4.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>1 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s migrant status (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal migrant</td>
<td>13 (54.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International migrant</td>
<td>5 (20.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-migrant</td>
<td>4 (16.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>2 (8.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents’ marital status (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>13 (54.2)</td>
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<td>Divorced</td>
<td>9 (37.5)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Household wealth (%)</td>
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<td>Poor</td>
<td>15 (62.5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>6 (25.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>3 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in formal or non-formal education (%)</td>
<td>23 (95.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IQR Interquartile range
**Figure 1:** Analysis procedure

**Data collection**
- Interviews with adolescents and adults

**Analysis Phase 1**
- Discussions about emergent findings
- Memos documenting first impressions of the data
- Comparing and contrasting interview experiences

**Analysis Phase 2**
- Familiarisation with the data and open coding
  - Emergent codes
- Writing memos
- Constant comparison of data segments, codes and categories
- Relating categories to each other
- Axial coding for more abstract concepts
- Structuring categories according to the paradigm model
- Theoretically linked categories
**Figure 2:** Conceptual model of psychosocial resilience among left-behind Adolescents

**CONTEXT**
- Migrating out of necessity
- Phone-based parenting
- Care and control

**CAUSAL CONDITIONS**
- Perceiving a duty of care
- Insecure relationship with caregivers
- Unavailable parents

**RESILIENCE: SECURING RESOURCES**
- Seeking warmth
- Strengthening financial support
- Obtaining guidance

**STRATEGIES**
- Maintaining friendships
- Learning to be independent
- Engaging in school
- Identifying a role model

**CONSEQUENCES**
- Aspiring to live a good life
- Agitators
- Focusing on the future