Mental Health Interventions for Migrant Children in China: A Framework Informed by Ecological Systems Theory

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Abstract: As the rural-to-urban migration continues, millions of children accompany their families into urban environments, where they face complex challenges adapting to urban life, resulting in mental health issues. This paper delves into the current academic conversations to dissect the mental health challenges faced by migrant children due to their struggles with social adaptation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental barriers experienced by migrant children in China. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this paper also advocates for a multilevel intervention framework across four domains: family, school, community, and society. Implementing this comprehensive framework offers migrant children improved adaptation to urban life and a reduced risk of mental health issues. While practical challenges exist, increased attention from social workers, educators, and policymakers, as well as supportive legislation, can enhance the well-being and adaptation of migrant children in China's evolving society.

Keywords: mental health, migrant children, ecological systems theory, intervention

1.   Introduction

Since the 1980s, a significant influx of rural residents into urban areas of China has occurred, driven by rapid economic growth and extensive urbanization, with the primary objective being the pursuit of enhanced financial remuneration [1]. This migratory trend has witnessed substantive transformations from the formerly predominant mode of individual migration toward familial migration [2]. This transformation has profoundly impacted the composition of China's child population, with children of migrant workers emerging as a significant component of the urban child population [3]. The fifth national census underscores this trend, reporting a migrant population in China surpassing 120 million, with nearly 20 million accompanying children residing in urban settings, a figure that continues to burgeon annually [4]. The scrutiny of the social adaptation of children of migrant workers and the facilitation of their integration into the urban milieu constitute vital imperatives during China's ongoing sociocultural transformation. Multidisciplinary research in this field spans education, psychology, and sociology, examining the social adaptation of migrant children. Notably scarce is research that addresses their mental well-being [4].

This paper examines existing scholarly discourse to anatomize the mental health issues confronting migrant children resulting from social maladjustment, engendering a more holistic elucidation of the developmental impediments encountered by migrant children in China. Concurrently, drawing upon the tenets of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this paper aims to proffer innovative

strategies for preventing, intervening, and ameliorating mental health concerns among migrant children. Ultimately, this paper aspires to galvanize governmental entities to proactively formulate bespoke policies and praxes designed to augment the well-being of China's migrant children.

2.   Causes of Mental Health Issues Faced by Migrant Children in China

Current research identifies three principal factors contributing to the social adaptation challenges of rural-to-urban migrant children in China: structural disparities (e.g., access to educational resources between urban and rural areas), pervasive societal biases and discrimination against migrant populations, and differences in living conditions, lifestyles, and behaviors compared to urban peers [5]. Consequently, migrant children who are devalued and marginalized can be categorized into three primary typologies: academic strugglers showing little motivation for learning and experiencing suboptimal academic performance, individuals with psychological disturbances, demonstrating reluctance to interact with peers, heightened sensitivity, irritability, and negative self-perceptions, and those displaying behavioral deviations, exhibiting contradictory psychological responses to external judgments and frequently engaging in antisocial behaviors, exacerbating societal stigmatization [2]. Furthermore, research suggests the abovementioned challenges lead migrant children to a heightened risk of developing mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorders, often with increased severity [4, 6].

Several factors also warrant attention. Firstly, parents' lower educational levels render their children incapable of adapting to new social environments, which may result in worse mental health status [7]. Secondly, traditional gender biases lead to greater social maladjustment among female migrant children than male migrant children [4]. Thirdly, the absence of grandmothers induces apprehension in migrant children when facing urban challenges since they generally play a pivotal role in maintaining stability within migrant families, providing emotional and material support. However, less than 10% of children have the opportunity to cohabit with their grandmothers in urban areas due to economic constraints [6]. These findings provide invaluable insights into the mental health of migrant children, emphasizing the need to understand how diverse external factors, such as family and culture, influence them and to develop corresponding strategies.

Some scholars emphasize the need to address external environmental determinants and advocate for policy reforms, such as advocating for the establishment of specialized educational facilities catering to the unique needs of migrant children, the promotion of greater societal inclusivity toward migrant populations, and the propagation of initiatives fostering psychological and social support networks [2]. Nonetheless, existing policies predominantly concentrate on macro-level advocacy and appeals, with limited focus on micro-level interventions. A more comprehensive approach involving the amalgamation of macro-level advocacy with other-level interventions is essential for effectively improving the mental health of migrant children.

3.   Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory, a developmental framework proposed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, underscores the significance of individual development within an intricate network of socio-environmental systems comprising four interconnected systems, each exerting mutual influence on adjacent systems [8]. The microsystem represents individuals or elements with whom an individual has direct and frequent interactions, constituting their primary sphere of influence, such as the family, which exerts the most profound impact [8]. The mesosystem connects essential organizations within an individual's life, signifying interactions between two or more life domains in which the developing person actively engages [8]. In the context of migrant children, the mesosystem pertains to the interplay between home, school, and community. While these interactions may not

directly shape an individual's development, they can influence and encompass intermediary organizations that impact and sometimes even determine the individual's growth. The exosystem refers to systems in which children do not directly participate but significantly influence their development. For instance, a parent's work environment is an exosystem factor. A child's emotional well-being at home and sense of belonging in the city may be influenced by their parents' job satisfaction in the urban setting [2]. The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural ideologies and supporting elements, including economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems. This system shapes children's thoughts and behaviors, as well as microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems, by prescribing how children should be treated, what they should be taught, and what they should aspire to achieve [9].

A comprehensive viewpoint that emphasizes interaction, exemplified by ecological theory, aids in identifying and comprehending the impact of different external factors on the mental well-being of migrant children. The mental health issues faced by these children do not exist in isolation; instead, they result from a complex interplay of various system layers. These layers span from the most immediate microsystem, including the family, to the interactions between schools and peer groups and extend to the macrosystem encompassing values and societal awareness patterns. Each of these systems engages in intricate, direct, or indirect interactions with one another and the individual, collectively shaping the individual's development.

4. Suggestions on Interventions for Mental Health Issues of Migrant Children in China

According to the ecological systems theory, changes in the mental health of migrant children are not isolated events but are influenced by multiple systems. This section will analyze and explore how to alter the close relationships between migrant children and their surrounding environments. It will also investigate how to harness and mobilize the capacities and resources within the families, schools, communities, and society of migrant children to provide suggestions on interventions of mental health issues faced by those children.

4.1. Family-Level Interventions

Family-level prevention interventions primarily aim to establish a stable home environment characterized by structured routines that provide predictability and sufficient communication between parents and migrant children, helping alleviate the adaptation pressures and feelings of insecurity experienced by migrant children. Creating an atmosphere where children feel comfortable sharing their emotions and concerns with parents helps migrant children ensure that their feelings will be acknowledged and supported. Simultaneously, it is crucial for family members to actively encourage the cultivation of a positive sense of self-worth in the children during their interactions. Acknowledging and commending the children's achievements and efforts are effective strategies for bolstering their self-esteem and confidence. These qualities, in turn, empower children to confront and overcome life's inevitable changes and challenges [4].

Significantly, family-level interventions extend beyond the confines of the home. Parents are encouraged to maintain close communication with their children's school, fostering an understanding of their educational situation and performance, thereby facilitating timely resolution of any school-related issues. Active participation in parent-teacher meetings is invaluable in supporting a child's school life. Furthermore, families should motivate their children to engage in community and school activities, promoting the development of social connections, friendships, and a robust support network. Lastly, when necessary, families should seek psychological support, such as therapy or counseling, to aid children in managing adaptation challenges and emotional distress.

4.2. School-Level Interventions

Migrant children, often isolated within the urban environment, rely heavily on their school connections, particularly with teachers and peers [2, 10]. These connections within the school environment are pivotal in determining whether migrant children can successfully integrate into the local community and maintain sound mental health [10].

Teachers' supportive attitudes can foster a sense of security, promote positive peer relationships, and mitigate feelings of isolation among migrant children. Furthermore, teacher expectations significantly impact academic performance, future aspirations, and mental health status [10]. If teachers have low expectations of migrant children, it may reduce their academic achievement and, in turn, affect future career plans and mental health status. Therefore, school teachers need to be aware of the importance of their attitudes towards migrant children. This paper suggests that the following strategies can be adopted: 1) conducting specialized seminars or training for teachers addressing the distinct challenges and needs of migrant children, including mental health, academic requirements, and socialization issues; 2) establishing a support network comprising teachers, parents, and school administrators to collaboratively address concerns pertaining to migrant children and facilitate information sharing, including identifying students at risk of mental health challenges, and provide resources like counseling services to ensure holistic student support; 3) reinforcing the philosophy of the universality of education, emphasizing that every student has the right to a high-quality education, irrespective of their family background, to aid teachers in recognizing that supporting migrant children aligns with the principles of educational equity.

Positive peer relationships also play a pivotal role in enhancing school adaptation and fostering good academic and mental health among migrant children [10]. Previous studies have revealed that migrant children face various barriers and difficulties in peer relationships, including aggressive behavior, lack of cooperation, insensitivity towards the impact of their words and actions on others, disrespect for others' actions, and a deficiency in social skills, such as ineffective conflict resolution strategies, resulting in hindering their adaptation to the urban environment [5]. To address these issues, class-based group activities focused on enhancing interaction and cooperation can effectively promote acceptance and peer relationships among all students and improve social adaptability. These activities not only help migrant children recognize their behavior patterns and consequences but also instill better strategies for addressing social challenges while encouraging inclusive values among all students and reducing the risk of discrimination and bullying [2, 5].

4.3. Community-Level Interventions

Community-level interventions necessitate effective communication and collaboration among families, schools, and communities. The establishment of a "school-family-community" communication platform facilitates the seamless connection of migrant children's various support systems, enabling the integrated utilization of resources for their societal adaptation. Additionally, this platform fosters social support networks for migrant families, encouraging discussions on children's education and urban adjustment to collectively aid migrant children in adapting to their present living and learning environment. Communities can further contribute by offering vital mental health resources, such as psychotherapy, counseling services, mental health education initiatives, multicultural programs, and the promotion of anti-bullying policies. These resources assist migrant children and their families in addressing adaptation challenges and emotional distress. Moreover, communities can arrange diverse social and volunteer activities, supporting the development of new friendships and social support networks among migrant children, thereby mitigating feelings of loneliness and anxiety. These community-based interventions collectively contribute to the creation of a safer, more welcoming, and inclusive environment, which, in turn, enhances the adaptation and

well-being of migrant children. It is important to note that the successful implementation of these activities relies on external support, encompassing both technical and financial assistance, emphasizing the crucial role of local government endorsement and recognition.

4.4. Societal-Level Interventions

Societal-level interventions require coordinated efforts involving government, educational institutions, community organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The government can enact policies and regulations to ensure that migrant children have access to education and psychological health support. This includes ensuring that their school transitions are not hindered by unnecessary barriers and providing support for psychological health services. Furthermore, the government can increase investment in schools in resource-limited areas to meet the specific needs of migrant children. This includes but is not limited to the hiring of more mental health professionals and counselors, as well as providing training and education for educators. Additionally, governments, schools, community organizations, and others can engage in advocacy and awareness activities to reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by migrant children. This can enhance public understanding and empathy for this issue, thereby fostering a more supportive community. Furthermore, future studies are required to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the needs and challenges of migrant children and to assess the effectiveness of intervention measures. All of these efforts necessitate support from various societal sectors.

It is worth noting that the discussion of interventions at different levels in the preceding sections was presented separately for analytical convenience. In practice, based on the ecosystem theory, the services within this framework utilize a multi-tiered intervention approach, where interventions at these four levels progress simultaneously, interlinked and integrated.

5. Conclusions

As a significant segment of the current urban child population, migrant children in China warrant the public's attention concerning their social adaptation and mental health. Literature analysis underscores that their external environment significantly impacts the mental health status of migrant children. To enhance the well-being of these children, a multilevel intervention approach is imperative, spanning from micro to macro levels encompassing four key domains: family, school, community, and society. At the family level, interventions should provide a stable family environment, extend emotional support, encourage open communication, and foster self-esteem and self-confidence. School-level interventions should emphasize the role of teachers' attitudes and expectations, seeking to enhance support for migrant children through training, support networks, and advocacy efforts. Community-level interventions revolve around the creation of communication platforms, the provision of mental health resources, and the organization of social and volunteer activities. Furthermore, societal-level interventions demand collaboration among government entities, schools, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations to develop policies, allocate resources, and advocate for the mental health support of migrant children. By implementing this comprehensive framework, migrant children can experience improved adaptation to urban life and a reduced risk of mental health issues.

Such an intervention model allows migrant children to experience enhanced fulfillment across various aspects, including self-perception, values, relationships with family members and teachers, as well as community awareness and participation. It provides a robust approach to expedite the adaptation of migrant children to their current environments. However, it is essential to recognize that the initiatives proposed in this paper, while idealistic, do not fully account for practical constraints, such as financial limitations. Hence, this paper advocates for increased attention from social workers,

educators, and policymakers to the challenges faced by migrant children and more comprehensive research efforts. Ultimately, it is hoped that the government will issue relevant laws, policies, and regulations to promote the improved adaptation and holistic well-being of migrant children in society.

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