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Attachment, psychological wellbeing and educational development among child members of transnational families

Gloria MANYERUKE,¹ Yağmur ÇERKEZ,² Aşkın KİRAZ,² Ebru ÇAKICI³

ABSTRACT

Objective: The current research investigated attachment styles, psychological wellbeing and academic development among children in transnational family arrangements in Zimbabwe. **Methods:** Purposive sampling was employed to select 57 children in transnational family arrangements and 41 children in conventional two-parent households between 8 and 14 years old. Attachment Style Classification Questionnaire for latency age children, Stirling Children's Well-being Scale, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Questionnaire for Evaluation of Development and Behavior were applied. **Results:** The results revealed that there were no significant differences in attachment styles, conduct problems, hyperactivity and academic development between the transnational and conventional family group. Social desirability and prosocial behavior were significantly lower in the transnational group. Children with both migrant parents had significantly lower scores for psychological wellbeing and higher scores for emotional symptoms and literacy problems compared to children with one migrant parent or conventional families. **Discussion:** There was no difference in attachment styles and academic development which may be a reflection of the strength of the extended family in substituting parental care. However, children in transnational family arrangements scored poorly on the prosocial subscale of psychological wellbeing which is associated with family cohesion. Parental migration negatively impacts family cohesion especially when both parents migrate. When both parents migrate the children exhibited emotional symptoms, literacy problems, poor prosocial behaviors and poor psychological wellbeing because children receive reduced social support. This study reveals that the child's age at parent's departure, family cohesion and economic security are integral to ensuring the wellbeing of children in transnational family arrangements. (*Anatolian Journal of Psychiatry* 2020; 21(x):xxx-xxx)

Keywords: transnational families, children, attachment, psychological wellbeing, educational development

Ulus aşırı ailelerin çocuk üyeleri arasında bağlanma, psikolojik iyi olma ve akademik gelişim

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışmada Zimbabvede yaşayan ülkeler arası aile düzenlemesi olan çocuklar arasında bağlanma stili, psikolojik iyi olma ve akademik gelişim araştırılmıştır. **Yöntem:** Amaca dönük örnekleme yöntemiyle 8-14 yaşları arasında ülkeler arası aile düzenlemesi olan 57 çocuk ve anne-babası ile geleneksel ev ortamı olan 41 çocuk araştırmaya alınmıştır. Bağlanma Stilleri Sınıflama Soru Formu-gizil dönemde çocuklar için, Stirling Çocuklar için Duygusal ve Psikolojik İyi Oluş Ölçeği, Güçler ve Güçlükler Anketi, Gelişim ve Davranış Değerlendirme Ölçeği uygulanmıştır. **Bulgular:** Ülkeler arası ve geleneksel aile grupları arasında bağlanma stili, uyum sorunları hiperaktivite ve akademik gelişim açısından anlamlı fark saptanmadı. Sosyal istenirlik ve prososyal davranış ülkeler arası grupta daha düşüktü. Anne-babasının ikisi de göç etmiş çocukların anne-babasından biri göç etmiş veya geleneksel ailesi olanlara göre psikolojik iyi oluş puanları anlamlı olarak daha düşük, duygusal belirtileri ve okuma sorunları daha fazlaydı. **Tartışma:** Bağlanma stili ve akademik gelişimde fark olmaması geniş ailenin anne-baba bakımının güçlü

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şekilde yerini almasının yansıması olabilir. Ancak, ülkeler arası aile yapısı olan çocuklar aile bağlılığı ile yakın ilişkili olan psikolojik iyi oluş prososyal alt ölçeğinden daha düşük puan almıştır. Aile bağlılığı anne-baba göçünden, özellikle anne-babanın ikisi birden göç ediyorsa, olumsuz etkilenmektedir. Anne-baba birlikte göç ettiğinde çocuklar duygusal belirtiler, okuma sorunları, zayıf prososyal davranış ve zayıf iyi oluş göstermektedir. Bunun nedeni çocukların daha az sosyal destek alması, yardım arayışına isteksiz olması ve orada bulunmayan anne-babalardan kendilerini uzaklaştırmaları olabilir. Tersine, sadece baba göç ettiğinde çocuklarda daha olumlu bir bakış saptanmıştır, çünkü anne aile bağına korurken babanın yolladığı para da sosyal güvenliği garanti etmektedir. Bu çalışma ülkeler arası aile yapısında çocukların iyi oluşu için anne-baba göçünde çocuğun yaşının, aile bağı ve ekonomik güvenliğin önemini göstermektedir. (*Anadolu Psikiyatri Derg* 2020; 21(x):xxx-xxx)

Anahtar sözcükler: Ülkeler arası aileler, çocuklar, bağlanma, psikolojik iyi oluş, eğitsel gelişim

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are heavily dependent on learning for development especially during childhood. Physically, cognitive and psychosocial development rely on learning from the environment. Learning begins in the family context where the child establishes secure attachment.¹ A family is considered the basic unit of society, traditionally composed of two parents raising their offspring.² This definition has also grown to encompass various social units functioning as or equivalent to this traditional family structure such as single-parenting, blended families and transnational families. Methodologically and theoretically, families have always been perceived as nuclear and residing together and geographical proximity was regarded as a prerequisite for family interaction.³ The advent of globalization brought about large scale migration which increased the popularity of the transnational family structure. McCarthy and Edwards define transnational families as family ties, membership and kinship that is sustained across multiple countries.⁴ Transnational families require the creation or maintenance of feelings of family connectedness, shared welfare and a sense of belonging across two or more national borders.

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

The goal of this study is to investigate the effect

of transnational family arrangements on children's psychological wellbeing, attachment styles, and academic development.

METHODS

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

Sampling

To collect data, three schools were selected from Masvingo district in Zimbabwe. These schools were selected based on the assumed homogeneity of their student populations. Homogeneity was considered in regard to socio-economic background and recruitment criterion. The participants are children who attend schools that cater to urban middle-class families. A sample of 57 LBC and 47 students from conventional households were purposively chosen. Table 1 depicts the sample's demographic information.

Measures in the students' questionnaire

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

The Stirling Children's Well-being Scale (SCWBS): The SCWBS was designed by Liddle

Table 1. Frequency table for the demographic characteristics of the participants

Demographic information	n	%
Gender		
Female	54	55.1
Male	44	44.9
Family arrangement		
Transnational	57	58.2
Conventional	41	41.8
Transnational family arrangement		
Emigrant mother	8	14.0
Emigrant father	24	42.1
Both emigrant parents	25	43.1
Place of residence		
Boarding school	22	22.9
At home	73	76.1

and Carter in 2015.¹¹ It is a 15 item, measure of psychological wellbeing scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The subscales are positive emotion, positive outlook, social desirability and general wellbeing. It can be applied to children between 8 and 15 years old. It has a reliability score of 0.75 Cronbach’s alpha. In the current study the positive emotion subscale had a reliability of 0.79, positive outlook 0.70, social desirability 0.55, and general wellbeing 0.86 Cronbach’s alpha.

Measures in the teachers’ questionnaire

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

Questionnaire for Evaluation of Development and Behavior (5-15R: Teacher’s Questionnaire): This 5-15 R was designed by Kadesjo et al. The questionnaire was designed to measure skills and behaviors of students on various developmental domains.¹⁴ It is applicable to children between 5 and 17 years. Cronbach’s alpha was between 0.86 and 0.96. In this research the four acquisition of academic skills subscales

were used to measure educational development among the sampled students. The subscales are problem-solving, reading and writing, arithmetic ability and general learning. In the current study reading and writing had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86, arithmetic 0.91, general learning 0.70 and problem solving 0.86.

Data analysis

The data for this study was collected in adherence to ethical principle of Research by the Scientific Research Ethics Committee which approved the research on January 22nd, 2019, application number YDU/EB/2018/282. The data was analyzed using SPSS 24. The Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that the data was non-parametric. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the frequencies for demographic data. Chi-square was used to compare the attachment styles used by LBC and children in conventional families and Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the psychological wellbeing of LCB and children in conventional family arrangements. The Mann-Whitney U test also enabled a comparison of the psychological wellbeing and academic development of LBC whose parents departed before the age of five and the over five years group. To compare the psychological wellbeing and academic development of children in different transnational family arrangements the Kruskal-Wallis test was employed, followed by pairwise analysis. The Spearman’s correlation analysis was used to measure the correlation between the child’s age at departure and psychological wellbeing as well academic development.

RESULTS

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

The second objective is to compare psychological wellbeing of the LBC with children raised in conventional family. The SDQ and 5-15R were used compared for two groups with Mann-Whitney U analysis (Table 2). There is no significant difference between groups on the subscales of positive emotion, positive outlook and general wellbeing. However, LBC score significantly lower on the social desirability subscale ($p=0.035$). The result show no significant differences between LBC and the conventional family

Table 2. Mann-Whitney U comparison psychological wellbeing according to family arrangements

	Transnational family arrangement			Conventional family arrangement			U	p
	n	Mean ranks	Sum of ranks	n	Mean ranks	Sum of ranks		
Positive emotions	55	45.59	2507.50	40	51.31	2052.50	967.50	0.317
Positive outlook	56	52.04	2914.00	40	43.55	1742.00	922.00	0.140
Social desirability	56	43.47	2434.50	40	55.54	2221.50	838.50	0.035
Psychological Wellbeing	55	48.09	2645.00	40	47.88	1915.00	1095.00	0.970
Emotional symptoms	49	40.15	1967.50	34	44.66	1518.50	742.50	0.392
Conduct Problems	49	40.77	1997.50	34	43.78	1488.50	772.50	0.562
Hyperactivity	49	40.87	2002.50	34	43.63	1483.50	777.50	0.602
Peer problems	49	42.86	2100.00	34	40.76	1386.00	791.00	0.695
Prosocial	49	36.45	1786.00	34	50.00	1700.00	561.00	0.011
Total	49	40.22	1971.00	34	44.56	1515.00	746.00	0.420

Table 3. Kruskal Wallis comparison of subscales of SDQ for teachers and SCWBS according to the transnational family arrangement

Subscales of the SCWBS	Emigrant parent	n	Mean rank	χ^2	df	p	Significant differences
Positive emotions	Emigrant mother	9	41.33	13.51	3	0.004	3-2
	Emigrant father	23	60.61				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	32.24				
	Conventional family	40	51.31				
Positive outlook	Emigrant mother	9	54.33	14.77	3	0.002	2-3
	Emigrant father	24	65.63				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	36.96				
	Conventional family	40	43.55				
Social desirability	Emigrant mother	9	59.50	17.39	3	0.001	3-1
	Emigrant father	24	52.50				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	27.78				
	Conventional family	40	55.54				
Wellbeing	Emigrant mother	9	46.56	13.57	3	0.004	3-2
	Emigrant father	23	63.33				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	33.46				
	Conventional family	40	47.88				
Subscales of the SDQ Emotional symptoms	Emigrant mother	6	27.83	8.48	3	0.037	3-1
	Emigrant father	20	32.53				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	50.00				
	Conventional family	34	44.66				
Prosocial	Emigrant mother	6	55.75	15.48	3	0.001	3-1
	Emigrant father	20	41.93				
	Both parents as emigrants	23	26.65				
	Conventional family	34	50.00				

SCWBS: Stirling Children's Well-being Scale; SDQ: Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire

group on subscales of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and the overall psychological wellbeing score. LBC score significantly lower than the conventional family group on prosocial subscale than LBC ($p=0.011$) (Table 2).

Table 3 reveals that there are differences in psychological wellbeing according to emigrant parent on the subscales of the SCWBS, positive emotion ($p=0.004$), positive outlook ($p=0.002$), social desirability ($p=0.001$) and general wellbeing ($p=0.004$). On the 5-15R significant differ-

Table 4. Kruskal Wallis analysis of academic development according to the transnational family arrangement

Subscales of the academic development	Emigrant parent	n	Mean rank	χ^2	df	p	Significant differences
Problem solving	Emigrant mother	7	37.07	3.68	3	0.298	
	Emigrant father	19	36.08				
	Both emigrant parents	23	48.13				
	Conventional family	31	38.32				
Reading and writing	Emigrant mother	6	24.50	8.14	3	0.043	3-1
	Emigrant father	18	35.17				3-4
	Both emigrant parents	20	47.63				
	Conventional family	30	34.75				
Arithmetic ability	Emigrant mother	6	30.33	5.84	3	0.120	
	Emigrant father	18	35.58				
	Both emigrant parents	20	46.05				
	Conventional family	30	34.38				
General Learning	Emigrant mother	6	31.75	7.24	3	0.065	
	Emigrant father	18	32.78				
	Both emigrant parents	20	46.28				
	Conventional family	28	32.93				

Table 5. Spearman's analysis of correlation between age at departure and subscales of the SCWBS and 5-15R

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

SCWBS: Stirling Children's Well-being Scale; 5-15R: Questionnaire for Evaluation of Development and Behavior

ences were found on the subscales of emotional symptoms ($p=0.037$), and prosocial ($p=0.001$). However, there is no significant difference on the subscales conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and the cumulative score of psychological wellbeing. Further pairwise comparison reveal between which groups significant difference exist (Table 3).

The third objective is to examine the effect transnational family arrangements have on the LBCs' academic development. The results shown in

Table 4 reveal that there is a no significant difference in academic development according to which family member migrates in the transnational family on the subscales of problem solving, arithmetic, and general learning. Significant differences are found on the subscale of reading and writing problems ($p=0.043$).

Spearman correlation analysis revealed significant positive moderate correlation between the child's age at parent's departure and positive emotion, positive outlook, social desirability and

general wellbeing (Table 5). Spearman correlation analysis also shows that age at departure was highly correlated with all subscales of the SCWBS and moderately negatively correlated challenges in reading and writing. Mann Whitney U analysis of children whose parents migrated before the age of five in comparison to parental migration after 5 revealed significantly lower scores for positive outlook ($p=0.006$), social desirability ($p=0.024$), general psychological wellbeing ($p=0.060$) and significantly higher scores on the subscale of conduct problems ($p=0.054$).

DISCUSSION

The results show no significant difference in attachment styles according to family structure, the most common attachment style is secure attachment. This is against the assertion by Zhao et al. that during long periods of separation from parents children may develop negative emotions that may result in disruptions in attachment.¹⁵ According to Zhao et al. the attachment styles employed by children reflect their perception of parental migration.¹⁵

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

The results of self-reports of psychological wellbeing and teacher's reports reveal significant differences between LBC and children in conventional families on the subscales of social desirability and prosocial behavior. Social desirability scale is associated with providing socially acceptable responses. Similarly, prosocial behaviors subscale encompasses helping and being considerate of the feelings of others. According to Chernyak et al., prosocial behaviors in children include altruism, co-operating and sharing.¹⁹ Kufakurinani et al. describes LBC as delinquent, reckless, disrespectful, snobbish and profligate which is congruent with low pro-

social behavior scores.²⁰ Wen and Lin suggest that family cohesion and supervision promote prosocial behavior, both are negatively impacted by parental emigration.²¹ Porta and Brown define family cohesion as the affectional bond shared within the family.²²

The results show differences in psychological wellbeing according to transnational family arrangement, similar to studies by Mazzucato et al. in Angola.¹³ Children with both migrant parents report lower scores of psychological wellbeing and teachers report this group to have the more emotional symptoms than the one emigrant parent or conventional family settings. This may result from the trade-off between parental time-input and financial input. Zhao et al. alludes that the emotional toll caused by parental absence negatively impacts the child's psychological wellbeing because material gains fail to substitute care.¹⁵ According to Graham et al., LBC report to be sad, feel lonely and struggle with managing emotions.²³ LBC are also more vulnerable because of neglect, poor emotional support or reluctance to seek social support. Children are likely to detach themselves from absent parents which decreases social support and isolates them.²⁴ Disruptions in power dynamics in the family cause a vacuum of authority figures and care, this is congruent with the term diaspora orphans used to describe LBC in Zimbabwe.²⁰ The term depicts their vulnerability and emotional struggle. These children are likely to experience less family cohesion because when both parents migrate, child loses more elements associated with family such as the house, furniture and neighbors may account for their poor prosocial scores.²¹

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

in quality education, nutrition and healthcare for their offspring. According to Fialkowska, the fathering role in family is associated with authority, economy and defense.²⁸ These characteristics are threatened by the children's awareness of the unemployment and poverty prevalent in Zimbabwe.²⁹ Positive outlook and resilience are associated with economic status of the family, flexibility and effective communication.³⁰

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

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

The current research investigated the attachment styles, psychological wellbeing and educational development of children in transnational family arrangements. The attachment styles employed by LBCs suggest they have a positive perception of their parent's migration. The age of the child at departure and the society's percep-

tion of parental emigration may contribute to the resilience evident in the LBC attachment styles and academic development. In consideration of psychological wellbeing, LBC were revealed to have challenges with prosocial behaviors because of loss of family cohesion especially when both parents migrate. The migration of both parents has more negative effects on the child's psychological wellbeing than when either one of the parents migrate. As a result of social norms and gendered role, children cope better when their fathers migrate. Paternal migration is also associated with upward social mobility and financial security. The central issue arising is that parents should consider the emerging transnational family structure as well as the age of the child because it influences the child's ability to cope with separation and the acquisition of literacy skills.

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

The main limitations of this study is the small sample size which may inflate differences between the groups. The results cannot be generalized to countries with different migration trends. Further studies would benefit from getting perspective of biological parents and co-present caregivers as well a qualitative measures. We would like to indicate that the concepts like attachment are largely viewed as cultural and it would be useful to conceptualize them for the African setting. Further validity studies should be carried out for the instruments to make the instruments more suitable for the sample. Despite these limitation we believe this article will contribute positively to the understanding of child development in the transnational family setting.

Authors' contributions: G.M.: Conceptualization, data collection, and statistical analysis, writing; Y.Ç.: conceptualization, and supervision; A.K.: conceptualization, supervision, and writing (review); E.Ç: statistical analysis, writing (review), and language editing.

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