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Feelings of abandonment among elderly people in rural Northeast Thailand

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Supaporn Sudnongbua

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ABSTRACT

The study was focused on feelings of abandonment among elderly people whose children had left their home villages in rural Northeast Thailand. Sequential mixed methods were employed. A cross-sectional survey (Study A) was used to determine (1) the extent and degree to which older persons living in a rural area of Northeast Thailand felt abandoned by the migration of their children from their home province; (2) the factors which affect feelings of abandonment; (3) the impact that feelings of abandonment had on their quality of life. Ethnographic methods (Study B) were then used to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and meaning of abandonment from the perspectives of those who identified as feeling abandoned or not feeling abandoned. Furthermore, data were obtained and analysed that highlighted the way in which the two groups solved problems when facing difficult circumstances.

A cross sectional survey, consisting of 113 questions including the 26-item WHOQOL-BREF and the 24-item WHOQOL-OLD was administered to 212 participants who ranged in age from 60 to 107 with a mean age of 71. While only 9% were found to live alone, 20% stated that they felt abandoned to some degree. To identify the factors which may impact on feelings of abandonment, participants were assigned to groups based on their stated feelings of abandonment (i.e., abandoned / not abandoned) and compared on 21 variables. They were found to differ on 7 of those (i.e., age, level of education, whether they lived alone or with others, satisfaction with living arrangements, frequency of contact with any of their children, degree of economic hardship, and family support). A standard multiple regression was performed to predict variance of feelings of abandonment using those 7 variables. These variables predicted 23% of variance in feelings of abandonment in this sample. Only 4 variables (i.e., frequency of contact with any of their children, living alone or with others, degree of economic hardship and family support) were found to make a unique and significant contribution to this prediction. A one-way between groups MANOVA was conducted to determine if those who felt abandoned differed from those who did not on a single-item question of overall quality of life and the total scores for the WHOQOL-BREF and WHOQOL-OLD. Significant differences were found

between groups on the total scores for the WHOQOL-BREF and the WHOQOL-OLD only.

Participants in Study B were initially selected from those in Study A and supplemented by purposive sampling in the study setting. Twenty-five participants, 14 who felt abandoned and 11 who did not feel abandoned were recruited. Data collection involved participant observation and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. The findings from Study B were that the reasons for feeling abandoned (as perceived by elderly parents) are constructed from children's actions perceived as negative by parents, economic hardship, illness/spouse's sickness, and hopelessness. Of these reasons, only two were also identified in the cross-sectional survey the frequency of negative contacts with children and degree of economic hardship showed as quantitative measures of abandonment. Problem solving by participants is formulated from several bases: using Buddha's teachings, acting positively towards their children, focusing on life's satisfaction, finding financial solutions, seeking support and dealing with sorrow.

Recommendations made as a result of this study draw attention mainly to the minimization of the negative effects of labour migration on elders. In addition, the government, health care workers, and community should play an active role in taking care of those old persons left behind, especially aging people who live alone, by providing community bases and home health care services rather than increasing institutional services. This could substantially change the implications of migration on the well-being of the parents, especially when illness or frailty occurs and daily personal assistance is needed.



(Golden 'first Buddha' of Thasung temple in Uthaitхани province, Thailand)

I dedicate this thesis to my father
(Pol.Lt.Col. Surb Sudnongbua) who was a senior
policeman and helped the people in remote areas all
his life. In addition, I devote the knowledge from this
research to all elderly in Thailand.

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There is no tension for those
Who have completed the journey
And have become free from
The distress of bondage.

Dhammapada v.90

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY

Acronyms

ADL	Activities of daily living
AUT	Autonomy
DAD	Death and Dying
INT	Intimacy
NGOs	Non-Government Organizations
PPF	Past, Present and Future Activities
QOL	Quality of Life
SAB	Sensory Abilities
SOP	Social Participation
SSQ	Social Support Questionnaire
WHO	World Health Organization
WHOQOL	World Health Organization Quality of Life
WHOQOL- BREF	World Health Organization Quality of Life- BREF
WHOQOL- OLD	World Health Organization Quality of Life- OLD
USA	The United States of America

Glossary

B

Bab-Boon-Kun-Tote

A colloquial way of expressing the belief that if people do a good thing, the good thing comes back. In contrast, doing a bad thing, the bad thing comes back

Berng-Lae

To look after

<i>Bon-Pra</i>	To make a pledge
<i>Boon</i>	Merit
<i>Boon-Ma-Ha-Chart</i>	Buddhist festival
<i>Boon-Pai-Boon-Mun</i>	The outcome depends on that person's merit
<i>Brahmavihara</i>	Holy abiding, sublime states of mind, the Four Abodes of the Buddha: <i>Metta</i> , <i>Karuna</i> , <i>Mudita</i> , and <i>Upekkha</i>
<i>Bug</i>	E-Sarn (Northeast Thailand) people call 'Bug' in front of male name and call 'E' in front of female name. It represents gender.
C	
<i>Chang</i>	Wishing somebody to get suffering and to have a lot of obstacles in their life
D	
<i>Dharma</i>	Buddha's teachings
<i>Dok-Mali</i>	Jasmine
F	
<i>Fung-Din</i>	To save money from agricultural produce
K	
<i>Karma</i>	Good and bad volition
<i>Karuna</i>	Compassion
<i>Kem-Hug-Duang-Nerng-Ka-Bor-Dai-Num-Kaow</i>	I did not even get a broken needle from inheritance
<i>Kert-Ma-Tong-Sai-Hai-Mun-Koom-Sart</i>	As I was born in this life, I have to live my life as fully as I can before I die
<i>Kong-Tun-Cha-Pa-Na-Kit</i>	A community-based Social Welfare Fund in each community that aging people pay into and which is used for their funeral and family after they die
<i>Krob</i>	To bless

Kor-Ka-Ma

To ask for forgiveness

M*Mae*

Mother

Metta

Loving-kindness towards all living beings

Mudita

Altruistic joy in the accomplishments of a person

N*Nirvana* or *Nippan*

The state of perfect peace, absence of defilements and freedom from suffering

O*Ow-Yung-Pai-Bor-Dai-Bud-Tai*

Nothing will go with me when I die

P*Pa* or *Tod-Ting*

To abandon

Pang

To love

Pook-Kan

To tighten a cotton thread on the wrist

Pi-Ti-Pook-Kor-Tor-Kaen

A ceremony where the younger people including elderly parents' children will tie older people's hands by using cotton thread

Por

Father

R*Rom-Po-Rom-Sai*

The person to whom the younger gives respect and the person to whom the younger are grateful

Ruk-Wer-Hai-Pook-Ruk-Look-Hai-Tee"

To love cows is to tie cows. To love children is to hit them

S*Sin-Bor-Pai-Pla-Bor-Ma*

Nothing changes. Literally, the meat does not go and fish do not come

So-Tai

To let myself die

T

Te-Wa-Da

Angel

U

Upekkha

Equanimity, or learning to accept both loss and gain, praise and blame, success and failure with detachment

W

Wai

To pay respect

Won-Mae

National Mother's day (12 August)

Y

Yuh-Pai-Sum-Hod-Mer-Tai or
Sum-Sa-Hod-Mer-Tai

Living without meaning until death

Yai

Grandmother

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PREFACE

This study was prompted by my background growing up in Northeastern Thailand. After studying nursing and then practicing for six years, I began researching and teaching community medicine and public health for a subsequent ten years. As a public health instructor my field experiences at the Faculty of Public Health, Naresuan University led to my interest in the area of aging people's health.

While I was training students in rural areas, I observed that those living in the villages were almost entirely aging people and young children. That observation made me wonder "Why are there only elderly and little kids in the villages? What will be the effect on the elderly?" This prompted me to conduct research about the consequences of younger adults leaving their aging parents in their home villages for better economic opportunities elsewhere and the older people's possible consequent feelings of abandonment. This study also looked at the relationship between such feelings of abandonment, and the traditional Thai expectation that older relatives would be looked after.

It was decided to conduct this research in the Northeast because this area has the lowest per capita income in Thailand, and consequently has very high levels of labour migrating elsewhere. My origins in this area also allowed me to approach study subjects from their own cultural background.