Experiences while on the Run– A Qualitative Study of Runaway Adolescents in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Pervious studies of runaway young adolescents in Hong Kong mainly focus on the pre-run period, for example investigating the risk factors which encourage adolescents to flee from their homes and on the post-run period, for example exploring the family reunification experiences after they return home. Little is known the running period which is about experiences while on the run of runaway adolescents. As such, this paper reports the experiences of running away based on a qualitative approach and conducts in-depth interviews with three male runaway adolescents after they had run away from home or group care in Hong Kong. Findings demonstrate the running experiences of the interviewed runaway adolescents through three themes, which include fulfilling life needs, such as searching for shelter and food, work and companionship and participating outdoor activities, challenges encountered such as reacting to parents’ responses to their leaving home, encountering the police, involving in different kinds of behavioral problems, such as fighting, crimes, as well as emotions and feelings, for example some are positive like freedom and independence, while some are negative like loneliness and boredom. The current study proposes a suggestion for further study to compare runaways’ experiences between Hong Kong and other cities to examine culture difference or to enroll female runaway samples to explore gender difference.

Key word: runaway adolescents; experiences; on the run
Background

Running away is commonly defined as having remained away from home or the residence for at least one night without permission and/or consultation with parents or the responsible adults (the group workers) and through subsequent self-definition as having run away (Angenent, Beke & Shane, 1991). The problem of young adolescents running away from home has emerged as one of common phenomenon around the world. It happens both in developed countries and developing countries, in cities and rural areas, on both male and female. It is estimated the number of runaway and homeless is 100 million worldwide including 40 million in Latin America, 30 million in Asia, and 10 million in Africa (Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998; UNESCO, 2007). In Hong Kong, more than half (51.1%) of the identified at-risk youth experienced running away from ages 11 to 18 (Ngai, Cheung, Xie, &Sun, 2001). The majority of missing persons were adolescents aged between 7 and 15 and their number was increasing—for males from 892 in 1997 to 1212 in 2001 and for females from 1691 to 1809 respectively (Commission on Youth, 2002, cited from Liu, 2005). However, studies show that not many families report their missing children to the Police Force (Lee, 1997). So the real number of adolescents running away from home in Hong Kong is larger than the reported official number.

The public in Hong Kong firstly paid attention to the issue of runaway adolescents was in 1989, when one local youth service agency called “The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG)” announced one report on runaway youth in one district (HKFYG report, 1989, cited from Liu, 2005). More studies on this group of youth subsequently conducted. Local studies explored the risk factors or causal factors of running away from home and some social and psychological factors, such as peer influence, poor relationship with parents and searching for excitement, have been commonly identified as causes for the young people to run away from home. For example, Cheung et al. (2005) conducted a survey based on a sample of Grade 7 students in Hong Kong and explored the factors affecting running away. They found that parental monitoring and classmate support reduced runaway risk whereas friend relationship raised the risk. There are other studies about reunification of these young people. Liu (2005) conducted a qualitative research and explored what kind of family responses facilitate and attract a runaway adolescent to return home and what kind of parental characteristics facilitate the adolescents’ adjustment to family reunification. It was found in this study that most of the informants returned home because they missed home or they ran out of money, and they preferred to go home. A few were sent home by the police, but they also reported that they felt guilty (towards their parents) because they had committed a crime. In the west, a few studies have explored the experiences after leaving home of runaway young adolescents once they leave home since 1930s (Minehan, 1934) to the recent decades (such as Slesnick, 2004). When discussing about “experiences” of runaways who leave home, researchers noted the importance of starting to study their housing options or alternatives they may go after leaving home. The housing options are mainly including: street, shelter, and friend’s home (Slesnick, 2004). Street is with the characteristics of easy to access, open, un-protective, free, enticing, exploitive, including square, park, abandoned building, and other living areas. Shelter is a protective and temporary living place, providing with food and bed, and some kind of counseling and recreational activities, etc. Friend’s home or relative’s home, where is safe, free but easier to be found by their parents. Among the experiences of the three housing options, the street experiences or experiences of living on the street were mostly explored in the literature (such as Howell, Emmons, & Frank, 1973; Brennan et al., 1978; Kufeldt &Nimmo, 1987; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; etc.). Howell, Emmons, & Frank (1973) found two aspects of street experiences: positive experiences or feelings and problems and difficulties encountered on the street including encountering with the police, sexual harassment and the scarcity of food and a place to sleep. Brennan et al. (1978) found that life
on the street was characterized by gravitation toward crime, such as stealing things as the method of survival while on the street. Some runaways reported the running experience as negative such as complaining about the uncomfortable living and sleeping conditions and feeling bored and lonely, while some runaways stated the positive aspects of street life, including independence, freedom, fun, drugs, and social experiences. Palenski(1984) found that all researched runaway adolescents expressed their interest in finding jobs but only few of them had been employed since leaving home, and those jobs were part-time. Hanging out was the most common activity for those not working, even though they complained it as boring and wasting time. The research conducted by McCarthy&Hagan(1992) provided further evidence of the street experiences of runaway adolescents: without permanent shelter, a stable source of food, consistent employment, or a regular income, heavy drug users, had resorted to crimes associated with street life(e.g. ,theft and prostitution),had been incarcerated, and had attempted suicide. Slesnick(2004) described lives on the streets of runaway through five aspects: where they live, what they eat, what they do, independence, freedom, fun, drugs, and social experiences. Palenski(1984) found that all researched runaway adolescents expressed their interest in finding jobs but only few of them had been employed since leaving home, and those jobs were part-time. Hanging out was the most common activity for those not working, even though they complained it as boring and wasting time. The research conducted by McCarthy&Hagan(1992) provided further evidence of the street experiences of runaway adolescents: without permanent shelter, a stable source of food, consistent employment, or a regular income, heavy drug users, had resorted to crimes associated with street life(e.g. ,theft and prostitution),had been incarcerated, and had attempted suicide. Slesnick(2004) described lives on the streets of runaway through five aspects: where they live, what they eat, what they do, loneliness and their health care. All concepts from western literature and evidence research findings about experiences after leaving home of runaway young adolescents are helpful to start the current study.

Objectives/Research Questions
From the literature review of research on runaway adolescents in Hong Kong, it can be concluded that previous studies covered the runaway issue on the pre-run period, such as examining the risk factors related with runaway and on the post-run reunion, or family reunification. To our knowledge, there is no local study focusing on the running period which is the experiences of runaway adolescents. This study will mainly explore what is going on after they leave home-experiences while on the run among runaway adolescents in Hong Kong. "Experiences while on the run" is the main key concept, which is more exact; in particular, it examines the availability of shelter, food, work and companionship for runaway adolescents while on the run. As well, it explores these youths’ participation in outdoor activities, criminal activities and the problems they faced. Finally, it examines whether these youths encounter some positive experiences.

Research Methodology
Research design
There are different experiences and interpretations between different runaway adolescents. As some sensitive aspects, such as street violence, drug use and prostitution, which these youths may encounter when they are running away, thus it's better to use a qualitative method to encourage the informants to talk. Through qualitative approach, this study can get deeper understanding about how they spend their day time and night time, how they deal with the basic survival needs and spiritual demands and how they get through the loneliness and so on.

Data collection
The data of this study were collected through qualitative semi-structured, open ended, in-depth interview approach (Minnichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990) to glean valuable information from three runaway adolescents’ specific ‘insider’ perspectives. An interview schedule comprising questions regarding the youth's demographic characteristics and some environmental factors associated with running away, and runaway experiences, for example, their age when they first ran away, the frequency and duration of their runaway behavior, the locations they frequented, their feelings and activities while on the run, and how they survive, how to get sleeping place, food and how to obtain money. However, one respondent had already found a job and returned home and another is living in the children
hostel at the time of interviews, so these were retrospective in nature and provided a youth perspective seen in ‘hindsight’ rather than of current experience. Interviews’ voices were recorded by an electronic recorder for later transcription. Each one-to-one interview with the researcher averaged around an hour.

Sampling
Due to time and resource constraints, this study applied conventional sampling and finally focused on three cases from The Boys’ & Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong, to explore the experiences of runaway adolescents when they left home. The researcher got to know some cases from a social worker of The Boys’ & Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong—one social work agency mainly serves for the youths who conduct minor offence. That means the gatekeeper is the social worker. The researcher had a clear talk with the social worker before conducting the study, and make sure more detail information of different runaway cases. The researcher selected some of them due to the topic and then the social worker arranged the interviewing time. But because some were still running away, or some adolescents refused to be studied, it was difficult to find a large sample of runaway adolescents, the researcher finally interviewed three male youth.

Data analysis
Verbatim transcripts were typed out according to the interview recordings, and then the data were coded by different themes and were analyzed for thematic strands emerging from what the respondents said. These are reported and discussed in the following section on findings of the three cases, through three themes including fulfilling life needs while on the run, such as searching for shelter and food, work and companionship and participating outdoor activities, challenges encountered while on the run such as reacting to parents’ responses to their leaving home, encountering the police, involving in different kinds of behavioral problems, such as fighting, crimes, and emotions and feelings, such as freedom and independence, and loneliness and boredom.

Findings

Characteristics of the three cases
Case one was called Qin (Nickname), male. He ran away four times. First time he ran away from his origin home for one week when he was 14 years old, the later three times he ran from children's hostel, where he was sent by the court. Case two was called Li (Nickname), male. He was 10 years old years old when he first time ran away. He was a repeated runaway. He ran away for many times, every time stayed out for two or three days. Case three was called Fat (Nickname), male. He was 14 years old when he first time ran away. He is one time runaway, just staying out for 3-4 days. Reasons for running away from home varied from different respondents and even in each time of runaway experience. Qin first time ran away from home because of his family environment and poor relationship between him and his step-mother. He lived in an abusive family because his step-mother started to beat him when he was 10 years old and always beat him afterwards. He had a conflict relationship with his step-mother because of his poor academic performance and parent's high expectation, but indifferent relationship with his father. The later three times he ran away from hostel almost for one month because he felt boring there and was "running to" something, such as new experiences. Li came from a single-parent family. His father left them and did not give money so his mother raised him and his two siblings alone. He has very little contact with his father. He ran away due to his parents’ divorce and mainly because he can’t feel love and
care from his mother. Because of busy work, there was poor communication between him and his mother. So he decided to run away. Fat was a “running to” adolescent who felt boring at home and was attracted by his activities with peers so that he decided to run away from home and, at the same time, did not report any negative reflections on their relationship with their parents. Generally speaking, Li is a typical “running from” adolescent, who are essentially escaping from unresolved personal and family problem (Homer, 1973), while Fat typical belongs to “running to” group, who is seen as being motivated by pleasure-seeking, fun, or adventure (Homer, 1973), and Qin belongs to both “running from” and “running to” group.

Fulfilling life needs while on the run
After leaving home, both typed runaways need to consider where to go, how to find food and shelter, and how to protect themselves, etc.

The first thing for runaways to consider after leaving home or other care is searching for shelter and food. Qin ran with friends and stayed in friends' houses. So he did not need to worry about the shelter and food. Although some times his friend's parents did not allow him to stay, he went to another friend. During his one week running away, he went to eight friends' house and slept there. Li ran alone. At night he stayed in the internet bar and slept and ate there, while during the day time he still went to school and ate there. Because his mother did not know he was running away, she still gave him money. And also sometime his father gave him some pocket money. So he could stay in the internet bar. Fat had strong feeling of peer activity so he also lived with his friends and slept and ate with them.

While out of home, runaway young adolescents needed to think of protecting themselves. Role of friendship was important to self protect for runaway young adolescents. They would like to keep connect with the existing peers and make new friends while out of home. At the time of deciding running away or while on the process of running away, young adolescents would go to find support from their existing peer network because of the characteristics of peer-centered early adolescence period. Qin ran away after class from school, because he just did not want to stay at home, but he still wanted to attend school. He “ran with some of his classmates, who are also interested in basketball and smoking and drinking”. Fat ran away alone from his home, but the first thing he did was “calling the friends and asking them out and play together”. He found five or six male and female friends. Searching for new friendship is not common for the respondents, but when they ran, they knew some friends, those who also ran away from home and those who also went to the streets and internet bar and so on. Li knew some new friends on the street and talked stories with each other and he knew some guys who also run away from home and most of these guys had quarrel with their family. For Qin and Fat, they stayed with their own friends, so they did not have some interest in knowing other new friends. But when they were hanging out, they know some of friends through their peers. Fat gave one example of his experience of knowing new friends while on the run.

I: “How about other friends? Did you know some friends outside?”
Fat: “Yeah. I knew some when I went to the bar with my friends. One if my friends knew them then introduced to me and we just sat together and had a casual talking”.

Respondents tried to survive after leaving home by searching for some jobs. Qin and Fat found a job when they were running away. Qin got a part time job when he secondly ran away from the children hostel. He felt boring there and just wanted to get new experiences. So he had a strong desire on searching for work. On the other hand, he was also satisfied with the job from where he got some salary. Fat searched for work because his friends attended school and he had nothing to do in daytime. He felt boring and went to one of his friends' parents' restaurant and earned some money, which could support his running away life.
Different above cases, Li had to go to school, so he didn't go to search a job. Also he felt happy with the internet and game playing. 

*Respondents participated outdoor activities* while on the run. “Hanging out” was one common outdoor activity during nighttime, although it was boring and a waste of time. They usually went to the park and street. Qin hang out with his friends and looked around and had a talking with friends.

I: “Ok, so you always stay in your friends' house? How about outdoor activities?”
Qin: “We went to the park and just hang around”.

Runaways would also find some places such as KTV, disco and bar to spend their night time. Fat usually spent time in KTV and Bar with his five or six friends, singing song, drinking and dancing. Li Hang out with the friends he knew on the street. They usually walked around and nothing else.

I: “Did you go to the street? Or just stayed in the internet bar?”
Li: “Yeah. I knew some friends and hang around on the street”.
I: “So what did you do on the street?”
Li: “Just walking and talking to each other and sometimes find some place and smoke together”.

**Challenges encountered while on the run**

While on the run, the runaway adolescents usually encountered some difficulties or challenges.

The first challenge for runaway adolescents is *reacting to their parents' responses*. For Qin and Fat, parents informed the police after their running away. Qin knew his father called the police from his classmates. But he seemed indifferent on his father's response and just tried to avoid the police.

I: “So your father called the police? When was that?”
Qin: “Yeah. After three days he called the police. That day he called the teacher and then make sure I have run away. Then he informed the police”.
I: “So from whom you know your father called the police?”
Qin: “My classmates. They hear from the school and then they told me”.
I: “How was your response? How did you fell of it?”
Qin: “I just don't want them to find where I am. So mostly I stayed inside of my friends' house and just sometimes when I need to buy cigarette I will go outside or I just asked my friends to offer me cigarette”.

Fat knew his mother informed the police the second day. His mother tried to call him but he didn't pick up the phone. Because Fat just felt boring at home, he wanted to be out for long time, where there was no control and more freedom.

Fat: “I just want to play more. I don't want to pick up the phone. I know they will scold me. So I will stay out for three days. It's same. So why not enjoy more outside?”

Li was different from above cases. Due to his mother unawareness of his running away, she did not inform the police. But he encountered the police checking and was taken to the police, the policed then informed his mother and his mother picked him up many times. His mother felt disappointed, but he still ran away and he knew his mother habited with it and ignored him. He just addicted to the internet and felt so ease outside.

Li: "Yeah. at the beginning I didn't know how to react to it when I was taken to the police station. And my mother went to pick me up. So many times my mom just habited with it and just ignored me. Later I know, every time when I saw the police I just told them I was going to home.”

The second common problem while on the run for these runaways is *encountering the police*. Qin encountered the police twice when he was outside to buy the cigarette. While because he
knew his father informed the police that he ran away. So he was very careful of the police. First time he ran from the police but second he was arrested by the police. Fat encountered the police when they were in the bar, but just casual checking. He was not afraid of it. Li also encountered the police and was checked ID card and even taken to the police station. Qin gave a typical recalling of his experience of encountering the check from the police.

I: “So have you ever encountered some police on the street during the running away period?”
Qin: “Yes, one time I saw one police a little far then I ran away.”
I: “Why are you escaping them? What are you afraid of?”
Qin: “Because the police will check the ID card.”
I: “Then what's the matter? You didn't take ID card with you?”
Qin: “No, I took it. But you know my father called the police. If I show him my ID card he will catch me. So I just ran from him.”

Having fight with others is another problem these adolescents encountered while on the run. Li was beaten by others due to his weak body. But his friend will help him and he did not get heavy injury.

I: “Did you have fight with others?”
Li: “You can see me (thin and short); of course I was always beat by others.”

Qin mentioned he was laughed by others so he fought with those guys.
I: “You just mentioned you had fight with others. What happened?”
Qin: “Because they bullied me.”
I: “What do you mean by bullying you?”
Qin: “Some guy just laughed on me: “Oh, you are such an idiot. So you didn't go back to your home yet?” I felt so unease. Then I just hit him.”

Runaway adolescents also conducted crime while on the run. Runaways may conduct crime, such as theft, extortion, drug use, mainly for money or for fun. Qin obtained money through extortion, for cigarettes.
I: “So where is the 100 dollars from?”
Qin: “One time I hang around with my friends and we had a fight with another group of guys. I beat one guy with my friend's help. The guy gave me 100 dollars.”
I: “Which guy do you mean? Your friend? or the guy was beat by you?”
Qin: “I beat one guy and he beg me not to beat him again, then just gave me 100 dollars.” (high tune, proud).

B witnessed his friends taking drugs and once was advised to take drugs but refused. He knew a lot of deviant peers on the street and conducted shoptheft with some peer.
I: “Can I know you and your friends took drugs?”
Li: “Some of my friends were taking drugs, I know them outside after 2008. But I know I should not take drugs, even its better to just smoke and drink.”
I: “So are there any friend asked you to take drugs?”
Li: “My friend one time asked me to try and taste but I refused. Actually I had a girlfriend in 2009, and she took drugs. At the beginning I didn't know but later she told me. We sometimes went outside together, and they asked me and another guy to stay outside and they went inside. I knew they were taking drugs.”

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I: “You mentioned you stole something in 2008. That time you were not in school and didn't have job. Can you tell me what happened?”
Li: “Just boring and just made fun.”
I: “So you conducted alone or with friends?”
Li: “Just some friends. Boring and wanted to make fun.”
Emotions and feelings while on the run
Negative feelings such as loneliness and boredom are common in the late running away life. Li was always alone, so it's not strange he felt boring sometimes.

I: “Did you feel alone?”
Li: “Yeah, But that time I am so young. Not so many feeling about lonely. Just sometimes I felt boring.”

But it seemed confusing Fat also had this feeling. One possible explanation is that his parents over-controlled him for a long time, so he desired freedom and enjoyed for one or two days. But he was always with that five or six friends and went to the same public places, which made him boring in later third and fourth day.

I: “How did you feel?”
Fat: “I felt boring because I just enjoyed enough.”

Freedom, independence and fun are the positive experiences these three adolescents expressed. Qin said he was more daring because no one controlled him while running away.

I: “What do you mean by bullying you?”
Qin: “I feel more daring because no one can control me, even the polices.”

Li said he conducted shoptheft for fun and showing his rebelling. Fat showed his satisfaction with his running way experience. Li: "I have more freedom; I do whatever I can do”.

Discussions
Why young people run away from home and what types of young adolescent runaways existing in Hong Kong? Similar to most common findings from western studies (Kerr &Finaly, 2006; Zide &Cherry, 1992 ), it can be founded that some adolescents in Hong Kong run away from home because of “pushing factors” such as conflicting family relationship and belong to "running from" group, or some youth run away from home due to “pulling factor”, such as new experiences of outside world, pleasure-seeking, fun, or adventure and belong to “running to” group.

When young people run away, he may face some of urgent situations, such as should he run away alone or with friends? After leaving home, how to survive, such as how to sleep and how to eat, and from where to get money? Runaway young adolescents may encounter some negative emotional feeling, such as loneliness and boredom, or some perceived their runaway experiences as positive, such as freedom. Runaways may also face some problems or danger. For instance, their parents may inform the police him running away, or there are police checking in public places, so he needs to respond to these problems. Findings indicate that though belonged to different types of runaway adolescents, the three interviewed male runaways in Hong Kong have some common experiences while on the run, such as participating more in outdoor activities and all have to encounter the inquiries from the police, and involve in several kinds of behavioral problems, such as fighting, crimes, while the running experiences of the interviewed respondents are also different in fulfilling life needs, such as searching for shelter and food, work and companionship, challenges encountered while on the run such as reacting to parents’ responses to their leaving home, and emotions and feelings while on the run. From the retrospective experiences of the respondents, it’s so clear that peer support is very important in their running away life because it was said their friends understood why they ran way and stayed with them and when encountering problem on the street, peers would help them. It's more obvious for "running to" subgroup, who almost stayed with their friends and more likely to ask help from friends to offer shelter and food, or even ask their friends to help them find jobs and hide them from their parents’ searching. Parents of these runaway adolescents reacted differently to their children’s running away behavior, some informed the police while some ignored the problem, which further result in runaways’ different response to it. “Running to” group are more likely to hide away from
their parents’ searching and keep running away, while parents of “running from” group less passively reacted to their runaway behavior, thus “running from” adolescents did not need to ask friends or less likely to think of hiding from their parents. Runaway young adolescents encounter some negative emotional feeling, such as loneliness and boredom, so they need friendship while running. On the other hand, runaways may come from dysfunctional family or just need new experiences, so they may perceive running away positive because they leave home for chasing fun or freedom. To sum up, the way of fulfilling their basic physical and psychological needs are varied among different runaway adolescents.

Findings on the experiences of runaway adolescents in Hong Kong are also different from previous western studies (Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). The young runaway adolescents in Hong Kong do not have difficulty for shelter and food and not going to search for social assistance. One possible explanation is that most of pervious study mixed the sample of homeless and runaway (Tyler & Bersani, 2008). Different from homeless youth, shelter and food are not big challenges for runaways. In this study these runaway youth have places to stay, so shelter and food are not the big difficulties. They also do not live with their relatives, but with their friends, which reflects the youth culture and post 90's subculture. They did not spend the whole night on the street and they would not like to ask social agency for help, because they voluntary run away. This study did not find age difference and prostitution is not one common survival strategy. It may because this study did not conclude female runaways or culture difference between Hong Kong and western countries. Limitations of this study need to be noted. Due to conventional sampling, the result can’t be generalized.

Recommendations

Cheung et al.’s (2005) study indicates cultural differences on risk factors of runaway, which are the preventive effects of parental monitoring was stronger on adolescents born on the Chinese mainland than in Hong Kong, and the effect of friend relationship was stronger on the Hong Kong born than the mainland born. The need is suggested for further study to compare runaways such as experiences while on the run and reunification in Hong Kong and Mainland of China and to find there is culture difference or not. Other studies may include more female runaways to find whether there is gender difference or not.

References


